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Woman Abuse and Ontario Works in a Rural Community ***Rural Women Speak about their Experiences with Ontario Works***

“The government is doing everything possible to hurt us, to make us dependent. I don’t mean dependent on the welfare system, but I mean dependent on men.” (Huron County woman)

Executive Summary

This study asked abused women in Huron County to speak about their experiences with Ontario Works since 1995 and to provide recommendations for change. Twenty women provided rich and compelling information for local service providers and provincial policy makers. The true experts on the delivery of Ontario Works for abused women are in fact the women themselves. They have formulated important action items and provided new information for the development of an improved Ontario Works response to abused women and their children.

The findings and recommendations from this study reflect the unique experiences of abused women in the rural community of Huron County. The land, services, work, history, culture, people and values in Huron County shaped their experiences. This study was linked to a larger provincial project that has gathered information from abused women on Ontario Works in many different communities, as well as from Ontario Works staff and administrators. We hope that these studies provide a body of information that will lead to change in the way Ontario Works is delivered to abused women throughout Ontario.

Women Today of Huron sponsored this participatory action research project on the effects of current Ontario Works policies on rural women dealing with violence and abuse in their intimate relationships. The project was guided by an Advisory Committee and funded by Status of Women Canada. It had the following goals:

1. To learn about the experience of abused rural women with Ontario Works and to hear directly from them their recommendations for change.
2. To consult with Ontario Works on their experiences with abused women and their recommendations for change
3. To collaborate with a province wide project (Queen’s University, York University, Carleton University) with similar goals

The project collected data from several sources:

- Twenty women were interviewed using an open-ended interview guide modified from the tool developed by the Provincial Project after an initial screening and information contact. All of the women were on Ontario Works since 1995 and experienced domestic abuse in that time period. The interviews were taped and transcribed, and a qualitative approach to the data analysis was used.
- Nine interview participants attended a Women's Workshop to discuss a summary of themes from the interviews and to develop recommendations for this report.
- Huron County Ontario Works staff and their supervisor participated in a consultation where they discussed a summary of themes and the recommendations from the Women's Workshop and provided additional recommendations.
- A brief review of relevant research, as well as a review of Ontario Works Policy Directives.

Findings, Recommendations and Action Items

The findings, recommendations and action items from this study are presented from three different perspectives:

Abused women who participated in the interviews and Women's Workshop; Huron County Ontario Works staff; and a summary from the Project Advisory Committee.

Recommendations from the Women's Workshop

1. Make changes to the way Ontario Works responds to victims of domestic violence.

- 1.1. Within the Ontario Works system there should be a branch that deals specifically with women and children leaving abusive relationships, or specific case workers should be trained to deal with such cases.
- 1.2. A program needs to be in place so that women leaving abusive relationships can access Ontario Works funds prior to leaving.
- 1.3. A booklet should be provided by Ontario Works that outlines all of the services and deferrals that can be accessed by abused women

2. Support the safety of abused women and their children.

- 2.1. Ontario Works needs to recognize that for many women who have escaped abusive relationships, there are safety issues with finding employment right away.
- 2.2. Ontario Works should provide women with phone services,
- 2.3. A policy should be created that places the onus of finding the father for child support purposes on an outside agency so that the woman does not have to re-expose herself to the abusive partner or let him know her current location.

3. Increase benefits and supports for abused women on Ontario Works

- 3.1. There must be an increase in the amount of money provided by Ontario Works to ensure women and children have enough money for decent food, safe housing, and essential living expenses.
- 3.2. Women who have left abusive relationships should not be immediately pushed to get into the work force. They need a window of time to heal emotionally before they will be able to succeed at a job. They need time, education and counselling if they are going to be successful in the work force.
- 3.3. Raising children needs to be valued by society and reflected in the policies of Ontario Works. Women who care for their young children are working hard and are contributing to society. Children who have lived in abusive family situations need to have their mothers available to them.
- 3.4. If women are forced by Ontario Works to be present at certain appointments (court, etc), then they should be provided with additional funding for childcare, travel expenses etc.
- 3.5. Ontario Works should cover the cost of all prescription medications, as well as dental and optical needs for women.
- 3.6. Baby bonuses and child support should not be considered income, and thus should not be deducted from monthly payouts.

4. Help abused women get off of Ontario Works

- 4.1. People on Ontario Works should be allowed to put money in savings so that they can eventually get out of the system and be self-sufficient.
- 4.2. Families receiving Ontario Works should be allowed to keep education savings for their children.
- 4.3. The amount that women can earn without penalty should be increased.
- 4.4. Ontario Works needs to place greater emphasis on helping women get out of the system.

5. Recognize the unique situation of abused women in a rural area.

- 5.1. Rural women need to be allowed to keep their assets (homes, cars) without penalty from Ontario Works. Leaving an abusive partner should not result in

- financial penalties for the victim. Women should not be expected to sell off all of their assets while in transition after leaving an abusive relationship.
- 5.2. Money should be provided for rural women to assist in the payment of car insurance, upkeep and gas. Vehicles are essential for women in rural areas for safety and to access employment and support services. Since public transportation is not an option in rural areas, a vehicle is not a luxury but a necessity.
 - 5.3. Provide the supports and time that women need to get good paying jobs in their rural communities. More supports and more opportunities for retraining or additional education are needed for abused women so they find the work that will lead to long-term financial security and independence.

Recommendation from Huron County Ontario Works staff:

- Implement province wide training for Ontario Works staff on abuse issues and how to respond to abused women accessing Ontario Works.
- Continue to build community partnerships between Huron Ontario Works and local community organizations, Women’s Shelter, Second Stage Housing and Women Today of Huron.
- Consideration be given to increasing the base level of benefits for recipients of Ontario Works.
- Consideration be given to a review of the “necessities of life” under the Ontario Works program to look at the necessities that are essential for rural people. Car allowances and an allowance for basic telephone service could be considered as necessities in a rural community.

Key Issues and Action Items from the Project Advisory Committee:

1. The Ontario Works program needs to be redesigned to ensure that it is part of a seamless community response to domestic violence, with the safety of victims as its first priority.

Provincial Action	Local Action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Develop a specialized social assistance response to abused women that recognizes the unique needs of women who need OW because of abuse. ➤ Develop a comprehensive provincial Domestic Violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Continue to develop local partnerships and information sharing between Ontario Works and Huron County women’s services. ➤ Develop local protocols with Ontario Works to clarify local

<p>policy and procedural framework for the Ontario Works response victims of domestic violence that includes: screening and identification procedures, risk assessment procedures, specialized response procedures for abused women, confidentiality and safety procedures (contact with the perpetrator, work safety issues etc.), specialized programs and services.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Complete province wide training with OW staff on domestic violence, responses to victims and safety planning. ➤ Develop province wide domestic violence education strategies for Ontario Works clients 	<p>procedures and practices for abused women on Ontario Works.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Continue local interagency training initiatives on domestic violence to increase community capacity for a community response that includes Ontario Works.
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2. Current Ontario Works and Disability benefits are not adequate to provide abused women and their children with adequate food, safe housing and access to proper health and social services.

Provincial Action	Local Action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Increase Ontario Works and Disability benefits and index them to inflation. ➤ Build affordable housing for abused women and their children in rural communities ➤ Fund eye care, dental care and prescription drugs for women and children on Ontario Works. ➤ Increase funding to Violence Against Women agencies and invest in long-term public education strategies to address domestic violence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Develop a local strategy to meet discretionary needs of women and children on Ontario Works in Huron County. ➤ Advocate for increased benefits for Ontario Works clients.

3. Ontario Works benefits must include allowances for basic telephone service, car allowances, and quality childcare as essentials for life in a rural community.

Provincial Action	Local Action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Review “essential needs” using a rural lens. ➤ Include allowances for basic telephone service and a car allowance for abused women for safety reasons. ➤ Fund quality childcare in rural communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Advocate for the inclusion of basic telephone and car allowance ➤ Advocate for quality, affordable childcare in rural communities.

4. Abused women need short-term financial assistance from Ontario Works to deal with the transition from the abusive situation and long-term financial, employment and education supports to ensure they gain full economic independence.

Provincial Action	Local Action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Provide social assistance for abused women retraining or attending post secondary education. ➤ Develop strategies for long-term supports for abused women and their children recovering from abuse. ➤ Increase minimum wage levels. ➤ Develop programs to improve employment equity and employment opportunities for women in rural communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Develop local strategies to support women needing retraining and education. ➤ Address stigma towards women on OW through public education initiatives and local programs for abused women. ➤ Consult with women on supports they need, and how local services can be helpful ➤ Support women as volunteers to assist other abused women dealing with OW and abuse.



Acknowledgments

It is difficult to find an adequate way to thank the twenty women who participated in this study. They made time in their complex and often exhausting lives to spend hours with a complete stranger. The information they shared was intensely private and at times overwhelmingly painful. We hear their voices in this report, their unique stories and perspectives, only because they revisit their sites of trauma for the information. Each woman delved deeply into her fear, her hopes and her disappointments to bring us her knowledge and expertise. Twenty women participated with great courage and honesty. Each woman in this study said they participated because they hoped their experiences and knowledge would make the lives of other women and children better. The women said, as difficult as it was to talk about their experiences of abuse and their lives on Ontario Works, it was worth it if changes could be made to help other abused women and their children. Every woman in this study asked to be contacted for the women's workshop to develop recommendations based on the interviews. Only nine women were able to attend, but they spent another day of their time to put together the recommendations in this report. We thank them for coming forward, for sharing their knowledge, for revisiting painful and disturbing memories, and for their recommendations for change.

Thank you to Huron County Ontario Works. Michele Gaynor and Huron Ontario Works staff were important partners and participants in this study. They reviewed the draft findings, provided information on Ontario Works locally and provincially, and provided their recommendations.

Thank you to the members of the Project Advisory Committee: Michele Hansen, Tanya Verburg, Lori Stanley, Shelley Passmore, Michele Thompson, Rhonda Hartleib, Pam Hanington. The advisory committee brought many important perspectives to this project; from community agencies to that of women of experience. Members were involved in every step of the project from the design to the review of the final report.

Thank you to Women Today Huron: to the Board of Directors for sponsoring this project and for providing in kind support; to Executive Director, Pam Hanington for her leadership and commitment to this work; and to staff members Kati Durst, Sarah Caldwell, and Vanessa Yeats, for administrative and practical supports.

Thank you to Patte Ricciotti for assistance getting the project started and for transcribing the interviews.

Thank you to the staff at Second Stage Housing in Clinton, Exeter and Goderich and Arletta Glenn, Gertie Gerrits, and Tanya Sinnett for assistance with the recruitment of women and for arranging space for interviews.

Thank you to the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food for providing space for interviews, and to the Betty Cardno Centre and for providing space for the women's workshop.

Thank you to Status of Women Canada for providing the funding for this project, and to Arlene Timmins and Louise Pitre for their support of this project.



Introduction

Women Today of Huron sponsored a participatory action research project on the effects of current Ontario Works policies on rural women dealing with violence and abuse in their intimate relationships. The project was guided by an Advisory Committee and funded by Status of Women Canada. It had the following goals:

1. To learn about the experience of abused rural women with Ontario Works and to hear directly from them their recommendations for change;
2. To consult with Ontario Works on their experiences with abused women and their recommendations for change;
3. To collaborate with a province wide project (Queen's University, York University, Carleton University) with similar goals.

This project arose out of two primary concerns in the community of Huron:

- Ontario Works in this rural community has undermined the economic security of women, especially those who have left or want to leave abusive relationships, and may have made these women and their children more vulnerable to violence and abuse;
- Ontario Works policy is reflective of an urban bias and assumes that there are jobs to get, affordable and safe places to live, available childcare, available transportation, and that anonymity and privacy are obtainable for abused women in Huron County. Furthermore, rural culture as context for understanding the relationship between the available social safety net and the risk of violence against women and children has not been considered in Ontario Works policy making.

Women Today of Huron made an application for funding to Status of Women Canada as a result of information-gathering through a preliminary community consultation and conversations with women in Women Today programming that indicated that some women delayed leaving an abusive relationship or violent situation for fear of financial destitution and loss of property rights, and they reported they were more likely to return to the abusive situation for financial reasons.

This report presents the findings, recommendations and action items from a participatory action research study that involved abused women and Huron Ontario Works staff in the rural community of Huron County.



Background and Context for this Study

The Impact of Ontario Welfare Changes

Dr. Margaret Little provides an overview of the changes in the Ontario Welfare system since 1995 and the impact of women in her article “**A Litmus Test for Democracy: The Impact of Ontario Welfare Changes on Single Mothers**” (Little, 2001).

In 1995, the Ontario government began an overhaul of the provincial the welfare system with rate cuts of 21.6% to all welfare recipients. In 1996, the federal government dismantled the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) and replaced it with the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST), while announcing billions of dollars in cuts to the provinces for social programs. The new CHST program made it possible for the Ontario government to proceed with the introduction of a new approach to social assistance called Ontario Works. The previous federal CAP program required all provinces to meet federal standards for social assistance in order to receive funding:

- benefits based solely on financial need;
- all provincial residence requirements eradicated;
- an appeal board established in each province to protect recipients’ rights.

The CHST program dismantled national standards for welfare and made it possible for the province of Ontario to introduce Ontario Works, an employment–tied approach to social assistance that forces all welfare recipients except mothers with pre school-aged children and people with disabilities to participate in work to “earn” their social assistance cheques. It has also allowed Ontario to tighten eligibility requirements, curtail the rights of welfare recipients to appeal welfare decisions, and introduce new anti-fraud measures (Little, p. 3–6).

The introduction of welfare rate cuts and the Ontario Works “workfare” program has had a disproportionately negative impact on single women because

“it is assumed that all welfare recipients are gender neutral – equally able to top up miserly welfare cheques and equally available for employment. Consequently these welfare changes virtually ignore the different child care and familial responsibilities of women” (Little p.7).

Little interviewed 30 workfare recipients across Ontario, interviewed anti-poverty activists and analysed data from 200 focus group interviews conducted by Ontario Workfare Watch. Her research found that the reductions to welfare benefits resulted in:

- Single mothers going without food in order to feed their children;
- Women returning to abusive partners, experiencing increasing amounts of violence and harassment from ex partners;
- Women selling all possessions to buy food and necessities of life;
- Women attempting suicide out of despair;
- Women living without telephone services;

- Women who were economically dependent on abusive partners, family members or harassing landlords because they could not be economically independent on Ontario Works.

Little suggests that the introduction of “gender neutral” workfare programs had a negative impact on single women with children because they do not recognize the additional responsibilities and work that women must do in the home to care for their children. Women reported discrepancies in rules about job-searches, women being cut off welfare because of inadequate job searches (which cannot be appealed), and futile job search activities in low employment areas. All women with school-aged children are now required to participate in Community Participation, unpaid work in return for welfare, for up to 70 hours per month. Women reported difficulties complying with workfare requirements because of the lack of childcare, no transportation, and harassment on the job by ex-partners.

Anti-fraud measures in Ontario have made social assistance more punitive, intrusive and degrading for recipients and encourage the belief that poor women are morally suspect.

“Welfare workers can demand literally hundreds of different pieces of information, depending on the circumstances of the case and can refuse, delay, cancel welfare payments if this information is not provided. People are often told to provide information that they cannot possibly obtain, or to provide it within impossibly short periods of time.” (Little, p.15)

Little concludes that the changes to Ontario’s welfare policy have eroded the social rights of poor single mothers.

“Welfare recipients are not treated as full citizens. Because they are assumed to be undeserving, their benefits and other support services have been slashed. Because they are assumed to be lazy, there are coercive measures enforced to make sure that they are constantly looking for employment or participating in job-related activities. And because they are assumed to be cheaters they are constantly scrutinized by government workers, neighbours landlords, teachers and families. This is a highly intrusive, punitive welfare state which does not begin to treat its citizens with dignity nor recognize their real needs. This results in a loss of both material and moral power for poor single mothers,” (Little, p. 21)

The **Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses** (OAITH) surveyed 38 Shelters in Ontario in 1996 on the impact of cuts to welfare funding on abused women in Shelters. The survey found that more abused women who use Shelter services are choosing to remain with abusive partners because of cutbacks to welfare and more women are returning to abusive partners (OAITH, 1996).

Welfare Watch, an organization based in Toronto completed a report in 1999 that questioned whether the new welfare program, Ontario Works, is helping people leave

welfare for work (Mitchell, 1999). The Workfare Watch Project Interim Report in 1999 found that Ontario Works has not lived up to its promise to offer people a “hand up”. The report suggests that Ontario Works is hindering people’s efforts to leave welfare because:

- The extreme poverty of living on welfare hinders many people’s efforts to find a job;
- Necessary employment training and/or education is not available through Ontario Works;
- Training opportunities are inadequate and geared towards minimum requirements for people to enter the lowest tier of the labour market;
- Ontario Works does not assess participants’ barriers to employment or provide enough employment supports, for example transportation or childcare;
- Workfare gives few people new marketable skills and is displacing paid employment.

In 2002 Workfare Watch Bulletin #15 reported that welfare reform in Ontario, like elsewhere in the United States and Canada, has been reduced to a single narrow purpose: reducing the caseload. The report notes that the Ontario government does not track people once they are off welfare to find out why they left assistance, the types of jobs they now hold and the well being they experience, and suggests that caseload reduction has become an end in itself, the sole indicator of success for the entire program of welfare reform (Lightman, Mitchell & Shillington, 2002). This report concludes that the Ontario Works caseload is made up increasingly of single parents. It notes that lone mothers are least likely to move up from low paid work possibly because of barriers created by their responsibilities for child rearing and the difficulty they experience finding quality child care.

Review of Ontario Works Policy Directives for Victims of Family Violence

A review of Ontario Works Legislation and Policy Directives was completed to determine what the legislation says and the exemptions for abused women. The information was obtained through an Internet search of information on the Ministry of Family and Community Services web site, the Ontario Works website and a limited “Google” search, which included the Ontario Workfare Watch website.

A search of 54 Ontario Works Policy Directives (2001) was completed using key words “family violence”, “victims of family violence” and “domestic violence”. In the Policy Directives Index, there are references to family violence under Abuse or under Interval and Transition Homes for Victims of Family Violence. Searches of selected additional directives revealed other references to victims of family violence that were not referenced in the Subject Index. In general, references to Family Violence are not organized in a way that allows any focus to this population of clients, and it is difficult to find or know all the policy aspects that may apply to this group of clients.

There were several places in the Policy Directives that refer the reader to the “Policy on Domestic Violence”, but do not give a Directive number or reference, nor is there a specific Policy Directive named as such. It does not appear that there is a comprehensive Policy on Domestic Violence that includes all the various aspects of the Ontario Works response to victims of family violence.

The Participation Application directives appear to emphasize the need for Ontario Works staff to complete all aspects of the forms first, then it identifies cautions or waivers related to victims of family violence. There does not appear to be any clear decision tree or approach that would allow caseworkers to identify victims of family violence. In addition, references to deferrals or waivers for victims of domestic violence do not include examples that might heighten awareness to the needs of and/or the need for sensitivity in the response to victims of family violence.

Directive 6:0 describes rules for and guidance about setting requirements for an applicant or participant. Individuals dealing with family violence “are advised that they meet one or more conditions for deferral, and where they agree, have their participation requirements deferred”. Participants are given the option to participate where they are able and willing. A deferral from participation for victims of family violence would include deferrals from job search, job search support services, basic education and job specific skills training, employment placement, or self employment activities (see Directive 37.0 Early Employment Measures & Basic Education). An applicant or participant who has declared herself to be a victim of family violence can be deferred for a minimum of 3 months with further extension where approved by the Administrator.

Directive 7:0 outlines the Participation Agreement, a required form, which is an agreement between a participant and OW that outlines the activities in the participation plan. The Participation Agreement must be completed, regardless if the participant’s requirements have been deferred because of family violence. The Participation Agreement must be reviewed every 3 months.

Directive 18.0: Residence Requirements assists workers in determining eligibility based on the type and place of residence. Victims of family violence are eligible for Personal Needs Allowance and Shelter Costs to maintain their community accommodation while at an interval or transition house.

Directive 19.0: Co-Residency. Under the Head of Household section this directive states that delivery agents must be aware that the head of the household should not be any person who has a recent or current problem that may result in misuse of the allowance or where there is evidence of abuse of the funds or a history of family violence. There is no information provided on how the worker determines a history of family violence.

Directive 23:0: Family Support. This directive states that where there is potential for support the target for having provisions in place is 120 days from the date of application. It notes that the family violence policy must be followed, but it is not clear where to find

this. There is specific information on Family Violence situations in the Application of Policy section. A temporary waiver of 3 months shall be granted to applicants who have left the home because of a violent situation. The deferral for family violence occurs when the violence is verified, for example by a doctor, police, etc., approved by the supervisor with a decision in writing, and is subject to a review of circumstances every 3 months.

Directive 31.0: Provision of Benefits (Community Start Up). The Community Start-Up Benefit is a mandatory item of assistance, available only once in a 12 month period. Victims of family violence are eligible for Community Start Up Benefits and may split the benefit when they leave a Shelter to interim housing, then move again to a permanent residence.

Directive 49.0: Delivery Standards. This directive outlines program standards for the delivery agency, including training requirements for Ontario Works staff. Training on domestic violence, identifying abuse or working with victims of violence is not noted as one of the training areas.

Summary: Ontario Works directives include provisions for deferrals and waivers of aspects of workfare for victims of domestic violence. There is no comprehensive policy document or protocol that sets out how victims of violence can be supported when they access Ontario Works while dealing with violence in their lives, or how Ontario Works will work with other community agencies to address the health, safety and support needs of victims. Specific information about family violence appears in a piecemeal fashion, sprinkled throughout policy directives and without examples that would provide workers with guidance on how to respond to victims in the field. It is difficult to locate specific information on family violence because not all of the information is included in the subject index. Finally, workers are not required to identify family violence (they rely on victim disclosure) or have any training in the area of domestic violence, although they will certainly deal with victims of violence in difficult and dangerous life situations as part of their jobs.

Domestic Violence and Welfare: Research from the USA

Ontario Works is a program that is modelled on workfare programs that were introduced during the 1990's in the United States. **“A Review of Research on Welfare and Domestic Violence”** in the Journal of Social Issues (in press) by Richard Tolman and Jody Raphael summarizes and critiques the growing body of research on domestic violence and welfare. Although there are differences between the American situation and that of Ontario, this review is extremely relevant and provides important information for both policy development and for Canadian research. The Tolman and Raphael review is organized in several areas: prevalence of domestic violence among women receiving welfare; the relationship between domestic violence and women's

employment; health and mental health issues; child support; and evaluations of policies and programs.

Prevalence of Domestic Violence Among Women on Welfare

The review by Tolman and Raphael notes that studies of domestic violence prevalence among women on welfare have consistently found rates considerably higher than rates of women in the general population. A review of nineteen studies on the prevalence of domestic violence found prevalence rates of lifetime domestic violence between 34% and 65%, with most rates in the 50%-60% range. Recent or current rates of physical abuse ranged from 8% to 33% with most rates ranging from 20%-30%. A substantial number of women on welfare experience domestic violence in their lifetime.

A study conducted in 1999 by Honeywell and Marshall compared women receiving welfare to other low-income women found that the severity of violence women had sustained from the current partner was associated with welfare receipt (Tolman and Raphael, 2003).

In work by Ziliak et al, in 1997, the prevalence of domestic violence and other problems among welfare recipients is seen to increase as the most employable move off welfare, since these problems may constitute barriers to employment that would prolong the need for public assistance.

Domestic Violence and Women's Employment

Researchers have documented the direct ways that abusers interfere with women's attempts to work, including keeping women up all night before interviews, destroying clothing, inflicting visible facial wounds before job interviews, threatening to kidnap the children, failing to provide childcare or transportation and harassing the woman at work (Tolman and Raphael, 2003).

Welfare-to-work participants report similar interference, as well as continuous effort to make women feel guilty about leaving children with outside child care providers. Women reported increased violence when they sought education, training or work. Pearson and associates (1999) found that 44% of domestic violence victims reported that their abusive ex-partners had prevented them from working.

Tolman and Raphael cite Bush (in press), who found that battered women who had sought a protection order (restraining order) were six times more likely to drop out of a program than women who did not, which is strong evidence that battered women facing a safety crisis will be unable to comply with welfare reform requirements.

Low income battered women have many different responses to the abuse: some battered women struggle to work; others work but cannot sustain employment over time; and others do not or cannot obtain jobs (Browne et al., 1999, in Tolman and Raphael, 2003).

Tolman and Rosen (in press) found that recent severe domestic violence and direct work interference did not predict which women were working, but women's health and mental health did predict employment.

Smith (1999) found that the combination of physical and sexual abuse as an adult was associated with employment instability (more jobs, fewer months of work, lower wages) (cited in Tolman and Raphael, 2003).

Health and Mental Health Issues

There is strong evidence in the research that abuse victims were more likely to report adverse physical health and increased levels of mental health problems (Allard et al, 1997; Circio 1996; Browne, Bassuk, and Solomon 1999, cited in Tolman and Raphael, 2003). Tolman and Rosen (in press) found that 62% of recent victims of severe violence had at least one of the five psychiatric disorders measured, compared to 34% of past victims and 23% of those who never experience violence (cited in Tolman and Raphael, 2003).

Child Support

American welfare reform requires women cooperate with the collection of child support payments. Studies show that most abused women want to collect child support payments and do not want waivers. Recent studies suggest that women want to collect child support, with between 2% and 8% of women screened for domestic violence saying they needed a waiver of child support payment for safety reasons (Pearson et al., 1999; Raphael & Haennicke, 1999, cited in Tolman and Raphael, 2003). However, it is important that women who fear the repercussions be identified and obtain waivers.

Specialized Welfare Response for Abused Women

Federal policies in the USA allow states to provide violence victims on welfare with temporary exemptions from workfare. In 1999, federal regulations require states implementing the "Family Violence Option" to assess women for domestic violence and refer them to a person trained in domestic violence issues to create an individualized service plan designed to promote employment safely. Only a handful of states do not offer the Family Violence Option and most states assess women for domestic violence and refer them to off-site domestic violence providers for safety planning and other services. Several locations employ domestic violence specialists in welfare offices as demonstration sites.

Very few women disclose abuse to the welfare caseworker and most states do not track the number of disclosures. Information from trained DV specialists at demonstration sites indicate the women did not disclose the domestic violence in their lives for fear of being pitied by the welfare worker, out of shame, or out of fear of the abuser.

Overall the number of waivers because of domestic violence nationwide has been low (Raphael & Haennicke, 1999, cited in Tolman and Raphael, 2003).

Unfortunately, choosing not to disclose the violence means that workers are unable to assist women in safely obtaining employment. The fact that women disclose more frequently to on-site domestic violence advocates than to caseworkers demonstrates that more work needs to be done to improve response to battered women in welfare offices (Tolman & Raphael, 2003).

Rural Women and Poverty

In 2002 the Rural Women and Poverty Action Committee, with the support of Women Today of Huron, conducted a participatory action research study with rural women living in poverty in Grey, Bruce and Huron Counties. Thirty-five diverse women, including women on Ontario Works and dealing with abuse, attended two workshops to speak of their experience of rural poverty. Women in this study said they are poor because:

- There are no jobs or job opportunities for women to use the good skills they have. Most of the higher paying jobs are reserved for men; while women are forced into low paying jobs that leave them in poverty;
- They experience sudden loss of employment, loss of health or disability issues, abuse, divorce/separation that propel them quickly from middle class to poverty;
- There is little access to education or retraining in rural communities;
- They are economically dependant on men in rural communities;
- They care for their children and this work is not valued or compensated;
- They live on farms and the farm takes everything they have;
- Social assistance and Disability Pensions are not adequate to keep women out of poverty.

Women in this study reported that Ontario Works is a dead-end for women in this rural community, noting that the system is a maze, lifetime bans are threatening, there are constant audits on women, and women cannot get ahead. The women in this study recommended an evaluation of Ontario Works to get a true picture of what is happening to women and children in rural areas to inform changes that will make Ontario Works work for women (Purdon, 2002).



Project Methodology

Participatory Action Research

This project used a participatory action research process to hear directly from abused women in Huron County about their experiences with Ontario Works. The research was a systematic collection and analysis of information from abused women in Huron County and from Huron County Ontario Works staff members. The participants in our study, or the “subjects” of the research, also participated directly in the design of the research methodology, in the analysis of data and in the development of recommendations for the final report. We used the participatory action research models as outlined in the work of the BC Women’s Research Centre and the Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children as guides for this study.

The project was guided by a Community Advisory Committee and was coordinated by the Project Coordinator. The Project Coordinator conducted the interviews with women, facilitated the women’s workshop to develop recommendations, completed a consultation with Huron County Ontario Works staff, and prepared the Final Report. She worked closely with the Project Advisory Committee and Women Today of Huron Executive Director, Pam Hanington, throughout this study.

The themes, findings and recommendations from this project are the voices of women in the County of Huron. They speak clearly for change in the way Ontario Works is provided for abused women and their children.

Project Advisory Committee

A project Advisory Committee guided this project throughout. It included broad representation from local service providers (Women’s Shelter services, Children’s Aid Society, Domestic Abuse Response Team, Victim Witness Program, Women Today of Huron) and women who had direct experience with abuse and Ontario Works (A memberships list is included as Appendix A).

The project advisory committee drafted the initial questions and methodology for the project, assisted with the recruitment of women for interviews, monitored the project, provided the Project Coordinator with advice and feedback, assisted with the analysis of the data, and reviewed the draft and final report.

Project Partners

Early in the life of this project, we became aware of a large provincial project on Woman Abuse and Ontario Works that was being undertaken by a three-person research team (Dr. Janet Mosher at York University, Dr. Margaret Little at Queen’s University and Dr.

Pat Evans at Carleton University). The Project Coordinator contacted Dr. Janet Mosher to discuss any opportunities for collaboration and to avoid duplication. The provincial project was at about the halfway point when we contacted Dr. Mosher. They planned to complete a total of 100 personal interviews with women dealing with welfare and abuse in 7 diverse communities, as well as conduct a mail survey with Ontario Works Administrators and shorter interviews with 20 Ontario Works case workers across the province. At the time we contacted the project, they had completed the survey of Administrators and were beginning to interview women.

The Provincial project agreed to share their research tools (interview guide for women, consent form, project information, and a survey tool for Ontario Works staff) with this study. The Project Advisory Committee reviewed the tools and compared the research questions and interview guide for women with the list of questions and the draft interview guide we had prepared for our project. Almost all of the questions that we had drafted were included in the provincial project's interview guide. We decided to use the provincial project's interview guide, with their permission, and added several questions on rural communities. The interview guide and consent form used in the project was a revised version of the provincial project tool (Appendix B). We did not use the survey tool for Ontario Works staff.

Over the course of the project we had several contacts with the provincial project to share information on our respective projects. The Provincial project made a decision to cut the number of women interviewed to 70 from 100 and we also decided to interview 20 women instead of the 30 planned. In addition, the Project Coordinator discussed data analysis processes and shared preliminary findings with the Provincial project. We will continue to collaborate and share information as both projects proceed. The members of the Project Advisory Committee and the Project Coordinator are grateful for the support and helpful advice we received from Dr. Janet Mosher, and the opportunity to share information with the Provincial project.

Project Participants

Abused Women on Ontario Works

A total of 20 women were interviewed for this study. Women were recruited for the project through flyers posted at the local Shelter, Second Stage Housing in several communities, at Women Today of Huron in Goderich, at other community agencies (doctor's offices, hospitals, libraries, Salvation Army, Community Centres) and through newspaper advertisements (Appendix C).

Women who responded to the flyers or ads were screened initially by telephone by Women Today of Huron staff to ensure that they had experienced Ontario Works since 1995 and were dealing with a form of abuse. The Project Coordinator then contacted each woman and provided her with information on the project, discussed any safety concerns or issues, and arranged an interview time.

The women came from a broad range of backgrounds, income and employment backgrounds, education levels and ages. Two women were visible minorities and one woman identified as First Nations. Two women had a first language other than English. Eighteen of the 20 women had children, and twelve women said they experienced a disability or mental health issue. All of the women had experience multiple forms of abuse in their intimate relationships with a male partner. Several women had experienced extreme abuse over a long period of time, some women had experienced more than one abusive partner, and several women were victims of child abuse or had witnessed violence as children. Several women were afraid for their lives, or the lives of their children at the time of the interview or while living with their abuser. Most of the women had ongoing safety concerns, even though they were no longer living with their abuser. At the time of the interview, one woman was living with her abusive partner, seventeen women had left an abusive partner and were living apart from him, and two women were living with a new partner.

All of the participants had been on Ontario Works since 1995 and while they were dealing with the abuse in their lives. At the time of the interview, some women had temporary deferrals or exemptions from some mandatory aspects of the Ontario Works program (for example Employment Placements, Community Participation, or seeking support payments from the spouse).

The following chart indicates their status with Ontario Works at the time of the interview:

OW Status at the Time of the Interview	# of Women
Full OW Benefits with some exemptions/deferrals	2
Full OW Benefits with no exemptions/deferrals	5
Employed (part time) with some OW Benefits	7
Full Time Employment, no OW Benefits	3
Disability Pension	3

Each woman who participated in the project received a small honorarium to cover her childcare and transportation costs. They received an information package about the project, signed a consent form and were asked if they would like to be invited to attend a follow-up workshop to develop recommendations. All 20 of the participants asked to be invited to the workshop.

Nine women who participated in the interviews attended a one-day workshop to review preliminary themes from the data, to provide their input on themes and priorities for the project, and to compile recommendations for the final report. They participated enthusiastically and their recommendations are included, as they developed them, in this report.

Huron County Ontario Works Staff

Although this project did not initially include the participation of Ontario Works staff, it became clear that some form of consultation would be important to ensure that the project builds community capacity and lays the foundation for ongoing interagency work. We approached Huron County Ontario Works and informed them of the project, and that we wished to consult with the staff. A re-worked copy of the Provincial project's Ontario Works Staff Interview guide was forwarded to the attention of the supervisor. In a telephone conversation between the Project Coordinator and Ontario Works supervisor, it was decided that an interview approach was not the best way to move forward. They agreed that a group consultation on the preliminary outcomes from the interviews and project recommendations would be a better way to consult with Ontario Works staff.

In the fall of 2003, the Project Coordinator sent a draft preliminary report that included a description of the project, key themes identified by women, and the recommendations that women made at the workshop. The Ontario Works supervisor forwarded the report to staff and a follow-up workshop was held with the supervisor and staff (6 participants). The consultation yielded additional recommendations for this report, new information on the Ontario Works policies and practices and allowed for clarification on several of the identified themes.

Project Limitations

There are a number of limitations with this study and that influence the findings:

- Women volunteered to participate in this study by responding to media advertising or through the local Shelter or Housing programs. All of the participants were connected in some way to social service agencies and had information about local services. The data in this does not include the perspective of women on Ontario Works who are not aware of abuse specific services, or who had never been involved with community agencies.
- All of the women who participated in this study had left their abusive partner, and most were living on their own at the time of the interview. Although several participants were on Ontario Works at the time they left their abusive situation, most of the information in this study reflects the experience of women on assistance while living apart from the their abuser.
- The diversity of women in the Huron County community is reflected in this study, and every attempt was made to include as many diverse women as possible. We do not know if the participants represent the full diversity of women in the community.
- Several women in this study had multiple experiences with the welfare system, before 1995 and after the introduction of Ontario Works. Every effort was made

to direct women to report on their experiences with Ontario Works (their experience after 1995), but some of the data may include the woman's experience before 1995.

- The interview transcripts do not include the full interviews with several women. In a number of cases, women became upset and required support or direction to support services during the interview, and the tape recorder was shut off. In other cases women did not want detailed information about their abuse, or their situation, included on the tape because of safety or privacy concerns. The description of the abuse, or the impact of the abuse on women, is in some cases under-reported.
- The interview guide and protocol was developed by the Ontario project under the direction of three research academics and provided to this study by Dr. Janet Mosher. Dr. Mosher provided the Project Coordinator with guidance and advice for the analysis of the data, but we did not have the resources to analyze our data with the specially designed computer software used by the provincial project.
- This study arose out of concerns in the community about the impact of Ontario Works policies and procedures on women dealing with abuse in their lives in Huron County. The members of the project advisory committee and the Project Coordinator worked with this bias - and from the assumption that there are improvements that need to be made to the Ontario Works program to better support abused women and their children.



Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews, Workshop with Women, Consultation with Ontario Works

Twenty women living in Huron County were interviewed in the winter and spring of 2002-2003. All of the women had been on Ontario Works since 1995 and were dealing with abuse. The interviews lasted two to three hours and took place in Goderich, Clinton, Exeter or Wingham. Most of the interviews were conducted at a community location, but several were conducted at the woman's home because of childcare issues or a disability. The Project Coordinator conducted all 20 interviews and made extensive notes. All but one woman gave permission to tape the interviews. Nineteen interviews were transcribed from the tapes and notes from the Project Coordinator, and one interview was prepared from hand written notes only.

In June 2003, nine of the women who participated in the interviews attended a workshop to discuss the themes from the interviews and make recommendations for the final report. Women worked together in small groups and in a plenary session to review themes that had been identified by the Advisory Committee from the original transcripts of the 20 interviews. They made a list of priority themes, and then developed recommendations for the final report.

The major themes and recommendations for Ontario Works were discussed at a workshop at their staff meeting on October 6th. Six Ontario Works staff and their supervisor participated in the consultation. Recommendations for action were developed by the group and are included in this report.

The process for the development of themes, findings and recommendations for this study can be summarized as follows:

- The Project Coordinator reviewed five transcripts chosen randomly and developed a list of themes that occurred in most of the transcripts.
- Members of the Advisory Committee divided the remaining transcripts between them and reviewed each one, looking for congruency with identified themes and for any new themes or findings.
- All of the themes from this exercise were then collected in a list, compiled by the Project Coordinator.
- The Project Coordinator then reviewed all 20 transcripts and notes from the interviews using the list of themes from the Advisory Committee. She compiled a summary list of key themes for presentation to participants at the Women's Workshop.
- The Women's Workshop participants discussed the summary list of themes and developed a list of priority findings and recommendations for action.
- A summary of the key findings and recommendations from the Women's Workshop was developed and presented to the staff of Ontario Works for their

input and discussion. OW staff provided new information and made additional recommendations.

- The members of the Advisory Committee reviewed the key findings and recommendations as part of their review of the draft final report, making additional comments, and organizing the findings under broad headings. The Advisory Committee also developed the summary recommendations for action.
- A final review of the interviews to select quotes from the women and summarize the Ontario Works consultation was completed by the Project Coordinator to complete the Final Report.



Findings from the Interviews and Women's Workshop

This section outlines the key findings from the interviews with women and from the Women's Workshop. Wherever possible the findings are expressed in the words women used in interviews and at the workshop. The findings are organized in three sections:

- A. Women's Experience and the Impact of Abuse;
- B. Women's Experience of Ontario Works; and
- C. Rural Issues for Abused Women.

Excerpts from the interviews are included to capture the voices of women and to set out their experiences in their own words. In some cases changes have been made to the quoted passages to protect the confidentiality of the woman.

A. Women's Experience and the Impact of Abuse

Women on Ontario Works are afraid of their abusers.

All of the women in this study said that at some point in their relationship their abusers were a threat to their physical and/or mental health and many women said that the abuser was a threat to their children as well. All of the women reported that they feared the abuser while living with him and many continued to fear him after separation. Some women said the abuser was also a threat to other family members, to her new partner, or to his new partner. Some women reported that their abusers became more dangerous when she left the relationship. Seven of the twenty women interviewed said they feared for their lives or the lives of their children and that they had sustained serious injuries (miscarriages, broken bones, choking, etc.). Two women were living in a state of vigilance at the time of the interview because of death threats. All of the women reported that fear of their abuser has had a very negative impact on their lives, and for some women the threats of the abuser have restricted their lives in a profound way.

“If I saw him today I would still be afraid of him. There was a lot of abuse – physical, mental, emotional, you name it. I left that relationship without him knowing I was even leaving.”

“I continue to fear him. I have a safety plan in place. I am constantly on the look out.”

“I am worried that he's going to steal my son...it scares me because they're (police) are looking for him right now, they have been looking for the last couple of months, but they haven't found him.”

Women on Ontario Works have experienced many forms of abuse.

The following chart sets out the predominant forms of abuse that women in this study experienced at the hands of their partners at the time they accessed Ontario Works.

Experience of Abuse at Time of Accessing Ontario Works	# of Women
Extreme physical and emotional violence- serious injuries, women fears for her life and/or life of her child	7
Physical and/or sexual violence and emotional abuse	9
Emotional abuse, controlling behaviors	4
Total	20

In addition:

- Some women reported that they were in highly abusive relationships before 1995, and some women had a series of abusive partners over many years.
- Several of the women in the study had a long history of abuse that began in childhood, including witnessing violence between their parents, incest and child abuse. Two of the women reported extremely abusive childhoods that forced them to flee from their homes as teens.
- Six of the women in this study entered into their abusive relationships between the ages of 14 and 17. Four of these women were pregnant between the ages of 16-17 and several interviewees had lived in long term abusive relationships that began when they were young teens and had only ended after 1995.

Abusers interfere with the woman’s ability to work or get an education.

Women reported that their abusers made it difficult to get a job, keep a job, or to get an education. Some women said that their abuser determined when, if she would work, and what kind of work she would do. Women reported that they could not rely on their partners to look after children while they worked, and several women said they were forced to quit their jobs because they could not trust their husbands to care for the children. Other women said they were fired when they were not able to go to work after an assault, or when the abuser harassed them at work. One woman said that her partner undermined her pursuit of education. Several women reported that they jointly owned a business with their abuser, and that his abuse and financial mismanagement left her destitute and without a credit rating. One woman said that her partner forced her to put his business in her name, then left her with all of the debts when the business failed. Many women in this study reported that the partner’s interference (harassment, stalking, bankruptcy issues, discrediting her in the community) continued after she left the relationship, or has ruined her opportunities for future work.

“I wasn’t allowed to work. A friend told me about a position, no experience required, they train you and it was offering \$13/hour...I wanted to apply and when I talked to him about it he said no way is any woman of mine going to be making more money than me.”

“I lost another job because he beat me up one time. I had a bruise on my face. I said I couldn’t come into work – I was up all night with him and the bruises on my face – I wasn’t going into work. And I said “I can’t come in – I have a family emergency. I called back on the Monday to get my shifts and they said I couldn’t come back to work”

“I couldn’t work because I couldn’t leave my kids alone. He was threatening the children. I was in and out of the Shelter 11 to 12 times over the past few years.”

“Because of the situation with my abusive partner in the past, I wasn’t ready to enter the field of working. I was still very fearful of being in the public eye, not knowing where he might be lurking, even though I had him restrained from the workplace house, schools etc. He wasn’t allowed to be around, but I didn’t feel that that would stop him.”

Women on Ontario Works have health and mental health issues from the impact of the abuse while living with their partners, at the time of leaving and continue to suffer after they leave. All of the women in this study reported having health and mental health problems directly related to their experience of abuse. Some women had chronic illnesses directly related to their abuse that forced them on pensions, or to leave their professions. For many women in this study health and mental health problems associated with their abuse makes it difficult to work or seek work.

“It wore down my health. It was constant – getting up for the police, going to court and taking time away, and I would be up late at night because he would be at the door or rattling the windows with stones, and then I would go to my car in the morning to go to work and it would have two flat tires....then when he found out where I was working he would harass me on the job. It was just a nightmare.”

“Well I have to discover who I am now...I was like a child. I was in this abusive relationship for 15 years and I was never allowed to grow up and be an adult, so now I’m just learning all that and it’s hard when I’m looking after 3 kids to grow up.”

“I have flash backs; post traumatic stress that started only within the last months. I have severe problems with depression and I’ve had two episodes of thinking about suicide.”

“I was walking around like some kind of a zombie – I would come back from the hospital, I would wait for the next punch, I didn’t even know what I was feeling anymore.”

“the affect of the abuse was low self esteem – you didn’t think you were worth anything.

“I don’t think you ever get over it – it comes back and hits you...its just like being in a war, it never ends – chances are I’ll be in counseling for the rest if my life.”

“I kept going through these attacks – panic attacks – body shut down. I go through body shakes uncontrollably, night sweats, hair loss, weight loss/gain, and battles with mild and moderate depression.”

Women leave their abusive situations in many different ways. The women in this study reported on many different ways that they had left their abusive situation. Some women were abused while they were on Ontario Works and did not know how to address this with their Ontario Works worker. Some women planned their escape from their abusers. Some women left as a result of a police intervention or CAS intervention, or referral to the local Shelter. No two women involved in this study had the same situation, or required the same response from Ontario Works and other community social services. In general, women said they would like to see Ontario Works take their situations and needs into consideration when dealing with them. The following chart outlines when women accessed Ontario Works:

Woman Accessed Ontario Works	# of women
While living with the abusive partner	5
At the time of leaving the abusive partner	9
Sometime after leaving the abusive partner	6
Total	20

An important finding from this study is that 6 of the 20 did not immediately access Ontario Works after leaving their partner. For several of the women who were eligible for assistance or who actually needed it, the stigma attached to being on welfare was too great and they tried to manage on their own. Some women had resources (family, assets) to live for a time without assistance. One woman lived on her credit card for almost a year before going on Ontario Works. One woman said she was embarrassed to be on Ontario Works and lived hand to mouth until the CAS told her she must access Ontario Works as a child protection measure.

One woman called Ontario Works to see if she could get assistance to leave a highly abusive situation. She did not disclose the abuse and was told that Ontario Works could not provide funds for her to leave her husband.

Leaving the abuser confronts the women with many changes and demands.

All of the women in this study reported that they were overwhelmed at the time they left the abuser and accessed the Ontario Works system. They said that it is a time when

they were emotionally vulnerable and many said that they were at higher risk of harm. Women said they were forced to juggle their lives and the lives of their children to meet demands of many agencies and to keep themselves and their children safe. Most women were involved with police, the court system, Ontario Works, and community support services such as Shelters, Healthcare services, CAS or the Mental Health services. In addition some most women moved out of their homes temporarily or permanently, and some women were forced to move from their communities and support networks.

B. Abused Women's Experience of Ontario Works

Ontario Works helps women leave their abusive partner. All of the women in this study said they were grateful that Ontario Works exists, and that Ontario Works was an important support for them. They looked to Ontario Works initially for assistance to meet immediate practical needs: money for food and daily needs, money for housing, support to provide for children, and help to finish education or get training. All of the women in the study said there are good things about Ontario Works: it's available for women who need it, volunteer drivers to get to the doctor, the drug card, childcare when the woman has counselling, work start up funds, access to legal aid, information and support from caseworkers.

“Ontario Works made it easier to leave - I had that to fall back on. I don't know what would have happened to me if I hadn't had Ontario Works to help financially”

“Ontario Works helped me to leave, and it helped me to get back on my feet...”

“Ontario Works provided day care for women and their kids, so they don't have to worry that their ex spouse can come in and take the kids”

“It (Ontario Works) has really helped. I have a positive outlook for the future despite what I have to deal with every day. I finished college. I'm accomplishing my goals...It helped in that initial time, when I was in shock... I had time to get my bearings.”

“They helped me so much – to leave my husband after so many years was quite a step to take. They got me in touch with so many people that could guide me in the right direction. I went back to school and got my grade 12 and took all kind of courses.”

“I think it just helped me knowing that I at least had an income and I knew that my bills would be paid and that I had something. When I left I had nothing – knowing that I wouldn't go back.”

Ontario Works staff are an important source of support and information for abused women.

Many of the women in this study did not know about abuse specific services or did not identify their abuse in their relationship until they became involved with community services. Women who were living with an abusive partner on Ontario Works did not report getting information about abuse from Ontario Works, nor was the abuse identified as part of the Ontario Works assessment. Women in this study said that Ontario Works workers and other community services need more information on abuse and how to deal with it. They said that Ontario Works workers who have a good understanding of abuse are very helpful, especially when they work closely with Shelter and Second Stage Housing. In general, women in this study said that once the abuse was identified, Ontario Works staff were helpful, but were limited in what they could do by the rules.

“I would say that my worker has really been supportive and understanding for me.”

“I don’t know what I would have done without the shelter, second stage house and Ontario Works. It was a package - they all worked in conjunction with each other.... I found they all had the same goal in the end - which is to get you better”

“Education is a big one. I was 37 before I found out anything about the cycle of abuse...had I known earlier, I would have left earlier and I could have spared my kids a lot of trauma.”

“Here (Huron County) they were very sensitive and concerned of about my health, not only physically, but emotionally and mentally. They were very good to me.”

Ontario Works does not provide enough money to meet the basic needs of women and their children. All but one woman said they couldn’t afford to live on Ontario Works. They said they couldn’t afford proper housing, proper food for themselves and their children, medication, clothes and childcare. Ontario Works does not cover eyeglasses or anything but emergency dental care for women. Women rely on family support and food banks to feed themselves and their children and to make ends meet. The women in this study who were without family support were truly destitute. The impact of low Ontario Works rates is especially hard for single and disabled women, and women with children who do not have subsidized housing. They reported great hardships, hunger and hopelessness. Women said they couldn’t pay their bills or save money to get off Ontario Works. Many women do not have enough money for a phone, which is a safety issue for them and their children

“It’s bad never feeling I have enough money – paying one bill and not the next one – over and over again...(It’s) stressful. You want to get off of it (Ontario Works); you want to be able to do without it, but at the same time you need to claim everything you make and if you miss an appointment they hold your cheques.”

“They just give you the basic amount. Once I paid my bills for diapers, formula there was hardly any money left for groceries – no money for you...The health nurse keep pushing breast feeding but you need to eat to do that. My milk ran out – I couldn’t do it anymore.”

“I needed new glasses and had no way of getting them. At a monthly interview with the worker I talked about problems with my feet and she helped me to get good shoes. She said just go down to the shoe store and get good shoes and bill it to welfare. But I thought that it was very strange that I couldn’t get glasses – I need to see, my feet I can soak.”

“A phone - that’s the biggest thing. I didn’t have a phone until my parents got me one. My phone was disconnected the middle of the month. A phone is really important so that you can call the police and not go outside yourself.

“I still have to borrow money off of my parents for bills and for the kid’s clothes.”

Inadequate benefits and workfare policies push abused women back into the workforce before they are ready.

Many women reported that low Ontario Works rates pushed them into the workforce before they were ready because they could not provide for themselves and their children on Ontario Works. Several women said that they pushed themselves to do multiple jobs before they had healed from the impact of years of extreme abuse, which has had a long-term negative impact on their health. Several women said that they had to put making money ahead of the care of their children, who were also suffering from the impact of abuse. Many women said that the OW program is set up to get women into the workforce, and that means they feel pressure to work, even when they are not ready, or feel that their children need them at home.

Women at the workshop felt that when it is such a hard life on assistance, women can be forced to go back to their abusers and jeopardize the safety of themselves and their children. Although no women in this study returned to their abuser because they could not manage on Ontario Works, several women said that they had thought of it.

Several women reported that they are now on disability because they had to work so hard on Ontario Works at the same time as dealing with the impact of the abuse, and now they have chronic health problems.

“I wanted her (the child) to be at least two or three when I went back (to work) but welfare didn’t give me enough to live on, so you’re pretty much forced to go back to work... ”

“The amount they give you is unrealistic - you absolutely cannot do it, its impossible”

“They (OW) want you to get out and work – meanwhile you had kids at home to pay for. You weren’t good enough as a mother – someone else had to be the mother during the day – the caregiver, the babysitter and had to be paid to do what I did in the home to begin with.”

“I feel that I really can’t look for a part time job right now. I feel that I need to get things situated for my children and for me, to get on my feet... – not always worrying and being stressed out with this and that and not being able to concentrate on the work.”

Women are deeply and negatively impacted by the stigma attached to welfare.

Most women reported feeling increased shame and worthlessness when they had to access Ontario Works. They said that family and community members can act with contempt because the woman is on Ontario Works. Women said they feel as though they are viewed as “lesser” members of society or viewed as lazy, careless people who just don’t want to work. All of the negative stereotypes attached to welfare and welfare recipients are directed to abused women who need Ontario Works support. Women who were forced to leave employment or who were not able to work because of the abuse said they suffered from feelings of failure. Women said that there is a great deal of stigma attached to being on welfare in this rural community. Some women said they shared the negative stereotypes about welfare recipients until they were forced to go to Ontario Works because of abuse.

“It’s like you failed your marriage, your business and you can’t get any lower than welfare. Its embarrassing personally - not the way you thought you would grow up”

“I went off welfare before I should have; there is a stigma with welfare and Ontario Works.”

“When they give you the Work Start Up they don’t actually give you money...they run this big long receipt at Wal-Mart and you have to bring that to welfare so they can approve it. So everybody that is working that day at Wal-Mart knows what you are there for ... It is totally humiliating”

“We are non citizens in the community. We are seen as untrustworthy.”

“Being on welfare, like I said, you have this stereotype. It has made me realize that there is no stereotype – it’s available for those who desperately need it. You could be from a wealthy family and you need some place to go.”

“I will never go back to that food bank again. They were so rude...I don’t feel there is any reason that I should be intimidated or put down – it could very easily be them in my situation. They should be more thankful that they have a job, and that they’re healthy and that they’re fine and they haven’t had to endure this type of stuff (referring to her abuse).”

“A lot of people look down on people who are on Ontario Works. I haven’t had this problem because I have been working for my cheque and people would say, ok, she’s out in the work force putting in her time.”

Abused women experience barriers in disclosing their abuse to Ontario Works.

Most women said they would have disclosed their abuse, or thought that it would be good for women to disclose, but faced barriers:

- lack of privacy in Ontario Works offices,
- lack of understanding of abuse issues by workers,
- the woman’s fear for her safety,
- her shame about her situation,
- fear that the worker would not believe the woman.

Women said the Ontario Works workers don’t need to know the details of the abuse, but need to know about the kind of assistance the woman will need because of her abuse. Women in the study said that abused women need a sensitive response from Ontario Works workers who understand that she may be embarrassed or ashamed.

“When it’s your first time on Ontario Works and you’re talking about the abuse you don’t know who’s listening in the next cubicle.”

“I don’t think women would tell the worker about the abuse - fear is in the way... I think Ontario Works should help support them and talk to the women, help guide them and get them through this. Yeah, it’s good to tell the worker. If they can talk about it maybe Ontario Works can support you more.”

“If you say something about the abuse, the worker doesn’t see this in the abuser. If you looked at my ex-spouse, you wouldn’t believe it.”

Abused women need to be informed of Ontario Works policy directives that provide deferrals or exemptions from Ontario Works activities. Only one woman in this study was informed of policies that allow deferrals from specific activities for abused women. Nineteen women were not told about deferrals. They said they would have liked to have known about deferrals for abused women and some said it may have helped them to disclose their abuse to the worker. Most of the women said that they needed an initial deferral from workfare at the time of leaving the abuser in order to address the many issues in their lives. Women did get some deferrals in this study, but did not know why. Several women reported that they were pressured to get child support from abusers. They said that abused women should not be pushed to get child support from abusers, or to get information directly from abusers that compromise their safety. Abused women in this study suffered from health and mental health issues because of their abuse (depression, anxiety, injuries, post traumatic stress) that were acute at the time of leaving the abuser and accessing the Ontario Works system. These women said they needed to focus on their safety, their healing and support for their children and need exemptions from workfare.

“Any woman coming out of an abusive situation is not ready to go back to work full time. They’re just going to end up getting a job and quitting, or fall apart at work or make mistakes.”

“I’m being pushed into something I’m not ready for. It’s overwhelming with job searching and school. It’s hard to cope with other issues that are going on... They want you to get out there and get work and start getting things done - snap, snap, snap - not even thinking about what you’ve been through.”

“I had to give all the information I put on him...they put you in a position to look for that information and at one point I said to them: I don’t want him to know where I am, I don’t want to go sniffing for this information.”

“I think that my case is exceptional. I think that if most women were handled the way that I was, if women especially when they come out of a shelter, out of a situation, need a period of time when they are not forced to have to look for work – whether six months or a year. I think that they (women) are in so much shock - there is so much to deal with – you need that time to stabilize.”

Abused women need more focus on their safety and the safety of their children from Ontario Works. Women said they and their children are at risk of further abuse when they leave their partners and go on Ontario Works. Women are afraid of their abusers when they live with them and continue to fear him when they leave and go on Ontario Works. They said that Ontario Works needs to consider how safe it is for them to work, go out in the community, or go after child support. Some women said their abusers reported them to CAS or the Ontario Works “snitch line” to get back at them. Several women reported that they risked their safety to get necessary documentation for Ontario Works.

“Yes the abuse continued. He’s publicly threatened to kill me and my kids. He’s been threatening me. There has been no physical abuse since I left him, but I am still afraid of him.”

“ You shouldn’t be forced to go after the man for support. I don’t think that is right. There is a reason why that person is out of your life. I think maybe welfare should go after them – they can easily find him.”

“I don’t feel safe right now at all. I’m in my own home, I have a dog, I have my own lock – I don’t feel safe.”

“If a woman cannot apply for a support order due to safety issues, it shouldn’t be a question – they should let it go. And you shouldn’t be docked for it because you can’t go ahead and get it...now after the criminal court is done with our case they (Ontario Works) want me to proceed with the support issues... It is not something I can do and still end up being around, so I will have to find another way.”

Abused women said they were exhausted and stressed by requirements from Ontario Works at a time when their lives were difficult and dangerous. Most women in this study said they were overwhelmed with the documentation and reporting requirements of Ontario Works. Some women said that they are torn between their obligations towards their children, their health and safety issues, their obligations to courts and other social services and their obligations to Ontario Works. They said they are forced to cancel counselling in order to attend meetings and court, even when they know that counselling is what is important for them.

They are required to get child support, even though the support payments are deducted dollar for dollar and do not benefit their children. They juggle their lives and the lives of their children to make time for appointments and to collect documentation for Ontario Works. Many women reported that they feel forced to put complying with Ontario Works ahead of their health and safety. Women said that this form of control mirrors the abuse they experienced in their intimate relationship.

Some women said they could not get benefits because their abusive partners would not provide documentation. Several women said that they were only able to manage documentation requirements with help from staff at the local Shelter.

“Yes, it’s difficult to produce documents. They wanted a year of hydro/phone bills – a lot of things that was hard to come (up) with...it was very detailed, what they wanted.... For the benefits I received, I would never do it again. I would continue to struggle as I was.”

“Its very difficult because I always have to get something together in order for me to continue on the Ontario Works. It’s hard for me to do my schooling, plus 120 hours of job search plus my court, my interviews and all my appointments. I have to have it

because they've already suspended me because I didn't have my income tax done – but my ex-husband didn't do it for three years and he had all of the information, so I couldn't get it done and they didn't accept that.”

“They (OW) want me to take him for spousal support. I'm sorry but you've been separated from him for two years and then you go and take him for spousal support – how peachy is he going to be over that? I don't want any part of him if possible.”

“Welfare doesn't want you to get part time – they want us to get full time. It's very hard for single parents who have kids that aren't in school...right now with this job I work midnights. I barely see my children from Monday to Saturday...I really think that they should wait until kids are in grade one for the mothers to do full time work”.

Women worry about being cut off from Ontario Works if they do not comply with requirements. Many of the women in this study said that they worry about making mistakes with paperwork or getting cut off Ontario Works. Some women were cut off from Ontario Works and said that they were not properly notified and did not have an opportunity to explain. Some women said they had money deducted for child support, even though they did not receive it from their abusive partner, and that they have not been able to recover the money. Other women reported that they had deductions from their welfare based on employment earnings they did not receive. Several women in this study experienced investigations because of calls to the “snitch line” that they believe were instigated by their abuser or his friends or family members. Many women worry that they may commit fraud inadvertently, because it is so difficult to keep all of their paperwork straight, and that will result in a lifetime ban.

“The only thing I am worried about is (I've heard) that if you can't get child support they cut you off...I doubt very much I'm going to get any child support and that worries me...Where will that leave the kids and I?”

“I find they want too much from you. They want to know everything about you and I find it's control. You might as well be in a relationship that's controlling.”

“If you are being cut off for something that you have supposedly done, they just cut you off by sending a letter in the mail... I didn't know that I had been reported until I got the letter”.

“They've got you constantly on the go, always hyper – what if I can't get this or something happened and all of a sudden you can't get a cheque – that kind of thing; and that's constantly on your brain, and that's very stressful too considering you're already going through stress as it is.”

“When I was working, welfare was still deducting what I was supposed to get. Welfare was short on my cheque for 2 or 3 months. I faced eviction. I needed to work under the table to make my rent. I was worried about fraud and the consequences – getting

caught and it was a lot of stress for me then too. (I had) no choice but to do something against the law or they put you out on the street”.

“I was cut off cold turkey because I didn’t have my (Social Insurance) card... the workers, they don’t make the rules. They are decent people. They tried to give me enough time to get those cards, but they have to submit their papers...they have amazing details that they need and without these they are incomplete and have a non compliant subject (the woman).”

The current Ontario Works system makes it difficult for abused women to get off Ontario Works. Women in the study reported feeling trapped on Ontario Works because they can never save enough to get ahead and move on. They said they need enough money for decent housing, childcare, to run a car, and for basic phone service in order to get back in the work force. They want to be able to set up a savings account to help them leave Ontario Works. Women want Child Support Payments and the Child Tax Credit to go to them and their children, in order to help move off Ontario Works. Several women were not able to continue with their education because Ontario Works no longer supports women who want to continue with post secondary education. They cannot support themselves and their children on OSAP, or may not be eligible for OSAP because of bankruptcy related to their abusive relationship. All of the women in this study want to be off Ontario Works as soon as they are physically and emotionally recovered from the abuse.

“The government is doing everything possible to hurt us, to make us dependent. I don’t mean dependent on the welfare system, but I mean (dependent) on men.”

“I called about doing a course then I called the day care and there were no spaces available. I called my worker and she said they will pay up to \$18 a day if you can find sitter. I was thinking that not too many people would want to be paid \$2.00/hour and then would you want to leave your child with that person?”

“I have had jobs while I was on welfare, but it really wasn’t beneficial... I was probably putting out more money out than I was gaining.”

“Employment Insurance will most likely pay for my schooling so that makes it possible for me to go back to school to do what I want to do, as opposed to just working in a store and getting paid minimum wage and not being able to survive....a lot of people are going back on welfare ‘cause they just can’t make it work.”

“If you help me it helps the kids and (then) your whole family system runs. We are the caretakers of our home and family and when you aren’t independent you are dependent and you can’t be dependent on men.”

“If you could go to post secondary school and still stay on welfare, it would get so many women off of welfare.”

Abused women who have been on Ontario Works are a resource for the Ontario Works system and for other women. Many women involved in this study would like to use their experiences and expertise to help Ontario Works provide a better service for abused women, and to help support women negotiate the Ontario Works system successfully. They want to turn their negative experiences of abuse into something positive by helping other women deal with the abuse in their lives, and preventing violence against women in the future. Women want their voices and experiences to be heard, so abused women have the supports and services they need.

“This experience of violence all my life has helped me to be compassionate towards others, whatever they are suffering. I’m a good listener. I am good at comforting people, because of my lifetime experience with abuse. I intend to write a book.”

“Someday I want to help somebody else – because of all the things I dealt with on welfare, and through all the new things that have happened: the kids being in care, the court system and lawyer system - I’ve got lots I could tell someone.”

C. Rural Issues for Abused Women

Lack of information and access to services make it difficult for abused women. Many women in this study did not have information about community services when they tried to leave their abuser. They said their abuser kept them isolated and information was not easy to find.

“There’s hardly any information out there. You go to Phoenix House (Second Stage) and they have pamphlets galore and everything to tell you. In my situation, the only spot I was allowed to go was to the grocery store. At that time there was nothing about Phoenix or the women’s shelter. What about having something on TV, the local news to give us information so that people can find out about that stuff?”

“I was in the middle of nowhere on a farm. I knew nothing and I didn’t know the people.”

Rural Barriers: Distances to services, lack of transportation, and lack of childcare. Rural barriers make it difficult for abused women to attend Ontario Works appointments, get to places of employment or seek employment, or access support services. Many women reported that they cannot afford a phone or to run their cars on Ontario Works. Many women struggled to find affordable and safe childcare.

“the lack of transportation, that was a big one because, without transportation I couldn’t make it to the meetings which made me get cut off.”

“The most important change needed for Ontario Works is that you are allowed to have a vehicle or access to a vehicle and a phone included with a basic monthly plan, no long distance, for safety reasons. The phone should be included no matter what.”

“Transportation has always been a problem. I have an old car. If it ever breaks down, I don’t know what I would do.”

“the very first and foremost, when women are getting out of abuse they need childcare. Women are dealing with so many different issues, you need time to heal and the kids need time away from you, and the kids need time to be kids.”

There are few jobs available for women in their communities and women’s work at home with their children is not valued.

Women said that it is a different reality for women and men when it comes to employment in their rural community. There are many more job opportunities for men than women, and most jobs for women are poorly paid and/or are part-time. Women with small children said they wish that mothering and staying home with their children was an option for women. They believed there would be much more valuable to their children by staying home and caring for them than by doing part-time, dead-end jobs to satisfy Ontario Works requirements. Many women in this study wanted to stay home to support their children who are also recovering from the trauma of violence in the family. They said that this work was not recognized or valued by Ontario Works, or the community. Finally, many women said they need support to make the long-term changes that will allow them to get good jobs.

The job search stuff – I find that it’s not fair, not equal for men and women...Living in a small town there are more job offers for men than there are for women.”

“There are more opportunities in the city. (Here) there are so many people fighting for jobs, even MacDonald’s – older women are fighting for these jobs too.”

“I want to be home with my children but that’s not realistic because you need to go out and get a job... I would just love to take off and stay home until my kids are going to kindergarten and grade one -.I can’t do that, there’s just no way – I’d get kicked off assistance.”

“Being safe is being more powerful - so give women time and money to get education and to get better jobs so they aren’t easy targets.”

“Working full time is my goal. I am working at 4 part-time jobs. It works because I can work around the children’s schedule.”

Concerns about safety and the lack of confidentiality in rural communities.

Several women expressed concerns about the general lack of confidentiality in small communities. Some women knew workers at Ontario Works because of family or friendship ties. Several women said that it is harder to be safe in a rural community because in a small community it's harder to get away and keep away from the abuser.

“Women are afraid about lack of confidentiality – things get around in a small community. The (Ontario Works) worker is from the community and may be related to the abuser or her family. Women keep this (the abuse) to themselves.

“You are more liable to bump into the abuser. I don't go out very much...I like to stay in my apartment, lock the door and it feel safe.”



Recommendations from the Women's Workshop

Women's Recommendations for Changes to Ontario Works Policy

The following recommendations come directly from a one-day workshop with nine women who participated in the interviews. They reviewed a list of themes from the interview transcripts and discussed these in small groups, making additions and identifying priorities. The women then worked in small groups to develop recommendations, which were shared in the large group. Their recommendations for action are clustered under broad headings:

1. Make changes to the way Ontario Works responds to victims of domestic violence.

- 1.1. Within the Ontario Works system **there should be a branch that deals specifically with women and children leaving abusive relationships, or specific case workers should be trained to deal with such cases.** These workers could be trained to be sensitive and accommodating to the particular challenges facing abused women, such as confidentiality, fear, depression, etc.
- 1.2. A program needs to be in place so that **women leaving abusive relationships can access Ontario Works funds prior to leaving.** This money may be necessary for her make her escape safely.
- 1.3. **A booklet should be provided by Ontario Works that outlines all of the services and deferrals that can be accessed by abused women.** It should include non-profit community organizations as well as Ontario Works policies and regulations, including exemptions and deferrals for women dealing with domestic violence, so women can be aware of their rights.

2. Support the safety of abused women and their children.

- 2.1. Ontario Works needs to **recognize that for many women who have escaped abusive relationships, there are safety issues with finding employment right away.** Often, the abusive partner will jeopardize the woman's safety each and every time she leaves her house. Furthermore, in terms of confidentiality, it may not be safe to establish oneself as an employee in a community. Thus, in these instances, women must not be pressured to endanger herself or her family.
- 2.2. Ontario Works should **provide women with phone services, including initial hook up fees and monthly bill subsidies** so that they can feel safe in their own homes. This is especially true for rural women, who may live in isolated areas.

2.3. A policy should be created that **places the onus of finding the father for child support purposes on an outside agency so that the woman does not have to re-expose herself to the abusive partner** or let him know her current location.

3. Increase benefits and supports for abused women on Ontario Works.

3.1. There must be an **increase in the amount of money provided by Ontario Works** to ensure women and children have enough money for decent food, safe housing, and essential living expenses.

3.2. Women who have left abusive relationships should not be immediately pushed to get into the work force. **Women need a window of time to heal emotionally before they will be able to succeed at a job.** They need time, education and counselling if they are going to be successful in the work force.

3.3. Raising children needs to be valued by society and reflected in the policies of Ontario Works. Women who care for their young children are working hard and are contributing to society. **Children who have lived in abusive family situations need to have their mothers available to them.** Thus, for those women who have young children, or children who have been affected by abuse, alternate job hunting should not be forced.

3.4. If women are forced by Ontario Works to be present at certain appointments (court, etc), then they should be provided with **additional funding for childcare, travel expenses** etc.

3.5. Ontario Works should **cover the cost of all prescription medications, as well as dental and optical needs** for women.

3.6. Baby bonuses and **child support should not be considered income**, and thus should not be deducted from monthly payouts.

4. Help abused women get off of Ontario Works.

4.1. People on Ontario Works should be allowed to **put money in savings so that they can eventually get out of the system and be self-sufficient.** Perhaps this money could be put into an account that is frozen until the individual is no longer on Ontario Works.

4.2. Families receiving Ontario Works should be allowed to **keep education savings for their children.** Furthermore, Ontario Works should encourage educational pursuits. Education should be seen as a valid pursuit in and of itself rather than just a means to get women off Ontario Works.

4.3. The **amount that women can earn without penalty should be increased.** Otherwise, there is no incentive to get out and get job experience. Also, any earnings her children make should not be counted against a woman.

4.4. Ontario Works needs to place **greater emphasis on helping women get out of the system.** They need to realize that the vast majority of the people it serves want nothing more than to be employed and self-sufficient. However, until some of the above policies change, once a woman turns to Ontario Works it is incredibly difficult for her to get back on her feet.

5. Recognize the unique situation of abused women in a rural area.

5.1. **Rural women need to be allowed to keep their assets** (homes, cars) without penalty from Ontario Works. Leaving an abusive partner should not result in financial penalties for the victim. Women should not be expected to sell off all of their assets while in transition after leaving an abusive relationship.

5.2. Money should be provided for rural women to assist in the payment of car insurance, upkeep and gas. **Vehicles are essential for women in rural areas for safety and to access employment and support services.** Since public transportation is not an option in rural areas, a vehicle is not a luxury but a necessity. In cities, bus fares are subsidised by Ontario Works, so an equivalent amount of money should be allotted for transportation costs in rural areas.

5.3. Provide the supports and time that women need to get good paying jobs in their rural communities. There are very few good paying jobs for women in rural communities. Women with good skills and educations should not be forced to do any kind of work just to get them off the system. **More supports and more opportunities for retraining or additional education are needed for abused women so they find the work that will lead to long-term financial security and independence.**

Additional Recommendations from the Women's Workshop

In addition to specific recommendations for Ontario Works, women at the workshop listed general recommendations for the Provincial Government and Local Agencies to improve the way the system responds to victims of domestic violence.

Recommendations for the Provincial Government:

- There should be in place a province or nation wide database that would track convicted abusers similar to the paedophile tracking system.
- Disallow private detectives from tracking women for their abusers or hold them accountable for doing so.

- Insist that police scramble their radio signals so that women's calls for assistance aren't broadcasted to their entire communities via scanners. The knowledge that their personal circumstances will be gossiped about within the community often deters women from calling the police.
- Women must have control over their personal information, and their partners must not have avenues of getting a hold of it. In circumstances where women are hiding from abusive partners and have custody of the children, the children's information must also be sealed so the husband cannot track down the family.
- The minimum wage needs to be increased. The current minimum wage does not meet the needs of women with children; as a result, they are forced to use social support systems or work multiple jobs to make ends meet.

Recommendations for Huron County:

- Implement a high school program that teaches students about abuse: what it is and what to do if they are experiencing it.
- Food banks need to be made more accessible. They do not provide enough food, and often the food that is provided is expired or not fresh. Also, the use of vouchers creates embarrassment for those forced to use them. The use of regular gift certificates may eliminate some of this embarrassment. People need to be allowed to use food resources whenever they are needed, and not on a monthly or bi-weekly basis. Also, users should be able to access their food without hassles from food bank employees.
- Money needs to be made available for women in shelters to rent storage space for their things. Also, funds or assistance should be provided when women move out of the shelter and into a home of their own.
- Legal Aid needs to be clear about their policies and the rights of the individuals who access legal assistance. People leaving abusive relationships need to be given more than a 6-month window of opportunity to access these services.
- Women would benefit from self-esteem or confidence building seminars organized by local communities where they could access information and network with others who have shared similar experiences.
- Support and education for families of abused women would help them understand what they can do to help.
- Economic independence programs for high school girls need to be organized. These might help prevent people from entering the system in the first place.

- The public needs to be made aware of the inadequacy of the current Ontario Works system. This may help to decrease the stigma attached to being on assistance.
- An advocacy group, comprised of women within the Ontario Works system, should be formed to lobby for change. This would not only draw attention to the deficiencies in the system, but it would also provide women with an outlet to focus their negative experiences to help other women.



Consultation with Huron Ontario Works

We wished to consult with Huron Ontario Works to gather the following information for the project:

- What changes do OW workers want to see happen to make Ontario Works better for abused women?
- How has existing legislation helped or hindered OW staff provide assistance for abused women?
- What changes to Ontario Works are important for a rural community?

A great deal of discussion and planning went into the design of the consultation. It was important to structure the consultation to build on positive work between Ontario Works and the local Women's Shelter that was underway. The Project Advisory Committee, the Project Coordinator and the Supervisor at Huron County Ontario Works developed the following objectives for the consultation:

- To provide Ontario Works staff with an opportunity to review and discuss the key findings and recommendations from the research before the report was completed and released;
- To use the findings from the research to consider practical changes that could be developed at the local level;
- To provide Ontario Works staff with information on what is working well for women in Huron County;
- To build partnerships between Ontario Works and abuse specific service providers in Huron County (Women's Shelter, Second Stage Housing, Women's Centre, CAS and Domestic Assault Review Team (DART) Huron).

Three possible formats for the consultation were proposed:

- One-on-one Interviews with Ontario Works staff;
- Ontario Works staff complete a written staff survey, designed by the Provincial project;
- A group interview or focus group with Ontario Works staff.

The third option was chosen, and the Project Coordinator met with Ontario Works staff and their supervisor at a regular scheduled staff meeting. An information package with the key themes and recommendations from the research was sent a week in advance for the staff to review. The Ontario Works supervisor provided the Project Coordinator with brochures and information on Ontario Works practices and policies. The consultation can be summarized under the following headings:

Ontario Works as an Opportunity for Women

Staff suggested that the Ontario Works program is a more positive approach for women than the previous welfare system because it is more than an income support and includes employment supports and ways to help women towards employment. Staff

reported that they make extensive use of exemptions for women who they know are dealing with domestic violence as set out in the Ontario Works Directives. They work hard to be very flexible with meetings to accommodate the many appointments and commitments abused women deal with. All women who are assessed for Ontario Works receive information on community resources and view a CD that includes a short section on domestic violence.

Women where abuse is identified normally have a connection with the local Women's Shelter. Women who are not connected with these services need to self-identify the abuse to the worker. Staff may not know that a woman is dealing with abuse if she does not self-identify. Ontario Works is clearly a program to get women back into the workforce as quickly as possible, but exemptions for abused women are used when staff are aware of the abuse in the woman's life.

The Stigma Surrounding Ontario Works

Staff were concerned that the research project used the term "Ontario Works" interchangeably with welfare and believe that there is still a great deal of stigma attached to the term "welfare" in the community. Ontario Works staff agreed that there are still negative attitudes towards all people on Ontario Works in the community, and they also have experienced stigma attached to them as workers as well. Staff said that the stigma associated with Ontario Works is a stress for anyone in the system, and that it is an added stress for women who are leaving abusive partners.

Identifying Abused Women in the Ontario Works System

There is no general screening for abuse when women enter the Ontario Works program, nor are women told that there are deferrals or exemptions available to women who are dealing with domestic abuse. All women are shown a video that talks about abuse, but they are not asked directly about abuse in their lives. Workers rely on women to tell them about any abuse, or they know about abuse when the Shelter refers women.

Ontario Works workers said that universal screening would be very difficult. They said that they do not presently have the skills or training to routinely screen for abuse. They noted that they are not counsellors and are extremely limited in the amount of time they have for each client. They have a great deal of information that they need to provide and get in a short interview time, and they would need much more time to address abuse. Workers said they are not trained to provide any kind of safety planning for women in an abusive situation, but they do provide information about community services to all women.

There was no consensus on how Ontario Works could effectively identify abuse in a woman's life so that exemptions and deferrals could be offered. When the woman reports abuse or is referred by the Shelter, then deferrals are offered. Staff said working together with the local Shelter and Second Stage Housing programs works well, where the Shelter staff provide counselling and support, and Ontario Works provides practical assistance for the woman.

Limitations of Ontario Works

Staff discussed specific limitations for abused women and their children under Ontario Works.

- The current level of benefits is not adequate and this presents difficulties and additional stress for women leaving abusive relationships. Most women cannot afford to operate a car, which is a problem in a rural community where there is no public transportation. Ontario Works staff expressed concern that some women cannot afford a telephone.
- Prescription drugs are covered, but workers acknowledged that it could be difficult for women who need over-the-counter drugs.
- Childcare is provided when women seek employment, but it is not available for women who need to go to court to seek support payments in order to remain on Ontario Works. This was recognized as a problem for women.
- Huron Ontario Works staff is accountable for funds provided for Community Start Up and must approve these expenditures. Ontario Works wants to ensure that the woman is getting the items that she needs as this mandatory benefit is only provided once a year when a client moves.
- Ontario Works may provide qualifying women with short term educational courses offered online, through correspondence or in class. In certain case, Ontario Works may be in a position to top up OSAP for women taking post secondary education courses, or coordinate with HRDC for women who are “Reach Back” eligible.
- In Huron County, discretionary benefits are not available. The Ontario Works office has developed creative programs through the National Child Benefit Supplement to bridge this gap. Ontario Works offers diapers, formula coupons, prenatal vitamins, car seats, computers for continuous learning, Good Food Box, emergency car repairs, a “Kids Booster Club” to help children access recreation, and other supports. There is a concern that if this program ends there will be no funding available to meet the special needs in the community. A long-term plan to address this gap is needed.

Community Partnerships

Ontario Works has a good relationship with the local Women’s Shelter that has developed over many years. Staff want to see a continuation of the good working partnership with the local abuse specific services in the community. They reported that a recent training session with Shelter staff was positive and provided an opportunity to look at ways to work together, and to make the best use of local expertise and resources.

Recommendations from the Ontario Works Consultation

The consultation ended with staff suggesting the following recommendations:

1. Implement province-wide training for Ontario Works staff on abuse issues and how to respond to abused women accessing Ontario Works.

2. Continue to build community partnerships between Huron Ontario Works and local community organizations, Women's Shelter, Second Stage Housing and Women Today of Huron.
3. Consideration be given to increasing the base level of benefits for recipients of Ontario Works.
4. Consideration be given to a review of the "necessities of life" under the Ontario Works program to look at the necessities that are essential for rural people. Car allowances and an allowance for basic telephone service could be considered as necessities in a rural community.



Summary: Key Issues and Action Items

This study asked abused women in Huron County to speak about their experiences with Ontario Works since 1995 and to provide recommendations for change. Twenty women provided rich and compelling information for local service providers and provincial policy makers. The true experts on the delivery of Ontario Works for abused women are in fact the women themselves. They have formulated important action items and provided new information for the development of an improved Ontario Works response to abused women and their children.

The findings and recommendations from this study reflect the unique experiences of abused women in the rural community of Huron County. The land, services, work, history, culture, people, and values in Huron County shaped their experiences. This study is also linked to a larger provincial project through shared research tools and processes. We believe that the findings and recommendations from this community may resonate with what abused women in other Ontario communities report. We hope the Provincial project will benefit from the outcomes from this study and that together they identify necessary changes that are needed for all abused women in Ontario who rely on Ontario Works to deal with abuse in their lives.

The Project Advisory Committee reviewed the findings and recommendations from the consultation with women and Ontario Works staff. The following key issues and action items have been identified as priorities for the community and for the provincial government:

Key Issues from this Study

1. The Ontario Works program needs to be redesigned to ensure that it is part of a seamless community response to domestic violence, with the safety of victims as its first priority.

Data from this study indicate that Ontario Works staff and programs are an important first tier response for many abused women and their children, and a critical link in the community response to domestic violence. A surprising number of women in this study reported that they either did not know that what was happening to them was abuse or did not know about abuse specific community services until the incident that resulted in them accessing Ontario Works. For them, Ontario Works was one of first agency responses in their attempt to deal with the abuser and the impact of the abuse on their lives.

This study also revealed that there is no systematic way that OW workers use to identify abused women when they access Ontario Works, or to identify abused women already receiving benefits. The Ontario Works program relies on women to voluntarily disclose their abuse in order to implement specific exemptions or deferrals to enhance their

safety and welfare. If a woman does not disclose, then she does not find out about deferrals and the safety and health of the woman and her children is compromised. Women in this study identified many barriers that make it difficult to disclose abuse voluntarily. There does not appear to be the capacity within the present system to address these barriers, or to make information about deferrals available to all women who access Ontario Works.

There does not appear to be a coherent provincial or local Ontario Works policy or procedural framework that sets out how Ontario Works will support women in abusive situations. Ontario Works staff in this study responded to abused women with sensitivity and care in most cases when they knew that woman was dealing with abuse, but they are hampered by a system that clearly wants abused women to work, often at the expense of her health, her safety and the well being of her children. In addition, workers are not trained to screen for domestic violence or to identify abuse. They are not trained on the impact of abuse on victims, how to respond to victims of violence, or on safety planning. They do not have time in their jobs to screen or identify abuse or address safety issues.

At the present time, Ontario Works deals with vulnerable women and children in complex and dangerous situations without the tools or knowledge needed to enhance their safety or well-being. Ontario Works was for many abused women in this study a system that forced them to compromise their safety and well being in order to keep food on the table and a roof over their heads.

2. Current Ontario Works and Disability benefits are not adequate to provide abused women and their children with adequate food, safe housing and access to proper health and social services. The extreme hardship that women in this study experienced due to inadequate benefits has a long lasting impact on mental and physical health of abused women and their children. Women's extreme level of poverty on OW has an impact on their safety, and their opportunities to heal and move on from the abuse. An immediate increase in benefits is critical for the health and well being of the abused women and children.

3. Ontario Works benefits must include allowances for basic telephone service, transportation allowances, and quality childcare as essentials for life in a rural community. This study, like many before it, stresses the importance of addressing the specific barriers to services and employment that women in rural communities face: the critical need for telephones, transportation, and childcare to overcome distance and access barriers. In addition, abused women who lack telephones, transportation and quality childcare face safety issues in rural communities.

4. Abused women need short-term financial assistance from Ontario Works to deal with the transition from the abusive situation and long-term financial, employment and education supports to ensure they gain full economic independence. Abused women in this study were unanimous in their desire to leave Ontario Works as soon as possible. The workfare approach did not work for most

women in this study. They needed more time to heal from the abuse, time to support the healing and readjustment of their children and more time and resources to build skills, education levels and confidence to be truly independent. They said that women in rural communities must be well-educated and well-trained to be financially independent, and the present Ontario Works system is not adequate.

Action Items

1. The Ontario Works program needs to be redesigned to ensure that it is part of a seamless community response to domestic violence, with the safety of victims as its first priority.

Provincial Action	Local Action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Develop a specialized social assistance response to abused women that recognizes the unique needs of women who need OW because of abuse. ➤ Develop a comprehensive provincial Domestic Violence policy and procedural framework for the Ontario Works response victims of domestic violence that includes: screening and identification procedures, risk assessment procedures, specialized response procedures for abused women, confidentiality and safety procedures (contact with the perpetrator, work safety issues etc.), specialized programs and services. ➤ Complete province wide training with OW staff on domestic violence, responses to victims and safety planning. ➤ Develop province wide domestic violence education strategies for Ontario Works clients 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Continue to develop local partnerships and information sharing between Ontario Works and Huron County women's services. ➤ Develop local protocols with Ontario Works to clarify local procedures and practices for abused women on Ontario Works. ➤ Continue local interagency training initiatives on domestic violence to increase community capacity for a community response that includes Ontario Works.

2. Current Ontario Works and Disability benefits are not adequate to provide abused women and their children with adequate food, safe housing and access to proper health and social services.

Provincial Action	Local Action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Increase Ontario Works and Disability benefits and index them to inflation. ➤ Build affordable housing for 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Develop a local strategy to meet discretionary needs of women and children on Ontario Works in Huron County.

<p>abused women and their children in rural communities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fund eye care, dental care and prescription drugs for women and children on Ontario Works. ➤ Increase funding to Violence Against Women agencies and invest in long-term public education strategies to address domestic violence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Advocate for increased benefits for Ontario Works clients.
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3. Ontario Works benefits must include allowances for basic telephone service, car allowances, and quality childcare as essentials for life in a rural community.

Provincial Action	Local Action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Review “essential needs” using a rural lens. ➤ Include allowances for basic telephone and a car allowance for abused women for safety reasons. ➤ Fund quality childcare in rural communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Advocate for the inclusion of basic telephone and car allowance. ➤ Advocate for quality, affordable childcare in rural communities.

4. Abused women need short-term financial assistance from Ontario Works to deal with the transition from the abusive situation, and long-term financial, employment and education supports to ensure they gain full economic independence.

Provincial Action	Local Action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Provide social assistance for abused women retraining or attending post secondary education. ➤ Develop strategies for long-term supports for abused women and their children recovering from abuse. ➤ Increase minimum wage levels. ➤ Develop programs to improve employment equity and employment opportunities for women in rural communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Develop local strategies to support women needing retraining and education. ➤ Address stigma towards women on OW through public education initiatives and local programs for abused women. ➤ Consult with women on supports they need, and how local services can be helpful ➤ Support women as volunteers to assist other abused women dealing with OW and abuse.

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Appendix

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Appendix B: Workshop Flyer

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Woman Abuse and Welfare in a Rural Community: Rural Women Speak About Their Experiences with Ontario Works

Guide for Interviews with Women

Thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed; I really do appreciate it. Before we begin, I'd like to just review with you some of the highlights of the consent you have signed. You can decide to end the interview at any time; you can also choose not to answer a question, or decide that something you have told me shouldn't be included after all. The only thing that couldn't be changed is that if you told me that your child was currently being abused--I would need to report that.

Before we begin, do you have any questions at all about the project? About the interview? Anything else?

A. Welfare History and Goals

1. People come on welfare for a variety of reasons, and some expect that it will be for a short time, and some expect it will be for a longer time. Can you tell me about the situation that brought you onto welfare?

Probe for:

Applied as single mother? Married woman? Disabled woman/partner?
Sponsored immigrant?

Where was she living?

When did she begin to receive welfare? Is she currently on welfare?
Ontario Works or Ontario Disability Support Program?

Note: If there has been more than one period of welfare receipt, we will need to get a sense of reasons for, and the length of receipt.

2. When you think back to the time that you came onto welfare, what did you see as your goals or hopes at that time? (If more than one occasion on welfare, the focus should be on the period that was most relevant to the experience of abuse.)

3. *Would you say that coming onto welfare at that time helped to achieve these goals/hopes?*

Probe for:

What helped you/stood in your way?

4. For those who have left welfare at least once: *What were the reasons you went off welfare?*

Probe for:

Was it ever to return to an abusive relationship (and if so, was this tied to the inadequacy or difficulty of being on welfare)?

Employment Experience and Goals

When you think about all the factors in your immediate situation, would you say that your ideal option is to be at home giving full-time care to your children, combining care for your children with a part-time job, or combining it with a full-time job?

Probe for:

How does the ideal option fit with the current reality? If it does, what helped her to make that fit? If not, what gets in the way?

What is her job experience? What kind of work? Ever worked while on welfare?

Has she combined employment with care of her children? Worked mostly full-time/part-time? Taking or taken training or educational upgrading courses?

If currently employed---how many hours a week?

C. History of Abuse

I would like to return a little later to some of your experiences on welfare, but I wonder if we could now talk about abuse. Many women have been in, or are in, relationships where their husband, boyfriend or same sex partner hurts them physically, sexually, and/or emotionally and it is important for our research for us to learn whether anything like this has happened in your relationship(s).

1. *Have you had a husband/partner/boyfriend that hurt you or you were afraid was going to hurt you? Can you tell me about that relationship? [If more than one, we are concerned with the one that is the most relevant to her current situation.]*

Probe for:

Nature of the abuse (typical incident and frequency).

Length and nature of relationship.

Still afraid of this individual?

2. *Apart from physical abuse, many women find that their partners try to control their lives----how much contact they have with their friends and family, whether they work outside the home, what they wear and how they look, to give just a few examples. Did X try to control you in this way?*

Probe for:

Areas of control---scope and intensity.

Typical incidents and frequency.

3. *Partners can also try to put down women---make them feel that they can't do anything right. Did you ever experience this?*

Probe for:

Areas of put down.

Typical incident and frequency.

4. *When you were with your partner were you employed? Did you want to be? Did he want you to be? Did the abuse interfere in any way with your work?*

Probe for:

Harass her at work.

Make her feel guilty about working.

Whether she felt safe from him at her job.

5. How would you describe the way that this abuse affected you?

Probe for:

How did it affect how she feels about herself?

Affect health? Depression, anxiety, sleepless nights, chronic pain?

Get in the way of day-to-day life?

Employment?

6. Did you ever call the police or contact a social agency because of the abuse?

Probe for:

If yes, what did she hope would happen as a result? Did it? What proof, if any, was required of the abuse?

If no, did she ever consider calling for help? What prevented her from calling?

7. *Did you ever go to your doctor or go to the hospital because of injuries or emotional stress caused by the abuse?*

Probe for:

Did she disclose that the injuries or stress were caused by the abuse?

If yes, did anything facilitate the disclosure?

What did she hope would happen and what was the actual response?

If she considered disclosing, but didn't, what prevented her?

8. *Did you ever get any legal advice or assistance?*

Probe for:

If yes, was it helpful?

If no, did she want legal assistance; and if she did, what prevented her from getting it?

D. Leaving Abusive Relationships

I'd like, if we could, to talk about trying to decide what's best---whether to leave or to stay. Many women struggle with this decision, which is often a very difficult one to make--there are often both 'push' and 'pull' factors. And of course, for a variety of good reasons, women may change their minds: they may decide at one time that leaving is best, and later that returning to the relationship is best.

1. Can you tell me about your decision to stay/leave? In making your decision, what were the factors that weighed most heavily with you?

Probe for:

The specific factors that are mentioned, and whether they are 'push' or 'pull': fear of future violence; concern for children's safety; better life for children; concern about ability to support herself; inadequacy of welfare rates; availability of legal aid; etc.

2. Was welfare a factor in your decision?

Probe for:

Push or pull, and what specific feature of welfare was important.

3. What about housing...how has that played out in your decision? Did you have to leave your home?

Probe for:

Is current housing subsidized? Is it in a safe neighbourhood? Has she had to go without some things in order to afford her rent?

4. As you think back, what did you hope would happen as a result of your decision to stay/leave?

Probe for:

Did these things happen? What helped to make them happen? What got in the way?

5. Did the abuse continue after you left/decided to stay?

Probe for:

If so, in what form?

Did you continue to fear him?

6. After you left him, was there further contact with him that created a problem for welfare?

E. Dealing with the Welfare System

- 1. Now, I would like to shift gears a bit and talk about your experiences of welfare and get a sense of what being on welfare felt like for you. Are there good things about welfare? Bad things?***

Probe for:

- Bad:*** adequacy of benefits (if inadequate—what did she go without?)
 sense of stigma
 lack of privacy—being scrutinized
- Good:*** breathing space to get over a crisis

- 2. What about your dealings with welfare workers - what were these like?***

Probe for:

Experience of home visits.

Success in contacting worker, if needed.

How did her dealings with her welfare worker(s) make her feel?

- 3. [For women who have left their partners.] Do you remember about how long it took before you received any money? Was this a problem?***

Probe for:

Problems getting welfare cheque in the middle of the month, for example.

- 4. What about documents? Were there papers you had to produce when you applied for welfare?***

Probe for:

What were they? Was it difficult to produce them?

- 5. [For women born outside Canada]: Has your immigration to Canada ever been an issue in your dealings with welfare?***

Probe for:

Sponsorship issues, including whether or not the mandatory deduction of \$100 was imposed.

Whether told of the family violence exemption from the \$100 deduction?

Language interpretation---was it offered, did she understand what she was signing?

6. [For those applying as single mothers] *Do you recall whether you were told anything about welfare rules regarding relationships with men?*

Probe for:

Was she required to answer a questionnaire about living with a man?

Was she wary of forming relationships with men while on welfare---either intimate relationships or friendships?

If on welfare in 1995 - was she told anything about a new definition of 'spouse'?

7. People on welfare can be investigated for a variety of reasons, no matter how innocent and these investigations are occurring more often. Have you ever been investigated for any reason?

Probe for:

Nature of investigation?

Any idea what prompted it?

Did partner or ex-partner ever report or threaten to report her to welfare?

Ever cut off welfare?

8. *Now I want to ask you if the abuse you had experienced from X ever came up in your discussions with welfare workers? Were you ever asked if you had been abused? Did you ever tell the worker about your situation?*

Probe for:

Try to get sense of what led to disclosure and reaction or why she did not disclose.

How she responded to being asked by worker?

What happened as a result of any information that was given?

What proof, if any, was she required to provide?

If she disclosed, looking back would she do the same again?

9. *Did your dealings with welfare make things more difficult between you and your (ex) partner? How?*

10. *Did your welfare worker require you to have more contact with your (ex)partner than you wanted?*

Probe for:

Did she have to pursue child support when she would have preferred not to?

What was she expected to do? Was she expected to get him to attend a meeting with welfare officials about child support? Was this a meeting that she was expected to attend? What was that like for her?

11. *As you may know, welfare can require women to find a job or participate in volunteer work or training. Have these requirements ever been applied to you?*

Probe for:

Which requirements and with what results/concerns?

In the absence of requirements, what choices would she have made?

12. *[If required to participate] Did your partner or ex-partner interfere in any way with your participation? Did your participation make the abuse worse or change it?*

Probe for:

Did he call her at work, destroy her work clothes, try to prevent her from going to work or to class, promise childcare or transportation but then not provide it, etc.

13. *Although welfare can require women to go after child support or to find a job, women who have been abused can also be exempted from these requirements. Did you know about these exemptions at the time?*

Probe if she knew:

How did she know—friends, worker?

Did she ask for an exemption? Why or why not?

What was required, if anything, to prove that she had been abused; did she have difficulty getting it?

If she ever had an exemption, was she later required to pursue support or participate in workfare?

Probe if she did not know:

Would she have wanted to be exempted? Why or why not?

14. Did your welfare worker ever advise you that legal services might be available to help you?

15. We have talked about a number of aspects of dealing with welfare, but there may be rules and regulations that have caused problems for you that we haven't yet talked about. Is there anything else in your experience that has been a problem for you?

F. Impact of Living in a Rural Area

I would like to talk to you about how living in a rural community has impacted on your situation and decisions.

1. *How has living in a rural community had an impact on you as a woman dealing with abuse?*

Probe for issues such as lack of transportation, childcare, isolation, accessible services, farm life, access to phone, privacy, what she does without.

2. *How has welfare helped or hindered your ability to live successfully in your rural community?*

Probe for health care, food, recreation, housing.

3. *What do you need to feel and be safe in your rural community?*

4. *What do you think women in rural communities need from welfare to make their lives safer?*

5. *What strategies have you used to cope with your situation?*

6. Supports Women Need

1. *Given your experiences, what would you say are the most important things that need to be done to help women who are being abused?*

Probe for:

Importance of decent job, childcare.

What do women need to be safe in employment/training?

Can welfare do more to protect women from having to meet with their abusive (ex)partners?

Immigration process (isolation, language barriers).

Legal services and information.

2. *Do you think most women are likely to tell their worker about the abuse? Why or why not?*

Probe for:

Would it be a good thing if they did? If so, what needs to happen?

3. *If you could have your way, what would be the most important changes you would want to make so that welfare worked better for women who have been abused?*