

New app aids women in violent relationships

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Women experiencing violence from intimate partners now have access to a unique, interactive safety app that can help them assess their risks, set priorities and plan next steps. The [myPlan Canada app](#) was co-

developed at Western, with Nursing professor Marilyn Ford-Gilboe as the Canadian project lead.

The app allows users to input their specific circumstances—such as whether they are in immediate danger, live with the abuser, have young children at home, have a job, are in a rural or urban area, or have access to a vehicle—and will walk them through a personalized plan to protect their safety and health.

"The purpose of myPlan is to give [women](#) space and time to think about their situation, to think about their options. It's a starting place," said Ford-Gilboe, Women's Health Research Chair in Rural Health at the Arthur Labatt Family School of Nursing.

The [free app](#), available on Apple and Android, is available throughout Canada and includes location-specific resources customized for every province and territory.

It is also available in the United States, where it is searchable as myPlan and was developed in partnership and with research by Nursing professor Nancy Glass of Johns Hopkins University.

Just 1-in-5 women experiencing intimate-partner violence connects with a service such as a helpline, shelter or domestic-violence program. The reasons are often complex, Ford-Gilboe said.

The app is meant to augment—not replace—the social, police, legal and [medical help](#) available, by equipping women to decide on steps that are right for them, including whether, and where, to seek support if they choose.

The app's features include options for a quick or detailed danger assessment; a safety plan; and where to find helpful confidential services

in person, online or by phone.

Private and secure, the app even has safeguards protecting women from unwanted snooping on their smartphones. For added safety, users can also click on a quick-exit button that leads to a generic Google-search page.

"There isn't anything as interactive or personalized as this," Ford-Gilboe said. "It's one of the few apps that has been tested through research."

Research partners in Canada include Nursing professors Colleen Varcoe from the University of British Columbia (UBC) and Kelly Scott-Storey at the University of New Brunswick (UNB). A francophone version is in development through Université de Laval.

Ongoing research funding has come through the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) and the app's development is supported and promoted in part by the federal Department of Women and Gender Equality.

The Canadian version of the app builds [on an online set of tools called iCAN Plan for Safety](#)—developed at Western, UBC and UNB with the help of hundreds of women survivors of violence and other experts—to help women assess their risks and danger in violent relationships, and to discover and use strategies for safety.

Importantly, tools in the online site and app also help women gain insights into their health and wellbeing and take the temperature of their anxiety, chronic pain or depression. In research studies, women who used these tools reported better mental health, increased confidence in safety planning, stronger sense of control over their lives and less coercion from their abusive partners.

These resources also help women feel empowered to assess their risk and make changes to improve their health and [safety](#), Ford-Gilboe said.

"We know women experiencing violence are strong and resilient—and sometimes support from the right place at the right time is something that makes an incredible difference to them. Sometimes it's in person and sometimes it's not. It would be my hope that this app could provide some of that knowledge or insider info."

That's particularly important as the COVID-19 pandemic has made women more isolated and potentially more vulnerable by having to stay in close proximity to an abuser.

myPlan will be under continuous improvements, with new information and resources added as research continues and community collaborations grow.

It is another example where evidence-based data should be used to find solutions to real-world issues, Ford-Gilboe said. "The research I do ought to be used for social good. Mobilizing that into something that makes a difference is important to me," she said.

More information: myPlan Canada: myplanapp.ca/

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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