April 17th 2020

Violence Against Women Sector Survey: Impacts of COVID-19

WomanACT
WOMAN ABUSE COUNCIL OF TORONTO

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on survivors of gender-based violence and the organizations that support them. The necessity for individuals to socially isolate has left some survivors in isolation with their abusers and faced with additional economic and social pressures. This is happening at a time when health and social services are simultaneously overwhelmed, shelters are at capacity, and establishing new ways of working, and many of the sector workforce are working from home.

Despite these challenging times, organizations and their staff remain resilient. The Violence against Women sector has continued to adapt and ensure supports and services are available while also responding to new challenges as they arise.

WomanACT has heard from sector partners about the need for swift and coordinated information gathering in order to identify areas of challenge and mobilize rapid solutions with the sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are committed to supporting the sector during this novel and challenging time.

Working with sector partners, WomanACT developed a survey to better understand how Violence against Women sector organizations are impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey consisted of multiple choice and short answer items. The questions were focused on the challenges and concerns of organizations and their workforce, additional support they require and information on what is currently working well.

The survey was shared with the Violence against Women sector through the website, social media and email. The survey was also disseminated to the following networks and groups in the Toronto region:

The Transitional and Housing Support Program Network (THSP)
Toronto Region Violence Against Women Coordinating Committee (VAWCC)
Violence Against Women Network (VAWN)
Toronto Region Children's Aid Society and Violence Against Women Advisory Committee
Violence Against Women Counselling Network
Shelter and Support Services Committee
WomanACT General Members

The survey was open between April 6, 2020 and April 10, 2020 and received 60 responses. Respondents had the option of providing contact details or remaining anonymous. This survey report is a summary of the data collected from the 60 surveys organized into dominant themes and sub-themes. As a next step, this survey report will be used as tool to share knowledge and explore the mobilizing of solutions.

Impacts on survivors

Respondents were asked about the challenges that their clients are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic. 58% of respondents spoke to the increasing risks that survivors are facing as a result of being socially isolated with abusive partners. Respondents also spoke about the pandemic exacerbating and compounding the factors which can increase the risk of violence for women and girls. These factors include isolation, financial stress, and substance misuse. Seven respondents also reported that survivors feel in limbo because their plans have been delayed or because of difficulty in accessing essential services such as housing, shelters, employment, education, and income support.

Isolation

Survivors are experiencing increased separation from services and supports, including from community agencies, families, and friends. While the majority of services for survivors are still operating with service modifications such as remote working facilitated by technology, the lack of face to face contact can impact the nature of the support. The survey respondents shared that survivors are having difficulty accessing support due to a lack of privacy in the home. In some cases, women do not have access to a phone or the internet.

Additionally, women are unable to access the safe spaces they did previously to connect with services, such as libraries or a friend's house. Many group programs have also been postponed or cancelled. Another concern reported by one respondent is survivors' fear of unwanted pregnancies.

Financial pressures

Survivors are experiencing increasing financial pressures because of a loss of wages. In addition to the difficulty in paying rent and bills, the reduced income is increasing the level of stress in the home. Another concern identified includes the difficulty in access or affording basic items such as food, cleaning supplies, diapers and formula.

Access to housing

Survivors are facing a lack of housing options, including access to shelters and independent accommodation. One respondent indicated that they are aware of women who have received an eviction notice despite the province suspending eviction orders. Two respondents reported that in some cases, women have had to return to an abuser, or an abuser has moved in with the survivor due to financial pressures.

Mental health

25% of respondents reported that survivors are faced with increasing anxiety because of the various exacerbated and intersecting issues, including safety, finances, childcare, and anxiety due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A few respondents described that some survivors are anxious about COVID-19 and overwhelmed by the amount of information. Concerns were raised about the

lack of information available on COVID-19 in different languages. In a couple of cases, respondents expressed concerns about survivors not practicing social distancing and that survivors were feeling frustrated over the changes to the services and support they are receiving.

Impacts on children and childcare responsibilities

Many respondents reported that children in the home are at risk of increased exposure to tension and abuse. On top of this, women have to support children with their fears around COVID-19.

Additional responsibility has been placed on women in regards to childcare and continuing their children's education. Respondents expressed that women are struggling to keep their children occupied. Others reported that women are feeling stressed about having to navigate and oversee school activities for children. This is particularly difficult for women who do not have access to a computer or tablet in the home.

Two respondents described the stress and uncertainty that women are experiencing concerning access visits and custody arrangements. There is distress about their children's possible exposure to COVID-19 in different homes and traveling between these homes. Respondents also expressed that women may be afraid to stop access visits or current custody arrangements due to repercussions.

8% of respondents expressed that some women feel that their plans have halted because services are closed or operations have been suspended. For example, some criminal, family, and immigration pending matters have been postponed. Another instance is women who have fled from abusive situations, including intimate partner violence or labour trafficking, are unable to recover their personal identification documents due to the closures of government offices such as Service Ontario and Service Canada.

Impacts on operations

Organizations are faced with uncertain times and new ways of working. Many survey respondents described working in unchartered territory during the pandemic. A large number of respondents reported that changes to operations have been a reasonably smooth transition. The majority of respondents shared that the transition is made easier by increased communication across their organizations, flexible working arrangements, and support from colleagues. Access to phones, internet, and video conferencing software has supported those working remotely, and staggered staffing schedules has made it easier for those who are working in shelters or still working from the office.

What are the current challenges your organization is facing in delivering services?

Service delivery challenges
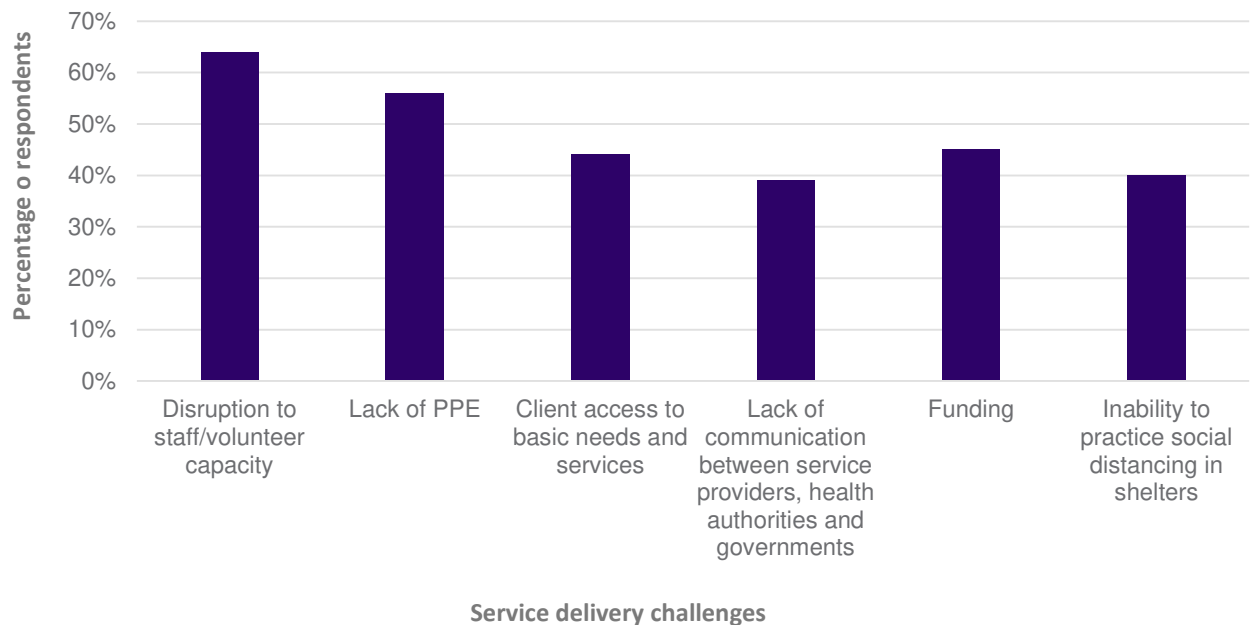
65% of respondents expressed disruption to staff and volunteer capacity as a challenge. Two of the respondents reported that their organizations have reduced hours for staff or have had to lay off staff. Many spoke about the impact that the absence of volunteers and student placements have had on their capacity and operations.

While some respondents reported that working from home is working well, others reported that they are concerned that they have to use their personal devices such as telephones and computers to conduct work-related tasks. Of those respondents who are still working from the office or working in shelters, some reported it is difficult to observe social distancing.

Eight survey respondents indicated that the pandemic has made their work more challenging, especially safety planning and counselling. Safety planning is more difficult because of the lack of contact with survivors. In addition, safety planning must now take into account the changes to communities and services. Respondents described that they are also supporting survivors with

anxiety around COVID-19. In some cases, respondents reported that the counselling has shifted from clinical counselling to crisis counselling. Counselling has changed in nature because it is delivered through telephone or video conference. While technology was identified as critical support to counselors, some raised concerns about privacy and confidentiality with technology, particularly Zoom.

Respondents indicated that it is a challenge to find housing or accommodation for survivors because some shelters are at capacity, and some are not accepting new referrals. Housing options for survivors was identified as an existing crisis that the COVID-19 pandemic has made worse. Moreover, respondents reported that it is challenging to complete housing applications because of the lack of contact with survivors, access to scanners and printers, the client's availability to complete electronic forms, and difficulty in accessing personal documents.

45% of respondents shared their concerns about potential cuts to funding or financial streams during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, respondents reported that some granting organizations and foundations have postponed or changed programs. Fundraising events have been cancelled or postponed, and respondents anticipate that fundraising efforts may be negatively impacted for several years. One respondent stated they are pleased to see the federal government has increased funding for gender-based violence organizations. Some reported the need for clarity on funding information, such as when it will be available and what the eligibility criteria for organizations will be.

Support organizations need

Respondents were asked: What additional support does your organization require during the COVID-19 pandemic to deliver your services?

I.T	• Laptops and cell phones to support staff who are working remotely • Financial support and compensation for staff who are using their personal devices and internet when working remotely • Secure online video conferencing for counselling and group sessions
Organizational policy and practice	• Support to develop shelter guidelines and protocols • Training and support to develop an organizational pandemic and continuity plan • Support to develop policy on the practice of phone and video conferencing for confidential services
Personal Protection Equipment (PPE)	• Access to PPE • Sector-wide coordination to acquire and distribute PPE • Training for staff on how to use PPE appropriately
Information	• Services available to survivors, including access to income supports • Funding available for organizations • List of housing options, including shelters, accepting referrals • Access to resources and information shared by networks and groups
Access to housing	• Access to additional accommodation spaces such as hotels • Increased coordination between organizations, the province and the City of Toronto in relation to housing
Coordination	• Internal communication and coordination, including clear roles and responsibilities • Increased coordination across organizations, public health and different levels of government • Violence against Women sector coordination with municipal partners on shelter and other housing initiatives • Access to COVID-19 assessment centres
Support for staff	• Access to support and mental health resources for workforce
Funding	• Funding to support with staffing to respond to capacity issues • Funding to acquire additional accommodation spaces • Funding to support with new expenses, including technology

Impacts on workforce

Various perspectives were shared from the Violence against Women workforce about the impacts they are individually experiencing. Many spoke about the importance of the support they are receiving from their colleagues. Some said that they miss the camaraderie of working in-person with their colleagues and the opportunity to discuss challenging cases.

18% of respondents reported that the shift from working in an office to working from home has been difficult because of balancing caregiving responsibilities with work. Respondents spoke about the need to maintain a routine and work-life balance despite working remotely.

39% of respondents indicated that their day to day work has become more complex. Some spoke about their reliance on creativity and their advocacy skills to navigate processes such as facilitating group programs online, offering counselling by phone and completing housing applications without in-person meetings or documents. A few shared that it is time-consuming to keep up to date with news and best practices during the crisis. In addition, some respondents reported that their workload has increased because they are having to provide more support for staff and responding to COVID-19 related issues while also carrying out responsibilities such as board meetings, meetings with funders, project reports, and year-end audits.

A common theme shared by survey respondents was the increase in anxiety caused by the pandemic. Three respondents reported that at times they are experiencing feeling unmotivated, distracted, helpless, and disconnected. They spoke about the importance of organizations being flexible, transparent, and understanding. Others highlighted the importance of sharing information and resources across the sector during the crisis.

Ten respondents spoke about the need for up-to-date information on services available for survivors so they can provide their clients with appropriate information and make relevant referrals.

Fourteen of the respondents spoke about the success of quickly moving services online where feasible to continue operating. However, a few respondents raised concerns about having to use their own personal equipment while working from home, including phone and internet.

Support the workforce need

Respondents were asked: What additional support do you require as an individual during the COVID-19 pandemic to conduct your work?

I.T	• Laptops and cell phones to support staff who are working remotely • Compensation for additional expenses incurred by staff
Personal Protection Equipment (PPE)	• Adequate supply of PPE
Information	• Information on changes to housing policy, programs and services • Information on how best to access housing for survivors, including any changes to shelters or SPP applications
Access to housing	• Access to additional accommodation spaces • Increased coordination between accommodation providers, province and municipalities related to changes to housing
Communication	• Clear communication from leadership on changes to policies and future plans
Support	• Access to clinical supervision • Opportunities to connect with other colleagues to support and learn from each other • Opportunities to learn from other sector colleagues on how to support staff and best support clients

Impacts on shelters

3 survey respondents shared that their shelters are currently at capacity and 5 survey respondents reported that their shelter is taking new referrals. Many shared that they are currently assessing the situation on a day by day or case by case basis. In addition, the majority reported that they are presently working on actions and drafting policies or protocols to modify current shelter referral pathways and acquire new accommodation spaces.

Some reported that they are exploring the possibility of new referrals quarantining for 14 days within a community provided space, such as a hotel before intake into the shelters to ensure staff and resident safety. Others reported they have a dedicated space in the shelter to provide quarantine, and one reported that they are currently using hotel rooms for this purpose.

Shelters are practicing social distancing in different ways such as staggered staffing schedules, asking women to eat in their rooms, establishing cooking schedules, and implementing new cleaning practices.

Some of the respondents shared their fears, and concerns should someone in the shelter test positive for COVID-19. There are concerned about the risks related to staff travelling from the shelter to home. In addition, one respondent shared that some residents in their shelter work in essential services. One shelter reported that they are operating in lockdown with no women leaving the shelter unless necessary.

The lack of PPE was a common theme shared by shelter providers, in addition to a need for training related to PPE. A few respondents described additional expenses to their organization such as hotel rooms, computers for women, personal hygiene products, PPE, and items for children.

Three respondents indicated that tension has increased in the shelter, and in some cases, has increased conflict between the residents. One shelter reported that they have provided women in the shelter with laptops to ensure they stay connected with information and supports

What has worked?

- Increased communication and partnership with leadership, staff, volunteers, partner organizations, donors and funders in an effort to share information, troubleshoot problems and develop solutions.
- A centralized place for organizational communication and up-to-date information and resources to ensure all staff have access to the same information.
- Support from leadership and colleagues including flexible working arrangements, compensation for internet and phone use and putting staff and client safety first.
- Changing the staff schedule and duties to reflect service needs and the health and safety of staff.
- Remaining connected to colleagues and partner organizations through video conferencing.
- Developing an internal call centre and crisis line to streamline all calls and direct clients to appropriate services.
- Using digital tools to engage clients and deliver group support programs.

"The willingness and dedication of our staff who continue to be committed to providing clients with a level of support."

"The support of some community donors who have compassion for our clients and an appreciation for the work we do."

"It is amazing how the sector has come together during these trying times. I'm so appreciate and a little in awe of the collective dedication to our work. I know our clients are more than grateful for the work we continue to do."