



L'RCF des centres
de femmes
du Québec

The Work of Women's Centres Surrounding Violence Against Women

Joint Research Project
Ksenia Burobina and Marie-Marthe Cousineau



ISBN – printed publication: 978-2-920747-34-0

ISBN – digital publication: 978-2-920747-35-7

This project was made possible thanks to funding from:

CRSH  SSHRC
Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

 Femmes et Égalité
des genres Canada Women and Gender
Equality Canada

Canada 

Fonds de recherche
Société et culture
Québec 

Contributors to this joint project

This project was born from a need outlined by L'R des centres de femmes du Québec as part of the Trajetvi initiative and from a meeting between L'R Co-Coordinator Odile Boisclair and Trajetvi/SAS-Femmes Academic Director Marie-Marthe Cousineau.¹

This project also aligns with the objectives outlined by L'R's membre centres at its 2018 annual general assembly during which it was voted to make the fight to end systemic violence against women one of L'R's priorities. It was also agreed that this priority be pursued through an intersectional approach geared towards training, visibility, and increased funding for women's centres funded through the PSOC framework.

Contributors to this joint project (2018-2023):

- L'R staff team (2018-2023)
- L'R des centres de femmes du Québec's Allied Committee (*Comité allié*)
- For the Trajetvi/SAS-Femmes team
 - Marie-Marthe Cousineau, principal investigator
 - Sylvie Gravel and Marisa Canuto, as project coordinators
 - Josiane Maheu, as project liaison
 - Helinette Pigatti Boamorte, as administrative agent
 - Ksenia Burobina, as project worker
- Discussion group participants:
 - Women receiving or having received support services from L'R's membre centres
 - Workers from L'R's membre centres

1 **From Trajetvi à SAS-Femmes.** This project was born from a co-construction process that involved L'R des centres de femmes du Québec (L'R) and Trajetvi. It was led as part of a research and action partnership by multidisciplinary researchers and community partners working with victims of conjugal violence and was funded by SSHRC between 2013 and 2022. For Trajetvi, the project involved conveying the journeys of vulnerable women, from facing conjugal violence to searching for help and seeking support services. The project originally proposed to Trajetvi by Odile Boisclair on behalf of L'R was in perfect sync with Trajetvi's objectives but seeing as Trajetvi's funding had ended, the project team pursued its work as part of a new collective research and action initiative known as SAS-Femmes (*Collectif de recherches et d'actions pour la sécurité, l'autonomie et la santé de toutes les femmes*), an initiative focused on women's safety, autonomy, and health and that has been funded by the FRQSC since 2020. The project was therefore folded into the SAS-Femmes' programming.

Preface: Tribute to Odile Boisclair

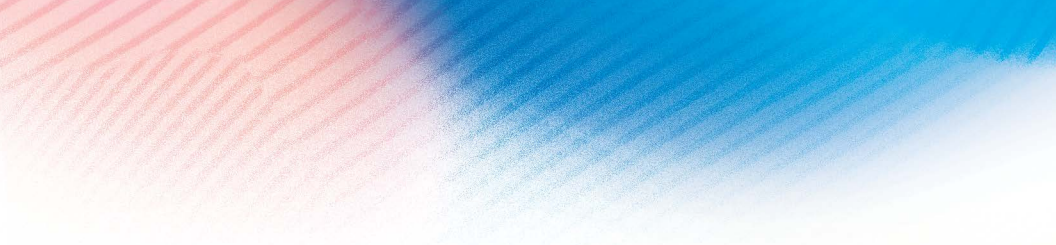
Dear Odile,

It is with deep admiration and gratitude that we would like to pay tribute to your immense contribution to the cause of women. Your infallible commitment and groundbreaking vision have forever changed the landscape for women's centres in Québec. We dedicate this publication to you in recognition of your work. We want to celebrate what you leave behind and highlight the crucial and all-too-often unnoticed efforts of L'R's membre centres in directly supporting women in the face of violence.

Odile, you are a seminal figure of the feminist movement. You have devoted decades of your life to improving the lives of women, fighting antifeminism, and supporting autonomous community action. For twenty years as L'R's co-coordinator, you championed the cause of community organizations —women's centres in particular— by fighting for their recognition through a basic funding structure that helps support their mission.

Your professional achievements are not the only things you leave behind. You were so much more than an activist. You were a colourful, liberated woman who fought the status quo and inspired so many. Your charisma, boldness, and determination will forever be remembered within the ranks of the feminist movement.

You spoke proudly about how your journey did not take you through the halls of academia but along the path of experience, a journey you started in a women's centre in Baie-Comeau. You rejected the idea that higher education guarantees success and proved that one's passion, intelligence, and determination can help one surmount any obstacle.



With these words, we want to shine a light on your deeply felt conviction that the work of women's centres in supporting women in their fight against violence is critical even if it is too often invisible. It is your conviction that inspired this publication, and it is your conviction that guides our everyday actions. We are determined to break the silence, to raise awareness in our communities and beyond, and to continue our work towards a future where all women are free of violence.

Odile, we dedicate this publication to you. You were the force behind this initiative; you and your unshakeable belief that women's centres have an essential role to play and that their work deserves to be seen. Our gratefulness for your dedication, your intelligence, and your boldness knows no bounds. You are forever in our hearts and have forever left your mark on the history of Québec's feminist movement.

Valérie Gilker-Létourneau, your work friend

WORDS WOMEN SHARED

- “ I can honestly say that the women’s centre changed my life. ”
- “ If centres weren’t there, I’d say that we’d see two to three suicides a year, at least. ”
- “ I feel such pride, pride at the steps I’ve taken. Steps I could never have taken without the women’s centre. ”





Table of contents

Introduction	8
L'R is the coming together of all its member centres	10
Research Results - Highlights	16
The Importance of the Informal: Raising Awareness as Part of Other Activities	29
The Role of Women's Centres in the Service Ecosystem Supporting Women Struggling with Violence	32
Women's Centres Best Assets	38
Other Needs and Wishes Women Expressed	43
Looking Ahead	47

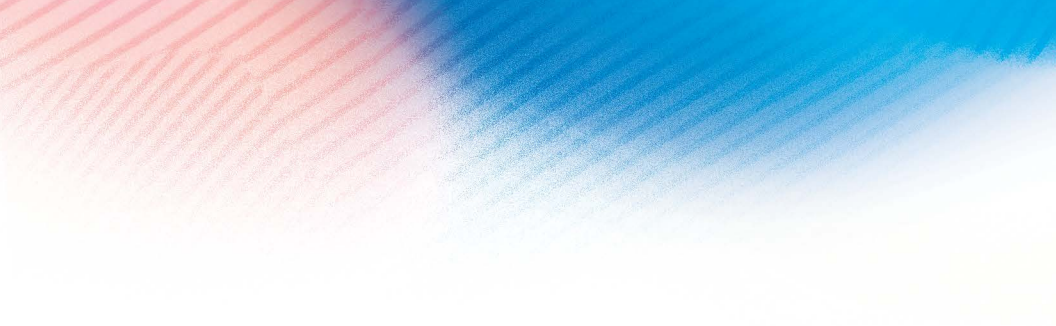
Introduction

In a 2019 publication, the World Health Organization (WHO) stated that, “Violence against women –in particular intimate partner violence and sexual violence– is a major and persistent public health problem and a violation of women’s human rights.”². It states that, worldwide, at least one in three women is a victim of serious, prolonged, or repeated aggression. According to data from the 2019 General Social Survey conducted by Statistics Canada, one woman in five in Québec will be subject to violence in her lifetime. Disturbingly, even today, only a small proportion of all instances of violence against women are reported to authorities. This violence has serious consequences on the health, autonomy, and wellbeing of many women and, in many cases, their children.

Finding one’s way out of violent circumstances is, in most cases, a complex process during which women need information, support, and accompaniment. Some immediately recognize that they need help from resources specialized in violence. Others are not ready to recognize or acknowledge the violence they live with.

2

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>, accessed April 2023.



This publication brings forward the main findings of this research project and, subsequently, the recommendations that can be drawn from them. It primarily sheds lights on the diverse forms of violence experienced by the women encountered by women's centre workers and on the work of women's centres in raising awareness, in directly supporting women, in offering them referrals, in accompanying them, and in leading group activities focused specifically (or indirectly) on issues of violence.

The project's ultimate objective is to raise awareness about work carried out by L'R's member centres in the fight against violence so that we may recognize their place within the continuum of services directly or indirectly offered to women who are victims of violence.

L'R is the coming together of all its member centres

L'R's member centres (which we sometimes simply call “centres” in this publication) are autonomous, feminist community organizations. Together, they form a large and significant network serving thousands of women across Québec³. Our centres are open to all women and are run by and for women. They are places of belonging and transition and also serve as places where women can learn and take action. (*Base d'unité politique de L'R*, also known as the BUP⁴). Per the BUP, L'R's mission is focused on improving women's living conditions and on promoting women's interests as well as social justice, equality, and equity for all women.

A part of their day-to-day activities, most of our centres are dynamic community spaces. Women who visit our centres can take advantage of their services and take part in activities which include workshops, collective kitchens, and community gardens. These community spaces are also places where women can drop in for a cup of tea or coffee and talk to other women or centre workers, or more simply touch down and take a moment for themselves. Our centres offer women the kind of support that speaks directly to their needs. Rooted in rural and urban communities alike, our centres are well placed to know and understand the needs, problems, and concerns of women in their communities⁵ (BUP).

3 At the time this report was drafted, L'R counted 79 member centres across Québec

4 *Base d'unité politique*. (2016). L'R des centres de femmes du Québec, online: www.rcentres.qc.ca/en/; <https://rcentres.qc.ca/en/basis-of-political-unity/>

5 Ibid.



Our work in the fight to end violence against women uses a transversal approach through which all centre activities and services are organized in keeping with four main pillars:



Taking Care of Oneself



Working Together



Helping Each Other



Learning and Empowerment

These four pillars help guide our centres' actions and action planning. They speak directly to their workers as well as what workers seek to promote among the women they serve.

A touchstone for the work of L'R's member centres in the fight to end violence

When looking at the continuum of resources available to women in need of help and support, L'R's member centres constitute the entry point and position themselves as an open door. Women reaching out to our centres are not, for the most part, looking for help to address issues of violence. They often don't even realize that they are experiencing violence, and this is particularly true for women facing violence in their relationships.

L'R's member centres define themselves first and foremost as community spaces and spaces where experiences can be shared.

Centres are more than just service points. They are places that foster peer support and solidarity between women. They offer all women a safe space where they can share and listen to one another. These spaces are also home to actions that promote "equity, equality of rights for all women, and social justice"⁶ through a series of "strategies that seek to defend and promote the rights and interests of women in the context of social change." This includes, specifically in terms of violence, the important work of raising awareness about the violence women face and the means to counter it. This is the work that this report seeks to highlight.

All the work of our centres uses the same touchstone: L'R's Basis of Political Unity (or BUP), a governing document that informs their practices and actions, and those of the women that make up each centre, all in pursuit of a shared feminist project, that of a just and egalitarian society⁷. The BUP is informed by, and promotes:

- a feminist approach to intervention and action, which embraces:
 - respect for women's pace and autonomy
 - recognition of the value of women as experts on their own lives
- the importance of shining a light on the **systemic nature** of the violence women face, and its link with women's living conditions.

6 L'R des Centres de femmes. (2016). *Base d'unité politique* (BUP)

7 L'R des Centres de femmes. (2016). *Base d'unité politique* (BUP)



We understand systemic violence as violence women experience through the interplay of a number of different systems of oppression, such as sexism, racism, ableism, colonialism, transphobia and heterosexism, among others.

Feminist intervention work is fundamental to the work of all our centres. It is driven by principles of collective action and is based on a holistic approach to women's experiences, one that sees their individual experiences as multifaceted and interrelated (Boisclair et al., 2010⁸). The feminist intervention approach focuses on peer support and solidarity between women (BUP).

In terms of concrete action, feminist intervention work is about accompanying and supporting all women in their journey to empower themselves and regain control over their lives. Through their work, activities, and collective actions, women's centres also seek to engage women in a larger, societal project to bring feminism to the fore.

The feminist intervention approach informs the practices of centres in all their work surrounding violence. It raises awareness about gender-based stereotypes and sees women's struggles through a socio-political lens. This perspective guides both their intervention practices and their political actions, specifically in terms of the fight against violence aimed at women.

Having witnessed the oppression experienced by women in all its varied forms as well as the varying forms and complexity of their experiences, L'R has begun gravitating towards couching its practices and intervention work in an increasingly intersectional feminist approach.

8 Boisclair, Odile, France Bourgault, Fanny Valois-Nadeau and Josette Catellier (2010). "L'intervention féministe dans les centres de femmes: en action pour un monde plus juste !" In Christine Corbeil and Isabelle Marchand (Eds), *L'intervention féministe d'hier à aujourd'hui. Portrait d'une pratique sociale diversifiée* (pp. 211-228). Montréal: Éditions du remue-ménage.

As part of their efforts on the issue of violence, women's centre's work on understanding that numerous systems of oppression impact women and shape their experience of violence, and that these intersecting oppressions make women who are subject to multiple forms of them all the more vulnerable to violence aimed at them because they are women.

“ Our knowledge about social movements, the inherent violence of systems, the patriarchy, and poverty is growing. We're very engaged in these issues. At my centre, we do what I'd call more clinical work, but this political perspective is also very important to us. ”

Research Objectives

The joint research project discussed in this report was spearheaded by L'R in response to a need expressed by its member centres for greater visibility and recognition of their work in the fight to end violence against women. In collaboration with L'R's working group, the following goals were outlined by the project's research team:

Overall objective:

- **Raise awareness** about, and **seek recognition** for, the work of women's centres in the fight to end violence against women.

Specific objectives:

- Collect information about the experiences and needs of women reaching out to our women's centres.
- Identify the knowledge and skills of centre workers.
- Inventory the variety of practices as well as specifics unique to each community.
- Identify potential training needs centre workers may need, where applicable.

Overview of the Project's Methodology

Project results were based on data collected in two different steps:



PHASE I 2018

A primarily quantitative **online survey** led among centre workers:

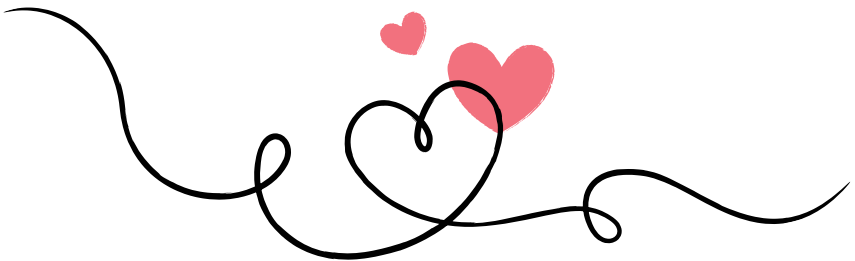
- yes/no responses collected from 82 centres



PHASE II 2019-2023

A **total of seven discussion groups** held in 2019:

- Three involving centre workers (total of 29 participants)
- Four involving women's centre users (total of 20 participants)



**Thank you to all those who participated!
You helped make this project possible!**

Research Results - Highlights

First off, results confirmed that centres have long been developing competencies based on their experiential knowledge about the poverty and exclusion women experience, the realities of living in non-urban centres, and more broadly, the complexity of the experiences and contexts in which women face violence.

Results also immediately revealed that, more concretely and beyond their shared engagement in serving women, **the work carried out by centres is not always the same, particularly when it comes to their work in supporting women who struggle with violence.** Reports from centre workers reveal significant diversity in how their day-to-day work is deployed **in response to local realities, the centre workers involved, above all, the needs of the women that reach out for help.**

Centres report having developed specific knowledge and approaches to help them address issues tied to violence aimed at women. Centre workers explain that they have developed a variety of ways to be responsive to the variety of situations women find themselves in when seeking support, including helping them navigate the criminal or civil justice system, the healthcare system, social services, housing, or employment. Workers' skill sets are multifaceted much like the realities of women who experience violence.

Ultimately, we found that **all women centres deal with the realities of women experiencing violence but approach them in various different ways**, each operating and deploying their efforts autonomously, with some working **outside the strict confines of issues of violence**. Centre workers explained, to use their words, that they work with women who experience “every form of violence imaginable.” This report explores more precisely what their work involves.

The diversity of violence experienced by women reaching out to our centres

Testimonials collected from women and centre workers show how all centres are helping women experiencing all kinds of violence in all sorts of contexts. Most have experienced violence numerous times over the course of their lives, sometimes all at once or at various times in their lives. These experiences involve:

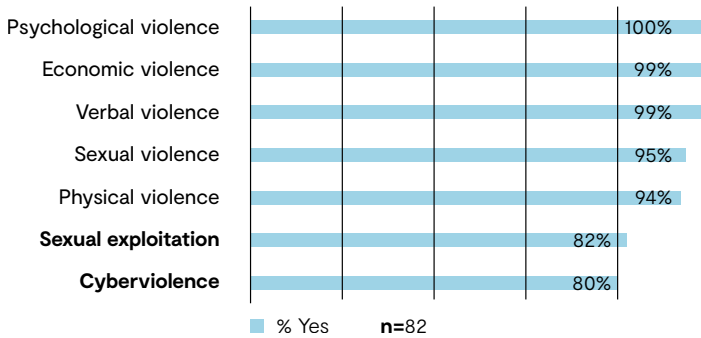
- circumstances where they have trouble getting help at the time they are struggling with violence
- a form of revictimization from having trouble getting help, especially from public services and institutions, such as when their voices and experiences are discredited or dismissed
- circumstances becoming exacerbated by other forms of discrimination
- a realization that services in non-urban centres are lacking

Centres are committed to supporting the women who reach out to them no matter the forms of violence or circumstances they are struggling with.

The varied forms of violence experienced by women working with centre workers

Figure 1 outlines the main forms of violence that centre workers have encountered when working with women (based on the forms of violence listed in the survey). Data collected show that all centres (100%) have worked with women who have reported or shown signs of psychological violence. Data show that nearly all centres have worked with women experiencing economic violence (surprisingly, as this form of violence is not well known and often goes unrecognized). Data also show that nearly all centres have worked with women experiencing verbal, sexual, or physical violence and, in more than 80% of centres, sexual exploitation. Circumstances involving cyberviolence were also reported, though less so. Even if this might be explained by this form of violence being newer, discussion groups have indicated that concern about it is growing.

Figure 1* Main forms of violence experienced by women reaching out to our centres (based on responses from surveyed centre workers)



* percentage of centres responding, "Yes, our centre works with women who experience this type of violence"

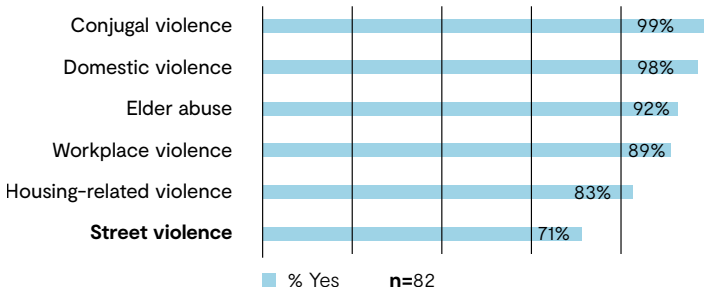
This is not to say that all women who reach out to women centres experience these forms of violence, but rather that all centres are likely to work with women who experience one or more of these forms of violence, which aligns with what many women report.

“ I’ve had experiences, I know there are five or six kinds of violence, psychological, physical, financial, sexual. I’ve experienced the sexual kind, the financial kind, yah I have experience with all that.”

The varied circumstances involving violence experienced by women working with centre workers

The various forms of violence experienced by women can occur in a variety of circumstances. Figure 2 outlines the circumstances associated with violence as reported by women’s centres that were surveyed: conjugal and domestic violence, elder abuse, workplace violence, housing-related violence, and street violence. The survey’s open-ended questions also revealed other less recognized or rarer circumstances: institutional or organizational violence, social violence, honour-based violence, spiritual violence, and violence between women being served by the centres themselves.

Figure 2* Different circumstances in which violence takes place (based on responses from surveyed centre workers)



* percentage of centres responding, “Yes, our centre works with women who experience this type of violence”

Beyond what is shown in figures 1 and 2, other forms and circumstances of violence specific to vulnerable women were raised by centre workers. This includes circumstances related to immigration, particularly non-status women, or related to women with unstable employment, and more broadly racialized women, elderly women, women living with a physical disability, and women struggling with mental health.

Violence tied to sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression was also reported by centre workers. All of these ever-changing circumstances must be brought to light to enable centre workers to deploy efforts that reflect and are responsive to the realities of these women.

Ultimately, the survey showed that violence is an everyday issue in the work of women's centres. Discussion groups have shown that **these types and circumstances of violence are often happening simultaneously, are not always recognizable, and are neither immediately nor spontaneously disclosed**. Centre workers are therefore called to carefully listen to the experiences shared in their conversations and work with women, be it during formal or informal settings in which they share time with them.

Centre workers also mentioned that they are regularly confronted with emerging or newly revealed circumstances involving violence (such as cyberviolence, mental health, immigration) and this requires them to continually adjust and update their approaches and practices.

Centre workers underscore the critical importance of educating themselves and staying informed in order to better help women struggling with violence. Indeed, staying up to date needs to be an ongoing effort.

“ Every centre worker is tasked with keeping themselves informed [...] I don't think our training is necessarily what makes us good support workers; life skills and know-how are not taught in school. Still, background training is essential, particularly in light of the complexity of the issues we are now seeing.”

Centre workers give great importance to the feminist approach, both as it relates to their work and their training. The women they work with also confirm the **importance of this approach** when talking about how they were pleased with the support they received.

“ The trust, respect, and non-judgmental approach of centre workers are immensely important to me.”

“ When a centre worker told me I had a problem and that the first step was to tackle it, I wasn't ready. If she had gone overboard and insisted, I would have walked out the door and wouldn't have gone back.”

Testimonials about the difficulty in getting help

Beyond struggling with violence, women reported having trouble getting access to the support, resources, and services they need.

Women in discussion groups explain that the attitudes they encountered were discriminatory and that this amounted to a form of **revictimization**. Some used the term “institutional violence” to describe their experience. Others explained that interacting with agents and personnel in institutional contexts was often humiliating and hurtful.

Put plainly, the fact that the violence they encountered went unrecognized in these institutional settings explains in part the difficulty they had in getting help.

For their part, centre workers explain that women are impacted by the decisions and actions taken by those providing institutional support and that these can have major repercussions on their lives, and in some cases, the lives of their children.

What women have told us echoes what centre workers tell us. Their testimonials eloquently express their sense of powerlessness and abandonment in the face of not finding help and services adapted to their experiences.

“ You know that feeling that you’re falling through the cracks? We’re told, “figure yourself out, the government can’t do everything for you.” Except that when you show up where they tell you to go, and try to keep working the system, to help yourself, you’re basically left to fend for yourself. ”

Often, when reaching out for help, the resources that women find aren't aligned with their needs. At times, the journey to find help can itself become a violent experience. These are the circumstances in which women talk about revictimization or violence upon violence.

“ Women like us don't just experience a one-time trauma from some kind of violence we encountered in our past. We experience trauma again when confronted with the behaviours of those working in institutions. Thankfully, there are community-based centres like this one.”

According to both women and centre workers, women face many barriers in getting the right kind of help. These barriers are even worse for those living exceptional circumstances and for those subject to other and often multiple forms of social oppression and discrimination. The journey to get help and find services can very nearly be described as a struggle that often leaves women feeling powerless when they have to tackle it on their own.

Some women explain how working with one, and sometimes more than one, women's centre is what helped them find the right doors to knock on to get help.

“ At the time, if I had had access to this women's centre to help me, my experience might have been different.”

So, what exactly is the work of women's centre and how it is deployed?

The Work of Women's Centres

Based on what women and support workers told us in our discussion groups, the work of women's centres in the fight to end violence against women fundamentally involves:

- directly supporting and being there for women who reach out to them
- supporting, referring, and accompanying women as they follow through on referrals to other services

...as well as other important work, as outlined in Figure 3, including:

- raising awareness
- defending women's rights and calling for gender equality in the political sphere

Centres see their work as falling into three specific categories: services, education, and public action.

Figure 3 Categories of work happening in L'R's member centres

Work happening in centres focused on violence against women



Services



**Awareness-raising/
educational activities**

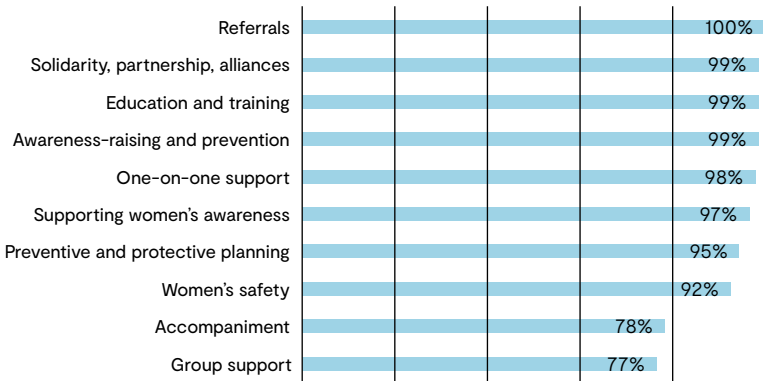


**Rights defence/
public action**

According to our survey, beyond the help centres offer to women directly or through a variety of group activities, all centres reported offering women **referrals** in response to the needs or circumstances they share with centre workers. These referrals are all the more customized when centres have developed partnerships and alliances with external organizations.

Virtually all centres also reported offering women activities where they can learn or train themselves as well as one-on-one or group activities where women can raise their **awareness** and learn to spot signs of violence and **recognize** situations involving violence

Figure 4* Main activities offered on the issue of violence (based on surveyed women’s centres)



* percentage of centres responding, "Yes, our centre offers this," n=82

One-on-One Support and Group Activities Offered Directly to Women

Women are offered support in a variety of ways depending on the centre, either on a one-to-one basis or through group activities. Support can take place as part of activities specifically focused on issues of violence (or not) during which experiences of violence are either revealed or suspected.

Referrals and Partnerships

Some centres find themselves working directly with victims of violence in a support capacity. In light of the gamut of needs women bring to them, centres also and inevitably work closely with other services and organizations.

This category of work means that centre workers are actively listening to the women who reach out to them to help clearly identify their needs and to know exactly where to refer them to get the right kind of help.

As such, our centres work in partnership, at times within a formal partnership framework, with other organizations and services. These partnerships allow centres to develop dynamics of trust that are essential to assuring women that they will be well served and not risk situations where they could feel revictimized.

Yet referral work is not strictly about helping women find appropriate resources in the community; it also involves accompanying them in following through on these referrals and all that this involves. Centre workers explain that there is a need for this work to happen in conjunction with these other organizations and services, where the expertise of all parties is maximized.

Awareness Raising

Centres help raise awareness about violence in any number of ways, the most usual being: awareness days, information kiosks, and awareness-raising pieces on social media, local media, websites, and newsletters. Other ways include advertising in the public transit system as well as conferences, theatre, art initiatives, videos, and other creative formats.

Centres can deploy their awareness-raising activities within their own spaces but also beyond, namely in the public sphere, with political leaders, in schools, in the healthcare system, within social services, with public safety agencies, with the legal system, and in the workplace. When women take part in these types of activities, it gives them an opportunity to take stock of the violence they see in their lives, in their relationships, in their families, in their workplace, or even in their quest to get help and find support.

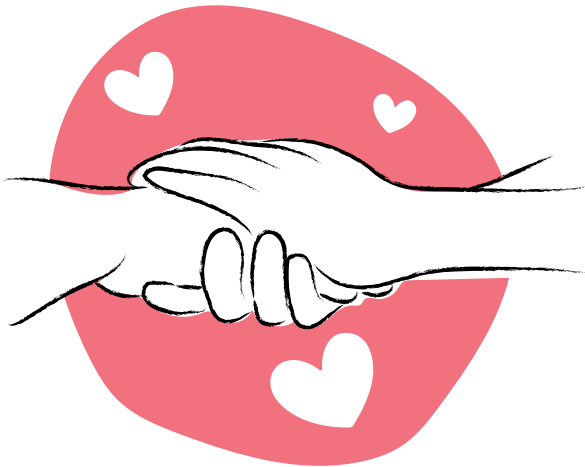
Public Action

Our survey showed that public action is a large part of the work women's centres do. Women actively take part and take away a great sense of value.

This type of work includes days of action centred on violence against women, petitions, or actions aimed at political leaders to demand concrete changes in how women experiencing violence can be better served.

“ For a number of centres, the annual Twelve Days of Action to End Violence Against Women and the activities held on December 6 are central. Alongside the women they serve, centre workers organize actions, take part in events, or organize their own either independently or in partnerships with local partners. By taking part in these activities, women open up opportunities to stir collective action and to raise awareness about the issues tied to violence against women.”

All this to say that the work of our women’s centres is not strictly about delivering services. It includes important work in raising public awareness about violence women face, about how to counter it, and about supporting social change that can help bring it to an end.



The Importance of the Informal: Raising Awareness as Part of Other Activities

An important part of what women's centres do in fighting violence in fact happens during activities not directly tied to issues of violence. This is critical given that many women reaching out to our centres are experiencing violence but are not reaching out to centres because of it. Centre workers highlight the importance of this work happening informally.

“ The expertise behind our approach is founded on being informal. When reaching out to a local CLSC, it's to get a service. The beauty of women's centres is that they are safe spaces where everything can be talked about and where everyone can share in the discussion. ”

For centre workers, talking about violence in activities not tied to the issue can present opportunities —if not to call it a strategy— to help women take on the subject and their experience with it without having to name it up front. This helps women who may not be ready or scared to recognize or talk about their experience with violence yet who are still looking for support in dealing with other aspects of their lives, such as feeling isolated or needing to build new skills.

“ We work hard on giving our activities the right titles and finding the right kinds of things to offer. We need to talk about violence, of course, but when it becomes too central, this can put women off. So we offer painting classes, knitting workshops, and it works well.”

The importance of group activities focused directly (and indirectly) on violence

Even if some centres offer women one-on-one support, centre workers agree that group activities and building solidarity is an important part of what they offer women. Beyond the good it offers women in breaking their silence and isolation (which is frequent among women struggling with violence) group activities allow women to consolidate their experiences and see them as shared and to learn and better understand the violence they experience by listening to others. Group activities offer women, whoever they are and no matter what they are experiencing, a place to take stock or to share their story and to get support from other women.

“ The power of working with a group is real, we can't forget that. Sure, we offer ourselves to them as guide, but it is often the power of the group that helps women who are struggling to shine a light on the potential they have. It's quite amazing.”

Centres therefore offer various types of group activities, both focused and not focused on violence, and different centres do this in different ways. Some offer support groups specifically about violence, and some are geared towards violence in general while others specific to certain forms of violence. Some offer group activities centred on wellness, like yoga, knitting, cooking, which offer women opportunities to talk and share both in structured and informal settings.

Examples of group activities that focus directly (or not) on violence offered in our centres

Group activities focused on violence

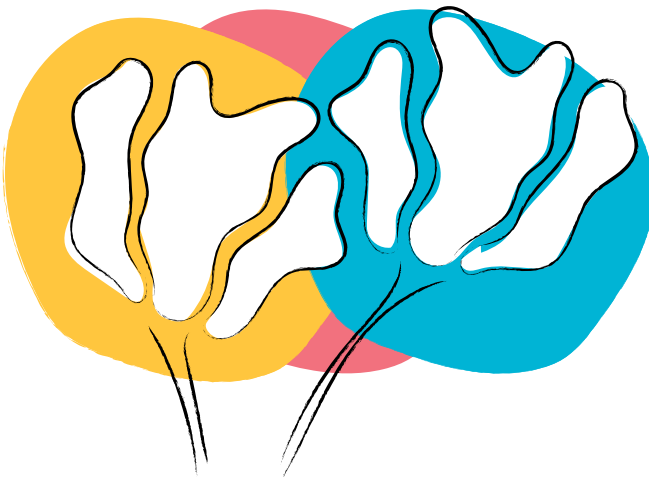
ACTIVITY TYPE

- Support groups (series of meetings over a specific period of time)
- Workshops (centred on a topic tied to violence against women)
- Training and talks on violence against women

Group activities not focused on violence but during which work on violence can take place

ACTIVITY TYPE

- Creative or art workshops
- Wellness activities
- Discussion groups on various topics that can open the door on sharing about violence (topics such as self-esteem, affirming one's identity, love, loss, art, yoga, knitting)



The Role of Women's Centres in the Service Ecosystem Supporting Women Struggling with Violence

Developing a **true continuum of services** would allow any woman experiencing violence (regardless of the form, circumstance, or character) to get the support she needs and avoid “falling through the cracks.” This is an **ideal to work towards**, both for government services and service providers, and to which the real stakeholders, women, must have access.

In our discussion groups, centre workers reminded us of the **importance of being there for women throughout their quest for help, support, and services** namely because the journey can be difficult, complex, filled with obstacles and dead ends, unanswered calls for help, and even exposure to abuse and other kinds of trying circumstances.

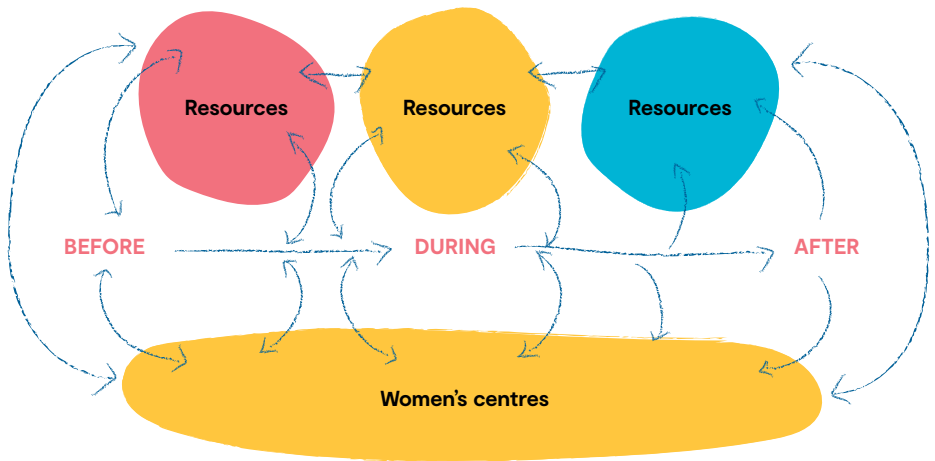
Achieving this ideal requires true collaboration and cooperation between the various resources designed to support women.

The words used by the centre workers we met with imply that this means ensuring that:

- their work **complements** this continuum of services designed to support women who are victims of violence, and
- services **not be offered in silos**

Indeed, data collected from centre workers indicate that, as a network, centres are called to work with women experiencing violence **before** they even acknowledge its existence, while they struggle with it consciously, and **after their circumstances are seemingly resolved**. This means that centres often intervene before women reach out to services specialized in violence, that their work often continues as women reach out to these specialized services, and (according to our research) that their work continues after they have escaped the violence.

It is also often the case that centres step in to support women **when other services cannot** either because they are not accessible to them, which can happen in non-urban centres, because women's profiles do not match the ones required by specialized services, or because women choose not to seek their help for a variety of reasons.



Before Women Seek out Services Specialized in Violence

Seeing as many women know about women's centres before they become aware of their violence in their lives, or before taking the step to get help, they often seek help there before going elsewhere. Taking part in the activities of women's centres can, as we saw earlier, help women recognize that they have experienced violence.

“ Our setup allows us to be there for women. We can help them to shed some light on their lives and help them start to see that they might in fact be experiencing one form of violence or another. ”

Centre workers explain that by not being labelled as a “service for victims of violence” can be an advantage and help centres **reach more women earlier in their quest for help.**

“ We are perfectly placed to serve as an entry point, because we aren't a women's shelter, or a sexual assault centre, or a crime victims assistance service. Women can simply say they're headed to the local women's centre because there's an event, a dinner, a workshop, or any other kind of activity. ”

In their role as **sentinels** and **awareness raisers**, women's centres can therefore offer women support above and beyond the one-on-one and group activities focused on violence, namely:

- act as entry point, as needed, to services specialized in violence against women
- refer women to the services they need
- offer personalized referrals or accompany women in their journey for help

Accompanying women on their journey once they recognize the violence

Women who experience violence often reach out to women's centres while they reach out to other organizations. In these cases, women's centres can offer them referrals and accompaniment as they seek help elsewhere (social services, legal system, shelters, victim support services, etc.). In these cases, their work is complementary to other services being offered and can meet other needs tied to individual women's circumstances.

“ We come because, even if we are getting help elsewhere, we have other things to deal with. And sometimes, the places you try to get help from don't have time, or don't see you as a good “fit” and if you're not a good “fit” you're not going to get help and you get nowhere. So we come here. ”

The women we met told us how important it was to have someone be there for them as they took on their journey out of violence. They explained that the expertise of centre workers helped them tremendously in getting the help they needed elsewhere —and often the numerous places they needed to work with to get help. In truth, a single point of service is rarely able to meet all the needs of women struggling with violence.

Women say having felt “privileged” to have access to the experience and the connections offered to them by centre workers. These helped them facilitate their journey, or sometimes more plainly made it possible. They expressed dismay at not having been able to get the help they needed themselves and some mentioned feeling revictimized in light of all the trouble they had in getting the help they needed.

“ The system is just like that. You’re a puppet to them. You need a support worker with you because you’re at a loss for words. Agents talk to you but nothing’s getting through. To get what I need, a support worker has to come along, to act as a witness. Because she’s from a women’s centre, it changes the dynamic.”

In certain cases, centre workers explain having had to interrupt conversations to help avoid women experience violence as they work with the resources meant to be helping them. This echoes what women report about their journey to get the help to meet the needs of their circumstances.

After the violence has ended

Women can suffer the repercussions of violence long after they have ended and these can impact their lives and the course of their lives.

For many women who reach out to centres, finding their way out of violence is a difficult moment where they have to rebuild much of their lives, from where they live, their career plans, and their finances to their mental and physical health, their relationships, and sometimes all of these things. Having to start from scratch on many of these fronts is far from rare.

After their circumstances appear resolved, centres can continue to support women who initially got help and services at the time they were struggling with violence. Whether they received psychological support or temporarily stayed in a shelter, these forms of support often come to an end once the crisis has been addressed. Yet women may still look to get support on other fronts seeing as the impacts and repercussions of experiencing violence can endure even after they have made it through the initial crisis.

As women who participated in this research project told us, this highlights the importance of the ongoing support centres can offer to women once they have reached the “post-crisis” period of their journey.

“ When you finally get out, you’re burned out. You’re really looking for someone to be there and help you build yourself up again.”

“ Takes no time for self-esteem to be shattered. Building it back, well that’s a whole other story.”

This kind of post-crisis support may involve things like reclaiming one’s autonomy, reclaiming one’s self-empowerment, having someone to work with while rebuilding one’s life, but every woman’s journey involves a whole range of different steps and needs. Some express the need to better understand what happened, often so they have the tools to counter violence they may encounter in the future. All this work can take time which underlines the importance of having the kind of long-term support women’s centres can offer, no matter where women are along their journey.

“ What happens “after” is terribly important. Once the crisis is over, once they have escaped the violence. Rebuilding self-esteem, we invest a lot of efforts on that front. ”

Women's Centres' Best Assets

The discussion groups held as part of this project invited centre workers and women to talk about the role of women's centres in supporting women. One of our major findings was that **there is consensus on what their strengths are**. Without being exhaustive, highlights of these discussions are reported next.

The Work Centres Do - Strengths from the Point of View of Centre Workers



Asterisks indicate the aspects that both centre workers and the women mentioned in the project's discussion groups.

The strengths raised by centre workers are in part tied to their role within the continuum of services offered to women who are victims of violence and in part tied to the actions deployed by the centres.

Within the continuum of services required or available to women struggling with violence, the **strengths of women's centres from the point of view of centre workers are:**

- their work in helping **raise awareness** and in **detecting** violence against women*
- their role as an **entry point** to different resources that meet the needs of women who are aware of their violent circumstances*
- their knowledge and expertise about **eliminating barriers** and enabling women to get help and access services

The strengths of the centres themselves from the point of view of centre workers:

- their commitment to **feminist intervention principles** which include respecting women and the pace at which they need to go

and valuing their voice and experiences as well as their knowledge and autonomy

- their **group activities**, their **peer support mechanisms**, and the **solidarity building** between women designed to help break women's isolation*
- their ability to support women at **different stages of their journey** and over the long term based on their needs and level of engagement*
- their roots in the community which enable them to customize their efforts based on available local resources

The Work Centres Do - Strengths from the Point of View of Women

The women who participated in our discussion groups expressed how the support women's centres offer is often crucial for those experiencing violence, and this is true even if women are not aware of this violence when they first interface with the centre.

“ Doesn't matter much what kind of violence it is, you get stuck in it like a sand trap and if no one is there to reach out to you, you can stay trapped for years. If no one says “Hey, look” or “Hey, this way,” you can't get out. There's no such thing as just a bit of violence.”

Women expressed gratefulness about specific actions deployed by women's centres, namely being there for them, offering them referrals to the right resources, and supporting them as they take steps in their journey. Concretely, this means centre workers can help by:

- **detecting** violence and **raising women's awareness*** about what violence looks like, the forms it takes, the circumstances in which it happens, and how it can manifest
- **stepping in when women need support*** often when support from elsewhere is inaccessible or insufficient, especially in non-urban centres
- **supporting** women along their journey to free themselves from violence

- **referring** women towards useful resources and helping them follow through as needed
- **enabling access** to the right resources based on individual women's needs
- **accompanying women** as they seek help and services from other institutions and organizations

The strengths highlighted by women using the centres' services zeroed in on a variety of things, including the approach used by centre workers, notably:

- how centre workers make women's voices and experiences the focus on their efforts*
- how centre workers engage women in the work of the centre and thereby give value to their knowledge and skills*
- how centre workers respect the pace at which women need to go*
- how skilled centre workers are at listening and most importantly understanding women's experiences*
- how centre workers work without judging the women they support*
- how centre workers are available for one-on-one support*

In terms of the strengths of centres themselves, women talked about:

- services and activities deployed **from within the centres*** and group activities including those focused directly on violence
- activities centred on self-esteem building and wellness recovery

They also made explicit mention of the types of things they could not find elsewhere:

- a sense of solidarity among women at the centre* to help them feel less isolated
- a sense that they could get involved and stir change, particularly in terms of improving the everyday lives of women

The testimonials that follow help bring to light, in their own words, what women said they were unable to find elsewhere than in women's centres:

- “ I took a deep breath (before I walked in) and as I came through the door, a centre worker said, “Can I help you?” I said, “Yes, I’m at the end of my rope,” and I cried, and I talked, **and she was there to listen, and referred me to places I didn’t know existed, that I didn’t even know could exist.**”
- “ I’m not quite sure how they managed, just seeing me unravelled like that, not saying a word, and they stepped right up and helped, you know, worked with where I was... and the change that happens is real.”
- “ It’s personal here, it’s warm, it’s different, it’s not like this in other places.”

In sum, women readily acknowledge the competence of women's centres in terms of raising awareness about violence but also in terms of detecting violence, offering victims direct support, or being there with them as they seek out help and services to help them heal from the violence they experienced, be it by increasing their autonomy, rebuilding themselves, re-empowering themselves, or finding wellness again.

Women also confirm the relevance of the feminist intervention approach which they qualified as respectful of their journey, their pace, and the steps they take in it.

They also confirm the relevance of intervention work and group settings that help build solidarity between them and help them feel less alone in their journey, which is all too common in women who have been victims of violence.

Indeed, women victims of violence were eloquent in telling us how they felt that centres distinguish themselves from other help services to which they could reach out (or could have reached out to). Yet they also shared with us the ways that women's centres could have better been there for them.

Other Needs and Wishes Women Expressed

The women we met with were keen on sharing their experiences with us, both about the women's centres they reached out to and the other services they either had, or could have, reached out to. They did so with a desire to help other women who, like them, struggle with violence in their lives.

“ It's important to pay it forward. By sharing our experiences, we can help someone else in their trek across the desert land and offer them shortcuts. ”

Women first wished that:

- the **work of women's centres could be better communicated and more widely** so that they can reach more women
- **more cooperation** should exist between the different services and support available to women facing violence, including women's centres
- to do so, **channels of communication** that disseminate information about services available to women need to be improved, whether this be online or through different service points.

“ We need more communication. We need things to be reorganized. We need more links to be made between different organizations. ”

Women who shared their views with us as part of this project agree that **increased funding** would allow women's centres to better fulfill their mission and reach a greater number of women. They see this as added value for society at large, namely because, in their view, centres help victims get back on their feet faster and better. This happens thanks to the work centres do directly or through referrals and support they offer to get women the help and services they need.

“ **Not sure that it costs us more to support the frontlines (instead of leaving women fend for themselves). I'm sure the costs are greater. Without support, these women will be unwell for years, will need help to heal, and won't be able to work. I'm sure the costs are greater if we leave them to themselves.** ”

The wishes expressed by the women we met as part of this project did not stop at what women's centres could do. They also talked about how often their journey in finding help and services could be improved. On the whole, women shared that they needed:

- **access to more support, more help, and more services**, in terms of quantity, duration, quality, and immediate availability
- access to high-quality support in tune with their needs in places where these are lacking (such as legal assistance, psychological support, and support for children)
- earlier access to support to help them mitigate the repercussions of violence
- long-term support, including for things that come up only after the crisis of violence ends
- **to be safe from revictimization and discrimination in their interactions with different service points**
- their voices and experiences to be recognized beyond the walls of women's centres

In many ways, as we saw earlier, women recognize how women's centres can help meet their needs. The fact that centres perform their work with a feminist intervention approach explains this. The wishes they expressed are mainly aimed at other service points that they were able to (or had to) reach out to in order to get help. The work of women's centres is to assist women in getting these needs met and mobilize the kind of help that respects women and reflects their voices.

Wishes Expressed by Women about the Help Received from Women's Centres

Women at times express wishes that are not compatible with the mission or the operation of women's centres, such as the presence of men or family members in their activities. Other wishes sometimes stem from very specific situations not relevant to all centres. It is nevertheless useful to be aware of, and sensitive to, these perspectives and find alternative solutions wherever possible or otherwise be in a position to explain precisely why these wishes cannot be met.

All in all, the things being asked for by these women can be summed up as **needs specific to their circumstances that could help guide the services offered by women's centres. These include:**

- greater availability, more specifically in terms of a wider variety of business hours namely for those employed, at school, or with young children
- greater accessibility to services specialized in violence in terms of their proximity, ideally available within the centres themselves through collaborative and service agreements
- greater clarification on how women's centres operate so that women can understand what they can expect right up front and avoid having their expectations dashed
- greater communication about exclusions, exceptions, and unforeseen factors that impact service availability, for the same reasons noted above
- more ways to obtain women's feedback about how centres operate, the services they receive, the activities offered, etc.

As one woman explained during a discussion about the services she'd like to see improved:

“ Obviously all this means more investment on the part of government. Ultimately, more money is what's needed.”

This echoes what centre workers also expressed, as captured in this quote:

“ We aren't a real service point. We strive for this, we'd like to get there, we really would. But that would mean making cuts to the other things we do. It's a question of money —and time— we don't have. There's no way around the fact that we have to make difficult choices.”

Looking Ahead

The research that lies behind this publication allowed us to outline more precisely the work that women's centres do around the issue of violence against women. It helped us see that, even though women's centres do not market themselves as places where women can obtain support when they experience violence, it is relatively common for them, as part of their one-on-one and group activities, to be places where experiences of violence are shared or detected. Tied to this, our research also helped us highlight how women's centres contribute to the wider range of services available to women struggling with violence.

In concluding our project, it seems appropriate to outline a number of forward-looking considerations and recommendations, among which some are already in place. The exercise of outlining them has two purposes:

- highlight the **already valuable work of centres**, which is often developed and implemented on a local level, and which deserves better exposure and should continue to be pursued;
- recognize that the work and practices of women's centres involve ongoing effort and appropriate levels of support in order to be pursued

It is in this sense that our research was led, and in this direction that the following recommendations were drafted. These recommendations are formulated namely for centre workers but equally for women who reach out to women's centres as well as other service points and organizations engaged with the issue of violence against women. They are meant to stir collaboration in recognition of the role of women's centres in this array of services. Our recommendations are also relevant to governments who can support the work of women's centres both by recognizing their importance and role within the gamut of services available to women struggling with violence —and by providing the necessary funding for them to continue their work, that alone a form of concrete recognition.

In terms of the work women's centres do, we recommend that they:

- pursue the work they currently do to **support women struggling with violence** no matter the form or circumstances surrounding this violence
- continue **acknowledging women's voices, knowledge, and lived experience**
- continue fostering good two-way **communication** with women
- continue to **learn more about the needs and experiences of women**, including circumstances that are emerging and less well known
 - by continuing their work in listening and being open to women's lived and diverse experiences through one-on-one work and group activities
 - by investing in the ongoing professional development of their workers
- focus on **respect and inclusion** and adjust their work in that sense as best they can, namely:
 - respect and inclusion in terms of women's lived experience
 - respect and inclusion in terms of women's place along their journey
 - respect and inclusion in terms of the barriers and obstacles women face, bearing in mind that these can be numerous and overlapping based on who they are
 - respect and inclusion in terms of specific circumstances tied to women's personal and professional lives prior to, during, and after their experience of violence, including their ability and constraints in making use of the centres' services and activities
- develop and apply the **intersectional feminist intervention approach**

In terms of their external presence, we recommend that women's centres:

- make ongoing, concerted efforts to make their work, their approach, and their tools known, particularly by regularly touching base with organizations with which they interface
- continue supporting and investing themselves in **collaborative and partnership efforts**
- **stay up to date about other organizations focused on violence** or other issues relevant to women experiencing violence to ensure they can continue offering women useful referrals
- focus on offering women **personalized and responsive referrals** to relevant service points by accompanying them in their efforts to seek out help
- continue their **work focused on social change** in ending violence towards women and improving the living conditions of women more broadly

In terms of L'R's role, we recommend:

- following up on this project by disseminating its results and implementing its recommendations
- **drive efforts**, as a collective, to **give more exposure** to the work of women's centres surrounding the issue of violence and to the voices of women they serve, namely among decision-makers
- create and foster mechanisms, **tools, and safe spaces** within its committees and structures to support knowledge sharing and critical thinking about its practices
- ensure that an **ongoing follow-up mechanism** is in place to help share and disseminate knowledge about violence and the variety and diversity of women's needs
- encourage **cross-generational knowledge sharing**
- support the dissemination of tools and practices developed locally by centres in order to promote the diversity of expertise found in centres and among their workers
- in light of the impacts of violence intervention work on the mental health and wellbeing, ensure that centres and support workers benefit from organizational support to help manage these impacts while at the same time recognize and promote the value of their work
- complete and keep updated all materials relating to L'R's work notably to ensure that changes in practices are documented and shared terminology is well defined without, however, detracting from the autonomy of individual centres and their work

In terms of the women reaching out to our centres, we recommend that they:

- help make women's centres safe, inclusive, and compassionate spaces for all women as well as all those who take part in activities, support workers, staff, and directors
- share constructive feedback about the support and services they receive from centres, including what they valued most and why
- help promote the work of centres on the issue of violence in their circles in an effort to reach more women likely to benefit from their activities

In terms of other community and private organizations and professionals working with women struggling with violence, we recommend that they:

- recognize the work and expertise of women's centres on the issue violence
- make concrete efforts or show an interest in **learning or learning more about the work of women's centres on the issue of violence**
- collect and update data about the activities, practices, and tools used by women's centres in their region in view of helping an increasing number of women by sharing this information with them
- work collaboratively with women's centres to help support the women found in their organizational or professional communities by:
 - collecting testimonials from women in an effort to identify how to best collaborate and organize services to meet their needs
- invite women's centres, their support workers, and the women who use their services to share their knowledge and practices as part of formal and informal knowledge mobilization and knowledge transfer forums and activities (trainings, talks, workshops, consultations, etc.)

In terms of the role of decision-makers, we recommend that they:

- recognize the work of women's centres serving women struggling with violence and recognize the importance of their role in providing women support and services as well as supporting violence prevention efforts, namely by:
 - including women's centres as stakeholders in all efforts aimed at fostering dialogue, joint actions, and initiatives around the issue of violence against women, whether decision-makers are driving or just taking part in these efforts
 - supporting the work of women's centres on the issue of violence through funding and formal recognition of their work
 - respecting the autonomy of women's centre within the context of funded or collaborative initiatives namely by valuing their approaches when taking on issues of violence, including the importance of both informal and feminist values and approaches, particularly in terms of respecting the pace of individual women in their journey.

Ultimately, all the recommendations made here seek to raise awareness and give recognition to the fundamental role of L'R, its member centres, and their respective support workers as allies and partners in the struggle to end violence against women.

List of Abbreviations

CLSC	Community-based service centres <i>(Centres locaux de services communautaires)</i>
FRQSC	Provincial research funding body <i>(Fonds de recherche du Québec – société et culture)</i>
L’R	L’R des centres de femmes du Québec
PSOC	Provincial community organization funding program <i>(Programme de soutien aux organismes communautaires)</i>
SSHRC	Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council
Trajetvi	Research and action partnership initiative focused on journeys and access to services for vulnerable women struggling with conjugal violence <i>(Partenariat de recherches et d’actions sur les trajectoires de vie, de violence, de recherche d’aide et de recours aux services des femmes victimes de violence conjugale en contexte de vulnérabilité)</i>

Rooted in their communities, our member centres aim to be there for women who reach out to them and aim to build trust and ties with them. They also aim to cater their work to meet their individual needs, circumstances, and preferences based on the availability of local services. Women's centres have the privilege of learning from the women they serve. This enables them to acquire collective knowledge about the violence women face and how to serve in the fight against it. This rich knowledge would greatly benefit from being better known and increasingly shared, not only among and between centres but beyond them too.



L'R des centres
de femmes
du Québec



rcentres.qc.ca



info@rcentres.qc.ca



514 876-9965