

ENDING VIOLENCE

Association of BC

BRIEFING DOCUMENT

ISSUE: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN SERVICES ARE VITAL SOCIAL SERVICES THAT MUST BE MAINTAINED AT CURRENT LEVELS DURING ECONOMIC DOWNTURN

KEY POINTS

Research evidence and the experience of front-line service providers indicate that violence against women and their children increases during times of economic distress.

Cuts to services that may accompany an economic downturn pose further risks to women and their children because they make it more difficult for women to leave abusive relationships and more difficult to access assistance and achieve financial independence when they do leave.

Women, their children, and their abusive partners require more rather than less services during economically difficult times in order to address both the stresses that may exacerbate the violence and the impacts of the violence itself.

THE CONTEXT

- Economically challenging times result in increased stresses on families, including high unemployment rates and increased poverty. These stresses, in turn, can result in increases in the use of dysfunctional coping behaviours such as violence and substance abuse. For a variety of reasons, financial strain may also keep women in violent relationships.
- Research shows that violence against women in their intimate relationships is more likely to occur when couples are experiencing financial strain. Low income, unstable employment, and financial stresses are some of the most commonly cited risk factors for violence against women in their intimate relationships, including homicide. (Benson and Fox, 2004a & b; BC Institute Against Family Violence, 2006; Carlson et al, 1999; Dawson et al, 2009; (DeKeseredy et al, 2006, 2008; Dutton & Kropp, 2000; Hanson & Wallace-Capretta, 2000; Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Kyriacou, et al., 1999; Light, 2007; Riggs et al, 2000; Schumacher et al, 2001; Sherman et al, 1992; Saunders, 1993; Stuart & Campbell, 1989). A sudden, recent change in employment status (e.g., being laid off or fired) is associated with increased risk of violence.
- One large study showed the rate of violence for couples worried about financial strain was three and a half times that of those with low levels of financial strain. The same study showed that repeat victimization of women is also more frequent in couples feeling financial strain. (Benson & Fox, 2001, 2004a & b). The authors found that both objective factors (unemployment and inability to make enough money to meet family needs) and subjective factors (worrying about money) are associated with increased risk of intimate partner violence.
- Media reports have also documented this trend during the current economic downturn, with news stories about increased violence resulting from financial pressures (The Associated Press, 2008; Calgary Women's Emergency Shelter, 2009; Mitchell, 2008; Taylor, 2009). The Calgary Women's Shelter reported a 300% increase in calls in February 2009 compared to

February 2008, an increase attributed to pressures associated with the economic recession. Shelter staff also reported significant increases in the complexity and severity of the violence.

- Lack of financial independence and fear of poverty or economic hardship may be an important factor in a woman's decision to remain in or leave a violent relationship. A woman may decide that her abusive partner's economic contribution to the relationship outweighs the risk of violence (BC Institute Against Family Violence, 2006; Cole, 2001; Davies et al., 1998; Dawson et al, 2009; Dutton, 1992; Gondolf, 1988; Johnson, 1992; Jones, et al., 2001; Kalmuss & Straus, 1982; Kirkwood, 1993; Logan et al, 2004; National Institute of Justice, 2009; Rhodes & McKenzie, 1998; Sullivan, 1991; Sullivan, et al., 1992; Ulrich, 1995). This fear may be particularly strong for immigrant and refugee women (or other marginalized women) who may already be facing economic hardship (Light, 2007).
- Economic downturns often result in service cuts as a component of cost-saving measures, including, for example, violence prevention services, legal aid, employment and re-training services, and emotional support and counselling services. Cuts to these kinds of programs make it more difficult for women and their children to get the assistance they need to leave abusive relationships, to access practical and emotional support when leaving, and to become financially independent.
- Other kinds of violence, including gang violence, also increase during periods of financial stress. Employment problems are associated with increased risk for criminality and general violence (Andrews & Bonta, 1996, 2003; BC Institute Against Family Violence, 2006; Totten, 2008). As male gang members often perpetrate violence against their girlfriends or ex-girlfriends (Totten, 2000), increased gang activity and violence therefore pose increased risks for women and children. In addition, many individuals involved with gangs come from families where gender stereotypes were perpetuated or where there was violence perpetrated upon their mothers (Totten, 2000), creating a cyclical dynamic of cause and effect.
- There is a critical need for adequate levels of service for women and their children who are victims of violence or at risk of violence, as well as for essential support structures for the anti-violence service sector. These support structures, including coordination, training, service provider support and resource development, are necessary in order to ensure that:
 - an effective, inter-sectoral approach to this complex issue is facilitated
 - service providers are well-trained in this demanding work
 - service providers coping with large caseloads and ongoing stressors are provided with necessary supportsThe need for these vital services is always acute; however, the need is even greater as a result of the current economic downturn.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

- While it is recognized that government must achieve cost savings during these financially challenging times, these savings should not be achieved at the expense of vital social services for women and children who are victims of violence.
- Government should maintain all current funding for services and support infrastructures for women who are victims of violence, their children and for those providing the services during this economic downturn.
- The funds held in the Victim Surcharge Special Account should be allocated to provide essential enhancements to services for women and their children who are victims of violence.

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