



BC Association of
Specialized Victim
Assistance &
Counselling Programs



B.C./Yukon
Society of Transition
Houses



BC Institute
Against Family Violence

CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

BRIEFING DOCUMENT

ISSUE: Addressing Gaps in Services for Marginalized Women

There are significant gaps in the network of support services for marginalized women who are victims of violence. In order to keep these women safe, these gaps must be addressed on an urgent basis.

KEY POINTS

- Most of the women and children killed or seriously injured in the context of domestic or sexual violence in recent years have been members of marginalized groups, facing particular barriers that made it more difficult for them to access critical support systems. The six Handel children killed by their father in Quatsino in 2002 lived in a very isolated setting. Sherry Charlie, battered to death by her uncle in Port Alberni in 2002, was an aboriginal child. Sherry Heron, killed at Mission Memorial Hospital in 2004, suffered from physical disabilities. Denise Purdy, killed in Nanaimo in 2003; Amandeep Atwal, murdered near Cache Creek in 2003; and Navreet Waraich, Manjit Panghali and Gurjeet Kaur Ghuman, murdered or critically injured in the Surrey/Delta area in 2006 (domestic violence suspected); were all immigrant women. The victims of Robert William Pickton were sex trade workers and drug users, many of whom were aboriginal women. Most of the women who have been murdered or gone missing on Highway 16 are aboriginal women.
- Service gaps include specialized, accessible domestic and sexual violence services for:
 - **Aboriginal women**, both on and off-reserve, who face high levels of violence as well as significant barriers to accessing services
 - **Immigrant women**¹, who are more vulnerable to serious abuse because of social isolation and lack of access to services
 - **Women with disabilities**, who are particularly vulnerable to abuse and whose safety depends on services being accessible
 - **Women with mental health and substance use issues**, who are vulnerable to abuse and are marginalized by society's misunderstanding and harsh judgments
 - **Women in rural and isolated areas**, where innovative approaches to service delivery are required to maximize cost-effectiveness

¹ For simplicity, the term "immigrant" is used here to include those who have, or have ever had, landed-immigrant status, whether or not they are currently Canadian citizens, as well as refugees, visitors and those without legal status in this country.

- **Women who live in poverty**, for whom material needs are often the most significant barrier keeping them in violent relationships
- **Lesbians and transsexual women**, for whom traditional services may not be accessible
- **Sex trade workers**, who are particularly vulnerable to physical and sexual assault by both pimps and johns and who face significant barriers to accessing services
- The major issues facing marginalized women who are victimized include inaccessibility of existing services and resources and lack of specialized services that target their particular needs and their social isolation. These barriers put marginalized women at greater risk. Given these women's vulnerabilities and needs, coordination of services is critical.
- A gender-based analysis and a diversity analysis are key to priority setting, funding decisions and development and implementation for all legislation, policy and government-funded programs addressing the needs of abused marginalized women.

THE CONTEXT

- BC can be proud of services developed in the past 20 years to support women victims of violence. However, some groups remain at particular risk. Their needs are often not met by existing services which are already inundated and have little time to reach out to marginalized groups.
- Experience and research indicate that needs of marginalized groups are more acute and less likely to be met by existing systems than the needs of "mainstream" groups. Barriers to accessing assistance increase their vulnerability to serious harm. Experiences and needs of abused immigrant and aboriginal women are particularly well documented. See reference list at the end of this note.
- It is well documented that material considerations present a particularly significant barrier for marginalized women trapped in abusive relationships. Decisions made about income assistance, affordable housing and bridging, pre-employment and job retraining programs directly impact the safety of all women who are victims of violence. They have an even more profound impact on the safety of marginalized women and their children.
- Fourteen victim service programs in BC are focused on aboriginal crime victims. Only three of these specialize in serving domestic or sexual violence victims and one specifically serves youth. Only three Transition Houses specifically focus on services for aboriginal women; there are no specialized aboriginal services in the Stopping the Violence (STV) Counselling program or the Children Who Witness Abuse program. Only four victim service programs specifically serve immigrant victims of crime, two of which specialize in serving victims of domestic or sexual violence. Two Transition Houses provide services specifically for women with special needs – one for women with mental health issues and one for women with substance use issues.
- MCS has funded 11 multicultural Outreach programs attached to existing services. These are a good start, but more such programs are needed, including programs for aboriginal women.

- Physical accessibility of services and resources continues to challenge many programs. However, some have made significant efforts to be inclusive of victims with disabilities. Most Transition Houses have been funded for wheelchair accessibility, some have TTY telephone systems for the hearing impaired, and many victim service and STV Counselling programs have worked hard to be accessible. There is a need for increased funding for Community-Based Victim Services, STV Counselling and Outreach programs to increase their ability to provide accessible services.
- Preliminary results of a study by the Justice Institute of BC indicate that the multiplicity of needs of abused immigrant women require a comprehensive, coordinated response delivered by a “key” agency.
- The Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance has recently indicated it will *defer* collection of sponsorship debt for women who can establish “substantial evidence of abuse.” Sponsorship debt collection has been identified as a significant financial barrier for many immigrant women wishing to leave an abusive partner they have sponsored. There is concern that the process for establishing “substantial evidence of abuse” may become a barrier for many women, particularly as severe violence or homicide may occur without a prior history of *physical* abuse.
- Studies and reports over the years have increased our knowledge and confirmed what we know about the unmet needs of marginalized women who are victims of violence. These communities are expressing high levels of frustration. *It is now time for action.*

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

- Consider funding new services and initiatives from the Victim Surcharge Special Account, which, under the *Criminal Code*, is mandated to fund victims of crime initiatives.
- Provide funding for Community-Based Victim Services, STV Counselling programs and Children Who Witness Abuse programs, as well as treatment programs for assaultive men, to facilitate accessibility for marginalized groups.
- In funding for enhanced accessibility of services, include funding for recruitment, cross-sectoral training and mentoring of staff from these marginalized groups, recognizing the fact that some potential staff persons from these marginalized groups may need extra support and training to enable them to contribute most effectively to program operations.
- In all decisions regarding funding for basic social services such as income assistance, affordable housing and bridging, pre-employment and job retraining programs, consider their impact on the safety of particularly vulnerable women who are victims of violence, and their children. Women and children who cannot leave abusive situations because of issues of poverty, housing, or unemployment, are women and children who are seriously at risk.
- Provide appropriate and effective cross-sectoral in-service training to address the particular needs of marginalized women, on an ongoing basis to staff of all victim support services, as well as system-based justice, health and social services to help ensure that existing services can better meet the needs of marginalized women.

- Translate key information resources and provide appropriate, trained interpreters in all major languages and for those with communication disabilities for all services key to women's health and safety.
- Provide funding for groups representing marginalized populations, including funding for research and education to assist government in policy and program decisions.
- Fund all victim support services to provide effective outreach and public education/awareness for marginalized groups, to address the isolation of many of these victims.
- Develop cost-effective strategies to involve key community organizations in the development and implementation of measures to address the issues raised here, to bring to the table the unique perspectives of those who are directly affected and provide guidance on priority-setting, funding criteria, program development and implementation strategies. Options might include:
 - Providing additional funding to existing provincial anti-violence organizations to serve this additional function
 - Developing a provincial advisory committee of key members of each diversity group

Aboriginal women

See Pacific Association of First Nations Women et al (2005) for more recommendations.

- Increase the number of funded aboriginal-specific victim support programs in areas with high aboriginal populations. In rural areas, consider aboriginal satellite programs or aboriginal outreach workers attached to programs serving the general population.

Immigrant women

See **Note** under **References** for recommendations forthcoming from Justice Institute of BC report.

- Provide funding for programs to enhance specialized services for ethno-specific and multicultural services for abused immigrant women, including satellite offices or outreach workers attached to existing anti-violence programs.
- Provide interpreters for family law cases at Supreme Court, for other essential legal services such as Court Registry business, court preparation, Crown and Legal Aid, and for essential health care services, on a priority basis.
- *Exempt* abused immigrant women from sponsorship debt collection and future sponsorship debt. Work directly with community agencies to develop guidelines on how women will qualify for the exemption and develop strategies to effectively communicate this message to immigrant women.

Women with disabilities

- Encourage and provide funding for innovative approaches to enhance physical accessibility of services, interpreters for those with communication disabilities, and adaptation of key information materials for those with sight/hearing impairments.

Women with mental health and substance use issues

- Provide adequate funding for victim support services for abused women with mental health and substance use issues, such as STV Counselling.
- Cross-train domestic violence workers working with women with mental health or substance use issues and mental health/drug and alcohol counsellors working with domestic violence victims.

Women in rural and isolated areas

- Work closely with The Community Coordination for Women's Safety Program² to develop innovative approaches to service delivery in sparsely populated areas in order to maximize cost-effectiveness.
- Develop more satellite programs and outreach workers in rural areas, attached to existing programs, where appropriate, to address needs of these victims.

Lesbians and transsexual women

- Enhance funding to existing STV Counselling programs for specialized counselling for lesbians and transsexual women.

Sex trade workers

- Provide funding to organizations working on behalf of sex trade workers, to enhance the safety of sex trade workers and facilitate linkages with other services.

CONTACT: Mary Clifford, Executive Director
BC/Yukon Society of Transition Houses
Telephone: 604-669-6943
Email: maryclifford@bcysth.ca

Tracy Porteous, Executive Director
BC Association of Specialized Victim Assistance and Counselling Programs
Tel: 604-633-2506
Email: porteous@endingviolence.org

Colleen Varcoe
Board of Directors
BC Institute Against Family Violence
Telephone: 604-827-3121
Email: resource@bcifv.org

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² One of the key focus areas of Community Coordination for Women's Safety is women in rural and isolated areas.

References

Note: The Justice Institute of BC, in partnership with MOSAIC, Prince George Elizabeth Fry Society and Vancouver and Lower Mainland Multicultural Family Support Services, is preparing a research report on empowerment of immigrant and refugee women who have been victims of violence. This report will be released later in 2007.

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