



nellie's
IMPACT REPORT 2026



How Nellie's Is Breaking the Cycle of Gender-Based Violence



After 50 years, we wish we could say that Nellie's wasn't needed as much as ever. But it is. In Canada, 187 women and girls were killed by violence in 2024, up from 148 in 2019. Most often, gender-based violence is unseen, with thousands of women and children living through it every year.

While Nellie's has long been known as an emergency shelter for women and their children escaping violence, we know trauma-informed support is essential, too. Today, we also focus on how we can make headway in breaking the cycle of gender-based violence, by supporting healing, sharing knowledge, and helping women build lives beyond crisis.

At Nellie's, women find both support and empowerment — an integrated approach that sets our work apart. From case management and educational workshops to dedicated children's programming and opportunities for connection and rest, we provide a holistic approach for women and their children as they rebuild their lives. On page 7, we take a closer look at what empowerment means in practice at Nellie's — and how embedding it across our work strengthens outcomes for women and their children.

Expanding our focus beyond crisis work is essential to our efforts toward supporting lasting change and healing for survivors and their families — because without this, we know gender-based violence often leaves families grappling with enduring intergenerational trauma. On page 4, we share Cindy-May's story, an incredible example of why empowering the women at Nellie's is not only critical for the women, but for their children as well. Born while her mom was living at Nellie's 29 years ago, Cindy-May is now a member of our staff.

Stories like Cindy-May's show what's possible when women are empowered to shape their own futures. Making that kind of long-term impact possible, however, depends on stable and sustained funding. As the financial landscape around us continues to shift, donations remain lower than in past years, and several of our traditional funding streams are changing or being reduced. None of these outcomes would be possible without the generosity of our donors.

Thank you for your continued support and trust in Nellie's, and for standing with us as we work to break the cycle of gender-based violence.

Ingrid Graham, Executive Director

A photograph of a woman with her hair in a bun, holding a baby close to her face. The woman is looking down at the baby with a gentle expression. The baby is looking towards the camera. The background is a soft, light blue and white gradient.

Gender-based violence is on the rise in Canada

Every 48 hours, a woman or girl is killed in an act of gender-based violence.

187 women and girls were killed by violence in 2024, up from 148 in 2019.

In Ontario, 43 women were killed by men in 2025.



From Newborn Shelter Resident to Shelter Worker: Cindy-May's Story

When Cindy-May Dapaah was born, her mom, Mercy, was living at Nellie's. Now, almost 30 years later, Cindy-May works at Nellie's as a social worker.

Back in 1997, Mercy was new to Canada and faced significant communication barriers — yet she found the courage to flee an abusive partner. At Nellie's, she found support that left a lasting impression. As Mercy's pregnancy progressed, she decided to honour two staff members — executive director Cindy Cowan, and shelter worker May — by naming her daughter after them. **“In our Ghanaian culture, parents usually name their children after someone in their lives [as a] sign of respect,”** Cindy-May explains.



For Mercy, this was more than gratitude. It was a way of carrying forward the care she received, and the belief that her daughter's life could be shaped by safety, dignity, and possibility. Cindy-May grew up hearing stories of these two women who helped her mom: **“She told me that she just didn't understand why they were so kind to her.”**

Without a doubt, the legacy of Cindy and May lives on in Mercy's daughter. From an early age, Cindy-May knew she wanted to give back to her community. **“I feel like there are so many different people that poured into me, and that made me feel like I also want to pour back into others one day,”** she says. Cindy-May became the first person in her family to attend university, and later earned her Master of Social Work.

Cindy-May has now been working at Nellie's since 2024, and says that her mom's story reminds her to always make time to check in on the residents. **“Knowing that my mother was in this same position, it helps me know and remind them that this isn't the end,”** Cindy-May explains. **“I know that once they leave, they're never going to forget this place. They're never going to forget who treated them well.”**

Mercy's experience at Nellie's shows how empowerment works over time. By being supported at a moment of crisis, she was able to rebuild her life, creating stability and opportunity for her daughter. Decades later, that same support comes full circle through Cindy-May's work with women and children at the shelter today. **“Every time I go to work my mom says, ‘Oh, you're going to the place where I gave birth to you!’”** says Cindy-May. **“That's how she refers to it every time. ‘The place where I gave birth to you.’”**





From Crisis to Stability: Why Empowerment Matters

For the women and children who arrive at Nellie's, safety is only the first step. What comes next — rebuilding confidence, navigating complex systems, and making difficult decisions — brings its own set of challenges. Without the confidence, tools, and support to make decisions for themselves, women and their children are more likely to remain caught in cycles of harm.

This is why Nellie's has focused on strengthening our support services to help women build the foundations for long-term stability. Rather than treating empowerment as a separate program offering, we're now weaving it through all of our work — from shelter and housing support to seniors' programs, children's services, and community outreach. This shift responds to the realities our clients are facing as they try to rebuild their lives, including more complex systems, longer wait times, and fewer clear choices.

The need for this type of support shows up routinely in our day-to-day work with the women staying at Nellie's. **“There's a mom and her teenaged son staying with us right now, and every time we ask the mom something, she defers to her son for the answer,”** says Jiin Yiong, Program Director at Nellie's. **“She likely came from a household where she didn't have a say in anything, so now we have to instill the confidence in her to make decisions for herself.”**

This tailored, timely approach is critical, Jiin adds. **“When we focus on empowerment throughout our organization, we are better able to address issues as they come up,”** she explains. **“We don't have to wait for the next round of programming for a woman to learn decision-making skills or work through the issues in her life. We're meeting the woman where she is, when she needs the support.”**

When women are supported to rebuild confidence and practice decision-making in real time, they become better equipped to navigate housing, legal, and support systems beyond their stay at Nellie's. This ability to make informed choices strengthens long-term stability and reduces the likelihood of returning to unsafe situations. For children, it also helps interrupt the intergenerational impacts of violence by modelling agency, resilience, and self-trust.

Our empowerment lens extends across our in-shelter and outreach programming. Through our Community Support & Outreach Programs, our healthy relationship workshops help women recognize red flags for abuse and strengthen their autonomy. Meanwhile, our children's programming focuses on building confidence and resilience through age-appropriate activities and therapeutic support.

“We provide them with the resources, tools, and confidence they need to make decisions for themselves,” explains executive director Ingrid Graham. **“We're the cheerleaders behind them, helping them move forward.”**





Thank you for your continued support.

Find out how you can help us build a future free of gender-based violence.

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