



The Downplay Effect

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Frontline organizations bring intimate partner violence directly to municipal leaders at UBCM

VANCOUVER, B.C. Battered Women's Support Services (BWSS) is bringing together approximately 50 frontline and community organizations from every region of British Columbia at the Union of BC Municipalities Convention today for a roundtable focused on what meaningful implementation of Canada's National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence must look like on the ground.

The gathering represents a significant opportunity to bring organizations working across different parts of the response to intimate partner violence to the same table—and to carry their frontline expertise directly into the conversations and decisions taking place at UBCM.

The message from BWSS is clear: addressing intimate partner violence requires all three levels of government, and commitments must result in action.

The urgency was made stark during the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

Ahead of the tournament, BWSS raised concerns based on research documenting increased risks of violence against women and increased demand for support associated with some major sporting events. BWSS maintained specialized IPV capacity during the tournament despite receiving only limited public funding for the response.

During the tournament period, BWSS analyzed 734 specialized service contacts, a 37.2% increase over the same period the previous year. Women reaching out described coercive control, escalating violence, strangulation, stalking and death threats.

Those findings became a powerful example of [The Downplay Effect](#), BWSS's province-wide movement to expose what happens when the warning signs and scale of intimate partner violence are minimized until the consequences become impossible to ignore.

BWSS is now bringing that challenge directly into municipal politics.

Ahead of B.C.'s October municipal elections, The Downplay Effect has contacted incumbent mayors and councillors, as well as candidates for mayor and council in municipalities across the province, asking them to publicly commit to five concrete actions on intimate partner violence. Commitments are being tracked publicly through the campaign's [Downplay Detector](#).

The campaign is asking municipalities to establish IPV task forces, support community-based services, strengthen local data collection, invest in prevention education and create greater accountability for municipal responses to gender-based violence.

Municipal governments cannot end intimate partner violence alone, but they make decisions every day that shape women's safety. Policing, housing, transportation, emergency planning, public spaces and community services can all affect whether a woman is able to reach help and remain safe.

As Canada prepares the next phase of the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence, frontline organizations are calling for a response that connects federal investment, provincial systems and municipal action to the specialized work happening in communities.

The next phase must strengthen sustainable frontline capacity, reflect regional and community realities, include frontline organizations in decision-making and ensure government commitments produce measurable change for women seeking safety.

At the same time, B.C. communities are navigating profound economic and social change. Tariffs and trade disputes, major infrastructure and resource projects, housing pressures and economic uncertainty may be debated in the House of Commons or the B.C. Legislature, but their effects are experienced locally.

For women experiencing violence, economic security, housing, transportation, access to services and the strength of local social infrastructure can directly affect their options for safety.

Today's roundtable provides a unique opportunity for organizations working across the response to intimate partner violence to identify what is needed next—from prevention and specialized services to housing, justice, public safety and community infrastructure.

Frontline organizations are calling for their expertise to shape real commitments, resources, policy and measurable action at every level of government.

Voices from across British Columbia

Bahar Dehnadi, Executive Director, Victoria Women's Transition House Society, Victoria

"In Greater Victoria, a woman fleeing violence may be navigating 13 municipal governments and six police forces that do not consistently connect with one another—and safety plans can fall apart in those gaps. Frontline needs are increasingly complex, while funding has not kept pace. Governments must invest in specialized services and sustained staffing rather than relying on one-time grants."

Lynnelle Halikowski, Executive Director, Prince George Sexual Assault Centre, Prince George

In northern B.C., access to specialized services can depend on whether a worker is available hundreds of kilometres away, whether a woman has transportation and whether the service has capacity when she reaches out. Distance cannot become another way violence is downplayed. Municipal, provincial and federal governments must work together to sustain specialized IPV and sexual-violence services in northern communities.

Allison McLauchlan, Executive Director, Kamloops and District Elizabeth Fry Society, Kamloops

Domestic abuse and violence cannot be addressed in isolation from housing, poverty and the justice system. In Kamloops and communities across the Interior, women are often forced to make impossible choices between safety, housing, financial survival and keeping their families together. We must invest in safe and affordable housing, adequately fund specialized frontline services and full shelter operations, and make meaningful changes to legal and justice systems that too often place women at greater risk—including increased risk of femicide.

Shahnaz Rahman, Executive Director, Surrey Women's Centre, Surrey

In a rapidly growing and diverse community like Surrey, we value the important investments being made through the National Action Plan, particularly for survivors at highest risk. Going forward, we need equitable, sustainable funding and a stronger frontline voice in decision-making to ensure services can respond to the scale, diversity and cultural realities of the communities we serve.

Angela Marie MacDougall, Executive Director, Battered Women's Support Services, Vancouver

This is an important moment because frontline organizations are bringing decades of experience directly to the people making decisions about our communities. We know what happens when intimate partner violence is treated as secondary to other public-safety priorities. Women's safety is not separate from the decisions governments make—it has to be part of them.”

“When governments talk about building stronger communities, we need to ask: stronger and safer for whom? A commitment only matters if it changes what happens when a woman needs safety. We have an opportunity to stop downplaying intimate partner violence and build a coordinated response at every level of government, beginning with municipalities.

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Battered Women's Support Services is a Vancouver-based feminist organization providing crisis intervention, advocacy, counselling and violence-prevention education. For more than four decades, BWSS has supported survivors of gender-based violence while advancing systemic change to end violence against women and girls.

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The Downplay Effect and Intimate Partner Violence in British Columbia

The Downplay Effect

The Downplay Effect is a province-wide movement challenging the ways intimate partner violence (IPV) is minimized, dismissed or treated as someone else's problem.

Its central message:

Intimate partner violence doesn't just escalate. It's downplayed first.

The campaign is bringing together survivors, community organizations and partners across BC to make IPV a public safety priority and demand concrete action from governments.

Women from communities across BC have also anonymously shared experiences of witnessing or experiencing IPV being downplayed — including survivors not being believed, warning signs being dismissed, and responsibility being passed between institutions.

The municipal campaign

Ahead of BC's October 2026 municipal elections, The Downplay Effect has reached out to incumbent mayors and councillors and candidates for mayor and council in municipalities across the province.

Candidates and elected officials are being asked to commit to five actions:

- Establish a Municipal Intimate Partner Violence Task Force.
- Support increased funding for community-based victim services and transition houses.
- Strengthen local, disaggregated data collection on IPV and gender-based violence.
- Invest in prevention education, including healthy relationships and consent.
- Establish independent accountability through a municipal or regional gender-based violence lead.

Commitments are being publicly tracked through the Downplay Detector so residents can see where their local candidates and elected officials stand.

Intimate partner violence in BC

- Nearly half — 48% — of women in British Columbia have experienced intimate partner violence since age 15.
- An estimated 80% of intimate partner violence is not reported to police.
- At least 135 people died as a result of intimate partner violence in BC between 2016 and 2024.
- Women represented 76% of victims killed by an intimate partner during that period.
- Indigenous people represented 24% of IPV victims reviewed by the BC Coroners Service, despite representing 5.9% of BC's population.
- In 36% of victim-perpetrator relationships resulting in death, there had been at least one previous police-reported IPV incident.

What happened during FIFA 2026?

Ahead of the FIFA World Cup, BWSS raised concerns about the potential for increased demand for IPV services based on existing evidence around violence against women and major sporting events.

BWSS maintained specialized IPV services during the tournament.

During the tournament period:

- 734 specialized service contacts were analyzed.
- That represented a 37.2% increase compared with the same period in 2025.
- Women described coercive control, escalating violence, strangulation, stalking, threats and other forms of high-risk IPV.

The experience demonstrated a central argument of The Downplay Effect: public safety planning must include intimate partner violence before demand reaches crisis levels — not after.

Why all levels of government?

Canada's National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence recognizes that preventing and responding to GBV requires coordinated action involving federal, provincial and territorial governments, municipalities, Indigenous partners, survivors, frontline service providers and other sectors.

Its five pillars include:

- Support for victims, survivors and their families
- Prevention
- A responsive justice system
- Indigenous-led approaches
- Social infrastructure and an enabling environment

For The Downplay Effect, this means municipal governments cannot be left out of the response.

Decisions about housing, policing and public safety, community services, transportation, prevention, local data and community infrastructure can all affect the safety and options available to women experiencing violence.