

**A Roundtable on strategies to prevent partner violence
against immigrant and visible minority women**

**held in Waterloo, Ontario
Dec 6th 2003**

The Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD), with assistance from the National Crime Prevention Strategy, hosted a roundtable discussion on the prevention of partner violence against immigrant and visible minority women.

It was held on Dec 6th 2003, the 14th anniversary of the shooting of 14 female engineering students in Montreal. The conference of the Canadian Crime Prevention Network in Waterloo, Ontario, provided the venue for the roundtable. Ekuwa Smith, Senior Researcher with the CCSD, moderated the roundtable, which brought together experts working on the front lines of partner violence across the country (see participants list below).

Dr. Smith provided an overview of her research report, *Nowhere to Turn?*, which was focussed on partner violence against immigrant and visible minority women. Speakers then outlined the problem in the communities they serve, and they presented strategies that work – or don't – to prevent partner violence in those communities. They offered important suggestions, including raising awareness of the problem and encouraging early intervention by doctors, lawyers, social service workers, and immigrant services.

Roundtable participants from the Waterloo conference engaged the presenters in discussions of the importance of police sensitivity to these issues, the importance of gender and ethnic diversity among police and other service providers, and problems of racism and sexism. The roundtable raised key issues and enabled presenters to contribute to the larger Waterloo conference.

Invited Participants:

- **Fatima Jaffer**, a legal advocate from Vancouver Custody and Access Support and Advocacy Association, whose work includes analysis of the impact of laws regarding separation and custody;
- **Carmen Moncayo**, who develops educational materials to help immigrant and visible minority women avoid becoming victims of partner violence through the Halifax-based Metropolitan Immigrant Settlement Association;
- **Judy Malik**, whose work with the Centre Communautaire de Femmes Sud Asiatiques in Montreal involves helping South Asian women adapt to the very different social and political environment of Canada;
- **Lillian Valverdi**, a facilitator with many years experience working with Toronto's Latin American Coalition to end family violence against women and children;
- **Ricardina DeSantos**, who helps French-speaking immigrants adapt to life in Toronto through the Oasis, Centre des Femmes.

- **Sgt. Kai Liu**, a police officer with Ottawa's Partner Assault Unit, one of the few police units in Canada dedicated to partner assault, who presented in concert with **Staff Sergeant Scott Nystedt** of the Diversity and Race Relations Section.

Discussion participants from the Waterloo conference included:

- Carolyn Andrew, University of Ottawa
- John Anderson, Canadian Council on Social Development
- Glenn Thompson, CCJA, Ottawa
- Ada Vandenberg, CCSPC Waterloo Region
- Clare Archibald, Moncton Headstart
- Carol Matusicky, BC Council for Families
- Dina Juras, National Crime Prevention Centre
- Dorothy Franklin, RCMP Headquarters, Ottawa.

Notes from the Roundtable

(Note: This is **not** a transcript.)

Presentations :

Kai Liu

Some years ago, Statistics Canada reported an increase in domestic violence in Canada, with the majority of it occurring in Ontario. To address this problem, Ottawa Police Services decided to create a specialized investigative unit, which investigates every report of partner violence, no matter how minor. All participants in the unit receive specialized training.

In 2001, the CBC news reported that Ottawa was the safest city in Canada.

There is a diversity and race relations component to the unit. The unit makes an effort to recruit as many officers as possible from visible minority groups, especially visible minority women.

Some of the actions of the unit that contributed to good results include: creating a Risk Assessment Form for Ottawa; offering specialized training in diversity and race relations; recruiting staff from visible minority groups; and working with a community/police action committee which includes representatives from diverse cultures.

Fatima Jaffer

It's been difficult to get the RCMP to the table. Legal aid cuts have been significant. Almost 100% of the legal aid that is available goes to criminal cases, which usually goes to men. The support from family and civil legal aid, which usually goes to women, is more limited. Hence it is difficult for women to defend their interests in court.

A three-year participatory action research study among marginalized women showed that the first contact for women in these communities is usually with a doctor, who often fails to detect

the abuse. Many doctors are not trained to recognize the symptoms of abuse, nor do they see it as a health problem.

In family law, the post-separation time has become a site of violence. Four children were recently killed during an access visit. Women are taxed on the child support they receive – whereas men get a tax break from it.

Changes to Bill C-22, the divorce act, will take into account family violence and the best interests of the child, including their cultural, linguistic, and spiritual heritage.

Lillian

Working with the Latin American community, it seems that all systems fail to support women. We need to change the models of intervention. Public education is a key tool for prevention. Funding is not available for education and prevention, so we work with volunteers.

Violence against women has to be understood in its social and economic context. The current economic model of globalization increases racism and violence against women.

Women need training in leadership – they need to participate in the political system. We have had an amazing number of responses from women through public education, using Spanish-speaking media to raise awareness of these issues.

We need multi-sectoral networking to look at both duplication of services and gaps. Workers need more uniform criteria for appropriate and effective training and intervention.

Ekwa

Public education is the key issue. At present, we need to find ways to do this without funding. Women need access to culturally sensitive information. When women arrive in Canada, they should receive a package of information about this.

Carmen

In Nova Scotia, only 1-2% are immigrants. They are invisible to policy-makers. During research last year on immigrant women's use of services for spousal abuse, most services said "If they don't come here, we don't need to serve them."

Nova Scotia has one of the highest rates of discrimination. Immigrant women have a sense of isolation. Our first challenge is to create a sense of belonging. We found out these women don't access social services. They all access doctors, but often doctors don't detect the real problem; they medicate instead.

When the problem is finally detected, it often is not referred to family social services. And if it does get there, it is a challenge to find someone who is culturally sensitive.

People feel that as soon as something is in the hands of the police, it is out of their control. They perceive that the Canadian approach is to break up the family. Women want to stop the abuse but

not separate from their abuser, at least not at first. The women want counselling, but can't get access to it – it's only available when things have deteriorated significantly. "You have to be crazy to get mental health services."

What we need is to empower women and create an inclusive host community. Don't assume that being part of the same culture means we can understand each other. And we need to develop social indicators which measure changes in these issues over time. We need long-term funding to accomplish these tasks.

Judy

The experience of patriarchy and women goes back thousands of years. Many women themselves don't recognize abuse as a problem, nor do they want to talk about it. In Pakistan, things are getting worse – men use rape as a means to get back at their enemies. It is a major task to educate the women. For example, in South Asia, women symbolize the honour of the family – one thing you do not do is say that you have been violated by a man. Furthermore, racism is a big barrier, so women are afraid to contact authorities, fearing that they will be returned to their country of origin.

We have organized a drop-in coffee house and outreach to community organizations. Unfortunately, disclosure groups have not been very successful. But we have trained some volunteers who have learned to be good animators.

One promising initiative is drama. It helps illustrate the problem, and motivates the audience to speak up.

We need two-way public education at every level, so that professionals such as doctors, nurses, social workers and teachers are sensitized, just as much as clients.

Ricardina

It doesn't matter where you come from – social services are not ready. Shelters are a terrible place to be, for all women. Staff are not trained. The base is rotten – nothing is going to grow from there.

Police look down on women, and say things like "you were looking for it." It is not normal that this still happens after 20 years. Shelters need to challenge the police. We need to spend more on training. Everything is cultural – the services, assessment tools, counselling, meeting space, all define cultures. We need to avoid generalizing and lumping all cultures together.

There also needs to be help for men – to deal with stresses that cause some of this violence. Let's face issues of poverty.

Discussion

An animated discussion followed the presentations. It brought out points such as:

- The lack of cultural sensitivity training for police and other service professionals (a half day to look at every culture is definitely not enough!)
- Gender, race and ethnicity of police is important. Police services need to recruit more women and members of different ethnic groups.
- We need diversity in all social service sectors.
- The person is also important. It is important not to generalize about any culture and to always treat people as individuals, with courtesy.
- The institutional culture of the police has to change and adapt to accommodate different cultures.
- The importance of developing relationships between police and shelters was emphasized.
- The importance of police participation in coordination tables on violence against women was highlighted.
- The usefulness of writing a letter of thanks to the police when they have done good work and responded effectively and sensitively was recommended.