

# The War on Women:

## The State of Domestic Violence Today

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There is a war on women occurring in North America at this very moment. If you want to expand the lens one can argue there is a state of war on women across the world. The pandemic intensified an already prevalent issue and statistics on domestic violence are only getting worse, after decades of slowly getting better. The only way out? Awareness, dignity and kinship among communities.

A [statistical profile](#) taken in Canada in 2019 revealed:

**“THERE WERE APPROXIMATELY 400,000 VICTIMS OF POLICE-REPORTED VIOLENT CRIME IN CANADA IN 2019. OF THESE, ONE-QUARTER (26%, OR MORE THAN 100,000 PEOPLE) WERE VICTIMIZED BY A FAMILY MEMBER—THAT IS, A SPOUSE, PARENT, CHILD, SIBLING OR EXTENDED FAMILY MEMBER PERPETRATED THE VIOLENCE.**

**WOMEN AND GIRLS ACCOUNTED FOR TWO-THIRDS (67%) OF ALL VICTIMS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE IN 2019. WOMEN AND GIRLS ALSO ACCOUNTED FOR OVER HALF OF CHILD AND YOUTH (57%) AND SENIOR (58%) VICTIMS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE, AND ALMOST FOUR-FIFTHS OF ALL VICTIMS OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (79%).”**

These numbers are staggering when it's considered women and girls account for over half of the victims of family violence, and this was before the COVID-19 lockdown forced abusee's to live twenty-four hours a day with an abuser. Moreover, the children involved in abusive relationships also found themselves under lockdown with abusers.

The same study noted above goes on to reveal that 71% of reported incidents are violent forms of assault. These studies do not include indigenous victims or unreported incidents. Therefore one can assume statistics are actually much, much worse. And [In fact](#) they are **six** times the amount of indigenous women are killed in Canada yearly compared to non-indigenous women.

Furthermore, it is reported that 67% of Canadians admit to knowing another woman who was subject to domestic abuse. These rates go up when communities are faced with environmental, and/or political stress:

**“NEW RESEARCH SHOWS THAT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE RATES INCREASE FOLLOWING NATURAL DISASTERS LIKE FLOODS, WILDFIRES AND HURRICANES. AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA FOR EXAMPLE, VIOLENCE BETWEEN PARTNERS ROSE BY 98%. WOMEN ARE PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE DURING TIMES OF CRISIS, WHEN WOMEN’S SHELTERS MAY HAVE TO CLOSE, AND SOCIAL SERVICES ARE STRETCHED BY INCREASED DEMAND. GIVEN THAT CANADA HAS ITS SHARE OF NATURAL DISASTERS, SUCH AS THE 2016 WILDFIRES IN FORT MCMURRAY, ALBERTA, THE 2013 FLOOD IN CALGARY, OR THE MANITOBA FLOODS OF 2009 AND 2011.”**

The COVID-19 pandemic is an ongoing crisis. Unlike natural disaster there is no marked end for many communities at this point. This prolonged uncertainty, lockdowns (including child care for working women) and ultimate economic down turn has placed women in a precarious situation when it comes to domestic abuse.

A particular question often comes up in this discussion: Why doesn't she just leave? Unfortunately statistics show that when a woman tries to leave her abuser she is at the [greatest risk for violence](#) and even death. Leslie Morgan Steiner discusses this in her TEDTalk.

**“TO ME, THIS IS THE SADDEST AND MOST PAINFUL QUESTION THAT PEOPLE ASK, BECAUSE WE VICTIMS KNOW SOMETHING YOU USUALLY DON'T: IT'S INCREDIBLY DANGEROUS TO LEAVE AN ABUSER. BECAUSE THE FINAL STEP IN THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PATTERN IS **KILL HER**. OVER 70% OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE MURDERS HAPPEN AFTER THE VICTIM HAS ENDED THE RELATIONSHIP, AFTER SHE'S GOTTEN OUT, BECAUSE THEN THE ABUSER HAS NOTHING LEFT TO LOSE. OTHER OUTCOMES INCLUDE LONG-TERM STALKING, EVEN AFTER THE ABUSER REMARRIES; DENIAL OF FINANCIAL RESOURCES; AND MANIPULATION OF THE FAMILY COURT SYSTEM TO TERRIFY THE VICTIM AND HER CHILDREN, WHO ARE REGULARLY FORCED BY FAMILY COURT JUDGES TO SPEND UNSUPERVISED TIME WITH THE MAN WHO BEAT THEIR MOTHER. AND STILL WE ASK, WHY DOESN'T SHE JUST LEAVE?”**

Morgan Steiner continues to say that we tend to stereotype victims of domestic abuse as “self destructive women, damaged goods” and in not so many words allude to the belief

that it's her fault she stays. She calls for an end to brushing the conversation under the rug, what survivors need is awareness, openness, and communication; the ability to discuss what has happened or what is happening, with dignity and without the added threat of feeling guilt or shame.

**“ABUSE THRIVES ONLY IN SILENCE. YOU HAVE THE POWER TO END DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SIMPLY BY SHINING A SPOTLIGHT ON IT. WE VICTIMS NEED EVERYONE. WE NEED EVERY ONE OF YOU TO UNDERSTAND THE SECRETS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE. SHOW ABUSE THE LIGHT OF DAY BY TALKING ABOUT IT WITH YOUR CHILDREN, YOUR COWORKERS, YOUR FRIENDS AND FAMILY. RECAST SURVIVORS AS WONDERFUL, LOVABLE PEOPLE WITH FULL FUTURES.”**

We can see the way abuse thrives in silence with a simple look to the now viral Gabby Petito case. True, much attention is paid when a young, middle class white woman goes missing or becomes a victim of murder compared to non-caucasian instances of violence, but the story is powerful just the same. It's powerful because its an ongoing pattern and we have become complicit in the face of that pattern.

One of the striking of the [Petito story](#) is the 52-minute long body camera footage taken by a Utah police officer. It features a very distraught looking Petito alleging her intimate partner hit her during their #VanLift vacation.

**“POLICE IN UTAH STOPPED THE COUPLE'S VAN ON AUG. 12 AFTER RECEIVING A COMPLAINT ABOUT A DOMESTIC DISTURBANCE. THE HOUR-LONG ROADSIDE ENCOUNTER, IN**

**WHICH THE TWO WERE QUESTIONED SEPARATELY, DID NOT RESULT IN CHARGES AGAINST EITHER OF THEM.”**

It’s heartbreaking to watch the video. It’s more heartbreaking when you realize that one month after the body camera footage was taken Petito’s parents had reported her missing.

Petito’s boyfriend, Brian Laundrie returned home without her - ten days before he went missing.

Petito's body was recovered in a remote area of Wyoming’s Bridger-Teton National Forest, not far from the couples campsite, and their abandoned van.

The video taken by Utah police shows Petito in the back of a police car crying and looking, I’ll say it, traumatized. Bystander’s called police for intervention after witnessing the [following](#):

**“WE DROVE BY AND THE GENTLEMAN WAS SLAPPING THE GIRL,” THE CALLER SAID. “THEN WE STOPPED. THEY RAN UP AND DOWN THE SIDEWALK. HE PROCEEDED TO HIT HER, HOPPED IN THE CAR AND THEY DROVE OFF.”**

Even [stopping the couple](#) proved dramatic.

**“POLICE LOCATED THE VAN AND PULLED THE COUPLE OVER AFTER THE VEHICLE EXCEEDED THE SPEED LIMIT, ABRUPTLY LEFT ITS LANE AND STRUCK A CURB, ACCORDING TO A POLICE REPORT FROM MOAB OFFICER ERIC PRATT. THE OFFICER WALKED UP TO THE PASSENGER SIDE OF THE**

**VEHICLE, WHERE A CRYING PETITO TOLD HIM, "WE'VE JUST BEEN FIGHTING THIS MORNING. PERSONAL ISSUES," ACCORDING TO THE BODY CAMERA FOOTAGE.**

Domestic violence experts across America have referenced the video in attempt to highlight the ways domestic abuse is sometimes ignored by municipal parties.

In the video, Petito [tells officer's](#) that Laundrie hit her, then later backtracks and claimed she hit him first. The statement comes after officer's question her, multiple times, about the truth of her story.

**"YOU SLAPPED HIM FIRST? AND JUST ON HIS FACE?" PRATT CAN BE HEARD ASKING PETITO. "WELL, HE KEPT TELLING ME TO SHUT UP," PETITO RESPONDS.**

**"DID HE HIT YOU, THOUGH? I MEAN, IT'S OK IF YOU'RE SAYING YOU HIT HIM, AND THEN I UNDERSTAND IF HE HIT YOU, BUT WE WANT TO KNOW THE TRUTH IF HE ACTUALLY HIT YOU, BECAUSE YOU KNOW...," PRATT [THE OFFICER] SAYS."**

Mindy Murphy, Domestic Abuse expert in Florida, claims this video crystallizes what's known as "*Battered Woman's Syndrome*" in which survivors are repeatedly told they are making a big deal out of nothing.

At one point Murphy notes, Petito claims Laundrie hit her in the face. Here, Murphy said, law enforcement officers could have followed up with "Has this happened before? Has he hit you in the face? *Has he had his hands around you neck before?*" as opposed to "Are you sure you didn't do anything to provoke him."

Murphy's comment is a heartbreaking form of foreshadowing as two weeks after her report on FOX news, [Associated Press](#) reported Petito's death was caused by strangulation. Little more was reported about Petito's physical condition — including whether she may have been strangled directly by somebody's hands, a rope or some other item. Her body was left for three to four weeks in the wilderness. Their van found not far away. In three to four weeks her body was believed to be in the wilderness, however, put her death around the Aug. 27-30 period investigators believe Petito and Laundrie had traveled to the area.

Going back to the body camera footage, Petito's own statement that she "may have" hit Laundrie first put her in the position to be charged as the abuser. While Utah police declined to charge Petito, they did little to dig deeper into the situation, and instead of asking more questions, chose to separate the couple.

A common theme appears in this interaction, shared en masse online, domestic victims are too often unheard and unsupported and ultimately end up back in the arms of their abuser.

Petito and Laundrie reunited, her death following weeks later.

Currently, Laundrie is AWOL, and the prime suspect in the investigation of her death.

The question not only remains but remains more pertinent than ever: *How do we as a community move towards supporting, listening, and communicating issues of domestic violence?*

**More importantly, how do we support women getting out of domestic violence?**

I suspect the answer to be three prong. We have to meet survivors of domestic abuse with **AWARENESS, DIGNITY** and with **KINSHIP/COMMUNITY**.

Awareness affords us the ability to discern when domestic situations turn dangerous - physically, mentally and emotionally. Talking about the insidious and often sneaky nature of domestic abuse creates an awareness around the commonality of the experience - woman or man. In creating awareness survivors feel less stigmatized by shame and guilt through their admission that they had been abused. Instead, awareness empowers survivors and friends, family and community members to listen to their needs, enabling victims not just to survive but to thrive. This also ultimately gives loved ones the tools to help.

As human beings dignity then affords us worthy of **honour and respect**. Many cultures across the world value honour above most things. Honour is the antidote to shame and guilt and *respect* is the gift it gives back. Survivors of abuse aren't looking for sympathizers, they are looking for respect. Dignity, honour and respect can be as simple as having a safe place to use the washroom, to say what we think or to have the basic necessities for good living like food, water and product to keep clean. In many cases the need for basic necessities whether literal, financial or emotional can keep a victim located in a domestic violence pattern for lifetimes.

Finally, survivors of abuse need kinship and community. Sometimes with other women, but generally survivors need the kinship of others who understand they are having a human experience. Long gone are the days of the red tent when women had monthly opportunity to connect and learn from each others wisdom. We must make it a priority to create ties of kinship in our communities, yes with other women, so that we can lend a hand in creating awareness and dignity where and when needed. If one in four homes experience intimate abuse across North America then this is the of kinship that is needed, *badly*, be-



cause it creates communication free from guilt and shame, space *to ask for help* when needed. This becomes the the hinge point where community healing has a chance to occur. Where the needle that states one in four moves to one in six, one in ten even.

A fantastic community organization supporting this three prong approach to domestic abuse is Angel Freeman's [Fill A Purse for a Sister Campaign](#). A perfect example of the way awareness, dignity and kinship create opportunities for women in domestic abuse situations assistance.

The Fill a Purse for a Sister campaign runs annually and:

**“BRINGS COMFORT, HOPE AND DIGNITY TO WOMEN AND YOUTH IN CRISIS WITH THE GIFT OF PURSES FILLED WITH PERSONAL NECESSITIES.”**

The campaign runs across Canada with community leads in cities and towns offering space to drop off new or very gently used purses filled with items like tampons, shampoo, conditioner, soap, words of encouragement and other necessities like perhaps a whistle or flashlight.

Angel Freedman is the President & Founder of Fill a Purse For a Sister Campaign. Her mission is to promote awareness, especially around domestic violence and, as she says, **"make this a better world, one community at a time"**.

Inspired by the Susan B. Anthony quote “every woman should have a purse of her own,” Freedman, has collected bags for sisters [since 2015](#).

Fill a Purse for a Sister brings support and awareness tools to local police as well, and in a big, big way.

The filled purses and financial contributions are collected by volunteers across Canada. Once gathered they are donated to the York Regional Police and then to women's shelters and domestic violence shelters that include Yellow Brick House, Women's Support Network, Women's Center of York Region, Blue Door and Rose of Sharon.

**"THE YORK REGIONAL POLICE ARE MY ANGELS. I USED TO DELIVER THE PURSES MYSELF, BUT THEY HAVE BEEN DOING IT FOR A COUPLE OF YEARS NOW," SAID ANGEL FREEDMAN. "THEY PICK UP THE WARES, AND THEY TAKE THEM TO THE SHELTERS. ALL I HAVE TO DO IS TELL THEM WHICH ONES THE PURSES ARE GOING TO BECAUSE THEY ALREADY KNOW WHERE THEY ALL ARE. THAT'S INFORMATION I CAN'T DISCLOSE TO JUST ANYBODY."**

The police department also retains some of the filled purses for human trafficking victims.

COVID-19 protocols are in place, as support is needed more than ever, and all items are sealed in plastic bags and untouched until they are received by their new owner. Extra steps are worth it because every bag and donation collected goes directly towards helping women, children and youth in need.

The three month campaign ends December 1, 2021. If you are interested in becoming a community lead or contacting a community lead for drop off you can find that information [here](#).

Looking for a drop-off location? Feel free to check [here](#).

Interested in donating financially? You can do so [here](#).

SOURCES:

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