

Insecurity and Inequality: From Lived Experience to the Power to Act – METRAC's Contribution

104- 01/09/2026 METRAC[\[1\]](#), a Canadian organization founded in Toronto in 1984, is dedicated to preventing and- /combating gender-based violence. Now recognized for its expertise, the organization has developed a collective strategy combining audits, collective and coordinated initiatives, education, research, access to rights, and policy change. METRAC works alongside groups exposed to violence and discrimination in public spaces and in the workplace: women, young people, 2SLGBTQIA+ people[\[2\]](#), immigrants and racialized people, Indigenous communities, older adults....

METRAC's development can be understood through the three dimensions of collective empowerment: community, collaborative, and societal. The process begins with an individual awareness of a danger, threat, or injustice, and the determination no longer to endure it. The person then connects with other residents who share the same sense of resistance.

Organized into groups, they turn their individual experiences into a collective understanding of the problems at stake. They identify areas of concern, analyze both immediate circumstances and the systemic constraints shaping their daily lives, and then work with stakeholders to develop responses that address both immediate obstacles and their deeper causes.

Community empowerment: starting from lived experience

For METRAC, people who live in a given space are experts in their own experience of safety. In 1989, the organization

created the *Women's Safety Audit*, later renamed the *Community Safety Audit*. The aim is not to entrust outside experts with determining what makes a neighbourhood safe or unsafe, but to enable residents—particularly those most exposed to risk—to observe their environment, name the problems, and propose solutions.

This approach transforms individual experience into collective knowledge. A poorly lit street, an isolated bus stop, a difficult-to-access passageway, or a space where someone does not feel safe cease to be mere personal impressions: they become sites for observation, discussion, and action.

These findings illustrate community empowerment, as expressed by one member: *"I realize that my experience matters, that others share it, and that together we can produce legitimate knowledge that deserves to be heard. By developing new expertise collectively, we become agents of change."*

Focus: Safety audits—far more than a diagnosis

The innovative character of the Safety Audit lies in this shift in expertise. The process begins with the formation of a local group, followed by training in the method. Participants choose the location and timing of the audit, observe the space in concrete terms, identify the factors contributing to feelings of insecurity, and formulate recommendations. The results are then compiled into a report and followed up to assess the implementation of the recommendations.

The method combines situational prevention through environmental design, participatory action research, community development, and an analysis of gender-based violence. It can be applied to neighbourhoods, transport systems, housing, schools, campuses, and workplaces. The response is not limited to improving lighting or installing signage. METRAC sees the audit as a tool for building people's capacity to act: participants leave with the ability to lead conversations

about safety, challenge systemic barriers, and advance local solutions themselves. Its 2024 impact report indicates that hundreds of audits have mobilized thousands of people, including young people, older adults, newcomers, and 2SLGBTQIA+ people.

The effects can be very tangible. The approach contributed, among other things, to the creation of designated waiting areas and a request-stop programme on Toronto's public transit system, improved lighting in parking garages, and changes to urban design. In Ottawa, an audit conducted by an organization that had adapted METRAC's method helped bring about a change in the location where students were picked up by school buses. The audit therefore produces a double shift: the citizen becomes both a producer of knowledge and an interlocutor for decision-makers.

Collaborative empowerment: understanding the other's constraints in order to act together

Once the problem has been identified, it is necessary to understand who can address it: who can act, with what resources, under which rules, and within what constraints. METRAC involves all relevant actors in safety initiatives: residents, community groups, elected officials, public services, schools, urban planners, transport operators, and institutions.

On campuses, for example, the audit is explicitly designed as a partnership between students, administrators, faculty, staff, and the wider community. It examines physical features, practices, policies, discrimination, and sexual violence simultaneously. "Citizens" are not positioned in opposition to "institutions." Instead, they recognize interdependencies, take account of each actor's constraints, and identify the room for manoeuvre that makes collective action possible. The problem experienced by individuals becomes a shared problem, around which different stakeholders are called upon, involved,

and mobilized.

Focus: The right to justice—turning information into power

METRAC's second flagship pillar is its *Community Justice Program*, active for more than thirty years. Its objective is to reduce the barriers that prevent vulnerable people from accessing their rights. METRAC produces plain-language legal information for women who have experienced or are at risk of violence, as well as for young people and marginalized communities. The programme covers family law, criminal law, immigration, harassment, and human rights. It relies on workshops, training sessions, webinars, digital resources, and partnerships with community organizations.

METRAC also participates in law-reform initiatives and, alongside other organizations, intervenes before courts or legislative committees on issues affecting women. Its programme is supported by two legal-information platforms: *Family Law Education for Women* (FLEW), available in 14 languages, and the *Ontario Women's Justice Network* (OWJN).

Here again, we find the three levels of empowerment applied to rights: I learn about my rights; I share this knowledge with my peers; and, together, we act on both the social determinants and the legal frameworks that sustain or reinforce inequality.

From collaborative empowerment to societal empowerment

METRAC's other programmes extend this approach to different audiences. *ReAct*, created in 2002, develops young people's leadership through popular education and peer-to-peer training on gender-based violence, relationships, harassment, and cyber-violence. Young people take part in producing these resources and in sharing them.

The *TransFormed* programme was designed from the perspectives of Two-Spirit, non-binary, and trans people experiencing

intimate-partner violence. Other initiatives address discrimination against Black women in employment.

The guiding principle remains the same: bring forward the experience of those directly affected, turn it into knowledge, build alliances, and act on institutions, policies, and representations. The organization seeks first to address immediate threats, then to change the underlying conditions that produce insecurity.

METRAC's trajectory shows that citizens are able to produce knowledge, understand the issues raised by urban planning and development as well as the power relations underlying them, engage with those who have the capacity to act, build alliances, and ultimately help make territories safer and society more inclusive and tolerant.

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[\[1\]](#) METRAC: Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children

[\[2\]](#) The acronym 2SLGBTQIA+ refers to Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, and asexual people, as well as other gender identities and sexual orientations.