



YOUR MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS.

Q&A: Tracy Porteous on addressing workplace sexual harassment

BY [MARIANE GRAVELLE](#) February 23, 2017

SHARE



As part of a weekly series leading up to the release of the “Not Just a Bystander” Podcast, presented by the CBA National [Women Lawyers Forum](#) on addressing sexual assault and sexual harassment in the workplace, we interviewed Tracy Porteous, the executive director of the Ending Violence Association of British Columbia and co-chair of the Ending Violence Association of Canada. Tracy has been involved in developing programs and policy that respond to violence against women for 35 years; one example being the More Than A Bystander Program.

CBA National: How is the issue of violence against women being handled now compared to when you became involved in that line of work 35 years ago? Have you seen positive change?

Tracy Porteous: For over 40 years, women’s anti-violence advocates across the globe have been raising awareness on issues related to violence against women to whoever would listen. There is much we can be proud of - many social policy advances have occurred over many decades. Great thanks are owed to thousands of feminists, the United Nations, many levels of government, First Nations women and labour groups who have concerned themselves with the all too stark, often lethal, epidemic of violence against women.

We have seen massive change over the last four decades in Canada in some areas and little change in others. In 1982, the Federal Solicitor General issued a directive instructing the RCMP to recommend that charges be laid in all cases of spouse assault where ‘reasonable and probable grounds’ existed. In that same year, the Federal Justice Minister encouraged all provinces and territories to be more proactive about spouse assault and to put in place programs to encourage more women to report. By 1985, some form of spousal assault policy was in place in most of the provinces and territories of Canada and since that time we have seen a cascade of legislation, policy, programs, training, and protocols developed to assist women and their families struggling with the results of intimate partner violence.

The same however cannot be said for sexual violence. In the 1970’s, important work took place that resulted in vital changes to the Criminal Code in 1983 concerning sexual assault. At the same time, sexual assault centers began to be created by groups of concerned women, but unlike domestic violence, sexual assault and those harmed in this way have largely been left behind by social and legal policy advances and programs set up to help.

Not by anyone's doing, but simply because sexual violence remains to this day, uncomfortable; even frightening for most people to talk about,



And while the cup may feel to some as half empty or neglected entirely, I think this time, right now, holds great promise for movement forward.

N: What is the top complaint you hear from victims? From support workers? Has that changed throughout the time you've been involved with this issue?

TP: With the exception of pockets here and there, we have not yet supplied our justice, health, anti-violence and social service systems with the training, policy, tools and resources they need to respond to disclosures with confidence, competence, compassion and sophistication.

The flow of funding to support services for survivors has been missing as well, where large areas of Canada have no specialized sexual assault services, and where services exist - they have been held at 1980's funding levels and where most of Canada has no specialized medical/forensic, or police or prosecutorial response.

It needs to be said that women running Canada's current sexual assault services have been doing herculean work; ever increasing their sophistication and responding to increasing levels of violence and complex trauma with little to no increased funding.

Most of Canada has no cross-sector, sexual assault policies; most don't even have even single-sector sexual assault response policy. Training for police, Crown, corrections, and the judiciary is missing as well as training for general practice physicians, nurses, lawyers, social workers, HR managers. I think that training across all the human services areas and training for the average Canadian to understand this epidemic, is virtually nonexistent.

N: What else needs doing to get to the root of this problem?

TP: Individuals and the systems they inhabit need to get involved and make these issues their issues and we all need to do everything we can to end violence against women. Almost 70 per cent of Canadians say they know a woman who has experienced sexual or physical violence yet most people don't know what to say or what to do should this violence come across our paths. We need big framework planning, legislative change and funds to educate, prevent and create real societal change in the way people think about this, as well as provide the very necessary supports to survivors.

I think of campaigns to end drinking and driving, to get people to wear seat belts and stop smoking - they have all made massive change in shifting societal norms. The Be More Than a Bystander; Break the Silence on Violence Against Women campaign we started with the BC Lions Football club is the same as these other important social change movements. We are trying to make violence against women and girls socially unacceptable and give tools to people, especially to men to speak up about violence instead of staying silent because saying nothing is really the same as saying it is okay to abuse women.

On March 8, 2017, coinciding with International Women's Day, the CBA will release its new "Not Just a Bystander" Podcast, which is presented by the CBA National Women Lawyers Forum in collaboration with various CBA National Sections and the CCCA. This new podcast builds off of the Forum's recent #WriteYourWrong campaign, through which individuals were encouraged to anonymously submit stories of their encounters with sexual assault and sexual harassment in the workplace, and strives to continue the discussion on this important issue and examine what lawyers, clients, and the community can do to fix this problem.

SHARE

Filed Under: [Features](#)

National magazine is the official periodical of the Canadian Bar Association and covers the latest trends and developments affecting the legal profession and the practice of law, as well as the latest news regarding the association and its activities. If you have suggestions, ideas or requests concerning this Web site or the magazine, please send us an e-mail at national@cba.org