



**Strengthening Federal Legal Protections and Advancing  
Survivor Safety**

**Submission to the Standing Committee on Justice and Human  
Rights  
House of Commons**

***Study on Bill C-16: Protecting Victims Act***

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April 27, 2026

## I. Executive Summary

### INTRODUCTION

Battered Women’s Support Services (BWSS) appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights on Bill C-16: *Protecting Victims Act*. BWSS welcomes this effort to address the ongoing and systemic crisis of gender-based violence in Canada, including coercive control and femicide. We support the development of legal frameworks that recognize the full spectrum of violence experienced by women and gender-diverse people, centre the safety and lived realities of survivors, and increase public and institutional understanding of gender-based violence as rooted in unequal power relations, including patriarchy, colonialism, racism, and economic inequality.

Drawing on over four decades of frontline work with survivors of intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and other forms of gender-based violence, BWSS brings a trauma- and violence-informed, intersectional feminist perspective to this submission. Our experience demonstrates that while legal reform plays an important role, the effectiveness of such reforms depends on the capacity of systems to understand, identify, and respond to violence in ways that enhance safety rather than reproduce harm. Bill C-16 presents an important opportunity to strengthen protections; however, without clear safeguards, coordinated implementation, and sustained investment in prevention, there is a risk that these reforms will not achieve their intended outcomes for those most impacted.

Battered Women’s Support Services (BWSS) provides this submission on Bill C-16, the *Protecting Victims Act*, grounded in decades of frontline advocacy supporting women and gender-diverse people experiencing violence.

BWSS supports the intent of the Bill to address femicide, coercive control and strengthen protections for victims of gender-based violence. However, we emphasize that:

- Coercive control cannot be effectively addressed through statutory amendments and criminal law alone;
- Without clear safeguards, the Bill risks further criminalizing victims—particularly Indigenous, Black, and other marginalized women;
- The proposed amendments must be accompanied by systemic reforms, including funding, training, and public education.

In Canada, gender-based violence is widespread and deeply embedded. More than four in ten women—approximately 6.2 million—have experienced some form of violence in an intimate partner relationship, with psychological abuse, including coercive control, representing the most common form. Police-reported data captures only a portion of this reality, with over 128,000 victims of intimate partner

violence recorded annually, nearly 80% of whom are women. At the same time, intimate partner violence remains significantly underreported, particularly where abuse is non-physical and pattern-based. Coercive control operates through cumulative behaviours that are often difficult to identify within incident-based systems and frequently escalate over time.

Frontline and research evidence further demonstrate that current justice system responses are inconsistent and, in some cases, harmful. Survivors—particularly Indigenous, Black, and other marginalized women—are at risk of being misidentified as primary aggressors, especially in contexts of dual charging or when defensive actions are interpreted without full context. These dynamics highlight a critical gap between the prevalence and nature of coercive control and the capacity of existing systems to respond to it safely and effectively.

## **II. Coercive Control**

### Summary

The proposed introduction of coercive control into the Criminal Code represents an important acknowledgment of non-physical forms of abuse. However, coercive control is a complex, pattern-based form of violence rooted in power, domination, and entrapment.

Criminal law, on its own, is not equipped to fully address this form of harm.

Frontline experience demonstrates that:

- Coercive control is often misunderstood by justice system actors;
- Victims are frequently misidentified as primary aggressors;
- Survivors may engage in survival-based or defensive behaviours that are misinterpreted as abusive conduct.

Canadian evidence demonstrates that current criminal justice responses to intimate partner violence can result in the misidentification and criminalization of survivors. More than 6.2 million women in Canada—approximately 44%—have experienced violence in an intimate partner relationship, with psychological abuse, including coercive control, representing the most common form. At the same time, police-reported data captures only a portion of this reality, with over 128,000 victims of intimate partner violence recorded annually, nearly 80% of whom are women. Within this context, mandatory charging policies have produced unintended consequences, including dual charging, where both partners are charged, and an increase in charges against women who are themselves victims of violence. Research indicates that a significant proportion of women charged in intimate partner violence cases have experienced abuse, with studies showing that many were acting in self-defence or in response to ongoing violence. Evidence from

BWSS's frontline research and analysis, including *When Battered Women Are Arrested* and *Colour of Violence*, documents these patterns in practice, demonstrating that incident-based approaches frequently fail to capture patterns of coercive control and instead result in survivors being misidentified as primary aggressors. These dynamics disproportionately impact Indigenous, Black, racialized, and marginalized women, reflecting systemic inequities in how violence is interpreted and responded to. Without clear safeguards and contextual analysis, there is a significant risk that legal reforms, including the introduction of a coercive control offence, will expand these existing patterns of criminalization rather than improve safety for survivors. Marginalized women—particularly Indigenous, Black, racialized, migrant, and low-income women—are disproportionately impacted by these failures.

## **Key Concerns**

### **Criminalization and Misidentification of Victims**

Victims of coercive control are at significant risk of being criminalized within existing justice system responses to intimate partner violence. While criminal law is intended to provide protection and accountability, frontline and research evidence demonstrates that survivors are frequently misidentified and processed as offenders, particularly in contexts where violence is assessed through an incident-based lens rather than a pattern of coercive control.

Survivors may be charged for actions taken in self-defence or in response to ongoing abuse, including efforts to protect themselves or their children. In many cases, these actions are interpreted without full consideration of the history, context, and dynamics of the relationship. This can result in survivors being mischaracterized as perpetrators, particularly where there are visible injuries on both parties or where coercive control is not recognized as the primary pattern of violence. Mandatory charging policies have contributed to this dynamic, leading to dual charging in some cases and an increase in charges against women who are themselves victims of violence.

Evidence from BWSS's frontline research and analysis, including *When Battered Women Are Arrested* and *Colour of Violence*, documents how survivors are drawn into the criminal legal system as accused persons, often in the context of ongoing victimization. These patterns are compounded by systemic barriers, including racism, colonialism, language barriers, immigration status, and economic marginalization, which disproportionately impact Indigenous, Black, racialized, migrant, and low-income women. Survivors navigating these systems may face significant pressure to accept guilty pleas, even where viable legal defences exist, in order to resolve charges, avoid prolonged court involvement, or mitigate risks related to child welfare, housing, or immigration consequences.

The introduction of a coercive control offence, without clear safeguards and a requirement for contextual, pattern-based analysis, risks expanding these existing harms. Where systems are not equipped to accurately identify primary aggressors or interpret coercive control, there is a heightened risk that survivors will be further criminalized, reinforcing rather than addressing the conditions that place them at risk.

### **Weaponization of Coercive Control Allegations**

Abusive persons frequently manipulate legal and institutional systems to maintain power and control over victims. Introducing a criminal offence for coercive control, without clear safeguards and contextual analysis, creates a significant risk that these provisions will be used not only to address harm, but also to extend it. Patterns already observed in criminal and family law systems demonstrate how allegations can be strategically deployed by abusive persons to discredit survivors, undermine their credibility, and shift attention away from ongoing violence.

In the absence of robust mechanisms to identify primary aggressors and assess patterns of coercive control, abusive parties may initiate retaliatory complaints following police involvement or separation. Survivors who seek help may find themselves counter-accused, particularly in situations where their actions, such as attempts to protect themselves, set boundaries, or restrict access to children, are reframed as controlling or abusive behaviour. These dynamics are compounded in systems that rely on incident-based assessments and do not adequately capture the cumulative and contextual nature of coercive control.

The risk of weaponization is particularly acute in family law proceedings, where allegations of coercive or controlling behaviour may be used to challenge a survivor's credibility, support claims of parental alienation, or influence decisions related to custody and access. Survivors who raise concerns about violence may themselves be characterized as manipulative or controlling, reinforcing patterns already documented in both family and criminal legal contexts. This can have profound consequences, including loss of custody, increased legal exposure, and heightened risk of ongoing abuse.

Coercive control provisions may also enable expanded forms of surveillance and control through state systems. Police involvement, court conditions, bail restrictions, and monitoring mechanisms, while intended to enhance safety, can be leveraged by abusive persons to track, constrain, or retaliate against survivors, particularly where both parties are engaged in legal proceedings. For survivors who are already navigating multiple systems, including child welfare, immigration, and housing, the cumulative effect can deepen entrapment rather than support exit and safety.

Evidence from BWSS's frontline work and analysis, including *When Battered Women Are Arrested* and *Colour of Violence*, demonstrates how systems can be used as tools of control in the context of intimate partner violence. Without explicit safeguards, the introduction of coercive control as a criminal offence risks expanding these dynamics, enabling the misuse of legal processes in ways that further harm survivors rather than protect them.

## **Mental Health and Trauma Responses**

Survivors of coercive control often experience complex trauma that shapes their behaviour, decision-making, and interactions with others. These responses are not incidental; they are directly connected to ongoing patterns of violence, control, and entrapment. Trauma-related behaviours may include heightened fear responses, difficulty regulating emotions, attempts to maintain safety through avoidance or boundary-setting, and actions taken under conditions of coercion or threat. Survivors may also experience acute mental health crises, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, particularly where violence is escalating or options for safety are limited.

Within existing justice system frameworks, these responses are frequently misunderstood or misinterpreted. Behaviours that reflect distress, survival, or attempts to regain control over one's safety may be characterized as instability, non-compliance, or even controlling conduct. For example, a survivor's efforts to monitor an abusive partner's whereabouts, restrict access to children, or respond emotionally in moments of crisis may be interpreted in isolation, without recognition of the broader context of coercive control. Similarly, expressions of distress, including threats or acts of self-harm, may be treated as manipulative behaviour rather than as indicators of trauma and risk.

The introduction of a coercive control offence, without explicit protections, risks further entrenching these misinterpretations. Provisions that include behaviours such as threats of self-harm or emotional distress, without clear contextual safeguards, may result in survivors being criminalized for trauma responses that are directly linked to their experience of violence. This risk is heightened for survivors who already face systemic barriers, including Indigenous, Black, racialized, migrant, and low-income women, who are more likely to encounter punitive responses to mental health crises within policing and legal systems.

Evidence from BWSS's frontline work and analysis demonstrates that survivors navigating violence often present with complex trauma responses that require understanding, support, and intervention—not criminalization. Without clear direction to interpret behaviour within the context of coercive control, there is a significant risk that legal reforms will reinforce harmful patterns, where trauma is misread as culpability and survivors are drawn further into systems that do not enhance their safety.

## **Human Trafficking and Labour Exploitation**

Human trafficking in Canada remains a significant and underreported form of gender-based violence, with over 5,000 incidents reported to police between 2014 and 2024 and increasing rates year over year. The vast majority of identified victims—over 90%—are women and girls, while most accused persons are men. Trafficking is closely linked to sexual exploitation, with over half of cases involving sex trade-related offences, and reflects broader patterns of coercive control, including isolation, surveillance, and economic dependency. At the same time, criminal justice responses are limited, with approximately 84% of cases resulting in stays, withdrawals, or dismissals, and only a small proportion leading to conviction. Migrant and temporary foreign workers face heightened vulnerability to trafficking and labour exploitation due to precarious immigration status, employer dependency, language barriers, and limited access to supports. These conditions create significant power imbalances that can facilitate coercion, exploitation, and abuse, particularly in sectors characterized by isolation and low-wage labour.

The Bill does not adequately capture coercive control in these contexts.

## **False Reports, Retaliatory Complaints, and Coercion Toward Self-Harm**

Survivors of coercive control face significant risks of their experiences being reframed or undermined within legal processes. Abusive persons frequently use allegations of false reporting as a tactic to discredit survivors, particularly where survivors have disclosed violence, sought police intervention, or initiated legal proceedings. In this context, the focus can shift from the pattern of abuse to the credibility of the survivor, exposing them to scrutiny, counter-allegations, and potential legal consequences. The threat or perception of being accused of making a false report can itself act as a barrier to seeking help, reinforcing isolation and entrapment.

Retaliatory complaints are a well-documented feature of coercive control. Following disclosure or separation, abusive persons may initiate counter-complaints, often mirroring the survivor's allegations or reframing protective actions as abusive conduct. In systems that rely on incident-based assessments, these complaints can be given equal weight, increasing the risk of dual charging, misidentification, or escalation of legal involvement for the survivor. Survivors may be drawn into multiple, overlapping legal processes, including criminal, family, and child welfare systems, which can be used strategically by the accused to prolong contact, exert pressure, and maintain control.

Coercion or encouragement toward self-harm or suicide is another form of control that operates within these dynamics. Survivors may be subjected to threats, manipulation, or pressure related to their own safety, including being blamed for an accused threats of self-harm or being driven into states of acute distress through sustained abuse. At the same time, survivors' own expressions of distress, including

suicidal ideation, may be misinterpreted as manipulative or controlling behaviour rather than as indicators of trauma and risk. These dynamics are central to coercive control, yet they are not consistently recognized or appropriately addressed within legal frameworks.

Without explicit safeguards and a requirement for contextual, pattern-based analysis, there is a significant risk that coercive control provisions will fail to distinguish between these dynamics and instead reinforce them. Survivors may be further exposed to legal risk through allegations of false reporting, retaliatory complaints, or misinterpretation of trauma-related responses. Evidence from BWSS's frontline work and analysis demonstrates that these patterns are not exceptional, they are common features of coercive control that must be clearly addressed in any legislative response.

Other jurisdictions that have criminalized coercive control demonstrate that legal recognition alone does not improve safety. Where implementation has not been accompanied by training, infrastructure, and safeguards, the result has been underuse, misidentification of victims, and continued reliance on survivors to carry the burden of proof.

Canada is repeating the first phase of other jurisdictions' approach, introducing the offence, without embedding the conditions that those jurisdictions later identified as necessary for it to function safely.

Jurisdictions that have introduced criminal offences for coercive control show a consistent pattern: legal recognition has not translated into meaningful enforcement or improved safety. In England and Wales, where the offence has been in place for nearly a decade, tens of thousands of cases are reported each year, yet only a small fraction proceed to charge and an even smaller number result in conviction. Fewer than 2% of reported cases lead to a conviction. Early data from New South Wales, Australia, shows an even sharper drop-off, with only a handful of charges and a single conviction emerging from hundreds of reported cases. These outcomes are not anomalies; they reflect the structural difficulty of investigating, evidencing, and prosecuting pattern-based, non-physical forms of violence within systems designed to respond to discrete incidents.

What these jurisdictions demonstrate is not that coercive control is unimportant, but that criminalization alone does not produce accountability or safety. The primary points of failure occur at the front end of the system, police identification, evidence gathering, and prosecutorial decision-making, where coercive control is frequently misunderstood or minimized. Survivors are often required to carry the burden of proving patterns of abuse over time, leading to withdrawal, case attrition, or misidentification as perpetrators. Without significant investment in training, standardized risk assessment, and survivor-centred safeguards, the introduction of a coercive control offence in Canada risks replicating these outcomes: low charge

and conviction rates alongside continued systemic harm to the very people the law is intended to protect.

## **Recommendations – Coercive Control**

The introduction of a coercive control offence must be accompanied by clear safeguards, precise drafting, and system-wide implementation measures to ensure that it enhances safety rather than reproduces harm. Based on BWSS's frontline experience, research, and analysis, the following recommendations are essential:

### **A. Safeguards Against Criminalization of Survivors**

Amend the legislation to explicitly require primary aggressor analysis, including consideration of:

- a. patterns of behaviour over time;
- b. power, control, and coercion;
- c. the context of self-defence and survival-based actions.

Include a statutory provision that survivors must not be criminalized for actions taken in response to violence, including:

- a. self-defence;
- b. resistance to control;
- c. efforts to protect themselves or their children.

Amendments to ensure survivors are not criminally charged where:

- a. mental health crises arise as a response to gender-based violence, including threats or acts of self-harm or suicide;
- b. behaviour reflects trauma responses rather than coercive intent.

Ensure that survivors are not criminalized for:

- a. restricting an abusive person's access to children where such actions are taken to protect themselves or their children.

### **B. Preventing Weaponization of the Law**

Include safeguards to prevent retaliatory or cross-complaints from being used to:

- a. discredit survivors;
- b. initiate counter-prosecutions;
- c. escalate legal entanglement.

Require courts and decision-makers to consider:

- a. the risk of legal system abuse (including family law and criminal proceedings);
- b. patterns of litigation and complaint used as a form of control.

Prohibit the use of coercive control allegations in ways that:

- a. reinforce parental alienation narratives;
- b. undermine credible disclosures of violence.

### **Clarifying the Legal Definition**

Refine the offence to centre coercion, domination, and entrapment, rather than general “controlling behaviour.”

Require that the offence be interpreted as:

- a. pattern-based, not incident-based;
- b. grounded in cumulative harm over time.

Remove or narrow provisions that risk criminalizing survivors, including:

- a. behaviours related to self-harm or emotional distress, unless clearly linked to coercive intent by the accused.

Ensure the offence includes:

- a. economic abuse, isolation, surveillance, and intimidation;
- b. recognition of non-physical harm as central, not secondary.

### **D. Expanding Scope to Reflect Lived Realities**

Amend the legislation to explicitly include coercive control in:

- a. human trafficking (sexual and labour exploitation);
- b. domestic servitude and migrant worker exploitation.

Recognize coercive control in contexts involving:

- a. immigration dependency and sponsorship;
- b. economic precarity and housing instability.

## **System Capacity and Implementation Requirements**

Require that the offence not be implemented without:

- a. mandatory, standardized training for police, Crown counsel, judiciary, and child welfare professionals;
- b. training grounded in:
  - trauma- and violence-informed practice;
  - intersectional analysis;
  - recognition of coercive control patterns.

Mandate the development and use of standardized risk assessment tools across systems to:

- a. identify escalating risk;
- b. prevent lethality;
- c. support consistent decision-making.

Establish clear prosecutorial guidelines for:

- a. evidentiary standards;
- b. contextual analysis;
- c. avoidance of misidentification.

## **F. Data, Monitoring, and Accountability**

Require the collection of national, disaggregated data on:

- a. charges, prosecutions, and convictions under the coercive control offence;
- b. rates of dual charging and misidentification;
- c. impacts on Indigenous, Black, racialized, and marginalized communities.

Establish independent monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to:

- a. assess outcomes;
- b. identify unintended harms;
- c. inform legislative and policy adjustments.

## **G. Survivor-Centred Supports**

Ensure access to:

- a. independent legal advice for survivors;

- b. community-based legal advocacy services;
- c. culturally relevant and Indigenous-led supports.

Provide sustained funding for:

- a. frontline anti-violence organizations;
- b. prevention and early intervention services.

Integrate coercive control responses with:

- a. housing and economic supports, recognizing that safety depends on viable pathways to exit.

### **Public Education and Prevention**

Develop and fund national public education campaigns on coercive control that:

- a. communicate patterns of abuse, not isolated incidents;
- b. are grounded in survivors' lived experiences;
- c. connect awareness to concrete supports.

Invest in public legal education to ensure:

- a. survivors understand their rights;
- b. communities can identify coercive control;
- c. system actors apply the law consistently.

### **. Indigenous-Specific Measures**

Ensure implementation aligns with:

- a. the Calls for Justice from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls;
- b. Indigenous rights, including UNDRIP.

Support:

- a. Indigenous-led design, delivery, and evaluation of services and responses.

The introduction of a coercive control offence represents an important recognition of non-physical forms of violence. However, without these safeguards and systemic supports, there is a significant risk that the legislation will replicate existing failures, resulting in low enforcement, misidentification of survivors, and expanded criminalization, rather than improving safety and accountability.

### **III. Femicide**

#### **Key Points**

Bill C-16 acknowledges that women are victims of homicide at higher rates than men. This is an important recognition.

However, the Bill does not adequately reflect the disproportionate rates of lethal violence experienced by Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people.

Femicide in Canada remains a persistent and gendered form of violence, with one woman or girl killed approximately every 48 hours, most often by a man known to her. In 2024 alone, 187 women and girls were killed, with the majority of cases involving intimate partners or family members and occurring in private spaces such as the home. These patterns reflect the cumulative and relational nature of gender-based violence, where coercive control, isolation, and escalating abuse precede lethal outcomes. The impact of femicide is not experienced equally. Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people face disproportionately high rates of lethal violence, being killed at rates more than six times higher than non-Indigenous women and representing up to one-quarter of all female homicide victims despite comprising a small proportion of the population. Evidence further demonstrates disparities in justice system responses, with cases involving Indigenous women less likely to result in the most serious charges and more likely to result in lesser convictions. These patterns underscore the need to recognize femicide as a distinct and preventable form of violence, while also addressing the systemic inequalities and institutional failures that allow it to persist.

Jurisdictions that have formally recognized femicide in law demonstrate that naming the crime matters, it acknowledges the gendered nature of lethal violence against women and girls and signals that these deaths are not isolated incidents but part of a broader pattern of male violence. Canada has an opportunity to show leadership in this area. At the same time, international experience makes clear that legal recognition alone does not reduce femicide. In countries with standalone femicide offences, rates remain high where there is limited accountability, inconsistent investigation, and inadequate coordination across systems. Recognition must therefore be understood as a starting point, not a solution.

A central gap in Canada is the absence of consistent, national, prevention-oriented data on femicide. Without comprehensive and disaggregated data, it is not possible to reliably identify patterns, assess risk, or intervene before violence escalates to lethality. This gap reflects a broader pattern of institutional minimization and failure to fully respond to male violence against women, particularly for Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people who experience disproportionately high rates of lethal violence. Femicide must be addressed not only through legal definition, but through systems that are capable of recognizing and responding to escalating risk.

Where progress has been made internationally, it is tied to the integration of legal recognition with prevention infrastructure: domestic violence death review mechanisms, coordinated risk assessment across policing, courts, and community-based services, and sustained investment in housing and frontline supports. Access to safe housing, in particular, is a critical factor in preventing femicide, as many women remain in or return to dangerous situations when there are no viable pathways to safety. Without these conditions in place, femicide provisions function primarily at the sentencing stage, after a death has occurred, rather than as part of a prevention framework.

For Canada, recognizing femicide in the Criminal Code should be accompanied by clear definition, national data collection, and accountability mechanisms that track outcomes and inform prevention. Femicide must be treated as a preventable form of violence, requiring coordinated, survivor-centred responses across systems. Without this, there is a significant risk that legal reform will reinforce a reactive approach that responds to lethal violence after the fact, rather than preventing it.

## **Recommendations – Femicide**

Recognizing femicide within federal law is an important step. To be effective, this recognition must be accompanied by clear definition, coordinated prevention systems, and accountability mechanisms that address the conditions under which lethal violence occurs.

### **1. Explicit Legal Recognition of Femicide**

Amend the Criminal Code to explicitly recognize femicide as the gender-related killing of women, girls, and gender-diverse people.

Ensure the definition reflects:

- a. the relationship between victim and perpetrator;
- b. the role of coercive control, prior violence, and separation;
- c. the pattern-based nature of escalating risk.

### **National Data Collection, Monitoring, and Reporting**

Establish a standardized, national femicide data system that collects disaggregated data on:

- a. victim identity (including Indigenous identity, race, and other factors);
- b. perpetrator relationship;
- c. known risk indicators (e.g., prior police contact, protection orders, threats, separation).

Require annual public reporting on femicide trends and system responses.

Align data collection across:

- a. policing;
- b. courts;
- c. coroners and death review processes.

### Indigenous-Specific Recognition and Implementation

Ensure the legislation explicitly recognizes the disproportionate rates of femicide experienced by Indigenous women and girls

Align all measures with:

- a. the Calls for Justice from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls;
- b. UNDRIP and Indigenous rights frameworks.

Support Indigenous-led design, delivery, and evaluation of prevention and response systems.

### **Prevention Infrastructure and Early Intervention**

Establish and fund coordinated, cross-sector risk assessment and intervention systems to identify and respond to escalating violence before it becomes lethal.

Require consistent use of standardized intimate partner violence risk assessment tools across:

- a. police;
- b. Crown;
- c. child protection;
- d. community-based services.

Strengthen domestic violence death review mechanisms and ensure findings inform policy and practice.

### **Housing as a Core Femicide Prevention Strategy**

Recognize access to safe housing as central to preventing femicide.

Invest in:

- a. transition housing, second-stage housing, and long-term affordable housing for survivors;
- b. supports that enable survivors to leave safely without risking homelessness.

Integrate housing into public safety planning, recognizing that many women remain in or return to dangerous situations when no viable options exist.

### **System Accountability and Oversight**

Establish independent oversight mechanisms to review:

- a. system responses in cases of lethal and near-lethal violence;
- b. missed opportunities for intervention.

Require accountability across systems, including:

- a. policing;
- b. prosecution;
- c. courts;
- d. child welfare.

Track and publicly report on:

- a. failures to act on known risk factors;
- b. patterns of inaction or misinterpretation.

### **Integration with Coercive Control and Public Safety Frameworks**

Ensure femicide is addressed as the end point of escalating coercive control and gender-based violence, not as an isolated incident.

Align femicide prevention with broader public safety strategies, including:

- a. early identification of high-risk cases;
- b. coordinated intervention across systems;
- c. survivor-centred safety planning.

Femicide is the result of identifiable patterns of violence, escalating risk, and systemic failures to intervene. Legal recognition must be paired with coordinated prevention systems, sustained investment, and accountability across institutions. Without these measures, there is a significant risk that femicide provisions will function only after a death has occurred, rather than as part of a framework designed to prevent it.

### **IV. Mandatory Minimum Sentencing**

## Key Points

Mandatory minimum sentencing (MMS) is often advanced as a tool to promote consistency in sentencing, denounce serious offences, and signal a strong public response to violence. In the context of gender-based violence, there is a legitimate desire for accountability, particularly in response to failures of the justice system to adequately protect women and hold perpetrators responsible. However, evidence demonstrates that mandatory minimums do not improve safety or deterrence and instead produce harmful and disproportionate impacts—particularly for Indigenous women, girls, and other marginalized survivors.

Indigenous women and girls are significantly overrepresented in Canada's criminal justice system. While Indigenous women make up approximately 5% of the Canadian population, they account for over 50% of women in federal custody. This overrepresentation continues to increase year over year and reflects the cumulative impact of colonialism, systemic racism, poverty, and criminal justice practices that fail to account for context, including histories of violence and victimization. Mandatory minimum sentencing limits judicial discretion to consider these factors, including those recognized under *Gladue* principles, and contributes to the continued over-incarceration of Indigenous women.

Mandatory minimums also shape how cases are resolved before trial. Because they remove flexibility in sentencing, they increase pressure on accused persons to plead guilty in order to avoid the risk of harsher penalties if convicted at trial. This dynamic is particularly concerning in the context of intimate partner violence, where survivors may already be misidentified as perpetrators. Research indicates that individuals facing mandatory minimums are more likely to accept guilty pleas, even where viable legal defences exist, in order to resolve cases quickly and reduce uncertainty. For survivors, this may be driven by concerns related to child custody, immigration status, housing stability, or the emotional and financial costs of prolonged court involvement.

In cases involving self-defence or survival-based responses to ongoing abuse, mandatory minimum sentencing can result in outcomes that fail to reflect the reality of the survivor's circumstances. Survivors who use force in response to violence may be charged and convicted in the absence of a full contextual analysis of coercive control, particularly where incident-based approaches dominate. Without the ability to tailor sentences to reflect these realities, mandatory minimums risk imposing penalties that are both disproportionate and unjust.

Multiple expert submissions have raised concerns that the proposed amendments in Bill C-16, including the reintroduction or expansion of mandatory minimum sentencing, risk exacerbating these harms. Evidence shows that mandatory minimums do not reduce violence or improve reporting, but instead contribute to systemic inequities and undermine the capacity of courts to respond appropriately to complex cases involving gender-based violence. In the context of coercive control,

where misidentification and criminalization of survivors are already documented concerns, the expansion of mandatory minimum sentencing may further entrench these patterns, resulting in outcomes that undermine, rather than enhance, safety and justice for survivors.

The proposed amendments risk exacerbating these harms.

### **Recommendations – Mandatory Minimum Sentencing**

Mandatory minimum sentencing does not enhance safety in the context of gender-based violence and risks compounding existing systemic harms. Based on BWSS’s frontline experience and the evidence presented, the following recommendations are essential:

#### **Do Not Reinstate or Expand Mandatory Minimum Sentences**

Do not reintroduce or expand mandatory minimum sentencing provisions, particularly those previously found to be unconstitutional.

Recognize that mandatory minimums:

- a. limit judicial discretion;
- b. fail to account for context, including coercive control and self-defence;
- c. contribute to unjust outcomes, particularly for survivors who are misidentified as offenders.

#### **Preserve and Strengthen Judicial Discretion**

Ensure courts retain full discretion to impose sentences that reflect:

- a. the context of the offence, including patterns of violence;
- b. the circumstances of the accused, particularly where they are also victims of gender-based violence.

Reinforce the application of Gladue principles and other contextual sentencing frameworks.

#### **Require Gender-Based and Intersectional Analysis in Sentencing**

Amend the legislation to require courts to consider the gendered and systemic context of offences involving gender-based violence.

#### **Suggested legislative wording:**

*“In determining sentence, the court shall consider the gendered and systemic impacts of the offence, including the circumstances of Indigenous, racialized,*

***and marginalized persons, and the extent to which the conduct occurred in the context of gender-based violence, including coercive control.”***

### **Introduce a Safety Valve Provision**

Where any mandatory minimum sentences are retained, include a clear and accessible safety valve allowing courts to depart from mandatory minimum penalties where their application would:

- a. result in a disproportionate or unjust sentence;
- b. fail to account for the context of coercive control, self-defence, or survival-based actions.

### **Prevent the Criminalization of Survivors**

Ensure sentencing provisions explicitly account for:

- a. misidentification of victims as offenders;
  - b. actions taken in self-defence or in response to ongoing abuse.
- Require courts to consider whether the accused:
    - a. was subjected to coercive control;
    - b. acted within a context of violence or entrapment.

### **Monitor and Report on Sentencing Outcomes**

Require the collection of disaggregated data on sentencing outcomes, including:

- a. the impact of mandatory minimums on Indigenous, Black, racialized, and marginalized women;
- b. rates of guilty pleas in cases involving gender-based violence;
- c. outcomes in cases involving coercive control or self-defence.

Mandatory minimum sentencing removes the ability of courts to respond to the realities of gender-based violence and shifts risk onto those already most vulnerable within the justice system. A sentencing framework that prioritizes context, discretion, and equity is essential to ensuring that the law does not reproduce the very harms it seeks to address.

## **V. Criminal Harassment**

### **Key Points**

Bill C-16 proposes to shift the definition of criminal harassment toward an objective standard of fear, focusing on whether conduct *could reasonably be expected* to cause

a person to believe their safety is threatened. While this change is intended to reduce the evidentiary burden on survivors, it introduces significant risks that may undermine protection in practice.

An objective standard can erase the lived experience of fear. Survivors of harassment, particularly those experiencing coercive control, often understand risk through cumulative patterns, prior incidents, and context that may not be visible in a single interaction. Removing or diminishing the role of the survivor's subjective experience risks discounting how fear is actually produced and experienced. Behaviour that may appear ambiguous or non-threatening to an external observer can carry clear and credible meaning to the person being targeted, especially where there is a history of violence, surveillance, or control.

The introduction of a "reasonable person" standard also risks imposing a narrow and generalized view of how fear should be interpreted. This standard does not adequately account for intersectional realities, including the experiences of Indigenous, Black, racialized, migrant, and marginalized women, who may assess risk differently based on lived experience, systemic discrimination, and prior interactions with violence or institutions. What is considered "reasonable" may reflect dominant norms that fail to capture these realities, leading to the minimization or dismissal of legitimate fear.

There is a further risk that an objective standard will reinforce existing systemic bias in how cases are assessed and prosecuted. Decision-makers, including police, prosecutors, and courts, may rely on their own assumptions about credibility, behaviour, and risk, rather than grounding their analysis in the context of the survivor's experience. This is particularly concerning in cases involving coercive control, where the harm is pattern-based and may not be immediately recognizable without a contextual understanding of the relationship.

Submissions from legal and advocacy organizations have raised similar concerns, noting that changes to the criminal harassment provision must not weaken protections for survivors. Maintaining a framework that recognizes both the subjective experience of fear and the broader context in which harassment occurs is essential to ensuring that the law responds effectively to the realities of gender-based violence. Without this, there is a risk that reforms intended to improve access to justice may instead create new barriers and reduce the effectiveness of existing protections.

### **Recommendations – Criminal Harassment**

Changes to the criminal harassment offence must strengthen, not weaken, protection for survivors. Based on BWSS's frontline experience and aligned with concerns raised by LEAF and others, the following recommendations are essential:

## **Do Not Adopt a Purely Objective Standard of Fear**

Avoid replacing the current framework with a strictly objective “reasonable person” test.

Recognize that fear is experienced in context and is shaped by:

- a. prior violence;
- b. patterns of coercive control;
- c. systemic factors including racism, colonialism, and marginalization.

Ensure that the law reflects how survivors actually experience risk, rather than imposing a generalized standard.

## **Incorporate Lived Experience and Context into the Legal Test**

Amend section 264(1) - the definition of criminal harassment to explicitly require consideration of the survivor’s lived experience and circumstances.

### **Suggested legislative wording:**

*“...causes that person, having regard to the circumstances, including their lived experience, to reasonably fear for their safety or the safety of anyone known to them.”*

**OR**

*“...causes that person to fear for their safety, whether assessed subjectively or objectively.”*

## **. Preserve a Contextual, Pattern-Based Approach**

Ensure that criminal harassment is interpreted in light of:

- a. patterns of behaviour over time, not isolated incidents;
- b. the dynamics of coercive control, including surveillance, intimidation, and escalation.

Require decision-makers to assess conduct within the broader relationship context.

## **Mitigate Systemic Bias in Application**

Require courts, police, and prosecutors to consider:

- a. how systemic bias may influence perceptions of credibility and fear;

- b. the disproportionate impact on Indigenous, Black, racialized, migrant, and marginalized women.

Ensure that interpretation does not reinforce dominant assumptions about what constitutes “reasonable” fear.

### **Align Criminal Harassment with Coercive Control Frameworks**

Integrate criminal harassment provisions with a broader understanding of coercive control.

Recognize that harassment often forms part of:

- a. ongoing patterns of control;
- b. post-separation abuse;
- c. escalating risk that may lead to lethal violence.

### **Provide Implementation Safeguards**

Require mandatory training for justice system actors on:

- a. coercive control;
- b. trauma- and violence-informed approaches;
- c. contextual assessment of fear.

Develop prosecutorial guidelines to ensure consistent, survivor-centred application of the law.

Criminal harassment laws play a critical role in addressing ongoing patterns of intimidation and fear. Any amendments must preserve the ability of the law to reflect the lived realities of survivors. Without explicit recognition of context, coercive control, and systemic bias, there is a significant risk that changes intended to improve access to justice will instead narrow protection and undermine safety.

## **VI. Public Education Materials – Examples of What Is Working**

### **Key Points**

Legislative reform must be supported by sustained investment in community-based services, public education, and survivor supports. Without this infrastructure, legal changes, particularly those addressing coercive control, risk being poorly understood, inconsistently applied, and ineffective in improving safety outcomes. Evidence across jurisdictions demonstrates that the success of legal reform depends not only on the law itself, but on the extent to which survivors, communities, and system actors are able to recognize, interpret, and respond to patterns of violence.

In Canada, access to supports remains uneven and insufficient relative to need. Gender-based violence services collectively respond to tens of thousands of requests annually, yet capacity constraints limit access to timely support. At BWSS alone, approximately 50,000 requests for service are received each year, reflecting the scale of demand for crisis response, legal advocacy, and counselling. Nationally, data from transition houses indicates that hundreds of women and children are turned away daily due to lack of space and resources. These access gaps directly impact safety, as survivors are often forced to remain in or return to situations of ongoing violence when supports are unavailable.

Public legal education and awareness are critical components of prevention and early intervention. Effective public education on coercive control must move beyond incident-based understandings of violence and instead communicate patterns of behaviour, risk escalation, and the realities of entrapment. BWSS's experience demonstrates that messaging is most effective when it is:

- grounded in survivors' lived experiences;
- clear and accessible;
- connected to concrete safety pathways and supports;
- delivered consistently across platforms, including community-based education, digital campaigns, and frontline interactions.

BWSS provides ongoing public legal education and professional training to service providers, legal professionals, and community members, integrating trauma- and violence-informed, intersectional feminist approaches. These efforts are essential in addressing persistent gaps in understanding coercive control across systems. Without this level of education, legal reforms risk being interpreted through existing frameworks that prioritize physical violence and individual incidents, rather than patterns of domination and control.

Independent legal advice (ILA) programs represent a critical model of effective intervention. These programs provide survivors with timely, confidential legal information that supports informed decision-making and improves navigation of complex systems. Evidence from Canadian ILA initiatives indicates that survivors who access independent legal advice report increased understanding of their rights, greater confidence in decision-making, and improved engagement with legal processes. However, access to these services remains limited and inconsistent across jurisdictions.

Survivor-informed advocacy services are equally essential. Community-based legal advocacy programs, such as those provided by BWSS, support survivors in navigating criminal, family, immigration, and child welfare systems simultaneously. These services improve access to justice by addressing practical barriers, providing accompaniment and representation support, and ensuring that survivors' experiences are understood within the context of coercive control. Outcomes from these programs demonstrate high levels of effectiveness in securing protection

orders, stabilizing housing, and supporting survivors through complex legal processes. For example, BWSS reports a 97% success rate in obtaining protection orders through the criminal and family law systems, highlighting the impact of integrated advocacy and support.

Despite this, significant gaps remain. Many survivors do not have access to independent legal advice, culturally relevant services, or ongoing advocacy support. Public education efforts are often fragmented, underfunded, or short-term, limiting their reach and effectiveness. There is a need for sustained, coordinated investment in public legal education and community-based services that can translate legislative change into meaningful improvements in safety.

Effective models already exist. Expanding and resourcing these approaches—public legal education, independent legal advice, and survivor-informed advocacy—will be critical to ensuring that legal reforms addressing coercive control and gender-based violence achieve their intended outcomes. Without this, there is a significant risk that legislative change will outpace system capacity, leaving survivors without the supports necessary to access protection and safety.

## **Recommendations – Public Education and Prevention**

Effective responses to coercive control require more than legal reform. Public understanding, early recognition of risk, and access to survivor-centred supports are essential to ensuring that legislative changes translate into safety. Based on BWSS’s frontline experience in public legal education, training, and advocacy, the following measures are critical:

### **Provide Dedicated, Sustained Funding for Community-Based Organizations**

Establish long-term, stable funding for community-based anti-violence organizations delivering:

- a. crisis response;
- b. legal advocacy;
- c. counselling;
- d. public legal education and prevention programming.

Recognize these organizations as core public safety infrastructure, not discretionary services.

Ensure funding models support:

- a. ongoing service delivery;
- b. outreach to marginalized communities;
- c. development of culturally relevant and accessible programming.

## **Expand Access to Independent Legal Advice Programs**

Scale up independent legal advice programs to ensure equitable access across all regions, including rural, remote, and underserved communities.

Guarantee that survivors can access:

- a. timely, confidential legal advice;
- b. information specific to their circumstances, including family, criminal, immigration, and housing issues.

Integrate ILA programs with:

- a. community-based advocacy services;
- b. trauma- and violence-informed supports.

Ensure programs are accessible to:

- a. Indigenous, migrant, and non-status women;
- b. survivors facing language or systemic barriers.

## **Develop and Fund National Public Education Campaigns on Coercive Control**

Implement coordinated, multi-year public education campaigns that:

- a. clearly define coercive control as pattern-based, non-physical violence;
- b. illustrate common tactics, including isolation, surveillance, economic control, and intimidation;
- c. connect awareness to concrete pathways for help and safety.

Ensure campaigns are:

- a. grounded in survivors' lived experiences;
- b. accessible in multiple languages and formats;
- c. inclusive of Indigenous, Black, racialized, and marginalized communities.

Use a range of platforms, including:

- a. digital media;
- b. community-based outreach;
- c. partnerships with schools, workplaces, and service providers.

## **Mandate Training for Justice System Actors**

Require mandatory, standardized training for:

- a. police;
- b. Crown counsel;
- c. judiciary;
- d. child welfare professionals.

Training must include:

- a. recognition of coercive control as a pattern of behaviour;
- b. trauma- and violence-informed practice;
- c. intersectional analysis, including the impacts of racism, colonialism, and systemic inequality;
- d. identification of primary aggressors and risks of misidentification.

Establish ongoing professional development requirements to ensure:

- a. consistent application of the law;
- b. adaptation to emerging evidence and best practices.

Public education and community-based supports are not ancillary to legal reform—they are foundational. Without sustained investment in education, legal advice, and frontline services, coercive control will remain misunderstood, under-identified, and inconsistently addressed. Strengthening these systems is essential to ensuring that legislative change leads to earlier intervention, improved access to justice, and meaningful increases in survivor safety.

## **VII. Implementation Requirements**

Gender-based violence cannot be addressed through statute alone. Proceeding on that basis risks producing unintended consequences, including increased oppression, criminalization, and victimization of women and girls, particularly those who are Indigenous, Black, racialized, migrant, or otherwise marginalized. Legislative change must be matched with coordinated, well-resourced implementation across systems to ensure that reforms improve safety rather than reproduce harm.

### **Adequate, Sustained Funding for Frontline and Prevention-Based Services**

#### **Mandatory, Standardized Training Across Systems**

#### **Public Education and Public Legal Education (PLEI)**

#### **Standardized Risk Assessment and Early Intervention**

Implement consistent use of evidence-based risk assessment tools across:

- a. police;
- b. Crown;
- c. courts;
- d. community-based services.

Require coordinated responses to high-risk cases, including information sharing and joint intervention protocols.

Integrate risk assessment into:

- a. bail decisions;
- b. protection orders;
- c. child welfare and family law processes.

### **Clear Operational Guidelines and Protocols**

Develop national and provincial guidelines for:

- a. investigation and prosecution of coercive control;
- b. interpretation of criminal harassment provisions;
- c. application of safeguards to prevent misidentification and dual charging.

Ensure guidelines explicitly require:

- a. contextual, pattern-based analysis;
- b. consideration of survivor safety and systemic barriers.

### **Data Collection, Monitoring, and Accountability**

Establish mechanisms to collect disaggregated data on:

- a. charges, prosecutions, and outcomes;
- b. dual charging and misidentification rates;
- c. impacts on Indigenous, Black, racialized, and marginalized communities.

Require regular public reporting and independent evaluation to:

- a. identify unintended harms;
- b. assess effectiveness;

### **Coordination Across Systems**

Mandate coordinated responses across:

- a. criminal justice;
- b. family law;
- c. child protection;
- d. housing and social services.

Address the ways in which fragmented systems can be used to:

- a. prolong control;
- b. increase risk for survivors.
- c. guide policy adjustments.

Implementation is determinative of its impact. Without sustained investment, training, public education, and coordinated systems, legal changes addressing coercive control and gender-based violence risk reinforcing existing gaps and harms. A comprehensive implementation framework is essential to ensure that reforms lead to earlier intervention, improved system responses, and meaningful increases in survivor safety.

### **VIII. Alignment with Existing Frameworks**

All reforms must align with existing national and international frameworks addressing gender-based violence, public safety, and systemic inequality. Failure to do so risks fragmentation, duplication, and continued gaps in protection and accountability including:

#### **National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls**

All legislative and policy reforms must align with the **Calls for Justice** from the

**Mass Casualty Commission** particularly:

- a. the recognition that gender-based violence is a public safety issue;
- b. the need for early identification of high-risk perpetrators;
- c. improved risk assessment, information sharing, and coordinated response across systems.

Implementation must reflect the Commission's emphasis on:

- d. prevention and intervention before escalation;
- e. systemic accountability for missed warning signs.

## **National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence**

### **United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)**

#### **Criminal Justice and Risk Assessment Frameworks**

Align with existing risk-based approaches to violence prevention, including:

- a. standardized intimate partner violence risk assessment tools;
- b. coordinated community response models.

#### **Housing, Poverty, and Social Policy Frameworks**

#### **Human Trafficking and Migrant Worker Protections**

## **IX. Conclusion**

Battered Women’s Support Services emphasizes that coercive control is a complex, pattern-based, and deeply contextual form of gender-based violence that cannot be effectively addressed through criminal law alone. Bill C-16 represents an important acknowledgment of non-physical violence and femicide; however, without careful drafting, robust safeguards, and coordinated implementation, there is a significant risk that the proposed reforms will reproduce, rather than remedy, existing systemic failures.

Frontline evidence demonstrates that current justice system responses to gender-based violence are uneven and, in many cases, harmful. Survivors, particularly Indigenous, Black, racialized, migrant, and marginalized women, are at ongoing risk of misidentification, criminalization, and institutional harm. The introduction of new offences and amendments, without addressing these systemic conditions, risks deepening these patterns.

Without the safeguards and investments outlined in this submission, Bill C-16 may:

- Criminalize survivors for actions taken in response to violence, including self-defence and trauma-related responses;
- Reinforce systemic discrimination in how violence is interpreted, investigated, and prosecuted;
- Exacerbate the overrepresentation of Indigenous women and girls in the criminal legal system;
- Fail to meaningfully improve accountability or safety, particularly in cases involving coercive control.

Evidence from other jurisdictions demonstrates that legal recognition alone does not produce effective enforcement or improved outcomes. Where reforms have not

been accompanied by training, infrastructure, public education, and survivor-centred supports, they have resulted in low charge and conviction rates, continued reliance on survivors to carry the burden of proof, and persistent system failures.

BWSS urges Parliament to amend Bill C-16 to ensure it reflects:

- The lived realities of survivors, including the pattern-based nature of coercive control;
- A rigorous intersectional analysis that accounts for systemic inequities, including colonialism, racism, and economic marginalization;
- A clear commitment to preventing harm through early intervention, coordinated systems, and sustained investment in community-based services.

Effective responses to gender-based violence require more than legislative change. They require systems that are capable of identifying risk, responding to complexity, and supporting survivors in ways that enhance safety and access to justice. Without this, there is a significant risk that the Bill will extend the reach of the criminal law without addressing the conditions that allow violence to persist.

Bill C-16 presents an opportunity to move beyond recognition toward meaningful prevention and accountability. Realizing that opportunity depends on ensuring that the law is grounded in evidence, aligned with existing frameworks, and supported by the systems required to make it work in practice.

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## **BWSS Reports and Internal Research**

- Battered Women’s Support Services.
  - *When Battered Women Are Arrested*
  - *Colour of Violence*
  - *BWSS Frontline Data and Service Statistics (2024–2025)*

## **International / Comparative Coercive Control Legislation**

- Serious Crime Act 2015
  - Introduced coercive control offence (England & Wales)
- Domestic Abuse Act 2021
- Crimes (Domestic and Personal Violence) Act 2007  
*(as amended to include coercive control provisions)*
- Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018
- Family Violence Act 2018