**Why isn’t violence against women an election issue?**

By Jane Gerster National Online Journalist — Features Global News (Sept.29, 2019)

It’s time for a more nuanced conversation about how Canada’s efforts to tackle intimate partner violence don’t seem to be working.

That’s what researchers with the Canadian Domestic Homicide Prevention Initiative said this week after their latest study revealed there’s been no change to domestic homicide rates in the last nine years. Women made up three-quarters of domestic homicides during that time period, with 52 per cent of women belonging to at least one vulnerable group the researchers identified — those with an Indigenous background, new immigrants or refugees, northern or rural residents and children.

Expand the scope from domestic homicides to all femicides and the picture is equally stark: one woman is killed on average every 2.5 days. That’s a statistic that hasn’t changed in four decades.

And yet, the issue of violence against women has yet to reach the campaign trail, where climate change and immigration — as well as Liberal leader Justin Trudeau’s blackface scandal — have dominated headlines. That has to change, says Andrea Gunraj, of the Canadian Women’s Foundation.

The three areas that would “make gender equality a reality” are ending violence and building safety, economic development and reducing poverty, as well as creating inclusive leadership and decision-making, Gunraj says. That’s what the Foundation wants the political parties to focus on. The Foundation is one of many advocacy organizations that see a national action plan on violence against women as key to ensuring women are safe.

“It’s something a lot of experts across the country have been calling for for the last 20 years,” Gunraj says. “That would be something that would really move us forward.”

No single policy will be the solution, says Lise Martin, executive director of Women’s Shelters Canada, which released its report this week on shelters’ financial strife. “It’s really important to look at things holistically… poverty is a big issues, within that is the importance of addressing childcare and housing and the other pieces of violence against women.”

Canada needs wide scale prevention but that has to go hand-in-hand with services, she says — remember the increased demand on services resulting from the #MeToo movement? Prevention doesn’t work if people don’t also have services to access.

Women’s Shelters Canada (WSC) has only existed for six years, created by the provincial organizations to try to put some hard numbers to anecdotal stories of women turned away from overcrowded shelters and rural shelters blowing huge portions of their budget on transportation to try to bring women at risk to safety.

“When shelters were first set up 40 years ago, that’s very much what it was: a bed,” says Martin. “Society has gotten more complex. Women who are finding themselves in the shelters are very often (dealing) with issues of mental health concerns and substance abuse concerns —very much a way to deal with the violence these women have been living with for often multiple years.”

That’s further compounded by the fact many of these women have children they need to care for and escalating housing costs that make an affordable home an unrealistic prospect, Martin says, which means women stay in shelters much longer than anticipated — the ripple effect of which means there isn’t always space for other women, so they stay longer in violent relationships.

Add to that disparities in access and service among rural and urban shelters, Martin says, and you’ll understand WSC’s election advocacy: “the services you receive should not depend on your postal code and that’s very much the situation in the country right now.”

WSC is one of many organizations pushing for a national action plan. So far, the government has implemented a federal strategy on gender-based violence. The problem, Martin says, is that that strategy is limited in scope to the federal level.

“They did get their house in order, but now it’s time to move on… they need to take leadership,” she says. “Often it’s convenient to say, ‘oh well it’s provincial jurisdiction’ or ‘we don’t want to step on the toes of provinces or territories’ … we need federal leadership, which basically means providing resources to the provinces and territories via this national action plan.”

So far, the federal parties haven’t dedicate much air time to women’s issues.

These are all issues that Canada needs to tackle, says Suki Beavers, executive director of the National Association of Women and the Law (NAWL) — one of the organizations calling for a comprehensive national action plan. “We need to tackle it with money, we need to tackle it with policies, and we need to tackle it with law.”

And yet, this election cycle has yet to devote much attention to women’s issues or violence against women, in particular. “I definitely think there has been movement, just the recognition that women’s rights are an issue is an important step forward,” Martin says, “but the situation for women who are living in violence hasn’t changed in the last four years, and it hasn’t changed in decades.”

That violence hasn’t been top of mind so far this election is “a bit worrying,” she says. “Is it because (the parties) feel this doesn’t have enough traction for them? If so, that’s worrying on a wider societal level.”

The Canadian Women’s Foundation is one of several organizations pushing for a debate specifically on women’s issues and gender equity issues. “We haven’t had one for many years,” Gunraj says. “It would be so powerful for voters to be able to hear what all the parties are going to do on these issues.”

Go ask the people running for election or reelection in your riding what they will do for women, she says, and then let that factor into who you vote for.