

Changemaking Toolkit

2026

Safety, Dignity, and Economic Security

Addressing the Intersection of Poverty and Violence Against Women in Rural Communities

Part 1: From Awareness to Dignity Based Systems Change

Huronia Transition Homes

Huronia Transition Homes

... working to end all violence against all women



About Us

Huronia Transition Homes (HTH) is a charitable organization that has operated across Simcoe County since 1984.

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Our Mission

We believe that all violence against all women and children must end. We are community members who are committed to education, advocacy, harm reduction, and poverty reduction as a means to end violence. Huronia Transition Homes is also committed to providing shelter and support to abused women and their children and to providing counselling to women survivors of sexual assault and socioeconomic opportunities through social enterprise.

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Acknowledgements

Lived Experience of Women in Service at HTH

This research project at Huronia Transition Homes is grounded in collaboration and a deep commitment to centering the voices, knowledge, and lived expertise of women who have experienced both poverty and violence. We extend our profound gratitude to the women who generously shared their time, insight, and trust throughout this study. Their contributions are not only foundational to this work, but also essential to shaping more just, responsive, and humane policy and practice.

Stewardship Advisory Council

Strategic guidance for the project is provided through a multi-sector Stewardship Council that integrates academic, Indigenous, public health, and anti-violence perspectives, strengthening both community accountability and policy relevance. The Stewardship Council includes:

- Janet Mosher, York University
- Lisa Moreau, Georgian Bay Native Women's Association
- Christine Bushey, Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit
- Meaghan Chambers, Elizabeth Fry Society
- Andria Howe, County of Simcoe

This advocacy is inspired and shaped by the Indigenous families, communities, and organizations, including NWAC, fighting for justice and prevention of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Girls and Two Spirit individuals

Purpose of the toolkit

This systems change toolkit equips the North Simcoe Basic Income Guarantee (BIG) Network, advocates, organizations, and allies to advance structural change at the intersection of violence against women and poverty, grounded in women's lived experience and feminist trauma-informed practice. It translates evidence from Huronia Transition Homes' research project (funded by Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) into clear demands, systems change strategies, and messaging tools to support coordinated action across systems.



What's in the toolkit

This toolkit is divided into 3 parts:

1. **Awareness:**
   - Self-care in advocacy
   - HTH Research Project
   - Key Messages
   - Dignity Based Systems Change
   - Policy Position:
     BIG as violence prevention
     and essential element of dignity-based systems change
2. **Recommendations for Policy Makers**
3. **Calls to action**
   - how YOU can make a difference!
   - Resource List
   - Get Connected



Selfcare in Advocacy

Advocacy for systems change can be meaningful, powerful, and deeply connected to community. It can also ask people to stay close to stories of violence, poverty, grief, racism, colonial harm, disability injustice, and institutional failure. A trauma-informed approach recognizes that advocates are human beings, not endless resources. Feeling tired, angry, overwhelmed, numb, hopeful, or deeply moved may mean the work is touching real places of pain, care, and responsibility.

Self-care in advocacy is essential to sustaining ourselves and each other so that advocacy can be grounded, ethical, relational, and long-term. Just as this toolkit calls for systems that do not blame women for the violence and poverty they experience, advocacy spaces must also resist blame, martyrdom, and the expectation that people must sacrifice their wellbeing to prove their commitment.

A trauma-informed advocacy practice makes room for choice, boundaries, rest, shared responsibility, cultural grounding, and connection. It invites people to participate in ways that are safe and accessible for them, whether that means writing a letter, attending a meeting, sharing a post, joining a conversation, taking a break, or saying no. Sustainable advocacy is not individual endurance; it is collective care.

Selfcare in Advocacy

Before and during advocacy, pause and ask yourself:

- What feels safe and possible for me right now?
- What boundaries do I need around time, emotional energy, privacy, and/or disclosure?
- Who can I debrief with, check in with, or ask for support?
- How can I stay connected to hope, community, culture, creativity, land, ceremony, movement, or rest?
- What would it look like to share the work instead of carrying it alone?

Reach out:

If at any point during your advocacy journey you are feeling triggered, overwhelmed, or in need of connection and/or support, reach out to our team:

- Rosewood Administrative line: 705-526-3221
- North Simcoe Crisis line: 1-800-461-1750
- South Simcoe Crisis line: 1-800-987-0799
- Suicide Crisis Helpline: *988
- **Text us for Support 24/7:** 705-999-0012



Huronia Transition Homes Research Project

With over 40 years of working alongside women affected by violence - many of whom are also navigating poverty - we began to ask: how are poverty, rurality, and gender-based violence interconnected in the lives of women identified individuals?

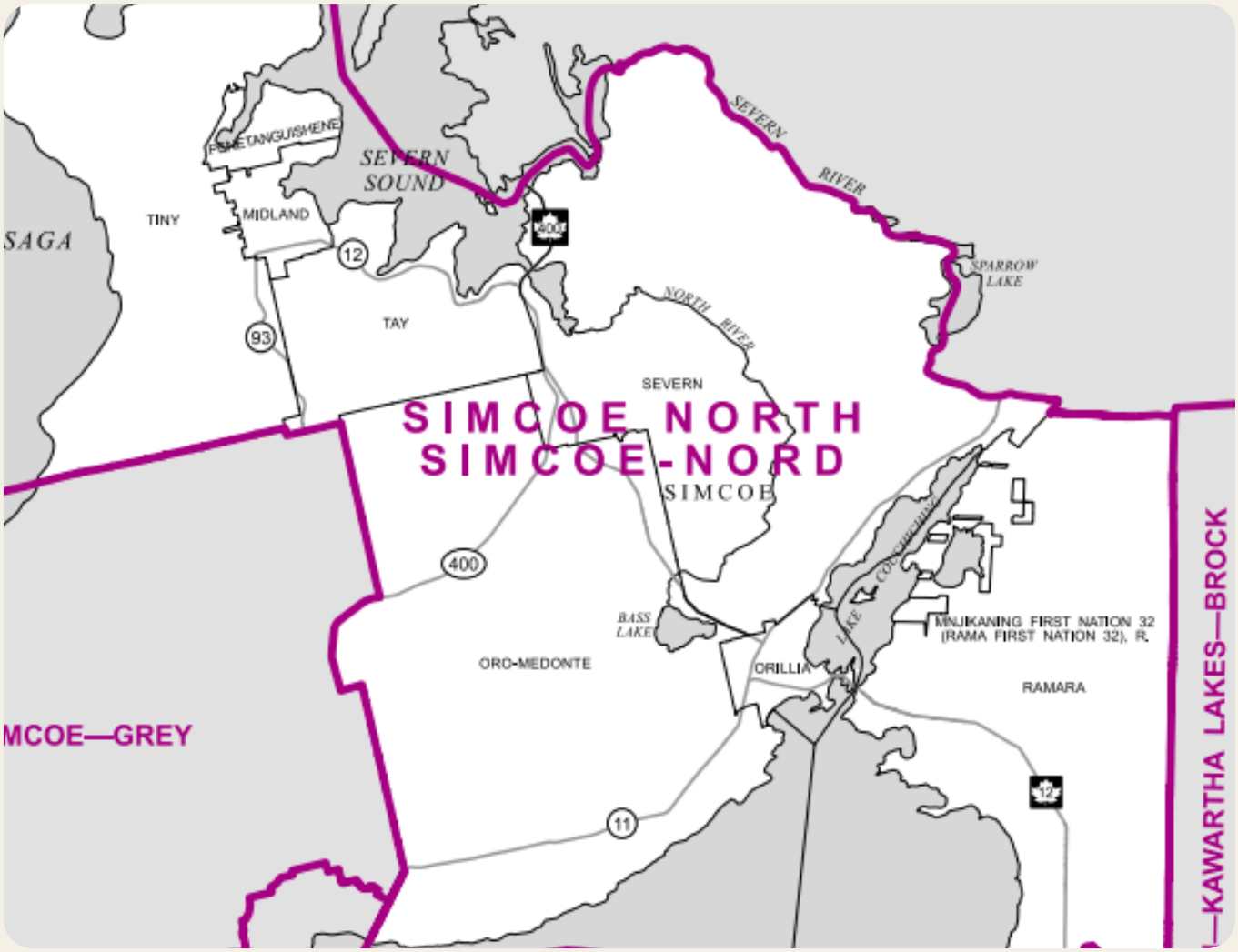
Recognizing women's lived realities as a form of expertise, we wanted to learn directly from them about their perspectives and insights.

To explore this, HTH held four focus groups with 27 women from North Simcoe, all with lived experience of both gender-based violence and poverty, who currently live in rural areas.



North Simcoe in Context

Situated within a dispersed set of small municipalities - including Midland, Penetanguishine, Tiny, Tay, and Beausoleil First Nation, a remote, water-access only community - the region of North Simcoe is marked by heightened economic precarity, limited public infrastructure (as compared to more urban areas in Canada), a growing housing and homelessness crisis that carries substantial implications, and an epidemic of Intimate Partner Violence.



Key Messages



Problem

We hold women responsible for the violence and poverty they experience.

How Systems Reproduce Harm:

Gender-based violence and poverty are interlocking systems but treated as separate issues.



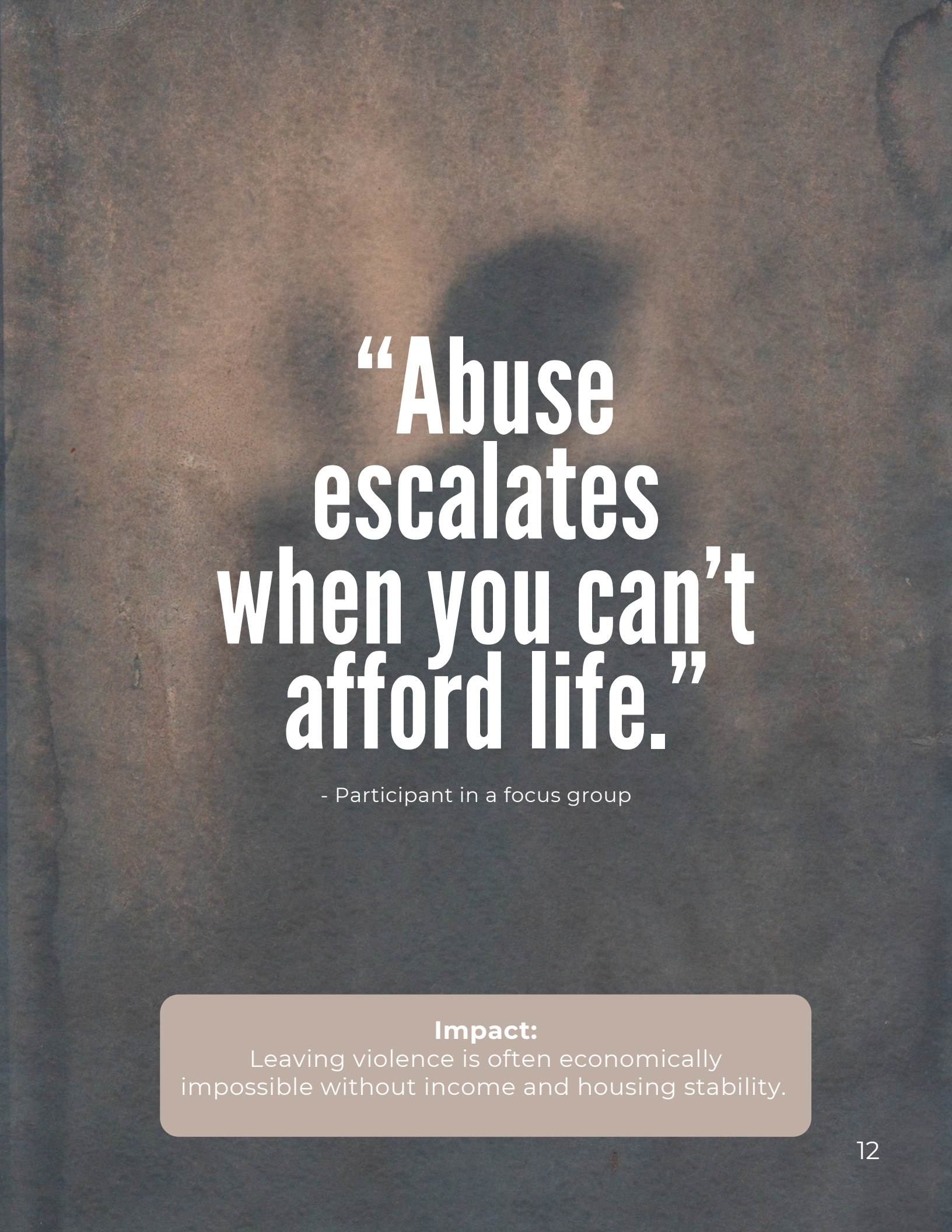
What women told us

Women in rural North Simcoe described:

- Economic control as violence
- Financial restriction by (ex)partners
- (Ex)partners wracking up debt in their names
- (Ex)partners controlling their income
- (Ex)partners preventing them from eligibility for OW, ODSP, and OAS
- Dependency created by social assistance rules

How violence causes poverty and poverty creates vulnerability to violence

- Loss of income, assets, and savings after separation
- Lack of affordable and safe housing, causing women to stay in or return to unsafe relationships
- Debt after leaving abusive relationships
- Low income trapping women in unsafe living situations and relationships.
- Abuse esclating due to economic insecurity



“Abuse escalates when you can’t afford life.”

- Participant in a focus group

Impact:
Leaving violence is often economically impossible without income and housing stability.

How Systems Reproduce Harm:

Women experience the surveillance and economic dependency enforced through institutional and social support systems as a form of coercive control, mirroring abusive dynamics.

What women told us

How institutional harm can lead them to stay in or go back to abusive relationships



Current systems are shaped by:

- "Deserving vs undeserving" logic
- Surveillance and monitoring
- Repeated proof requirements
- Fear of disbelief and judgement
- Multiple disconnected services
- Re-telling traumatic stories
- Conditional eligibility rules
- Constant documentation demands
- Punitive responses to income and/or independence
- High unpaid navigation burden

Women told us that institutional and social support systems including Ontario Works (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) often replicate control instead of providing support. They described being judged, monitored, disbelieved, and forced to provide repeated proof when seeking help. Women also told us that practices such as conditionality, benefit claw backs, and constant credibility testing limit their autonomy and reinforce economic dependency.

These system responses force impossible choices between safety and economic survival. Our research revealed that when institutions treat women with suspicion, demand constant proof of worthiness, or reduce support when they work, the system becomes part of the problem, rather than the solution. These dynamics replicate the power dynamics of abusive relationships, pushing women to remain in or return to unsafe situations. As a result, systems designed to help can end up reinforcing the very conditions; poverty, instability, and dependency; that sustain violence

"I feel stuck, without money,
you don't always have anywhere to turn.
Feeling like you can't leave
because what else are you going to do?"

"There is a person tracking my every move,
my every dollar...
leaving [social assistance]
because it's not worth it."

Impact:

Current OW and ODSP structures deepen dependency and limit choice.

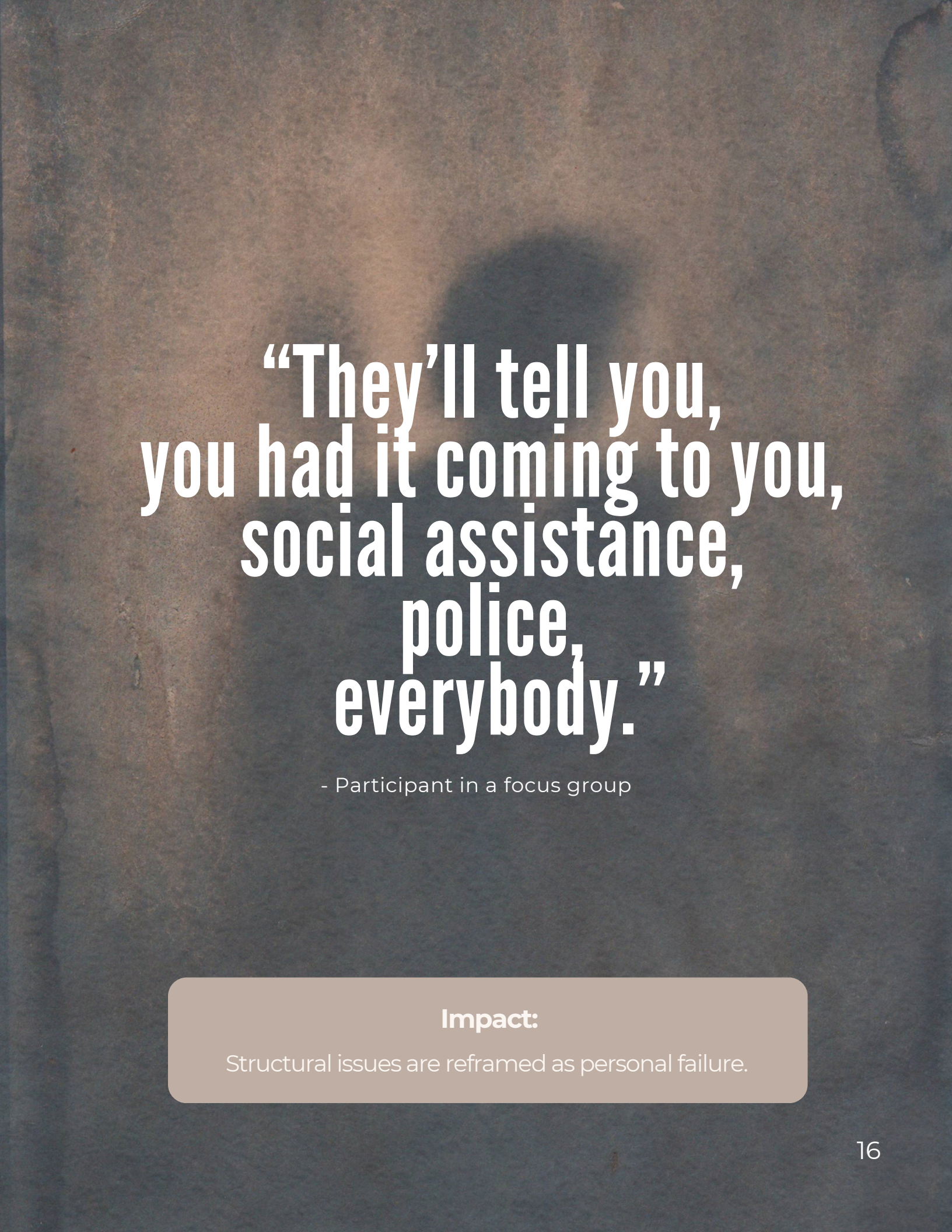
How Systems Reproduce Harm:

There is an offloading of responsibility for social provisioning onto the social sector and placement of blame on women for service gaps.



Systems often shift responsibility onto the social sector, including Violence Against Women agencies, while blaming women for the gaps they are left to navigate. Women described being blamed for the poverty and violence they experience, and judged for how they survive circumstances they did not create.

Women told us that this blame can become internalized over time. Their experiences make clear that responsibility lies with under-resourced systems and service gaps, not with the women left to absorb their costs.



“They’ll tell you, you had it coming to you, social assistance, police, everybody.”

- Participant in a focus group

Impact:

Structural issues are reframed as personal failure.

How Systems Reproduce Harm:

Systems demand productivity from women while insufficiently addressing trauma, grief, and pain.

Women told us that trauma, grief, pain, and fear deeply affect their ability to work and participate in daily life. They described being expected to heal, attend appointments, keep jobs, and become “productive” without the time, income, safety, or supports needed to recover.

Women are resilient, strong, and determined and they need time, support, and space to heal from trauma. Without this, working or staying employed becomes extremely difficult.

“The level of depression and isolation makes [me] physically unable to work.”

“After experiencing violence, I am scared to go out of my home to go to work.”

“While you’re dealing with chaos, it’s not easy to have stable things like a job”.

“Bottom line, we are all grieving, and we won’t address the grieving."

Impact:

Unsupported trauma undermines economic stability.

How Systems Reproduce Harm:

Women carry the unpaid labour burden of holding fragmented systems together.

Women told us that getting support often requires unpaid, unrecognized labour. They described navigating fragmented, hard-to-access, and judgmental systems while also managing poverty, violence, trauma, and caregiving responsibilities. Their experiences make clear that system navigation is a gendered form of survival labour that policy and service design often fail to recognize.

The unpaid burden of navigating fragmented systems further harms women by draining the time, energy, and capacity needed for life stabilization, safety, healing, caregiving, and economic stability.

“I get lost in the system. I’m already at 0% capacity, and reaching out for help is already so difficult on its own; but I’m expected to navigate.”

“Lack of transportation makes it difficult to access services and get work, [it takes a] big toll on my physical health."



Impact:

the unpaid burden deepens exhaustion, delays support, and undermines safety and stability.

How Systems Reproduce Harm:

Harm is intensified by colonialism, disability and rurality

Women told us that colonialism, disability, and rurality intensify the harms of poverty and gender-based violence. Indigenous women described how ongoing colonial policies and discriminatory practices continue to limit access to status, impacting housing, income, cultural supports, and safety. Women also told us that racism and punitive system responses deepen trauma and create fear of seeking help.

Women described additional harm when medical and social assistance systems fail to recognize disability, especially when disabilities are connected to trauma or mental health. In rural communities, limited services and unsafe or unreliable transportation make these barriers even harder to overcome. Their experiences make clear that safety and healing require increased access to transportation, trauma-informed and culturally grounded supports



“I cannot get status due to my mother’s status not being recognized, which results in me having restricted access to supports.”

“Disability limits when you can leave your house, and having supports/services spread out so much makes it even harder.”

Impact:

Exclusion deepens harm and blocks support.

Rural context matters

In rural communities like North Simcoe:

- Services are spread across geographies
- Transportation is limited or unavailable
- Housing supply is extremely constrained
- Waitlists for housing can span years



Key Insight:

Rurality does not just limit access, it exposes systemic design failure, and women pay the price.

How Systems Reproduce Harm:

Respectful services foster positive experiences and create safety, yet service improvements do not disrupt the conditions that create violence and poverty.

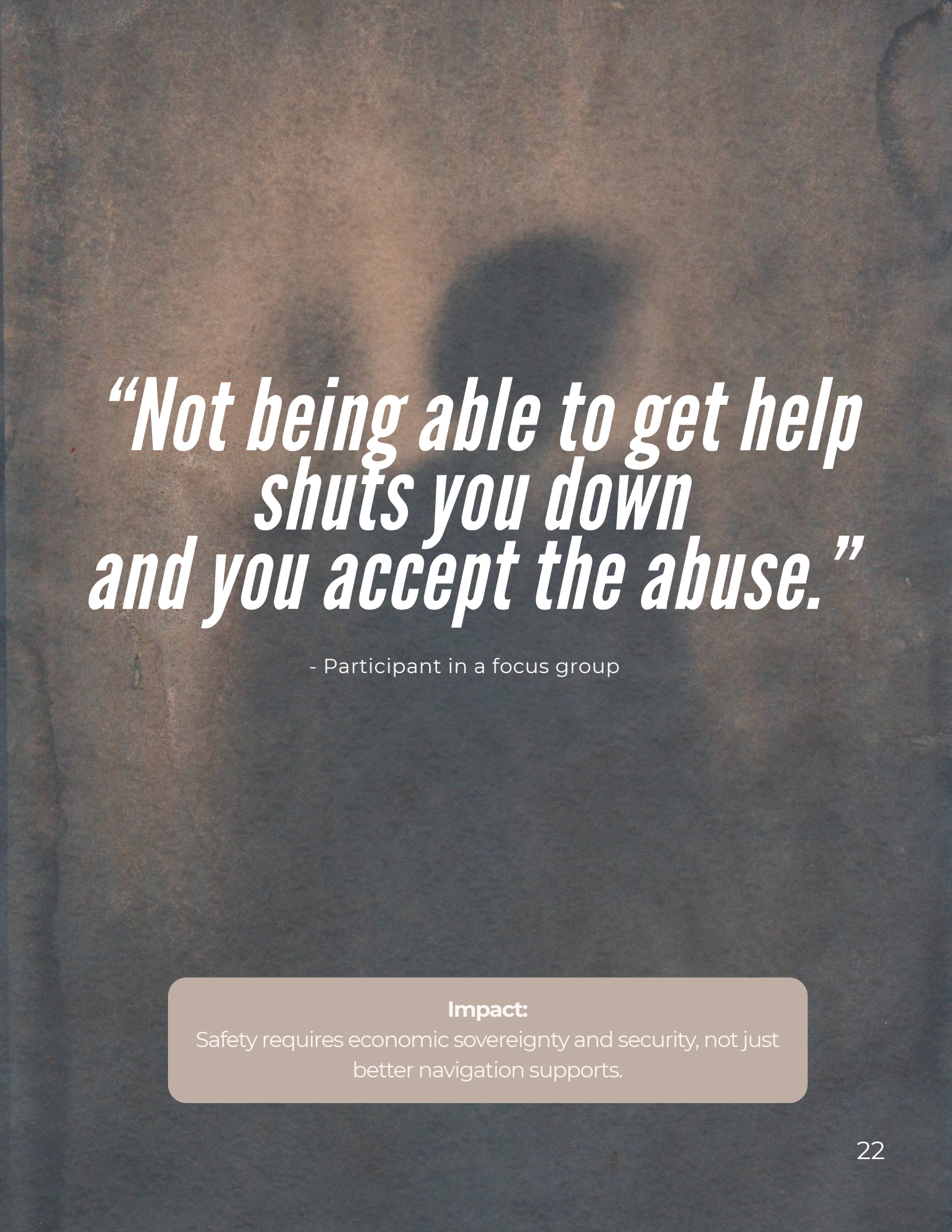


"What I love about OG is how accessible it is...
world's fastest intake,
I didn't have to give any details of my history..."

But service improvements alone are not enough!

While better coordination and navigation can help, they don't address the root causes of vulnerability.

What we heard from women is that safety is not just having access to services – it is having real economic autonomy. The ability to make choices, leave unsafe situations, and build stability.



“Not being able to get help shuts you down and you accept the abuse.”

- Participant in a focus group

Impact:
Safety requires economic sovereignty and security, not just better navigation supports.

So What?

Violence and poverty are not separate issues - they are produced and reinforced through systems that must be changed.

CORE TAKEAWAY

Women do not need more systems to navigate. They need systems that:

- respect dignity rather than reproduce harm
- support autonomy
- provide stability, and
- enable safety without survival labour



Women's experiences tells us what works

Women identified positive experiences when services are:



TRAUMA INFORMED



LOW BARRIER



NON JUDGMENTAL



PRACTICAL & IMMEDIATE



PROVIDE CLOTHING, FOOD, INCOME SUPPORT



RESPECTFUL



RAPID INTAKE PROCESS & MINIMAL DISCLOSURE



REDUCE REPETITION OF PERSONAL HISTORIES



INTEGRATED, COORDINATED AND WRAPAROUND

Dignity Based Systems Change

Systems change depends on listening to, valuing and learning from women's lived experiences.

- Women are experts in system design because they have lived its failures, and their insight is foundational to creating the systemic changes they need.
- To speak up and be heard, women first need their basic needs met, trauma-informed support, and safe, respectful spaces to heal.
- Strong community relationships and formal and informal networks give women the foundation to feel safe, engage in, and co-design the services that affect their lives.
- These supports work best when they respect who women are, what they're going through, and what they hope for in the future.



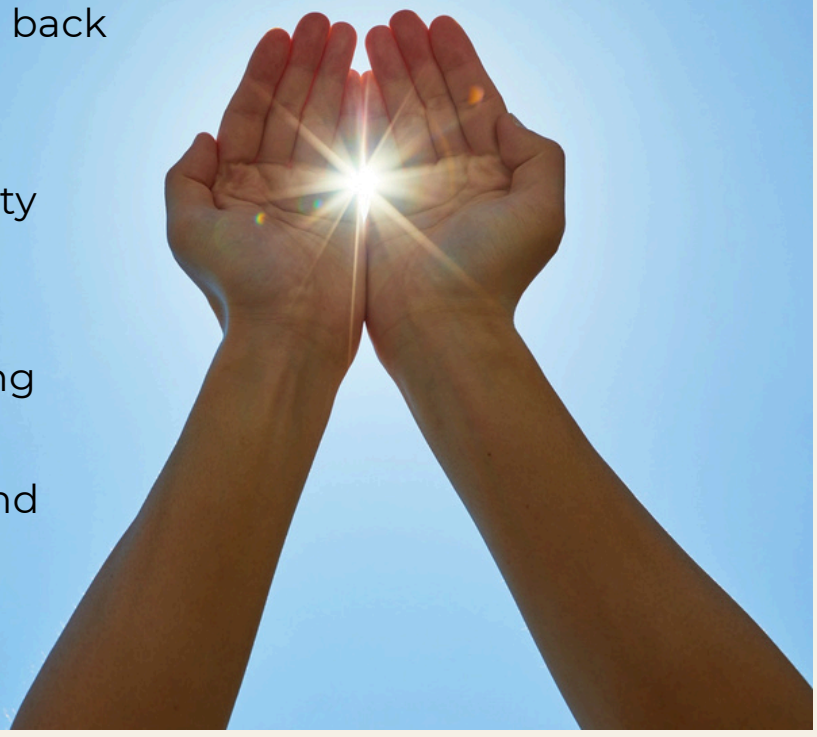
Dignity Based Systems Change

“I just want to be a woman, I want peace,
I’m forced to be on meds, to be tough,
the government just expects you
to carry on and be positive.

“Feeling safe in the place I’m in,
nobody is judging me,
people have an understanding of who I am,
helps create a foundation of feeling accepted."

True systems change means:

- shifting responsibility back to governments and institutions
- reducing conditionality and surveillance
- integrating services instead of fragmenting them
- prioritizing income and housing security as prevention



Dignity Based Systems Change



Blame keeps harmful systems in place.
Dignity breaks the cycle.

Policy Position



Solution

A **BASIC INCOME GUARANTEE** as an essential part of dignity-based systems change.

Policy position:

Basic income guarantee as violence prevention

Income stability is violence prevention.

A Basic Income Guarantee, offers a structural solution to reduce poverty and vulnerability to violence, promote autonomy, and offset economic consequences of gender-based violence.

A BIG is:

- Unconditional, *individualized*, adequate income support
- designed to ensure dignity, autonomy, and meeting basic needs



Why it matters - BIG directly addresses:

- conditionality → removes eligibility policing
- surveillance → reduces administrative control
- fragmentation → simplifies income access
- dependency → strengthens autonomy

Research shows BIG can improve safety, well-being, and cost efficiency, while laying the foundation for broader reforms addressing gendered, colonial, racial, and disability inequities. As part of broader systems change, including integrated approaches to violence prevention, poverty reduction, community safety and wellbeing, and more accessible and supportive housing, BIG can drive change grounded in dignity, autonomy, and empowerment.

BIG must be implemented as an essential element of dignity based systems change

Research Limitations

This toolkit is grounded in the experiences shared through HTH's research with 27 women in North Simcoe. Participants brought a range of identities, roles, and life circumstances to the research. This included women who were single, mothers, grandmothers, caregivers, partners, and family members; women who were white; women who identified as Indigenous, Métis, and Two-Spirit; women with visible and invisible disabilities; and women living in both stable housing and precarious, unstable, or unsafe housing situations.

We also recognize important limitations in the research sample. The focus groups did not include women who identified as racialized, newcomers, or women with precarious or no immigration status. Representation from 2SLGBTQIA+ communities was also limited. As a result, the findings should not be read as fully capturing the distinct experiences, barriers, strengths, and priorities of these communities.

The solutions, recommendations, and calls to action offered in this toolkit are not intended to exclude women and gender-diverse people whose experiences were not represented, or were under-represented, in this research. Rather, they reflect what was learned from the women who participated while pointing to the need for continued, respectful, and adequately resourced engagement with racialized women, Black women, newcomers, women with precarious or no immigration status, 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, and other communities in North Simcoe whose experiences must shape future policy and program design.

We believe a Basic Income Guarantee has the potential to advance economic security and dignity broadly, while recognizing that equitable implementation requires attention to the specific ways racism, colonialism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, immigration status, rurality, poverty, and gendered violence intersect in people's lives. We also acknowledge and value the leadership and expertise of regional, provincial, and community-based organizations already advancing this work, including organizations such as Gilbert Centre, Uplift Black, and OCASI.

Changemaking Toolkit 2026
Safety, Dignity, and Economic Security: Addressing the Intersection of Poverty and Violence Against Women in Rural Communities

Report prepared by Katie Woodcroft and Desiree Salis for Huronia Transition Homes
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