Addressing the Personal Security Issues of Women and Girls

Introduction

Personal security is central to every person's physical, intellectual, emotional, economic and spiritual sense of well-being. Crime and the fear of crime are two critical factors that can greatly undermine a person's sense of security.

Personal security issues are particularly important for women and girls. Women consistently report higher levels of fear of crime than do men. Almost half of all crime victims in Canada are women, and women and girls are the victims in the vast majority of certain reported crimes, such as physical and sexual assault by someone known to the victim.

Various studies have indicated that gender-based violence is the primary threat to women's personal security in Canada. Acts that threaten the personal security of women and girls represent a complex societal problem. The root of the problem lies

This publication is part of the Caledon Institute's crime prevention *series of* community stories*, produced in collaboration with the National Crime Prevention Centre. The series documents promising approaches to crime prevention through social development.*

in attitudes, behaviours and institutions that sustain unequal power relations between men and women, and render women and girls 'acceptable targets' for violence and abuse.

Gender-based violence has consequences for individual women and girls, and for the communities in which they live. Exposure to violence or an experience of victimization may increase the risk to personal security. A young girl who runs away from an abusive family situation may face new risks such as substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, violence from strangers and pressures to engage in prostitution and adopt an antisocial or criminal lifestyle. A woman who leaves an abusive relationship may face financial insecurity that limits her ability to find safe housing. Research suggests that personal security issues may be at the root of problems such as engaging in violent behaviour as a defensive coping mechanism and using inappropriate coping skills (such as substance abuse) to mitigate the effects of violence.

The level of gender-based violence in communities also contributes to a sense of fear and danger. Women and girls may modify their activities to lessen their perceived risk – hampering their access to educational and employment opportunities, and reducing their freedom to participate as equal citizens in community life.

The National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention recognizes the gender-specific aspects of personal security issues. It identifies as a priority the need to address the personal security issues of women and girls.

Partners in a long-term effort

Addressing the personal security issues of women and girls is a long-term policy concern that involves many players. Over the past two decades, a range of initiatives and actions have been taken by federal, provincial/territorial and municipal levels of government; by women's organizations and other equality-seeking organizations; by non-governmental organizations (including community-based crime prevention organizations); by professional organizations; and by the private sector. The National Strategy is one component of a multifaceted effort.

The Policy Framework

A Policy Framework for Addressing Personal Security Issues Concerning Women and Girls has been developed for the National Strategy. This framework assists the National Crime Prevention Centre in identifying, managing and providing funding for priority issues. The framework is being implemented in conjunction with complementary policy frameworks for the Strategy's other priorities: children (ages 0 to 12), youth (ages 13 to 18) and Aboriginal people.

The goal of the policy framework is to identify and reduce the range of factors and conditions that undermine the personal security of women and girls and contribute to gender-based crime. There are many dimensions to personal security, and concerns related to crime and victimization are only one part. Addressing root causes involves working to change underlying attitudes, values and

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National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention

The National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention aims to reduce crime and victimization by addressing their root causes through a social development approach. Social development is a long-term, proactive approach directed at removing personal, social and economic factors that lead some individuals to engage in criminal acts or to become victims of crime.

With an investment of $32 million annually, the National Strategy enables the Government of Canada to help communities develop projects and partnerships that will prevent crime. The strategy focuses particularly on children and youth, Aboriginal people and the personal security of women and girls. It includes the Safer Communities Initiative, a Promotion and Public Education Program and the National Crime Prevention Centre. The National Crime Prevention Centre is responsible for implementing the Strategy.

The Safer Communities Initiative is designed to help Canadians undertake crime prevention activities in their communities. It includes four funding components: the Community Mobilization Program, which helps communities develop approaches to crime prevention and undertake activities that deal with the root causes of crime; the Crime Prevention Investment Fund, which aims to establish reliable information on what works and what is promising in reducing the risk factors associated with crime and victimization; the Crime Prevention Partnership Program, which supports the involvement of organizations that can contribute to community crime prevention through the development of information, tools and resources; and the Business Action Program on Crime Prevention, which involves national and provincial/territorial business and professional associations in helping communities prevent crime, share information and encourage community mobilization.

On December 6, 1998, the federal, provincial and territorial ministers responsible for the status of women issued the *Iqaluit Declaration on Violence Against Women*. This Declaration reflects a shared vision of safe, healthy communities in every region of Canada and underscores the various governments' commitment to end violence against women. It is based on the following principles:

- Living free of violence is a right, not a privilege.
- Violence against women is a crime and should never be considered a private matter. Crimes of violence must be dealt with accordingly.
- Safety for victims and survivors must come first.
- In order to eliminate violence against women, equality and healthy relationships among boys and girls must be promoted from an early age.

structures that facilitate inequality, while at the same time implementing more immediate community-based prevention measures to reduce risk. These efforts require partnerships with other governments, nongovernmental organizations, communities and business.

The policy framework recognizes the complexities of addressing root causes, and the need for involvement from all sectors of society. The framework also recognizes and reflects the diversity that exists among Canadian women and girls. It takes into account differences in experience that relate to factors such as age, race, Aboriginal status, geographic location, class, disability, culture, language, sexual orientation, health and socioeconomic status. The framework includes a commitment to actively engage women and girls in the research, development and evaluation of solutions to crime problems. This approach of empowerment is consistent with the principles of crime prevention through social development.

The specific objectives of the policy framework are to:

- identify the root causes and risk factors that contribute to crimes against women and girls from diverse populations.

- encourage the sharing of information that will help communities – particularly high-risk and/or high-need communities – address personal security issues that affect women and girls in different situations.

- identify and promote strategies or promising practices that can reduce or minimize the risk factors associated with crimes against women and girls in different situations.

- promote conditions that produce individual and community resiliency to increase personal safety and effectively respond to gender-specific crime. (Resiliency is the capability to cope successfully in the face of adversity or risk.)

Priorities

The policy framework focusses specifically on the personal security concerns and needs of young women aged 13 to 18, young adult women (19 to 25) and their children. The risk is highest for these groups, and there are significant gaps in prevention. Adolescence and young adulthood are critical periods during which the risk of violence and crime may change or multiply, due to changes in personal activity patterns, living circumstances and relationships.

Older adult women living in high-risk/high-need communities are also a priority, as are girls up to 12 years of age who are living in conditions of risk. High-risk or high-need communities may include communities where personal security risks for women and girls are high; rural or isolated communities in which specific needs concerning this issue have not been addressed, or are only now emerging; and/or communities where few formal

or informal supports are available. These could include communities experiencing rapid or disconcerting change and communities experiencing or nearing crisis. There is a priority focus on Aboriginal communities.

The framework indicates that work is required in the area of public awareness and education – particularly involving youth – to change attitudes and behaviours that contribute to gender-based crime. Innovative and creative demonstration projects and evaluation research are needed to advance gender-sensitive approaches to prevention and intervention. Models of crime prevention related to the personal security of women and girls must be developed. There is a particular need for research to identify the personal security concerns of girls at various ages and stages, and to advance prevention. Tools and resources are required to empower communities to improve the security of women and girls in varying circumstances.

Various projects funded through the Safer Communities Initiative are tackling issues related to the personal security of women and girls. Projects funded through the Community Mobilization Program are empowering communities and individuals to change attitudes and reduce violence. For example, a project in Lindsay, Ontario, is developing support groups, workshops and educational programs to address the attitudes and isolation underlying violence against women in rural communities. A project in Lower Sackville, Nova Scotia, is researching female-against-female violence and using workshops to help junior high school girls make changes in their lives. A group in Montreal is promoting the adoption of Taxi-Plus, a prevention service provided by taxi drivers to enhance women's safety. Other projects are addressing personal security issues of Aboriginal girls and women, seniors, immigrant and visible minority women and girls, and women with mental health conditions.

Projects funded under the Crime Prevention Partnership Program are helping national and international nongovernmental organizations produce information, tools and resources to help improve the personal security of women and girls.

For instance, the International Centre for Criminal Law Reform and Criminal Justice Policy in Vancouver is disseminating a resource manual and compendium of best practices on model criminal justice and crime prevention to eliminate violence against women. Projects funded by the Investment Fund are helping to build and share knowledge about effective initiatives. The United Way of Calgary and Area, for example, is implementing and testing a model for a coordinated and integrated response by justice, social services, health services and community organizations to high-need women who are victims of domestic violence or at risk of revictimization.

Crime prevention is ultimately about people's values, attitudes and behaviours. The National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention is helping Canadians from all walks of life to make the changes necessary to improve the personal security of women and girls.

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For more information on the National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention, call (toll-free) 1-877-302-6272, or visit the website at *www.crime-prevention.org*.

Limited quantities of this publication are available in alternate formats (Braille, diskette and audio-tape).

Cette histoire communautaire est également disponible en français.