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Perceptions related to gender-based violence, gender equality, and gender expression

by Laura Savage and Adam Cotter

In 2018, Statistics Canada conducted the Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces (SSPPS) with the goal of advancing knowledge of gender-based violence in Canada. The development and collection of this survey and the analysis of its results was funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada as part of *It's Time: Canada's Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender-Based Violence* (the Strategy).¹ The Strategy's activities are organized across three pillars: preventing gender-based violence, supporting survivors and their families, and promoting responsive legal and justice systems (Women and Gender Equality Canada 2018).

In addition to measuring gender-based violence and other unwanted experiences of inappropriate sexual behaviour in public places, online, and in the workplace (Cotter and Savage 2019), part of the goal of the SSPPS is to identify and monitor broader trends in terms of Canadians' perceptions and attitudes towards gender-based violence and, more generally, gender equality in Canada.

Gender-based violence is rooted in social structures and systems, which can serve to produce and reproduce gender inequality and gendered violence (Jewkes et al. 2014; Fleming et al. 2015). Examining attitudes and beliefs is therefore important in order to prevent and address gender-based violence. These attitudes and beliefs can provide further insight as to whether certain behaviours are seen as acceptable or normal among the population as a whole and can illuminate areas where societal norms and attitudes can be addressed. Furthermore, public opinion does have some degree of influence on public policy (Burstein 2003). To this end, the SSPPS included eight statements, adapted from various instruments, in an attempt to measure perceptions and attitudes towards gender-based violence and gender equality in Canada (see Table 1).

On the whole, women and men in Canada tended to have attitudes associated with beliefs in gender equality and beliefs that gender-based violence is not acceptable (Table 1; Table 2; Text box 1). Similarly, for the most part, levels of agreement or disagreement with statements related to gender-based violence indicate that the majority of Canadians believe certain types of violence are unacceptable and that, largely, victims of sexual assault are telling the truth.² For the most part, women were more likely than men to hold these beliefs.

The majority of women and about half of men believe reports of sexual assault are almost always true

Certain myths about sexual assault suggest or reinforce the notion that women may use accusations of sexual assault as a means to get back at particular men, to hide the existence of an affair, or because they had consensual sex and later regretted it (Johnson 2017). Rather than being true reflections of sexual assault reporting, these beliefs can be harmful as they can have negative consequences for victims who have disclosed an assault, and can dissuade victims from reporting the incident to authorities or seeking support, whether formally from victims' services, healthcare providers, or the criminal justice system, or informally by disclosing to friends or family who may provide emotional support (Johnson 2012).

According to the SSPPS, 10% of women and 16% of men disagreed with the notion that people who report sexual assault were telling the truth. Women (62%) were considerably more likely than men (47%) to agree or strongly agree that those who report sexual assault are almost always telling the truth (Table 1).³ Notably, 27% of women and 36% of men neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement, more than any other statement included in the SSPPS.

There was little variation by other characteristics among Canadians when it came to their perceptions about victims of sexual assault (Table 2).

Most Canadians support equal adoption rights for same-sex and opposite-sex couples

Prejudice and discrimination towards same-sex couples wanting to adopt children together has been noted in many parts of the world, both formally through policies and legislative decisions and informally through generally held attitudes (Montero 2014). The passage of the *Civil Marriage Act* in Canada in 2005 extended the right to legal marriage, as well as other legal recognitions and benefits that accompany legal marriage, such as adoption rights, to same-sex partners at the national level for the first time (MacIntosh et al. 2010). This statement was included in the SSPPS as an indicator of homophobic beliefs; research suggests that homophobic attitudes can be associated with other forms of gender-based violence against individuals and communities, such as hate crimes targeting sexual orientation (Alden and Parker 2005; Franklin 2000). According to the 2018 SSPPS, 79% of women and 70% of men agreed or strongly agreed that same-sex and opposite-sex couples should have the same rights to adopt children (Table 1).

The highest levels of agreement with this statement were observed among the younger age groups and decreased with age, for both women and men. For example, 90% of women and 83% of men who were 15 to 24 years of age supported equal adoption rights, declining to 66% and 56%, respectively, among those 65 years of age or older.

There was also a considerable gap between the attitudes of heterosexual Canadians and sexual minorities.⁴ The vast majority (96%) of sexual minorities agreed or strongly agreed that same-sex and opposite-sex couples should have the same adoption rights, while this was the case for three-quarters (74%) of heterosexual Canadians.

Men living in urban areas were slightly more likely to agree with this statement than were men in rural areas (Table 2), the only statement for which there was a statistically significant difference between urban and rural men. For women, there was no difference between those living in urban areas and rural areas.

Women and men largely agree that people should be free to express their gender

The majority of women (85%) and men (78%) agreed or strongly agreed that people should be free to express their gender however they choose. A small proportion did not believe that this was the case (5% and 8%, respectively). On average, those who most often strongly agreed were bisexual women, lesbian women and gay men, women currently attending school, and women who were 15 to 24 or 25 to 34 years of age (Table 2).

Regardless of sociodemographic background or characteristic, the majority of Canadians supported the rights of others to freely express their gender.

When asked how they would react if a family member of theirs came out as transgender, most Canadians indicate that they would support them. Eight in ten (80%) women and seven in ten (71%) men stated that they would support a family member who came out to them as transgender. Slightly more men (11%) than women (8%) stated that they would not support a family member in this scenario.

While there was some variation when looking at the average level of agreement with this statement (Table 2), on the whole Canadians of varying socio-demographic characteristics would support a transgender family member. Women living in rural areas were slightly more likely than those in urban areas to state that they would support a transgender family member, while there was no difference in results between men in rural areas and those in urban areas.

Three-quarters of women believe significant obstacles make it harder for women to get ahead

While the other statements related to gender equality pertained to a belief about how things should be, one statement referred more precisely to the perception of current society. Barriers to gender equality, both real and perceived, can serve to limit the advancement of women in their careers, education, or other aspects of civil life.

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed that there are significant obstacles that make it harder for women to get ahead than men and the perceptions of women and men were quite different. Seven in ten (72%) women agreed or strongly agreed that this was true, compared to 55% of men (Table 1). On the contrary, men were twice as likely as women to disagree that this was the case (22% versus 11%). In other words, women are more likely to believe that there are barriers to gender equality—something which may be reflective of their lived experiences.

Regardless of other sociodemographic characteristics, on average, women more often agreed or strongly agreed that these significant obstacles are present, when compared with men (Table 2). Women and men who were 55 years of age or older were slightly more likely, on average, than their younger counterparts to agree or strongly agree that there are significant obstacles to equality. This generational trend may speak to how older Canadians have witnessed or faced certain obstacles throughout their lives, while those who are younger perceive current society as affording equal opportunity to women and men.

Text box 1

Perceptions about violence in intimate partner relationships

The Survey on Safety in Public and Private Spaces (SSPPS) included a range of questions asking about experiences in intimate partner relationships since the age of 15 as well as in the past 12 months, capturing various dimensions of emotional, psychological, financial, physical, and sexual abuse. Information on intimate partner violence (IPV) will be the focus of forthcoming reports.

In addition to questions about experiences of violence and abuse in their relationships, the SSPPS also included questions on perceptions of violence between partners (Table 1). While most women and men stated that violence was unacceptable between partners in the specific scenarios presented, a considerable proportion held views that would justify or excuse violence in certain situations.

Nine in ten (88%) women and a slightly smaller proportion of men (83%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that violence between partners could be excused if it was due to anger or a loss of control. Similarly, the majority of women (70%) and men (62%) did not feel that an affair was a justifiable or understandable reason for violence towards a partner. Though it was a minority point of view, a substantial proportion of men (20%) and a slightly smaller proportion of women (16%) felt that reacting violently is understandable if one suspects their partner of infidelity. The remaining 17% of men and 13% of women neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement.

Furthermore, six in ten women (58%) and men (60%) did not think that people had the right to check who their partner had been calling or texting at all times. Similar proportions of women (18%) and men (17%) agreed or strongly agreed that people did have this right, while close to one-quarter (23% of women and 22% of men) neither agreed nor disagreed.

Data source

Data are drawn from the Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces.

Detailed data tables

Table 1

Attitudes towards gender equality and gender-based violence, by gender and statement or perception, provinces, 2018

Statement or perception ¹	Women [†]			Men		
	percent	95% confidence interval		percent	95% confidence interval	
		from	to		from	to
People should be able to express their gender however they choose						
Agree or strongly agree	85	84	85	78*	78	79
Neither agree nor disagree	10	10	11	14*	13	14
Disagree or strongly disagree	5	4	5	8*	7	8
There are significant obstacles that make it harder for women to get ahead than men						
Agree or strongly agree	72	71	73	55*	54	56
Neither agree nor disagree	17	16	17	22*	21	23
Disagree or strongly disagree	11	10	11	22*	21	23
People who report sexual assault are almost always telling the truth						
Agree or strongly agree	62	61	63	47*	46	48
Neither agree nor disagree	27	26	28	36*	35	37
Disagree or strongly disagree	10	10	11	16*	15	17
Violence between partners can be excused if people get so angry they lose control						
Agree or strongly agree	6	6	7	9*	8	10
Neither agree nor disagree	5	5	5	8*	7	8
Disagree or strongly disagree	88	88	89	83*	82	84
It is understandable that someone would react violently if they suspect their partner of having an affair						
Agree or strongly agree	16	15	17	20*	20	21
Neither agree nor disagree	13	12	14	17*	16	18
Disagree or strongly disagree	70	69	71	62*	61	63
If a family member of mine came out as transgender, I would not be able to support them						
Agree or strongly agree	8	7	9	11*	10	11
Neither agree nor disagree	12	11	13	17*	17	18
Disagree or strongly disagree	80	79	81	71*	70	73
People have the right to check who their partner has been calling or texting at all times						
Agree or strongly agree	18	18	19	17	16	18
Neither agree nor disagree	23	22	24	22	21	23
Disagree or strongly disagree	58	57	59	60*	59	61
Same-sex and opposite-sex couples should have the same rights to adopt children						
Agree or strongly agree	79	78	79	70*	69	71
Neither agree nor disagree	12	11	12	15*	15	16
Disagree or strongly disagree	9	9	10	14*	14	15

* significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.05$)

† reference category

1. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement on a scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). For the purpose of this analysis, the five response options were grouped into the following three categories: agree or strongly agree, neither agree nor disagree, and disagree or strongly disagree.

Note: Excludes data from Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and Nunavut, which will be published at a later date.

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces.

Table 2
Selected attitudes towards gender equality and gender-based violence, by gender and selected characteristic, provinces, 2018

Selected characteristic	People should be able to express their gender however they choose		There are significant obstacles that make it harder for women to get ahead than men		People who report sexual assault are almost always telling the truth		If a family member of mine came out as transgender, I would not be able to support them		Same-sex and opposite-sex couples should have the same rights to adopt children	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
	mean ¹									
Age group (years)										
15 to 24 [†]	1.6	2.0**	2.2	2.7**	2.3	2.7**	4.3	4.0**	1.5	1.8**
25 to 34	1.6	1.9***	2.2	2.7**	2.3	2.7**	4.2	4.1***	1.5	1.9**
35 to 44	1.7*	1.9**	2.2	2.7**	2.3	2.6**	4.2	4.0**	1.8*	2.0***
45 to 54	1.8*	2.0**	2.2	2.6**	2.3	2.6***	4.2*	3.8***	1.9*	2.3***
55 to 64	1.8*	2.0**	2.1*	2.5***	2.3	2.6***	4.1*	3.8***	2.0*	2.3***
65 and older	1.9*	2.0**	2.1*	2.3***	2.4*	2.6**	3.9*	3.7***	2.3*	2.6***
Indigenous identity										
Indigenous person	1.7	2.0**	2.2	2.6**	2.3	2.7**	4.2	4.0*	1.8*	2.1**
First Nations	1.8	2.0**	2.2	2.6**	2.3	2.6**	4.0	3.9	1.9	2.1
Métis	1.7	2.0**	2.1	2.5**	2.3	2.6**	4.2	4.1*	1.7*	2.0**
Inuk	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Multiple Indigenous identities or specific group not stated	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Non-Indigenous person [†]	1.7	2.0**	2.2	2.6**	2.3	2.6**	4.1	3.9**	1.9	2.2**
Visible minority										
Yes [†]	1.8	2.0**	2.3	2.7**	2.5	2.8**	3.8	3.6**	2.0	2.3**
No	1.7*	2.0**	2.1*	2.6***	2.3*	2.6***	4.2*	4.0***	1.8*	2.1***
Immigrant status										
Immigrant [†]	1.9	2.0**	2.3	2.7**	2.5	2.8**	3.8	3.6**	2.2	2.4**
Non-immigrant	1.7*	1.9***	2.1*	2.5***	2.3*	2.6***	4.2*	4.0***	1.8*	2.1***
Sexual orientation										
Heterosexual [†]	1.8	2.0**	2.2	2.6**	2.3	2.6**	4.1	3.9**	1.9	2.2**
Gay or lesbian	1.3*	1.3*	2.0	2.3***	2.1*	2.3*	4.4*	4.5*	1.3*	1.3*
Bisexual ²	1.2*	1.6***	2.0*	2.4***	1.9*	2.5**	4.7*	4.1**	1.1*	1.6***
Sexual orientation, n.e.c. ³	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Not stated	2.0*	2.1*	2.3*	2.7**	2.5*	2.8***	3.8*	3.4***	2.2*	2.5***
Disability										
Person with disability [†]	1.7	2.0**	2.1	2.5**	2.3	2.6**	4.2	3.9**	1.8	2.2**
Person without disability	1.8	2.0**	2.2*	2.6***	2.4*	2.6**	4.1*	3.9**	1.9*	2.2**
Employed in past 12 months										
Yes [†]	1.7	2.0**	2.2	2.6**	2.3	2.6**	4.2	4.0**	1.7	2.1**
No	1.9*	2.0**	2.2	2.4***	2.4*	2.6**	3.9*	3.7***	2.2*	2.4***
Educational status										
Currently attending school [†]	1.5	1.9**	2.2	2.7**	2.2	2.7**	4.2	4.0**	1.6	1.8**
Not currently attending school	1.8*	2.0***	2.2	2.6***	2.3*	2.6***	4.1*	3.9***	1.9*	2.2***

See notes at the end of the table.

Table 2 — end
Selected attitudes towards gender equality and gender-based violence, by gender and selected characteristic, provinces, 2018

Selected characteristic	People should be able to express their gender however they choose		There are significant obstacles that make it harder for women to get ahead than men		People who report sexual assault are almost always telling the truth		If a family member of mine came out as transgender, I would not be able to support them		Same-sex and opposite-sex couples should have the same rights to adopt children	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
mean ¹										
Marital status										
Married or common-law†	1.8	2.0**	2.2	2.5**	2.3	2.6**	4.1	3.9**	1.9	2.3**
Separated, divorced, or widowed	1.8*	2.0**	2.1*	2.6***	2.4*	2.7***	4.0*	3.8***	2.1*	2.4***
Single, never married	1.6*	1.9***	2.1*	2.7***	2.3*	2.7***	4.2*	4.0***	1.6*	1.9***
Area of residence										
Urban†	1.7	1.9**	2.2	2.6**	2.3	2.6**	4.1	3.9**	1.9	2.1**
Rural	1.8	2.0**	2.2*	2.6**	2.4	2.6**	4.2*	3.9**	1.9	2.3***
Total	1.7	2.0**	2.2	2.6**	2.3	2.6**	4.1	3.9**	1.9	2.2**

F too unreliable to be published

* significantly different from reference category only ($p < 0.05$)

** significantly different from estimate for women only ($p < 0.05$)

*** significantly different from reference category ($p < 0.05$) and estimate for women ($p < 0.05$)

† reference category

1. Represents the average response in each category from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). For example, a mean of 1.5 would mean that the average response fell between strongly agree and agree.

2. Includes persons who reported being, for example, pansexual, omnisexual or polysexual.

3. n.e.c.: not elsewhere classified. Includes persons who reported being, for example, asexual, demisexual or sapiosexual.

Note: Excludes data from Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and Nunavut, which will be published at a later date. Responses of not stated are excluded from the calculation of the means. Confidence intervals are not displayed but are available upon request.

Source: Statistics Canada, Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces.

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Notes

1. The Strategy can be consulted at the Women and Gender Equality Canada website: It's Time: Canada's Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender-Based Violence.
2. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each, on a scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). For the purpose of this analysis, the five response options were either 1) grouped into the following three categories: agree or strongly agree, neither agree nor disagree, and disagree or strongly disagree or 2) presented as a mean response.
3. Some respondents may have disagreed due to the inclusion of the word "almost" in the statement; i.e., they believe all reports of sexual assault are true and disagree that **almost** all reports are true.
4. Sexual minorities refers to those who stated their sexual orientation was anything other than heterosexual.