Note: Social studies teachers should approach the topic of GBV by connecting it to broader discussions about equity, systemic discrimination, and social justice. By examining the historical and contemporary causes of GBV, students can better understand the intersection of gender, race, socio-economic status, and other factors that contribute to inequities in Canada. Examining how Canadians have responded to address GBV and the underlying social, economic, and political factors that maintain it highlights for students the pathways for change and empowers them to envision solutions. It is essential to create a safe and inclusive classroom environment where sensitive issues are approached with empathy, allowing students to engage in meaningful dialogue about the steps needed for societal change. For more information about creating a safe space please see [Teaching Difficult History A Guide for Teachers 7 to 12](#).

What is gender-based violence?

Gender-based violence (GBV) is violence directed at someone based on their gender, gender identity, or perceived gender. It includes physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, and economic violence. In Canada, GBV disproportionately affects women, girls, Two-Spirit, and gender-diverse individuals, with particularly high rates among Indigenous, racialized, 2SLGBTQIA+, and disabled communities. GBV is rooted in and maintained by systemic inequities in Canada.

What are the causes of gender-based violence?

Historical Factors

Colonialism and Its Ongoing Effects

The legacy of colonialism in Canada has had lasting impacts, particularly on Indigenous communities. Policies such as residential schools, the Indian Act, and forced relocations were designed to assimilate and control Indigenous populations, disrupting traditional gender roles and family structures. These policies have resulted in generations of trauma, marginalization, and violence, which continue to disproportionately affect Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit individuals today. The ongoing crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) is directly linked to this colonial legacy and systemic neglect.

Patriarchal Social Structures

Canada's development, like that of many nations, was influenced by patriarchal social structures that valued men's roles and authority over women's. Historically, women were excluded from politics, legal rights, and economic opportunities, reinforcing a power imbalance. This imbalance normalized control and violence against women, creating a social environment where GBV could occur with minimal repercussions. Even with legal and social advancements, these patriarchal attitudes persist, resulting in GBV being framed as a "women's issue" instead of identifying and addressing the causes of the violence.

Contemporary Social and Economic Factors

Intersectionality and Marginalization

Intersectionality—how overlapping identities (e.g., race, gender, socio-economic status) create unique experiences—plays a crucial role in understanding GBV. For example, racialized women, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, and women with disabilities face higher rates of violence in Canada due to multiple layers of discrimination. These individuals often encounter additional barriers when seeking justice or support.

Economic Inequality

Economic disparities are closely linked to GBV, particularly for women and gender-diverse individuals. Wage gaps, precarious employment, and limited access to resources can trap victims in violent situations, as they may lack the financial means to leave. Women of colour, Indigenous women, and immigrant women often experience higher levels of economic insecurity, making them more vulnerable to violence and less able to access protective services.

Gender Norms and Stereotypes

Traditional gender roles and stereotypes continue to influence perceptions of violence and control in relationships. These norms often frame masculinity as dominant and femininity as submissive, which can justify or excuse controlling and violent behavior against those who challenge these expectations. Media, cultural messaging, and even some legal responses reinforce these stereotypes, leading to societal tolerance of certain forms of GBV, such as intimate partner violence or sexual harassment.

Systemic Inequities and Institutional Barriers

Legal and Policy Gaps

While Canada has made significant strides in addressing GBV through legal reforms, many gaps remain. For example, the criminalization of intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and harassment has evolved, but these laws are not always effectively enforced, particularly for marginalized communities. Indigenous women and racialized individuals often experience discrimination within the legal system, leading to underreporting and limited access to justice.

Lack of Comprehensive Support Systems

Access to shelters, mental health services, and legal support is critical for survivors of GBV. However, systemic inequities mean that many communities—especially rural, Indigenous, and immigrant populations—lack adequate services. These gaps make it challenging for survivors to receive the support needed to escape violent situations or rebuild their lives. Additionally, support systems may not be culturally responsive or accessible to individuals with disabilities, further marginalizing those most in need.

Contemporary Efforts to Address GBV and Inequities

Grassroots Movements and Indigenous-Led Initiatives

Many grassroots organizations, particularly those led by Indigenous and racialized communities, are at the forefront of addressing GBV and advocating for equity. These groups emphasize culturally relevant support, community healing, and systemic change. Indigenous-led initiatives, for instance, focus on reclaiming traditional knowledge and gender roles that promote respect, balance, and non-violence.

Policy Interventions and Government Responses

Government responses, such as the National Inquiry into MMIWG and Canada's strategy to address GBV, aim to reduce violence and promote equity. However, these initiatives often face criticism for being slow to implement or lacking adequate funding. A critical approach is needed to examine how these policies address the root causes of GBV and their effectiveness in reducing violence, particularly for marginalized communities.