

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

Final Report

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Executive Summary

The primary purpose of this project was to carry out an environmental scan of existing services and service coordination systems designed to serve the needs of women abused by intimate partners in Toronto. An environmental scan is a critical component of any effort to formulate plans, policies, or strategy; in short, to plan a future course of action. This scan will enable Toronto Public Health (TPH) to increase its understanding of the response system for women who experience intimate partner abuse and use this knowledge to further policy and practice initiatives related to woman abuse.

Data for the scan were collected from 47 key informants who participated in telephone interviews, in-person interviews or focus groups between October 2006 and January 2007. Key informants were identified through a collaborative approach with TPH. An initial list was augmented by a snowball sampling technique that generated additional key informants who were then subsequently contacted and interviewed. Key informants came from a range of organizations in the social services, criminal justice and health sectors as well as organizations that worked across sectors. The key informant data were supplemented by a review of relevant documents/policies/protocols related to woman abuse in Toronto.

The scan identified that there has been an increase in attention to the issue of woman abuse in Toronto. However, the findings suggest that, similar to other jurisdictions, many women experiencing abuse do not seek help or come to the attention of service providers. Specific factors identified in this scan as contributing to this 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 to women's ability to leave abusive situations, including poverty and a lack of viable economic and housing options.

For those women who are identified and/or choose to leave or to get help in dealing with an abusive relationship, the service system is not always responsive. The scan identifies strengths as well as gaps in services, service coordination, and the service system response across sectors in Toronto.

Services

There is a wide range of services available in Toronto, including a 24 hour crisis phone line, a targeted 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 Transitional Housing Support Program for women leaving abusive relationships that is offered through numerous agencies in Toronto.

Many agencies in Toronto espouse a commitment to respond to and eliminate woman abuse. Some agencies have well-established programs with a long history of responding to woman abuse. Other agencies have new programs. 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 who compete for resources with larger multi-service agencies. The feminist orientation that has been at the core of the response to woman abuse is at risk.

The lack of ongoing sustainable funding and mandated services limits the consistency of response and makes it difficult to ensure ongoing programming. Many organizations are granted project money to provide programs and services such as counselling or training and, even though some initiatives are found to be helpful, agencies are no longer able to provide the program or service once the funding stops.

Key informants discussed additional issues and gaps that need to be addressed in order to improve services for woman who are abused 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;
- limitations on funding for ethno-cultural and immigrant services agencies who see women who have been abused (their funding as settlement agencies limits their work to an initial response and information provision);
- 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 anti-woman abuse 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 high staff turnover.

Service Coordination

The commitment to and momentum for service coordination across sectors has increased as a result of Coroner's Inquests and the Joint Committee on Domestic Violence. Some improvements in service coordination have been reported. The Woman Abuse Council of Toronto (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 WACT's High Risk Committee, which 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.

However, programs and services are not yet consistent in their response and oriented 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 that a multitude of sectors and organizations need to be involved. Limited funding results in inadequate resources, as well as inadequate time for attending meetings, working across and within sectors for joint priority setting, and ensuring a unified and consistent response. Further, 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 the issue of woman abuse and essential responses both across and within sectors varies, resulting in lack of commitment to a common goal. There is no unified system to prevent, identify and respond to abuse. 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 in need of 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 immigrants and/or without legal status. The criminal justice sector reported an increase in abuse among young women, including 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 from specific ethno-cultural communities;
- gaps in the response from 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 must 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 trap women in 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.