



Photo: NWT Fire

# Supporting the Most Vulnerable:

## The Case for a GBA+ Approach to Emergency and Disaster Planning

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## Overview

Co-authored by YWCA NWT and the Yellowknife Women's Society this briefing note is intended to inform decision-makers about the necessity of a GBA+ approach to risk assessment and emergency planning. The experiences of our organizations during last year's evacuation and the challenges supporting our clientele has been a catalyst for action on this issue. Looking to 2024's wildfire season, we believe it is essential for those in leadership positions to ensure their responses are intersectional, compassionate, and centered around uplifting the most vulnerable in our communities.

## About YWCA NWT and YKWS

YWCA NWT and the Yellowknife Women's Society are long-standing presences within Yellowknife and the wider Northwest Territories.

For the past 58 years, YWCA NWT has been working to create safe and equitable communities across the Northwest Territories where women, girls, and families can strive to meet their full potential. It was first established in 1966 to provide housing for Yellowknife's growing population of single working women, and has since grown to include a variety of programs, including transitional & second-stage housing, emergency shelter, childcare, youth empowerment, and food distribution, among other services.

The Yellowknife Women's Society, or YKWS, is a community-based not-for-profit organization that supports people to live in safety with dignity, purpose, and connection by providing shelter, housing, and other practical assistance. YKWS was established as a nonprofit organization in 1990, and over the past thirty-four years has developed and implemented programs intended to support the health, social, cultural, and economic autonomy of women, their families, and broader support networks, wherever possible. YKWS currently provides a range of services in the city focused on housing/shelter, street outreach, family programming, and childcare.

## What is GBA+?

Gender-Based Analysis Plus, or GBA+, is an analytical tool used by governments and other service providers to consider how diverse groups of people may experience different policies and programs. It can help to account for a range of factors such as sex, gender identity, race/ethnicity, age, education, sexuality, language, race, ability, class, etc. This process highlights the need for an intersectional approach, recognizing that different identity factors shape how we experience the world.

Women and Gender Equality Canada has a number of resources on GBA+ and how to use it; those can be accessed [here](#). Their training course includes a case study on applying GBA+ to emergency preparedness, exploring how emergency situations impact people in different ways based on intersecting identity factors and how vulnerabilities are often heightened during emergency situations.

## The Gendered Impacts of Emergencies & Disasters

A growing body of research highlights how emergencies and disasters can have greater consequences for women and gender-diverse individuals. The Canadian Red Cross lists women as one of 10 populations with particular vulnerability during emergency situations.<sup>1</sup> Other populations include seniors, Indigenous residents, people with disabilities, medically-dependent persons, low-income residents, children & youth, people with low literacy levels, transient populations, and new immigrants & cultural minorities.

Primarily, risk factors contributing to both the likelihood and severity of gender-based violence surge in such events. For example, following a particularly volatile bushfire season in 2009, researchers in Australia found that cases of domestic violence against women increased even amongst those who had never experienced it before.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, research done in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina showed a 98 per cent increase in physical victimization of women in impacted areas.<sup>3</sup>

Another recent example is the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been well-established that violence within the home rose dramatically, as social distancing and stay-at-home orders trapped people in dangerous situations.<sup>4</sup> In the first month of the pandemic alone, YWCA NWT estimates that calls to our family violence crisis line rose by 50 per cent.

It is important to translate these lessons from other jurisdictions and from the pandemic into the sphere of climate emergencies in Yellowknife. It is crucial to understand how various scenarios such as an evacuation order or a shelter-in-place directive may impact individual experiences, and therefore how best to plan in order to mitigate risks and increase safety. Another important consideration is the experience of Yellowknife as a receiving community for others being evacuated to the city. Research illustrates how pandemic experiences by shelter staff were marked by challenges due to staff shortages,

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<sup>1</sup>[https://cdn.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/diff/ace-women-health/WHCR/ACEWH\\_not\\_just\\_victims\\_women\\_emergencies.pdf](https://cdn.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/diff/ace-women-health/WHCR/ACEWH_not_just_victims_women_emergencies.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>[https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/thesis/Women\\_s\\_experience\\_of\\_violence\\_in\\_the\\_aftermath\\_of\\_the\\_Black\\_Saturday\\_bushfires/4705114](https://bridges.monash.edu/articles/thesis/Women_s_experience_of_violence_in_the_aftermath_of_the_Black_Saturday_bushfires/4705114)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3394178/>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>

uncertainty, burnout, and secondary trauma - all of which we believe are relevant considerations when planning for climate emergency responses as well.<sup>5</sup>

## GBA+ in Emergency Management

Similar to its use in other contexts, a GBA+ approach in emergency and disaster management would allow those in leadership positions to better plan for the lived realities of a diverse group of people. Importantly, it would enable some of the most vulnerable community members who face various barriers due to their intersecting identities to be well represented in community plans and increase the level of safety for all residents.

There is limited but growing research on the intersecting experiences of climate disasters and emergencies. However, some conversations have begun about the “social dimensions of climate hazards,” including wildfires specifically.<sup>6</sup> Researchers are considering how identity factors shape these experiences, for instance reporting that Indigenous mothers feared their children being taken away during evacuations, a worry shaped by colonial legacies.<sup>7</sup> The Canadian Women’s Foundation also explains that the use of GBA+ in emergency planning is paramount for “identifying community risks, vulnerabilities, and hazards for those who are most likely to experience the disproportionate impacts from these events.”<sup>8</sup>

YKWS has [publicly documented](#) the gaps exposed during the 2023 Yellowknife evacuation, specifically in relation to vulnerable populations. Many people reported a lack of support available, and despite the good intentions of the evacuation order in removing people from the immediate danger of the wildfires, there was a lack of understanding, analysis, and planning to reduce the harms people were being sent to when evacuated. GBA+ at all stages of emergency planning, beginning with risk assessment, could help mitigate these harms in the future.

## Calls to Action

Flowing from the evidence and discussion provided above, as well as decades of front-line experience, YWCA NWT and YKWS have recommendations for practical ways that those in leadership positions can better support vulnerable community members through emergencies.

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<sup>5</sup> [Research-Snapshot-Lessons-Learned-from-a-Pandemic-Shelters-EN.pdf \(canadianwomen.org\)](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Wildfire evacuations: How our diverse experiences can strengthen disaster response \(theconversation.com\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Canadian Women’s Foundation survey on HRVA and GBA+.

We call on all levels of government to **commit to risk assessment and emergency planning that considers intersectional and gendered experiences**, such as increased risks of gender-based violence, in order to promote safety for all residents. As research has shown, “emergency responses that don’t consider a diversity of experiences often create unintended harm.”<sup>9</sup> Failure to incorporate such an analysis will result in further harm for those most vulnerable, by effectively placing less value on certain lives over others when it comes to emergency responses.

Intersectional analysis should be established as **a minimum requirement** for Hazard Risk and Vulnerability Assessment and implementation throughout the emergency management planning process. This includes ensuring that all employees involved are trained in GBA+ and understand how to implement it within their work. Emergency preparedness must ensure safety for those who are most marginalized, particularly women, trans, and non-binary people who are also Black, Indigenous, and racialized, living with disabilities, and those with precarious immigration status.<sup>10</sup>

We also call on all levels of government to commit to **proactive and consistent communication with community organizations** that serve vulnerable populations. This does not mean simply seeking input after an event has occurred. Rather, community consultation should take place well in-advance of any emergency, remain ongoing throughout the duration of the event, and be responsive to any needs or gaps identified.

Furthermore, governments should bolster organizations’ ability to properly support their own clientele, as they possess the front-line expertise to do so. Community organizations such as YWCA NWT and YKWS continually step in to fill social gaps, and this work is heightened during times of crisis, as was evident in last year’s evacuation. Along with consistent, timely communication, these organizations require consistent and adequate funding to support this work.

## Conclusion

With our communities facing the ever-growing consequences of a climate crisis, emergencies and disasters are likely to become common-place in the Northwest Territories. The time to plan for the safety of *all* community members is now. YWCA NWT and YKWS call on those in leadership positions to carefully consider our recommendations regarding GBA+, and reach out to our organizations (as well as others) for assistance in determining what specific considerations must be made to protect vulnerable populations,

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<sup>9</sup> [Gender-Justice-Labs-Final-Report-EN.pdf \(canadianwomen.org\)](#)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

including survivors of gender-based violence. Together, we can ensure that everyone receives the care, compassion, and support they deserve.

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