

Recommendations for Moving Forward on Eliminating Violence Against Women: A Discussion Paper for Professionals



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The shelter movement began in Canada in the 1970s as a response to women's increased consciousness of the systemic violence that was being perpetrated against women by men. Today there are more than 450 shelters across the country. Over the years we have successfully articulated this aspect of women's oppression. We have led the move to a paradigm shift in the public and institutional understanding of violence against women. What was once considered to be a private issue to be dealt with within in the family has now become a societal responsibility with the expectation that our social and government institutions will respond in a manner that will ensure consequences for this violence, and which will reinforce the message that violence towards women is not acceptable.

Perhaps the most concrete example of this change in social attitudes is the government directive to police in the 1980s that assault charges must be laid. Also, women now know that they have choices, the very least of which is that they will have access to a safe place to stay anywhere in the country. The presence of state funded women's shelters in itself is a strong message that we are taking a stand that violence against women will not be tolerated and that no woman must remain in an abusive relationship.

We know, however, that violence against women does continue. Violence is an aspect of human relationships that requires constant scrutiny and attention as we work towards creating non-violent societies. There are many fronts on which we address the issue of the physical harm we inflict on each other.

In the women's shelter movement we will continue to be vigilant and to move forward with effective strategies. Based on our over 20 years of experience in working in this area and from conversations with activists and service providers, we are proposing the following areas where professionals need to focus their attention in order to achieve our goal of eliminating violence against women.

Understand the Issue of Violence Against Women from a Systemic Context

One of the great achievements of the women's movement has been to contextualize violence against women as a systemic problem that is rooted in the unequal relationships between women and men. Understanding the fact that many of our social relationships and institutions are based on men controlling women, or excluding women from the loci of control, helps us to know where to start in addressing violence against women. Keeping these control dynamics in the forefront of our analysis is important as we develop solutions to the problem.

We can then work to change policies and practices which are rooted in this inequality. We can institute changes in labour, domestic, government and social arenas to ensure that women are equal players.

We live in a society that often sees violence as a solution to problems. In a sense violence is normalized. There are many circumstances where people find that violence is acceptable such as retribution for an injustice, to win demands when we are not being heard, and even in a recreational or sport environment.

Another systemic issue which we need to confront is racism. Racism is often associated with violence as one cultural group seeks to dominate another. We need to explore how our overt as well as our unconscious assumptions serve to oppress minority and/or indigenous women and make it difficult for them to leave violent relationships. For example, as professionals if we are not understanding the cultural beliefs and expectations of non-white women, then we may not be providing them with the most appropriate support.

The Need for Education

There is a continued need for education. This education must be directed at various sites, from the general public to the individual. At the general public level we need to continue to point out the way in which inequality is played out in society. We must talk about the alternatives to violent responses to conflict. It is necessary for organizations providing services to women who have been abused to find the time and resources to build in a public education component to their work. Our analysis must be current and reflective of people's real life circumstances. Also, we must remain vigilant and continue to focus the public's attention on the price we pay for allowing inequality, condoning violence and ignoring racism.

Education also needs to occur on the individual level where we communicate to girls and women that they do not have to live with violence. Telling them that there are supportive services available will help them to make changes in their lives. We must find opportunities to ensure that girls are feeling confident, deserving of respect and understanding the danger that may lie ahead of them when they are being controlled through threats and violence.

Our education should focus also on the roles that women assume in relationships, and how those roles might leave them vulnerable to abuse. If we see ourselves primarily as caregivers, we may feel that we have the obligation and power to change a partner's abusive behaviour. Women need to learn to find a healthy balance between compassion and understanding and paying attention to our own need for a respectful and loving relationship. Women may need not only education but individual therapy and support to help them overcome their own unhealthy patterns and deficiencies that have resulted from

the generational patterns they have experienced in their families. Girls and women should be given opportunities to resist these patterns as well as the patterns of inequality that are pervasive in society generally.

Address Barriers which Make Leaving Abusive Relationships a Challenge

Essential for achieving success in helping women to live free from violence is the removal of barriers which make living independently a challenge. Probably poverty is the most pervasive difficulty that keeps women trapped in a cycle of violence. Social assistance rates fall far below poverty lines¹ making poverty an absolute certainty for women who are not employed. Even women who are working are more likely to be employed in part-time, low-wage and unstable jobs.²

When women are poor they face lives of inadequate housing and nutrition. They are denied access to legal advice and education. Opportunities for social and recreational outlets are limited. Their children suffer from exclusion from the advantages enjoyed by their peers. Until women are able to be assured of a life with financial security, living independently will be a formidable challenge.

It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for poor women with children to obtain a professional education. Higher education is associated with higher rates of income so that poor women who are trying to establish financial independence are often hampered by lack of education and therefore access to secure and high paying jobs. Our policies need to ensure that women have access to education that will lead them to careers where they are able to support themselves and their children.

Women who experience violence may also face the barrier of social isolation particularly if they are from communities which are disadvantaged or marginalized. Women's social supports may not be healthy ones, but rather ones that encourage their continuation in lifestyles which are self-destructive. Creating positive social supports is a task for the whole community. We need to provide opportunities for women to develop networks which will support their desire for personal progress.

¹ National Council of Welfare Reports. 2005. 'Welfare Incomes 2004'. Ottawa: National Council of Welfare.

² Krahn, Harvey and Lowe, Graham. Work, Industry and Canadian Society, 2002. Scarborough: Thomson Nelson p. 177.

Awareness about the Needs of Specific Groups of Women

When responding to violence against women, we must understand that not all women come from the same circumstances or have the same needs. Immigrant women may be especially isolated due to language barriers and not being supported by their communities in their attempts to leave abusive partners. Disabled women are more prone to abuse and face even greater challenges in finding adequate income and housing.

Many of the victims of domestic violence are First Nations women. Supporting First Nations women in leaving abusive relationships requires an understanding of the impact which cultural genocide has had on their communities. Whole communities are in turmoil which results in high rates of poverty, a lack of healthy social support, and increased incidents of violence. People's attitudes and responses may be grounded in racist beliefs and assumptions. We need to work to challenge these attitudes and create social environments which are empathetic and inclusive. We need to build on the many strengths to be found in the First Nations communities.

Defining the Role of Government

Government policies and actions can have an impact on the circumstances of women leaving domestic violence situations. Perhaps the most obvious area of impact is the response of the justice system to violence against women. Keeping women safe from abusive partners is the role of the justice system. If an abusive partner is a threat to a woman, then justice officials need to ensure that he is in a place where he cannot carry through on his threats. Too often, restraining orders are accepted as adequate protection when the reality is that abusive men are at large and have access to their partners. Also, the danger to the woman and her children is often not taken seriously when access is being determined.

Police training in responding to domestic violence must not fall by the wayside. Police must never forget the potential for loss of life when a woman is calling for help. Police and other helpers in general require an understanding of the various dynamics which keep women returning to dangerous situations and that each call for help deserves an immediate response.

The government also has a role in creating policies that ensure women's economic security. Currently our system of providing welfare is intrusive, punitive, inadequate, overly complex and focuses excessively on attachment to the labour market. Women leaving abusive relationships often have dreams of a career and economic independence. This hope, however, is sometimes not realistic in the short term. Women need financial security as they heal from abuse, tend to traumatized children and take time to identify their resources. Immediate entry into the labour market is often not an option.

Federal, provincial and municipal governments need to take responsibility for the adequate housing of their populations. Market rents may be beyond the reach of many people, particularly women attempting to live independently. Access to appropriate housing is a basic right of citizenship.

After years of repressive and judgmental social welfare policies which have stigmatized and demonized those requiring financial support it is time for a paradigm shift. It is time to recognize that access to the basic necessities of life is a universal right of citizenship regardless of attachment to the labour market or other behaviours of people requiring assistance.

Perhaps now, more than ever, people expect governments to listen to the concerns of citizens. Policies and laws cannot be enacted without considering the impact on ordinary citizens. Collaboration must occur with people affected by family violence and with those providing services. It is no longer acceptable for government to hear only the voices of the business elite and those representing corporate interests. We cannot put corporate interests first if for no other reason than our environment is being destroyed by policies that promote economic growth and the accumulation of wealth. All of us will benefit from government policies that put quality of life issues ahead of the interests of the affluent few.

Global Nature of the Issue

A third wave of feminism is in order. This feminism occurs on a global scale and will look at all aspects of women's inequality. We can no longer see violence against women in isolation from the other inequalities that women face and in isolation from the circumstances of women around the world. We must use our advantages as a nation of privilege to support vulnerable women in countries where they do not have the advantages that we do and where they have not yet had the successes that we have had. Women around the world are ready to take action. There is a growing shelter movement and a movement to end violence against women that is taking root in Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe. Women from all parts of the world are using the internet to convey the abusive acts committed against their sisters. We need to let our government know that it is our expectation that they convey the message that women's inequality is not acceptable anywhere in the world.