

“A Coordinated Community Response to Violence Against Women and Girls”

Second Story Women’s Centre and Community Partners

Status of Women Canada - Project Brief

May 2012

Background: Over the years, efforts have been made by many people in many organizations that have helped many women, men and children affected by violence. However, the rates of violence, sexual assault and social attitudes, including stigma, shame and secrecy remain virtually unchanged, and some would say, even worse. The impact of social media and technology makes the influence of violent and disrespectful models of gender relations ubiquitous, especially to youth at alarmingly young and impressionable ages, making the urgency of balancing those messages with healthy, respectful, peaceful approaches even more essential.

Second Story Women's Centre's (SSWC) Social Action Committee identified gender based violence as a primary priority in September 2010, launching the Making Change initiative in partnership with Harbour House and the local RCMP. This raised community awareness, offered opportunities for women to tell their stories, and opened public conversations in schools, church groups, service clubs. An open forum in April 2011 (at NSCC) solicited interested individuals/groups to continue grass roots action as a Violence Against Women Action Coalition (VAWAC). It was this group that prompted the proposal to Status of Women Canada (SWC). (The VAWAC will now fold its activities into support of this project.) Funding has been awarded to Second Story Women’s Centre **to engage community partners in developing a coordinated community response to violence against women and girls over the next 3 years.**

Project Description: (As stated by SWC)

This 36-month project will address the range of institutional (and social) barriers and other factors that limit community efforts to address the issue of violence against women and girls, including sexual assault, in rural communities. This project will build lasting collaborations between community stakeholders, (eg., tri-level government, community leaders, women’s and community organizations, service providers, legal institutions, law enforcement agencies, school systems, etc.) to identify and respond to the specific needs of women and girls. The project will target the population in Lunenburg County and neighbouring communities and benefit a broad range of people- girls and boys, women and men.

The Givens: The following Key Activities are required by the funder:

1. Engage and establish working partnerships with:

- Local women and girls
- Women's and other community organizations, community leaders, stakeholders and potential allies

2. Plan project and adapt to local needs:

- Conduct a gender-based analysis with respect to rates of gender-based violence and the specific needs of women and girls
- Work with local women and girls to identify their priorities, viewpoints and potential strategies for addressing gender-based violence
- Identify existing institutional mechanisms and supports as well as gaps (e.g., policies, programs, services, models, strategies, frameworks, planning and decision-making processes, etc.)
- Identify promising practices to address the issue of violence against women and girls in rural and small urban settings.

3. Develop community plan:

- collectively identify gaps, priorities, opportunities, valuable resources and supports and potential strategies

- collaborate to ensure tangible results for women and girls and a coordinated community response to gender-based violence in the context of local need.

4. *Implement community plan:*

- Work with women, planning partners and community members to ensure effective implementation of the plan
- Focus on a priority component of the plan (e.g., coordination of community programs and services to avoid duplication and maximize resources to address gaps, improve access to supports and ensure their effectiveness).

Potential Risks

As identified in the project proposal: The topic of violence against women is complex, emotionally laden and challenging. The impact is huge, both for individuals and families, and also for our service systems, and the social and economic vibrancy of rural communities. Yet it remains fraught with secrecy, shame, stigma and danger for those involved, and privacy concerns and avoidance by a large segment of society. It will require extraordinary sensitivity and creative thinking to bring the issue out into the open, without compromising the safety and choices of individuals involved.

It may also require a belief that change is possible and that our efforts together can bring about the conditions that allow for boy and girls and men and women to be all they can be.

Our social and institutional structures, which persist as male-dominated structures, may relegate violence against women to the realm of 'women's issues' overlooking the role of these structures in perpetuating the very dynamics we are trying to change.

As in any system, there are often silos where people do great work, but rarely truly collaborate and connect with those in other silos. This appears to be shifting among community organizations, as well as government departments. Attention is needed to dismantle the barriers to partnership, sharing of information and collaborative action. Similarly, ownership issues may arise among the people who have been skillfully engaged for decades in providing services to women and men. It may be challenging to establish partnership with others who may lack the experience, expertise and devotion they have honed over many years. The wisdom and contribution of providers must be honoured, even as we engage together in further inquiry about tools, practices and approaches. Inclusion, transparency and common purpose should be the hallmarks we rely on to navigate this territory.

Our Evolving Approach

1. Strong collaborative community partnerships with ongoing attention to:

- Convening interested people/organizations, nurturing relationships and defining roles and commitments
- Recognizing the unique contributions each person/organization is making to the system as a whole
- Resolving conflicts and questions of jurisdiction
- Tracking activities and results
- Maintaining momentum, managing challenges, overcoming obstacles
- Navigating political systems
- Engaging communities in creative opportunities for public discourse
- Creative use of arts, technology and social media to convey messages and engage people of all ages

2. 'First voice' stories and the people who tell them are the core of this effort. It may not be possible or desirable for many, but for those who are ready and choose freely, storytelling may be the most potent, instructive and healing instrument, both for the storytellers and the storycatchers. Great care needs to be taken with this.

3. Boys and men: While this project's focus is women and girls, change in our communities to reduce violence is not possible without engaging boys and men. Their voices are integral in addressing cultural and societal messaging that promulgates limiting and negative stereotypes, and to identify barriers to the healthy evolution of 'gender' relations and peaceful relationships. Transforming blame, shame and division to compassion for all, offers a chance of affecting the kind of change we wish to see.
4. Inclusive- anyone who has a contribution to make, a perspective to offer, a desire to be involved, can be. We will seek to engage people who represent the diversity of our communities, eg., genders, cultural/ethnic backgrounds, ages, races, sexual orientations, physical/intellectual abilities, etc.
5. The lenses that are emerging so far to frame our efforts are:
- Asset-based versus deficit-based community development
 - Population health modeling that invites us to consider the social determinants of this issue of violence or its opposite- peace, peaceful relationships, peaceful schools, peaceful communities
 - An appreciative approach that validates previous efforts by inquiring into what's going right, what is already effective and how might we amplify and collaborate with those efforts