



COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

***Addressing Violence
against Women and Girls in
Blackfalds Alberta: Gender
Based Analysis for
Community Needs and
Resources Assessment***

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Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*

- Margaret Mead

Understanding the Issue of Violence against Women & Girls

The United Nations defines violence against women as: *“Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”* **(Fact Sheet – Moving Women out of Violence, Canadian Women’s Foundation 2012)**

Violence against women and girls is one of the most widespread violations of human rights. Gender-based violence not only violates human rights, but also hampers productivity, reduces human capital and undermines economic growth. **(UNIFEM)**

Each year in Canada, violence and abuse drive over 100,000 women and children out of their homes and into shelters. Violence against women costs Canadian society more than \$4 billion each year and takes an incalculable human toll. As our nation’s largest single provider of shelter services for women and children fleeing violence, YWCA Canada sees violence against women as a broad social issue demanding immediate attention. **(YWCA Canada – A Turning Point for Women 2011)**

Violence against women doesn't always end in murder. In Canada in 2007, nearly 40,200 incidents of "spousal violence" (i.e., violence against legally married, common-law, separated and divorced partners) were reported to police. And yet the figures show that such reported incidents had actually decreased by 15 per cent between 1998 and 2007. Let's put that another way. Despite a 15 per cent decline in those years, more than 40,000 Canadian women still reported being subjected to violence by their partner in 2007. **(Gerald Caplan – The Globe and Mail, July 2010)**

Aboriginal women are the most at risk group in Canada for issues related to violence. The overrepresentation of Aboriginal women in Canada as victims of violence must be understood in the context of a colonial strategy that sought to dehumanize Aboriginal women. While the motivations and intersections may differ, NWAC has found that colonization remains the constant thread connecting the different forms of violence against Aboriginal women in Canada. The value of Aboriginal women is diminished by the persistence of patriarchal values that, consciously or not, continue to influence and regulate social norms and gender relations. **(What Their Stories Tell Us – Research Findings from Sisters in Spirits Initiative 2010)**

For the Métis, violence against women is a community issue with each person having a role and responsibility to prevent, intervene and support victims or those who have lost loved ones to violence. “It is time to take a stand for our Métis women and girls. When one of our own has suffered or is lost it resonates throughout the veins of the community,” said Women of the Métis Nation President Melanie Omeniho. “Every community citizen, service provider and leader must make Métis women a priority and this starts by properly identifying our women as being Métis.”



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(Media Release - Women of the Métis Nation calls for strong action to end violence against Métis women. 2011)

SUMMARY of Community Connections Project

Blackfalds has a population of just under 7,000 and lays approximately equal distance between Lacombe, AB. (a community of 12,000) and Red Deer, AB. (a community of approximately 80,000).

There are currently few resources to address issues of '*violence against women and girls*' in this small rural community. The community struggles with an active young adult gang of males, contends with multiple distributors of alcohol and has frequent and ongoing domestic violence issues. For women and girls experiencing violence in Blackfalds, accessing services has an immediate challenge, given that there is no public transportation to either of the larger centres in Red Deer or Lacombe, where services are available.

Shining Mountains Living Community, in discussions with Blackfalds Neighborhood Place recognized this emerging need to develop a comprehensive *Community Plan* to address violence against women and girls in an area with minimal resources.

In these preliminary discussions, the Coordinator of Blackfalds Neighborhood Place confirmed that serious rates of violence occur within Blackfalds, and highlighted domestic and gang related violence as a significant concern. The Blackfalds RCMP unit has reported domestic complaints of 85 over the past six-month period (Jan. 2011 to June 2011) including sexual assault and more recently, 5 reported domestic complaints for the month of September 2011. Although the needs of rural women have been well documented in Canada over the last 10 years, little has changed to provide significant intervention or assistance.

There is however a strong commitment and community excitement to develop a *Community Plan* from which will emerge a vehicle to address complex issues such as women's economic security (including financial literacy); leadership development; economic prosperity; basic issues of safety; and education pertaining to the elimination of violence and discrimination against women and girls. In many instances, this will also include the children of the women.

In developing and implementing the *Community Plan*, it is hoped that the experiences and lessons Blackfalds gains as a community can be shared or recreated in other communities within Canada.



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Community Needs and Resources Assessment to Identify Issues

In the past year, much of the focus was on collecting the information, after the community working group committee was established.

Conducting the community needs and resources assessment did not need to be complicated, there were numerous sources and/or templates to be utilized; the key was to make it our own to meet the needs of our community. The assessment tools helped and will continue to help in identifying the important needs, assets or resources within the local community, within the context of violence against women. Some of the benefits of the collaborative group's work included:

- Helping to inform the community working group to organize and plan their efforts on next steps.
- Capitalizing on the resources identified in the assessment to help make the collaborative group's community organizing work a success.

Key elements included:

- Focused on both needs and resources so as to not just focus on the problems facing Blackfalds community, but on its strengths as well.
- Included a mixture of quantitative (numbers) and qualitative (stories) to determine needs and resources
- Collected data from multiple sources rather than just relying on one source
- Included data from existing resources, but it created an opportunity to collect new data to assess needs and strengths

Why it was important to conduct a Needs and Resource Assessment?

- Violence against women affects all communities
- Blackfalds has unique challenges, needs and strengths
- Helps create goals that build on resources
- Its potential use as a baseline measure for later comparison
- Fosters community ownership amongst stakeholders
- Helps in the development of an informed community organizing strategy and the development of a toolkit



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What We have learned to date:

Blackfalds is primarily a “oil rig” community, in that the majority of employed people are in services to or directly involved with oil field work, although the employer itself is not located in the community. This fact also places unique economic/employment opportunities and mobility issues; primarily with men upon the residents of the community. When the oil fields are “booming” there is a great deal of disposable income and oil field workers are often gone from their homes for weeks or months at a time. The eb and flow of oil prices is seen reflected in the employment and economic stability of the community and in the rates of violence there are well.

Males are frequently employed directly in the field, with relatively high incomes while women are more often employed in stationery or support positions with relatively less income. The rates of violence apparently fall and rise with the economic stability of the oil field.

Gaps in services include a lack of employment services, either stationery or mobile delivered to Blackfalds. The closest employment service is in Red Deer, this results in women needing to find transportation to look for work/apply for benefits etc. Other gaps related to gaining meaningful or improved employment opportunities surround employment training programs or services, assistance with resume writing, interview skill development and so on, all of which are accessed in Red Deer.

Financial impacts can be seen in the reality of only one banking institution in Blackfalds, making it difficult for a woman to open/access her own account without concern that her partner might find out.

Blackfalds Neighborhood Place is only open four days per week, with a registered social worker only two days per week. This severely limits the opportunities for women or girls to seek support, guidance or other related supports to begin the development of a plan when face with violence or potential violence. There is no male support service/worker in Blackfalds to assist males with a safe place to explore their alternatives for behaviours.

Blackfalds may be unique in the lack of immigrant or foreign workers employed in or residents of the community.

About Community Connections

Community Connections is a three year project funded by Status of Women Canada. This project was the first endeavor of two community partners; Shining Mountain Living Community Services, from Red Deer and the Blackfalds Neighborhood Place. The intent of this project is to address the range of institutional barriers and factors that limit the community of Blackfalds in addressing violence against women and girls, including sexual assault in this rural community.



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As this project continues, an important step is to continue partnership building and collaborations with community stakeholders, and will include community women and girls, Blackfalds Town Council, regional and provincial governments, community/business leaders, law enforcement (RCMP) and others that may be mobilized to identify and respond to the specific needs of women and girls in the Blackfalds community. The original responses to the project were very positive, as staff began conducting interviews, gathering women and other stakeholders together a quiet resistance or fear began to be noticed. The fear of “unknown” impacts was commented on by both males and females, whether in business or stay at home parent roles.

The underlying goal for this project is to increase support systems for women and girls by developing and implementing a broad range of residential and outreach programs, and more importantly, to fill gaps in services that are currently unavailable to the community of women and thereby reducing violence, homelessness and poverty. Moving from “hidden or quiet” violence to addressing or uncovering issues and becoming proactive takes time and “a hero” to move forward.

Truly reducing violence, homelessness and poverty for the community of women and girls in Blackfalds can only be achieved by mobilizing the community and encouraging connections within the community to increase, add or supplement existing community programs. Ultimately it is about assisting rural women and girls successfully create healthier living situations where women can thrive and flourish. It is expected that the Community Connections project will be a valuable tool for other communities to utilize when developing similar plans.

It is the plan of the project that at its completion date, Blackfalds as a community will be the ultimate “owner” of the resources. Already some participants have identified potential benefits such as the ability to request employment service accessibility, to have increased counselling staff for addictions, family issues and related concerns. Additionally some residents have indicated the potential for locating affordable housing options by the community planning development committee.

Community Connections is a part of the vision that Shining Mountains holds giving voice that all women and girls have a right to equality through employment, housing, financial independence. SMLCS views that equality is best reached through a process of engagement and education regarding gender equity and issues which support growth and development of women’s rights.

Gathering Information

Basic information about Blackfalds was already known to SMLCS as seventy five percent of the staff and volunteers reside in Blackfalds. This knowledge included services or resources in the community, school values and norms and general attitudes. The key questions regarding gender



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in Blackfalds that were determined to be needed by the working group were statistics regarding age, parental status, sex, employability, etc. The gathering of this basic data enhanced the group's ability to begin to measure the early layers of women's independence, interdependence or dependant decision-making powers lay. Other aspects that impact gender imbalance such as ethnicity, language and sexual orientation are common factors in the work that SMLCS conducts on behalf of consumers on a daily basis and form an integral part of development.

Some external factors that may impact the equality of gender outcomes will continue to be spurred due to the economic drivers of the community such as gas and oil future development. Another aspect is the degree of continued growth in the city of Red Deer as its boundaries spread northward, there is a realistic possibility that it will engulf the community of Blackfalds in the foreseeable future.

Participants in the Community Connection project have been self-selected and new participants of both interested women and men are welcomed and encouraged to take part. Consultation has been conducted based on self-identification of interest and desire, the participation of women has been enhanced through offering assisted child care and transportation. This project has the opportunity to affect gender relations in Blackfalds through supporting improved choices for training/education, increasing the awareness of financial literacy as well as awakening a knowledge of proactive community development options.

Information Analysis

The researched data relating to gender equality issues and concerns form the basis for Community Connections ongoing activities. The lens of gender is used to view each stage and to improve the usefulness of the activities undertaken. The working group believes that they activities and approaches they have considered are appropriate based on age and gender, and modify the content, venue and facilitation based on consensus. As unintended gaps are identified through the collection of data, they are recognized, addressed and potential solutions to fill in the gaps are generated based on community participant input. Community Connection project engages women and men expected to benefit from the project in follow-up activities by open invitation and by ensuring to as large an extent as possible that the activities are scheduled and organized to maximize participation.

Analysis Incorporation

Clear, Measurable and Achievable Gender Equality Results developed for the project.:

Based on the analysis of data that has been gathered to date, the working group has determined that three top priority results would be focused on:



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- 1 – The creation of a policy and procedure for the Town of Blackfalds to address how bullying would be handled, including at the schools, reports of cyber bullying, and prevention of bullying.
2. The expansion of awareness activities available to reduce violence, including a violence prevention day.
3. A discussion with and commitment from Town Council to have developers consistently include affordable or low income housing in new development permit applications.

Evaluation:

How will the gender analysis be incorporated into the overall project evaluation using an appropriate balance of qualitative and quantitative techniques to track and assess success or challenges. ?



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