

**Environmental Scan of Services and  
Service Coordination  
for Woman Abuse in Toronto**

**Final Report**

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## **Section 7      Analysis and Discussion**

An understanding of the environment is gained from a scan of factors and trends that have the potential to influence a policy or service issue and responses to it. Thus, an environmental scan captures a view of the environment around an issue. Its purpose is to detect new, relevant events and facts including, but not limited to, interactional effects among and between actors and issues across the environment being studied.

The most effective and user-friendly scans begin with an appropriate and sufficiently broad appreciation of *what, or the elements* that will comprise the scan environment. A variety of scan templates or frameworks have been developed to provide a broad and encompassing structure that helps to frame the scan (Morrison, 1992). One of the most enduring of these is the STEEP framework. The macro-environment is effectively captured under five broad areas expressed in the acronym, STEEP: S socio-cultural; T technological; E economic; E environmental; and P political (governmental). The STEEP, or other similar structural frameworks, have several strengths (Abraham, 2006; Fletcher, 1998). They add rigour, when properly utilised, by shaping the interview guide, document review and other aspects of the data collection. They offer analytic utility by helping to ensure that the scan data are analysed comprehensively in light of the relevant spheres of the environment.

In this environmental scan the elements of the STEEP framework were applied as follows:

### Socio-Cultural:

- Who are the users of woman abuse services, including their cultural and ethnic backgrounds? What determines their willingness to use services?
- What is the range of ethno-specific services and how do their costs compare to generic services?
- Are services equally available across the geography of Toronto? Are they accessible in terms of linguistic, social, cultural and physical factors?
- Are there socially determinative or predictive indicators of what services will be accessed and in what sequence? Are there services that appear to be more or less user-friendly to particular groups?
- Are there indications of change in public attitudes to woman abuse? Are there changes in service system response?
- Are programs in place to mitigate the effects of woman abuse on children?

### Technological:

- Are there protocols, policies and practice guidelines?
- Are protocols, policies, and practice guidelines followed? Has their use had an impact on response time/follow up/protective factors/treatment/support?
- Are technical and/or legal jurisdictional factors positively or negatively affecting services and responses?

- Are technological interventions (e.g., security alerts, electronic bracelets, and video monitoring) available? Are they being implemented?

#### Economic:

- Are there funding issues? What are they?
- Are there access issues for economically disadvantaged women? Does the service system look the same regardless of economic status?
- Are there reliable estimates of the social and economic costs of woman abuse (e.g., reduced productivity and work interruptions)?
- What service gaps or service coordination issues derive from a shortage of resources?
- Is access to funding equitable across spheres of service and by neighbourhood?

#### Environmental:

- Are there geographic disparities in services and/or responses?
- Are there territorial or jurisdictional disputes that hamper coordination and access?
- Are there neighborhoods that need (sensitively) more support regarding prevention of and response to abuse?

#### Political:

- Are government responses (federal, provincial and municipal) improving the response to woman abuse?
- Are coordination/oversight systems appraised? Who appraises them?

The data from the environmental scan were analyzed using the STEEP framework. The STEEP categories are not mutually exclusive. Although STEEP adds an objective structure to the analysis, it does not preclude the researcher's judgments about which material fits where. For example, data showing under-servicing in a particular region can be analyzed within the environmental category, the political category if under-servicing is related to political factors, or the socio-cultural category if particular cultural communities reside in the geographic area.

#### **Socio-Cultural**

This sphere considers the social and cultural dimensions of woman abuse, including service barriers, obstacles, and achievements. It also inquires about the dominant social context in which woman abuse and responses to it occur.

Toronto is a challenging service milieu as it is a major immigrant reception centre and has one of the most culturally diverse populations of any city in the world. In this context, a major issue is the significant number of new immigrants and/or women from non-

western cultures who require - and have difficulty obtaining- culturally appropriate services. There are shortages of cultural interpreters, shelters that can accommodate women's diverse linguistic and dietary needs, and counseling services in languages other than English.

A number of agencies have attempted to respond to these needs, offering group supports in a variety of languages and partnering with ethno-specific agencies to enable them to more effectively support abused women. In spite of these efforts, service shortfalls continue and many agencies report that women from some cultural communities are very unlikely to use generic or mainstream, western-based services. Some groups of Muslim women were identified among those particularly reluctant to use western services, as well as some Asian populations. Thus, many women seek out ethno-specific service agencies (some are funded and/or train staff to respond to woman abuse, but some are not). The 2005 Domestic Violence Death Committee Review recognized this as an issue and recommended that agencies that assist immigrant women and their children have access to ongoing training on education, awareness and interventions related to woman abuse (Office of the Chief Coroner, Ontario, 2005).

Some geographic communities appear to be under-served, particularly northwest Toronto (covering a large area north and west from Jane/Finch) and Scarborough. These two areas tend to be important immigrant reception communities and hence these shortages exacerbate the issues raised above, for immigrant women.

More generally, counseling services are inadequate with long waiting lists and there is a lack of language-specific services in spite of widespread acknowledgement of their importance in supporting abused women. Some informants believe that funding for counseling reflects short term, crisis-focused, less-expensive solutions and that the more expensive services which go beyond crisis supports are those that are most likely to be in short supply.

There are few programs and services to treat male perpetrators. While the PAR program may have some psycho-educational impacts on men participating, it is not intended as a treatment program. This leaves little by way of funded interventions for male perpetrators. Informants acknowledged that abusers who are incarcerated are unlikely to receive treatment (although one innovative program has been piloted at a Toronto correctional facility), which means that the only system response to male abusers is a punitive one. Many men who abuse are not incarcerated, thus punishment is not routinely applied, even if it were to be effective at changing an abuser's behaviour. Some informants suggested that funding programs for men may be seen to be politically problematic because the focus should be on the woman. While this is true, efficacious programs for men would reduce repeated violence.

Children too, need effective support after witnessing violence. "Here to Help" programs are not systematically available or sufficiently varied or intense; they are not intended as treatment programs. One informant speculated that treating children would be a social admission of the magnitude and pervasiveness of woman abuse, which our society is

unwilling to face.

All informants saw ensuring a woman's immediate safety as the first step in an abuse response. Secondly or concurrently, once a woman is clear about being unsafe and wants to leave, she often turns first to shelters. The centralized shelter system does not always serve abused women well. There is a shortage of beds and some women feel uncomfortable in particular shelters because of strict rules or because of cultural and linguistic barriers. These issues cause both agencies and service users to bypass shelter intake. As well, some women are hesitant to call shelter intake because of the agency's mandated reporting to CAS if they suspect child abuse or neglect.

Some informants suggested strongly that there is a major difference in the kind and intensity of the support provided by feminist, woman-abuse-specific services and mainstream agencies. Mainstream agencies are often large multi-faceted service organizations that over the last 10-15 years have begun to deliver woman-abuse specific programs funded on a contract basis by government. They differ from the "traditional" woman abuse services that tend to be feminist in orientation and often 'grass roots' in organizational style. Informants suggested that "traditional" feminist services were more likely to vary to meet the needs of individual women, and were more holistic and less bureaucratic, often going the extra distance to ensure that a woman had the support she required.

Service coordination was seen to be improved, although there are major gaps between services to women, the courts and the police. Coordination within the criminal justice system was seen to be a major issue. Informants told stories of women being scheduled into domestic violence court and family court at the same time, and sentences imposed in one court being unavailable to a subsequent proceeding in the other court.

Informants described an important social shift in how woman abuse is perceived and hence treated. The strong feminist analysis that underpinned services in the 1970's and 80's has changed. Services tend to be less ideologically based which means that an analysis of men's power in intimate relationships and society as a whole is less visible. Some informants fear that with this shift has come a view that woman abuse is less of an issue, that men are also abused so the circumstances are more equal, and that there are services in place and the issue has been addressed. Dual charging by police is offered as an illustration of the shift that has occurred. While it has always been possible for the abused partner to be charged if she responded to abuse with violence, it had been very uncommon. While specific data were not accessible, informants advise that the incidence of dual charging has dramatically increased. These changes are consistent with a more conservative social milieu. This issue is further discussed under the political component of the STEEP analysis.

### **Technological**

This sphere includes protocols, practice guidelines and other technical elements that are part of a 'routinization' of the service system, wherein a problem becomes both socially

accepted and acknowledged and organized, and bureaucratic responses to it are formulated. Routinization can also mean that an issue has become bureaucratized and accepted as an enduring social issue rather than a problem to be rallied against. Technological interventions that may be used to improve women's safety are also considered in this sphere.

There were surprisingly few protocols that were actively followed. WACT has developed best practice guidelines for effective responses within each sector and between sectors (WACT, 2002). While key informants were largely aware of the protocols, most acknowledged that they were not closely adhered to. Some informants indicated that with the entry of mainstream services there has been less interest in developing service agreements or practice guidelines for the system, as some large agencies already have existing practice guidelines which are non-specific to woman abuse and hence these organizations have less interest in common protocols that focus on woman abuse.

Informants in the health sector referred to protocols and documents that clearly articulate a role for the health care system (e.g., WACT position Statement and RNAO guidelines). The Registered Nurses Association of Ontario (RNAO, 2005) has developed Best Practice Guidelines, outlining practices for screening, identification and the initial response for woman abuse within nursing practice. The best practice guidelines recommend routine, universal screening for all females over the age of 12. As well, they suggest mandatory education programs for nurses on woman abuse, work place policies and procedures on woman abuse and that health care organizations work with the community at a systems level to improve collaboration and integration of services between sectors in responding to abuse. The RNAO nursing best practice guidelines identify that, with respect to woman abuse, screening means embedding questions about woman abuse in a health history or incorporating validated screening instruments into the history/assessment process (p.15). Local documents from the Woman Abuse Council of Toronto (1998, 2005) also recommend consistent responses from the health sector that include screening and identification, training and education for health care professionals and coordination with other sectors. However, many informants said that for the most part, these guidelines are not followed by health care organizations and there is very little universality or consistency in the health sectors approach to a response to woman abuse.

A number of informants commented on the bureaucracy of the criminal justice system, the lack of coordination between the courts, and the lack of protection afforded to victims. With respect to this latter point, one informant offered the example of an abused woman being threatened by her abusive partner while they both sat in a court hallway waiting for trial. There were no systems in place to prevent this type of incident from occurring. Key informants also suggested that court systems could readily be established to ensure that appropriate information was shared across jurisdictions.

Some informants alluded to gaps in the family law system, which unfortunately was not represented among the scan's key informants. Women do not always turn to the criminal justice system, but they do find themselves in court, dealing with separation, divorce and child custody after leaving an abusive partner. The 2005 report of the Domestic Violence

Death Review Committee identified that, while the criminal justice system had recognized domestic violence for some time, the situation differs within the practice of family law, where there is no systematic focus or attention given to woman abuse. The Committee recommended that domestic violence be a regular part of the family law curriculum, the bar admission course, and continuing education programs for family law lawyers (Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario, 2005).

A number of informants report that some technical aids such as the internet and email have improved service accessibility. As part of the scan, the websites of many woman abuse services were reviewed. The information available is detailed and extensive. Most sites advise a woman how to disguise that she has visited their site as an extra safety precaution. While email was reported as an aid to coordinating with other agencies it was also seen to be part of a growing level of de-personalization within the system. Some respondents reflected that these personal connections had supported service and coordination agreements.

Finally, the absence of technical devices such as video monitoring, alarm bracelets and other security systems that could be employed to keep women safe was highlighted. Instead of a receiving a passive restraining order, male perpetrators could be required to wear an alarm band that advises a probation officer or police officer if the restraining order is breached. There were many such devices reported to be more actively used in US jurisdictions. Informants advised that these devices are effective but not widely employed in the woman abuse sphere, possibly related to a lack of resources or other complex socio-political factors. Some respondents speculated that the lack of use of technology to control male perpetrators was symptomatic of how abused women are seen and that we do not have a system vigorously investigating and employing diverse strategies to keep women safe. An increased political and social emphasis on the problem of woman abuse was seen to be a necessary precursor to a more fulsome interest in exploring technological innovation.

### **Economic**

The analysis of the economic environment includes the micro environment of funding, the 'richness' of the service environment, as well as a consideration of the broader economic context in which the service environment exists. The economic well being of service consumers is also considered.

Informants across all sectors reported that the demand for service exceeds supply. These problems were more acute in certain service areas – services for men and children, long term counseling for women, affordable housing, and services to minority communities. Both the levels of service funding and funding consistency were reported to be inadequate.

Particularly problematic was the lack of funding for abused women to develop economic self-sufficiency. One respondent noted that an effective pilot project, in which a very high percentage of program participants obtained and kept jobs and did not return to

abusive partners, did not receive ongoing funding. The respondent identified that there were no other similar programs specific to abused women.<sup>1</sup> Even more generally, there has been a dramatic reduction in employment training programs that equip women to obtain sustainable employment. The welfare model of “shortest route to work” tends to provide the most minimal training necessary to secure minimum wage, non-standard work.

Almost all informants from all sectors pointed to women’s poverty as a factor in determining which women could escape abuse. Poor women, respondents said repeatedly, have fewer service options and manage the court system less well because, in part, they rely on over-worked legal aid lawyers. Even when a woman with a low level of employment skill manages to cobble together the supports that enable her to leave, she is often forced to return to an abusive partner, as she will be unlikely to have sufficient earnings to support her children. Many informants across sectors described these scenarios repeatedly.

In acknowledging the determinative power of economics, even in cases of woman abuse, respondents continually reported that higher incomes tend to be accompanied by higher levels of education – so women have available information and social networks that provide many of the supports that poor women need to obtain from the service system. Thus, the experiences of middle and upper income earning women tend to be very different than those of poor women experiencing abuse. Middle class women can often stay with friends or in a hotel, likely have existing social supports, can hire a lawyer, find new housing etc. This is not to minimize the struggles that these women face, perhaps having to re-establish their economic independence after being controlled by an abusive partner, acknowledge their abuse to family and friends, face court and custody challenges and so on, but their experience in the system differs markedly from that of poor women.

Women without financial supports often turn to social assistance to support themselves and their family. An Ontario study exploring the impact of the welfare system on women who were experiencing or had experienced abuse in an adult relationship, found a lack of support for abused women from Ontario’s Welfare system (Mosher et al., 2004). The 64 women who were interviewed reported their experiences to be profoundly negative. The level of funding provided through social assistance was insufficient to survive. Women also encountered a system that was not clear about entitlement and rules. The women also talked about demeaning treatment from workers. The report clearly articulated that the inadequacy of the welfare system played a pivotal role in a woman’s decision about whether to leave an abusive relationship. Nine of the women they interviewed had not left the abusive relationship because they knew how much money they would receive on welfare and that they would not be able to support themselves and their children. Seven women reported returning to an abusive relationship, claiming that one of the reasons, or the main reason, was the struggle to survive on social assistance. Six other women were contemplating going back to an abusive relationship for the same reasons. In addition, almost 50% (17 out of 35) of the welfare area administrators surveyed knew of cases

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<sup>1</sup> When reviewing her agency’s section of the template in Appendix D, the informant noted that a similar program had now been funded. However, the lack of ongoing and consistent funding for these types of programs remains an issue.

where a woman had left welfare and returned to an abusive relationship because she could not adequately support her family.

Economic deficiencies in the system were also seen to be related to the public profile of woman abuse as a social issue. As it receives less public attention, there is less innovation, less funding and shorter funding cycles. Overall, as workers in all sectors are stretched because of a tightened service-funding environment they too have fewer extra resources to support abused women.

### **Environmental**

The environment sphere can be considered both broadly, as in the sphere of woman abuse services, and more narrowly as geography. Both aspects are analyzed here.

In terms of the overall woman abuse service system environment, it might be characterized as having some excellent, highly responsive services. These tend to be services that have a specific woman abuse focus, or a focus on a particular ethno-cultural community. While there are other good quality services, these were the types of services that informants across sectors commented on as exemplary models.

These high quality services exist within a system that is under-funded, with long waiting lists for counseling and an increasingly mainstream or generic approach to service delivery. At the same time the women needing services - are more likely to be very poor, racialized, new immigrants and non-English speaking and require more specialized services.

A major initiative, which will address issues of coordination as well as under-service in Scarborough, is a plan for co-location. A number of woman abuse serving agencies are working on access issues in Scarborough and looking at the possibility of locating together so that a woman may receive a range of supports under one roof. This holds promise as a new direction for services and is a model found in a number of US jurisdictions.

In terms of geography, as has been previously mentioned, Toronto suburbs, especially Scarborough and northwest Toronto (the area ranging north and west from Jane/Finch) appear to be underserved. This is true for all types of services from shelters to agencies that provide counseling. Some agencies have made significant attempts to address service needs in these communities by establishing satellite offices or locating staff that serve abused women on a periodic basis in existing local services.

These two communities tend to receive the new immigrants who have been previously identified as groups facing additional risk and challenges related to woman abuse. Key informants advised that war trauma, status as an illegal immigrant and the overwhelming cultural, financial and social issues faced by new immigrant families contribute to abuse and the ability to seek help or leave an abusive relationship. Women in these situations, especially those who have fled military dictatorships but, even more generally, many

recent immigrants, have a reluctance to engage with the authorities. Thus, abused women in these communities may be especially reluctant to call the police.

Several informants mentioned services acting territorially as an impediment to effective coordination. Services which had carved out particular turf – either geographic or by type of service were sometimes reluctant, or even oblivious of the need, to work with others. New service delivery agencies were reported to not always be appropriately sensitive to services that had long histories and traditions in serving abused women.

The health and criminal justice sectors were seen to be the most inconsistent in the woman abuse service system. Informants noted that police need- not new rules- but significant training in understanding woman abuse, rather than seeing woman abuse more generally as assault. There was some consensus among informants that police response was inconsistent and depended on the attending officers – rather than there being a protocols and best practice guidelines for responding to woman abuse. Some police divisions were singled out by key informants as having either good or problematic responses.

A recent report released by the WACT (2006) outlines the results of a Court Watch project that monitored woman abuse cases in four of the specialized domestic violence courts in Toronto. They found that in almost every area they tracked, the criminal justice response in 2006 was less vigorous than three years ago and concluded that the domestic violence courts in Toronto are less rigorous and less consistent in providing an effective and accountable response to woman abuse.

Another issue is the location of the Domestic Violence (DV) Courts and their geographic separation from Family Court as these courts are most often both in play in the lives of women leaving an abusive partner. Women often have to be in both places on the same day and access by public transportation can be difficult. Furthermore there are no systems of coordination between these two courts. Informants told many stories of problems relating to this issue, including that of a Family Court enabling a father's access to his children hours before a DV Court convicted the man of assaulting his wife and children. As well, certain DV Courts have reputations as being better serviced and more accommodating of women's needs. This issue spans a number of STEEP categories as the coordination or lack thereof in the courts is also raised in the Technological and Political discussions.

With respect to the health sector, emergency rooms and family doctors do not routinely screen for abuse. Community Health Centres (CHCs) appear to be a very important resource in this sector and protocols for screening and coordination are currently being developed among CHCs. CHCs were noted by many informants as being especially effective because they can offer many of the different types of services abused women may need and they tend to be well connected to other types of services within the system. However, CHCs are limited in who they can service. Some are not taking on new clients because they are full.

There are ongoing, recent, and some new initiatives to train health care professionals, but many health care workers remain reluctant to incorporate a proactive response to woman abuse in their practice. Doctors have been identified as a leading group that could dramatically improve the identification and access to services for abused women, if woman abuse screening was to be routinely undertaken. Public health nurses were also identified as being in key roles to identify and respond to abuse and again this was felt to be done inconsistently rather than as a routine part of every client contact. Service demands and professional practice freedom were seen to be the basis for some health care professionals not embracing a protocol of routine screening.

The Toronto housing environment was identified by many informants as highly problematic for abused women. The lack of housing in Toronto compounds the shortage of shelter beds as women must remain in a shelter while they look for or await affordable longer-term housing. Housing is unaffordable for a single mother with children, either on social assistance or in a low-wage job. There is a shortage of social housing and although abused women are supposed to be prioritized, demands for documentation often cause women to lose their priority status as they are required to produce documents such as leases or medical evidence of abuse that are either difficult to obtain, unavailable, or seen to be too intrusive. For these reasons, many women who experience abuse give up on applying for social housing

A recent research report by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (2006) identifies that private landlords generally prefer to not have women who have left abusive male partners as tenants for fear of “trouble” and that they also tend to discriminate against lone mothers with children. The lack of affordable housing is a primary reason why women either do not leave or return to abusive partners (Mosher, 2004).

Those shelters that have reputations in the community for being particularly responsive to the needs of abused women tend to fill quickly and stay full, in part, because of their more flexible rules about lengths of stay. Women looking for a shelter bed will often contact these shelters directly. Thus, the effectiveness of the service coordination system is diminished as women make arrangements directly with a shelter and even service organizations noted that they have established relationships to enable direct referral to specific shelters. Overall, for abused women the central intake system of shelter services coordination appeared to be more detrimental than advantageous.

A notable omission in sectors taking up the issue of woman abuse is the educational sphere. Many informants talked about the role schools could play in both educating students about abuse but also in supporting children who witness abuse. Children will often disclose to a teacher or a teacher will notice something amiss and inquire about abuse. Key informants reported that there were no protocols in place and a very short supply of counselors and mental health professionals within the system to provide support. It must be noted that the key informants did not include informants from the educational sector, thus these issues have not been confirmed. Informants indicated that, if school officials have evidence of woman abuse, they have a responsibility and duty to call a child welfare agency. This sometimes, as in the case of such calls from Shelter

Central Intake, can inadvertently put the child at further risk as he or she may be punished or removed from school for ‘telling’. Overall the educational sector was seen as a key sphere that needs to be included as an active part of the woman abuse service system.

### **Political**

The political area of analysis considers the broad political climate, the politics of intergovernmental relations and jurisdictional responsibility, the broad public ‘politics’ of certain actions or commitments made by governments, as well as the politics of interagency relations and the political importance and risks associated with the issue itself.

A limitation of the scan became apparent through the STEEP framing. Information was not gathered from relevant potential informants in the political realm. This limitation must be acknowledged, especially in light of the numerous comments made by informants on funding and overall policy directions with respect to the system. Informants in the Ministry of the Attorney General, Ministry of Community and Social Services, Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, and the Ontario Women’s Directorate may have offered useful perspectives on such matters as funding priorities, mandated services and the ongoing assessment of initiatives such as the PAR program and the Domestic Violence Courts.

Although there is no information directly from funders and those developing policy at all levels of government, key informants commented on the political realm. Key informants identified under-funding of services for women as well as men. Most often funding was described as being inconsistent, with a short-term view of appropriate responses. The programmatic response from funders with regard to male perpetrators was described as punitive rather than treatment oriented, which may not be in an abused women’s best interests, given the number of women who return to abusive partners for economic and other reasons. This was but one example of what were seen to be shortsighted and incrementalist approaches to the funding and delivery of woman abuse services.

In the shelter system, narrower funding criteria have reduced support for some types of services oriented to raising women’s consciousness about equality issues. An effort to standardize shelters, without a gendered analysis of woman abuse has also resulted in inclusion/exclusion criteria and a more institutional approach with strict rules that can make a shelter an “unfriendly” place for a woman who has left an abusive relationship in which she was highly controlled. These changes were seen to be political- derived from a more conservative political climate that seeks to fund minimal rather than enhanced services. In this same climate, attention to women’s issues and equality issues is seen as diminished, which further affects the funding climate.

Programs for economic development for low-income women, which are seen as essential to women’s ability to sustain themselves and their children independently, are almost non-existent. Some informants identified this gap as related to the broader social politics of how woman abuse is viewed. Their perspective was that woman abuse has become one

more issue warranting a social service response rather than a matter of equality rights or public policy. Given this purported shift in view, what follows are social service responses rather than more political 'feminist' interventions aimed at changing women's power, both within the private and public realm. Women are more likely to be 'treated' rather than empowered.

The previously described perspectives support a major issue identified by a number of key informants. Public education programs, as evidence of a belief that woman abuse is a broad societal issue, have fallen off. Many key informants believe that there were more visible and effective campaigns a couple of decades ago and that the issue has become less socially important and, correspondingly, less visible. Many informants suggested that the focus should go beyond available services for women, and also be on increasing the visibility of the issue and reaching out to women, so that those who are abused recognize the signs and seek help. Woman abuse continues to be seen as a private issue by many and women often do not even recognize the signs of abuse and what services exist. A number of informants discussed clients who accepted being hit by their male partner, being denied access to friends, family and the outside world, and having their every move monitored as 'normal'. Especially for recent immigrants, knowing that Canadian society offers certain protections from such abuse is a critical public education message.

Ongoing reports of the Domestic Violence Death Review Committee have pointed to "a need to generally heighten awareness and provide education about abuse" (Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario, 2005, p.3). The report stated that in all cases reviewed in 2005, family members, friends and others had knowledge of the situation between the perpetrator and victim, but did not "appreciate the significance of the situation". (p.3)

Many informants described the changes referred to above as a "backlash" against feminist approaches and philosophies that have guided the development and operation of many woman abuse services. This view is supported in the literature on woman abuse. Randall (2003) describes this backlash as coming "from right wing anti-inequality organizations and from so-called "father's rights" groups – which attempt to minimize and deny that there is any problem at all." (p.2) She states that the backlash has also resulted in public institutions engaging in a "degendering" of woman abuse, resulting in attempts at an "inclusive" framework that can obscure the true nature of the problem and "miss opportunities to address it directly". This is seen to be happening in the woman abuse service system.

Some informants suggested that the political realm, which has changed police charging practices (not always for the better), funded services, and established a separate court system, views the job as done. Other informants, particularly those who view themselves as advocates for abused women, suggest changes in the political climate go further - that there is no concerted effort at making woman abuse unacceptable. A broad social consensus about the problematic nature of woman abuse could be developed, similar to what has occurred with the issue of drunk driving. If this were to occur, the prevalence rate of woman abuse could be significantly reduced and those who are abused would feel safer in coming forward. This change would require a focused and long standing

commitment to re-insert the issue into the public discourse.

## **Section 8 Key Issues and Recommendations**

The issue of woman abuse is complex and requires a response from many sectors, including the political and criminal justice systems, community and social services, housing, education and health. This scan has outlined some of the key gaps and issues with the inter-sectoral response to woman abuse in Toronto. A key issue identified suggests that, despite the increased attention to the issue of woman abuse in Toronto, many women experiencing abuse do not seek help nor come to the attention of service providers. Specific factors identified in this scan as contributing to this issue include:

- limited/inconsistent public awareness raising/outreach activities;
- lack of a consistent approach to identifying woman abuse;
- women not being aware that they are experiencing abuse;
- lack of awareness of existing services;
- limited services in some geographic areas;
- lack of culturally sensitive services and outreach initiatives; and
- societal and structural barriers including poverty and a lack of viable economic and housing options.

A first step in breaking the cycle of violence is awareness. Women will not seek help if they are not aware that they do not have to live with abuse and that there are services that could help them. Organizations across sectors are involved in some awareness raising/outreach activities, but most agree that more needs to be done to reach women. Some initiatives, such as a computer game to educate children, have been developed but there needs to be greater involvement by schools to reach both boys and girls at a younger age, before patterns of male abusing are formed. The scan also pointed to a need for more programs to educate men or to intervene with men who have been abusive.

Overall, there is a lack of a consistent approach to identifying woman abuse. While WACT (1998; 2005) recommends a consistent response from the health sector that includes screening and identification and RNAO (2005) has set out guidelines for screening and identification, efforts to implement universal screening within the health sector are stalled. In other sectors, women may come in seeking help for other issues and abuse is sometimes disclosed. However, key informants did not comment on the development of a consistent approach to identification across sectors.

It is clear that, women who are new Canadians and/or from specific ethno-racial groups and/or those who lack immigrant status have increased barriers to accessing help. Abuse in these communities remains hidden due to factors such as not wishing to “break the silence” and a reluctance to involve police and other service providers.

The results of the scan point clearly to numerous larger societal and structural barriers that prevent women from seeking help and putting an end to the abuse that they are

experiencing. Poverty, a lack of housing and a lack of economic options for women are key to women having the necessary power to make independent choices. Leaving an abusive relationship often puts a woman in a position of having to choose between living with abuse or a life of poverty. Many women choose to stay in abusive situations because they see no other option. Advocacy and public education must be core components of any systematic response to woman abuse. Organizations need to be able to advocate for policy changes that will benefit women. In spite of this need, there are many limitations on advocacy across sectors. Funding, mandates and roles either limit advocacy or preclude the advocacy activity of organizations.

For those women who are identified and/or choose to leave or to get help in dealing with an abusive relationship, the system often poses challenges. The scan identifies strengths as well as gaps in services, and service coordination issues across sectors in Toronto.

### **Services**

There are a wide range of services available in Toronto, including a 24 hour crises phone line, a woman abuse focussed police response, including heightened protection for women at high risk, hospital-based crisis programs, counselling, support groups, and numerous other community initiatives. There has also been growth in some programs and services over the last few years, such as the funding of the Transitional Housing Support Program for women leaving abusive relationships, which is offered through numerous agencies throughout Toronto.

Many agencies in Toronto have a strong commitment to respond to and eliminate woman abuse. The response to women who come to the attention of service providers, however, varies both within and across sectors. The response also varies related to characteristics of the woman herself, such as her income level, immigration status, language and place of residence.

Grass-roots, feminist organizations have a long history of responding to abuse. As increased numbers of mainstream agencies with multi-service mandates have become involved in responding to woman abuse, bureaucratization of services has increased and flexibility of response has diminished. Funders are also setting stringent criteria regarding service provision and how outcomes are measured, resulting in challenges for small grass-roots agencies that compete for resources with larger multi-service agencies. The feminist orientation, which has been at the core of the response to woman abuse, is at risk.

The lack of ongoing sustainable funding limits a consistent and sustained service response and makes it difficult to ensure ongoing programming. Many organizations obtain project funding to provide programs and services such as counselling or training and, even though some initiatives are found to be helpful, agencies cannot continue the program or service once the funding stops.

Key informants discussed a number of additional issues and gaps that need to be addressed to improve services for abused women in Toronto. These include:

- a shortage of prevention, outreach and educational initiatives for all women, as well as specific subpopulations of women (i.e., new immigrants, specific ethno-cultural groups, low income women);
- a shortage of services for diverse ethno-cultural and immigrant communities coupled with racism and a lack of culturally-sensitive programming in many sectors;
- a shortage of one-to-one counselling, especially long-term and/or for non-English speaking women;
- limits on funding for ethno-cultural and immigrant services agencies who see many women who have been abused; the funding of settlement agencies limits their work to an initial response and provision of information even though these agencies are uniquely positioned to be accessible to new immigrant women;
- insufficient shelter beds, particularly for women with larger families or children with special needs;
- a lack of affordable long term housing;
- the private rental housing market discriminating against women leaving abusive relationships;
- a lack of economic supports and job training for women leaving abusive relationships;
- limited educational programs geared to men;
- limited programs and services to intervene with abusive men;
- limited programs and services for children who are exposed to woman abuse; and
- limited training for staff who respond to woman abuse, resulting in inconsistent responses and staff turnover.

### **Service Coordination**

The commitment to and momentum for service coordination across sectors has increased as a result of the Coroner's Inquests and the Joint Committee on Domestic Violence. There have been some improvements in service coordination. The WACT has created best practices for a coordinated approach to woman abuse. The Court Advisory Committees and several committees of the WACT provide a forum for information sharing and coordination. Task forces and issue-focused committees bring people from various organizations together to work towards a common goal. The High Risk Committee that is developing a comprehensive strategy for identifying and responding to potentially lethal situations of abuse and the Scarborough Access project which is identifying ways to make services more accessible to women and their children are both working towards enhanced service coordination.

In spite of all of these efforts, programs are not coordinated, consistent in their response,

or working consistently toward a common goal. Women are often alone in navigating a myriad of services. Several issues make coordination of woman abuse services in Toronto a challenge. The complexity of the issue and the complexity of Toronto's population require the involvement of multitude sectors and organizations. Limited funding results in inadequate time for attending meetings, working across and within sectors for joint priority setting and ensuring a unified and consistent response. The commitment across organizations to a coordinated response is often dependent on whether or not there is an official mandate to respond.

Specific gaps/issues that need to be addressed in order to improve service coordination include:

- territoriality regarding issues and services across sectors;
- varied attendance at committee meetings such as the Court Advisory Committee, making it difficult to follow up on coordination issues;
- the need for more service coordination protocols and guiding documents, including endorsement within/across sectors. Specific examples include:
  - referral by police to hospital-based DV programs
  - referral to shelters
  - coordination between child protection services and other sectors, including the shelter system; and
- the need for better integration and coordination within the court system, including supports for women, coordination between Family and Domestic Violence (DV) courts, and more consistent prosecution of abusers.

### **Service System Response**

Despite improvements in inter-sectoral work, the service system response to woman abuse in Toronto still falls short of consistently identifying women who are experiencing abuse and helping women who choose to leave abusive situations. Understanding of the issue of woman abuse and essential responses both across and within sectors varies, resulting in no true commitment to a common goal. The service system response has improved such that some women receive the help they need when leaving an abusive relationship. Generally women who speak English, who know they are experiencing abuse and know about available services have an easier time accessing the help they need.

The need for woman abuse services is growing and new subpopulations of women are experiencing abuse and so require new services and outreach strategies. The social services sector in particular is seeing increasingly vulnerable women (multiple victimizations) and women who are racialized, especially those who are immigrant and/or without status who have more limited options. The criminal justice sector reported seeing an increase in abuse among young women, including women in teen dating relationships.

Several key themes related to the service system response emerged from this scan. They include the following:

- lack of accountability for a systemic response which results in an inconsistent response across sectors;
- no universal mandate for protocols that outline a response to woman abuse across sectors and within organizations;
- a trend towards the “de-gendering of abuse” to a more gender neutral framework, resulting in limitations in how shelters and other organizations can work with women;
- a lack of inclusive approaches and models to work with women from disabled, lesbian, racialized, new immigrant communities and women without status; lack of cultural sensitivity and inability to meet the needs of women specific ethno-cultural communities;
- gaps in the response in the judicial, health, and social services sectors as well as the need to involve the educational sector; and
- dual charging of women by the police and mandatory reporting to child welfare, which deter women from seeking help from the police, shelters and other services.

Most importantly, the scan demonstrates that the service system needs to go beyond the traditional notion of services and address the political and structural root causes of abuse and the inequalities that contribute to abuse. Poverty, a lack of housing and child care, shame, and a sense of powerlessness all deter women from leaving abusive relationships or seeking help. There is no substantive policy focus, especially related to broader issues such as economic security and housing policies that make it very difficult for women to leave abusive relationships. Political discourse on these issues and policy changes that work towards women’s equality need to be a core component of the response to woman abuse.

## **Recommendations**

It is recommended that:

1. TPH use the findings of this scan to inform the development of best practice guidelines for Healthy Families Public Health Nurses and a TPH Organizational Policy on Woman Abuse.
2. TPH discuss the implications of this scan for its policy, program, prevention, and advocacy initiatives and explore the possibility of enhanced roles for TPH in: outreach to women who may be experiencing abuse; advocacy and education related to the determinants of health and their relationship to abuse; detection and response to abuse; and working with the health sector to enhance its capacity to identify and respond to woman abuse.
3. TPH share the findings of this scan with key informants and other stakeholders involved in responding to woman abuse and encourage key informants and other

stakeholders to discuss the findings and implications of this scan for policy, program, and advocacy initiatives within their own organizations/networks.

4. TPH share the findings of the scan with key municipal and provincial stakeholders.