



NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO WOMEN'S CENTRE IMPACT REPORT

A Retrospective of the Difference the Centre Makes on Women's Lives and the
Community



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Northwestern Ontario Women's Centre Impact Report

A Retrospective of the Difference the Centre Makes in the Lives of Women and the Community

Executive Summary

As part of the 2022 Strategic Planning process, 32 key stakeholders (women who use the Centre, external organizations, current/past staff, current/past board members, placement students), were interviewed over the months of January/February 2022. They were asked about how the Centre made a difference in women's lives and their recommendations for strategic priorities for 2022-2027.

This report summarizes their opinions on how the Centre impacts not only women but also the overall community.

Women reached out to the Centre because they were dealing with issues like intimate partner abuse (threat of being homeless), difficulties leaving a toxic relationship, sexual assault, custody, and/or family court. Some respondents came to the Centre because it is a gathering place for women and a place to learn about issues that affect women.

Women spoke of the following types of impact, and observations by other stakeholders reiterated their experiences.

Immediate Impact. Some of the difference was immediate, i.e., within 10 minutes of walking into the Centre, or after the initial intake conversation.

Intermediate Impact. Other changes occurred over time, as they received coaching, attended clinics, built confidence, and learned new skills.

Long-Term Impact. When women achieve their goals around why they connected with the Centre in the first place.

Life Goals. Impact sometimes extended beyond the timeframe of working with the Centre.

External stakeholders, students, staff and board members spoke about systems change that occurred as the result of the Centre's partnerships, education and advocacy. Examples of changes and a positive impact were seen on:

Service providers. E.g., increased knowledge of the legal system and feminist analysis.

Community capacity. E.g., the ability to refer complex clients, fill gaps in legal system navigation and funding for new projects.

Systems and partnerships. E.g., more formal protocols for partnerships, reduced silos for services for women.

There are also examples of the impact of specific initiatives like the Good Food Box and the Honouring our Stories project, and how students benefited from doing their placement at the Centre.

Introduction

As part of the 2022 Strategic Planning process, 32 key stakeholders (women who use the Centre, external organizations, current/past staff, current/past board members, placement students), were asked if and how the Centre made a difference in women's lives.

Seven service users were interviewed, 3 of whom self-identified as Indigenous. As well, there was some representation of Indigenous perspective among those interviewed as external stakeholders.

Most spoke of how the Centre helped women when they were looking for support for issues like leaving an abusive relationship, sexual assault, and/or poverty. Some respondents came to the Centre because it is a gathering place for women and a place to learn about issues that affect women.

The users who were interviewed were at least 1 year past when they would have been in high need or crisis. Many worked with the Centre for quite a few years as different, but related, issues arose.

In addition to the impact on women, many external stakeholders, students, and staff talked about the impact the Centre had on organizations, policy, practice, and systems change.

"I just feel like people need to know about the Women's Centre because they can do lots of things for people, help with anything really. And I just think about how thankful I am for it. And I wish that other people can use it to help them too, because maybe they'd be in a different place. Without the woman's centre, I'm sure I'd be much more of a stress case. Because it's just scary and having someone who was educated in so many things, made it easier to navigate through all of that." User

This report is divided into three parts:

- a) What we heard from women who had used the Centre. Women were asked to
 - Reflect on how they felt, what they were like, before they started working with the Centre, and then
 - Share how things are going now, after they'd received support. (Prompts – How do you feel? What are you like? Has anything changed?)
 - If they talked about change, women were asked what caused that change.
- b) What we heard from staff, board members and external stakeholders. These stakeholders were asked:
 - To what degree is the Centre making a difference for women, in women's lives? (Prompts - How are they making a difference? How are women better off?)
- c) What we heard in response to "What would be happening if the Centre was not doing this work?" (Prompt for women – What would your life be like?)

Women's State of Mind Prior to Service (Users)

Women reached out to the Centre because they were dealing with issues like intimate partner abuse (threat of being homeless), difficulties leaving a toxic relationship, sexual assault, custody, and/or family

court. Given the complexity of women's lives, most respondents needed assistance with more than one issue, and they often intersected and overlapped.

When service users were asked about how they were feeling when they first reached out to the Centre, women talked about the following:

- State of disbelief
- Frightened, scared, terrified of what was going to happen
- Felt violent and enraged
- Stressed out, crying
- Overwhelmed
- Distraught
- In survival mode
- Experiencing trauma. Not wanting to tell my story again.
- Had lots of questions about what to do

Many women felt these emotions repeat as new issues arose while dealing with their situation. Their interaction with the Centre was often ongoing.

Impact & Strategies - As Told By Women Who Use the Centre

Women who received support from the Centre spoke about the difference the Centre made in their lives. They were also asked what the Centre does to achieve that positive impact, i.e., strategies.

Immediate Impact. Some of the difference was immediate, i.e., within 10 minutes of walking into the Centre, or after the initial intake conversation.

“Always made me feel understood. Always had good feedback for me. When I go to the office, I feel my problems are really big, and when I leave I feel like they are really small. Was always told that I'm a strong woman.” User

“I had lots of questions about what I should be doing, could do. Because he was so manipulative, and meeting with the Centre grounded me. And made me understand a little better, even with lawyer stuff.” User

Intermediate Impact. Other changes occurred over time, as they received coaching, attended clinics, built confidence, and learned new skills. These are labelled as “Intermediate Impact”.

“One of the hardest times in my life, leaving a very toxic relationship...when I left, I needed a lot of help. [The Centre] was excellent. She did a lot of safety planning with me, and her recommendations really kept me safe. I was able to navigate all the systems... but also following the advice and steps...when you're in it, you need an external brain and keep things in perspective.” User

“Feel like I have a framework for the long path to healing.” User

Long-Term Impact. “Long-Term Impact” is considered when women achieve their goals around why they connected with the Centre in the first place, e.g., leaving an abusive relationship, finding housing, or getting on Ontario Works.

Life Goals. However, the impact sometimes extended beyond the timeframe of working with the Centre. These impacts are labelled as “Life Goals”. There are stories of women having the confidence to go back to school and re-train or advocate to their elected officials.

Immediate Impact

Immediate Impact	Strategies - What the Centre does to achieve this
<p>Feel welcomed</p> <p><i>“I was there every second day sometimes. I never felt shoed out the door.”</i> User</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -immediate response, open door, no waiting list, -always go the extra mile -calm, welcoming staff, smiling faces when walking through the door, “can tell staff love what they do” -safe space, comfortable surroundings with tea -children welcomed with toys etc. -Indigenous Woman “You are loved poster”
<p>Feel validated</p> <p>Don’t feel so alone</p> <p><i>“I never felt “less-than”, always an equal conversation”</i> User</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Clear message that the situation happens to other women, not alone. -normalized the situation -explained implications of reporting, or not reporting to police and discussed the best strategic option. -Knowledge of and recognition of Indigenous issues e.g., impact of systemic racism, intergenerational trauma -non-judgemental, -comfortable, safe space for people who may not be able to explain themselves -Christmas-time hamper
<p>Lower stress levels, feeling less stressed</p> <p><i>“Huge sense of relief”</i> (User)</p> <p><i>“Not crying anymore”</i> (User)</p> <p><i>“Staff never joined me in my crisis.”</i> (User)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -ability to call or email anytime -listened! -reassuring conversations that increased understanding and “brought me down” -ability to speak to an “external brain” and provide a perspective that was not caught up in the emotions -clear next step and plan of action based on “always knowing the answer” and knowledge of how to work within the system
<p>Increased access to information</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -give out brochures and websites on different issues and solutions -holds sessions on political issues that impact women e.g., free trade agreement, changes to income tax laws

Intermediate Impact

Intermediate Impact	Strategies - What the Centre does to achieve this
Increased knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -takes the time to explain -talks on a level of understanding -in-person, paper, online resources to read -seminars/workshops/websites -referral to courses e.g., parenting, dealing with trauma Topics include: -family law -dealing with trauma -parenting -what to expect when dealing with an abusive partner -the impact of abusive parenting -political activism issues
Not so scared (about court)	-access to services or support e.g., Ontario Children’s Lawyer, legal aid, TBay Housing, Victim Services
Increased safety Feel like there are layers of protection	-Safety Plan in place
Increased confidence Comfortable giving advice to others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -help to understand e.g., government letters, how to interpret court order -provided ability to assess situations
Increased skill to navigate systemic barriers – put recommendations into practice <i>“Helped put knowledge into practice” User</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -staff advocacy and navigator roles and responsibilities -staff involvement and coaching re. court and bail proceedings -increase understanding and knowledge to make informed decisions -focus on the bigger picture -work together to take action e.g., learn to write court affidavits, information for No Contact Orders, court access calendar for daycare/school
Feeling empowered to move forward Increased self-esteem Sense of control of my own life Ability to make informed decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -consistently told “You are a strong woman. You will get through this.” -encouragement to take action, e.g., call the police, breach meetings re. no contact orders -building the aforementioned skills -given the tools -understanding of their rights and options -learned about activism and to fight

Intermediate Impact	Strategies - What the Centre does to achieve this
Able to differentiate between fear and reality	
Increased ACCESS to services or support for themselves, children	-Centre staff go with women to school meetings, court, -advocacy and navigator staff roles and responsibilities -Office of the Children’s Lawyer -referral to other agencies, counselling for children -bring the case to Roundtable, High-Risk Table -application support to financial aid, Ontario Works -Good Food Box
More connected – feel part of a group Increased connection to LGBTQ2S+ community	-Craftivism events -political activism seminars -Safe place to meet people, selection of LGBTQ2S+ books, activities to join -Good Food Box volunteering

Long-Term Impact

Women spoke about the value of getting support with system navigation, and building knowledge, skills and confidence over time to navigate complex systems more independently.

The result of this support and skill-building around system navigation include:

- improved lives due to addressing social determinants, i.e., safe housing, financial assistance/Ontario Works, access to healthy food through Good Food Box
- reuniting with families, full custody
- access to legal aid, and how the explanation of complex legal terms saved lawyers’ fees

The following are quotes from users that reflect that feeling of empowerment after working with the Centre, sometimes over many years, as their life situations changed:

“Learn to like myself, feel like a good mother.” User

“Learn about activism and fighting for myself and stand up for myself. Taught me I have a right to my life and to live free.” User

“Result – safe. Advice from the Centre is all on you - you have so much control. And then they teach you – hey, you have control over this, you have control over where you go, over when you have your appointments, over when you pick up the phone and call the police, when you can trespass someone on your property, that you don’t want there.

Another layer of protection she (Centre staff) gives you every step of the way, that’s on you, and then all of a sudden you feel extremely powerful because you never thought you’d get away (from relationship), and now you have the tools.

And it's wonderful. Empowered all of a sudden, like, for me, after 9 years of not having control, I'm like – 'look at you with all the control'. And in control of my life, and who I want around me and who I let be mean to me." User

The Centre has long been a welcoming space for the LGBTQ2S+ community. Users spoke of being able to connect to others with the same lifestyle.

"The Centre was awesome for when I came out. For volunteering and meeting people I felt comfortable with, with same lifestyle. A safe place to meet people, selection of books, activities to join. Boosted my self-confidence, made me feel there were people who understood who I was, and where I wasn't going to be judged." User

Impact on Women - As Observed by Board Members, Staff, Students and External Stakeholders

External stakeholders, staff, placement students and board members were all asked about what difference the Centre made in women's lives. These stakeholders either referred women to the Centre, or saw women reach out at times of greatest need of a non-judgemental, supportive environment.

The changes they observed in women parallel what the users spoke about, i.e., increased confidence, skill, and empowerment that led to increased safety, access to services, custody, etc. This section provides additional insights to those in the first section of this report.

"Knowledge is power – when you know what resources are out there for you, how to access help, how to get supports, how to leave abusive situations, how to navigate systems – these are all huge endeavours for women, in particular those experiencing violence being able to leave a situation like that. – this knowledge, education and advocacy is critical to their safety" External Stakeholder

Immediate Impact. Validation when women are told by partners and institutions that they are not credible, imagining it, and don't deserve justice.

Intermediate Impact.

"Getting referrals to adequate services, being supported, creating a circle of care and community (this is how it feels when getting services) knowing that you have other folks in your corner really makes a difference for people." External Stakeholder

"It's no wonder why somebody with education finds those tasks difficult (e.g., court impact statements) and why women in the community would just forego it, and not do it at all." Student

- Economic – Centre helps women access financial resources and benefits and helps with food security. One example is when bank accounts have been cut off when leaving an abusive relationship.

- More confidence – to tell whatever story they want to tell, and to stick up for themselves when approaching other systems when dealing with the same situation.

Long-Term Impact.

- Increased resilience - Centre teaches women how to advocate for themselves
- Decreased reliance or shift in need over time due to empowerment and skills to navigate systems and get assistance with emerging challenges.
- Increased access to healthy food - Good Food Box
- Escape from the abuse and the system and ability to stand on own feet.
- Increased ability and confidence to care for one's children alone.

Centre Strategies - General

In addition to the strategies noted above, respondents talked about several strategies that made an overall positive impact on women.

Users of the Centre spoke about:

- how it's a "safe space", that it is small, with an open-door policy, a comfortable space that's not overly fancy
- how support and information are specific to your needs and continue long-term as needs change
- staff having a deep knowledge of the inter-related issues that arise in challenging situations (especially legal) and where to refer

"Obvious that staff love what they do, really care about people, makes me feel comfortable and builds trust" User

"The Centre creates a safe space, not judged, held in confidence, and set a frame for long path to healing." User

"I can tell staff the shittiest shit and no one will judge me". User

External stakeholders and staff spoke about:

- A whole-woman approach, i.e., recognition of the intersectionality of issues many women face, including those who are traditionally hard to serve, and who may have burned bridges elsewhere.
 - A low-barrier intake - women walking in the door for any issue, and not having to share tough, sensitive experiences until they feel safe to do so.
 - A "wrap-around" approach, which is the opposite of a more common "siloed" approach observed in agencies with more specific mandates.
 - Ongoing case management. No termination of service. Women can access as little or as often as required for as long as needed. Sometimes years, due to the nature of recurring issues with family court, custody, and poverty issues.

- Advocacy for women at many systemic levels and collaboration with various local organizations to ensure women's needs are met. Agencies spoke of “soft handoffs” that expedited service.
- Trauma-informed approach and support to deal with physical, emotional and lateral violence.
- Survivor-centric and feminist perspectives frame the response. Very aware of what challenges people face institutionally and personally.
- Staff teaching women how to advocate for themselves, very hands-on. Unlike many other organizations, staff don't do everything for them.
- Staff are always up to date on changes to programs and services.

“I completely trust that the Women's Centre will respond [to when I refer someone].” External Stakeholder

“...there is no funding that says if a woman doesn't show up, it's your responsibility to go find her. That's not in the book. That's them taking it on like a woman caring for a woman, and that's genuine and hard to find.” External Stakeholder

“Women's centre is small and intimate, so feels cozy and safe – so if you have something to disclose, safety concern, trouble parenting – you feel comfortable sharing. The first thing women are asked is not ‘what are you doing here’, it's ‘do you want a cup of tea’. More about caring for the person than the problem.” External Stakeholder

“Imagine not knowing the system or not having the education, the family or the financial resources – and the centre provides all that in a one-stop-shop. You can come in and staff can talk to you and not make you feel like a lesser person.

And say this and this is what we need to look out for, and being able to paint a picture of what will happen, then also provide the support throughout experiencing all those systems. Staff is not leaving when the woman has to go to OW, someone is going to go with them or support them. Like a wrap-around system”. External Stakeholder

Impact on the Community

External stakeholders, the board, staff and students gave examples of the Centre's impact on community partnerships and systems. Service providers rely on the Centre for up-to-date information and knowledge of the legal system. Long-term involvement in various partnerships has resulted in more systematic or wrap-around approaches to supporting women.

Impact on service providers

External stakeholders spoke of how much more knowledgeable they are about the complex challenges facing women. They spoke about how the Centre is the only voice that consistently brings forward a

feminist analysis at meetings and partnerships. As well as how this both educates and holds service providers accountable.

There have been times when the Centre took the time to analyze a new policy or procedure, e.g., perpetrator rehabilitation programs or changes in laws/language, only to learn of an unintended harm or risk for women. One external stakeholder spoke about how the Centre creates workshops for women and service providers on these emerging issues and facilitates discussion on how to move forward.

“Bring forward issues of things like a new law that is touted to improve situations for women, and then she's [Centre staff] like 'but no! you're missing this' or what are the implications of these changes, and then reflecting that in the legal education. E.g., women need to know why this is dangerous, and how or what they might be agreeing to might not be what they think it is.” External Stakeholder

“... for other service providers, it pulls up our game as well, due to a better understanding of the complex issues” External Stakeholder

External stakeholders also mentioned:

- Increased knowledge of topics in the area of family law, custody issues, coercion and control.
- More awareness of the complexity of the issues women face, e.g.,
 - impact of racism, colonialism, oppression
 - how the justice system marginalizes and harms women, rather than supports them
 - the invisible layer of patriarchy

“Build a critical understanding of coercion and control, so more conversations about that – makes me understand things I didn't previously understand and the complexity of these issues women face.” External Stakeholder

Impact on community capacity

External stakeholders spoke of how the Centre's broad mandate gives them greater latitude to apply for unique funding opportunities. With or without funding, most stakeholders spoke of how the Centre “fills a gap” for services and initiatives that benefit the whole community. Stakeholders spoke of how the Centre's work and involvement have resulted in new initiatives.

Examples of where community capacity has increased include:

- Legal system navigation
 - Increased community capacity to respond, filling a gap in services for women in high-risk situations, divorce, and custody battles through funding for court, navigator and Gender-Based Violence positions.
 - Family law workshops or “a quick call to the Centre” results in increased knowledge among service providers of the most up-to-date procedures – saving valuable time spent on research.
 - Legal workshops on topics specific to clients of other service providers, saving staff time.
- Cutting edge research in response to emerging needs e.g., Honouring our Stories project
- Stronger partnerships

“As a referring professional – knowing I can call them up to get really deep knowledge on how to navigate legal stuff, and for advocacy situations.” External Stakeholder

New services. Over the years, the Centre has played a catalyst and incubator role in efforts that address gaps in services and policy. One recent example noted by stakeholders is the development of a formal High-Risk Protocol and the Analysis to Action on Gender-Based Violence website. One stakeholder spoke about how the Centre provided the research and pulled the pieces together to get funding for the High-Risk Navigator role – a community goal for many years.

Impact on systems and partnerships

For the purpose of this report, “systems” can refer to agency, community, and government level protocols, policies, procedures and laws. Systems change, in any context, takes time. Long-term staff and external stakeholders spoke of subtle shifts over the years in response, attitudes and collaboration.

Respondents spoke of how the Centre typically takes a stepwise approach. I.e., bring forward an emerging need; garner support from stakeholders; secure funding for research; secure or collaborate on funding for an initiative. This approach and advocacy leadership has resulted in new initiatives, new services, more formal processes among partners and stronger collaboration.

Some respondents spoke about the impact of a specific initiative led by the Centre. These anecdotal comments are included under “Impact of Specific Initiatives” below. More detailed evaluation reports can be found at the Centre.

Because the Centre tracks what issues women come in for help with, it is often the first indication of a change in agency policy or law. Respondents spoke of how the Centre brings these emerging issues forward for a collective response to mitigate or prevent harm.

It also sometimes results in agencies looking at their internal systems or policies or double-checking that standard protocol is being followed.

“Some Community members are awakening to understanding the importance of the feminist, intersectional lens, trauma-informed lens, anti-oppression lens. If we can look at the issues through those lenses, I think we will find the solutions much more readily. Because issues are complicated and systemic issues and there are no simple solutions, and change has to happen at the systemic level and the Women's Centre has an important role to play to make sure that happens.” External Stakeholder

“Violence Against Women leads table – complex cases – Centre has helped advocate for streamlining where everyone is on the same page and making it clear, and always bringing back the message that we need to make sure that we're focusing on women's strengths and family strengths and putting the ownership on the person doing the violence, and create pathways that we can follow that are concrete where everyone is talking the same language and doing the same thing.” External Stakeholder

“The Centre helps bring the pieces together, especially with access to the high-risk navigator. Even though we have so many tables, and we have really good working relationships between partners within this sector, I think still so much of it is done in silos, or maybe we're not realizing that pieces need to be connected even. So I think that the Centre does a good job of honing in on “hey this is the gap that I see”, or “hey remember this? And really reinforce this” External Stakeholder

More formal protocols and collaboration among partners. The Centre sits on many tables and committees and is an active partner and contributor to collective action. Stakeholders gave the following examples of stronger partnerships and protocols.

- Designed a High-Risk Protocol in collaboration with legal and social service workers, to work toward making systemic change.
- Thunder Bay and District Coordinating Committee to End Women Abuse has a more formalized approach and stronger relationships among service providers as a result of the Centre identifying the need, getting funding for research, building the partnerships, then getting funding for the Gender-Based Violence program.
- Centre brings trends (e.g., increase in charges against women during intimate partner violence situations) to Coordinating Committee to End Woman Abuse, triggering a review of the evidence. Result - Police held accountable e.g., incidences of women perpetrators of intimate partner violence are being looked at more closely.
- Reduced siloed approach to supporting women by connecting services and stakeholders, and participating in committees like the High-Risk table.
- Coordinating Committee to End Woman Abuse – has reached out to crowns, justices, and judges to voice collective concerns about premature releases, reduced jail times, and holding offenders accountable.

Impact of specific initiatives

Respondents specifically mentioned their perceived impact of the following initiatives.

Honouring Our Stories and the subsequent Trauma-Informed Practice Training resulted in:

- Fewer negative interactions between women and the police
- Increased knowledge among some police re. trauma-informed practice
- Police running own trauma-informed training
- Women seeing police officers as human beings

Court Observer – possible increase in women's safety due to a) the community can be informed when a violent offender is being released and b) the possibility that fewer offenders are released when a court observer is present.

Safer Together Model training (Perpetrator Pattern Response) – crystallized a more feminist approach to violence among agencies and increased awareness of the aspect of coercive control. Combined with the Centre's presence at high-risk tables has resulted in a shift in frontline staff focusing on the perpetrator, being held more accountable for language, and taking a strengths-

based approach, which results in better interactions and a feeling of being able to better support survivors.

Tech-Facilitated Violence Workshop resulted in City of Thunder Bay staff running a social media campaign for youth.

Good Food Box. Stakeholders, staff and users (some of whom were volunteers) spoke about the importance of the Good Food Box. In addition to the points below, most agreed that it was the biggest contributor to maintaining the Centre's profile in the community.

- Impact on women
 - access to healthy food
 - save money
 - knowledge of new produce and how to cook
- Impact on volunteers
 - positive feelings and mental health of contributing to something really important
 - increased social connections and a sense of community
 - discounted rate on the box.
- Impact on systems
 - A strong relationship with Westfort Foods has resulted in increased organizational capacity in Thunder Bay and across the region.

Impact on students

Three students who did their placement at the Centre (social justice, social work, law) were asked whether their experience had an impact on them. The responses were all positive, and most said that this placement deepened their understanding of the issues women face and set them up to better understand their field of study.

- Non-profit operations skills. Learned:
 - how a non-profit operates
 - how to keep data/statistics
 - how to write grant applications
 - how to be creative and find information
- Impact on practice
 - Learned active listening skills, and how to confirm and validate feelings e.g., "It's valid that you feel that way."
 - More empathetic, more compassionate, more humanistic approach due to increased knowledge of the social context around women.
- Ability to navigate complex systems, and help others
 - Learned what questions to ask of women, then use that info to connect all the different services.
 - Knowledge of agency mandates and legal processes. E.g., how to prepare documentation like impact statements, and criminal compensation applications.

- Knowledge translation skills
 - Increased ability to help people understand the information and resources

What if the Centre did not exist?

External stakeholders and staff were asked, “What would be happening if the Centre was not doing this work?” Users of the Centre were asked “What would your life be like if you weren't working with the Women's Centre?” and prompted with “What if it didn't exist?”

The responses to these questions give a different perspective to earlier sections of the report that talk about the impact and the difference the Centre makes in women's lives.

“People would just give up.” User

“Hard to imagine what it would be like, scared of what life would be like and unsure of what would happen to me and my kids.” User

“With family law and child welfare issues... I feel in a lot of those issues, [staff] was really good to hold those systems accountable when something wasn't going appropriately...even though she's helping one woman on a certain issue, with the power she has to advocate for it, it's not going to happen to another one.” Student

“If no Centre advocacy, women would not be connected to appropriate services – because agencies have closed mandates – lots of doors closed. Women will not want to look anywhere else, after they've been shut down by system, after system, after system.” External Stakeholder

“There would be a lot less women clawing out of the clutches of capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy – because it's [the Centre] laid a foundation and safe space for women to know. And if it wasn't there where else would we go? Other places are so bogged down...” External Stakeholder

Users spoke about how women leaving abusive relationships would have no place to turn. One predicted a possible increase in the use of the emergency room for mental health issues due to a lack of someone to talk to (with tools), in the short term. Another talked about the long-term impact on families – how children with mothers with poor well-being will enter a cycle of poor well-being. As well, one user felt that more women would be taken advantage of in court.

External stakeholders and staff talked about how much worse off women would be. Specifically:

- more women staying in abusive relationships and believing they were in the wrong, were crazy, and deserving of the violence
- more women in unsafe situations and getting hurt by intimate partners
- more women losing custody of their children
- more women falling through the cracks
- increased marginalization, desperation - women would be on the street, evicted, no shelter, no food

- More women living in poverty and food insecure

Respondents also talked about why women would be experiencing the situations in the previous list. They would be worse off due to:

- lack of understanding of the issues in their family law disputes
- no access to no cost, low-cost legal information
- not being protected from violence, fewer safety plans
- more fractured relationship between women in the community and the police – (photovoice project worked to repair those relationships)
- complex, high-risk issues not being serviced by mandate specific agencies e.g., custody over international borders
- no safe space to go to get information and connect if not feeling safe with police, partners, or family
- no feminist analysis of women's situations

Stakeholders and staff also mentioned that there would be “gaps” in the system. Many of these insights reflect how the work of the Centre impacts systems, partnerships and community capacity noted in the previous section.

One stakeholder spoke about how the Violence Against Women partnership would not be as strong, successful, or collaborative without the Centre's research and involvement. Another said there would be a loss of deep feminist analysis around what's needed in the community.

“There is so much funding represented in the violence against women sector...and there are so many other issues surrounding women and gender-diverse people that are not being addressed in those other centres, particularly locally. So there are also advocacy and legal questions, and a lot of stuff regarding equity, and work and refugee status that isn't offered by anyone else but them, so they really fill a huge gap.” External Stakeholder

“I almost see us as helping someone get a foot in the door to get more services or understand how to navigate systems, something that might be very distressing or hard to understand, e.g., justice system. Help people navigate systems that are very big and hard and scary to do alone, and help them build this network of support, that you might not get as a first response from an org with a more tailored response. e.g., victim services or VAW.” WC staff

Examples of gaps in the system if the Centre was not doing this work:

- No court navigator services, or funding for a formal court support navigator program for women who are not eligible for Victim Witness.
- The low-barrier threshold for who the Centre helps, along with a broader mandate, means it:
 - fills the gaps in the continuum of care needed by women intersecting with the VAW shelters.
 - fills the gaps in support for women and agencies looking to address child protection concerns, i.e., through services, advocacy, referrals and system navigation.