THE CATALYST

When Men Step Up

Rethinking masculinity to end gender-based violence

By: Christine Sismondo | Posted: November 27, 2025

The 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-based Violence is an annual international campaign that begins on November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, and goes until December 10, Human Rights Day.

When Joshua Hopkins learned that his older sister and two other Renfrew County women were murdered in one of the worst incidents of intimate partner violence in Canada's history, the news was too shocking for him to process.

As more information emerged in the aftermath of the September 2015 murders of Nathalie Warmerdam, Anastasia Kuzyk, and Carol Culleton—by a former partner to all three—Hopkins, despite his numbness, pain and disbelief, did have one crystal clear realization.

"It really should not have taken my sister's murder for me to understand how misogyny and domestic violence affect the society that's around us," he says. "I think, often, when men hear the terms 'domestic violence' or 'violence against women', it sounds like a women's issue, but it's not."

Gender-based violence (GBV) and intimate partner violence (IPV) are increasingly being seen in a new light, one that re-frames the violence as a systemic issue that we have a shared responsibility to prevent. And, in response, men are stepping up by establishing initiatives to address these issues and owning the crucial role they play in changing a culture that helps sanction gender-based violence.

"It's so important for us, as men, to act as allies," says Hopkins, an acclaimed opera baritone. "We have to stop putting blame on the victims and focus the lens on the abusers, which, statistically, are mostly men. We need to focus on *why* men are so angry."

For his part, Hopkins worked with composer and pianist Jake Heggie and poet/author Margaret Atwood to create *Songs for Murdered Sisters*, a song cycle that underscores how these murders are part of a pattern of violence, not only individual tragedies. The song cycle has been performed live in multiple venues, including a sold-out performance at Carnegie Hall earlier this year. A Juno-nominated album version and a film version are also available through the initiative's website.

Despite an increased number of organizations working to prevent gender-based violence, it's still prevalent in Canada. According to Statistics Canada, more than two-thirds of solved homicides of women and girls between 2009 and 2022 were gender-related. The past decade has seen an increase in gender-related violence, and 2022 saw an unprecedented 184 Canadian women and girls murdered—mainly by men. Nova Scotia, British Columbia, New Brunswick, and more than

100 municipalities in Ontario have recently declared gender-based violence an epidemic.

Benefits for men

As with many forms of abuse, intersectional identities play a role. Indigenous women and girls, newcomers, racialized and marginalized women, 2SLGBTQI+, non-binary people, women with disabilities, and women in remote and rural communities have an elevated risk of experiencing GBV. Preventing violence against vulnerable populations is a matter of human rights and a fundamental component of building an inclusive society.

Leading the charge to address this public health crisis are a number of well-established Canadian projects and organizations including the Courage to Act Foundation and initiatives run by the Canadian Women's Foundation, as well as an increasing number of initiatives led by men, including Men &, White Ribbon, and Next Gen Men, all of which emphasize the crucial role men have to play in preventing GBV. And some of the organizers say that participants are often surprised to learn that the work that goes into changing the culture of masculinity has plenty of benefits for men.

"Men's mental health is an entry point for having a conversation about how we can challenge and break down the systems that are harming everyone," says Next Gen Men's Trevor Mayoh.

"Over one-third of men will not talk about mental health in the workplace because they feel like their job could be at risk," he explains. "Men tend not to take proactive care of their health generally. Instead of going to a doctor when a problem starts, they're more likely to hold out until it gets bad."

Mayoh associates this inability to admit vulnerability—a key trait in what some call "classic masculinity"—with epidemic health problems that disproportionately impact men, including opioid overdoses, chronic loneliness, social isolation, and suicide deaths. Roughly 75 percent of people in Canada who die by suicide are men, according to research from the Mental Health Commission of Canada.

"We have this culture that absolutely does privilege men, albeit, looking at it through an intersectional lens, some men more than others," says Mayoh. "That same culture is quite literally killing men too, though, so men have skin in the game and a key role to play in terms of dismantling the patriarchy."

Messages about the patriarchy and privilege, he notes, aren't always easy for men to accept when they're struggling with pain, stress, and family crises. To encourage meaningful conversations about rethinking masculinity, organizers have found it's often helpful to create men-only spaces where they can feel safe and comfortable with making mistakes and being "messy."

Through Next Gen Men's extensive work, the organization has found that the two primary things holding men back are a fear of getting things wrong and the fear of being cancelled. When they're in a room with people who look and sound like them, it can feel safer.

"This shift has to happen on a peer-to-peer level," says Mayoh. "It's not going to come from driving down the street and seeing a billboard saying, 'Don't hit someone'; It's going to actually come from when a friend in a locker room or in the car says, 'Hey, that's not funny.'"

Meaningful change

Men taking an active role in the prevention of gender-based violence, then, is essential. One notable instance of this is Rita St. Gelais, a licensed psychotherapist working with men in Alberta who have a history of abuse and are looking to change their behaviours.

“If you’re going to address domestic violence and try to end it, you need to go to the source, which is the people who are choosing violent behaviours,” says St. Gelais. “However important it is to work with people who experience domestic violence, we’re not going to end it that way.”

Most of the resources allocated to support people in violent relationships are, quite understandably, earmarked for people who have experienced violence. Getting serious about stopping a cycle of violence requires investing in the people who want to change, though.

“I think there’s a strong stereotype that these people are monsters consumed by rage at all times,” St. Gelais explains. “If you can see them as people and move past that initial gut reaction, meet them where they’re at and give them dignity and respect while maintaining dignity and respect for the people that they’ve hurt, then it’s possible to help people who want to change.”

It’s a big job, one that involves a lot of dark and heavy material. It can be so emotionally taxing, in fact, that it prompted her to found an initiative called Two Chairs, which aims to make it easier for therapists to get therapy. People working in this space need to prioritize self-care, but, as St. Gelais explains, sometimes those who preach the importance of caring for themselves don’t take their own best advice.

Despite the emotional toll, St. Gelais finds her work deeply fulfilling. It’s also deeply necessary. When the Renfrew County inquest into the triple murder committed finally concluded in 2022, several of the 86 recommendations for change involved therapeutic interventions for men with similar histories to Basil Borutski, the convicted murderer of three who died in prison in 2024.

“Basil was in and out of jail for various assaults within the course of his life, but it didn’t change his behaviour,” says Joshua Hopkins, noting that Borutski was ordered by the courts to enroll in an anger management program but skirted it.

Many advocates, folks at risk and families of victims have called for profound changes to the justice and carceral systems, noting that they lack resources to prevent gender-based violence. Some even question the carceral approach and advocate for early education programs, projects to change the culture of masculinity, and investing in mental health supports.

“This idea that we’re just throwing men into jail without some kind of rehabilitation or being able to teach them a better way of dealing with their anger and stress, isn’t going to bring change,” he continues. “Programs that deal with this issue and are able to make real change are vital.”

Further reading and resources: The Manosphere and Mental Health.

Author: *Christine Sismondo writes about personal and public health and other contemporary social issues from her office in Toronto.*

Illustrator: Kasia Niton – https://sunnystreet.studio/ Instagram: @sunnystreet.studio

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Mental Health Commission of Canada
https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/

350 Albert Street, Suite 1210 Ottawa ON K1R 1A4
Tel: 613.683.3755 | Fax: 613.798.2989
mhccinfo@mentalhealthcommission.ca