

SAFE AND STRONG

Research Report on Gender-Based Violence Among Black Girls, Women, and Gender-Diverse Individuals in the GTHA

Ontario Learning Development Foundation
Greater Toronto Hamilton Area | 2021–2022
Data Collected: July–September 2021

Public Release Note

This report presents findings from the Safe and Strong research project examining gender-based violence among Black girls, women, and gender-diverse individuals in the Greater Toronto Hamilton Area (GTHA). Data collection was conducted between July and September 2021. The original report was prepared in 2022. This version represents the public release of the research in 2026.

Executive Summary

The Safe and Strong research project, conducted by the Ontario Learning Development Foundation, examined the intersection of gender-based violence (GBV) and the COVID-19 pandemic for Black girls, women, and gender-diverse individuals aged 12 and over in the Greater Toronto Hamilton Area (GTHA). Data was collected from July to September 2021 through surveys, focus groups, and in-depth interviews.

This report presents findings across three core areas: key quantitative survey data; two dominant qualitative themes — Institutional and Interpersonal Racism and Mental Health; and a set of actionable policy recommendations directed at the Ontario Government and community stakeholders.



Methodology & Purpose

This study employed a qualitative and exploratory research design to investigate how COVID-19 public health measures have intersected with and exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities to gender-based violence for Black girls, women, and gender-diverse individuals in the GTHA.

Data collection included three components:

- Survey (n=41): Quantitative data on prevalence of GBV experiences, forms of violence, and awareness of services
- In-Depth Interviews (n=20): Individual narrative accounts exploring lived experiences in depth
- Focus Groups (n=15 participants): Group discussions on themes, recommendations, and community perspectives

The purpose of the Safe and Strong Project is to document the realities of gender-based violence as experienced by Black girls, women, and gender-diverse individuals, to illuminate the compounding effects of systemic racism and the pandemic, and to generate evidence-based recommendations for policy and practice.

Key Survey Findings

The survey data reveal the significant prevalence of gender-based violence and harassment among participants, with the pandemic serving as an accelerant to pre-existing vulnerabilities.

Prevalence of Gender-Based Violence

While 53.7% of respondents reported no experience of GBV at work, home, or in their community since COVID-19 began, a substantial 46.3% had experienced some form of GBV in these settings during the pandemic period. This figure is particularly significant given that the study population — Black girls, women, and gender-diverse individuals — already faced elevated risks prior to the pandemic.

Lifetime Experiences of Harassment

Survey data showed that 53.7% of participants reported experiencing harassment, and 48.8% had experienced sexual harassment at some point in their lives. These numbers reflect the persistent and cumulative nature of gender-based violence across the lifespan.

Youth at Elevated Risk

A particularly alarming finding was that 73.1% of all participants between the ages of 12 and 24 reported experiencing some form of GBV in their lifetimes, with many indicating recent experiences tied to the pandemic. This highlights an urgent need for age-appropriate education, early intervention, and youth-centred support services.

Theme 1: Institutional and Interpersonal Racism

A dominant theme emerging from focus groups and in-depth interviews was the pervasive influence of both institutional and interpersonal racism on participants' experiences of gender-based violence. Participants consistently described how racist systems — from the justice system to healthcare — compounded their vulnerability and undermined their ability to seek help.

Institutional Racism

Koshan et al. (2020) have documented the structural inequities that women of colour face within the justice system, including in family court proceedings related to custody and protective orders. This research aligns closely with participant accounts from Safe and Strong: Black women who attempted to leave violent relationships described encountering systemic barriers that disadvantaged them relative to their white counterparts, particularly in lower socioeconomic circumstances.

Participants described a justice and social services landscape designed in ways that consistently failed to centre their safety and autonomy. The pandemic — by restricting movement, closing services, and shifting resources — made these institutional failures even more acute.

Interpersonal Racism and the 'Angry Black Woman' Stereotype

When asked whether their experiences of violence had been minimized or dismissed due to stereotypes labelling Black women as 'Angry' or 'Strong,' nearly all participants responding to this question answered affirmatively. Three representative accounts are presented below:

"Well, there was a misunderstanding between me and [person] and [person] is white. My side of the story was not listened to, everyone took [person's] side. When we had solid evidence and proof that [person] was wrong, they still did not acknowledge that [person] was wrong and the issue just died down. I did try to seek support and only got an apology back. — Jane"

"Yes — I have experienced that. Standing up for myself, I was described as angry. — Sarah"

"Most of the violence, based on recent community it's mainly based on my gender and color...maybe because they think I'm angry...I don't think most people classify Black people as strong...mainly angry. I think I've looked past that now so I'm able to handle those situations better...I'm also female. — Ronnie"

These testimonials illustrate how harmful stereotypes function not only to dismiss individual experiences of violence, but to systematically discourage Black women from advocating for themselves. When these

stereotypes become normalized, many women of colour begin to internalize them — reinforcing the cycle of interpersonal racism that participants repeatedly identified throughout this project.

Theme 2: Mental Health

Mental health emerged as a second major theme throughout the study. Participants described significant barriers to accessing mental health services, shaped by a combination of stigma, systemic racism, and well-founded distrust of institutions. COVID-19 lockdowns intensified pre-existing mental health challenges while simultaneously restricting access to support.

COVID-19 and Mental Health Burden

Evans et al. (2021) found that pandemic-era public health restrictions had a paradoxical effect for survivors of domestic abuse: closure of businesses and movement restrictions trapped many victims with their abusers, while simultaneously making it harder to access crisis hotlines safely. In some regions, calls to these services dropped by more than 50% — not because abuse declined, but because victims could not call safely. Evans et al. also noted that communities of colour faced domestic violence at disproportionately higher rates than their white counterparts during the pandemic.

Barriers to Help-Seeking

Participants were asked how confident they felt in local services to provide adequate mental health support for GBV survivors, and how hesitant the Black community is toward mental health services. Three representative accounts follow:

"I would say a 5, just because there are services, but they're not widely known. It is not widely known that there are culturally sensitive services. — Sharon"

"I feel like even before we who have experienced racism in reaching out for support, we hear of and we are very aware of the fact that a lot of institutions, whether it's the police services, hospitals, the judicial system... are historically not kind to us as Black people and Black women. There is definitely widespread racism, and it makes us hesitant to reach out for support because we are not sure we would even get it. — Sharon"

"Being young and Black is a double case against them, so they definitely won't want to come out that easily. — June"

Across these accounts, a consistent picture emerges: Black girls, women, and gender-diverse individuals are aware that services exist, but feel deeply — and rationally — hesitant to use them, given historical and ongoing experiences of racism within institutional settings. This institutional distrust is not irrational;

it reflects lived reality. Addressing it requires not just increasing awareness of services, but also transforming them to be genuinely culturally safe and responsive.

Recommendations

Based on survey findings, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews, the Safe and Strong Research Team puts forward the following recommendations for the Ontario Government, policymakers, and community stakeholders.

1. Education Curriculum Reform

The Ontario Government should revise its education curriculum so that children and youth receive dedicated, age-appropriate learning about gender-based violence: what it is, how to recognize it in relationships and community settings, and how to respond. While the Ontario curriculum includes some content on healthy relationships, this does not go far enough. Equipping young people with this knowledge early is an investment in safer future communities.

2. Reform of Restraining and Protective Orders

Current Ontario legislation limits restraining orders primarily to individuals who were married, in common-law relationships, or share children. The Safe and Strong Research Team recommends that the Ontario Government reconsider these parameters to extend legal protection to survivors of GBV in casual, dating, or community-based relationships. Many incidents of gender-based violence occur outside of formal partnerships; survivors in these circumstances are currently under-protected by law.

3. Increased Awareness and Accessibility of Services

Multiple participants indicated that even when services exist, they are not widely known — especially culturally sensitive services appropriate for Black women and gender-diverse individuals. Governments and service providers should invest in community-based outreach to ensure survivors know what help is available, and that services are tailored to the specific needs and realities of Black communities.

4. Funding for Legal Advocacy

Consistent with recommendations from Koshan et al. (2020), the Safe and Strong Research Team recommends increased funding for underfunded programs that provide legal advocacy for women of colour navigating the justice system while escaping domestic violence. This includes support for custody proceedings, restraining order applications, and post-violence legal stabilization.

5. Community Safe Spaces

Participants called for more shelters, support groups, and safe spaces tailored to Black women and girls. Creating dedicated, culturally competent spaces where survivors can speak openly without fear of racism or dismissal is essential to effective GBV response.

Conclusion

COVID-19 did not create gender-based violence in Black communities — it exposed and amplified a crisis that was already present. The Safe and Strong Research Report provides evidence that Black girls, women, and gender-diverse individuals in the GTHA face GBV at significant rates, compounded by the twin forces of institutional and interpersonal racism, and significant barriers to mental health support.

Addressing this crisis requires action at multiple levels: legislative reform, curriculum change, increased service funding, and a fundamental shift in how institutions engage with Black women and girls. The voices of participants in this study — those who shared their experiences, fears, and resilience — make clear both the urgency and the direction of change needed.

The Ontario Learning Development Foundation is committed to continued advocacy for the safety and well-being of Black girls, women, and gender-diverse individuals in the GTHA and across Canada.

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Disclaimer

The views expressed in this report are those of the author and research team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Canadian Women’s Foundation or Women and Gender Equality Canada.

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