

## Theme: Supporting Women Fleeing Domestic Violence

### Theme Description

Women are much more likely than men to be victims of domestic violence and be killed by their partners. Violence against women and girls often begins before adolescence and its impact becomes more pronounced and debilitating in adulthood as women and girls are also disproportionately impacted by other factors such as poverty, homelessness, isolation, disabilities, racism, sexism and other factors. Women who experience violence at the hands of their intimate partners may access specialized services provided by women's shelters and community-based organizations. They must also negotiate multiple government systems, including justice, legal, financial, housing, health and mental health.

### What are the Issues or Barriers?

- "Gender neutral" services often fail to recognize and respond appropriately to women's uniquely barriered experiences of violence and abuse. As such, service providers are far less likely to successfully meet women's needs and create effective safety nets to keep women and their children safe from abuse.
- The interrelationship between trauma exposure, long-term homelessness, mental health difficulties, health problems, and social disadvantage produces an environment which presents multiple potential barriers to women's success in creating violence free lives. Absence of coordinated service models to support access to and navigation of available services to address multiple simultaneous problems women face exacerbates these issues and creates challenges in keeping women safe.
- Women in the overall population have higher rates of depression and anxiety than men – often as a result of a lifetime of exposure to violence and abuse. The trauma suffered by domestic violence victims often culminates in them being mistakenly judged as psychologically unstable, and not believed.
- Intergenerational trauma is a result of experiences of racism, history of colonization and residential schools in Indigenous communities and Indigenous women are particularly affected. They are at higher risk of violence and the violence they experience is more severe than other cultural groups.
- Perception of women as helpless victims is still prevalent in our society, along with misconceptions and underlying attitudes surrounding domestic violence.

### What Works?

- Women and girls with extensive experience of violence are more likely to require specialist and sometimes long-term services. Promising practice models with women fleeing domestic violence focus on woman-centered approaches, empowerment, trauma-informed care, integrated health and mental wellness services, safety, system advocacy, accountability and compassion. Government must make sure such services are adequately funded and properly delivered.
- A change in orientation is needed for service provision to Indigenous women: the short-term crisis intervention model that dominates Western therapeutic approaches should be replaced with a long-term holistic approach.
- Greater priority must be given to making available gender specific services and ensuring that public services which women come into contact with are gender informed and responsive.

- Collaborative safety planning is essential to supporting women to realistically identify their level of risk and in putting in place life saving strategies. Safety plans should be personalized, used in a culturally appropriate way, and based on an ongoing assessment of the risks women face (e.g., using the Danger Assessment tool).
- 'Routine enquiry' (asking women whether they have experienced violence and abuse) should become standard practice across a whole range of government and community services and be accompanied by proper support for those women who disclose past or present experiences of abuse.
- Direct and immediate access to funds and basic needs positively impact women's ability to flee their abusive partners. Access to such funds supports a variety of expenses including clothing, household items, transportation, job-related expenses, dental care, necessities for children and childcare, home security features, as well as housing and bad debt.
- It is important to collaboratively develop and produce multidisciplinary curricula and training for adaptation and implementation by different provider groups and in various settings, supported by specific protocols and tools and based on trauma- and violence-informed care, cultural safety and competence, sex- and gender-based principles and health equity.
- Public awareness education can help dispel the myth of abused women as helpless victims in relation to their abusive partners as most have successfully implemented numerous strategies to keep themselves and their children safe. With some lethally abusive partners, staying may in fact be the safest alternative for both mother and children.
- Coordinated community initiatives, particularly those with an entry through a community-based, women focused organization, enhance women's ability to navigate services they need. Sustainability of such initiatives can be supported through thorough protocols, standards and agreements as well as on-going monitoring.