

Toward a New Imperative in Ontario: Violence Prevention as a Provincial Priority

Building a Bigger Wave Ontario Network: Coordinating Committees working to end violence against women and children (BBWON)

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Abstract

This paper proposes a 'new imperative' for Ontario to work towards social justice and gender equity as a unified effort across sectors, communities and governments. With ten years of investments by the Liberal government and after winning a majority in the last provincial election, aligned now with a new federal Liberal majority that has identified domestic violence as a priority issue, the time is right to reach higher and think larger. Ontario needs a high level comprehensive and integrated violence prevention strategy to realize maximal social returns on the investments that have been made. There is a breadth of research that clearly shows violence in relationships generates cascading human, social and economic costs. Violence against women and children is a health issue, an economic issue and a social issue that impacts all Ontarians.

Prioritizing violence prevention across the lifespan is a rational response to growing and unsustainable economic pressures on the tax base.

Introduction

Premier Kathleen Wynne has spoken publicly about her commitment to social justice and gender equality. A new imperative for social justice in Ontario means that ending violence against women and children is a widely shared provincial priority for every sector and every citizen and community in the province. Leadership at all levels of the system is needed. Addressing violence against women (VAW) is a critical doorway into reconfiguring the existing system and social structures to reduce inequities and improve social justice.

The Building a Bigger Wave Ontario Network wants to support dialogue at local VAWCC tables and with government leaders. Proposed here is the goal to create an overarching and integrated *Ontario violence prevention strategic 'process'* to tackle root causes through primary and secondary prevention across the lifespan and across government funding lines. We believe that intersecting issues need to be integrated in a comprehensive engagement plan because we fully understand that anything less will be more costly and less effective in the run long.

Since the fall of 2014, the Ontario Government has demonstrated a commitment to social change and an ability to act quickly. *It's Never Okay: An Action Plan to Stop Sexual Violence and Harassment* is a vanguard moment for the VAW sector because it is a brave plan that is unequivocal in naming patriarchy and the rape culture as the ground for misogyny that must

be challenged and changed. The Plan sets out priority action areas and institutes a permanent VAW Roundtable that makes community expertise accessible, ideally for discussion with government leaders that can help shape decision-making across ministries.

It's Never Okay could be an important step toward the development of an overarching, comprehensive and integrated violence prevention strategy process. It is for the Premier to decide. We are asking for her leadership to use existing action plans as stepping stones to a higher level ongoing strategy dialogue that prioritizes violence prevention across the lifespan, and to give it a mandate. To this end, BBWON coordinators have been meeting local bureaucrats and politicians (MPPs and MPs) to ask how this can happen and to pledge commitment to the cause. The Network has been building capacity to create access into communities across the province through VAWCC multi-sector tables. These tables could be harnessed together to engage in dialogue and provide input on diverse issues. We see this as an important contribution if we are to move beyond the 20th century limits of strictly top-down systems to more collective social responsibility with capacity to enable and engage shared leadership at all levels of the system.

Moreover, violence prevention is a non-partisan issue that should be supported by all parties. We need to also engage and ask all party leaders to endorse and contribute to the dialogue so that a violence prevention lives beyond elections. This is a role for community leadership.

Change the Discussion

It is a challenge to find ways to talk about a new imperative of social justice that tackles violence against women without falling into the deep sinkholes that bog creative action down in endlessly polarized positions and hostilities that grow out of the status quo 'scarcity' do-more-with-less model. The literature on health equity is one avenue that we can look to as a basis for this discussion. There is a caveat. The pervasive problem we are seeing is that health professionals responsible for planning and implementation of health services (LHINS in particular) have cited health equity as the reason to *exclude* a gender lens and thus fail to consider violence against women as a critical health issue. We see this across the province as 'collaborative' mental health and addictions tables do not include the VAW sector. In many communities, the VAW sector is unaware that these tables exist. This is of great concern as so many women who have experienced violence struggle with mental health and addictions, physical health problems and disability. Despite this, health equity may yet become a productive avenue toward broader engagement on VAW issues.

The exclusion of violence as a health concern could be addressed with an integrated violence prevention mandate. As well, in the health sector, there is new interest in violence and trauma-informed models of care under public health. Ontario-based health researchers are leading the national development of innovative service models and interventions for women

who have experienced violence. The time for a new imperative of prevention that connects Health and VAW is right.

Work with Existing Initiatives and Resources

The Ontario Domestic and Sexual Violence Action Plans provide a solid foundation from which to build a more integrated and just response to VAW in Ontario. There is also much that is good about the current 10 year mental health transformation agenda. Our next step is to address the systemic issues of violence against women in an integrated and sustained way. Otherwise, the human and social costs of violence and other structural inequities will continue to grow and compound. There is much evidence to support this claim. (See: below, p.5)

Investments that have been made in the VAW sector since 2004 are mostly project-based, which means the ground gained is in danger of being lost when the funding concludes. To realize the best possible return on these investments, we need a comprehensive strategy process that capitalizes and builds on good outcomes that have already been achieved and opens a space for implementing and carefully evaluating new approaches. We can paint a picture of the gains – they are significant. Ontario is already recognized as a leader by other provinces and countries – Ontario’s leaders and citizens need to know this too.¹

With a new imperative of prevention, Ontario is poised to become a provincial-national-global leader on one of the toughest social issues of our time. There is real opportunity for Ontario to shine and to support a national call to action led by the Canadian Network of Shelters and Transition Houses.² Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has identified domestic violence as a priority issue in his mandate letter to the new Attorney General. Ontario can move the ball toward a national commitment and strategy. These are strong alignments for Premier Wynne.

A New Imperative - Violence Prevention

We have a wealth of expertise in Ontario in research and best practices that can inform system level violence prevention strategic thinking and planning. As well, other countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the U.S. have extensive violence prevention work to draw upon. To date, Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) is the only other Canadian jurisdiction that has put a comprehensive violence prevention strategy in place. They completed the first 5 years of the program and then unfortunately the government changed and the initiative lost momentum and resources. The new imperative of prevention has to live beyond political mandates. Nevertheless, we can learn from NL and others.

¹ Ontario is the first jurisdiction in the world to legislate employers as being responsible for protecting workers from domestic violence and has introduced new legislation in 2015 to strengthen sexual harassment laws. Other jurisdictions are looking to Ontario for inspiration and leadership. There are other such examples.

² The Case for a National Action Plan on Violence Against Women. October 2013

Next Step

In 2015, BBWON began working with a broad base of researchers, advocates and leaders seeking to elevate VAW discussions with a number of ministries to a system level. The focus has been on specific issues such as the way we deal with domestic and sexual violence offenders in Ontario. We have been critical of the bureaucracy but consistent in our intention to generate more constructive dialogue and to build more collaborative relationships with leaders in the different ministries. Government and community are necessary partners if we are to be successful. The Premier's mandate letters are clear on this. Beyond the specific issues, we have asked the Premier to convene and host a series of think tanks with a small group (20) of our best researchers and strategists, senior bureaucrats and politicians to discuss a new imperative of violence prevention across the lifespan for Ontario. BBWON has been doing legwork to support the request, initiating discussions about engaging men as a beginning point for broader discussion.

The BBWON is committed to doing everything we can to support the new imperative. Our efforts are important but we are only a piece in a much larger picture. What is crucial to achieving systemic change is the political will to prioritize violence prevention with a focus on gender issues. We have many strong elements; what we lack is the overarching strategic capacity and process to think together. We will continue to ask for the forums that bring us together. To prioritize prevention requires a commitment to the time necessary to think and talk strategically across government and with community on specific issues. We have proposed PAR and stopping violence at the source as a logical place to start. Our goal is to align, consolidate and integrate our best efforts – that are already in motion - and then to design next steps. We need high level leadership and vision in government to help us move forward.

Final Thoughts

Creating a just society requires shared vision and a collaborative project that can potentially unite the province across many sectors. We MUST learn to work together to address the whole ecology of interpersonal violence to lift ourselves out of long established histories, traditions and cycles of violence that are endemic to the industrial age. It is in all of our interests to do so.

(Just a Few) Anticipated Benefits

- Greater ROI for investments of tax dollars into social issues through comprehensive strategy that aligns and integrates innovative initiatives
- Development of effective, innovative and flexible approaches to address mental health, substance abuse, trauma and abuse issues that harness knowledge and expertise that is currently siloed.
- A transferrable model – international recognition for Ontario

Economic Arguments to Support a New Imperative for Violence Prevention

A priority to prevent violence against women across the lifespan is the new imperative that is a rational response to growing and unsustainable economic pressures on the tax base.

Violence is a health issue

The Mental Health Commission of Canada (2012) reported **\$50 Billion per year** attributable to mental health and addictions costs. The report does not recognize the critical role that violence and trauma play in those costs. There are strong associations between histories of violence/trauma, mental health and addictions.

- The WHO³ contends that gender-based violence is “epidemic”:
 - The rates of lifetime violence against women varies from 10 – 71%. Rates are higher in countries with more substantial gender inequality⁴
 - The “severity and duration of exposure to violence are highly predictive of the severity of mental and physical health outcomes”
 - Women who have experienced violence make up the largest group of those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
 - Rates of depression are 2-1 in women and men and linked to lifetime exposure to abuse in childhood and adulthood
 - Depression will be the second leading cause of global burden of disease by 2020⁵
 - Among women who have experienced violence, depression and PTSD contribute to physical health problems, such as chronic pain.⁵
- McMaster study found that 1 in 6 fractures are caused by domestic violence (2013)⁶
- In a Grey-Bruce project that looked at the intersection of violence, mental health and addictions issues it was found that 70% of the 36 women who participated in focus groups reported that they had attempted suicide at least once⁷

Violence is a justice issue

- Justice Canada reported **\$7.4 Billion per year** attributable to domestic violence (2012)
 - Looked at costs to healthcare, police, employers, individuals⁸

³ World Health Organization: Gender Disparities in Mental Health.

⁴ Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2006.

⁵ Lim, S., Vos, T., Flaxman, D., Goodarz, D., Shubuya, K., Adair-Rohani, H., Ezzati, M., 2012.

⁵ Wuest, Ford-Gilboe, Merritt-Gray, Wilk, Campbell, Lent, Varcoe, & Smye, 2010.

⁶ Bhandari, M., 2012 See: <http://www.cbc.ca/m/touch/news/story/2013/06/11/hamilton-domestic-violence.html>

⁷ Purdon, C., No Wrong Door: Creating a Collaborative Rural Response for Women with Abuse, Mental Health and Addictions Issues, 2008.

⁸ Zhang, T., Hoddenbagh J., McDonald, S., Scrim, K., 2012.

Violence is a workplace issue

- The first national study (2014) of workplace domestic violence in Canada shows that a third of all workers experiences domestic violence. Fifty percent of those experience it at work.⁹
 - Increased absenteeism and sick leave costs, accidents, lost productivity
 - Clear links made between economic independence, being in paid employment and the impacts of domestic violence for women workers

Violence is a social issue

- Canadian Study on the partial Costs of violence among Canadian women who have separated from an abusive partner: **\$6.1 Billion per year** (2011)¹⁰
- Costs of VAW are related to high rates of service use: 2 - 292 times higher than women in the general population; poor health and poverty are the strongest predictors of service use across multiple sectors¹¹
- As of 2014, there are 1,181 known cases of missing or murdered Aboriginal women in Canada.

These are compelling economic and social reasons to be made in support of a new imperative in Ontario for comprehensive and integrated violence prevention strategy across the lifespan. If not now, when?

⁹ Can Work Be Safe When Home Isn't:

http://makeitourbusiness.com/sites/learningtoendabuse.ca.makeitourbusiness/files/DVWork_Survey_Report_2014_EN_0.pdf

¹⁰ Varcoe, Hankivsky, Ford-Gilboe, Wuest, Wilk & Campbell, 2011.

¹¹ Ford-Gilboe, Varcoe, Noh, Wuest, Hammerton, Alhalal & Burnett, In Press.