



INTERVENE.

EMPOWER.

LEAD.

YWCA CALGARY

PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

PART I

preamble

This practice framework is intended to guide and support the staff at YWCA Calgary and was developed after consultation with frontline staff, leadership and external stakeholders. It was also informed by a review of exceptional documents developed by women's organizations nationally and globally.

Part I of this package will be a consistent anchoring document across the breadth of YW client services, advocacy and operations. Part II of the document will be customized to each program or service area.

Our deepest thanks and gratitude to Jill Cory, co-author of several publications including *When Love Hurts*, a *Woman's Guide to Understanding Abuse in Relationships*. Jill contributed her 28 years of experience in the field of anti-violence to this document and helped to shine a light on the importance and responsibility inherent in our work.

Purpose of this document

- Provide a unifying focus for all aspects of YW; from client service to advocacy and operations.
- Articulate our stand on violence against women, women's poverty and women's homelessness and how we will intervene and support women.
- Recognize the central role that our beliefs and values play in how we support women who are impacted by abuse, poverty and homelessness.
- Provide guidelines for principle-based, women-centered services which focus on increasing the safety of women and their children.
- Articulate a framework to guide frontline practice at YW.
- Promote evidence-based good practice among service providers at YW.
- Contribute to, and influence the social narratives about women's issues.

YWCA PHILOSOPHY OF SERVICE DELIVERY

YW Calgary is the largest and longest serving women’s organization in Calgary. For more than 100 years we have focused on enhancing women’s safety and well-being while advocating for equity. Together with our donors, partners, government and social agencies we provide shelter, supportive housing, counselling, child development, childcare, education and employment programs that help move women from crisis to stability.

With our focus on empowering women to move from a place of vulnerability to one of resilience, YW continues to be there when and where she needs us most.

We approach our work from a woman’s point of view with an understanding of oppression, inequity and constrained choice that women experience. We work to build up women, community and all we work with.

YWCA FOCUS OF SERVICE DELIVERY

Rigour in service delivery

- Our work has clear vision and focus.
- Our work is leading edge.
- Our work is results driven and evidence based.
- Our services balance the bottom line with what’s important.

Depth in service delivery

- We develop our expertise.
- We share our expertise.
- We develop meaningful partnerships.
- We hold ourselves accountable.

Excellence in service delivery

- We are renowned for our continuum of service delivery that supports a woman’s mind, body and spirit.
- We are respected for our passion and commitment.
- We provide the right service at the right time.

ARTICULATING OUR STAND ON VIOLENCE AND ABUSE AGAINST WOMEN, POVERTY AND HOMELESSNESS

Defining violence and abuse against women

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Everyone has a responsibility to prevent and end violence against women and girls, starting by challenging the culture of discrimination that allows it to continue. We must shatter negative gender stereotypes and attitudes, introduce and implement laws to prevent and end discrimination and exploitation, and stand up to abusive behavior whenever we see it. We have to condemn all acts of violence, establish equality in our work and home lives, and change the everyday experience of women and girls.



Ban Ki-moon
UN Secretary-General
2014

Violence and abuse against women in relationships is viewed as one facet of a global picture of gender oppression that includes rape and sexual coercion, forced sexual initiation, sexual abuse, trafficking, forced prostitution, exploitation of labour, violence against survival sex workers, rape in war, sex-selective abortion, female infanticide, deliberate neglect of girls, and female genital mutilation. The many manifestations of gender-based violence point to the significant role that social norms, gender roles, and social and political institutions play in legitimizing and therefore perpetuating abuse and violence against women, in addition to contributing to women's vulnerability to abuse and vulnerability.

Violence and abuse of girls and women is defined as:

- Part of a continuum of human rights violations that are perpetrated primarily against girls and women by men.
- Patterned, assaultive, controlling, threatening and coercive tactics of abuse, including physical, sexual, psychological, economic, social, spiritual and cultural abuse against their current or past partners.
- Intentional use of power aimed at controlling, dominating and/or forcing compliance.
- All forms of abuse have potential long-term impacts on women and their children.

Language matters

The tendency to neutralize the gendered dynamics of violence against women is problematic as research and evidence shows it is very much a gendered issue. Gender-neutral terminology such as 'domestic violence', 'family violence', 'trauma' and 'intimate partner violence' can conceal the perpetrator's role by embedding the problem within the 'domestic' or 'intimate' context or within a more psychiatric paradigm (e.g. trauma, PTSD). The recent shift to describing women's experiences of male violence and abuse as 'trauma' raises concerns that the gendered and social nature of abuse against girls and women is lost. Trauma labels alone, without the application of feminist and gender-based analysis, can ignore the far-reaching personal, health, and economic, legal and social impacts of abuse.

Using abuse rather than violence is preferable, as it reflects the reality that abuse comes in many forms of power, dominance and control. The term "violence" is used to highlight the serious, and often criminal, aspects of the experience. However, it would be uncommon for women to experience physical and/or sexual violence without experiencing other forms of abuse, although many women who are abused have not been physically assaulted.

We understand violence against women in the following ways:

- Violence and abuse against women is a form of gender oppression related to cultural, social, political and economic factors.
- Violence against women is a social phenomenon, not an individual pathology (e.g. depression, anxiety, anger, trauma, borderline personality disorder) to be 'treated' with medications or counselling.
- Men's use of violence and abuse are not acceptable forms of behaviour. Violence is a learned behaviour supported by social structures. Men who are abusive are 100 per cent responsible for their use of violence/abusive tactics and services must hold men responsible and accountable for their abuse – societally and individually.
- Men are responsible for the impacts on their children when those children have been exposed to their father's abuse. Women go to great lengths to keep their children safe and need help from services and systems to protect their children.
- Violence and abuse must always be considered in the context of coercion, power and control. Women who are experiencing the impact of violence committed against them must not be seen as abusers (e.g. mutual abuse) if their acts reflect an effort to protect or defend themselves or their children, or in a struggle to regain control over their lives.
- The stereotypes of women with experiences of abuse can lead to interventions that focus on women's pathologies and failures as partners and mothers rather than understanding these as the impacts of abuse. Reframing 'deficits' to women's strengths, safety strategies and impact of abuse is more accurate and empowering.
- Women with experiences of abuse may use substances as a safety, numbing or coping strategy. We recognize women's vulnerability and their use of substances should not be used as a reason to deny women access to safety, support and services.
- Women's experiences of abuse often lead to physical and mental health impacts. Mental health impacts should be linked to abuse for women, rather than being viewed as separate 'disorders' to be treated in isolation from gender-based violence and abuse.

Defining women's poverty

The face of poverty in Canada is a woman's face and when women live in poverty, so do their children. Our discourse related to poverty recognizes that poverty as an experience is not only about money (though it is always about money) and also affects women's time, ability to interact and participate socially and confidence.

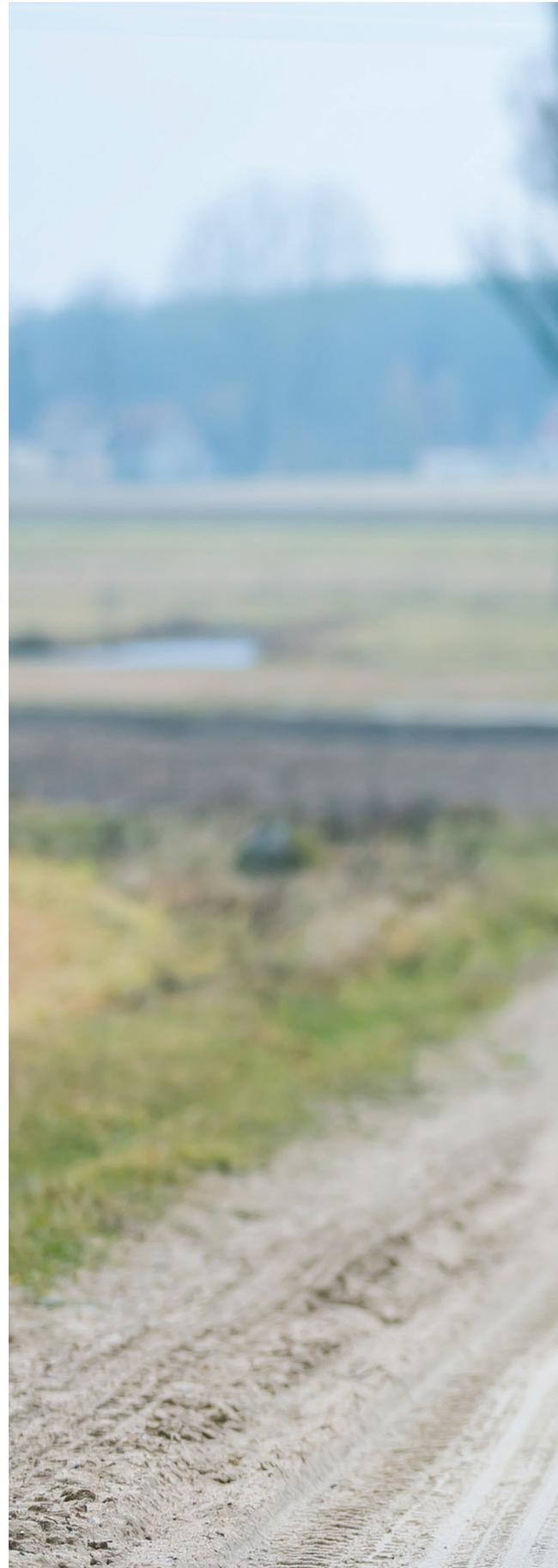
Poverty and violence against women are connected: women recognize that fleeing abuse is likely to plunge them and their children into poverty and, perhaps, homelessness. Children of women who have left abuse are five times more likely to live in poverty than if women stay with the abusive partner.

There is significant stigma associated with poverty, as with other conditions or experiences. Poverty definitions have historically been overly simplistic and looked at statistical calculations such as the Low Income Cutoff to define who is and is not in poverty. Such measures fail to account for personal circumstance related to family size, health, debt levels, housing needs etc. As such, Canadians carry myriad views about what poverty really looks like.

Absolute poverty refers to a set standard (typically related to very basic food, shelter and sanitation) which is the same in all countries and which does not change over time.

Relative poverty refers to a standard which is defined by the specific society in which an individual lives and the minimum standards deemed adequate in order for a member of that society to meet their core needs for survival and societal participation. Relative poverty differs between countries and over time. Within a Calgary context relative poverty encompasses concepts related to housing, home heating and utility bills, transportation, childcare and communication tools. An income-related example would be living on less than X% of average income.

Absolute poverty and relative poverty are both valid concepts. The concept of absolute poverty is that there are minimum standards below which no one anywhere in the world should ever fall. The concept of relative poverty is that, in a developed or wealthy country such as Canada, there are higher minimum standards below which no one should fall, and that these standards should rise if and as the country becomes richer.

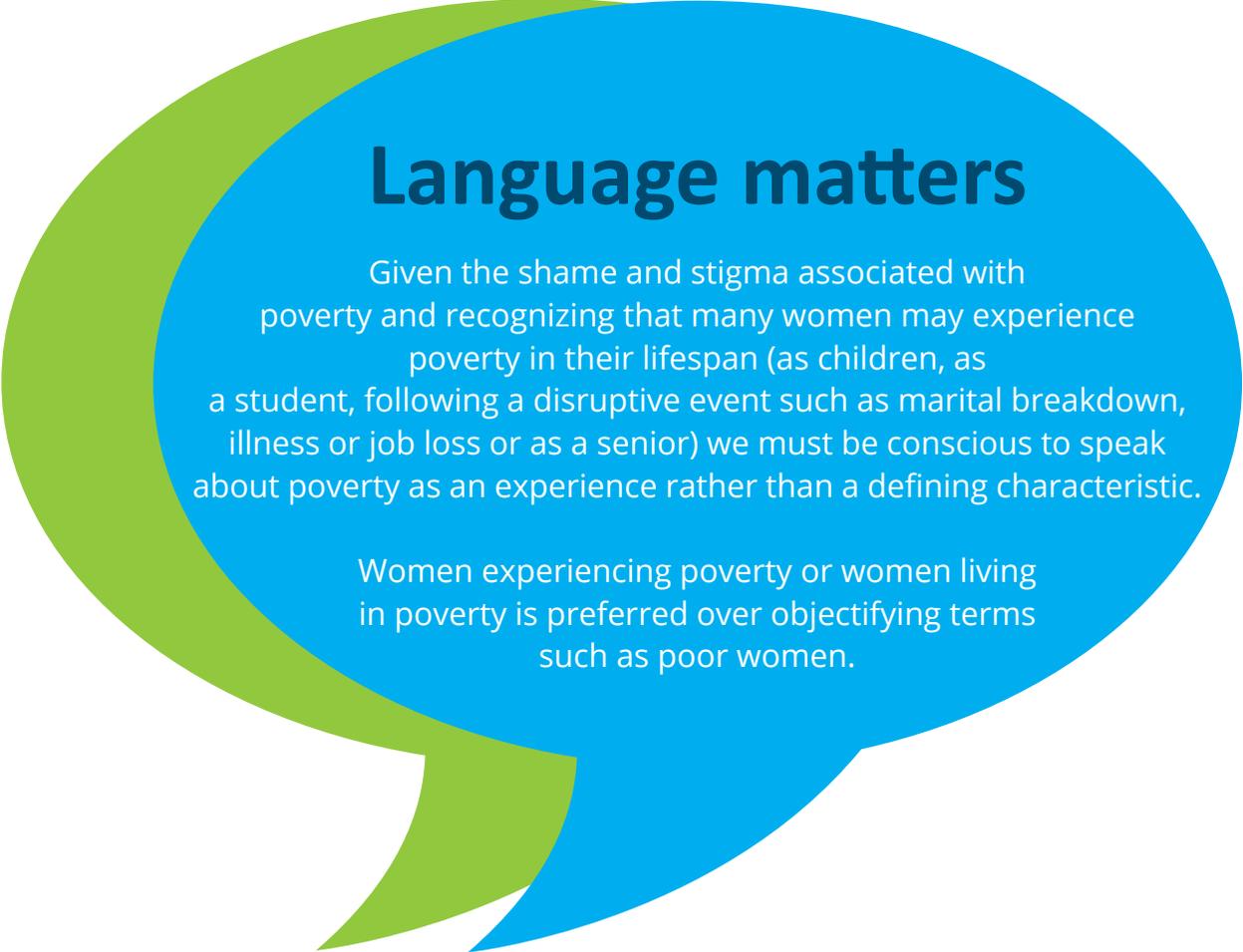




POVERTY.

We understand women's experience of poverty in the following ways:

- Gender roles with respect to work and family and household duties are learned and reinforced from a young age. Women disproportionately bear childcare, family and household duties impacting women's hours and availability for paid employment meaning women are more likely to work in temporary, contract, part-time or unstable jobs, often with no benefits such as healthcare or pension.
- Interruptions in paid employment related to child rearing affect women's pensionable income leaving women at higher risk of poverty throughout the lifespan. Women's lower earning power means they are at a high risk of falling into poverty if they have children and then become separated, divorced, or widowed. Women are less able to save for retirement and more likely to be poor in their senior years.
- Traditional gender roles are reinforced in school settings where boys are more likely to be praised for their academic and intellectual work while girls are likely to be praised for their appearance, behaviours and compliance. While school and university completion rates for women are now higher than among men, women with degrees do not earn as much as men who have completed university.
- Gender related income gaps continue to persist and women working full time in Alberta earn approximately 68 cents for every one dollar earned by a man, the largest gap in the country. This gap cannot be explained solely based on work availability and persists when wages are compared on an hourly basis. Wages in traditionally male-dominated sectors are higher than in roles which are seen to be "women's work."
- Access to flexible, affordable, appropriate and accredited childcare is an important enabling force for women and supports women's economic and social inclusion.
- Building on women's education, assets and skills so that women can earn adequate income is essential to support women out of poverty.
- No woman should have to resort to sex work or exploitive labour as the sole means of earning income and providing for her basic needs or those of her children.
- When children are poor – and 1 in 10 children in Calgary is – it's usually because their mother is poor. Eighty per cent of all lone-parent families in Canada are headed by women. Single mothers have a net worth of approximately \$17,000, while single dads have a net worth of approximately \$80,000.
- A lack of discretionary income limits women's ability to socialize over a meal or coffee. The children of women who live in poverty may struggle with school completion, isolation and social participation due to a lack of access to sports, recreational and arts pursuits as well as for social activities like a trip to the movies or a birthday party.



Language matters

Given the shame and stigma associated with poverty and recognizing that many women may experience poverty in their lifespan (as children, as a student, following a disruptive event such as marital breakdown, illness or job loss or as a senior) we must be conscious to speak about poverty as an experience rather than a defining characteristic.

Women experiencing poverty or women living in poverty is preferred over objectifying terms such as poor women.

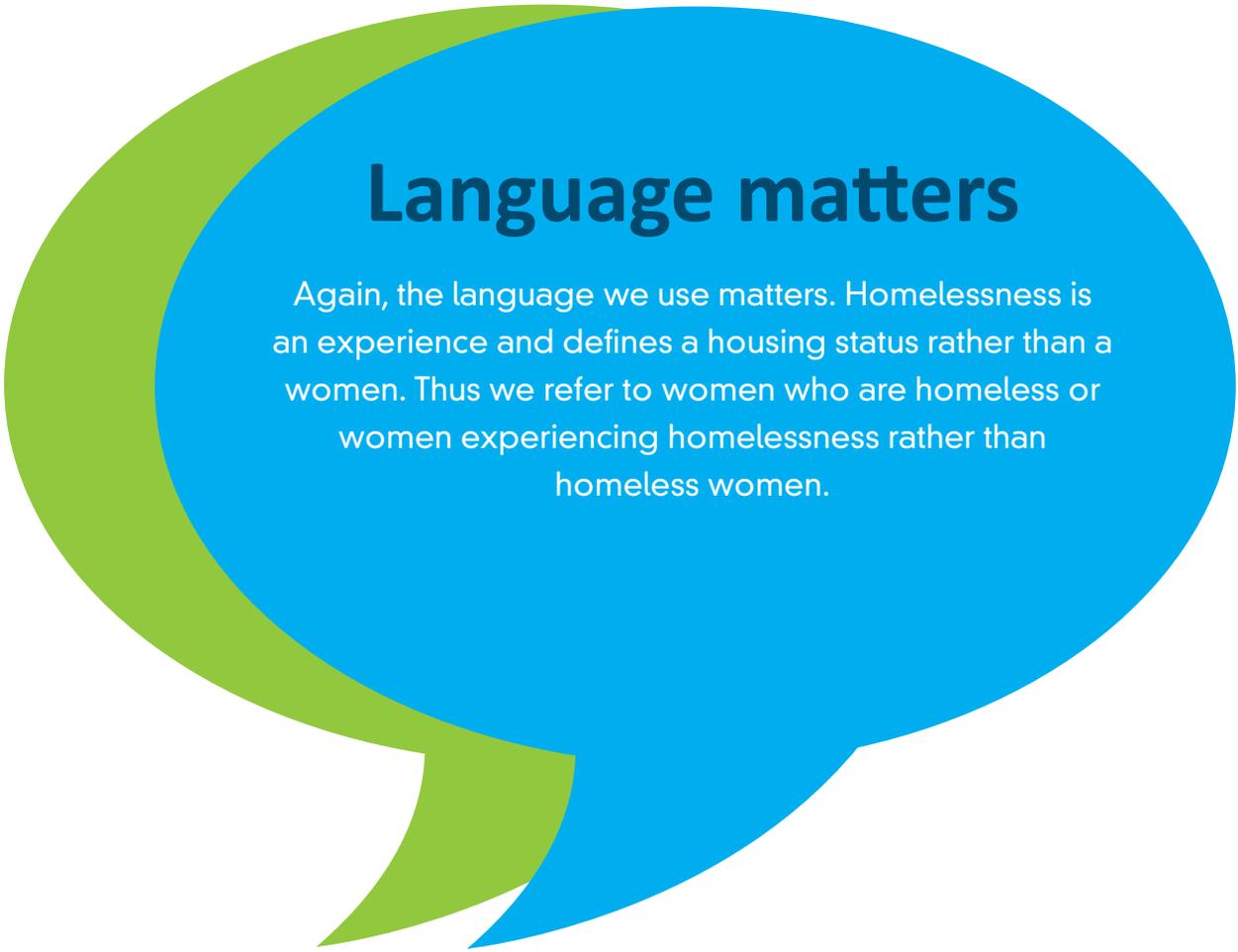
Defining women's homelessness

The reality in Canada is that women make up a significant and growing percentage of the homeless populations and the gendered experience of women's homelessness is unique. Women are at increased vulnerability without a safe place to call home. Women sleep on the streets, trade sex for a place to stay and remain in abusive relationships rather than enter into a cycle of homelessness.

Once women enter into homelessness research indicates they are at an increased risk of violence, abuse and victimization if staying on the streets or in mixed gender shelters. More than half of single parent families headed by a woman live in poverty and women who are homeless with their children fear the involvement of child welfare systems and the judgement of society. Women's experience of homelessness is often unacknowledged and unrecognized. Most of the research and literature has focused on men's experience of homelessness.

We understand women's experiences of homelessness in the following ways:

- Women's homelessness is often hidden: while 25 to 30 per cent of homeless individuals counted on the streets and in shelters are women, the majority of women's homelessness isn't visible. Women couch surf with friends or relatives or stay in unsafe or substandard accommodations to avoid the street or mixed-gendered homeless shelters where they fear being victimized.
- Domestic violence and abuse is the main pathway into homelessness for women and their children.
- Loss or instability of housing can precipitate involvement of child welfare systems and women at risk of or experiencing homelessness fear losing their children.
- Women may trade sex with men for a place to crash for the night or remain in unsafe or abusive relationships to avoid homelessness.
- Women will go to great lengths to avoid homelessness and the risks associated with being homeless including street-level and sexual violence and child welfare involvement increases apprehension. Thus, without significant changes to income or economic circumstance, women may cycle through periods of unstable or insecure housing.
- Solutions for people who are defined as chronically homeless, including housing first, are suitable options for some women though women may be "screened out" of such program offerings which focus on people (most often men) who have been homeless frequently or for prolonged periods of time.
- Homelessness and housing insecurity can be significant barriers for women to move forward in their lives through pursuit of employment, further education and supportive counselling.



Language matters

Again, the language we use matters. Homelessness is an experience and defines a housing status rather than a women. Thus we refer to women who are homeless or women experiencing homelessness rather than homeless women.

We recognize that beliefs shape practice

Our goal is to ensure that all women who are experiencing abuse, poverty, social isolation and/or homelessness have access to our services. To that end, we strive to offer anti-oppressive, low barrier, inclusive service that is reflective of what women share in common as well as their differences. Our approach to all service is woman-centered, and takes a feminist, intersectional and anti-oppressive approach.

Some communities of women, in addition to gender, experience oppressions related to class, race, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, disability, and/or because they're indigenous women or have other status. While woman abuse and poverty impact all women, we embrace the diversity of women's lives: our services strive to be inclusive of women's languages, cultural, spirituality, sexuality, faith and experiential differences.

**WE
BELIEVE.**

We believe

Women are the experts in their own lives and we need to listen to women as they tell us about their experiences in their own time, language and ways.

Equity and inclusion are meaningful words and we are committed to providing women with safe and respectful support.

Women and their children have the right to safe, appropriate and affordable housing, education, child care and economic security.

Women and their children have the right to live free of violence and abuse.

In order to make informed decisions, women need access to information, resources and options.

Women should have the greatest opportunities for empowerment, self-determination and control over decisions that impact their lives.

Low barrier services which do not impose unnecessary rules or conditions meeting women when and where they are at.

Our practice is based on guiding principles that can counter the impacts of dominance and oppression. We focus on a woman's strengths, what has happened to her rather than what is 'wrong' with her.

Principles of practice

Principles guide practices. YW staff will be guided by seven principles, and apply each principle to the practice standards as it is relevant to support and advocate for women. A brief description of each principle is provided, along with some examples of how to apply the principles within the context of our work with clients, advocacy efforts and operations.

Because violence against women, poverty and homelessness affect women so profoundly, the way that we interact with women matters more than the models we use, the assessments we formulate, or the referrals we make. If women feel safe then our services will have a positive effect for them. To achieve this, staff will embrace the following principles and commit to applying these principles to their practice.

It is important to note that this document defines YW's approach on two levels: societal and individual. As such, some of the statements relate to our collective and organizational world view (our philosophy) while others are indicative of how we approach our work with individual women (our practice). The principles articulated in this framework can serve as a basis for our agency-level advocacy and brand positioning in addition to serving as a guide for frontline staff in programs.

Principle # 1: safety first

Safety is a fundamental tenet of women's support services and is at the centre of all of our decisions. Our responsibility is to ensure that women and their families feel safe, physically and emotionally while receiving services at YW.

Women bring their experiences of inequality, discrimination, oppression, poverty, violence and abuse into their encounters with service providers. To create a safe environment for women, all staff must acknowledge these past experiences and work hard to counter the effects of abuse and oppression. Creating safety for women is best achieved by forming safe, respectful relationships with women and focusing on the primary goals of safety, empowerment, choice and control over her life and decisions.

**SAFETY
FIRST.**

Applying a safety first approach

What does safety mean for women and how do we ensure our facilities feel safe for all women?

- Integrate goal of women’s physical and emotional safety into all aspects of YW service delivery.
- Interactions with all women are informed by the awareness that women experience significant rates of violence and abuse over their lifespan. Half of all women in Canada have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since age 16.
- Recognize that women who have identified as having experienced abuse – or are experiencing abuse - often continue to be controlled, and their decisions and actions are mediated by fear of reprisal from an abusive partner. We will not repeat these dynamics in our relationships with women we support.
- Create a safe environment where women have the opportunity to direct the topic or conversation, and feel comfortable and safe raising questions and expressing their opinions. This partnership approach can contribute to an empowering and inclusive space where women can discuss and explore issues without fear.
- Focus on ensuring that staff are careful not to pressure women to disclose more information than they wish to. All interactions should feel safe and respectful to help counter women’s fears and concerns.
- Ensure that women feel safe and knowledgeable regarding our childcare and child-minding services so women can recover and heal knowing that their children are being cared for.

Women feel safe when services focus on empowerment

Safety means:

- Maximizing choice.
- Developing authentic relationships.
- Sharing experiences without judgment, minimizing or negating.
- Receiving consistent information.
- Being free from coercion, force, threats, punishment and harmful consequences.
- Recognizing that sharing their experiences is their choice.
- Talking about experiences of abuse with other women is important to recovery.

Women feel at risk of further harm when staff perpetuate power imbalances

Risk means:

- Following routines and rules without consideration of women’s needs.
- Defining and/or diagnosing women’s ‘problems’.
- Judging women’s experiences to determine competence and ‘appropriateness’ of services.
- Controlling information.
- Reducing and/or pathologizing expressions of strong emotion e.g. anger.
- Using authority to control behaviour and making it comfortable for staff.

Principle #2: violence-informed and trauma sensitive approach

Violence against women and girls is pervasive throughout our society and the impacts are experienced at an individual, family and community level. Violence-informed practice recognizes that, despite the high rates of violence against women and girls, services are sometimes unaware of the dynamics and impacts of abuse and how these can be replicated in their service models, practices and procedures. Without this awareness, we are at risk of repeating similar dynamics to those that women are fleeing from: e.g. use of expert or hierarchical, rule-based, threatening, fear-based or controlling approaches to pressure women into compliance. Women acquiesce to these approaches to avoid negative consequences such as being discharged from a program or shelter, having children removed, losing income assistance, etc.

The goal of YW is to broadly implement violence-informed and trauma sensitive policies and practices that create a safe environment, respectful and caring relationships and to avoid re-traumatizing women. The keys to violence-informed and trauma sensitive practice include:

- Have a strong awareness of power and control dynamics and the impacts of these dynamics.
- Recognize the harms of the abuse and be aware that these experiences can have a significant impact on women's thoughts, feelings, behaviours, decisions, and relationships with others.
- Recognize that women have developed strategies to cope with their experiences.
- Support women to have control over their lives and the lives of their children as much as possible.
- Educate and inform ourselves on trauma and trauma reactions and recognize its manifestations are unique to every woman and every experience.
- Be cognizant of unanticipated Harms of Help and review policy and practice to ensure we offer the right support to women and their families.

Applying a violence-informed approach

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In contrast to dominant views of battered women as helpless victims or as provocative women who ask for the abuse, [we must] approach... women as survivors of harrowing, life-threatening experiences, who have many adaptive capacities and strengths.
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Michele Bograd, Ph.D, 2001

- Recognize that the impacts of abuse can appear to be 'problems' within women. Our responsibility is to reframe these experiences as impacts rather than individual deficits that need to be 'worked on'.
- Develop policies and practices (e.g. transportation, childcare, food, advocacy, documentation, etc.) that promote empowerment and strength.
- Ensure that control and decision making remains in the hands of women as much as possible.
- Establish meaningful relationships with women so that they can experience relationships based on care, respect, mutuality and equality.
- Recognize women's safety strategies and actively support them.
- Acknowledge that women know what will be safest for them.
- Recognize that women may not be able to choose to leave a partner or stop using substances and that these may be harm reduction strategies.

Principle #3: women-centred and feminist-based frameworks

A women-centred approach acknowledges that women have different lived experiences than men and require services that focus on equality and equity goals. A women-centred approach means consistently keeping the needs and well-being of the women we serve at the focus our work.

Feminism is “the advocacy of women’s rights on the grounds of political, social, and economic equality to men.” Feminist approaches share a common goal of valuing women’s lived experience and highlighting how gender politics, power relations, and sexuality create gender inequality and inequity and reduce women’s human rights and freedoms.

A feminist-based approach is critical for understanding violence against women, and women’s oppression, poverty and homelessness. This approach rests on the understanding that systemic and gender inequality exists and has multiple implications for women. It recognizes that women’s lived experiences are different from men’s and that women in general are more vulnerable to gender-based violence and economic inequality.

Applying women-centred and feminist-based approaches

Feminist and women-centred approaches are based on the assumption that violence against women, women’s poverty and women’s homelessness is a systemic, not individual problem. This requires a shift in practice from focusing on ‘what’s wrong with women?’ to asking ‘what’s happened to women’. It moves beyond individual assessments, diagnoses and blame to further encompass a focus on advocacy and support.

The key principles in this approach focus on equality and equity; empowerment; choice; autonomous identity (more than just a “mom” or “DV victim”); partnership; self-determination; respect; safety; control; confidentiality; and consent.

EQUALITY.

Principle #4: intersectional and anti-oppressive approaches

Intersectionality recognizes that there are multiple and intersecting forms of domination and oppression and “that gender is experienced by women simultaneously with their experiences of class, race, sexual orientation, size and other forms of social difference” (Morrow and Hankivsky, 2007). Intersectionality also recognizes that the interaction between these forms of oppression is complex and compounding (e.g. woman abuse, mental ill health, substance use, class and gender overlap and compound the risks and vulnerabilities of women), thus pointing to social inequities as interdependent.

Women have a number of different roles and identities, and they experience various forms of oppression that can intersect. Women face additional harms from social and structural inequalities such as:

- Poverty.
- Housing and food insecurity.
- Inability to afford health care and other services.
- Lack of transportation.
- Lack of accessible and affordable childcare.
- Lack of access to legal services.
- Social discrimination.
- Lack of services for indigenous women, immigrant and refugee women.
- Lack of services for lesbian and transgendered women.

These compounding factors play a significant role in keeping women trapped in marginalization and violence. They also make it extremely difficult for women to create safety and security — physically, socially and financially — for themselves and for their children.

Applying intersectional, anti-oppressive approaches

At YW, women will have the opportunity to explore how their various social identities and experiences intersect and impact their experiences of violence, access to services, the kind of support they receive and how relevant and meaningful the support is. This can counter women’s experiences of oppression and vulnerability.

It is essential that we recognize the oppression and marginalization that women may be experiencing. The YW’s anti-oppressive approach includes acknowledging the power and privilege we have as staff and as an organization, and actively working to shift this power towards inclusiveness, accessibility, equity and social justice.

It is important to have culturally safe services where women can trust that they will encounter workers who have respect for and knowledge of diverse cultural identities and realities, and where possible women can find – or be linked to – services in their own languages.

Principle #5: inclusive, low-barrier services

Women's help seeking experiences have been studied extensively and a range of barriers and gaps in services have been identified. Many barriers prevent women from getting the support they need in the community, including systemic/structural barriers, the role that abusive partners play in controlling and manipulating women's attempts to access support, and the way services are designed and delivered. Waitlists, lack of childcare, cost of services, lack of knowledge about the needs of women with experiences of abuse, lack of gender/feminist analysis, lack of appropriate services and attitudes of service providers can create high barriers for women and their children.

A low-barrier and inclusive approach recognizes how difficult it is for all women to access support, and some women face additional systemic barriers. Many communities of women, including indigenous women, women with mental /physical disabilities, seniors, racialized women, newcomer and immigrant women, women with limited education, LGBTQ+ women, and women who are socially isolated face further discrimination. Our practice must reflect a commitment to reducing systemic barriers.

The attitudes and approaches of staff can be a crucial factor in whether women feel that YWCA programs and services are accessible and inclusive, or whether they feel these barriers to service. It is important for staff to avoid preferential treatment of some women, judgmental or punitive treatment to other women. Our goal is to find ways to support women to access our services, not to find ways to have women removed from our services. Describing women and labelling their actions in negative ways such as, 'mental health issues', 'anger issues', 'lying/hiding information or secretive', 'lack of compliance with shelter rules', 'using substances', 'demanding', 'poor parenting skills' and 'manipulative' are examples of misrepresenting and misinterpreting women and their intentions. This can and does lead to outcomes that serve to re-create power and control dynamics which results in disengagement from services. Unfortunate outcomes can include homelessness and increasing women's likelihood of returning back to their unsafe and abusive situations.

If staff approach each woman with the goal of supporting her to remain engaged with the YWCA until she is ready to move on, all women accessing our services feel supported in the way they need to be, the overall goals of inclusion and emotional safety will be achieved. With access to the right support, women are able to feel safe and have support while they make decisions and move forward for themselves. When women feel that they have access to our services, we have the opportunity to partner with women to reduce their risks of becoming isolated, vulnerable, marginalized and in danger. Conversely, if women encounter services that don't fit their experiences, women may feel they have no option but to return to the streets and/or face homelessness, or return to an abusive partner.



REMOVING BARRIER



Applying a low-barrier approach

Building a trusting relationship with at least one provider is necessary as women try to make changes in their lives. However, creating an open relationship poses a complex dilemma – in order to build a relationship, women need to be honest and open, but the potential for negative repercussions such as facing judgment if they share that they are struggling with literacy, seeing their abusive partner, if they share their substance use or mental health concerns, and the fear of child welfare involvement for women with children can be a significant barrier for women.

It takes courage and, given the many logistical and systemic barriers to accessing many types of support, also takes persistence on the part of women. We will work diligently to address potential barriers created by our services, so that our services are accessible for women.

Practical support such as providing trustworthy childcare, transportation and choice in times and locations for programming are important considerations, as these can be significant barriers for women to access services.

Principle #6: harm reduction approach

Harm reduction is a specific approach that aims to keep people safe and minimize the serious and often life-threatening consequences of a variety of high risk behaviours, particularly substance use. Harm reduction as an approach encompasses strategies, policies and programs. Examples of harm reduction include condom distribution, needle exchange programs, smoking cessation programs, designated driver campaigns and relapse planning.

Harm reduction at YWCA involves a broad range of support services and strategies to enhance women's knowledge, skills, resources, and supports. Harm reduction as an approach in service delivery is not passive, and works actively alongside prevention and treatment. It is pragmatic, non-judgmental and respects a woman's right to self-determination. It is evidence-based and cost effective.

Research has found such consistent correlations between woman abuse and substance use to suggest a causal relation. In women's shelters, for example, substance use among women has been estimated to range from 33% to 86% and approximately two-thirds of women accessing anti-violence services report that they began their problematic substance use following experiences of violence in their relationships.

When substance use is viewed as a response to violence and abuse, it shifts the approach from focusing on substance use as a problem to seeing substance use as a woman's harm reduction strategy. Women have learned to adapt to experiences of abuse and violence in order to survive, escape and cope. They demonstrate resourcefulness and ingenuity in their substance use to reduce the many risks they face. For instance, some women shared that they would use substances to avoid feeling the physical and emotional pain of being harmed by a partner.

Applying harm reduction

We at YW, adopt a broad view of harm reduction to encompass substance use as a safety and/or coping strategy from abuse, and recognize that women may not have freedom or choice to decide whether or not to use substances. Our approach will reflect the complexity and risks inherent in women's substance use and avoid labeling or judging women for their coping strategies. We will strive to meet women when and where they are at.

We will avoid language that praises sobriety or being "clean" because of how it may make other women feel (i.e. are they are "unclean" or "dirty" if they are using?). By making the link between abuse and substance use, we normalize women's reality and focus on ensuring that a woman is able to access safe housing and support. This is more important than whether a woman is using or not. Recognizing women's efforts and determination to reach out and get the support they deserve is emphasized.

Supporting vulnerable women who face high-risk, complex, and multi-dimensional issues requires increased knowledge, compassion, communication and integration within agencies and amongst service providers.

There is no expectation that women need to be free of mental health conditions or sober to be access service at YW Calgary; they just need to be supported to participate in the right programs or cope with living in a communal environment. We will support women if they are seeking support for their substance use.

Principle #7: support for women as mothers: linking the safety and well-being of women and their children

Living in poverty or isolation or living with an abusive partner can undermine women's ability to mother their children the way they wish to. A woman might be so focused on keeping herself and the children safe that she has little time left to 'mother' them.

The biases and judgments from service providers and systems about vulnerable women are often intensified when they are mothers. This can result in blaming mothers for risks or harms to their children rather than recognizing systemic and interpersonal circumstances that create increased vulnerability for children. This bias is exemplified by the frequently asked question, "Why do women stay in abusive relationships when this places them and their children in jeopardy?" rather than asking, "How can we help this woman to protect her child from an abusive partner?" These biases can be compounded when women are substance using and/or have mental health concerns or have other vulnerabilities.

Applying support for mothering

Women who are mothers are most often their children's primary source of safety and nurturing and will continue to have this responsibility after they leave services with us. We will support the mother and child bond and avoid any interventions that diminish women's capacity to parent. Women have often been judged in their role as mothers and require support and encouragement from YW staff. YW staff will teach women to grow in their role as parents and we will not assume that role for them. All efforts will be to strengthen women's capacity to care for their children, while recognizing that they are in crisis and need our support. As an example, we will provide licensed childcare spaces, offer parenting support through the YW Parent Link Corridor program, non-custodial parent visitation services through the YW Family Access program and create activities at YWCA Sheriff King crisis shelter for women and children to participate in together.

Our goal is to have child-minding available to support women, whether they need time to attend a class to increase their proficiency in English, see a counsellor, attend a workshop, or look for housing. Having staff care for their children is not a sign of 'poor parenting' but a necessary service to allow women to move forward and children to thrive in a supportive environment. Women must feel confident that their children are being cared for appropriately. We will work hard to earn women's trust.

Women's permission and consent will be required prior to any meeting and assessment of their children or their parenting. Staff will review all forms with women and share the purpose of the meeting and assessment. Women will have full access to all records pertaining to their children, in accordance with privacy laws and organizational policies.

We will work together for her safety and the safety of her children, which we believe is dependent on the mothers' safety. If, in the event that Child and Family Services needs to be involved, we will support the woman to understand the concerns we have for her children.

(See further YWCA policy on child abuse reporting for specifics.)

Responsibilities of YW staff within the Practice Framework

Reflection and action

This Practice Framework is aligned to the mission and vision of YWCA Calgary. The principles are reflective of best practice. Each program will integrate the principles of our practice framework into its operations. Staff interactions with women and their families will embody the philosophy and principles articulated in the framework. In particular, the following statements will guide and inspire our work.

RESPONSIB





ILLUMINATIONS.

We believe women.

Women who have experienced vulnerability have developed skills and strengths to cope with their situation. Our role is to acknowledge, validate, and attempt to add to these skills and strengths, not to judge women and not to see women as helpless, in need of being rescued or penalized.

We are partners with women.

Women are the experts in their own situations and we can help facilitate access to information and resources and navigate system barriers.

We acknowledge the inherent power imbalances between staff and women.

There is an inherent power imbalances between staff and women and their families accessing YWCA services. We have a responsibility to acknowledge this power and harness it to act as advocates in partnership with women and their families.

We understand that women face very difficult and limited options.

We support women as they address the issues and barriers that arise as a result of their experiences.

Team Work

Supporting women with experiences of violence and abuse, poverty, social isolation and homelessness is an important responsibility. The challenges in this work arise from supporting women as they navigate systemic barriers and make difficult decisions within a short timeframe. YW staff need the support and trust of each other to be effective at supporting women and their families who are often in crisis and present with complex needs.

Staff will support each other and our culture statement:

We are passionate about our vision: We are driven to achieve it! We get things done. We're thoughtful in our approach AND we like to take action – it's a balance.

We are groundbreakers: We strive to do leading edge work. We embrace positive change.

We are caring: We develop relationships, build trust and empower one another.

We are learners: We're committed to personal and professional development. We measure and learn from our work so that we can be better tomorrow than we are today.

All client services staff will seek out and receive regular, meaningful supervision.

YW clients will also benefit from seeing positive, respectful interactions among staff, as this can demonstrate positive relationship values for the women, men and children we serve.

WOMEN FACE STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO SUPPORT AND SAFETY

The harms of help

Research studies have demonstrated how services can re-traumatize women by replicating the events or dynamics of women's primary abuse or trauma. Re-traumatization can occur in many ways, such as when services are lacking and unavailable for women, when providers are unable to recognize and validate the abuse in women's lives and when services are inappropriate or irrelevant within the context of women's lives. Services that do not account for women's experiences of abuse and their need for safety, support and respect are emotionally unsafe and disempowering.¹

Research clearly shows that help itself can be the problem for women if it is not women-centered and violence-informed. Without such an approach, practices tend to focus on assessment, management and change at the level of the individual woman. Help is problematic if it lacks a gendered analysis, is blind to historical and systemic biases and misses the need to support women as they navigate high barrier, mainstream services which can lack empathy for women's experiences of abuse and their need for safety.

Social narratives or beliefs about abuse and poverty that perpetuate such untruths as 'women choose abusive partners' and 'she just needs to stop being lazy' can increase the risk of re-harming women. These narratives shape whether women experiencing abuse and poverty are considered 'deserving' of services, public and professional sympathy, support and safety and these, in turn, shape social responses to women.

A recent women's shelter study in BC clearly indicates that many women have negative experiences at women's shelters, which increases a woman's likelihood of returning to her abusive partner and elevates her risks.² Conversely, when staff demonstrate care and take time with women, this human connection can make a significant difference for women. For many women, past experiences have made them acutely aware of the dynamics of power and control and able to quickly assess when these dynamics are present in a helping relationship.

¹Markoff, L.S., et al. (2005). Relational systems change: Implementing a model of change in integrating services for women with substance abuse and mental health disorders and histories of trauma. *Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research*, 32(2), 227-240.

²Report on Violence Against Women, Mental Health and Substance Use. February 2011. Prepared for Canadian Women's Foundation and BC Society of Transition Houses.
<http://www.canadianwomen.org/violence-prevention-resources>

The following documents provided evidence-based direction for practice and philosophical guidance:

Best Practice Approaches. Child Protection in Cases of Violence Against Women, BC Ministry of Child and Family Development, 2010 http://endingviolence.org/files/uploads/MCFD_best_practice_approaches_nov2010.pdf

Building Bridges. Making the Link Between Woman Abuse, Substance Use and Mental Health Impacts, 2008-2015. <http://www.bcwomens.ca/Services/HealthServices/WomanAbuseResponse/Building+Bridges.htm>

How the Earth Didn't Fly into the Sun. Missouri's Project to Reduce Rules in Domestic Violence Shelters, Missouri Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, http://www.vawnet.org/Assoc_Files_VAWnet/NRCDV_ShelterRules.pdf

Making Connections. Supporting Women with Experiences of Abuse, Substance Use and/or Mental Health Concerns, 2013. http://www.bcwomens.ca/NR/rdonlyres/B61C3DD3-3F47-45E8-9201-113A06245ED6/63124/MakingConnections_2013_March.pdf

Reducing Barriers to Support for Women Experiencing Abuse, 2011, BC Society of Transition Houses <http://www.bcsth.ca/content/reducing-barriers-support-women-who-experience-violence>

Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH), <http://www.oaith.ca/resources/publications/analysis-of-violence-against-women.html>

Elliott, D.E., et al. (2005). **Trauma-informed or trauma-denied: Principles and implementation of trauma-informed services for women.** *Journal of Community Psychology*, 33(4), 461-477. 12.