

## Speakers Series Event 2 – Paulette Senior Precis of Presentation

Paulette Senior, CEO and President of the Canadian Women's Foundation<sup>1</sup>, opened our second event in the 2020/2021 CFUW Ontario Council Speakers Series with a riveting presentation on gender based violence (GBV) in the time of COVID-19. The numbers are grim. All families are struggling with job losses and reduced income, food insecurity, issues related to childcare and education, fears about contracting the virus, exacerbated mental health issues, disrupted family routines, and reduced access to services and resources but for those trapped with an abuser, the consequences of each one of these stressors is exacerbated putting women and children at additional risk, said Paulette.

Pre-COVID numbers point out that on average one woman in Canada is murdered by her intimate partner every six days and specific groups, women with disabilities, Indigenous women, young women, trans, Two-Spirit and non-binary people, are at even higher risk. Interval and transition houses have had both increases in calls and decreases (both equally concerning). Overall, a Statics Canada survey noted that one in every 10 women is concerned about the possibility of violence in the home. If you think about the number of women you know personally and include those you know casually, there are probably 10 – 20 in your own circle that worry about abuse in their own home.

Service providers for those facing GBV, Paulette noted, are suffering from chronic underfunding (and fundraising, at least during the first phase of the pandemic, has been nearly impossible). In this pandemic, they have had to shift daily activities to technology based methods, staffing challenges are exacerbated, and finding space for those in need of respite is difficult. Add to this their own burnout and the situation is a tinderbox!

Shelters are not the only facilities facing these trials. Mental health services and those providing financial help are experiencing increased demand but no increase in capacity to help.

When the pandemic hit, Paulette explained, the Foundation launched a Nation-wide emergency, *Tireless Together Fund* to help organizations meet their immediate needs. Their public awareness campaign, *Signal for Help*, went into high distribution gear to help an abused person gesture that they need to be checked on. (Please look at this campaign video: [www.canadianwomen.org/signal-for-help](http://www.canadianwomen.org/signal-for-help).) The Foundation has other activities in which we can participate: 16 Days of Activism calendar in conjunction with Body Shop Canada, advocating for a National Action Plan for GBV (sign and send their letter to local officials) and ensuring that the government, which identified this Plan in the Speech from the Throne, actually acts on its promise.

The Foundation is also publishing a series of reports called *Resetting Normal* which outline a roadmap for pandemic recovery. The first report, already out, identifies a new funding model for the women's sector to build gender equality into the pandemic recovery. The second report will focus on the role of caregiving and policies needed in this area, and the third will concentrate on GBV.

The presentations spurred numerous questions from the floor, all of which garnered thoughtful, and where possible, actionable responses. Questions directed to Paulette included:

Question: what efforts are being made toward shelters being pet friendly (there is a link between not leaving an abusive domestic situation due to fear for abuse of pets) – Answer: shelters recognise this as

a barrier and some are accommodating pets or helping women find suitable accommodation for their pets and supporting the financial costs;

Q: What are the results for the *Signal for Help* campaign - A: do not know statistics but many countries have picked program up (it is given out for free) e.g. Spain, India, US and recognition in Canada is high. It was launched as a tool therefore limited in terms of who it can help and can't help. The remedy is not calling the police but rather finding a safe (private) way to check in on someone who has signaled (your actions can exacerbate situation), for example find someone who knows the person to ensure safety;

Q: how can CFUW OC help those serving the GBV community (other than money to shelters) – A: message of need to stay home in first wave was taken seriously by GBV victims. The second wave is actually worse than the first in terms of GBV and messaging from government needs to be nuanced so that if a person's life is in danger, leave. Interestingly, some jurisdictions had an increase in GBV calls, others saw a significant dip. If you know someone or know someone who knows someone, make sure they get the message that no matter what is going on with COVID, leave.

Q: Could part of the solution for GBV and the Reset Normal initiative be to educate youth about unhealthy relationships – A: CWF already funds programs such as Teen Healthy Relationships within GBV stream (they have been highly effective) as well as financially supporting shelters;

Q: how is privilege affecting equity and choices in this pandemic - A: Paulette called it pandemic inequity. The pandemic has just shone a light on what was already known – indigenous, racialized, disabled, the most at risk populations have become even more at risk. Health equity in Canada does not exist. Those whom we depend for food, movement, aged care, child care, etc. are paid and valued the least. We are lying to ourselves because we won't pay what is needed to allow front line workers to live comfortably – they have no benefits, they have to work at several jobs to earn enough to pay for their basic needs, etc.. Advocacy by CFUW has a role to play in resetting what has been normalised.

1. CWF website: <https://canadianwomen.org/>