

Commentary: Ending violence against women will save money

SILKE BRABANDER Commentary

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A rally for women's rights in 2017 in front of the Alberta legislature. Silke Brabander of UNB's Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research writes that gender-based violence is 'not a so-called "women's issue." It's everyone's issue.'

Photo: Postmedia Archives

"Canada ignores national security threat posed by violence against women." "Canadians across the country march to end violence against women." "Intimate-partner violence happens far more often than cases that make headlines."

These are just a few of the national headlines I've come across in the weeks leading up to International Women's Day.

According to a report released by the Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability last month, one woman or girl was killed every two and a half days last year. Ninety-one per cent of the accused were male (53 per cent of the women and girls were killed by male partners, and 13 per cent by other male family members). New Brunswick had the third highest rate of all provinces and territories in Canada.

Yet there is a deafening silence in New Brunswick when it comes to recognizing this violence as a societal, human rights issue – or even an economic issue.

Let me first acknowledge that efforts are happening all over the province of New Brunswick to respond to survivors of violence against women, thanks to the outstanding work of many community agencies – from transition houses to domestic violence

outreach workers, second stage housing to sexual assault crisis centres, family violence resource networks, and so on. There is no shortage of effort in responding to these types of violence – though there is always room for more funding, as most of this work falls on the backs of dedicated women who are fuelled more by their own determination and passion than by the appeal of a decent salary.

The provincial government is also working to draw attention to human trafficking, murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls, sexual violence, intimate partner homicide, and domestic and intimate partner violence in collaboration with many of these community agencies.

Yet the numbers continue to rise – or at the very least, they aren't going anywhere.

Gender-based violence is a societal problem that will not be resolved anytime soon without some serious attention and resources devoted to changing the culture of violence in our homes, schools, workplaces, and communities. And it's not a so-called "women's issue." It's everyone's issue.

Children who are exposed to intimate partner violence within families are at higher risk to be victimized themselves later on in life, or to recognize violence as normal behaviour. Teens are at risk of being trafficked for sex. Dating violence is highest among 15 to 24 year-olds. New Brunswick has the highest rate of police-reported victims of intimate partner violence and the highest rate of people killed by their intimate partners in the Atlantic Provinces.

Violence against women and children is an age-old problem. It's time to start taking it seriously and bring it to an end, if we are ever going to advance as a society, and if we have any respect for human lives.

We must start teaching our children differently. We must explore gender norms, and prevent this type of violence, rather than just responding to it. It's 2019, and New Brunswick can be a leader in this if we take it seriously enough to bring about a cultural shift.

Even if you don't care about human rights and you think healthy relationships is a "soft" issue, there are economic gains to be made by addressing this issue. A 2009 study by the Department of Justice estimated the financial impact of spousal violence costs each Canadian \$220. New Brunswick spends more than \$165 million annually addressing costs related to intimate partner violence, such as the lost wages of victims, losses to employers, damaged or destroyed property, criminal and civil justice costs (court, police, corrections), health care and so on.

According to the Chief Public Health Officer of Canada, some impacts of this type of violence include poor mental health, suicide, and a higher risk of developing cancer, heart disease and diabetes.

When our citizens aren't suffering pain and trauma, they are able to attend work more frequently. When families are happy and healthy, they are contributing to the economy. When people are mentally healthy, there are fewer burdens on the limited resources we have in our already overworked mental health systems, police responses, social development, and so on. It only makes sense to dedicate resources to end gender-based violence – and save costs in the long run. The time is now: we must make it a priority.

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