

SAFE AND STRONG

What Our Research Found — And Why It Matters

A Community Summary | Ontario Learning Development Foundation | 2022

About This Project

The Safe and Strong project was carried out by the Ontario Learning Development Foundation. Our goal was to understand how gender-based violence (GBV) affects Black girls, women, and gender-diverse individuals in the Greater Toronto Hamilton Area (GTHA) — and how the COVID-19 pandemic made things harder.

Between July and September 2021, we spoke with 76 people through surveys, one-on-one interviews, and group discussions. Their voices are at the heart of this report.

41

Survey participants

20

In-depth interviews

15

Focus group participants

What We Found

46.3%

of participants experienced some form of gender-based violence at home, work, or in their community since COVID-19 began

This means nearly half of the people we spoke with had experienced GBV during the pandemic. This is not a small problem — it is a community crisis.

53.7%

Experienced harassment in their lifetime

48.8%

Experienced sexual harassment in their lifetime

73.1%

Of participants aged 12–24 reported lifetime GBV experiences

These numbers are painful. But they tell us something important: this is not rare. It is happening to our daughters, our sisters, our neighbours.

What People Told Us

Racism Makes Everything Worse

Participants told us that when they experienced violence or tried to report it, racism often got in the way. Black women are frequently dismissed using harmful stereotypes — labelled as 'angry' or 'too strong to be hurt.'

“

My side of the story was not listened to, everyone took [their] side. When we had solid evidence and proof that [they] were wrong, they still did not acknowledge it.

— Jane

“

Standing up for myself, I was described as angry.

— Sarah

These stories are not exceptions — they reflect a pattern. Many participants shared similar experiences of being dismissed, disbelieved, or ignored when they tried to speak up.

Getting Mental Health Help Is Hard

We also asked people about mental health services. Most participants were aware that services exist. But many felt deeply hesitant to use them — not because of stigma alone, but because of racism within healthcare and support systems.

“

A lot of institutions — the police, hospitals, the judicial system — are historically not kind to us as Black people and Black women. That makes us hesitant to reach out for support because we are not sure we would even get it.

— Sharon

Participants rated the Black community's hesitancy toward mental health services at between 7 and 10 out of 10 on average. This hesitancy is not a personal failing — it is a rational response to years of institutional racism.

What Needs to Change

Participants and our research team identified clear actions that governments, institutions, and communities should take:

For the Ontario Government

- Revise the education curriculum so that children learn about gender-based violence from a young age — what it is, how to recognize it, and what to do
- Expand who can get a Restraining Order — currently only available to people who were married or share children, leaving many survivors without legal protection
- Fund more mental health services that are designed for and led by Black communities
- Increase legal support for survivors navigating the court system

For Communities and Service Providers

- Spread the word about existing support services — not only after violence happens, but before it
- Create safe, welcoming spaces for Black girls, women, and gender-diverse individuals
- Work with community organizations to build trust and deliver culturally appropriate support
- Train frontline workers and educators to recognize and respond to GBV

If You Need Support

If you or someone you know is experiencing violence or feels unsafe, you do not have to face it alone. Reach out to:

Support Resources

- Assaulted Women's Helpline (Ontario): 1-866-863-0511 (TTY: 1-866-863-7868)
- Shelterline (Ontario): 1-800-668-6868
- Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868 or text CONNECT to 686868
- Canadian Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-363-9010
- Talk to a trusted adult, teacher, doctor, or community leader

You are not alone. Your experiences are real. You deserve to be safe.