



Caroline is not her actual name. But she is a real person.

She describes herself as a strong personality.

When she was pregnant and in the early years of her daughter's life, Caroline was working for a large bank and felt she was "bringing it" at work. She was sure of herself.

The security she felt in her career was totally at odds with the yelling, the volatility, the violence inside her home.

There, she was not safe.

Caroline wanted an end to the abuse from her then-partner—the high-pitched screaming, the fits of rage, the objects that came hurling at her—but mostly she wanted him to get better.

She clung to moments of tenderness. Glimmers of vulnerability. Years later, she calls it a period of "high denial and many promises."

"There were moments of such love. I saw them, that's why I stayed. But when the monster came out, you learned where the line was," Caroline says. "I stood up to this guy until his hands were on my throat."

There were also moments that could have—should have—been opportunities to support Caroline, like the connections she had with systems such as child protection services, meant to keep her and her daughter safe.

Seeing her baby girl react to the violence around her shifted something in Caroline.

Maybe it wasn't all under control.

"I thought I was managing it until I saw the reaction from my infant. I thought, 'she's asleep, she doesn't hear it, she doesn't see it.' But when it started happening when she was in the same room, even though she couldn't speak, she would just start to cry in distress," Caroline recalls.

"I could see it so clearly on her face."

WARNING

This story contains details of intimate partner violence that may be upsetting to readers.

REACH OUT

If you are experiencing intimate partner violence and are in immediate danger, call 911. Visit ShelterSafe.ca to locate nearby shelters or find the crisis line in your region. In Ontario, you can call the Assaulted Women's Helpline for free, 24/7 support in many languages: toll-free at 1-866-863-0511, TTY at 1-866-863-7868 or text #SAFE (#7233).

CAROLINE GOT OUT, fleeing after police arrested her former partner for assault. But many don't.

The numbers are shocking. Almost half of adult women in Canada who have been in a relationship—44 per cent—reported experiencing physical, psychological or sexual violence at some point during their lives, according to a 2018 Statistics Canada analysis. Every few days, another woman is murdered by her intimate partner.

The costs are immense.

Women facing violence have worse health and economic outcomes. Their challenges affect friends, coworkers and workplaces. Children exposed to violence—and almost half of child protection service cases stem from that very issue—face higher rates of anxiety and depression, behavioural problems and continued abusive relationships.

Beyond the devastating human toll, one estimate from Canada's Department of Justice pegged the annual economic cost of dealing with the effects of intimate partner violence at more than \$7 billion. That figure hasn't been updated, even for inflation, since it was calculated in 2009.

Rates of intimate partner violence are rising. Between 2014 and 2022, incidents reported to police were up almost 20 per cent in Canada. And that doesn't include the cases that go unreported.

Now a research assistant at Western's Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children (CREVAWC), Caroline is well aware of the realities of intimate partner violence in this country. And CREVAWC is using her work to flip the script.

How could such a pervasive problem, literally killing Canadians, remain in the shadows? Why are inquests and national strategies still not driving radical change?

There are no easy answers. But experts have some promising ideas.

The first problem, says Katreena Scott, CREVAWC academic director and Canada

Research Chair in Ending Child Abuse and Domestic Violence, is a lack of understanding. Experts are still forced to explain the prevalence of intimate partner violence.

For experts like Scott, who have dedicated their lives to studying and eradicating gender-based violence, this starting point is a source of frustration that reveals a deeper issue: basic knowledge is still lacking.

With nearly one in two women in Canada experiencing violence in a relationship, everyone knows someone facing this battle—even if they don't realize it.

"We advocate constantly for getting this message out, everywhere. It has to be standard knowledge," Scott says.

She encounters all sorts of compassionate citizens, community and political leaders, who just don't realize the scope of the problem.

Even when survivors speak out, they encounter significant barriers, Scott says.

"The need to remain anonymous is just one example of the challenges facing women who have bravely chosen to share their stories. They have to navigate legal obstacles alongside the impact and trauma of intimate partner violence," she says.

Wanting to drive change isn't a substitute for basic knowledge. Among those committed to helping, understanding is still lacking.

Scott's had executives claim intimate partner violence isn't an issue for their employees, or at least not a workplace issue.

Even more worrisome, she speaks to professionals who don't have the necessary expertise to interact with those experiencing violence. That's a major gap—clear moments for intervention falling by the wayside. But it has a straightforward solution.

"For social workers, psychologists, nurses, lawyers, there is, at most, an optional course on family violence they might take. Shouldn't every single one of them be required to have this training?" Scott says.

But there's a lack of effort, funding and social or political will to make it happen.

"We have staunch advocates raising these issues at every table they sit at. But it's still a side issue. People don't seem to realize that gender-based violence is central for policing, mental health, child protection, family law and others," Scott says, noting those sectors have an important role to play when it comes to intervention.

Those systems see the ripple effects of intimate partner violence in their cases every day. Workers on the frontlines can help provide or direct people to support before their problems turn into criminal cases, mental health crises and unsafe environments for kids.

"This really is core work," Scott says.



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Above: Young women light candles at a vigil for 17-year-old Breanna Broadfoot in London, Ont. on July 24, 2024. Broadfoot was fatally stabbed, and her boyfriend then shot by police on July 18, 2024.

NADINE WATHEN, a Western nursing professor and Canada Research Chair in Mobilizing Knowledge on Gender-Based Violence, understands why the issue is so stubborn.

“There’s just so much going on in the world, and this seems like another big, thorny, complex problem that’s overwhelming,” she says. “It seems too onerous and scary.”

She focuses on the deep structural challenges and entrenched systems of misogyny, oppression and racism that allow violence to take root and flourish.

It’s one big, interconnected problem, Wathen says.

“There is so much complexity. The system is so gendered, so patriarchal and keeps women subservient and expendable. We’re so embedded in this way of thinking about gender and exonerating men that it seems too daunting to break out of that framework,” she says.

“It’s much easier to say, ‘He was a nice guy, he just had some mental health problems.’ Blame her a little bit, exonerate him a little bit.”

In 2023, London, Ont. city council declared intimate partner violence an epidemic. Ninety-four Ontario communities followed suit, and the province is now considering similar action.

A moment of recognition. But now it’s left to advocates and leaders like Scott and Wathen to remind politicians they’re actually late—extremely late—to the game. This kind of violence long ago reached crisis levels.

That history is at the very core of CREVAWC’s work.

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The centre was founded in 1992, three years after a shooter who claimed he was “fighting feminism” murdered 14 women and injured another 14 in an engineering class at École Polytechnique, the deadliest shooting in the country’s history until recently.

An expert panel released a report on the Montreal massacre with recommendations to address violence against women, including the need for more community and research collaborations.

CREVAWC answered the call, the result of a partnership between Western, Fanshawe College and the London Coordinating Committee to End Women Abuse. It has been part of Western’s Faculty of Education since 2001.

More than 30 years later, the landscape looks eerily similar.

Despite compelling reports, inquests, even the creation of death review committees, movement is slow.

Scott is part of the Domestic Violence Death Review Committee in Ontario, an expert panel analyzing each homicide where gender-based violence may have played a role. And it appears to play an outsized role.

At the time of printing, two of the six homicides in London, Ont. so far in 2024 have been connected to intimate partner violence.

A 62-year-old woman reached out to organizations that help victims of abuse in the hours before her death. Her boyfriend is now facing second-degree murder charges. Less than a month later, a 17-year-old girl was fatally stabbed, and her boyfriend then shot by police.

Mass tragedies also continue to strike a national chord, forcing attention.

But for every case that seems to galvanize the country into action, there are expert recommendations that continue to be ignored in the aftermath.

In 2020, Canada’s deadliest mass shooting renewed demands for change after a man kicked off a 13-hour killing spree across Nova

Scotia by assaulting his intimate partner and setting their cottage on fire. He took the lives of 22 people, one of whom was pregnant, and injured three more in a fear-filled night that left deep scars across the province.

The Nova Scotia Mass Casualty Commission, the public inquiry body formed in the wake of the devastation to investigate and issue recommendations to keep Canadians safe, produced a seven-volume final report.

It describes the connections between gender-based violence, family violence and mass casualties as irrefutable.

“Our perceptions of where the real danger lies are misconceived, and we ignore the hard truth of the ‘everydayness’—the commonness and seeming normalcy—of violence between intimate partners and within families and the ways in which this violence spills out to affect other people, too,” the Commission wrote in its final report, called *Turning the Tide Together*.

Scott was particularly struck by the report highlighting all previous recommendations from similar inquiries, driving home just how few have ever been implemented.

Still, there is hope, she says. More and more, people are talking about the issue.

And that’s an important strategy to build momentum.

IT’S CRITICAL for everyone to understand warning signs and what to do, experts say. Sometimes it’s casual conversations, where victims have a sense of comfort or safety, that encourage people to reach out for help.

Scott sees those moments as key.

Building up the knowledge needed to extend a hand in tough times could help turn the tide before police or child protection services are ever involved.

CREVAWC offers online training with practical tips to support those facing violence.

Part of the “Neighbours, Friends and Families” public education campaign, the free course is one way to teach the public about signs of abuse and how to respond. The goal, as CREVAWC describes it, is to “engage the power of everyday relationships to help keep people safe.”

Scott calls it “leaning in” to openings for intervention.

It doesn’t take an expert to make a difference, she stresses.

“We still worry about these conversations, we’re not sure how to have them,” Scott says. “How do you lean in and say ‘Hey, I’m worried about you.’ Or, ‘That didn’t feel right to me, and I’m sure it didn’t for you, either.’”

The system is so gendered, so patriarchal and keeps women subservient and expendable. We’re so embedded in this way of thinking about gender and exonerating men.

RESEARCHERS at Western are also building pathways to support women facing violence, like the iHEAL mobile and desktop app. It provides information and interactive activities to help users navigate their situation and address priorities, whether that’s safe housing, health, childcare, legal options or building a network.

Developed by a team led by nursing professor Marilyn Ford-Gilboe, the Women’s Health Research Chair in Rural Health at Western, the app offers choice and support. It gives women complete control over where and how they seek it.

Everyone from neighbours to social workers to border security guards can share the app as a lifeline, Wathen says.

“People looking at this material may be able to help themselves and their friends. It’s a simple, innocuous way to say, ‘I’m concerned. Here’s something that might help.’”

Wathen prioritizes what’s called trauma- and violence-informed approaches—which recognize the connections between trauma, violence, health and behaviour—to help shelters and other services better support survivors.

She believes the best path to progress is tackling broader issues of equity.

Workers in the sector must understand how racism and other forms of oppression are intertwined and can give rise to gender-based violence, she says. Those who are disabled, gender-diverse or using substances are at huge risk.

And stigma can kill. When women facing violence are turned away from shelters or support services because they exhibit uncomfortable behaviours—perhaps they are using drugs or experiencing intense mental health challenges—some are forced to walk straight back into the fire.

They don’t always make it out again.

“I realized we’re not going to make things better for women until we make it better for all people coming into these services,” Wathen says.

After getting out, Caroline told a trusted colleague and friend about her situation. He would book a meeting room so she could cry and rage after receiving calls from her family lawyer. Often, those calls brought allegations from her ex-partner about her parenting, as she fought for custody.

CAROLINE'S STORY is full of contact with systems intended to help.

She remembers meeting with child protection workers, an intervention prompted by a police visit to her home. Sitting in a small room with her partner right next to her, the employee asked about their relationship.

Her partner did most of the talking. He said everything was fine. No one inquired further.

Later, after police arrested him, Caroline left her home and the relationship. Neighbours in their small rural city had called 911 before, when the violence was too loud to ignore. But this time, he was cuffed and held overnight in custody.

It became a pivotal moment.

Caroline moved to Toronto, Ont. with her daughter.

She didn't see her former partner again for nearly a year, until she testified at his trial, shaking so badly she couldn't drink from the courtroom-supplied cup of water.

Caroline would eventually face him in not one, but two criminal trials, plus a bitter custody battle.

She won full custody of her daughter, but the criminal charges were dismissed in one case and dropped in the other, after her former partner agreed to a peace bond—a protection order that required him to stay away from Caroline and places she would frequent, among other stipulations.

She still remembers the fear and shame she felt after leaving the relationship, and again after reporting to police. Nearly a year after she returned to Toronto, she walked into a station to tell her story.

It led to a second arrest and set of charges, but it was far from easy for Caroline.

"I looked at the officer and said 'I'm going to give my statement once. If you don't record me, I'm probably going to recant it tomorrow,'" she recalls.

"It took two-and-a-half hours to give my statement. I was mortified, devastated. I went home and threw up. They arrested him the next day."

Caroline was processing a complex and conflicting bundle of emotions as a survivor who wanted to do the right thing for her daughter, herself and the person with whom she had fallen in love and built a life.

For a long time, she hadn't even told her family what was happening at home.

Years later, workplace support for those experiencing intimate partner violence or abuse is now the focus of Caroline's graduate work and her research at CREVAWC. She's contributing to projects that help workplaces become places of safety from gender-based and sexual violence—safe havens for employees who are dealing with violence at home.

The support she received from her friend at her previous job was a lifeline. Despite his complete lack of experience with intimate partner violence, he saw the opportunity to help, connecting Caroline to community support.

Her doctor, too, seized a moment of intervention. Caroline was at an appointment for her daughter, but mentioned she was navigating the justice system after experiencing intimate partner violence. It led to a therapy referral from the doctor, allowing Caroline to access multiple sessions covered by Ontario health insurance.

She's grateful her doctor spotted the opportunity. "That therapy helped me get better," she says.

GIVING PROFESSIONALS like doctors, lawyers and social workers the tools to take advantage of those moments for intervention is key, experts agree.

But moving the needle on intimate partner violence, addressing the epidemic at its root, means starting young with early education. The sector calls this primary prevention.

The Western-developed Fourth R program, already used in more than 5,000 schools across North America, is a perfect example. The healthy relationships program—and its name—is based on the principle that relationship skills are just as vital as proficiency in reading, writing or math.

The Fourth R covers everything from what a healthy relationship looks like to warning signs and how to support peers in abusive situations. Primary prevention is crucial to drive change, Wathen says.

Learning must start early—think age three or four. It's also necessary when young people start to form romantic relationships, Wathen says.

But tackling gender-based violence also means digging deeper.

"Education is necessary, but not sufficient," Wathen says.

The work goes beyond relationships, like building emotional intelligence and cultivating coping skills.

"We don't give little boys much of a chance to be their full selves. We sanction them from feeling their full set of emotions. Feminized terms are the worst things you can call a boy—you're called a girl or gay—and then boys learn the only appropriate response to big feelings is to react with anger or fly into a rage," Wathen says.

Changes and repair are needed across so many elements of daily life, from parenting approaches to the culture in schools and sports, she adds.

Kaitlynn Mendes, a Western sociologist and Canada Research Chair in Inequality and Gender, researches sexual violence and the ways it can be facilitated by digital technologies. She works with youth and parents to lay bare the troubling realities and enhance their knowledge.

Take smartphones. Mendes warns parents against using tracking technology to keep tabs on their kids.

"It sets a precedent that it's normal to track important people in your life. When young people get older, they won't think it's a problem their partner is tracking them," she says. "One of the biggest things we're seeing is around surveillance. Partners are using tech to stalk. This is a really, really big thing," Mendes says.

Even a few years ago, women's shelters weren't addressing that challenge head-on. Now, their safety plans include digital security, such as checking for spyware or enabled location data on a cellphone, she says.

And yet despite the harsh truth of digital harms, Mendes says she is spotting encouraging signals. Schools are addressing violence prevention, including education on how to safely navigate technology. Parents are adopting the idea of consent at younger ages, whether that's photo release forms for after-school sports or giving children permission not to hug family members.

"Getting rid of tech isn't the answer—there are so many benefits—but thinking more intentionally and carefully about how we're using tech is really important," Mendes says.

Boys learn the only appropriate response to big feelings is to react with anger or fly into a rage.

CAROLINE IS COGNIZANT of the difficult childhoods and circumstances—including abuse—that can set the foundation for future violence.

"Nobody is all monster, nobody is all angel. These people have very good parts and moments," she says.

"This guy didn't become an abusive, bad guy by himself, just walking down the street. It's all cycles of violence."

CREVAWC designs and runs programs for men who have perpetrated violence, a point of connection that's essential to changing abusive relationships, Scott says.

That intervention is about accountability.

"In a group of guys who are abusive, it's easier for them to call each other out, more than they can look at themselves," Scott says.

Change isn't instant. But she's seen it happen.

Running a court-ordered program for those charged with domestic violence, Scott once saw the realization "click" for a participant after comments from another man in his group—more than a dozen weeks after they had started attending sessions.

It's about leaning into these forms of education—even multiple times, when progress seems slow—to use the power of repetition and catch people at the right moment, Scott says.

Some men see the light when they hear stories of other relationships.

"It's so much about 'I don't want to be that guy,'" Scott says.

Caroline still has hope that change is possible, despite all she's endured.

"He learned it. So, I also like to think he could unlearn it," she says of her former partner. "We all learn bad habits; we can still grow. People stop smoking. Maybe people can stop hitting, too."

Caroline still thinks about a woman with whom she locked eyes when she was navigating her darkest days. Picking up her daughter from daycare, she noticed one of the workers wearing sunglasses inside. When Caroline asked what happened, the woman replied she had fallen down the stairs.

"I just knew it was domestic violence. I grabbed her hand and said, 'You take care.' When our eyes met, I saw that she knew that I knew. We held each other's gaze in that moment," Caroline says, recalling shared anguish and grief.

She still thinks about that moment.

"I wonder if she got out, if she is OK now."

Caroline says the memory reminds her of the Maya Angelou quote: Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better.

She knows more now, thanks to her own experiences and the research it led her to pursue. Caroline and the CREVAWC team are equipping others with that same knowledge, so they too can fill the gaps.

It'll take widespread action to turn the tide, but they believe it's possible.

Their message is clear: It's time to do better. ●