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Attitudes and Awareness of Gender-Based Violence Among Youth in Canada

Executive Summary

Prepared for Women and Gender Equality Canada

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Canada 

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This public opinion research report presents the results of a survey conducted by Environics Research on behalf of Women and Gender Equality Canada. The research was conducted from February 10 to March 10, 2022. This publication may be reproduced for non-commercial purposes only. Prior written permission must be obtained from Women and Gender Equality Canada. For more information on this report, please contact Women and Gender Equality Canada at: FEGC.Communications.WAGE@fegc-wage.gc.ca

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Executive summary

Environics Research (Environics) is pleased to present this report to Women and Gender Equality Canada with findings from the Attitudes and Awareness of Gender-Based Violence Among Youth in Canada survey.

A. Background and objectives

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a widespread and persistent problem across Canada. More than eleven million Canadians (men and women) have been physically or sexually assaulted since they were the age of 15, and this number represents 38% of women nation-wide (Source: Statistics Canada Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces 2018). GBV also takes many forms including emotional, psychological, financial, physical, and sexual abuse committed by a current or former spouse, common-law partner, or dating partner. There are also many specific segments of the population who are at heightened risk of experiencing GBV, and there is reason to believe that the Covid-19 pandemic has led to increases in a “GBV shadow pandemic”. While GBV can affect people of all ages, there is evidence that it is a particularly big problem for younger people between the ages of 14 and 24 (Source: Statistics Canada Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces 2018).

This research was conducted with the objective of informing upcoming efforts to raise awareness about GBV and shift attitudes within Canada that contribute to gendered inequalities and gender-based violence (GBV). It is also intended to provide a measure of awareness, attitudes, and behaviours in order to monitor the impact of change efforts over time.

The survey explores the awareness, attitudes, and behaviours of Canadian youth with regard to the following topics:

- Gender-based violence
- The definition of consent
- The role of bystanders/friends/family members in addressing and preventing GBV
- Gender roles and norms, sexual diversity, and gender identity and expression
- Gender equality and equity
- Socio demographic characteristics of GBV including ethnicity, Indigeneity, gender identity, etc.

B. Methodology

Environics Research conducted a 15-minute online survey with 2,002 Canadians aged 14 to 24 from February 10 to March 10, 2022. Survey respondents were selected from registered members of an opt-in online panel. Since a sample drawn from an online panel is not a random probability sample, no formal estimates of sampling error can be calculated.

Quotas for the general population were set by age, gender, and region. The final general population data were then weighted to ensure the sample is representative of the Canadian population, according to the most recent Census. More information about the methodology for research is included in Appendix A of the full report.

C. Key findings

General awareness

- Canadian youth rate gender-based violence as an issue of high concern, with four in ten (40%) saying they are very concerned about this issue; this puts it on par with climate change (38% very concerned).
- Canadian youth are also broadly familiar with the term (77% familiar), though they generally struggle to define it beyond the most elementary definition of “violence against a person based on gender” (40%).
- Youth most readily identify acts of physical violence and overt threats committed by men, against women, as gender-based violence; there is less agreement where other types of abuse are concerned, like emotional or financial abuse, or when the victims of violence and abuse are male. There are lower levels of agreement around non-physical forms of abuse, like financial abuse, sharing nude photos without consent, and cajoling someone into sex after they’ve said no; the perception that these acts are not gender-based violence is generally common across sub-groups, and not limited to likely perpetrators.
- While they may struggle to define or identify gender-based violence in concrete terms, Canadian youth nonetheless widely recognize it as a problem in Canada (73%) and in the province or territory where they live (67%). Moving to the local and personal level, youth tend to see gender-based violence as a less serious issue within their own community, school, work, or family; this difference speaks to a distinction between awareness and actual experience with gender-based violence.
- Most youth see gender-based violence as an issue that has worsened with time (44%) or hasn’t changed (20%), a finding that may reflect a rapidly changing public discourse that has shone a light on gender issues in recent years. The way youth experience and talk about gender-based violence now is also very different compared to the past; the importance and ubiquity of online spaces continues to intensify for youth, who are increasingly subject to newer forms of gender-based violence like online bullying and “revenge porn” that simply didn’t exist for previous generations. In fact, when asked where GBV is most likely to occur, the most common setting youth mention is online (42%).
- Throughout the research, it can be noted that concern, awareness, and understanding of gender-based violence is generally higher among segments more at risk for experiencing it, namely women, Indigenous youth, racialized youth, and those identifying as LGBTQ2.
- Another notable pattern that is consistent through the research is a difference between younger teenagers (14 to 17) and older youth (18 to 24); the younger cohort is less aware of gender-based violence compared to the older group and tends to see it in terms that reflect their lived experience with more emphasis on school, family, and online compared to older youth, who tend to see GBV as more prevalent in public spaces.

- Youth in Atlantic Canada generally demonstrate higher awareness and understanding of gender-based violence, particularly in contrast with youth in Alberta and Quebec.

Contributing Factors

- Canadian youth generally understand likely victims of GBV in terms of their gender or sexuality (i.e., women and girls, trans / intersex / non-binary, or LGBTQ2), but less commonly identify likely victims on the basis of other risk factors like racial identity, Indigeneity, mental health issues, or socio-economic disadvantages. This is especially true among those who identify as male, white, or straight.
- Looking at factors that contribute to gender-based violence, youth generally rate individual attitudes highest (sexism, homophobia, racism, culture of violence), followed by individual problems (substance abuse, mental health), with socio-economic conditions last (economic anxiety, poverty, upbringing). This points to a general perception that gender-based violence is a problem rooted in individual perpetrators, rather than societal conditions.

Awareness of WAGE

- Though familiarity with WAGE is generally modest among youth (36% aware), the department is nonetheless regarded as a worthy and trustworthy source of information, with half (53%) expressing interest in visiting the website in the future and most saying they trust WAGE somewhat or a lot (76%) as an information source on GBV.
- Familiarity with WAGE is lower among some groups who may be more vulnerable to gender-based violence, including women and LGBTQ2 youth.

Witnessing and Experiencing Gender-Based Violence

- One in three (35%) say they have personally witnessed gender-based violence at some point, most often in a public place (41%) or at school (38%). Of those who witnessed GBV, most say they tried to take some sort of action, like providing support to the victim (47%) or intervening to stop the violence (39%).
- One in four youth (27%) disclose that they have personally experienced gender-based violence. While experience with GBV is more common among women and LGBTQ2 youth, victims from these groups are less likely to seek help than victims who are male or who identify as straight.
- Youth rank police first among the sources they would turn to if someone they knew was experiencing or witnessing gender-based violence. However, when it comes to those who witnessed or disclosed their own experience with gender-based violence, few actually turned to police for support.

Consent

- There is some degree of uncertainty around issues of consent in a sexual context. Though most youth agree that consent must be given at each stage of a sexual encounter (79%), fairly substantial minorities agree that consent exists without a clear no (31%), or without physical resistance (29%). These, and other similar perceptions about consent, are more common among men and those who identify as straight.

Social Values

- Most youth have progressive attitudes toward issues of gender equality and sexuality. They reject statements in support of patriarchy and traditional families and support those in same sex relationships.
- Most youth reject the idea that violence can be exciting and also reject the idea that it is acceptable for people to react violently to relieve tension, but significant minorities agree with both of these notions.
- Most youth disagree that racism is largely a thing of the past and most reject the notion that there is too much immigration. They are more divided on whether immigrants should assimilate.
- Most youth disagree that their lives are predetermined, but half agree that they have trouble changing the course of events that affect them.
- Youth who have experienced GBV tend to be more accepting of violence and of patriarchal views of gender equality. They are also more fatalistic and less supportive of immigration.

D. Political neutrality statement and contact information

I hereby certify as senior officer of Environics that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada, and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate, or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

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