

# *Traps and Gaps:*

An Effectiveness Assessment of the VAW Service  
System in Thunder Bay and District

*A report on behalf of*

*The Coordinating Committee to End Woman Abuse in  
Thunder Bay and District*

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“There are gaps, and there are traps within the system that hold women accountable.”

“Two things need to occur to end violence against women; we need women’s equality and we need to hold men accountable for their violence. Currently, society does not hold men accountable, they blame women and the systems designed to support abused women also hold women accountable or create so many barriers women give up and return to abusive situations. I believe a first step is to get men to see VAW as a man’s issue and have men hold violent men accountable for their violence while supporting women’s advocates.”

“Their needs to be unconditional welcoming and support by service workers. No turning away. All women are worthy of help and need immediate assistance.”

“It is amazing how many hoops abused women have to jump through to get services, and are often treated terribly by them. A lot of workers don’t get the issue and hold lots of judgement towards them.”

“In a perfect world I would like to see the VAW system work cooperatively from the grassroots to the most institutional end of things. There would be cooperation and collaboration.”

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## **Executive Summary**

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This research initiative is intended to assist services in more adequately addressing the needs of abused women and children in Thunder Bay and District. The research findings have demonstrated that improvement must come from within the system itself. As it stands, the Violence Against Women (VAW) service system in Thunder Bay and District is a broken one which is barely able to deal with the symptoms of VAW let alone the problem. As it currently exists, the system continues to fail to hold perpetrators of woman abuse accountable, and perpetuates many of the systemic barriers which continue to oppress women and other marginalized groups. The recommendations resulting from this research are intended to address these systemic issues.

This research initiative was developed with the intention of addressing the following goals:

1. To assess the systemic response to VAW in Thunder Bay and District in order to identify gaps in service.
2. To assess differential strengths of Institutional Based Services and Community Based, Equality Seeking, Women Centred initiatives in order to identify the best methods for a cohesive joint response
3. To research the needs of women who have experienced/survived abuse living on reserve in the remote north to identify gaps in service in order to develop a protocol with local agencies to increase service from Thunder Bay and District to these women.

### **Defining the VAW Service System**

For the purpose of this research, the VAW Service System is defined as any agency which provides services to or has contact with abused women. These services include institutional agencies such as the police, the court system, medical services, and school boards, as well as community agencies such as shelters, counseling services, and women's advocates. For a complete list of the VAW services invited to participate in the research see appendix iv.

### **Who are the Victims?**

- The vast majority of respondents were Canadian citizens.
- The women demonstrated an equal split of aboriginal/non-aboriginal descent.
- The majority of women completed a high school education.
- Nearly 40% of the women had/have been in an abusive relationship for 1-5yrs.
- Nearly 45% of the women had/have been in an abusive relationship for 20+ yrs.

- Half had experienced abuse as a child and approximately half had a family history of domestic violence.
- Nearly 2/3 of the women had been in more than one abusive relationship.
- Only half of the respondents had accessed services or assistance of any kinds to help them deal with the abuse.
- Half of the women felt that they were at high risk in their abusive relationship.
- Nearly half felt they were at medium risk.
- 19% of the high school students knew someone in their school that is currently or has been in an abusive relationship.
- Nearly 70% of the high school students felt they didn't know what VAW services were available.

### **The Consequences of Abuse**

- Long-term damage to self-esteem.
- Long-term effects on mental health.
- The cycle of violence continues through children.
- Women living in constant fear.

### **Barriers to Leaving**

- Women are scared to leave when children are involved due to the inadequate and unpredictable response of child protection services and custody and access decisions.
- Women are fearful of reprisals from their abusive partner.
- Due to a lack of options, women are often forced to choose between two disagreeable options i.e., staying in the abuse and living in poverty.
- Women are often unable to identify the abuse they have experienced.

### **How are Women Connecting with VAW Services?**

- Inter-agency referrals are few. Women were often connected with services on their own.
- Women's satisfaction with services is important as it impacts their decision to utilize those services again (i.e., police, shelter). In addition, agencies can become known for unsatisfactory service and will deter other women from accessing them as well. For a complete listing of services utilized and the satisfaction rating for each, see appendix xi.

### **How the VAW System Impacts Women**

- Due to their lack of trust in the system's ability to keep them safe or respond appropriately, women are reluctant to report abuse.
- Women feel powerless within the system.



- Women, not abusive men, are being held accountable by the system
- Women are struggling to maneuver a far too complex VAW system, making it difficult for them to access services, and understand the process.

### **System Wide Issues and Gaps**

A few of the most pressing issues and gaps in the VAW service system include:

- Services to address addiction and VAW simultaneously.
- Uninformed agency policies which have a detrimental affect on abused women.
- Lack of system-wide dedication to holding men accountable for their behaviour.
- Restrictive mandates which prevent agencies from doing necessary work
- Racist and sexist behaviour demonstrated by workers within VAW agencies
- Lack of VAW training among VAW workers.
- Lack of system-wide dedication to working with abusive men.

### **Agency Specific Feedback**

Agency participants as well as focus group participants often made agency specific comments during the interviews. These remarks have been compiled for review by both the coordinating committee and the agency specified. For a complete compilation, see the agency specific feedback portion of this report.

### **The Criminal Justice System**

- Due to financial, language, cultural and other such barriers, the criminal justice system is often inaccessible to abused women.
- The attitudes regarding VAW within the judiciary are problematic when ruling on woman abuse cases.
- There is a lack of perpetrator accountability within the legal system.
- Custody and access decisions in woman abuse cases often demonstrate a lack of understanding of the detrimental effects that domestic violence has on children.

### **Neighbours, Friends and Family**

- The majority of the women interviewed felt that their neighbours, friends and family would not have helped them get out of the abusive relationship due to cultural barriers, and community and family values which are not supportive of victims of woman abuse.
- Some of the respondents reported that their neighbours, friends and family knew about the abuse but chose not to intervene in order to not jeopardize her safety further.

- Only one of the respondents felt that the neighbours, friends and family initiative would have given their loved ones options and information as to how to assist them in leaving the abuse.

### **The VAW System's Role in Ending VAW**

Agency interview participants articulated what they see as their role in ending VAW. Common perspectives among workers include:

- Advocacy for women
- Referral services
- Counseling services
- Empower women
- Education around VAW issues
- To provide crisis services to abused women and their children

\* Not one respondent reported that their role is to hold men accountable

### **Developing Service Based on Women Directed Best Practice**

Research participants were asked to share some their experience and knowledge that has come from their experience within the VAW system and/or working with abused women and children. The following are a few of the approaches to providing service that were suggested by participants.

- Compassion, understanding and a non-judgmental approach is particularly important when working with abused women.
- Patience is particularly necessary when dealing with an often inept system.
- Participants reported that women often choose to return to the abuse and therefore continue to be in need of support and respect from system workers despite this choice.
- Validating women's experiences and providing them with choices so they can be empowered through decision making is absolutely necessary.

### **Institutional Based VAW Service v. Community Based, Equality Seeking, Women Centred Initiatives**

The intention of this portion of the research was to examine the impact of increasingly institutionalized VAW services on women and children, as well as community based VAW agencies that have developed services for abused women based on the specific needs of women in Thunder Bay and District. It was also an intention to demonstrate the perceived importance of both institutional and community based VAW services by VAW workers within all VAW agencies.

- While institutional based services are a vital piece of the VAW service system, due to restrictive and ill-informed mandates make addressing women's individual needs appropriately difficult.
- At the coordinating committee table, community based services are quickly being out-funded and out-numbered by institutional services. This leave community based service with little power to do the advocacy work necessary to substantively address VAW.
- 64% of the participants feel that institutional based VAW services are a very important part of the VAW service system.
- Many who felt that institutional services were very important also felt that these services are not currently living up to their potential as effective services.
- 92% of the participants feel that community based, equality seeking, women centred services are a very important part of the VAW service system.
- Many who felt that community based services were very important felt that these services address the needs of women in ways that institutional services are unable.

### **The Coordinating Committee to End Woman Abuse in Thunder Bay and District**

- Despite the divisions currently affecting the coordinating committee, there is generally a common philosophy around VAW that bring agencies together. Several agency participants reported that their philosophy of providing service to abused women and their children includes the belief that the abuser is responsible for the violence, that we need to keep women and children safe, and that supporting women is the main priority.
- Personal perspectives on VAW by service providers, profoundly impacts the provision of service to abuse women and their children as well as the level of participation by members at the coordinating committee table.
- Agency representatives on the committee need to be dedicated to the issue of VAW, and have decision making power within their organization to address, or speak to issues brought to the table relating to their agency
- The vast majority of respondents feel that it is important that institutional and community based services collaborate on the issue of woman abuse in order to better serve the needs of the community.

### **Problems Specific to Aboriginal Communities**

- There is a complete lack of service available to women who are abused on remote northern reserves, including crisis housing, police protection, and counseling and support services
- Women who return to their reserve after seeking service outside of their community are at particular risk due to the inability of VAW services to successfully maintain contact with them.
- Lack of matrimonial rights is particularly problematic as it colludes with dominant sexist attitudes which contribute to the high rates of woman abuse within the aboriginal community.

- There is a lack of community support for abused women on northern reserves, as women are often blamed for the violence. This is particularly common when women return to their communities after seeking services off-reserve.

### **Developing a Northern Reserve Protocol**

Our endeavor to develop a formal protocol with northern reserves was largely unsuccessful due to lack of interest by relevant aboriginal organizations working on reserve. However, agencies that choose to participate shared information which could be used for further research initiatives by the committee.

- VAW service needed on remote northern reserves include, after care and support for women returning to reserve, emergency housing, mental health and counseling services, and programming for abusive men.
- Workers on reserve identified the need for enhanced communication with police and shelters, updates on available services off-reserve, and to be seen as advocates within the VAW system by off-reserve agencies.
- Workers expressed a desire for off-reserve services for aboriginal women to support women in returning to their reserve, for VAW services to work with the entire family unit, and for VAW services to provide culturally appropriate services to abused aboriginal women and their children.

### **Recommendations**

The research from this report has resulted in several short-term and long-term recommendations. Some of the short term-recommendations include:

- Actions to be taken by the coordinating committee to reorganize, and work more effectively in their collaborative efforts.
- Actions to address the need for education around VAW and available VAW services within the community.
- Actions to address the need for collaboration with aboriginal VAW agencies.
- Actions would enhance services to abused women and their children.

Some of the long-term recommendations include:

- Actions to ensure all front-line workers receive appropriate training around VAW issues.
- Actions to address the need for education around VAW and VAW services within the school system, including students, teachers, principals and administrators.
- Actions to address the needs of aboriginal women living on remote northern reserves who would like to access services in Thunder Bay.
- Actions to enhance services to abused women and their children and address barriers specific to abused women in the north.

## **Acknowledgements**

Participating in this research has been both an honour and a pleasure, as it has allowed me to continue to address issues affecting women's lives, as well as giving me the opportunity to learn tremendously about agencies working tirelessly to address systemic issues affecting women. I am grateful to the Coordinating Committee to End Woman Abuse in Thunder Bay and District for giving me the opportunity to participate in this research, as well as for their courage in taking on this extensive, and contentious research initiative despite the consternation it may have caused. I would also like to thank all of the agency participants for trusting me with their knowledge and experience and for their dedication to the issue of violence against women. I would particularly like to thank the Thunder Bay Police Department for their cooperation and assistance which exceeded expectations.

Thanks to my supervisory team, Gwen O'Reilly, Shannon O'Keefe and Debbie Ball for their assistance and support during the research process. I especially want to thank Debbie for housing me, guiding me and supporting me when women's stories were more than I could bare.

I would also like to thank my family for listening to my passionate rants and to my mom for giving me the tools I need to do the work I love. I especially want to thank my husband Rich Luskleet for being the self-assured man that he is, allowing him to be unwaveringly supportive of his wife's ambitions, in addition to being an incredible role model to our three children.

Lastly I would like to thank all the courageous women who have shared their stories with me and saw the value in participating in this research. Your strength and bravery is truly inspiring.

## Introduction

This research initiative, intended to assist services in more adequately addressing the needs of abused women and children in Thunder Bay and District, has come to fruition despite much resistance from several committee partners (See Appendix i-iii.) Although the findings may be difficult for some to hear, the results are based on a real and concerted effort to provide an accurate reflection of the effectiveness of the violence against women (VAW) service system in Thunder Bay and District.

What this research initiative has uncovered is incredibly valuable for service providers and funding bodies alike. Existing research has shown that the cost of addressing the medical needs of abused women is higher than if it was caught sooner, or ideally avoided altogether. Therefore it is in everyone's best interest to act on the recommendations in this report, as prevention is both ethical *and* cost effective.

Largely, improvement must come from within the system itself. As it stands, the VAW service system in Thunder Bay and District is a broken one which is barely able to deal with the symptoms let alone the problem. **The system continues to fail to hold perpetrators of woman abuse accountable, and perpetuates many of the systemic barriers which continue to oppress women and other marginalized groups.** In addition, prevention is nearly none existent, albeit due to a lack of available funding to do such work. Furthermore, many services are only marginally helpful to women with some acting instead as a deterrent for women seeking to escape abuse. It is only with humility, and dedication to the issue that service providers can regroup to develop a comprehensive and collaborative strategy which will substantively address the issue of VAW.

## **A Woman's Story**

(Written March 2007 by a former client of Faye Peterson Transition House)

As in any relationship, best foot forward is always standard to start, but like the spider spinning his web, to get the victim eventually. These progressions are so smoothly planned it is hard for the victim to believe they are really happening, I guess it is called denial. This is the beginning of the power and control and it just keeps escalating until something horrific happens.

June 2005 – The first assault to the extent of having to call 911 for help, was on my William. Jerry, William and I were just sitting around the dining room table taking a coffee break from the day's work and errands. Jerry has always disliked William for unknown reasons, and he has this part of his abusive personality to always do it in front of other people as if he's on stage. And so it starts again, verbally putting me down and putting me down until William just stands up and in a calm tone of voice says "Jerry, please stop talking to my mom like that." That was all it took. Jerry jumps up, pins Williams against the wall, verbally terrorizing him in his loud voice with his face in William's, grabbing him by the scruff of the neck. I'm yelling in horror "Stop it, stop it" and running around the table, so he turns to me, freeing William to run to the bedroom. My turn to be verbally terrorized. Then chairs start flying into the living room and the grand finale was the large dining table being overturned, coffee flying everywhere, yelling terrible bad things at me. William came out and together we ran outside. I had grabbed the mobile phone and locked us in the car and dialed 911. Jerry is at the car window screaming "Come inside, Come inside". The OPP arrived.

For all that, no charges were laid for assault on me. One year probation and 16 sessions on anger management courses for assault on William. The constant degradation toward me after this was unreal. Threats of leaving, you're nothing but a scarecrow with four children, no one would have you, you're nothing but a spoiled rotten little bitch.

September 2006 – Again after putting in a good days work, Jerry, my 14 year old son Bruce and I were inside. Bruce and I are in the living room chairs with rollers on the bottom, Jerry at the dining table drinking beers. While Bruce and I were discussing school, Jerry would put in comments here and there, I knew it was building up. I could see the signs, but why? We hadn't done anything wrong! And here it comes again, sticking his face right in Bruce's yelling and I'm saying "Stop it, stop it". We did nothing wrong! Out of the blue Jerry picks Bruce up, chair and all, and flings it onto the hardwood floor of the kitchen. Bruce screams and I verbally went at Jerry to leave the child alone which diverted his attention. Bruce escaped to his bedroom and calls 911, since Jerry smashed the other phone when I tried to call for help, as he was totally out of control. Jerry grabbed me by the shoulders and pushed me away to the wall, then ran and grabbed a knife, held it to his neck and said "My blood will be on your shoulder". The rage in his eyes I have seen so many times before, it was so horrible. I didn't know if he'd turn the knife on me or even on Bruce. He ran out the door, the OPP came and took him away, calling me later that night to say they had to take him to the psychiatric ward

because of his constant suicide threats. His courts date was remanded and trial set for March of 2007.

The time between then and now was so nerve wracking it is indescribable.

I received the call at 5pm from Victim Support. I was devastated. Something inside me died, belief in the judicial system, belief in myself. What did I miss to make them understand the severity of it all? \$100 fine and probation, for all the scars of the memories and lies and threats and disappointment that these children and I will carry for a lifetime.

Bruce was quiet for days before he finally opened up and said he was so hurt by the verdict.

I feel humiliated beyond belief, as if I had just been branded a liar, big time, and have to wear that brand anytime I go out, while all he's gotten for all he's done is the proverbial slap on the hand – until he does it to the next victim.

I am so depressed I feel I am no good, just the way Jerry used to make me feel, so the abuse from him just carries on. I feel so stupid to have been abused by a con artist, hurting me and the children emotionally, financially, and physically. He's a sly one, and now walks foot loose and fancy free while the children and I carry the burden. And they call this justice?



## **Defining the VAW Service System**

**For the purpose of this research the Violence Against Women (VAW) service system is defined as any agency or organization that may work with abused women at some point. Institutional agencies such as the police, the court system, medical services, and school boards, as well as community agencies such as shelters, counseling services, and women’s advocates are all included in this definition. For a complete list of the VAW services invited to participate in the research see appendix iv.**

## **The Research**

### **Goals**

1. To assess the systemic response to VAW in Thunder Bay and District in order to identify gaps in service.
2. To assess differential strengths of Institutional Based Services and Community Based, Equality Seeking, Women Centred initiatives in order to identify the best methods for a cohesive joint response
3. To research the needs of women who have experienced/survived abuse living on reserve in the remote north to identify gaps in service in order to develop a protocol with local agencies to increase service from Thunder Bay and District to these women.

### **Methodology**

In order to fulfill the varied purpose of the project, each goal must be approached individually in order to ensure the most effective and appropriate research methodology is utilized. Nonetheless there is some overlap in the research, as some data may have been used to inform more than one of the proposed goals.

#### **Goal 1**

To assess the systemic response to VAW in Thunder Bay and District in order to identify gaps in service.

#### **Goal 1 - Required Information**

- a) Data which articulates the lived experiences of women who have experienced/survived abuse who have used the VAW service system in Thunder Bay and District

- b) Data which demonstrates the assessment of the VAW service system in Thunder Bay and District by the women who have utilized said system.
- c) Data which demonstrates the community's knowledge of the issue of VAW and the VAW service system in Thunder Bay and District
- d) Data which demonstrates agency/community group actual and perceived relevance as a VAW service
- e) Data which demonstrates agency/community groups philosophy/approach to VAW
- f) Data which demonstrates agency/community group assessment of the VAW service system in Thunder Bay and District
- g) Statistical data on all women participating in the project

### **Goal 1 - Data Collection Methods & Information Sources**

#### 1. Focus Groups

- Focus Groups were held with various groups of women who have experienced/survived abuse by utilizing established support groups
- Focus Group were held at St. Patrick's High Schools in three girl's grade 9 gym/health classes to capture their perspective on VAW and VAW services.

#### 2. Survey

- A standardized survey was utilized for all focus groups in order to collect relevant statistical data.
- A standardized survey was utilized for agencies/community groups in order to collect relevant statistical data.

#### 3. Interviews

- Interviews were conducted with agencies and relevant community groups using a standardized set of interview questions.

#### 4. Police Ride-Alongs

- Three police ride-alongs were completed with the intention of attending all domestic violence calls to assess the needs of women at the initial point of contact with the VAW service system.

### **Goal 2**

To examine the relationship between institutional Based Services and Community Based, Equality Seeking, Women Centred initiatives in regard to VAW in order to identify barriers for these distinct groups to provide a cohesive response to VAW.

#### **Goal 2 - Required Information**

- a) Are institutional services alone adequate to address the needs of women who have experienced/survived abuse?
- b) Do autonomous, equality seeking women's services have a role to play in both service provision and coordination, and is that a minor, supporting or leadership role?
- c) Will the interaction of autonomous VAW services with institutional VAW services lead to the ultimate demise, reduction or institutionalization of community based, women centred services?
- d) Does the current fabric of coordination favour one response over another?
- e) What is the impact of provincial funding agency mandates on the ability of Institutional Based Services and Community Based Services to work cohesively in response to VAW?

#### **Goal 2 - Data Collection Methods & Information Sources**

##### 1. Focus Groups

- Utilizing the same Focus Groups as was used in Goal 1, questions were included which focused on Goal 2.

##### 2. Interviews

- Utilizing the same Interview Participants as in Goal 1, questions were included which focus on Goal 2.

### **Goal 3**

To research the needs of women who have experienced/survived abuse, living on reserve in the Remote North, to identify gaps in service in order to develop a protocol with local agencies to increase service from Thunder Bay and District to these women.

#### **Goal 3 - Required Information**

- a) What are the current VAW services available to women on remote northern reserves?
- b) What services are needed to make the response to VAW more adequate?
- c) How can VAW agencies in Thunder Bay and District contribute to fulfilling those needs?
- d) Do women in remote northern reserve communities want assistance in their response to VAW from Thunder Bay and District agencies/systems?

#### **Goal 3 - Data Collection Methods & Information Sources**

##### 1. Interviews

- Interviews were held with various knowledgeable and relevant agencies/community.

### **Participation**

Securing participation for this research initiative was more difficult than expected. Several agencies refused to participate at all, including a few who are currently members of the coordinating committee. Various reasons were given for the lack of participation including declarations of conflict of interest, disinterest in the research itself as well as outright refusal to be involved. (See appendix iv. – project participation table)

Some agency participants, including some from the committee, were particularly difficult to work with on this project, refusing to answer questions integral to the research or being generally non-cooperative. This is particularly problematic as it is indicative of the co-operation level of some of the members sitting on the coordinating committee. For a complete listing of project participants see appendix vi.

The judiciary was also asked to participate in the research in order to understand sentencing decisions, attitudes regarding violence against women VAW and, knowledge

of VAW services and their use within the judicial system i.e., programming for abusive men. All justices currently sitting in Criminal, Family and Provincial Court, as well as all Justices of the Peace were invited to participate. Only one responded to the request, albeit to decline participation. (See appendix v. - letter from Justice Leaman)

Connecting with knowledgeable, equality seeking agencies that work on remote northern reserves was especially difficult. Although there was some success in this area, several attempts to connect with particular equality seeking organizations were unsuccessful, which hindered the ability to attain sufficient information to develop a protocol with northern reserves.

## **Who are the Victims?**

### **Demographics**

Although it was an intention of the research to have balanced data which reflected the experiences of women from various cultural backgrounds, ages, etc., individual women were not asked to participate based on these demographics. The following data is a genuine reflection of the women who were accessing services through the agencies/support groups utilized for the focus group portion of this research. (See appendix vii. – Focus Group Participants)

The vast majority of respondents were Canadian citizens

The women demonstrated an equal split of aboriginal/non-aboriginal descent.

The majority of the women had 2 or 3 children.

Ages ranged equally from 20yrs – 60+yrs.

The majority of the women have graduated high school, with few having any post-secondary education.

### **How long do Women Stay?**

A distinct pattern emerged in regards to the length of time women were spending in abusive relationships. The nearly equal split demonstrated that the majority of women were either in the relationship for a relatively short period, or conversely, were in the relationship for a large part of their life. This data might suggest that there is a window within the first few years of the relationship during which, given the right supports and response from the VAW service system, women are more likely to leave an abusive situation

Nearly 40% of the women had/have been in an abusive relationship for 1-5yrs.

Nearly 45% of the women had/have been in an abusive relationship for 20+ yrs.

15% of the women had/have been in an abusive relationship for between 6 and 19 years.

### **Personal History of Woman Abuse**

Not surprisingly, almost all of the women had experienced multiple forms of woman abuse and were highly likely to have had experience some sort of childhood abuse or to have a family history of domestic violence.

The vast majority of the women interviewed had experienced verbal, physical, sexual, emotional and financial abuse in their relationship.

Half had experienced abuse as a child and approximately half had a family history of domestic violence.

Approximately 1/3 of the women had dealt with addiction, mental health, poverty, homelessness and custody and access issues.

The majority of the women felt that they did have support from family and friends in their life.

1/3 of the respondents were still in an abusive relationship at the time of the focus group.

Nearly 2/3 of the women had been in more than one abusive relationship.

The employment status of the women when they left their abusive partners is of particular interest as it demonstrates the common lived experience of women having to rely on some sort of social assistance when they leave. This makes accessing that system in a timely fashion, as well as having trained staff that are sensitive to the issue of woman abuse, of great importance in these agencies.

Nearly 2/3 of the women who had left their abusive partners were unemployed when they did so.

There is a disconnect between the number of women who have been/are being abused, and the number of women seeking help for the abuse. There are a multitude of possible reasons for this which are examined further in this report, including women's reluctance to report, barriers to leaving, knowledge of VAW services, and for Aboriginal women, lack of services on reserve;

Only half of the respondents had accessed services or assistance of any kinds to help them deal with the abuse.

### **Assessment of Risk**

The risk that abused women are facing is tremendous. This fact makes it clear that it is imperative that the VAW system respond appropriately and effectively in order to ensure the safety of the women and children they are charged with protecting.

Half of the women felt that they were at high risk in their abusive relationship.

Nearly half felt they were at medium risk.

Only one woman felt she was at low risk.

### **Abuse in High Schools**

The data collected from the high school focus groups is reflective of the experience of grade nine female students. The statistics indicate that violence within intimate relationships is already occurring and is being minimized within this demographic. However, given that statistics rise progressively through high school, there is certainly an opportunity to educate both female and male students at this early stage regarding healthy relationships, self esteem, and how to identify abuse.

### **Experience with Abuse**

12% of the students reported that they were in an abusive relationship at the time of the focus group.

4% of the students reported that they had previously been in an abusive relationship.

Only 1 student reported why she has remained in the abusive relationship.

I love him.

19% of the students knew someone in their school that is currently or has been in an abusive relationship. Some describe the abuse they were aware of;

Her ex-boyfriend hit her.

They have been hit, punched, pushed around. Being forced to do stuff they don't want to do. She was also being called mean and offensive names.

He would make fun of her in front of a crowd and not act very kindly towards her. No physical violence, he was just mean.

Hitting, punching, etc.

20% of the students knew adults who were in abusive relationships at the time of the focus group.

### **Personal History**

Nearly all students who reported experiencing abuse experienced emotional abuse. All had experienced verbal, and half had experienced physical abuse.

8% had experienced abuse as a child and has a family history of domestic violence.

9% have had alcohol or drug addition issues.

### **Assessment of Risk**

Nearly 75% of the students who reported that they were in an abusive relationship felt that they were at low risk.

1 student felt she was at high risk.

### **Personal Support**

Of particular concern was the student's reluctance to report abuse due to their assumption that their safety would not be ensured by the justice system, and therefore would be putting themselves at risk by reporting. Their fear of retaliation echoes the fears of many of the women in the focus groups who have experienced the justice system putting them at further risk.

95% of the students felt they have support they could rely on from family and friends.

77% felt they have support they could rely on from school counsellors.

16% of the students reported feeling isolated or alone.



70% of the student thought they would feel comfortable to seeking help from family, friends or counsellors if they were in an abusive relationship. Some reasons cited for not feeling comfortable include;

I'm independent and want to do it on my own.

I think it would be embarrassing and would keep telling myself they're just having a bad day.

Not from school because I don't know them and it would be awkward and I don't really talk to my mom about things like that.

What if the police became involved and he gets people after you?

No, because of the fear of getting hurt. What would happen to the other person and what would happen when it was all over?

I would say yes and no. I would only trust a friend. I would not be able to tell family members or the school unless it got to a point where I felt I had to and it would be the only way out.

### **Knowledge of Violence Against Women (VAW) Services**

High school age students demonstrated a lack of awareness of VAW services. Interestingly, the majority of students incorrectly assumed that most of their friends would know where to get help. Education on the services available to address woman abuse should be a part of the proposed program to address the issue of VAW within the school system.

Nearly 70% of the students felt they didn't know what VAW services were available.

Of the 30% who reported they knew of VAW services, the agencies cited were:

Kids Help Phone (11)

Police (6)

Children's Aid (1)

Nearly 50% of the students thought that their friends would know about VAW services.

Only 1 student had utilized any service to help them with the abuse they were experiencing. They cited the service utilized as well as who referred her to the service;

Counselling, referred by doctor

### **Comments and Suggestions from High School Students Relating to Woman Abuse Among Teens**

The comments and suggestions made by the students, relating to woman abuse among teens, further made apparent the necessity for education around VAW within the high schools;

100 years ago women were helpless when they were abused by their spouse, but now, its 2007. Women should know to take care of themselves and stop it if the situation is till in their control, and if they decide not to, they deserve to be abused. Its not the dark ages anymore, get over the 'I'm a woman, I'm helpless against men' mentality, because you are capable of defending yourself.

I would say that if that person was being abused, you have to tell some, and probably a service could help too.

Woman abuse is such a wrong thing. I don't get why teens always go back to the one who abused them. If that person really loved them they wouldn't harm in any way, shape or form.

We need to be educated more about it to help prevent further problems.

Continue to do presentations like this, making sure to clearly inform students the signs of any kind of abusive relationship.

I think when guys make fun of girls they don't realize that it hurts them, and if the girl sticks up for herself the guys still do it because they find it funny that we get mad at them.

## **The Consequences of Abuse**

Front-line workers and women alike reported that leaving an abusive relationship doesn't mean that women have escaped the violence that was perpetrated against them. Emotional and physical damage can last a lifetime and can manifest in various other destructive forms including entering further abusive relationships, developing addiction issues, and perpetuating the cycle of violence within their own family. Research

participants agreed that getting women out of the violence won't solve the problem, it is ensuring that they never experience it;

The toll that violence takes on women is tremendous. Physical injury is obvious but emotional and verbal abuse wears on self-esteem and is harder to repair in a person. It is harder for woman to explain that as well. Women truly are survivors. Women who survive are strong and deserve credit for that.

Men should be made accountable. Men are not punished, and women are punished for the rest of their lives with post traumatic stress disorder.

Children are coming back as adults in abusive situations. The cycle of violence is continuing itself. Women believe they can and are responsible to fix it.

There is a distinct lack of awareness of the effects of abuse on women and children by judges, lawyers and policy makers. This is obvious in the detrimental decisions they make which affect women's safety and women's lives.

Even if we are free from violence we never stop thinking about the possibility of violence happening.

It is a normal part of my life. I don't have an abuser anymore but now I abuse myself. There are long-lasting consequences of abuse. Life only feels normal when life is chaotic.

## **Barriers to Leaving**

Women are often so overwhelmed with the complexity of their situation that they become unable to take action. There is often custody, finances, and lethality, to take into consideration. It is difficult for women to find the strength and resources to leave even when they recognize the abuse.

### **Children**

Women are scared to leave when children are involved due to the inadequate and unpredictable response of child protection services and custody and access decisions;

The systems are not helping the women. When the woman has left the abuse and the man is still involved with the kids, this is not healthy involvement. It is not enough to get the attention of CAS but enough that it keeps women and their children in turmoil. The father shouldn't always be involved. The system has a difficult time distinguishing when they should or shouldn't.

The parental rights of the father are scary.

Men's lives are not regulated like women's, especially when it comes to children. I was the one who was abused but my ex has more custody.

My abuser called the police when I was trying to leave him. When the police came they told me to leave and made me leave without my three children.

The children were barriers. I didn't want them to lose their connection to their dad.

## **Fear**

Needless to say, one of the biggest barriers which prevent women from leaving is fear of their abusive partner. One respondent articulated her internal struggle when she wanted to call police;

Calling the police would only make him more mad. He would be back in a few hours and I would be alone with him again. Its not worth it, I would rather wait until I have to call.

My mom got me a plane ticket once I told her what was going on. I am away from my abuser but I'm still afraid of my ex finding me, he's been gone for two months but I'm waiting for him to just show up in my life.

I was abused for 13 years. The fear was paralyzing. I didn't know where to turn. Everyone in my community knew of the horrendous abuse and no one offered any support or help.

## **Lack of Options**

Women fleeing abuse are in need of immediate assistance. Too often they are stuck choosing between staying in an abusive situation and living in poverty. This is particularly true for women with children;

Women are poor, Ontario Works workers make the women feel horrible, and the system has women stuck in poverty. They can't get out because they can't afford it. Women often go back because they can't afford to stay out.

Women and children need to have compensation from the government in order to be able to survive without abuser.

Money is a big barrier. Abusers often take their money which leaves women with few options or opportunities to leave.

There is definitely a gap between when they leave and can find housing on their own.

One respondent pointed out the necessity for educational opportunities for abused women;

Women need support in accessing education, thereby providing employment, which is the first step to independence and women not returning to abuse.

In particular for aboriginal women, there is a lack of culturally appropriate options;

Services do not meet the cultural needs of aboriginal women. They are forced to choose between their communities and being safe.

### **Inability to Identify Abuse**

Women are often unable to identify the abuse they are/have experienced. Particularly while they are in the relationship it is often difficult for women to recognize what is happening to them, especially since they often take personal responsibility for the violence. Education around identifying abuse was pointed out as being of primary importance;

I didn't know I was being abused. I realized through counseling that I was. I understand what abuse is but it is difficult to cut off the relationship. I have definitely become stronger with help

If we want women to stay out of the relationship we have to help them understand their pattern of being in abusive relationships and help them understand why; low self-esteem, what a healthy relationship is, how to recognize the abuse.

Young women are minimizing violence to a new level. There is so much violence in schools that they minimize the violence. Young women minimize their risk or think it is okay.

For senior women who have lived with an abusive partner all their life, leaving is scary and risky. They don't know anything different and are scared to start a new life without him at this point in their life.

## **How are Women Connecting with VAW Services?**

How women are accessing VAW service is tremendously important as it points to the initial gap in the VAW service system, that is to say that women are not accessing services. The research collected from the focus groups was particularly disappointing as only a handful of referrals to services were made. In many cases it was by happenstance that the women were connected with services at all.

### **Services Accessed and Client Satisfaction Survey**

Equally important to women connecting with services is their satisfaction with service, as it impacts their decision to utilize those services again (i.e., police, shelter). In addition, agencies can become known for unsatisfactory service and will deter other women from accessing them as well. For a complete listing of services utilized and the satisfaction rating for each, see appendix xi.

### **Referrals**

Out of 41 focus group participants the following agencies gave them referrals to VAW services either being their initial contact or after they had accessed the initial service.

5 were referred by their counselor.

4 were self-referred.

4 were through their EAP program.

4 were referred by family or friends.

3 don't know how they found services

2 were referred from shelters.

2 were referred from hospital.

1 was referred by police.

## **How the VAW System Impacts Women**

The VAW system plays a crucial role in women's decision to report abuse, and success in escaping it. Unfortunately, too often the system itself acts as a deterring factor. Women are opting to remain in abusive relationships and/or struggle to escape the abuse on their own because the system which is intended to assist them is actually becoming a barrier to leaving. The system decidedly makes women feel powerless within it, holds women

responsible for their own safety and the safety of their children, re-victimizes families, and is nearly impossible for them to maneuver. All of these factors contribute to making women increasingly reluctant to report or seek help from VAW services.

In addition, help can be difficult to access due to the inordinate amount of hoops that women are required to jump through in order to obtain services. When women finally come to a point where they are reaching for a helping hand, the system needs to unconditionally grab hold. Too often women are refused service or are forced to bend over backwards to qualify. VAW services need to be unconditionally welcoming and supportive, as all women are worthy of help and need immediate assistance.

### **Reluctance to Report**

Women often don't feel safe enough to disclose the violence. This is largely because they want to protect their abusive partners, they are afraid of reprisal by the partner, and because of their lack of trust in the system's ability to keep them safe or to respond appropriately. Respondents shared their experience with women's reluctance to report;

It is difficult to try to get women to see that it is not their fault. Women come in and start worrying about him and who will take care of him. They contact him, he says he's getting counselling, they put hope and faith in him and often go back. The power and control wheel goes around and around. Women minimize their safety.

Women don't want their partner arrested but police are obligated to take them away, which means that women won't call again until the violence is so extreme that she has no choice but to call. Women have to feel that they are safe. There is only temporary relief when man is taken from the house. Who is going to protect her when he is released 12 hours later?

In the court system it is difficult to get women to testify. They are at high risk in these situations.

There is a definite fear of reporting abuse for women who have been in trouble with the law. I have seen women who are on conditional sentence, that were out past their curfew, get beat up by their boyfriend, and won't report for fear of reprisal. Women run the risk of reprisals from boyfriend as well as legal system putting sanctions against them. She often gets the book thrown at her and he gets another slap on the wrist. There is a disconnect between what is a serious crime and the sentences that are given.

One respondent demonstrated how women's reluctance to report can become frustrating to front-line workers and can affect their perception of victims of woman abuse. This frustration can contribute to an additional burden being placed on women to "do the right

thing” by reporting the violence, despite the system’s ineptitude at appropriately dealing with the issue.

Women’s reluctance to report is frustrating. They don’t want a “policeman” at their house, and don’t want to get their boyfriend in trouble. It is difficult to convince them to do the right thing.

### **Powerlessness within the System**

Respondents often expressed how women feel powerless within the system as one mechanism often unknowingly triggers another, leaving women trapped within an expanse of a system they did not necessarily ask to be a part of, as seen in this respondents comments;

Women feel tricked by a system which doesn’t ask her consent for services, or inform her when other agencies are asked to get involved. It can snowball so fast that it leaves women feeling like the system is happening to them rather than working with them.

### **Holding Women Responsible**

Respondents often commented on the fact that the system tends to hold women responsible for the safety of herself and her children in particular through child welfare agency policy;

CAS is a distraction from the real issue of the fact that CAS can’t keep the children safe from abuser. Women are therefore held responsible. There are gaps, and there are traps that hold women accountable, which detract from the need to hold men accountable.

CAS also holds mom responsible for keeping her children safe, therefore holding her responsible for the actions of the perpetrator.

Child welfare opens files in the mom’s name. This is extremely problematic. They need to be tracking the abusers who go on to abuse other women and children so they can pull all the information together on an abuser. To put them in the mom’s name places a expectation on the mom immediately that she is the contact person that they should have continual access to, that she is the parent that needs to work with child protection services, and that she is responsible to keep her family safe.



## **Maneuvering the VAW Web**

The complexity of the VAW system became quite apparent as the research progressed. Frontline workers often didn't know where to refer women for particular assistance, and advocates often reported that the system constrains their ability to advocate for their clients. It is unreasonable then to expect women to be able to manoeuvre through this system on their own as it currently exists.

Women need advocacy, therefore it is essential that funding for women's advocates is increased. In addition, women and advocates alike need a clear diagram of sorts, which illustrates the intersections of agencies within the system.

Respondents were particularly concerned that institutional services act as barriers due to the slow, unwavering pace at which they move;

It is difficult for women to access Legal Aid and Ontario Works in a timely fashion. They need to be fast-tracked through these systems. They are in crisis, and need a response which is appropriate for such.

There is no fast tracking through the system.

For a woman who has left, or is planning to leave, they often require financial assistance. When they come here they need money and we give it. If they aren't connected to services, i.e., shelters, there is no one to help them through all the steps. It is terribly difficult for women to do this on their own.

## **System-wide Issues and Gaps**

The following list of issues and gaps within the VAW service system is a compilation of the most commonly reported complaints by both women who have accessed the system and frontline workers.

### **Addiction/VAW Services**

Workers identified a gap for women dealing with addiction and abuse issues simultaneously. This is a result of services which are either mandated to work with addictions or to work with VAW, with mandates uncrossed. Furthermore, many VAW agencies have policies which specifically prohibit them from working with addicted women;

The absence of a service that can deal with violence and addiction is problematic. There needs to be stabilization work and ongoing services. Dedicated counsellors are needed to deal with violence and addiction from the beginning where she is still using, to where she has quit and is working deeper on violence issues. Counselling needs to be based on where women are at in their addictions. This

needs to be specialty counselling within VAW services. VAW services commonly believe that women “use” to cope with violence, but it take on a life of its own. The addiction may stop when she leaves, but it may not, as using may have developed new issues for her.

Housing is a particular problem for women with addictions because they are not eligible.

There is a big gap for women who are struggling with addiction and violence. In terms of housing, shelter living is difficult for addiction, or for women with behaviour issues.

Addictions are a big gap. It is difficult to get women into treatment quickly as there are waiting lists for treatment. There needs to be treatment centres where childcare is provided. Residential facilities like Faye Peterson could house addiction treatment and are able to accommodate childcare.

### **Agency Policy**

Individual agency’s policies have shown to be a constricting factor in providing service. Workers voiced their frustration with the policies which hamper them in assisting women;

I am often stuck being unable to provide services because of the risk of not attaining permission of both parties in a joint custody agreement. If they provide services to mom without dad’s permission they could be sued.

We work with mom because we don’t have access to dad. Our policies are based on this. The result of this is mom is held accountable for dad’s behaviour.

Many agencies are limited in their services because of how many people they have available to deal specifically with VAW issues;

34% of the respondents reported that they don’t have anyone specifically dedicated to VAW despite their agencies mandate to work with VAW issues.

23% of the respondents reported that the majority of their staff is specifically dedicated to working with VAW issues.

28% of the respondents reported that nearly half their staff is specifically dedicated to working with VAW issues.

15% of the respondents reported that there is no one at their agency who is specifically dedicated to working with VAW issues.

## **Childcare**

Workers identified a specific need for affordable childcare among abused women;

In terms of counseling, there is a gap around transportation and childcare. Women can't even access services because of these barriers.

There is a lack of adequate childcare for women who have left abusive partners and must enter the workforce or pick up extra jobs to make ends meet for their families. How can we expect women to opt for poverty?

Childcare is problematic as women's ability to access support is limited due to childcare issues. They often have to bring children with them or they can't attend appointments that require one on one. They often can't make or keep appointments due to childcare or transportation as well. Kids are also witnessing things that they shouldn't due to lack of childcare. For example, women often have to bring their children with them to the ER. There should be more childcare within services, perhaps by rotating childcare workers between agencies?

Access to childcare is difficult, which creates a cycle where women can't work and therefore have no money making it all the more difficult for them to leave.

## **Consistency**

There was a reported lack of consistency in the delivery of services, which can act as a deterring factor from accessing service;

When the police come you never know what is going to happen. Will they take him? Will they leave him? Will I be charged instead of him? What will happen to my kids?

When you deal with agencies like Ontario Works on a regular basis you realize how inconsistent services are. One worker might be helpful, the next may be unwilling to accommodate you in any way.

I never know if a woman will qualify for service. It's as though policy is always changing to exclude more women.

There appears to be a disconnect between how consistent agency's feel they are in their provision of service and the assessment of consistency given by other workers and the women accessing their services.

Nearly 50% of the respondents thought their agency was always consistent in the provision of service.

Policies are clear and domestic offences are considered high risk offences. The ministry expects and reinforces that standards will be met.

35% of the respondents thought their agency was somewhat consistent in the provision of service.

The majority of policy and response is mandated by policing standards, however as each case has individual characteristics they cannot be approached with a “cookie cutter” philosophy.

The case is accepted for service through the application of the eligibility spectrum, therefore there should be some consistency with the response of the case. When the case is accepted for service, the plan for each family is developed according to the needs of the family, so there will be variations in the service, however workers routinely consult with VAW policy and refer to the VAW sector.

Only 15% of the respondents thought that service varies dependent on the worker.

It depends on the worker, their knowledge and their ability and conviction to respond appropriately.

Unfortunately, not all workers respond to situations as empathetically as others. Clients will often thank one or two workers individually in their discharge surveys. We wish we were more consistent; however, we are also human.

No one reported that they thought providing consistent service was impossible. It could therefore be assumed that agencies are generally in favour of providing consistent service to women, and should be open to re-evaluating policy and procedure to ensure that consistency is a priority.

### **Crisis Housing**

Some workers felt frustrated when trying to access emergency shelters for their clients;

There is not enough crisis housing. We are limited as to where to direct women.

At a crisis home level, women are sometimes told that they need to call a supervisor first to get in. They phone back and no beds are available. I have to try to find another crisis home for them to go to. There is a lack of transportation to crisis homes if women are transferred to a smaller community. It is also problematic if their abuser lives in the community. There should be a central referral centre for crisis homes which would know who has beds, in what area, etc. They could do intake and refer to appropriate crisis home.

## **Frontline Workers**

The sensitivity that frontline workers have to VAW issues affects the quality of service that women receive. Women often reported negative experiences with service providers;

Workers don't always believe what women are saying. It is like we have to prove we are abused enough in order to get help from them.

It is frustrating dealing with ignorant professionals who assume abused women belong in a certain category. They make me feel worse about myself than my abuser does.

It is amazing how many hoops abused women have to jump through to get services, and are often treated terribly by them. A lot of newer workers don't get the issue and hold lots of judgement towards them.

Some workers obviously have no idea what it is like to be abused. They act as though it's my fault and now they are being put out by having to help me. I think some of them would rather not have to deal with my problems at all. I don't want to deal with my problems!

## **Funding**

Funding for advocacy and the provision of service was commonly reported as being a barrier to providing adequate services to abused women;

Funding is problematic. Funding should be ongoing. We shouldn't have to keep applying monthly or yearly. VAW should be identified as an ongoing need.

There is not enough funding for VAW services. We are working on a shoestring budget.

The VAW system is not well funded. It needs to be a priority.

There is a lack of funds to do more after-care and follow-up, and a lack of funds to provide consistent child care which is one of the biggest dilemmas for women.

## **Healthcare**

Workers pointed out the difficulties of tracking women abuse cases through the health care system;

Access to family doctors is problematic as women often don't have a doctor, and walk-ins don't provide case management.

## **Holding Men Accountable**

Almost all respondents reported that men are not being held accountable. Most pointed responsibility at the judicial system, although many felt that there are other opportunities to engage abusive men other than in the court system. Interestingly, not one respondent identified holding men accountable as part of *their* role in ending VAW;

Perpetrator accountability in the courts is the biggest gap. Police protocols have changed but still perpetrators are not being held accountable.

Abuser accountability is the biggest problem. We need an appropriate police and court response to woman abuse.

Perpetrators should be removed from house. The system should hold him responsible whether he wants to or not.

No one is addressing the men. Even if they are charged they are going to go on to abusive in other families. The cycle needs to be stopped.

One focus group participant articulated her feelings about perpetrator accountability;

Services dealing with abusive men need to be stricter. Abusive men's lives are not even regulated as much as the abused women's. My ex has more custody than I do and he was charged with domestic violence. How does this happen?

## **Homelessness**

The closing of community residence and the inadequacy of the newly constructed shelter house was discussed by several participants. Shelters for abused women are unable to accept homeless women and their children due to mandate restrictions, and Shelter House does not have the facilities to provide appropriate and safe housing for this demographic;

There is a gap for homeless woman as there is no homeless shelter for women who may have experienced violence but haven't identified it yet.

There are no homeless services for women and children in Thunder Bay. Women and children are the largest growing group of homeless people yet there were no accommodations made for them at the new shelter.

When community residence closed, no one called for housing. No one knows why or what has happened to these women. Have they gone underground? Gone back to the abuse? Where are these people? Where are homeless women and children?

## **Housing**

Workers identified housing as being a barrier for women who want to leave the abusive relationship;

There is a lack of affordable housing and a lack of availability of appropriately configured units. Women are waiting too long for a place to go.

There are no affordable homes for single women without children, and absolutely no housing for young women.

Housing is frustrating as women have nowhere else to go except back to the abuse.

## **Interpreter Services**

The need for interpreter services was reported by several frontline workers;

Women don't always have access to an interpreter immediately. Immigrant women have to face the fear of being absolutely all alone in this country. Language barriers increase isolation which makes it even more difficult for these women to get out.

Many institutional based services such as the hospital and police have no requirement to have an interpreter. This affects administration of services that women are entitled to.

One immigrant woman described some of the challenges that she faced due to the lack of interpreter services;

My inability to speak English limited services. My experience in court in particular was difficult. It was very difficult to get a protective order due to the language barriers. I could not explain what was happening to me.

## **Lack of Systemic Improvement**

Several workers reported their frustration with the failure of the system to substantively respond to the issue of woman abuse;

Workers are not accomplishing anything at the systemic level. At an individual level we do a great job for what the women need at the time, but we are not doing much systemically. I suppose there might be a trickle down effect once she understands that VAW is wrong but again it is left up to the women to fix the problem at an individual level.

The most frustrating thing is not being able to get the system to respond. Women and children are paying the price for an ineffective system.

## **Mandates**

Nearly half of the respondents reported that their agency's mandate limits their response to VAW. The following are some of the ways their services are restricted;

We are seeing more homeless women, young women between 16 and 18, and women with mental health issues seeking access to the shelter. We are not trained to deal with women with mental health issues, and we can not provide service to homeless women or women less than 18 yrs.

Confidentiality is most problematic. We have important information about their abuser that we can't release to victims. Although I understand the necessity for confidentiality, withholding this information puts women and children at risk.

Our mandate limits us in that we are one time crisis intervention. We are a valuable component of response but only one component. Some women would want to see them more than once, but once they are connected with other services we cannot. Funding is limited by MAG which limits the services provided. This limits us as to what we can do. I would like to be able to provide more services to women who might not access services later on. It would be nice to provide them with the option of us contacting them again.

Politically we are not restricted, although we have to be careful with the word advocacy with our funders. We are not funded to do intervention. We are out of the COMSOC loop and therefore don't get invited to participate with issues. We can't give out legal aid certificates, we are not a counselling agency, and we are not considered a direct service so we are not privy to the criminal justice process. Conversely, this can be helpful because we are seen as impartial and separate, and can be political without the threat of losing funding.

The agency does not like to get involved in custody and access. This is problematic since this is often the issue that needs to be addressed.

We are restricted financially by virtue of the numbers of clients who have qualified legal aid certificates.

Our mandate's goal is the protection of children. It is difficult to look at mom's safety who is trying her best to keep her children and herself safe. The process tends to re-victimize families, and women and families are uprooted due to policy. Policies hold women accountable instead of perpetrator for example by opening files under women's name.



Time limits for service don't allow enough time to navigate women through the system.

Of the respondents who felt their agency's mandate was not restricting, they cited the following reasons;

Our mandate doesn't define how a worker can advocate for a client.

Our mandate is for us to work specifically and holistically with women.

Our mandate really values everyone in our community. We are able to advocate for anyone in the community.

I have a board to report to which is not responsible to any government agency or dependent on any one agency for funding. We have lots of autonomy. People don't have to like us.

We are governed by board of directors and are non-profit. Our director will fight for the needs of the agency. We are not run by municipality which would limit our ability. Although we get some provincial funding, we are not limited by it.

Respondents who reported that their mandate restricted service often reported that they have attempted to work around their limited mandate in order to better serve women who have experience/survived abuse;

We never turn women away. We find them services and make referrals to agencies that are able to help them.

Occasionally we stretch our mandate to include a second visit to help them get connected to follow up services. We only do this when women are trying to get connected with services but are having a difficult time.

If a person presents with a VAW issue, they have often experienced other abuses that do fall within our mandate, therefore are able to provide service.

We have referred women to Victim/Witness and they would have information from the court that we are unable to give.

I discuss internally with colleagues to try to have the issue addressed and lobby MPs for money to increase legal aid services.

I have gone to crime stoppers with anonymous information.

I am always working on my relationship with the clients, remembering to be patient enough to be in there often with the women. I also make sure to have private conversations away from the partner.

I help them go to the children's lawyer to help with the issue.

## **Mental Health Services**

Some workers reported a lack of women and children's mental health services. Agencies are finding themselves ill-equipped to work with the issues and find it difficult to find agencies who can meet their clients needs;

There is no housing for women with mental health issues who may need more direction in their lives than we are able to provide. We do not have the ability for staff to be more directive in service with these clients with special needs.

Mental health agencies are a gap. It is too difficult for agencies to handle people with mental health issues. There is no where for them to go and receive appropriate services.

In terms of children's mental health, there is a lack of resources for workers to be able to respond to children in crisis. The result is that we will see these children continuing the cycle of violence as adults.

Community based agencies/initiatives sometimes have biases or misinformation about mental illness and psychotropic medications. This can interfere with a woman's access to services. The ability to share information can also be a barrier. Some agency staff can be fearful about women who have had hospitalizations for psychiatric reasons. Education could help.

## **Poverty**

Poverty was identified by workers as being one of the largest barriers for women experiencing abuse. This leaves women with fewer educational opportunities which could provide financial independence, a greater dependency on their abuser partner for financial support, and fewer opportunities to leave an abusive relationship;

Women are poor, Ontario Works workers make the women feel horrible, and the system has women stuck in poverty. They can't get out because they can't afford it. Women often go back because they can't afford to get out.

Women face a state of poverty when leaving their abusers, which often leaves them no choice but to return.

Poverty is the number one issue. If women can't even feed themselves how can they keep themselves safe?

Social assistance is a huge gap. There isn't enough money. Women can't live on the amount they are allotted. One of my clients had to go on assistance because

she was being abused by her partner and was left with nothing. She had to start all over with \$200 per month to live on from assistance.

## **Prevention**

Prevention of abuse is nearly non-existent in Thunder Bay. Although some agencies specified that they would do presentations in schools upon request, none had funding specifically to do so, and had been requested to do such work on few occasions;

There is not enough prevention work. There is no money for going to the schools.

There is not enough funding for preventative programs. There is a lack of education in schools and society about VAW.

## **Public Education of VAW and Services**

A need for public education around VAW services became apparent through interviews with both frontline workers and women;

Services need to be advertised for women. Women don't know what is out there.

Most women I see are unsure of where to turn for help in the community.

Crisis numbers need to be accessible to women. When women are in crisis they shouldn't have to fumble through the phone book to find help.

There was a common belief that the public needs to be better educated about VAW and how to assist anyone who may be abused;

There needs to be more upfront education around VAW. There needs to be more Ad campaigns out there to let women know the abuse is not their fault and that they can get help from services. It is difficult to reach women in the home who are trying to speak out.

There should be advertising about how to identify abuse in public places like hospital, schools, churches, grocery stores, malls, gyms, health clinics, anywhere there is a public bulletin board.

There is a lack of education about the issue. Society allows VAW to happen, its still a non spoken issue in society. There is a lack of holding the perpetrator accountable and people still blame the victim.

There should be commercials on TV about woman abuse. They were popular in the 80's. Do they think that the problem has been solved?

There needs to be more education on how to have relationships with others.

Women don't know the signs of what might be a dangerous man.

There is a lack of community support. There needs to be public education about victim blaming. Communities need to be getting involved. People need to learn that they can intervene.

Through the high school focus groups it became apparent that children need to be educated about how to identify abuse as well as how to have healthy intimate relationships. Workers also identified this need;

Young girls need to know what programming is available. We are seeing younger and younger clients.

We should be teaching children about recognizing abuse in school. We should teach them how to recognize it in their family because when people grow up with it they don't know there is anything wrong with it.

Women need to be more educated about what abuse is. We should start educating girls about abuse in grades 7 and 8.

### **Racism, Sexism and Oppression within VAW Agencies**

Several respondents reported experiencing oppression and discrimination from VAW service providers. Some workers pointed out the sexism that exists in their male-dominated work environment. Additionally, it became very apparent throughout the interviews with frontline workers that the majority do not fully understand the complexity of VAW. Many participants displayed resentment towards women who have been abused and showed little compassion or sensitivity towards the issue. It appeared that many workers were not passionate about the issues of VAW but rather were simply doing what their job required of them. Although it would be unreasonable to expect that all workers within the VAW sector are personally dedicated to VAW issues, it is not unreasonable to expect workers to be compassionate and non-judgmental of the clients they are serving. These sentiments were expressed well by one of the participants;

There is a general gender analysis lacking among service providers, including an understanding of the context of women's lives. People don't get poverty, race, class, gender, etc.

Respondents often pointed out the lack of cultural representation within VAW agencies, including specifically French speaking or Aboriginal workers. In keeping with this suggestion, the vast majority of respondents who were interviewed for this research, who were chosen by their executive director, were decidedly Anglophone and Non-Aboriginal. Although this may not point to racism in and of itself, it is indicative of the life experience that workers are bringing with them to the job, one which has largely avoided marginalization. A guide titled, *Creating Inclusive Spaces for Women: A*

*Practical Guide for implementing an integrated, anti-racist, feminist service delivery system*<sup>1</sup>, was developed by the Ontario Association of Interval and Transitional Housing which outlines hiring practices, and service delivery practices that could be adapted to be used by nearly any VAW agency to improve service delivery to women and their children.

## **Risk Assessment and Safety Planning**

Frontline workers were asked if their agency utilized a formal risk assessment or safety planning tool. Several workers reported that they had effective tools to do risk assessment and safety planning;

We use a “high risk” form for clients who identify their abusers as being at high risk of seeking them out to continue violence against them. This form is forwarded to the police as a tool in identifying the abuser. We believe that this could prevent future violent episodes because the community police are aware of the danger. We use safety plans provided from shelter net. We believe that they are effective because the client chooses which ones will pertain to her specific safety issues and they help her plan her own safety needs.

We have a risk assessment as part of our documentation tool. We use this to assess if they are at risk if they decide to go home. We do brief safety planning with initial the consultation, however women are usually linked to crisis homes for further safety planning. We have a brochure from Peel to assess if they are at risk.

Our agency follows the Risk assessment model for child protection, and we have a compilation of Safety plans that we utilize. It appears to be effective, but may be out-of-date. A more up-to-date safety plan would be more effective.

Yes, but it is not applied formally. We don't do a formal intake, but go through steps to assess risk informally through conversation. We use safety plans from METRAC and Woman Abuse Prevention Counsel. We talk about the different options for women and take women through safety plans to help get them out of the house, stay safe, etc. It is effective because it draws out women's experience, however we don't always have a sense of risk factors piling up.

Our risk assessment tool was developed for CAS/VAW collaborative agreement by Faye Peterson. I believe it is effective. It provides consistency with risk assessment, which is important.

We do safety planning after threat is removed and charges are laid. Packages are put together for officers which have all the necessary information. The packages

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<sup>1</sup> Stone, Shara and Esther Enyolu. *Creating Inclusive Spaces for Women: A Practical Guide for Implementing an Integrated, Anti-racist, Feminist Service Delivery System*. Ontario Association of Interval and Transitional Housing, 2005.

include the arrest sheet, victim statement, and pamphlets for shelters and services. Officers have everything they need.

There is a formal one in place, yet we have to consider the situation of each woman. It was developed by the Le Centre Victorian pour femmes (Sudbury). It is effective and important. It helps to secure the security of the woman. It points out security risk to workers as well as the women. The training manual provides workers with our own in-house guidelines. This manual is an effective tool for all staff and volunteers.

One was developed with the community report card 3-4 yrs ago. It includes the power and control wheel. All counsellors use it. It is effective because it is done in such a way that it gets women thinking about the situation they are in.

Some workers reported that they did indeed have risk assessment and/or safety planning tools, however felt that they could be more effective with some modifications or that the use of such tools was inconsistent;

I use the VAW/CAS personally but it was not given to me formally. The Ministry standard risk assessment is used by most workers. If the two were combined they would be more comprehensive. There is no standard safety planning tool, therefore it is dependent upon each worker. We give brochures for other agencies which do safety planning, but even this may not be standard.

Our tool is effective in the sense that if there is a grey area, it helps answer questions for workers whether we should accept them. Workers would like to see a risk assessment that would place women into categories of risk. A cut and dry tool would be easier for all workers to use.

We use the one from the VAW protocol. It asks valid questions and is an effective tool, but I often reword questions in order to give a better informational flow.

We use the VAW Protocol risk assessment as well as others. It is and isn't effective. You have to jump through it. From an intake perspective it is difficult to administer all of it. It is too big and too complex at an intake level. Intake staff uses a more compact version, and the worker picks up on risk assessment in their first session with the client.

Some reported that they refer women to agencies who do risk assessment and safety planning;

We do not provide safety planning or risk assessment. We refer to Faye Peterson or Beendigan and provide interpretation.

We do not have a formal safety plan that we do with women. We give safety plans to women for them to develop, but we don't do it with them. We talk to them about safety and what would be necessary to keep them safe. This is the most effective it can be given the amount of time they see women, which is usually only a short period immediately after man is arrested. Usually when we see them they are not interested in safety talking, but rather are still recovering from police intervention and are still in crisis. We try to encourage them to follow up on referrals and encourage safety planning with other agencies. We try to make link women immediately to shelter. Women tend to minimize their safety concerns when they see them. If women are expressing safety concerns we will encourage women more strongly to engage in services.

Several workers reported that they do not have a risk assessment and/or safety planning tool, but that they would welcome the implementation of one within their agency;

There is no formal risk assessment. Any assessment done is by the coordinator at her own initiative. One should be implemented for other facilitators.

We don't currently have one but I would like to have one provided.

We don't have anything that I am aware of. It would be department specific.

### **Sex Trade Workers**

Some respondents articulated the multilayered oppression faced by sex trade workers who often go unaddressed by the VAW sector completely;

Women in the sex trade industry are not only one organization's problem. This is a community responsibility. Who is deserving of help, particularly when they have a criminal background? Too often these women are denied services.

### **Training**

There is a desperate need for training within the VAW service system itself. Frontline workers have the ability impact a woman's success in leaving an abusive relationship and therefore require specific training on the complexity of woman abuse, and the sensitivity and understanding that it requires to work with these cases. Women's experience with VAW services needs to be relatively positive, as the last thing they need is to be made to feel worse about themselves by the agencies charged with assisting them.

Several frontline workers described the extensive training they have received to appropriately prepare them for dealing with woman abuse cases;

Ontario Works and Ministry of Citizenship domestic violence specific training is provided to everyone. Staff from Faye Peterson and a domestic violence trainer

from the OPP come in to provide training as well. The family law piece is also explained to staff.

Workers are offered crisis intervention training twice a year where specific subjects are addressed. We have in-house training twice a year on our protocol bibles. We also go to any workshops within the community that are offered. All workers are trained as Social workers. We also keep up to date on legislation. Workers are dedicated to this issue and do a lot of reading on their own as well.

All staff are trained in VAW issues. We are the experts in this field.

There are professional development opportunities for workers in-house or through other agencies. Ongoing internal education is offered as well. Students on placement are educated on VAW issues. The majority of staff have Social Work background.

Workers have to have a minimum of a social service diploma or equivalent. Once hired workers go through an orientation process. They have to have a criminal reference check and first aid certificate. They go onto the floor with a full-time counsellor and complete three or four shifts. They go through crisis call training. Training checklist gives them resources to read and videos to view. There is ongoing first aid training. The sky is the limit for training, including anti-racism, crisis intervention, mental health and addictions, healthy babies, medical training, and caring dads. We are always seeking training from other agencies. Training depends on the needs of the women, i.e., more addictions training. It depends on the need at the time.

Other agencies demonstrated a need for further training or training specific to woman abuse, despite the workers being unable to identify this need;

Operators receive three months of training before they start on their own. There is nothing exclusively provided regarding domestics. It is all part and parcel of general training. It is all applicable. We don't deal with it beyond immediate training so we don't get trained on counselling or anything.

We receive no formal training. People who are working with those issues go to external training. The majority have a social work background.

Workers are Social Work trained and we have a policy to never leave one worker alone.

Our main focus is on mental health. Women aren't necessarily coming to this agency for support so we don't receive training for it.

Our training is based on the VAW protocol which includes an afternoon of training. Most of the workers have a Social Work background. There is external



training for select people who would then come back and train other people, however, there is something lost in the message. There is a definite need for more training. There is no in-house training provided.

We are all registered nurses. We attend a four day orientation to the program. We go away for a week in Toronto after one year on the job to become certified. We provide doctors and nurses in the ER with training regarding attitudes and services. This is often difficult as it is hard to change their attitudes. They need more formal training.

We had woman abuse training this year. There is not really any formal training provided to all workers. Somebody just decided to put domestic violence training together. Maybe it was mandated by the government.

We don't receive any training to deal with woman abuse cases.

### **Transportation**

Transportation was identified as being a barrier for women being able to access service;

Women often can't make or keep appointments due to childcare or transportation.

In terms of counselling, there is a gap around transportation and childcare. There needs to be more services that go into the home. This could alleviate both of these issues.

### **Waiting Lists**

Workers reported that long waiting lists inhibit women from accessing service;

Waiting times for services are too long, especially for counselling, or to connect with support workers. Women need to be connected right away. The system loses a lot of women this way.

Long waiting lists turn women off. They need immediate help, not help in 3-9 weeks.

### **Working with Abusive Men**

Very few agencies are mandated to work with abusive men, therefore workers are lacking the appropriate training, funding and motivation to do so. There is a necessity for the VAW service system to come to a common understanding of how to work with abusive men, in order to successfully address perpetrator's behaviour;

PARS needs to have an outcome based successful completion instead of attendance based completion

More services may be available for abusive partners to get help than before, however I would be convinced they were working by a decline in incidents. The abusers are still not being addressed.

It is difficult to deal with men when they minimize what they have done and the impact on their family. How do we work with them when the courts don't even hold them responsible?

Programs for abusive men have the potential to be better if facilitators had a better philosophy and the program was court mandated. Someone has to work with these men even though it is difficult and not exactly what they want to do.

Connecting abusers with services is difficult. It has to be done immediately while the opportunity exists. The courts should be mandating programs.

## **Agency Specific Feedback**

The following is a compilation of all remarks specific to any VAW agency made by women in the focus groups as well as frontline workers. The intention is to provide agencies with both positive and negative feedback in order to assist them in improving service to abused women, as well as highlighting the aspects of service which are positively impacting clients;

### **Anishinabek Police Service**

There was no follow-up. They arrested him and then I was left on my own after that. They gave no referrals to services and I didn't hear anything from them about court.

The police take too long to respond to calls on reserve. They can show up anywhere from a half hour to four hours after call is made. This affects suicide rates as well.

The police seem to be on a power trip. They show up a long time after calls have been made.

### **Beendigen Inc.**

Beendigan was not helpful for the abuse but was helpful for my prenatal care.

The transitional worker through Beendigan was supposed to follow up but didn't really follow up. I got no counselling and there was no relationship between worker and client.

I haven't called them back because they told me to call back when I was sober. I didn't know about Beendigan before that but I looked it up in the phone book when he beat me. We had both been drinking a little bit but I still needed help. They didn't call the police or anything.

Crisis housing is seen as a shelter and is unappealing to women.

There was not one worker that I got close to.

They took information from me about the abuse but offered no follow-up, counselling, or help.

I called the crisis line after we had been drinking a bit and he hit me and they told me to call back when I was sober.

### **Catholic Family Development Centre**

They have been helpful for coping with my abuse issues. The counsellors were particularly helpful.

There was no follow-up. No counselling. No feedback from First Step program and no continual follow up throughout the week. The men's program they run is pathetic. I could find more information on the internet myself. The program doesn't touch on what they have done to their family and partner. He can just sit there and not participate.

Catholic Family Development Centre's First Step Program is problematic. There is a lack of progress reports and counseling. The topic they touch on are too brief and there is no follow-up. The paperwork for group is disorganized. There is no follow-up with victim.

### **Children's Aid Society of the District of Thunder Bay**

CAS was great. They arranged for my housing, brought me to appointments, got me on welfare, got me on legal aid, told me about Faye Peterson, gave me a bus pass and tickets to the CLE. They even have a 'special friend' that takes the kids to activities. They provided childcare so I can get to counselling. However at times they can overreact and get involved when they shouldn't.

Mother blaming by CAS and Dilico is a problem. They put the onus on the woman with no conditions for the man.

CAS needs to hold the abuser accountable, not the mother.

CAS is a problem as they are based on the number of children in care. The family is not being helped and children are being re-victimized.

As soon as there is domestic violence they want involvement and they blame the woman. There is a long process to get rid of them.

CAS policy is a distraction from the real issue of the fact that CAS can't keep the children safe from the abuser. Women are therefore held responsible. There are gaps, and there are traps, that hold women accountable which detracts from the need to hold men accountable.

In terms of child protection, funding is based on the number of cases that open. CAS and Dilico also hold mom responsible for keeping her children safe, therefore holding her responsible for the actions of the perpetrator. They are paid per case closed, therefore cases are often closed too fast. There is no perpetrator accountability within the system as they are too focused on mom. There is even less accountability in the aboriginal community.

CAS holds mom responsible for keeping her children safe, therefore holding her responsible for the actions of the perpetrator.

Women's introduction to CAS is usually through referral and investigation so it is difficult when women haven't asked for this service and it is forced upon them, or they might lose their children.

CAS doesn't get that you can't force someone to leave an abusive partner. They place no accountability on men. CAS gives women a list of things to do to become a better mom and protect her children which is totally backwards.

CAS is over-involved in women's lives, and there is a distinct lack of involvement by them in the perpetrators life.

### **Children's Centre Thunder Bay**

They took me and the kids for counselling. I thought they were good.

The services provided weren't helpful to the kids. They thought it was a joke. I thought it was good and it made me feel better knowing my kids were getting some kind of counselling.

### **Dilico Ojibway Child and Family Services**

Mother blaming by CAS and Dilico is a problem. They put the onus on the woman with no conditions for the man.

They have custody of my three kids. I am going to court for custody. The kids aren't getting any counselling, and I wasn't offered any counselling. In court they claimed that my "parenting license" had expired (she took the parenting course in

April). I have been separated from my kids for a year now. The children have minimal phone contact with relatives. My kids are at a level of such desperation that they were ready to commit suicide. Continual road blocks have been put up by the system that has prevented me from being their mom.

Dilico knew about the violence but offered no help to me or my children

In terms of child protection, funding is based on the number of cases that open. CAS and Dilico also hold mom responsible for keeping her children safe, therefore holding her responsible for the actions of the perpetrator. They are paid per case closed, therefore cases are often closed too fast. There is no perpetrator accountability within the system as they are too focused on mom. There is even less accountability in the aboriginal community.

### **Faye Peterson Transition House**

They were trained professionals and counsellors and gave genuine care and personalized service. The workers remember you after you leave, and are supportive even if you choose to stay you're your abuser.

Some workers lack sensitivity, one worker told me to get an abortion

Due to criminal past, clients are not always eligible for services i.e., women's shelters. Our role then is to advocate on their behalf to demonstrate they pose no threat so services will make an exception for them. Faye Peterson in particular has been more flexible in this respect.

Crisis housing is seen as a shelter and is unappealing to women.

It was a place to go and get options of what I could do.

They gave advocacy and support to help manoeuvre the system.

Faye Peterson should be better known. Crisis home numbers are not accessible in the phone book.

They treated me horribly while I was suffering from post-partum psychosis. They gave me no support while I was depressed with a new baby and two small children to take care of. I had to bundle up 3 kids 16 times a day to cart them to the dumpster to dispose of my children's diapers. I had to carry to babies around all day. Other women with just one baby used a stroller, when I asked if I could use one I was told no because the double stroller took up too much space. I had to take my three kids with me every time I had to use the toilet. I had to sit on the toilet, while holding the babies on my lap because they could open the door. I had to wash my dishes and prepare food/bottles in the kitchen but the kids weren't allowed in the kitchen, but also were not allowed to be out of arms reach of me.

A co-resident went out for the day, came back battered and no staff asked her about it. I took her to the ER. I was expected to do a “chore” which took no less than 1 hour while holding 2 babies and having a 5 year old hanging off me.

### **Legal Aid Ontario**

Legal Aid refused my case because I was not going to jail

At legal aid there is too much red tape. No compassion.

It is difficult for women to access legal aid and Ontario Works in a timely fashion. They need to be fast-tracked through those systems.

Legal Aid is a problem if it is a first time assault offence for the woman that she will likely get off from. She therefore can't get legal aid.

It is difficult to find a lawyer, or a good one through legal aid. Lawyers need more hours allotted to dedicate to women abuse and women need more good lawyers to take cases.

### **Nishnawbe-Aski Police Service**

Nishnabe Police Services is too slow in responding. Women call and no one comes for sometimes hours.

### **Ontario Works**

Ontario Works gave no support. They expected me to return to normal life right after. They don't even give enough money to support a family.

Some Ontario Works workers are very unkind and don't understand what we are going through.

Difficulties with the ODSP and Ontario Works systems include; the amount allotted to provide for single women and children, the limited amount of the Community Start-Up benefit, and the insensitivity of workers to VAW.

Ontario Works workers make the women feel horrible, and the system has women stuck in poverty. They can't get out because they can't afford it.

Ontario Works frontline workers have a lack of sensitivity and understanding. There is a need for training by women's advocates not connected to Ontario Works.

Ontario Works has a 45 minute intake interview.

Ontario Works workers have a tendency towards blaming victim, therefore are in need of training around VAW.

It is difficult for women to access legal aid and Ontario Works in a timely fashion. They need to be fast-tracked through those systems.

It is surprising that people ask what the circumstances were that brought the violence on, basically blaming the victim. This often occurs with probation officers, and other social services i.e., Ontario Works.

At Ontario Works there is no one who speaks French.

Ontario Works doesn't give enough money for women to make ends meet, which keeps women down. There is also a real possibility that they won't qualify for Ontario Works. If you get employment you lose your benefits i.e., drug plan, winter clothing allowance, and dental care, which creates a working poor. Women have to turn to food banks which have their own restrictions. Dental Benefits are provided to kids but not to mom.

Child Tax Credit claw-back affects Ontario Works because the women lose money.

Ontario Works has too many hoops for women to jump through.

### **Ontario Provincial Police**

They gave no follow-up after they came.

Police take too long to respond to calls on the reserve. They can show up anywhere from a half hour to four hours after a call was made. This affects suicide rates as well.

Police seem to be on a power trip. They show up a long time after calls have been made.

### **Partner Abuse Response Program (PAR)**

PARS needs to have an outcome based successful completion instead of attendance based completion

The credibility and accessibility of PARS is a huge gap. The program is not transparent enough to make workers feel comfortable enough with programming to refer men to it.

Men are not being held accountable through PARS.

## **Pregnancy & Health Outreach Project**

The programming has been great.

They have no judgement on you when you come in.

## **Probation & Parole**

My abuser is on house arrest for DV in the same house as me. The probation officer never checks up on him. He has 12 priors including uttering threats and assault.

He has a short meeting once a month with his probation officer. There is no follow-up and they are uninterested in the opinion of the victim.

It is surprising that people ask what the circumstances were that brought the violence on, basically blaming the victim. This often occurs with probation officers, and other social services i.e., Ontario Works.

## **Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP)**

They often take no action when called for a DV. Even with blood on the floor indicating there had obviously been an incident they just left.

## **School System**

In schools more work needs to be done with principals around VAW & custody. They must ensure that they have custody papers on file.

There needs to be school based services where there is an intersection point with family and a clear policy on how to support women who are experiencing violence against women. Schools need to figure out a way to deal with violence when it is identified in schools.

## **Supervised Access Program**

Supervised access doesn't have a female gendered analysis of VAW, which puts people at risk.

## **Thunder Bay District Health Unit**

On a bus trip we were all asked publicly, by a health unit worker, which organization we were from. We were on a gleaning trip to Gammondale Farm. This happened two years ago.



The fellow who was from the health unit asked my friend and I which organization we were from. We figured that it didn't matter which group we were from. We had a reason to be there just like anyone else on the bus. This happened when we went to Gammondale Farm picking strawberries two years ago on a gleaning bus trip.

### **Thunder Bay Housing**

At Royal Edward Apartments housing was not safe, lots of dangers, and high crime in the area. My doctor wrote a letter to Thunder Bay Housing requesting that I be transferred to somewhere quieter. They transferred me immediately

The Limbrick area is a particular problem. There are 16 cameras set up in the area and police have set up office in one of the units. How can they keep sending women to live in such obviously unsafe conditions?

At housing women are forced to tell their story over and over again. Are they providing counselling services prior to and after appointments to help women cope after having to retell their story multiple times to workers who don't really care?

At housing there needs to be more affordable housing, and trained workers sensitive to VAW.

City housing is often not safe for women. Limbrick areas should not exist. Women should live in regular neighbourhoods where they wouldn't be worried about their children playing in the backyard.

Central Housing Registry will not allow women on the list for housing without every piece of required ID even though it is problematic for abused women to get ID as the men often destroyed it. Also, applying for housing leaves a paper trail to where the women are.

Access to safe, clean, affordable housing is an ongoing issue, both emergency housing and non-emergency housing.

There is a lack of affordable housing and a lack of availability of appropriately configured units.

Housing is a particular problem with women with addictions because they are not eligible to stay in housing

### **Thunder Bay Police Services**

Services are streamlined, however it takes too much time to do paper work. Officers have to do it before the end of shift so that an arrest sheet is given to the

next shift to look for a perpetrator. That means that officers often stay beyond their shift to complete DV paperwork. Is there a way to streamline paperwork? Something should be set up for frontline officers to have some say in the paperwork. Officers are going to do a thorough job but don't necessarily like it. DV cases are quite involved.

I reported abuse anonymously to the police, however the police made it obvious who had reported the abuse of the neighbour.

Police need to be better with protocols. There is always work to do in that area. Dual charging is problematic. Police feel they have to be social workers. Police are not able to assess the imbalance of power between a man and a woman. Horror stories from women regarding their experiences with police deter other women from calling police.

My abuser called the police when I was trying to leave him. The police told me I had to leave and made me leave without my three children.

There was no follow-up on the report. No charge was laid and no one contacted me to testify. I was assaulted with a baseball bat and was hospitalized for several days but was never asked to testify. What happened?

When I left the house they made me leave the children with my abuser.

The police are particularly troublesome. Once police were mandated to lay charges lots of dual charges began happening. Women are being charged for self-defence.

Women get little respect from police, and there have been several cases where the woman was actually mocked by police. Aboriginal women are treated particularly poorly by police

Training of police and sensitivity to the issues is important. There is great concern regarding counter-charging. Perhaps there should be a diversity of training officers as there are some good and some bad.

There is a need for better trained police officers who are aware of VAW issues to help them better deal with VAW. They should separate the couple immediately to stop any intimidation from occurring.

There is a lack of understanding of dominant aggressor training. Women are getting charged with DV more often which demonstrate that the police are not equipped to understand dominant aggressor.

Information and referral cards should be provided by police at the first sign of abuse.

There is no dedicated DV investigator. There needs to be specially trained officers to handle domestics.

There needs to be enhanced communication between the Police and the Crown when they are involved with a woman assault case. Police are charging women when there is a domestic incident and the woman is not even known to be violent.

Thunder Bay Police treated me like crap. I was arrested for assault after I defending myself against my abuser. I was left in jail 2 weeks after having a baby and was leaking breast milk all over myself due to being engorged. I was freezing cold from being wet and they would not give me a blanket or anything. I was starving and I was bleeding heavily and they would not supply feminine napkin.

Police are problematic as they are making women who fight back feel guilty.

Women are getting charged with neglect if they leave their children during abuse.

Police seem to be on a power trip. They show up a long time after calls have been made.

Dominant aggressor training is not being implemented on the ground by police. Women are still being charged. The implementation of the protocol between police and shelters is not happening. Many officers are not even aware of its existence and no one is testing to see if it is being implemented.

Officers do not want to go to domestics due to paperwork which takes many hours to complete and often hold officers over past end of shift. The first officer on the scene is responsible do reports, etc. therefore when a DV calls comes over the radio there is sometimes a slower response to the call in hopes that another officer will have to handle the paperwork.

There is a lack of DV training for officers. Some officers have no formal training to deal with DV cases

There is a lack of training around DV protocols. Most officers are unaware of the Shelter/Police protocol.

Officers are lacking education around VAW. They often they don't understand barriers that prevent women from leaving and feel frustrated returning to same residence several times to deal with another DV. This often results in the poor treatment of the victim.

There is a lack of education around dominant aggressor theory. Officers see assault very black and white and therefore can't grasp the complexity of DV.

Officers all handle DV cases differently. There is no consistency which makes victims uneasy as they don't know what will happen when they call. Will they charge him? Will she be charged? Will they leave her alone with him again? It is often too high of a risk to call so women choose not to.

Officers don't use VCARS. They don't see them as useful and therefore don't refer to them. If they do refer, it is on their way out the door from a DV call.

Officers are not charging in many cases. They are often sent to calls that are reported as domestics but if they don't feel it merits their intervention, don't handle it as such. Mandatory charging does not happen.

### **Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre - Emergency Room**

They knew I was beaten by my husband, he was there with me and the doctors didn't intervene or call the police.

The waits are too long for abused women. They need immediate attention.

I was sent home with my abuser after being kicked in the liver and medicated by doctors. I had no one to talk to or to make sure I was safe. The doctors were awful to me and expected me to bounce back. They did no follow-up and gave no supports. The doctors were rushed, the nurses were rude, and they were completely insensitive. I had no family support either. I was rushed through, medicated and sent home.

### **Victim Crisis Assistance and Referral Service (VCARS)**

VCARS volunteers are not properly trained to deal with woman abuse cases. Professionals in the field need to be doing this work. This volunteer based program is simply a cost effective way for the government to appear to be assisting women in crisis.

Officers rarely refer women to VCARS. The service is insufficient for women, I would rather refer to women's shelters. I don't think VCARS they see many DV cases.

The time limits placed on service are a problem. Women are not being connected to follow-up services and they aren't ready do deal with the abuse when workers arrive, as they are still in crisis.

### **Victim/Witness Assistance Program (VWAP)**

Institutional based services such as victim/witness must be able to do safety plans. Programs such as victim/witness shouldn't be linked to court because they are so

limited. Everything they tell the victim/witness worker becomes evidence for the defence. This work should be done by women's advocates with no link to court.

VWAP's hands are tied. Workers can't do anything when women are treated terribly in court. They have no power to advocate for women.

There is a need for specialized workers for VAW at VWAP particularly around power and control issues. There needs to be a mobile response team to go to court with the victim, and have professionally trained counsellors available immediately.

## **The Criminal Justice System**

Nearly all respondents pointed to the criminal justice system as one of the largest gaps in the VAW service system. If men are not being held accountable in the court system, women continue to be at risk which has frontline workers and advocates frustrated, discouraged, and angry at a system which continues to undermine their efforts and purpose. Women report feeling helpless and vulnerable within the justice system, and are often made to feel worthless by a court system that chooses to protect their perpetrators over their safety, and the safety of their children. Workers often reported the need for public accountability by the courts in relation to VAW specifically;

The justice system undermines the safety of women and children. They never put the children first. Cases get dragged on and on which is expensive and women have to see their abuser every time they go to court. People need to know what is going on in the courts.

We need a DV court not a DV court process. There needs to be specialized crowns and judges just looking at the issue of women abuse. At a minimum assistant crowns should report to the DV crown, not the crown attorney. Otherwise there is no ability to hold the assistant crowns accountable for not following the DV crown's recommendations. There needs to be formal and public accountability of judiciary for sentencing or lack of sentencing of perpetrators

There is a big need for a Court Watch Program.

## **Inaccessibility of the Legal System**

Many workers reported the difficulty for women to access the legal system due to financial and other such barriers;

The length of the family court system is prohibitive. There are too many remands, especially with custody. If her partner has money they can drag it out.

The longer it goes the higher the likelihood you will lose women as the process becomes discouraging.

Finding women legal assistance, especially getting a legal aid certificate, and getting them timely advice is extremely difficult.

Women can't get legal aid yet can't afford a lawyer. They can't get a restraining order. The system constrains to the point where you can't advocate. Women can't leave or protect themselves. There is a tremendous lack of access to legal support.

Language and understanding of the law in Canada is a problem. Women cannot access services due to language barriers, fear of partner, cultural barriers, lack of knowledge of the system, racial bias by service providers etc.

### **Attitudes within the Judiciary**

Several workers reported their frustration with the lack of understanding of the complexity of VAW within the judiciary;

There is lack of awareness of VAW issues, including the effects of abuse on women and children and the reasons why women return or stay in an abusive situation, by judges, lawyers, and policy makers

The court system treats women like a number like anyone else.

Judges need to retire. Their objectivity is lost in the courts and there is a great need for change in attitude in the judiciary.

More training is needed for judges and crowns around the complexity of domestic violence.

### **Lack of Perpetrator Accountability**

Many respondents feel that the court system fails to hold perpetrators of domestic violence accountable for their behaviour. Not only does this send the message to women that they are not worthy of state protection, but is also complicit in the continued perpetration of woman abuse;

Systemic issues with the court system are infuriating. Family and criminal court do not hold perpetrators accountable and fail to keep her safe.

My abuser is on house arrest for DV in the same house as me. He has 12 priors including uttering threats and assault.

The criminal justice system needs to hold men accountable.

There are lenient or non-existent court sentences for partners who abuse women.

Perpetrator accountability in the courts is the biggest gap. Police protocols have changed but still perpetrators are not being held accountable.

The legal system gives out harsher sentences for the destruction of property than assaults against women and children.

Make the punishment more for the abuser than the victim.

Length of time it takes to go through the court system is prohibitive. It took me two years in the court system to do the division of property, meanwhile legal fees were accumulating, and I had no assets to pay for fees. The courts have not garnished his wages on time and I have no income. There is no consistency between workers at court. He is in arrears for a few thousand dollars.

The legal system is a huge gap i.e., in sexual assault cases involving children, the younger the child the less likely the case will be addressed. Offenders are not being addressed.

### **Custody & Access**

There is an obvious lack of judicial understanding of the severity of woman abuse, and the ongoing dangers that victims and children face following the end of abusive relationship. There is a need for family and criminal courts to connect to better understand and address custody and access in woman abuse cases. Workers and women alike reported their concerns around custody and access to children by abusive parents;

Women report to CAS constantly about access and what is going on in those visits. The women don't feel they are being heard and are forced by legal system to send their kids where it may not be safe

The parental rights of the father are scary. There should be a connection made between abusing the children's mother and his ability to be a father.

Services dealing with abusive men need to be stricter. Men's lives are not regulated like the women's.

Family and criminal court need to connect in order to better understand custody and access needs. In the criminal system, Justices of the Peace and the judiciary need to do risk assessments before releasing perpetrators.

The systems are not helping the women. When the woman has left and the man is still involved with the kids this is not healthy involvement. It is not enough to get the attention of CAS but enough that it keeps kids in turmoil. Father shouldn't

always be involved. The system has a difficult time distinguishing when they should or shouldn't.

Joint custody arrangements and difficulties with access can be long term stressors and put women at risk when they are forced to see their abusers on a regular basis.

## **Neighbours, Friends and Family**

The women who participated in the focus groups were asked if they thought their neighbours, friends and family would have intervened or assisted them if they were more knowledgeable about how to identify abuse, as well as how to assist women who are being abused. The majority of the women felt that this would not have helped them get out of the abusive relationship due to cultural barriers, and community and family values which are not supportive of victims of woman abuse;

No. I had family close to me in the situation but no one helped. They wanted to mind their own business.

It wouldn't have help. I am afraid to talk about it so it is not surprising they don't want to get involved.

My family couldn't do anything about the abuse because the abuse is almost a part of our cultural. Everyone just denies the abuse is happening.

My family was always good to my husband and treated him with respect. My parents thought that we should just work things out, so I assumed that is the way that marriage is supposed to be and that I should stay married even though he was abusing me.

Despite her ex mother-in-law working for the courts she was abused under her roof. Her family didn't know about the abuse. Her ex sister-in-law also worked for Dilico and knew of the abuse but gave no assistance.

My family's traditional views were harmful because they encouraged me to stay regardless of the violence.

Some of the respondents reported that their families knew about the violence and wanted to help but felt they would be putting her safety in jeopardy by doing so;

My family felt helpless and worried they may inflict further harm if they interfered. They were afraid my partner might retaliate.

Her parents were reluctant to help because they were fearful he would be worse to her. They kept quiet to avoid further violence.



One respondent reported that family intervention isn't necessarily going to work if the woman is not ready for it;

My family told me to leave, however I was in the middle of the crisis so I was not ready to take action. They aren't the ones that have to get away. They could better help after you leave if you need a helping hand. When you aren't ready to get help it wouldn't matter.

Several women reported that there was not an opportunity for family or friends to intervene because of the secrecy under which she kept the abuse;

I hid it from the children and family so they were protected

I isolated myself from my family because of embarrassment. It made me feel guilty and I didn't want to bring the problem to their house.

I didn't want my family to feel I was letting them down so I didn't let them know about the abuse.

One respondent reported that language barriers can play a role in neighbours, friends and family intervening in an abusive situation;

I could not speak English and I kept to myself so I couldn't ask for help. I felt very alone.

Several respondents reported that their family, friends or neighbours did assist them in escaping the abuse;

I didn't know that anyone knew what was going on until I left. My daughter finally pointed out that relationship was destructive and encouraged me to leave.

My family did help to get me and my children out of the abuse. They paid for our plane tickets out of there.

My brother was able to help me in his position at Family Services. My family generally wanted to mind their own business though.

My brother helped me by giving me a place to stay. He confronted my husband on another occasion.

I had no family where I was but my mom was a big support. She was encouraging of me getting help and being safe. My mom encouraged me to leave and was supportive of my decisions.

Only one respondent felt strongly that her family would have helped her escape the violence if they were better informed about woman abuse;

They would have cut through the bullshit. It was easy to lie about the relationship because it was over the phone with my mom. If friends had more tools it may have been helpful. If parents were educated maybe I wouldn't have been so ashamed to admit to the abuse. Women and families need to know there are services. This would help break the isolation.

## **The VAW System's Role in Ending VAW**

Agency participants articulated their personal role in ending VAW within their position. Interestingly, not one participant felt that their role was to hold men accountable. The following is a compilation of their responses;

My role is to advocate for women at a more local level. I call Ontario Works, Police, Dilico, and CAS. I do behind the scenes advocacy for women and tie up loose ends for women. I advocating for women in regards to housing and help her be safe within her home i.e., change locks, call housing, etc.

I do advocacy around Ontario Works, housing, etc. I try to help women manoeuvre through those system. My role is also to step in when systems are causing further problems.

My responsibility is to the individuals' safety on the day they come to the agency. To ensure that people who do this work are able to do the work with the appropriate mindset to ensure women are able to access service. To help address financial barriers for women so they can attain legal aid.

We are mandated to lay a charge if an offence has been committed.

We are here to end crime, it doesn't matter what it is you request of me.

Education. Getting out to the different agencies and departments to let them know that services exist for women, and letting women know what agencies can do for them.

Our immediate responsibility is ensuring the safety of everyone and to uphold the law. Ensure safety of the public. Lay the appropriate charge. The court has to address the punitive part. The better report you do the more effective it can be during the court process i.e., taking pictures, etc. We have to keep the peace. If the peace is broken we are sent to deal with it.

The role of the project is to recognize that VAW and addictions coalesce and to respond to it appropriately. To assist women in recognizing how VAW and addiction affects their lives. There is a role for the project around training and

development of services. I am also trying to take a look at barriers at administrative level around the table.

Violence will never end until people are understood and treated equally. I address them as a front-line worker when I see a client. If we want to address the media, there is a media protocol in place. A community developer would address it in programs. There is zero tolerance for verbal abuse in group.

To keep informed of what is going on systemically, locally and individually. To participate in advocating for solutions to VAW and participating in public awareness. Challenging the myths of DV i.e., victim blaming. Getting more people involved in actively working against VAW and actively involved in understanding the systemic factors and helping to address them. Training helps to ensure this occurs with volunteers helping women. To make the general public more aware of VAW and get them involved in movements to end VAW.

Our agency mandate focuses on counteracting the damaging effects of violence on individuals, families and the community. As a counselor, my role is to educate clients re: identifying abuse, looking at the effects of abuse, providing safety planning, and focusing on placing the responsibility for the abuse squarely in the hands of the abuser. Information about VAW services is also offered to the client. This is also accomplished in a broader arena when we provide presentations to schools, other agencies, etc.

My role is to work with women to provide them with as much information and analysis as possible regarding services available and the reality of the situation they are in. To let women know they are not alone and to politicize women around their experience. My role is also to provide advocacy and support. Addressing systemic issues connected to legal aid, poverty, racism, and other systemic discrimination. To address issues with individual women as well as taking those issues forward to committees, mainstream, etc. Bringing a feminist analysis to the table. To work provincially and nationally with other women who are working on political issues and legislation to bring issues to Thunder Bay. To be a credible position to legislators so they can bring the issues forward to demonstrate how issues are impacting lives of women.

My role is to provide information to clients, to make referrals and provide support, to advocate on behalf of women and to connect them with someone so you know their case is picked up where we left off. Speaking out is not just in the workplace but all over to address issues with clients. My role is also to provide information in a way that they will feel comfortable to talk about it, or to just let them know about services.

My role is first to believe what someone is saying to be the truth. I have the same approach each time to be non-judgemental.

Education, support, strict enforcement

I mainly do education with young moms.

To ensure staff are well educated if they are uncomfortable with the issues. To ensure they have current resources available to them. To do public awareness work and work with children in child witness programs. I have a role in CAS/VAW agreement. We are strong advocates for change.

My role is to work on a systemic level to work with systems to ensure that the response to VAW is appropriate at both a provincial & local level. Education through developing an understanding of VAW with the public, working with the women themselves, empowering them to make decision and keep themselves safe. I take every opportunity to hold people at the table accountable and offer analysis when appropriate.

My role is mainly education and advocacy. The G.I.C. plays an important role as it is a transitional space for people. I run campaigns specifically to address woman abuse for both male and female students. I help women recognize signs of abuse. The G.I.C. is important at the university level. We run Take Back the Night, Clothesline Project, White Ribbon Campaign, and CFS puts out the date rape campaign. We run campaigns to help women have a positive self image by building confidence, self image, and empowerment.

My role is to Advocate and educate. It is important to be careful how you approach women in that situation. You must develop trust and have no judgement. It is important to establish a relationship of trust so women will trust recommendations and referrals. It is also my role to be open to working with the partner as well so they don't just move on to a new family.

My role is to teach coping strategies and emotion regulation for inpatients and families that I see. Our multi-disciplinary team can help women develop coping skills.

My role is to make VAW a topic of discussion and not something that is taboo. Talking with children and friends about it is important as well as educating young women and girls. I am also vocal with politicians and decision makers in various areas of work. Making sure VAW topics are included in immigration and settlement related programs. Making sure staff is trained. Trying to create as smooth a process as possible for women who seek help, instead of creating more anxiety or stress during the process.

I work with the individual to help them become independent. I work on barriers together with the client to overcome them.

The agency's purpose is to connect people with the resources they need. Due to criminal past, clients are not always eligible for services i.e., women's shelters. Our role then is to advocate on their behalf to demonstrate they pose no threat so services will make an exception for them. Faye Peterson in particular has been more flexible in this respect. Advocacy and helping women connect with resources is our main goal.

To provide education including putting on workshops for families. To look at the healing side of things. To put on Healing Journey for Aboriginal women, which is a workshop for women dealing with domestic violence. Helping women identify what their hurts and pains really are, and giving them a vocabulary to express them. To facilitate the healing lodge in which a medicine person can be brought to assist. To arrange for a sweat lodge. To offer cultural medicine. There are lots of options that can be offered to clients.

I'm still learning what my role is. I am more of a demonstrator than a talker. I'm starting to talk about it more and more. I am beginning to recognize that I have more of a responsibility in that regard as a man.

To provide education and support for women. My role is to not judge why they go back or stay in the relationship. If she decides to stay in the abusive relationship my role is to help her develop the means to keep her and her children safe. Long-term non-judgemental support is often successful in eventually getting them out of the relationship. My role is also to help with the crown, housing, etc. and to get them into groups.

Part of my role is to call people on not doing their job properly. Education is important. Working with other professionals to help them get the issue of VAW. To let agencies know the woman's side of it. To be a voice for women.

To give women time, provide safety, offer information to women about their options, and increasing their awareness of VAW issues.

## **Developing Services Based on Women Directed Best Practice**

Research participants were asked to share some their experience and knowledge that has come from working with abused women and children. Many felt that being compassionate, understanding and non-judgmental was particularly important when working with abused women. Many also felt that patience was particularly necessary when dealing with an often inept system. Participants also reported that women often choose to return to the abuse and therefore continue to be in need of support and respect from system workers. It was also suggested that validating women's experiences and providing them with choices so they can be empowered through decision making is absolutely necessary to effectively work with women;

We need to believe women 100%. Women often have to deal with people who cannot believe what they are saying so assume it is a lie.

I have learned that women are very strong and courageous and brave and that once they get out of the violence they are good teachers to other women because they understand it. They can share because they know.

The healing process takes a long time. It is not just about keeping people safe, it's about the individual feeling safe and secure. My job is to empower women, and provide long-term ongoing counselling, which is important for post-traumatic stress. Providing support to children is important.

They are often not willing to come forward. They might call the police but that doesn't mean they will let you help them. This is often due to fear of retaliation by their husband. We don't need their cooperation to arrest someone. The victims often don't want anything bad to happen to him. Usually by the time they phone they don't want bad stuff to happen to him. It is particularly a problem if he is arrested and he is the only wage earner.

Individual choice is key. Validating women for where they are at is important. From a systemic level, the system is so fragmented that I don't know if we can provide an effective systemic response.

You have to be very sensitive and compassionate, understanding and non-judgemental. Let them know that you are not shocked or thrown off by it. Don't react if what they are saying is horrific. Believe them. Make them a part of the decision making, whether it is financial assistance or finding a place. It is important to connect them with all the supports available, as isolation they feel is difficult.

It is imperative that we work to empower women. We must respect a woman's racial and cultural diversity. We must understand that if a woman made a bad choice, it was governed by her awareness or reality at that time. We must give her other options, perspectives and encouragement to change that awareness or reality.

No judging. They all have reasons for doing what they do. We have to provide information and services but let them decide. This is sometimes frustrating when they go back. You get disillusioned with the system. You have to be very patient.

A tremendous amount of patience is needed.

There are some very desperate people out there and some very cruel people out there. People often judge. People in victim services often don't believe women and women often get eye rolling.

It is hard for women to come forward to address the issue. Women don't come forward right away and admit to victimization. The systems in play re-victimize women again i.e., crisis homes, courts, police, counselling services.

This question is not relevant. I understand the purpose of the project but I don't think my personal opinion makes a difference in it.

The safety planning tool is very helpful to begin to talk to the women about safety and threats. You need to be consistent with services and follow-up. Stay consistent with service.

I have learnt how separate the systems are. If women have addiction issues it becomes difficult for her to access VAW services. It is difficult for her to access any services.

Listening is most important. Make no assumptions. Women need to know that they are not crazy. Women have convinced themselves that they are not right. The system does not empower women, it causes them to doubt themselves. Women trust people who help them, and they shouldn't. Agencies should be upfront about their services so women don't tell them things that will disadvantage them. The system is incredibly complex and ridiculous for women to navigate alone. Women need an advocate to access services. Don't trust crown attorneys.

A lot of women want advice on what to do. Do not tell them what to do, let them figure out what is best for them. Talk to the women. They are people too. Listen to them. Respect that they are reaching out for help or have left the abuse. Do not judge women. Let women know they can come back to the shelter if they decide to go back to abuser.

There is an incredible amount of services out there but ultimately it is up to the individual to make that choice. It is a difficult choice to make as they are forced to make a sacrifice of known to unknown.

Working with women is never linear or strictly progressive. You take one step forward, lose contact, they come back, take a step forward, go back again, etc.

I have learnt not to make assumptions. We need to work carefully and respectfully. Women are doing the best they can with overwhelming circumstances. Ten sessions is not an appropriate service. We need to provide a longer service than what is allowed.

It is hell. It is surprising that people ask what the circumstances were that brought the violence on, basically blaming the victim. This often occurs with probation officers, and other social services i.e., Ontario Works.

Outlining what services do so that she can access them is important.

They are extremely vulnerable and resourceful. They often don't want the relationship to end, they want violence to end. They hate violence not men. Women are stuck and they have a lot of shame which society contributes to.

Cases that go through are unbelievable i.e., men in Quebec bring women back with them to bush camps out of province and leave them in bush camps in the back of a transport where they are used as slaves. They are 200 miles into the bush, abused sexually, physically, emotionally. The women come into town to get groceries and sneak away to centres. We don't realize how isolated women are. It is difficult to help clients in small regions because communities are so small and are close to abuser. Each case is unique and therefore we have to adapt.

It is a process. The healing takes a lot of time, often up to 10 years for victims to acknowledge what is going on and to get to a place where they are able to make decisions about it. It is too much for women to process in a short period of time. There is no quick fix. There are multi-layers of oppression and violence is a piece of that. We need to work with women as a whole as all oppression is connected i.e., addictions, mental health, poverty. There is increased oppression for aboriginal women. Leadership needs to be projected jointly from women's advocates as well as men who support women's advocates

I am always struck by the strength of the women. They have an ability to carry on in other areas of their life. Having really good people in place in the system makes a difference.

You need to push the police and judicial system. We need to remind the police to help women even when it is multiple times that they have to respond to the same woman.

Rarely do they come in once and never go back. Women go back several times before they can break away. Women that are vulnerable are often targeted by other abusive men and repeat abusive relationships. We have to keep giving information to women i.e., safety planning, self-esteem, etc., however they don't always get it while they are in crisis. We have to keep repeating it. There are a large percentage of women who never access services. Assistance to women is different depending on how many times they have been in. Nobody wishes to live in a shelter. You have to be welcoming to women as they carry shame and believe it is their fault. You have to make them feel it is not. Women with children are the hard ones. Kids don't have the opportunity to decide to leave, it is up to mom. The detrimental affect on children continues the violence.

Never assume that your community and/or community partners share your understanding of the issues.



The cycle usually involves women wanting to try the relationship again. It is hard not to preach.

## **Institutional Based VAW Services V. Community Based Equality Seeking Women Centred VAW Services**

### **The Institutionalization of the VAW Service System**

For the last several years, as services for abused women have become increasingly institutionalized, a shift in power has taken place within coordinating committees across Ontario. Historically, community based, women centred, equality seeking organizations have led the VAW agenda, however as more institutional programming is introduced to the table, the balance of power and funding is tipping in the favour of governmental VAW agencies, which has caused tension at those tables.

In and of itself increased governmental recognition of and programming addressing VAW is not a terrible thing. However, services that have been introduced into communities across Ontario, such as Domestic Violence Courts, Victim Witness Assistance, Victim Crisis Assistance Response and Hospital based violence response programs, have come with little or no input from communities in regard to structure, local need and implementation. Some local advocates feel that services have been ‘parachuted’ in with little regard for the actual issues facing abused women and their children, but rather with a political agenda which superficially appears to be concerned with women’s issues. In fact, some might argue that the government based programming is simple a bandage on an issue that is far more complex than simply implementing government based victim services. The underlying issue of inequality between men and women within Canadian society remains substantively unaddressed, while simultaneously annexing the voices of women who point to this greater inequality.

At the coordinating committee level this tension plays out in several ways. Institutional collaborators are often unwilling or unable to do advocacy work. Although this may stem largely from restricting mandates, the result is such that it ties the hands of committees who are unable to unanimously dedicate themselves to taking action of any sort. If advocacy work is therefore the responsibility of community based services, they need to receive due credibility for their analysis and expertise, thus should be setting the agenda. In addition, community based members are left dealing with the fallout of not setting the agenda. Substantive issues which contribute to VAW are failing to be addressed and therefore it is the community based services that are left picking up the pieces of a broken system which is adversely affecting the women and children that they see.

If, due to mandate, conflict, etc, Institutional players within the coordinating committee in Thunder Bay are unable to be involved in advocacy work they should at the very least be able to support the advocacy work going on by community based agencies, and hold

their own and each other's agencies accountable for their actions. If members are unwilling or unable to do so, they should not be sitting at a table designed to advocate for abused women and their children within the community. Simply being mandated by their governmental department to participate in such a committee does not entitle agencies to be given membership, as participation requires action.

Some member agencies have voiced their dissatisfaction with the participation of institutional players at the coordinating committee;

The system doesn't bring women's voices to the table. The agencies with power don't have direct contact with the women. (i.e., institutional players)

The government is going to download a response to VAW which will create a bigger need for a strategic analysis on the ground. We need a strong accountability framework to make this work. There is no formal accountability of services. The government is giving money to services without philosophical analysis so services are not provided with women in mind. The Coordinating Committee should be a common place for coordination to happen however it is not working thus far. Autonomous groups that, because of their autonomy have been able to maintain their political focus on VAW, will now be institutionalized.

### **Institutional Based Services**

Agency participants were asked to rate the importance of Institutional based services in addressing the needs of women who have experienced or survived abuse. Although it appears that the majority of respondents feel that these governmental services are very important, it is pertinent to note that several of those respondents also felt that despite their importance, institutional based services are not living up to their potential as effective services.

64% of the respondents feel that Institutional based services are very important

29% of the respondents feel that Institutional based services are somewhat important.

7% of the respondents feel that Institutional based services are minimally important.

Not one of the respondents feels that Institutional based services are not important.

Of the respondents who felt that Institutional based services are very important they cited the following reasons for their position;

They have the capacity to foster a consistent approach through collaboration and cooperation. Local agreements and protocols can enhance public safety. They are the decision makers and can influence institutional change.

As long as they are trained and following a non-violent, non-oppressive, non-racist feminist philosophy

Very important but not always effective. Both the legal system and the child protection system have some power to intervene and to place accountability on the shoulders of the offender. This does not always happen, and women are re-victimized in these systems.

Important, but women do not go there first so community are important as well.

All services are important to the many complex and varied experiences and needs of women and their children.

The services are reactive to support women

The victim should have a wide range of services available to her because although there are similarities in need, there are also differences. People respond differently to different services. The goal is to educate and empower women and to ensure their safety.

It helps women if they hear the same message over and over again i.e., “you are not crazy,” “You shouldn’t have to live in fear,” etc. It is also very important that we are working together as a system.

Of the respondents who felt that Institutional based services are somewhat important, they cited the following reasons for their position;

There is room to improve. Need to address holding the abuser accountable.

Depends on how they interpret their mandates.

Since this population is highly represented in our agency it is very important work, as our goal is to ensure the safety of children and promote their healthy development and this is best achieved by addressing the needs of their mothers.

We are needed to assist with identification and follow-up, however we require more services to identify perpetrators of abuse. Victim services are necessary but identification and accountability towards perpetrators are required.

Prior to the formal agreement between the two sectors, Beendingen worked cooperatively with Dilico and CAS. This has not changed, however the Children’s Aid Sectors appear to be much more informed of Woman abuse issues

and how they interrelate with child welfare. However, the Aboriginal sector of Children's Aid has, and continues to respond to child welfare issues in a more culturally appropriate manner as justified.

The respondents who felt that Institutional based services were minimally important citing the following reasons for their position;

Institutional based services are not culturally appropriate for aboriginal women.

Their involvement is situational only, preventing them from seeing the varied facets of a woman's life. Nevertheless, the deeper their understanding of VAW issues, the more effective these services will be.

### **Community Based, Equality Seeking, Women Centred Services**

Agency participants were asked to rate the importance of Community based, equality seeking, women centred services in addressing the needs of women who have experienced or survived woman abuse. The overwhelming majority feel that these services are particularly important, as they fill a specific need for abused women and children.

92% of the respondents feel that Community based services are very important.

4% of the respondents feel that Community based services are somewhat important.

4% of the respondents feel that Community based services are minimally important.

Not one respondents feels that Community based services are not important.

Of the respondents who felt that Community based services are very important, they cited the following reasons for their position;

These services can provide emotional, legal, and social supports. They can also seek to influence institutional change through lobbying. Not part of "the system".

All services are important to the many complex and varied experiences and needs of women and their children.

They are extremely important as they work with other women to lobby government for positive changes in women and children's lives. They tend to have the mandate and time to commit themselves to work that shelters don't always have time to do. Over the years these woman centred initiatives etc, have been able to bring forward much needed changes and continue to prove their commitment to the hard and sometimes tiring work.

Issues regarding provision of safety, advocacy, and assistance with resources needed for independent living are still a top priority for women experiencing/surviving violence.

Without time, space and support women have little alternative to victimization.

Services are reactive to support women/children

These services are vital to continuum.

These services are part of creating familiarity for women who leave and know they can be safe. There needs to be more money allocated to create housing and safety measures. They also provide long-term information for women who have survived abuse.

We are the grassroots organizers of protecting women and children

We see the bigger picture and are better able to advocate. We are the experts. It is our every day reality.

Saving the lives of women is important. Providing safety and shelter to women who have been stripped of income from abusive partners is important.

A safe haven for victims of violent crime is a primary step on proceeding with healing and moving forward from abuse.

It is critical that women have a safe place to live where they can care for their children and begin healing and making the necessary changes in their lives.

These initiatives educate, support and save lives. They are integral to our systemic response.

The respondents who felt that community based services are somewhat important, they cited the following reasons for their position;

It depends on the initiative and the community.

The respondents who felt that community based services are minimally important, they cited the following reasons for their position;

Mainstream community based services are usually not culturally appropriate.

## **The Coordinating Committee to End Woman Abuse in Thunder Bay & District**

### **What Brings us to the Table?**

Despite the divisions currently affecting the coordinating committee, the common philosophies around VAW that bring us together to collaborate must not be negated. In general, VAW agencies hold similar views about the issue of woman abuse and thus could be used as a stepping stone to developing a clear and active mandate for the committee.

Several agency participants reported that their philosophy of providing service to abused women and their children includes the belief that the abuser is responsible for the violence, that we need to keep women and children safe, and that supporting women is the main priority. Others reported that they believe that VAW is a social problem, that it is political, not personal and that society allows the power and control wheel to continue to function. Many reported that their agency believed in seeking equality for women, some specifically for aboriginal women, who are marginalized in society. Several agencies reported their desire for a planned strategy for addressing VAW, interacting with offenders, providing service to victims and working to address the systemic gender based barriers which are complicit to VAW. And finally, nearly all respondents recognized the profound effect that woman abuse has on victims and society as a whole.

In addition to sharing their agency's philosophies in regards to the provision of service, participants expressed their personal perspective on the root cause of VAW. The purpose of this exercise was to demonstrate how personal perspectives can alter service provision. All member agencies but one institutional member who found this question to be irrelevant, participated in this exercise. Interestingly, it is this precise denial of subjectivity which can have the most profoundly adverse affect on service provision.

Although participant's personal perspectives on the root cause of VAW were varied, the underlying ideas were often quite similar. Historical ties to patriarchy, societal complicity, the continued cycle of violence, and gender and race based oppression were commonly cited. In addition, all of the respondents who sit on the coordinating committee reported that they see VAW as an issue of power and control.

It is rooted in invisible structures of power and oppression that come from patriarchy, colonialism and imperialism and intersect with issues of race and class. Men have a sense of entitlement and have the economic and social power to wield it over women. Not all men are violent and not all women are non-violent. Power is particularly accessible to men, and they get recognition for this behaviour. Also stems from the treatment of women where labour is undervalued, negative media images of women, and sexual assault are not addressed by society.

Could be societal based. Fewer women in the work force. Male dominance in the work force. How is power and control being viewed by religion, marriage, etc..

Is it religious or cultural based? Systemic victimization of women by a society based on gender, race, social standing.

This question is irrelevant. I'm not going to comment on that

Past practices, acceptance and tolerance of the behaviour allows it to be magnified. Society as a whole is getting more aggressive and is being manifested in relationships.

Not just power and control although it is that. It is a lack of respect. It is an exertion of authority in some way. Need to be in control but without the ability to know how to deal with social and emotional issues relating from that. Not always the same root cause. It is an outlet for other things.

Social, political, and patriarchal systems.

Gender inequity stemming from patriarchy.

It is a learned behaviour. Someone who has been abused is more likely to abuse. Need support system in place to assist people who have been abused.

It is complex. Gender issues, socialization, and poverty are a part of it. 95% of women here are aboriginal. This is the result of colonialization and oppression. It is about power and control on several levels.

It is about power and control. Men are dominant and don't like to relinquish that role or be equal. It stems from an old school mentality. We have to break the cycle. Family history, role modelling and alcohol are huge factors. Alcohol is almost always involved.

Often stems from family of origin. Children model what they see. It's the way they learn to cope.

Traditionally men had all the power and control. This is a Feminist perspective as to the history of DV and why it is perpetuated. It is perpetuated because women are treated as less than men. There is a lack of resources, which is keeping women down so they don't have the same opportunities as men. This is a form of male control. Women are kept poorer and away from opportunities.

Persons own history, frustration, poverty. Most men I have been in contact with have experienced violence themselves. In particular in aboriginal families, there is a great sense of loss in their lives. There is a feeling of loss of power within society. There are also severe addiction issues.

Backgrounds, financial, self-esteem issues with both men and women. People's up-bringing. Their values and what they are taught. Issues around male and female roles. Media contributes to how people view those roles.

The violence is not personal. It is an issue of social inequality. VAW will continue as long as women are unequal.

Definitely based on unequal power dynamics. Historical inequality on all levels, combined with societal tendency to blame the victim.

Alcohol is a huge factor. And men have always been superior.

VAW is very shame based. Men have often had experience with abuse. There is a fear of not being in control, and there are limited supports to help them with these issues. Men don't always see it as being abusive. There is a need to educate men about abuse and appropriate relationships.

It is historical. Conservative families have ideas of women's place in the home and in society. Women want more for themselves. Attitudes of a male dominant society. People often don't believe it happens or blame the women when it happens. Men need to feel powerful in the relationship and need to feel control. VAW is about his inability to communicate effectively, etc.

Largely stems from power and control. There is a lack of community dedication to ending it.

The causes are incredibly varied. It is a systemic problem, with patriarchy addressed in some areas and not in others. Not all men are abusive.

There is not one cause. VAW is so pervasive even today. It hasn't moved far enough out of the hidden trouble that it once was. Violence in media contributes to it. There are lots of excuses made for perpetrators. The Court system makes it possible. Perpetrators are not accountable. This is terribly discouraging to people as it makes them feel helpless in the system.

It stems from inequalities in general. The legal system is not doing much to help. The systems which have power to make a difference are pretty ineffective at making change.

Stem partly from the inability of people to resolve conflict by appropriate means. Violence is a product of someone not having the ability to deal with conflict. It can result from alcoholism, poverty.

From an Aboriginal perspective part of it has to do with residential schools. It has been going on for 500 years. The Indian Act, residential schools, sixty scoop,



white paper are part of the problem. Assimilation is problematic. VAW is learned through example.

VAW comes from somewhere that says that women aren't as valued as men. Men are not held accountable for their behaviour. As a society we reinforce underlying patriarchal messages.

It stems from power and control. Society contributes. Media, police response, public view, lack of education, men not held accountable. Men are not held accountable because it is believed that men are "hard to engage".

It stems from men not being held accountable for their actions. You can't assault your neighbour without getting charged, why is it okay for him to assault his wife? There is a different standard of holding men accountable when it comes to VAW or keeping women safe. The system sees it as a family or relationship problem, which leaves men unaccountable.

### **Are We Dysfunctional?**

The Thunder Bay coordinating committee has struggled over the years to affect a difference in the lives of abused women and children. Inconsistent membership has had a detrimental effect on the committee, as vital representation, including that of the aboriginal community, has been lost at various stages. Furthermore, change to individual agency representation has impacted the effectiveness of the committee as a whole, particularly if members do not have a strong analysis around VAW issues.

The introduction of institutional based services, as was addressed earlier in this research, has had a particularly crippling effect on the productivity of the committee. Due to conflicting mandates, many institutional players are unable, or believe they are unable, to actively participate in committee business which has become increasingly frustrating for member agencies whose hands become tied by members unwilling or unable to contribute.

Additionally for some members who are mandated to sit on the committee, their motives for membership are vastly different than those whose agency's purpose is largely to address women's issues, and more specifically VAW. Despite the motivational divide, institutional agencies have an important role to play in addressing VAW. Collaboration between community and institutional based services is essential, and opportunities to do so at the committee table are plenty. However, in order effectively work in partnership, **decision makers** within each agency need to be at the table, ready and willing to re-evaluate agency policy and behaviour, as well as sticking out their neck for the issues when required. Several coordinating committees use this model, including the London coordinating committee on which the chief of police, crown attorney, E.D.s and other policy makers sit. As one of the goals of the committee is to pool community resources, the people who can approve protocols and collaborative initiatives need to personally

participate in committee business. Doing so also demonstrates the importance agencies place on the issues of VAW.

Several agency participants articulated their frustrations and disappointments with the committee;

We are not effective as a committee. Too many people are falling for the bait at the individual committee level and not able to get past insignificant issues. We are all trying to do the best we can and we are all part of this system. We are holding individuals accountable instead of holding the overall system accountable. We can't get consensus in regards to how we can work on things together.

Aboriginal agencies have left the table of the Coordinating Committee. We need to find out why.

The coordinating committee is dysfunctional. It is a shame because there are several agencies that can do good for the community.

The committee is ineffective. We should look at any way we can educate and assist women in DV situation. We need to be more open to projects rather than focusing on simply one project at a time. If there is money for projects we should always try to get the money.

There is no consistency at the committee level. There is no one to follow through with anything and keep up on track. We just keep spinning the wheels and going nowhere.

We need people at the table who care about the issues. Of course no one wants to see women abused but it is more than that. Being personally dedicated to this issue is essential to fully understanding the complexity and devastation of VAW.

### **Can We Work Together?**

Member agencies were asked if they thought that it is *important* for Institutional based services and Community based, women centred initiatives to work together to address the issues of woman abuse. All but one thought that it was important for these services to work together. Respondents explained their position;

Together is great as long as Women Centred takes the lead

Women often need support from both kinds of services.

Although women's histories are different they are all important. Sometimes the real issues get lost in too large a committee, or the right people are not represented at the table.

The historic issues of abuse of women and their status in NAN communities will need a focused intervention of all services to effect change.

This is absolutely important to ensure a strong support group for women exists who can assist in dealing with offenders and the criminal and legal sector.

Cooperation always works best to even just get the word out and it is good to compare approaches (what works and what doesn't) rather than just keep doing things that don't work and making it worse for the sake of statistics.

Imperative.

Need to have a consistent approach while respecting diversity among members. Valuable to share information, develop protocols, forge linkages, and support initiatives.

Absolutely since women need to access and utilize a variety of services to meet their varied needs. No one agency can meet all women's every need.

Takes a whole community to end woman abuse.

A better service is provided with a team approach. Services are aware of the roles and limitations of other services so that service is not duplicated or omitted and the client receives a comprehensive range service.

Mutual respect is critical. We both have a job to do, and if we can work together effectively, ultimately the client benefits.

All services need to work together to stop violence against women.

All services should work together as all are important and have been created to meet a need.

Otherwise, we work independent of each other and many more women fall through the cracks in service.

Best practices have demonstrated that networking and collaboration are important for addressing community issues.

Member participants were also asked if they think it is *possible* for Institutional based services and Community based, women centred initiatives to work together to address the issue of woman abuse. Again, all but one member participants felt that it is possible for all services to work together. Respondents explained;

Both have much to offer, working co-operatively can only enhance safety of women.

It is possible but not always consistent. Needs improvement.

Perhaps through the coordination of services. Central intake?

Yes if organizations are willing to let go of historical differences and move beyond mandates and work to achieve a system that would address women's needs first and organizational needs second.

Yes, however due to the epidemic violence in First Nations Communities, Aboriginal organizations will unite to do this work. The issues may be the same but are very different. This is not always clear to those in these committees. My agenda is all women but specifically Aboriginal woman abuse.

Yes, with women centred taking the lead

Police, VCARS and VWAP are examples of this model working.

We are in the process of developing Protocol's with different agencies and organizations to help address the issues of woman abuse and to work together to eliminate violence against women.

Dependent upon the terms of reference, inclusiveness, mandate, and commitment to working together.

If they listen to each other.

The challenge is presented by the vast geography of Nishnawbe-Aski Nation. Women are reluctant to leave the community, friends and family to escape the abuse.

Without cooperation, separate mandates and turfs remove benefits from the women.

Yes but need to have trust and be clear about a woman centred approach. It has been successful in other communities.

Everyone should work together. I believe that is one of the positive strengths of the VAW Coordinating Committee is to bring together players from all areas in the community.

Absolutely. Why wouldn't they be able to?

I think that we are already doing this to a degree and we could probably be doing more of it.

I feel that we are doing it already. We obviously have to keep improving our working relationships but our partnerships have greatly improved our ability to respond systemically to VAW.

One respondent felt that they were unsure if it was possible for these services to work together;

It must be clear, however, and caution exercised for we are first and foremost, women's advocates which could, at times, put us in a conflict situation with other services. Collaborating can blur this line, to the detriment of women. Women need a clear, strong, unwavering voice.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses**

The coordination of VAW services presents a particular challenge as mandates, funding, agency focus and resources often preclude collaboration. Frontline workers' hands are often tied due to agency policy and are often frustrated by the shortcomings of their services. No agency is responsible to address the issue of VAW, nor does any agency have the ability. Collaboration is key, which is why coordinating committees present such an important opportunity for cross-sectoral cooperation.

In and of themselves member agencies are only pieces of a puzzle. Some agencies, specifically dedicated to VAW and women's issues, may make up a larger portion of the puzzle, but all agencies who work with abused women and children have a place as well. The problem comes when agencies refuse to work with other agencies either because they are not specifically VAW agencies or because they consider themselves above collaboration with non-institutional agencies. Either way women are on the losing end of this power struggle.

Collaborating agencies need to be recognized for their contribution to the system, be it frontline VAW workers who work with women in crisis, institutional players who have clear policies and mandates which may limit their response to VAW, or secondary agencies who work minimally with abused women. The benefit of being at the table together is that where one agency's services or abilities end, there is bound to be someone else within the committee who can pick up or assist where the last one left off. The factor which can determine the success of this collaboration, that is missing from the coordinating committee, is trust. Through secrecy, non participation, apathy, and criticism, trust among committee members has been eroded over the years, thereby paralyzing the committee. Interagency collaboration is dependent upon a positive environment in which to come together. Members require support for what they are doing from their partners within the field, instead of constant criticism for what they are not doing. Likewise, members need to trust that any constructive criticism that partner agencies might suggest is not a personal attack, but rather an alternative perspective

which is being offered to better services to women, which is the common goal of committee member agencies.

Largely there are far more strengths in working together than there are weakness. It is a matter of getting the committee on the same page, and developing trust and respect between participants. Taking on this challenge is of course dependent upon the willingness of the committee.

## **Problems Specific to Aboriginal Communities**

Remote northern aboriginal communities face additional barriers to providing service to abused women and their children, largely due to their location in relation to available services, and the multifaceted oppression faced by aboriginal women. The situation for abused women living on reserve in the remote north is particularly grave. There is a general lack of accessibility to services, lack of community support, increased danger for women who are returning to their reserve after seeking VAW services elsewhere, and some workers believe a lack of an Aboriginal community strategic plan to deal with VAW.

### **Lack of Services**

Women on remote northern reserves are often desperate for VAW services, including police protection. They are often literally left with no options or opportunities to leave the abuse. One woman was so desperate to escape the abuse she was experiencing that she actually shot herself so that she would be medevaced off the reserve. This woman is not an exception, abused aboriginal women are living in dire conditions and are resulting to desperate measures to escape;

Police take too long to respond to calls on reserve. They can show up anywhere from a half hour to four hours after call for help is made.

Women on reserves who want to leave abuse have to leave reserve to do so. Everybody knows everybody and there is no way to hide, and their chances of leave are rare. It would have to be perfect timing to catch a flight that day if they had to flee.

There is a lack of access to all services in rural, remote locations. There are no counseling services, crisis housing or even police assistance for abused women.

There are no services in the remote north.

Remote communities are difficult to get in to. The high cost of transportation prohibits offering support groups, presentations, and public education.

## **Women Returning to Reserve**

Aboriginal women who have fled their reserve due to abuse and subsequently decide to return to their communities are at particular risk;

The system loses women on reserve as there is no follow-up once they return to their community.

There are few people on the reserve that are trained to work with abused women. Confidentiality on reserve is absent. Service providers need to be more ethical.

Shelters on reserve are problematic. There is no security and men have access to their partners and further threaten them if they don't return home. Police don't even respond to calls about this.

When aboriginal women they leave the shelter, where do they go? Are they sent back to an isolated community where they are put at further risk?

## **Matrimonial Rights**

Aboriginal women's lack matrimonial rights to their home or property on reserve is continuing to be problematic for women who are being abused by their partner and need to flee the home. Given that she almost immediately loses all rights to the home after leaving this is not surprisingly an additional barrier which prevent Aboriginal women from escaping abusive relationships. Aboriginal women are literally being forced to choose between remaining in abusive situations and being homeless.

## **Lack of Community Support**

Respondents pointed to a lack of support of victims within northern aboriginal communities. The woman is often blamed for the violence, and shamed if she decides to leave. For a woman to leave the reserve, she would be essentially giving up her community which may or may not welcome her back in the future. In addition, the violence in general that is occurring on many reserves is indicative of the crisis facing many First Nations communities.<sup>2</sup> Women shared their experience being abused on reserve;

Everyone knew he was abusing me but it was a family secret. Lots of women are beaten but no one usually charges their men for abuse so I was ostracized by my community.

My community felt it was my fault it was happening. They made him out to be a saint and spread rumours about me because I left. I went back up to Fort Hope shortly after I left. The community didn't even recognize there was an issue of

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<sup>2</sup> Ross, Rupert. Assistant Crown Attorney. *Traumatization in Remote First Nations: An Expression of Concern*. Kenora, Ontario. August 2006.

abuse. They pretended it didn't happen. I eventually got out of the relationship after he held me hostage for 3 days and police finally intervened. He got minimal jail time.

Women are desperate to get out of the reserves but there is no way out. You can't get a medevac because you are being abused. One woman shot herself so she could get a medevac off the reserve and get away from her abuser.

My family didn't want to get involved. You just don't talk about these things in my community. It is happening to so many women and everyone knows.

## **Developing a Northern Reserve Protocol**

The intention of this portion of the research was to improve coordination, access and provision of services to abused women and children on remote northern reserves by collaborating closely with existing Aboriginal equality seeking organizations. Unfortunately the intended alliances did not come to fruition and alternative connections were made with Matawa First Nations Management. Although the Matawa area workers were very knowledgeable in regards to some of the needs of aboriginal women living on northern reserves, their agency does not include women centred equality seeking as part of its mandate. Therefore, the substantive issues facing specifically women on northern reserves was largely left unaddressed, hence the development of a formal protocol at this point would be premature, as more research is needed.

The Matawa area workers who participated in this research came from various northern reserves where they provide services to members of First Nations Communities. Although they are not principally VAW service workers, they certainly are experienced in working with abuse issues on their reserves.

### **Identified Needs on Reserve**

The general consensus among the workers is that services in general are lacking on reserve. They specified several services in particular that they feel are essential services which need to be accessible on reserve;

- Programming for abusive men
- After-care and support for women returning to the reserves
- Professional counseling services
- Mental health services
- Emergency housing on the reserve



Workers also specified several needs, as workers, to more effectively assist women who have experienced or survived abuse;

- Enhanced communication with police
- Protocol with police services
- Updates on available services
- Enhanced communication with shelters
- To be seen as an advocate and identified as VAW workers
- Clarification on methadone and drug policies within shelters
- Financial Assistance to get women off reserve

### **Receptiveness to Enhanced Services**

Although it was not possible to arrange for focus groups with aboriginal women living on northern reserves, due the prohibitive cost of such an undertaking, Matawa workers were asked about the possible receptiveness of services provided by Thunder Bay and District VAW agencies. Participants generally felt that women would prefer to receive services on their reserve, however given the lack of existing services women would be receptive to services provided elsewhere, conditional upon service being culturally appropriate;

Women want more in depth counselling.

They want to go back to their own community to get services.

Women feel they do not get appropriate services in crisis homes, specifically counselling services. Shelters don't have the same philosophy as reserve communities to work with the entire family or use aboriginal values.

It is imperative that programming work with men and women to deal with entire family unit.

Going back to communities has to be a part of the philosophy of VAW workers.

Theories and philosophies of non-aboriginal communities do not work in aboriginal communities.

Services need to meet the cultural needs of aboriginal women.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations have been broken into two categories; short-term recommendations and long-term recommendations. For the purpose of this report, short-term refers to actions that should be taken within the next six months, while the long-term recommendations require more thought and preparation, yet should be initiated within the next 12 months. It is important to note that the recommendations are not in order of priority as they are all equally important in regard to the research out of which they have been developed.

### Short-Term Recommendations

1. The committee's agenda should be set by community based, equality seeking woman centred organizations, who are experts in their field and have the voice of abused women. The committee should develop a clear mandate, including a common vision, and expectations of committee members which should be strictly adhered to.
2. Committee members must re-evaluate their motivation for sitting on the committee. If motivation comes simply from mandate requirements or similarly disinterested reasons, members must find suitable replacement representation at the table, whose primary focus for being there is to substantively and cooperatively work to address VAW. Committee members need to reaffirm their commitment to holding men accountable. Membership must be contingent on members' dedication to do so.
3. The committee should recognize and identify the strengths and abilities of member agencies i.e., Faye Peterson and the Women's Centre are knowledgeable in regard to advocating for women, and assisting women in maneuvering through the VAW system, VWAP is knowledgeable in regard to assisting women during the court process, etc.. Doing so ensure that members' strengths and expertise are given credibility and utilized to their full potential at the table.
4. The committee should develop a system-wide strategy with partner agencies, not sitting at the table, to address the issue of woman abuse. This strategic development should led by community based, equality seeking, woman centred agencies who are experts in the VAW field, and should involve the development of a clear, action oriented plan, of which all member agencies should support
5. The committee should make it a regular practice to invite women to present their story to the committee and/or participate in committee business in order to ensure that women are being heard at the table.
6. In regard to specific complaints made against agencies within this report, committee members should seek to address the issues relevant to their agency. The committee as a whole should discuss agency specific complaints to ensure they have been addressed by participants and to collaborate on possible solutions to the reported problems. Member agencies should report back to the committee in regard to how the concerns have been addressed within their organization.

7. Committee member agencies should take steps to ensure that racism and sexism within their agencies, especially in the provision of services, is not tolerated. All incidents, known to committee members, which demonstrate these oppressive attitudes should be reported to the agency in question and should be addressed by the agency's committee representative within their organization and following this should report back to the committee on the incident and any action that has been taken to rectify the situation.
8. The committee should develop and/or share risk assessment and safety planning tools with other agencies providing service to abused women, and provide training on the use of the tools.
9. Given the public's lack of awareness in regards to VAW, the committee should seek to provide public education around VAW and available services. This should include an extensive, mainstream, public awareness campaign which focuses on helping women identify the abuse i.e., posters on how to identify abuse in all public places such as hospitals, churches, bus stations, etc. The committee could begin by examining the appropriateness of the Neighbours, Friends and Family in addressing this need.
10. A continued effort should be made by the coordinating committee to collaborate and coordinate efforts with various agencies servicing remote reserves in the Thunder Bay District. In particular the committee should seek to develop relationships with individual workers servicing northern reserves, including Matawa and Equay-Wuk workers.
11. The coordinating committee should send information packages to all area Matawa workers, as well as reserve nursing stations, to include the Community Resources for Abused Women and Their Children brochure, as well as the Support Services for Women and Children in Thunder Bay booklet. Additionally, shelter drug policies should be clarified for all relevant workers on northern reserves.
12. A continued effort should be made by the coordinating committee to encourage aboriginal VAW agencies to participate in the committee, to ensure that aboriginal women's issues are being addressed at the table. In addition, the committee must examine why aboriginal agencies are choosing not to participate at the committee table, as well as why non-aboriginal VAW agencies are not being invited to participate at aboriginal VAW tables.
13. Given the dismal referral practices reported by participants, the committee should work to improve inter-agency referrals. This could be accomplished through sending brochures to all VAW service providers as well as holding an information session for frontline VAW workers.
14. In order to address the systemic issues presented by the criminal justice system, the committee should seek to develop and/or support the development of a Court Watch Program in Thunder Bay.

15. The committee should seek to ensure that VAW services, particularly crisis services, provide or have immediate access to interpreter services.
16. The committee should lobby relevant governmental departments in regards to funding cuts which affect VAW services as well as applying for all available relevant funding which can be used for advocacy, support, research and programming. Additionally, the committee should lobby the appropriate governmental agencies to address the poverty issues overwhelmingly facing single mothers in Thunder Bay and District.
17. The committee should address the requests made by research participants. (See Appendix viii.)

### **Long-Term Recommendations**

1. The committee should develop a system-wide strategy for working with abusive men, and integrate services for perpetrators into existing services where possible.
2. In order to address the issue of addicted women's inability to access VAW services, the committee should consider its position on servicing this marginalized group, as well as developing a clear strategy to better serve these women. One model which could be used to assist in this process is a report submitted by the British Columbia Centre of Excellence for Women's Health which was published in December of 2004, titled *Tracking Alcohol Use in Women Who Move Through Domestic Violence Shelters*. In addition, an alliance and invitation of membership should be offered to the Pregnancy and Health Outreach Program, as their knowledge and experience working with addicted and abused women could inform the committee on developing an integrated system.
3. The committee should engage the judiciary, in an attempt to better inform their understanding of VAW and its effect on victims and the community, as well as its relation to custody and access decisions. An initial step being to ensure all justices receive a copy of this report.
4. The committee should seek to educate high school counselors and teachers about how to identify abuse, how to address the abuse, as well as available VAW services. In addition, given that high school is shown to be the highest form of education completed among the majority of abused women, the committee should make educating high school students about VAW a priority. The committee should seek and apply for any funding available to do this work.
5. Given the importance of elementary schools in protecting children in regards to domestic violence and custody and access, training with both school board administrations and principals should be undertaken to assist in their understanding of VAW and custody and access issues. Additionally the committee should work with school board administrators to collaborate on a clear policy for teachers and principals to identify and address woman abuse.

6. The committee should engage police services in regard to the need for further training for officers around DV and VAW issues. This training should not come from in-house but rather from an independent women's advocacy agency with a women's centred view on VAW. Because offering training would prohibit all officers from attending, mandatory self training modules should be developed for officers.
7. The committee needs to support and participate in efforts to change matrimonial laws adversely affecting Aboriginal women.
8. In order to address the need for training of frontline VAW workers, the committee should develop and implement system-wide training, to be led by community based, equality seeking woman centred organizations. All frontline VAW workers should have specific training to prepare them for working with woman abuse cases.
9. Given the reported need for childcare among abused women, the committee should lobby the federal and provincial government to develop a national or provincial childcare program, highlighting the specific importance for abused women.
10. The committee should engage local police services to re-evaluate the domestic violence paperwork, as the excessiveness of the DV package inhibits an appropriate police response. In addition, video statements should be encouraged by the committee to minimize officers' influence on a DV report.
11. The committee should work with local child welfare agencies to inform policy affecting abused women. This should include the re-evaluation of the filing policy, which puts mom's name on the file, and policies in regard to holding men accountable for the violence they perpetrate
12. Immediate on-scene advocacy for victims is required when police are called to a DV, as women don't necessarily want to open up to officers. Women need someone to assist them and advocate on their behalf while reporting abuse to police. Offering this service in person would likely increase the number of women who get connected to services. The advocate should be an independent women's advocate who can follow-up with women, connect women to appropriate services, and most importantly have a women's centred view of VAW.
13. Ongoing efforts should be made to encourage and support research which would improve services and/or access to services for aboriginal women living on remote reserves.
14. The committee should engage the Thunder Bay Police in regard to developing a specialized police unit to respond to woman abuse may improve services by focusing training on specific individuals dedicated to responding to DV calls, as well as effectively making DV paperwork process more efficient. This would also likely cut down on over-time costs paid by the department.

15. In order to address the homelessness issues affect women and children in Thunder Bay, the committee should demonstrate the need to Thunder Bay City Council for shelter space specific to homeless women and their children.

## APPENDIX IV

| Agency/Organization   | Declined Participation | Did not Respond | Agreed to Participate | Completed Survey | Completed Interview |
|---|------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| Anishinabek Police Service                                    |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Anishnawbe Mushkiki   |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Atikokan Crisis Centre  |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Beendigan Inc.  |                        |                 | X                     | X                | incomplete          |
| Caring Dads   |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Catholic Family Development Centre                            |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Centre des Femmes du Nord-Ouest de l'Ontario                  |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Children's Aid Society  |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Crown Attorney's Office                                       | X                      |                 |                       |                  |                     |
| Children's Centre Thunder Bay                                 |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Community Mental Health - TBRHSC                              |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Dilico Ojibway Child & Family Services                        |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Elizabeth Fry Society   |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Equay-Wuk   |                        | X               |                       |                  |                     |
| Family Law Office   |                        |                 | X                     | declined         | X                   |
| Family Services Thunder Bay                                   |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Faye Peterson Transition House                                |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Geraldton Resource Centre                                     | X                      |                 |                       |                  |                     |
| LU Gender Issues Centre                                       |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Independent Living Resource Centre                            |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| John Howard Society   |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Lakehead Public Schools                                       |                        |                 | X                     | X                | incomplete          |
| Lakehead Employment Services                                  | X                      |                 |                       |                  |                     |
| Legal Aid   |                        | X               |                       |                  |                     |
| Marjorie House  |                        | X               |                       |                  |                     |
| Matawa First Nation Management                                |                        |                 | X                     | incomplete       | X                   |
| Metis Nation of Ontario                                       |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Nishnawbi-Aski Legal Services                                 |                        |                 | X                     | X                | declined            |
| Northwestern Ontario Women's Centre                           |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| NorWest Community Health Centres                              |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Ontario Provincial Police                                     |                        |                 | X                     | incomplete       | incomplete          |
| Ontario Works   |                        |                 | X                     | incomplete       | X                   |
| Police Communications   |                        |                 | X                     | incomplete       | X                   |
| Pregnancy & Health Outreach Project                           |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Probation & Parole  |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Rural Family Resource Centre                                  | X                      |                 |                       |                  |                     |
| SA/DV Treatment Centre - TBRHSC                               |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Smith Clinic  |                        | X               |                       |                  |                     |
| Thunder Bay Catholic School Board                             |                        | X               |                       |                  |                     |
| Thunder Bay District Health Unit                              |                        |                 | X                     | X                | incomplete          |
| Thunder Bay Housing   |                        | X               |                       |                  |                     |
| Thunder Bay Indian Friendship Centre                          |                        | X               |                       |                  |                     |
| Thunder Bay Multicultural Association                         |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Thunder Bay Police Service                                    |                        |                 | X                     | X                | X                   |
| Thunder Bay Sexual Assault/Abuse Crisis and Counseling Centre |                        |                 | X                     | incomplete       | X                   |

|   |   |  |   |   |   |
|---|---|--|---|---|---|
| Victim/Witness Assistance Program             | X |  |   |   |   |
| Victim Crisis Assistance and Referral Service |   |  | X | X | X |



## APPENDIX VII

### Focus Group Participants

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| 8 women            | 50+ Support Group                             |
| 4 women            | Journey Beyond Abuse                          |
| 5 women            | RISK Support Group                            |
| 3 women            | WIN Support Group                             |
| 2 women            | Elizabeth Fry Society of Northwestern Ontario |
| 2 women            | Thunder Bay District Jail                     |
| 7 women            | Pregnancy & Health Community Outreach         |
| 55 female students | St. Patrick High School                       |

## APPENDIX IX

### Assessment of Services

Of the VAW services listed on focus group surveys, the following agencies were utilized (Agencies are listed in order from most to least utilized with client assessment next to each)

E= Excellent, G= Good, F= Fair, P= Poor

| <b>Agency</b>  | <b># of clients</b> | <b>E</b> | <b>G</b> | <b>F</b> | <b>P</b> |
|--|---------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Faye Peterson Transition House                             | 16                  | 13       | -        | 1        | 1        |
| Thunder Bay Police   | 10                  | 5        | 1        | -        | 4        |
| Ontario Works  | 9                   | 3        | -        | 2        | 3        |
| Catholic Family Development Centre                         | 9                   | 8        | -        | -        | 1        |
| Legal Aid  | 8                   | 2        | 3        | 1        | 2        |
| Family Services  | 7                   | 4        | 2        | -        | 1        |
| Smith Clinic   | 7                   | 1        | 2        | 2        | 1        |
| Thunder Bay District Housing Corp.                         | 6                   | 6        | -        | -        | -        |
| Beendigen Inc. Crisis Home                                 | 6                   | 3        | 2        | -        | 1        |
| Ontario Provincial Police                                  | 6                   | 1        | 1        | -        | 2        |
| Pregnancy and Health Community Outreach Project            | 5                   | 5        | -        | -        | -        |
| Anishinabek Police Service                                 | 4                   | 1        | -        | 1        | 2        |
| Dilico   | 4                   | 1        | 2        | -        | 1        |
| Superior Court of Justice                                  | 4                   | -        | 1        | 2        | -        |
| Victim/Witness Assistance Program                          | 4                   | 3        | 1        | -        | -        |
| Thunder Bay District Health Unit                           | 3                   | 1        | -        | -        | 2        |
| Children's Aid Society                                     | 3                   | -        | 2        | -        | 1        |
| Community Mental Health Services                           | 3                   | -        | 1        | 2        | -        |
| Elizabeth Fry Society of NW Ontario                        | 3                   | 3        | -        | -        | -        |
| Family Law Information Centres                             | 3                   | 1        | -        | 2        | -        |
| Thunder Bay Indian Friendship Centre                       | 3                   | 3        | -        | -        | -        |
| Northwestern Ontario Women's Centre                        | 3                   | 3        | -        | -        | -        |
| Children's Centre Thunder Bay                              | 2                   | 2        | -        | -        | -        |
| Lakehead Employment Services                               | 2                   | -        | 1        | -        | 1        |
| LPH – St. Joseph's Care Group                              | 2                   | 1        | -        | 1        | -        |
| Probation and Parole                                       | 2                   | -        | 1        | -        | 1        |
| Public School Board  | 2                   | 1        | -        | 1        | -        |
| Separate School Board                                      | 2                   | 1        | -        | 1        | -        |
| Anishnawbe Mushkiki  | 1                   | 1        | -        | -        | -        |
| Atikokan Crisis Centre                                     | 1                   | 1        | -        | -        | -        |
| Caring Dads  | 1                   | 1        | -        | -        | -        |
| Crown Attorney's Office                                    | 1                   | -        | 1        | -        | -        |
| Geraldton Resource Centre                                  | 1                   | -        | -        | 1        | -        |
| Nishnawbe-Aski Police Services                             | 1                   | -        | -        | -        | 1        |
| Sexual Assault/Domestic Violence Treatment Centre - TBRHSC | 1                   | -        | -        | -        | 1        |
| VCARS  | 1                   | -        | -        | -        | 1        |
| Other _____  |                     |          |          |          |          |
| Hospital – ER  | 1                   | -        | -        | -        | 1        |

|                                |   |   |   |   |   |
|--------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| 911                            | 1 | 1 | - | - | - |
| UI Office                      | 1 | 1 | - | - | - |
| London Battered Women's Centre | 1 | 1 | - | - | - |
| London Police                  |   | - | - | - | 1 |
| Counsellor - Sally Pine        | 1 | 1 | - | - | - |

## Requests of Coordinating Committee

- i. Referral information for women who access our shelter who could benefit from mental health services in Thunder Bay and area. Information about the new Shelter House in Thunder Bay, its location, how women are 'safer' there than in the old building, any services there specific to homeless women. – Atitkokan Crisis Centre
- ii. If you would like to host presentations on healthy relationships and VAW on our territory don't hesitate to do so. – Anishinawbek Police Service
- iii. Sure. Would like to see a copy of my report. Look at recommendations to possibly incorporate in own policy. Brochures from the Committee – Anishnawbe Mushkiki
- iv. Minutes from meetings – would be good to see what they are talking about, direction it is taking. – Faye Peterson
- v. A lot of their resources are in English. Ask for funding for translation of those documents when putting in proposals. May get more funding if you tell them it is going to be translated. – Centre des Femmes
- vi. -No, but I am willing to share resources with others – Faye Peterson
- vii. - update contact info for services  
- risk assessment tool kit/safety planning - Independent Living Resource Centre
- viii. Outlining what services do so that she can access them. – John Howard Society
- ix. Would like regular statistical reports – how many calls police are receiving, charges, gender breakdown, sentencing, referrals to Pars or caring dads. How many DV cases CAS is dealing with.
- x. A statement as a coordinating committee around the position and commitment related to women who are experiencing violence and addiction. Least able to meet the criteria for service.