

Institutional Barriers Facing Black Survivors of Gender-Based Violence in Canada

Evidence from the Safe and Strong Project

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Key Findings

- Black survivors of gender-based violence report significant distrust toward formal support systems, including law enforcement and social services.
- Experiences of racial bias and limited access to culturally responsive mental health care create barriers to help-seeking and recovery.
- Structural service gaps, including long wait times, limited community-based support, and low service awareness, discourage access.
- Youth participants reported notable exposure to gender-based violence and harassment, underscoring the need for early prevention.

Executive Summary

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a major public health and social justice concern in Canada. While national strategies increasingly recognize the importance of supporting survivors, research continues to show that racialized communities experience significant barriers when attempting to access services and protection.

Findings from the Safe and Strong project highlight persistent institutional challenges faced by Black survivors of gender-based violence, including distrust of formal support systems, experiences of racial bias within services, and limited access to culturally responsive mental health care.

These barriers affect help-seeking behaviour, reporting of violence, and long-term recovery outcomes. Policy responses must therefore address not only GBV itself but also the structural conditions that shape how survivors interact with institutions.

This policy brief summarizes key findings from the Safe and Strong project and outlines policy recommendations to improve institutional responses to gender-based violence affecting Black communities.

Background

Gender-based violence encompasses physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological abuse occurring within intimate relationships, families, and communities. In Canada, national surveys indicate that a significant proportion of women experience some form of violence in their lifetime.

Research increasingly demonstrates that survivors from racialized communities encounter additional challenges when seeking support. These challenges include systemic racism, lack of culturally appropriate services, and institutional mistrust shaped by historical and contemporary experiences of discrimination.

Black communities in particular have reported complex relationships with law enforcement, social services, and health systems. These dynamics influence how survivors navigate help-seeking pathways and whether they feel safe engaging with formal institutions.

Understanding these barriers is critical for developing effective and equitable GBV prevention and response strategies.

Why This Matters for Policy

Canada has committed to addressing gender-based violence through national and provincial strategies. However, policy frameworks often treat survivors as a homogeneous group and may fail to account for how systemic racism shapes access to services.

Without addressing institutional barriers and cultural safety in service delivery, existing GBV policies risk leaving Black and other racialized communities underserved. Improving trust, accessibility, and culturally responsive care is essential to ensuring equitable protection and support for survivors.

The Safe and Strong Research Project

The Safe and Strong project examined the experiences of Black survivors of gender-based violence and their interactions with institutional support systems.

The study explored:

- barriers to accessing services
- perceptions of institutional trust and safety
- mental health impacts of violence
- survivor experiences with legal and social service systems

Findings highlight the importance of addressing both gender-based violence and the structural inequalities that shape institutional responses. The Safe and Strong project was conducted in 2021, with the original report prepared in 2022. This 2026 policy brief draws on those findings to highlight institutional barriers facing Black survivors of gender-based violence in Canada.

Key Findings

Institutional mistrust remains a major barrier. Participants frequently described hesitancy to engage with formal institutions due to prior experiences of discrimination or perceived bias. This mistrust affects willingness to report violence or seek support.

Limited access to culturally responsive mental health services. Survivors reported difficulty accessing mental health support that acknowledged both trauma and racialized experiences. Lack of culturally competent care can discourage survivors from continuing treatment.

Structural barriers affect help-seeking behaviour. Barriers such as long wait times, lack of community-based services, and limited awareness of available programs further complicate the process of accessing support.

Youth vulnerability is significant. Younger participants reported high levels of exposure to gender-based violence and harassment, highlighting the importance of prevention and early intervention strategies.

Policy Implications

The findings suggest that addressing gender-based violence in Black communities requires more than expanding existing services. Institutional responses must also address structural inequalities and build trust between survivors and support systems.

Without targeted policy interventions, existing gaps may continue to discourage survivors from accessing services.

Policy Recommendations

1. Expand culturally responsive GBV services within community-based organizations serving Black communities.
2. Increase investment in trauma-informed and culturally competent mental health care for survivors.
3. Provide anti-racism training for professionals working within GBV response systems, including law enforcement, healthcare providers, and social service agencies.
4. Strengthen partnerships between government agencies and community organizations to improve outreach and accessibility of services.
5. Develop youth-focused prevention programs addressing gender-based violence within schools and community spaces.

Conclusion

Gender-based violence cannot be addressed effectively without recognizing the structural barriers faced by racialized communities. The experiences of Black survivors highlight the need for institutional reforms that prioritize cultural safety, trust-building, and equitable access to services.

Policy responses that incorporate community perspectives and culturally responsive approaches will be essential for strengthening Canada's GBV prevention and response strategies.

Acknowledgment

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Disclaimer

The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Canadian Women's Foundation or Women and Gender Equality Canada.