Executive Summary | Nova Scotia's Gender-Based Violence Endemic

In 2024, Moving from Good Ideas to Real Action

The "Why"—Why this, and why now?

Nova Scotia is in the midst of a precarious gender-based violence (GBV) endemic. There are higher rates of mental health issues, sexual exploitation of children/youth, transphobia, homophobia, misogyny, and GBV in NS today than ever before. One in five NS children and youth live in poverty; one in three will be sexually abused before age eighteen. Black and indigenous men and women are being over-policed and incarcerated. More indigenous kids are in care now than there once were children in residential schools. And the magnitude of these problems currently dwarfs the scope and scale of community-designated resources: there's no available housing, food banks are turning away those in need, and individuals working in the space of gender-based violence prevention (GBVP) are burnt-out from trying to meet growing support demand while bumping up against local systemic barriers and system-wide failures.

Why is there not more being done? It is not a matter of means or motivation: we have access to provincial/federal resources of unprecedented scale and scope, and there is a great deal of momentum to act, and act differently. Nor is it a question of next steps: we have the evidence and blueprints to begin making change today. A now impressive collection of landmark reports[1] have been published, collectively documenting how communities/individuals in the province are being devastated by GBV. They outline calls to action and specific guidelines for achieving full-scale change, making indisputable recommendations that multi-sectoral collaboration and action is required to immediately ameliorate our bourgeoning GBV endemic. And still, incidents of GBV in the province have never been higher or more complex. So, let us be clear: We do not have to study GBV in NS any longer. What we have to is take collaborative action now.

The "What"—IWD 2024 Summit

With project funding from the NS Status of Women Office, Leeside Society partnered with Be the Peace Institute to host a 2-day province-wide summit—"A New Year, a New Era: What are the gender-based violence prevention (GBVP) opportunities? How will we move the endemic needle?" The aim was to examine the current state of NS GBVP activities and explore future opportunities to amplify prevention efforts. Objectives included: (a) raising awareness and promoting prevention, (b) laying the pathway for action, (c) enhancing support networks/resources, and (d) expanding support capacity.

The summit welcomed individuals with lived GBV experience and members of the broader GBV community, including but not limited to those working in academia, primary care and community service organizations, and government. 135 thinkers, doers, supporters, funders and decision-makers attended on Day One, and 125 on Day Two, representing 68 cross-industry organizations, five academic/post-secondary institutions, all three levels of government, one hospital and one health authority. The summit hosted four formal panel discussions: one that focused on the system—on persistent/systemic GBV issues in the community, featuring Senator Wanda Thomas Bernard, Shawna Paris-Hoyt, Josie McKinney, and Jennifer Glennie—and three dedicated to the specific sub-topics of Transforming Justice, Cultural Responsiveness, and Family Matters (a Preventive Lens).

Outside of these panel discussions, the event leveraged "Open Space Technology" (OST)[2] to promote free discussion, enable conditions for interactive processes to emerge, and help break down GBVP activity siloes and barriers. Participants reported appreciating/feeling safe within the diverse and collaborative environment and valuing the

[1] Home for Coloured Children Inquiry; Mass Casualty Commission Report; Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry, Nova Scotia Equity, and Anti-Racism; The National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence; Renfrew City Inquiry; The Desmond Fatality Inquiry

[2] A strategic group meeting methodology, developed in the late 1980s by Harrison Owen, now utilized around the world as an effective process for facilitating change in both organizational/community settings.

interactive and innovative format.

The Level-Setting: Government/System perspective

Top of mind for the Day 1 system panelists was the recently published Mass Casualty Commission Report (MCC, 2023). Its capturing of GBV's nuances/implications went directly to the government's "central nervous system," prompting discussion at every level and a determination for the Executive Council Office (ECO) to coordinate a governmental response. While this meaningful step forward stands to breathe new life into important inquiries, panelists simultaneously acknowledged these interconnections of violence have also, in many ways, been long known[3], so enthusiasm for impending system change must realistically be tempered by the proof of precedent. Panelists discussed how the only way to upend the status quo will be to deconstruct current systems into day-to-day operations functioning with more agility/responsiveness. Additional key takeaways from structured panel discussions included:

(a) The need to intentionally create spaces for healing for those involved in the often-hostile environs of GBVP work.
(b) The importance of an intersectional GBV treatment/support approach to meet violence's gender/sex intersectionality.
(c) As long as the system remains siloed, systemic change will never be realized.
(d) If you are privileged/empowered by your role in government/systems, you have a responsibility to make change.

The Takeaways—Cross-stakeholder summit insights (Summit Day 1)

Most actionable takeaway insights emerged from participants themselves, generated in agile, OST-model conversation huddles. Specifically, participants raised 12 GBVP priorities to be used as the focus for small group discussions, consolidated recommendations for addressing those priorities info formal reports, shared reports across all groups and used a "dotmocracy" to collectively rank and triage workstreams. Topics ranged from housing and gender equality to innovative harm reduction strategies and preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences. Full details are available, but two that emerged warranting particular attention were (1) community engagement, and (2) the establishment of a GBVP Innovation Lab:

Community Engagement

Specifically, participants discussed priorities and developed action items for how the Department of Community Services (DCS) could better engage and connect with community members in response to the 2023 MCC report. People-focused recommendations included: engaging across diverse sectors, ensuring fair compensation and representation, community reciprocation, preparing communities for engagement via education/awareness, and rebuilding community trust. Process-focused recommendations included: clarifying the engagement process, maintaining agility while adhering to clear reporting/action deadlines, being transparent about what is achievable, utilizing flexible formats, acknowledging expertise limitations, establishing trust with transparency, and creating safe, trauma-informed spaces/approaches.

GBVP Innovation Lab

The establishment of a dedicated innovation/social change lab focused on addressing GBV in NS would build on the momentum created by the summit, the most recent set of GBV report recommendations, and the NAP-CAN. It would function as a trusted, independent host for the partnerships needed between the many various sectors and stakeholders involved in GBVP, including private companies, government agencies, academia, non-profit organizations and, importantly, those with lived GBV experience. It would address/work within the sector challenges of limited resources and collaboration, serving as a platform for as-yet siloed organizations to pool resources and expertise. Practical activities the lab could undertake include:

- Conducting knowledge synthesis and research on province-wide GBV issues
- Identifying innovative solutions, and implementing pilot projects to test them for scale in real-world settings
- Serving as a forum for collective policy work, advocating for changes to address systemic issues

To make this idea a reality, funding and resources to establish and sustain the lab would be needed in both the

[3] e.g. the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Marshall, Wortley Report, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), etc.

short- and long-terms. To meet its goals, the lab would require access to the valuable insights and guidance of experts, including those in the sectors of government, justice, and education.

The Calls to Action—Actionable next steps (Summit Day 2)

On the second day of the summit, participants self-formed follow-on discussion groups to concretize the areas of action necessary for immediately realizing system change, according to identified GBVP priorities. Some groups went so far as to designate resources needed to take action:

	Goal, purpose, or mission	Resources required
Regular sector collaboration	Tackle engagement challenges: De-isolate, collaborate, support	People (mental health), funding
Engagement of child protection partners	Facilitate open dialogue between stakeholders	
Equal representation legislation	Have equal representation legislated in NS	People (legislation), promotion
Education	Use education as a prevention tool	People (school stakeholders)
Harm reduction & transition house policy	Incorporate harm reduction into transition house policy	People, funding, training
Helping men + boys	Helping men + boys (awareness, engagement and support)	
GBV accountability measure	Create sector accountability to justify work	

Full details—including clear next steps and action items assigned to each priority area—are available upon request.

The Future State - What is Within Our Grasp—If We Can Finally Turn Good Ideas into Real Action.

Thanks to recent reports and facilitated conversations like these, we no longer have a reason to ask, "What can be done?" We know already. We have validated and documented the current endemic levels of NS GBV. The question that remains is, "When can we start? What can the future look like, if we take action today?"

Future state of GBV Masculinity Work—Restorative approaches become standard practice in NS schools, leading to more inclusive policies and a deeper understanding of GBV for all students. Programs like YMCA Immigrant Services, the Men's Support Worker Pilot program, and the Bridges could immediately expand services for boys, men and fathers.

Future State of the "System"—GBVP efforts that aim to foster safety, empowerment, and inclusivity within communities are no longer one-off programs, but integrated, trauma-informed, system-wide initiatives that don't have to compete for resources. Specialized responses are able to crucially address marginalized populations previously overlooked.

Future State of Public Awareness Activities—Youth are educated, seniors are supported, and GBV survivors are empowered with information and resources. Awareness work is no longer a responsibility left to frontline workers—i.e., the responsibility to "educate up" is not piled on those already handling real-world GBV fallout every day.

Future State of Intervention and Prevention Efforts—In a culture where we prioritize understanding problems' root causes, we better address them in the now and prevent them from reoccurring in the future. Immediate impacts could span workplace (managers and policies) and government (from "doing to" to "doing with") sectors.

Future State of Trauma-informed Therapeutics—Building on the "doing with" model, we realize the opportunity to trauma-inform many more areas of GBV support. I.e., integration of SANEs in GBV response becomes more widespread; completion of the Avalon 5-yr community outreach project leads to sustained awareness/utilization of services, etc.

Future State of Research and Report Dissemination—Continued attention to family violence in case law—combined with a streamlined and enhanced information/data processing approach—leads to more robust legal responses and protections for survivors/their families. I.e., scrutinizing system data/info, strengthening data collection/accountability.

Future State of Working with the Private Sector— We unlock as yet untapped private sector funding for GBV projects; private sector sponsors significantly elevate/mainstream awareness of GBV issues and amplify efforts to combat them within their organizations and their communities at large.

Recommendations- Instead of traditional recommendations, the final report provides draft letters to Government, Academia, the Department of Community Services and Community organizations. Each letter highlights specific calls to action that each group could take to amplify gender based violence prevention in Nova Scotia.

Conclusion

Through this summit, we've identified numerous governmental and policy barriers impeding our work—and equipped ourselves with concrete ideas and a collective determination to overcome them. What remains is support and resources to act.

Forging new, de-siloed partnerships has never been more important, underlining the power of collaboration and shared knowledge. Despite facing challenges, we've reaffirmed our commitment to supporting one another and recognizing the diverse perspectives and backgrounds within our community.

Moving forward, there's a clear call to action: to continue fostering spaces for collaboration, rest, and learning, while ensuring inclusivity and grace in our interactions with clients and colleagues alike. The discussions summarized herein showcase tangible progress and the momentum within gender based violence prevention work, signaling a promising future of continued dialogue and action. Let's seize this momentum and strive for real, informed, positive change together.

Full report is available on the websites of both the Leeside Society and Be The Peace Institute