

# The Role of Gender Inequality in Domestic Violence Against Women

Brandy Cowles

Why didn't she leave? Have you ever heard this statement? Not only does this statement victim blame women who experience domestic violence, but it also confirms a common societal misconception that women always have the choice or ability to leave an abusive partner. Failure to understand the barriers that women face when they are leaving an abusive relationship feeds this epidemic. While I acknowledge that all genders experience domestic violence, my focus is on domestic violence perpetrated against women. The impacts of domestic violence affect women worldwide on a daily basis. The Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability statistically shows that approximately every six days, a woman is killed by her intimate partner in Canada (2024). My passion for raising awareness about domestic violence arose from losing a good friend of mine to domestic violence and hearing about the numerous stories of women worldwide who want to leave but cannot because of the barriers they face due to being a woman. This essay explores how gender inequality perpetuates domestic violence against women through examining definitions, historical factors, current circumstances, political inequalities, and society's role in helping combat gender inequality.

## Definition

To understand what domestic violence is, we must explore the multifaceted factors that define it. An in-depth definition provided by The Domestic Violence Awareness Project defines domestic violence as:

[Being] best understood as a pattern of abusive behaviours – including physical, sexual, and psychological attacks as well as economic coercion – used by one intimate partner against another (adult or adolescent) to gain, maintain, or regain power and control in the relationship. Batterers use a range of tactics to frighten, terrorize, manipulate, hurt, humiliate, blame, often injure, and sometimes kill a current or former intimate partner. Domestic violence, also known as intimate partner violence, is a serious and widespread problem [...] However, the burden of domestic violence is not shared equally across all groups, with women and many racial/ethnic and sexual minority groups being disproportionately affected. (2021)

While this definition presents an open-minded understanding of the various ways that domestic violence can exist in a relationship, to fully comprehend, we need to examine the characteristics of domestic violence.

## What are the Characteristics?

As outlined by the Canadian Women's Foundation, perpetrators can engage in domestic violence against women in various forms of abuse, including physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, and financial abuse, as well as criminal harassment or stalking. Characteristics of physical abuse include punching, kicking, choking with hands or various objects, threats of the use of a knife or gun, or committing murder. Sexual abuse can entail uttering threats, intimidation, or physical force to coerce a woman into unwanted sexual acts. It is possible to identify emotional or verbal abuse as threats to kill her or the children, humiliating and degrading her, confining her to the house, isolating her, and other acts to demean and restrict her. Financial abuse occurs by stealing her money, controlling her finances, forcing her to work, or not allowing her to work. Spiritual abuse uses religion to manipulate, dominate, or control her. Lastly, criminal harassment or stalking includes following her, watching her in a malicious, unwanted manner, or invading her privacy in a way that threatens her safety (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2016). A lack of knowledge surrounding the many characteristics of domestic violence causes many to misinterpret that they are experiencing abuse or being abusive and how history perpetuates gender inequality that contributes to this.

## The History of Gender Inequality

It is undeniable that throughout history, the marginalization and oppression of women have been apparent, beginning with the Canadian government's belief that the term "persons" exclusively applied to men and that men should hold positions of governance over women. (Famous 5 Foundation, 2023). These historical belief systems are still deeply embedded throughout our governments, judicial systems, social systems, and society. This marginalization persisted into 1876 when police arrested women for trying to vote. In the ruling, "the judge [...] referred to an ancient English Law that stated, women were not eligible for rights and privileges, only pains and penalties" (Famous 5 Foundation, 2023). This fuelled the famous five to fight, and on March 14, 1928, the five women went before the Supreme Court to debate the classification of

“persons” to include women. However, the Supreme court judge denied the requests of the Famous Five. Finally, on October 18, 1929, according to the Famous 5 Foundation, this changed: The Famous 5 went before Canada’s highest court of appeal and fought for women to be recognized as “persons” and won with the historic decision that women would be included in the legal definition of “persons” (2023). Canada deemed October 18 Persons Day to commemorate this monumental moment in women’s rights. While this was a step in the right direction for women, it also left out women who faced intersectional marginalization.

The unequal treatment and intersectionality women encounter create more barriers to having their fundamental rights of safety upheld. OXFAM International declares:

Gender inequality is one of the oldest and most pervasive forms of inequality. For centuries it has caused discrimination and exclusion of women, non-binary and trans people from social, political, and economic life. It has also blocked women from leadership roles and has led to increasing gender-based violence. (2023)

Domestic violence is a social welfare issue, heightened by a lack of social service. Furthermore, OXFAM International states that:

Women form the majority of those living in poverty. Governments and social institutions increasingly treat women and LGBTQIA+ people unfairly and in a biased way. They have fewer resources, less power and less influence compared to men. [They] can [also] experience further inequality due to their class, ethnicity and age, as well as religious and other fundamentalisms. Being treated equally and enjoying the same rights [regardless of] sex or gender is a fundamental human right. (2023)

The history of gender inequality that has historically created barriers to women seeking solace from domestic violence is still evident today, as domestic violence against women has risen to epidemic heights.

## Current Domestic Violence Epidemic

Statistics compiled from Red Deer, Alberta, Canada, and globally, illuminate the epidemic levels of domestic violence women are enduring. In Red Deer, the number of women requiring urgent help has been steadily increasing, with 2022 showing the highest need for assistance: “Danica Hoffart, executive director of the Central Alberta Women’s Emergency Shelter, said in October [of last year] the shelter received 259 crisis calls, up from 180 calls during the same month

in 2021, 159 calls in 2020, and 55 in 2019” (Zielinski, 2022). Hoffart also states that the forty beds offered in the shelter are almost always at capacity with women and children (Zielinski, 2022).

Provincially, the increased needs of women’s domestic violence shelters are not being met by the province of Alberta, resulting in domestic violence shelters turning thousands of women and their children away last year. The provincial network of the Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters, which oversees the organization of domestic violence shelters, “released its annual report of shelter experiences in the province from April 1, 2021 to March 31, 2022” (Gibson, 2022). This report found that of the 25,530 calls to request admission to a shelter, only 16.6% of those calls resulted in shelters being able to provide admission (Gibson, 2022). Women are being turned away from shelters at alarming rates, which forces women to choose between staying with their abuser or becoming unhoused. Both options are not congruent to ensuring the woman’s safety. Either choice will result in women living in high-risk situations and places, which increases their already vulnerable state.

Nationally, there is an epidemic of domestic violence against women that desperately needs immediate action. StatsCan says that in 2021,

police reported 114,132 victims of intimate partner violence [...] aged 12 years and older [...] Eight in 10 (79 percent) victims of such violence were women and girls, and the rate of victimization was nearly four times higher among women and girls than men and boys (537 versus 147). (Al-Hakim, 2022)

Also in 2021, intimate partner murders resulted in:

90 homicide victims [...] Three-quarters (76 percent) of these victims were women and girls. The number of victims of intimate partner homicide in 2021 was higher than in 2020 (84 victims) and 2019 (77 victims). (Al-Hakim, 2022)

StatsCan based this data solely on police reports. However, “only about 25 to 30 percent of women report” (Al-Hakim, 2022) occurrences of domestic violence. This means that unreported domestic violence could be on the rise as well (Al-Hakim, 2022). This not only shows the importance of the domestic violence issue but also how the lack of resources can result in women losing their lives at the hands of their partners.

Globally, the WHO, on behalf of the UN Interagency Working Group on Violence Against Women, analyzed data ranging across 161 countries and areas during the periods of 2018-2020. They “found that worldwide, nearly 1 in 3, or 30%, of women have [experienced] physical and/or

sexual violence by an intimate partner or non-partner sexual violence or both” (World Health Organization, 2021). The devastating statistics of how many women and girls will lose their life to an intimate partner due to domestic violence, as shown by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes, is that “Globally 81,000 women and girls were killed in 2020, around 47,000 of them (58 percent) died at the hands of an intimate partner or a family member, which equals to a woman or girl being killed every 11 minutes in their home” (2021). We need effective solutions to lower the devastating rates at which women are experiencing domestic violence and raise women’s ability to flee their abusers safely. However, that needs to start with providing additional resources at a political level, which is crucial for women escaping domestic violence.

## Political, Global, and Economic Influences

However, global societal “norms” that are set forth by male political figures ensure that men hold the majority in government offices, which not only further perpetuates gender inequality but also creates economic barriers for women to have the means to leave their abusers. When interviewing political scientist Kathleen Arnold, they questioned her about her views on how current policies or attitudes ignore the realities of domestic violence. Arnold responded:

while most abusers can act with near-impunity, targets of abuse are often arrested, lose custody of their children and, even in the best of circumstances, are asked to flee to a shelter. [The abused] often see more jail time than perpetrators, and abusers succeed in securing child custody more often than targets of abuse. (DePaul University, 2015)

Arnold went on to explain that although domestic violence happens in an interpersonal context:

[S]ocial attitudes, police enforcement (or lack thereof) and laws all contribute to encouraging or tolerating abuse. Ironically, egalitarian attitudes like “it takes two to tango” make us blind to inequality in relationships in a variety of political and socio-economic contexts. When we view all relationships between men and women in egalitarian terms, we then often focus on the target of abuse rather than the perpetrator. We ask: “Why did she stay? Why [did] she [not] seek help?” [With this mindset], we hold [the woman] responsible if children [witness] any abuse. Counter-intuitively, this egalitarian attitude leads to an over-focus on targets of abuse, while ignoring abusers’ actions and destructive tendencies [...] If our culture were to recognize this, responses would change and abusers may be held accountable for their actions. Targets of abuse might call the police more [often],

and society might demand fair sentencing and stop blaming women trapped in these situations. (DePaul University, 2015)

These deeply engrained societal attitudes and the inability of many to see the clear inequality in numerous relationships, keep women in unsafe living conditions out of fear of losing their children and their lives.

Although governments enact laws to protect women and create equality, a fundamental inequality is also apparent within governing systems. According to OXFAM International, “women make up less than 24% of the world’s parliamentarians and 5% of its mayors” (2023). This is not conducive to making changes toward women's equality if it does not take the perspective of a woman with lived experience of the marginalization and oppression this inequality causes. If parliament does not have equality in their offices, how can they help others to understand that domestic violence is rooted in the inequality of women? Men cannot be the voice to make changes for women’s well-being.

While poverty, unemployment, or economic recessions do not cause domestic violence, these factors may increase the risk of a woman experiencing domestic violence. Studies have shown that women living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are twice as likely to become victims of domestic violence. Financial problems for survivors of domestic violence are common and often entrap women in either poverty or abusive relationships. Various obstacles obstruct battered women from finding employment, maintaining employment, and using their wages to gain economic independence and safety. We know that in times of financial stress and hardships, the need for services increases, but providers of emergency domestic services are also struggling with fewer resources and funds: “Eighty percent of domestic violence shelters nationwide report an increase in women seeking assistance from abuse, with 73% of shelters attributing this rise in abuse to financial issues [...] 65% of women in shelters [cannot] find employment due to economy” (Domestic Violence Awareness Project, n.d.). Shelters are feeling this economic struggle as they do not want to turn away a woman in need: “In one day alone, domestic violence programs were unable to meet 10,581 requests for services because of a lack of funding, staffing, or other resources” (Domestic Violence Awareness Project, n.d.). To bring about change, we need more women representatives to enhance the resources and safe options for women. This would include working with frontline agencies and the social work profession.

## Social Work's Role to Pursue Social Justice

Social workers need to be aware and acknowledge the harm that social work has done and is still doing to victims of domestic violence. We must recognize that

The [looming fear] of having children removed by social workers is acutely felt by women. Often this threat denies the efforts women have made to protect their child from abuse and does not take into account the challenges and the increased risk of violence faced by women when leaving their abus[ive] partner. (Watson, 2017)

Social workers need to challenge and remain aware of any biases they may hold of women who are in domestic violence relationships to ensure they are not blaming the women victims. This not only perpetuates the societal views that domestic violence is the women's fault, but this may also ultimately push a woman to leave the abusive situation before safety measures are put in place, putting her and her child(ren) at an increased risk of deadly violence. Battered Women's Support Services explain that:

The statistics outline the reality that the most dangerous time for a survivor/victim is when she leaves the abusive partner; 77 percent of domestic violence-related homicides occur upon separation and there is a 75 percent increase in violence upon separation for at least two years. These valid concerns must be addressed with safety planning. (2020)

These statistics show that social workers must build a trusting relationship with the women they serve to help women safely escape their abusive partners. It is a difference of life or death for these women.

For social workers to meaningfully advocate for the elimination of domestic violence, they must be at the forefront, working alongside domestic violence survivors as well as working towards the prevention of domestic violence. Further, social workers must be trauma-informed when working with survivors, as they will fight domestic violence on three levels: micro, mezzo, and macro. Fighting domestic violence at the micro level or personal level includes "one-on-one with victims to facilitate resources, advocating on behalf of the victim(s), and bypassing obstacles that otherwise stand in their way of obtaining justice" (EKU Online, 2022). Social work at the mezzo (community) level would encompass "interventions and treatment of the victim and their child(ren), increasing general knowledge of the issue in the community (especially for law

enforcement and health care professionals), and increasing the awareness of resources in the area” (EKU Online, 2022). Finally, at the macro (systems) level social workers:

may work against the societal norms that perpetuate public health issues such as [domestic violence], including gender inequality, or they may be working to amend or eradicate laws that prevent or make it more difficult for victims of [domestic violence] to safely leave their perpetrators. (EKU Online, 2022)

In “helping” positions, we must remain vigilant to our societal taught biases and challenge others to do the same, to change their outlook and educate them on how to fight domestic violence.

## What Can You Do as an Individual to Help Fight Domestic Violence Against Women?

Although many do not believe they can fight something as large as gender inequality or domestic violence, it is the actions of all individuals that create big change. The UN Women states that “ending violence against women is everyone’s business” (2023). They outline ten tips to help eradicate this epidemic, but I will highlight four:

1. Listen to survivors – When a woman is brave enough to share her story, that is her first step towards breaking the silence and the cycle of abuse. Call out victim blaming if you hear it: “Do not say ‘Why didn’t she leave?’ [But, instead] say, ‘We hear you. We believe you. We stand with you’” (UN Women, 2023).
2. Teach the next generation and learn from them – We set examples for our younger generations, and our examples will shape how they perceive gender, human rights, and equality. Have open conversations with your children that challenge traditional gender stereotypes. Teach them about consent. Listen to your children, for many are wiser than we think (UN Women, 2023).
3. Advocate for responses and services for survivors – Call on governments to support women by ensuring funding to shelters, helplines, counselling agencies, housing supports, and other resources needed to help survivors safely leave their abusers (UN Women, 2023).
4. Start a conversation – Domestic violence against women and girls has existed for decades, even though it violates women’s human rights. When we break the silence, we help survivors know they are not alone, that we believe them, and that we stand in solidarity



with them to fight gender inequalities that form the foundation of domestic violence (UN Women, 2023).

By reading these four tips, you have already taken the first step to stand against domestic violence and stand with survivors.

In conclusion, we can see that the longstanding effects of gender inequality on women are not only a current issue but date back to 1928. These inequalities that society instills in us at a young age have contributed to societal attitudes toward men's and women's expectations and roles; these shape our views of what we accept and how we behave which perpetuate domestic violence. To raise awareness and make changes, we need to start on an individual level by raising others' awareness and challenging them to think differently. This is the beginning of a journey of advocacy for women. I wrote this on behalf of all the women whose lives were stolen by intimate partners and who can no longer speak out for themselves. We need immediate changes to our justice system that include changing laws to better protect women experiencing or fleeing domestic violence. Protection orders are not protecting anyone, and we need change, and we need it now. If we do not see change soon, more women will lose their lives to their partners – it could be someone you love.

## References

- Al-Hakim, A. (2022, October 22). *Family violence increases for 5th straight year in Canada. What's behind the trend?* Global News. <https://globalnews.ca/news/9217215/canada-covid-family-violence-increase/>
- Battered Women's Support Services. (2020, June 11). *Eighteen months after leaving domestic violence is still the most dangerous time.* <https://www.bwss.org/eighteen-months-after-leaving-domestic-violence-is-still-the-most-dangerous-time/>
- Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability. (2024). *Femicide is preventable.* <https://femicideincanada.ca>
- Canadian Women's Foundation. (2016, August). *Fact sheet moving women out of violence.* [https://canadianwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/FactSheet-VAWandDV\\_Feb\\_2018-Update.pdf](https://canadianwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/FactSheet-VAWandDV_Feb_2018-Update.pdf)
- DePaul University. (2015, October 9). *Domestic violence solutions are political, not only personal, says DePaul University expert Kathleen Arnold.* Newswise. <https://www.newswise.com/articles/domestic-violence-solutions-are-political-not-only-personal-says-depaul-university-expert-kathleen-arnold>
- Domestic Violence Awareness Project. (2021). *About domestic violence.* <https://www.dvawareness.org/about-dv>
- Domestic Violence Awareness Project. (n.d.). *How does the economy affect the domestic violence incidents and reporting by victims?* <https://www.dvawareness.org/sites/default/files/2019-06/DVandtheEconomy-TalkingPointsForm.pdf>
- EKU Online. (2022, May 25). *The social work response to intimate partner violence.* <https://ekuonline.eku.edu/blog/social-work/social-work-bs/the-social-work-response-to-intimate-partner-violence/>
- Famous 5 Foundation. (2023). *The 'persons' case.* <https://www.famous5.ca/the-persons-case>
- Gibson, C. (2022, December 7). *Alberta women's shelters are under-resourced, leading people to be turned away: report.* Global News. <https://globalnews.ca/news/9329563/alberta-womens-shelters-turnaways/>
- OXFAM International. (2023). *Gender justice and women's rights.*

<https://www.oxfam.org/en/what-we-do/issues/gender-justice-and-womens-rights>

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2021, November 25). *UNODC research: 2020 saw a woman or girl being killed by someone in their family every 11 minutes*, [https://www.unodc.org/unodc/frontpage/2021/November/unodc-research\\_-2020-saw-every-11-minutes-a-woman-or-girl-being-killed-by-someone-in-their-family.html](https://www.unodc.org/unodc/frontpage/2021/November/unodc-research_-2020-saw-every-11-minutes-a-woman-or-girl-being-killed-by-someone-in-their-family.html)

UN Women. (2023, December 7). *Take action: 10 ways you can help end violence against women*. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/11/compilation-take-action-to-help-end-violence-against-women>

Watson, D. (2017, Mar 30). *Domestic abuse and child protection: Women's experience of social work intervention*. Iriss. <https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/insights/domestic-abuse-and-child-protection-womens-experience-social-work-intervention>

World Health Organization. (2021, March 9). *Violence against women*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

Zielinski, S. (2022, November 15). *Calls to Red Deer's women's shelter escalate*. Red Deer Advocate. <https://www.reddeeradvocate.com/news/calls-to-red-deers-women-shelter-escalate/>