



SURVIVORSHIP & STIGMA

UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STIGMA, CRIMINALIZATION, AND SURVIVING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE.

Researched and written as an outgrowth of On Our Terms, a survivor led project conducted by the Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia. This report explores the barriers to co-producing survivor led, survivor informed services, and paints stigma as a barrier which manifests uniquely both within relationships, society, and systems for survivors of gender-based violence.

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ABOUT ON OUR TERMS

Launched in October of 2021, the On Our Terms (OOT) project aimed to influence systemic change through a feminist and survivor-led perspective. In addition to a systematic review of existing services for survivors in Atlantic Canada, an initial goal was established to create a Systemic Action Plan, which would address barriers for survivors by increasing collaboration and redistributing decision-making power. In brief, the goal was to amplify the voices of survivors, reduce stigma, and remove barriers that exist for survivors; subsequently, influencing the services that survivors receive. In keeping with the spirit of centering the first voice, an advisory committee of survivors was created to guide the goals and outcomes of this project. What became apparent as this project progressed is that the barriers for survivors to influence systemic change were in fact too great for the intended outcomes to gain traction, and as required by such an obstacle, the project evolved. Part way into the work, participants recognized that there was little interest from stakeholders and system operators to hear from and to work with survivors. The project pivoted to emphasize collecting stories from survivors which would be used by the OOT team to raise awareness through various media platforms. It is often the case that marginalized groups utilize media and art as platforms to share their stories, and without a doubt, this mode of sharing stories is the lowest barrier. It allows for control over the presentation of information, for anonymity, and is a common way that survivors connect with one another across the globe. Through OOT, we also created a virtual space for survivors to connect and share their knowledge which was one of the most cherished outcomes of the project.

STIGMA AS A BARRIER

A BARRIER TO
EXIT UNSAFE
RELATIONSHIPS



A BARRIER
TO ACCESS
SUPPORTS



A BARRIER WHICH
CONTRIBUTES TO
CRIMINALIZATION



A BARRIER TO
HAVING ONES
VOICE HEARD

DESTIGMATIZING THE FIRST VOICE PERSPECTIVE

“THERE IS UNMISTAKABLE POWER IN THE FIRST VOICE, AND ITS POTENTIAL IMPACT ON SYSTEMIC CHANGE IS NOT ONLY INESTIMABLE, BUT ALSO IT IS INEVITABLE.”

While spaces for survivors of violence to connect, share, and heal in solidarity are incredibly valuable, they will not spark the collaboration needed to improve circumstances for those navigating systems and seeking support in the future. The unfortunate reality for survivors of gender-based violence is that the nuanced details of their lived experience are often dismissed as irrelevant and the harms they have faced are frequently minimized, by the public, by police, by lawyers or judges, and by their own families and friends. Actors within systems often hold beliefs that because survivors do not fully understand how systems work, they cannot contribute to reforming or influencing these systems with informed input. Conversely, through this project, and through the lived experience of those who participated, we know that survivors hold innate wisdom regarding the solutions to violence prevention, to creating trauma informed programming, and to restoring wellness within communities and families that have experienced violence. Survivors, in general, may not understand the intricate workings of government systems, but they do understand the violence which these systems are meant to respond to effectively. They know why and when violence may occur. They know the histories and circumstances that lead to violence. They know how to recover and heal, despite the many incidents of re-traumatization that they will experience along the way. There is unmistakable power in the first voice, and its potential impact on systemic change is not only inestimable, but also, it is inevitable. Through the advocacy within esteemed publications such as the Mass Casualty Commission's final report, the National Plan to End Gender-Based Violence, or the Final Report of the National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, the value and necessity of working with survivors of gender-based violence to address these issues is upheld as an essential next step. As inevitable as first voice influence may be, the perspective gained through On Our Terms reminds us that hindrances still exist for the successful co-production of new pathways forward. The first voice gives insight into these barriers, and to how they may be overcome, on the terms of survivors themselves.

When referring to “first voice” throughout this report, we are referring to the perspectives, knowledge, and expertise of persons who have lived experience. Specifically, we are referring to those with a lived experience of gender-based violence, inclusive of cis gender and trans women, and gender-diverse individuals. First voice perspective has the innate ability to provide context and sophisticated understanding of complex socio experiential issues. The depth of understanding gained through lived experience is not something which can be taught within institutions. Survival is a skill that is inherent to all people, but to intrinsically understand the complex impacts of surviving violence, one must have survived. Despite the practical value of lived experience, we still see a multitude of barriers preventing the incorporation of first voice recommendations into policy and programming across social services and systems. There is an apparent resistance to considering first voice in the planning and implementation of services, both anecdotally, from the perspectives of survivors and service providers, and through formal research. This resistance shows up more notably in mental health care settings, within the justice system, and in our provincial response to the issue of homelessness. The commonality worth noting among these services is that they each address the needs of a population that is heavily stigmatized, and where there is stigma, there are biases and stereotypes present which can, and do, discredit the first voice.

First voice has been regarded by researchers and experts on gender-based violence as an essential component of effective prevention. Survivors, through their experience of intimately knowing perpetrators of violence, have an intuitive understanding of the root causes of violent behavior. Survivors have loved, lived with, encountered, and fled from persons who have committed acts of violence. Their knowledge is not theoretical or academic in nature, it is a physically embodied and adaptive understanding. Not always, but often, they have shared stories and knowledge with other survivors. Just as those working within the justice system may notice patterns in human behavior, survivors see patterns within their shared experiences but are rarely offered opportunities to share this knowledge beyond their group. Undeniably, they have insight to bring to the table, but when we categorize survivors as the “service receivers” only, we lack their expertise in the room, at the table, and when we gather to address the issue of GBV. The socially constructed separation of “service user” and “service provider” has been observed by researchers Boyne et al (2013). They write that, “there is the perceived and actual distance between ‘providers’ and ‘users’, with different meanings, status and values attached to each category – and a strongly implied inequality of worth. Accordingly, providers are supposed to have power, knowledge, skills, and capability to act effectively, while users are assumed to have little or none of the above.” (Boyne et al., 2013). They also identify that,

for all people, having a sense of control over what happens to them has positive effects on their physical and mental wellbeing. The opportunity to participate in the outcomes of the services designed for them gives those with first voice perspective the opportunity for wellness and meaningful engagement. In addition to improved outcomes for services, the empowerment and flourishing of survivors is one of the many benefits of utilizing co-production. Co-production allows us to better address systemic issues within services that have historically disempowered marginalized groups. Just as was demonstrated via OOT, the barrier being uncovered by researchers is that while there is a strong push for co-production, existing bias toward service users is preventing the integration of co-production into relational services such as health care, criminal justice, education, and other government-led community services (Boyne et al., 2013).

“BREAKING THIS BIAS ON A SYSTEMIC LEVEL WILL REQUIRE A COLLABORATIVELY DISRUPTIVE APPROACH, AS OPPOSED TO A FOCUS SOLELY ON EDUCATING INDIVIDUALS.”

Under colonialism and white supremacy, through which dependence upon the crown and division of social status are embedded by design, it would be culturally defiant to break down the power imbalance which exists between service users and the providers of government services. The University of Melbourne (2020), supported by Domestic Violence Victoria, developed the Family Violence Experts by Experience Framework, through which they outline a framework to co-produce services with persons who have lived experience. Through the research that informed their model, they heard from survivors and several practitioners that cultural attitudes elevate the opinions of university educated professionals over the lived experience of survivors, creating a key barrier for meaningful co-production (University of Melbourne, 2020). In North America, on British colonized land, we hold academia to such a high standard that one can take a course on cultural competency and be considered qualified to inform cultural inclusivity. These social norms are pertinent to the ways in which Indigenous women and Two-Spirit voices are left unheard and delegitimized, compounding their experience of survivorship.

“I WANT TO KNOW WHAT BEING BELIEVED FEELS LIKE.” -OOT PARTICIPANT

In volume one, section one of the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019), the experience of Cheryl Maloney, former president of the Nova Scotia Native Women’s Association, is highlighted to demonstrate the politics of social status under colonialism. When pushing to spark an investigation into the death of Victoria Paul, who died while in police custody, Cheryl only received a response from government officials once accompanied by a university professor. This is a clear demonstration of how we regard colonial academics as more legitimate than community-held wisdom. Throughout the report, there are many examples of Indigenous women being silenced or ignored, and the first call to justice states, “We call upon federal, provincial, territorial, municipal, and Indigenous governments (hereinafter ‘all governments’), in partnership with Indigenous Peoples, to develop and implement a National Action Plan to address violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people”. The report also notes, “The implementation of the Calls for Justice must include the perspectives and participation of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people with lived experience, including the families of the missing and murdered and survivors of violence”. In all movements toward equitable responses to gender-based violence, we must challenge the inclination to center the needs and voices of white and cis gender women only. While all voices hold value, a society that does not respect Indigenous knowledge cannot authentically respect the knowledge of any survivor in ways that do not reinforce inequality.

The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls is not the only report that calls for co-production of services through incorporating the first voice. In 2021, the Joint Declaration for a Canada Free of Gender-Based Violence was endorsed by the federal, provincial, and territorial ministers. Canadian provinces have collectively made a commitment in working toward achieving the recommendations laid out within The National Plan to End Gender-Based Violence. The brief states, “Preventing and addressing GBV in Canada requires a coordinated national approach, with federal, provincial, and territorial governments working in close partnership with survivors, Indigenous partners, direct service providers, experts, advocates, municipalities, the private sector, and researchers” (Women and Gender Equality Canada, 2023). Two guiding principles listed are to be “survivor-centric and inclusive of children and families,” and to “recognize the expertise of survivors and community agencies providing support”.

“WE NEED SYSTEMS WHERE WE SPEAK TO EACH OTHER, WITH EQUITABLE AND RESTORATIVE SOLUTIONS. HEALING NEEDS TO BE PART OF THE PROCESS FOR ALL OF US.” -OOT PARTICIPANT

The Mass Casualty Commission's Final Report, Volume 3, contextualized the importance of understanding the role of gender-based violence in the Portapique mass shooting, and highlighted a number of recommendations including the following: "All organizations and individuals adopt women-centred strategies and actions to prevent, intervene in, and respond to gender-based violence, and to support restoration and healing." To implement this strategy well, it was noted that, "Recognition of the expertise and experience of the gender-based violence advocacy and support sector, including survivors of gender-based violence, is essential." (Mass Casualty Commission, 2023). These direct calls to work in partnership with survivors, experts, and advocates, invite us to consider the ways in which we may better incorporate first voice perspective into service provision and policy in the Maritime provinces. Conclusively, there have been numerous well-researched and expert reviewed reports to suggest that centering survivors is crucial to the success of programming and initiatives to address gender-based violence. What foundational learning is needed to take this step successfully? In this report, the ways in which stigma creates barriers for women to access services, as well as barriers to the voices of survivors being heard and deliberately considered, will be explored. The experiences for survivors of GBV are deeply individual, and yet, they are also tied to a larger experience of shared identity and historic violence. To contextualize the root causes of stigma, we must also first examine the societal and structural influences perpetuating gender-based violence in the Maritimes. What clues to solutions can we draw from the shared experience of survivors? To respond to violence in ways that are unbiased and restorative, the solution is not treating all instances as equal, but to acknowledge violence in the delicate context of identity, history, power, and privilege.

THE MANIFESTATION OF STIGMA - WHY DO WE STIGMATIZE?

"PERSONS WHO BENEFIT FROM SYSTEMS OF POWER...HAVE INCENTIVE TO STEREOTYPE OR STIGMATIZE SURVIVORS."

Stigma is defined as "a set of negative and often unfair beliefs that a society or group of people have about something." (Britannica, 2024). Survivors experience stigma uniquely depending on their class, race, ability, sexuality, and gender identity. Stigmas often intersect and shift to meet the needs of a society that functions through power imbalances. "Stigma power" is a concept which research has identified as a resource used to control, exclude, or exploit others. In short, this refers to the power which stigma has to keep another down or othered, and this power is thought to be exploited by persons with privilege and power in society. (Link & Phelan, 2001).

In the case of gender-based violence, we can see that systems such as patriarchy, colonialism, and white supremacy are all upheld through the ways in which we stigmatize, label, and judge survivors. As a common example, many survivors of sexual assault are victim blamed; a mark of disgrace. The “she was asking for it” narrative directly erases a survivor’s autonomy and credibility, and reinforces gendered stereotypes which benefit men who are estimated to make up over 90 per cent of sexual assault perpetrators. Blame is shifted away from perpetrators and onto victims (Vancouver Rape Relief & Women’s Shelter, 2020). Persons who benefit from systems of power have incentive to leverage myths and stereotypes which perpetuate stigma; protecting their privilege. While a rare percentage of cases may actually embody a stereotype, if in all cases we apply a stereotypical lens than the conversation about gender inequality is perpetually avoided. If in all cases she was simply “asking for it”, or perhaps she is “fabricating a lie because women are vindictive,” than we never need to acknowledge the relevance of power imbalances.

“I HAVE NEVER FELT SO HORRIBLY MISCHARACTERIZED AS I DID BY THE DEFENSE, AND PEOPLE KEPT TELLING ME IT WAS HIS JOB, BUT THAT’S NOT HIS JOB. IT WAS HIS JOB TO DELIVER A FULL DEFENSE, NOT TO USE STEREOTYPES TO PAINT ME A LIAR, VEXATIOUS, MANIPULATIVE, AND PUNITIVE. I STILL HEAR HIS WORDS ON LOW DAYS, AND SOMETIMES I WANT TO END MY LIFE.”

-00T PARTICIPANT

We can also look to the ways in which Indigenous and Black women are stigmatized uniquely to exemplify how colonialism and white supremacy are upheld via stigma power. The Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland NS reported to the Mass Casualty Commission that, “Even more often than other women, Indigenous women are expected to be responsible for themselves and for those they care about, especially with regards to their personal safety” (2023). Through intersecting oppressive systems, we have constructed the image of a “perfect victim”, which enforces a standard of victimization that, in reality, few victims are able to reflect. This stigmatic image works to uphold the very systems of oppression that perpetuate the victimization of women. First, it is important we acknowledge that under white supremacy, “real” victims are white women. It is important to recognize that respectability politics, and tone policing, impact the lives of Black women uniquely. Through white supremacy, Blackness is seen as less “respectable”; therefore, Black women experience violence through both patriarchy and racism, or as it has been coined, misogynoir (Mass Casualty Commission, 2023). Various factors contribute to the image of the ideal victim, such as respectability, weakness, innocence, modesty, conventional attractiveness, and ultimately, any trait which may uphold a traditional colonial standard of femininity (National Organization for Women, 2021).

Society is influenced by stereotypes of victimhood so profoundly that we have needed to implement laws to prevent bias toward victims from influencing criminal trials. A Canadian example of this is the “rape shield” law. By prohibiting questions about assault victims’ unrelated sexual history, this law prevents gendered stereotyping by removing the possibility of a woman’s lack of “innocence” and lack of “respectability” being used to argue that she is not reputable, or in other words, not an ideal victim (National Organization for Women, 2021). Unfortunately, policy alone will never prevent bias. Bias prevention requires healing and education at the community level. Presently, from within a violent relationship and then through to a trial, a person must prove their victimhood. Themes of idealized victimhood will be demonstrated repeatedly throughout this report as a mechanism of stigma and a barrier faced by survivors in accessing justice.

IMPACTS OF STIGMA ON IPV & GBV SURVIVORS

“I LOST ALL FAITH IN ANY REPORTING MECHANISM OR JUSTICE... I PUT A TARGET ON MY BACK BY COMING FORWARD.” -OOT PARTICIPANT

Stigma has an immense impact on how people are perceived and treated after they have been victimized. In anticipation of stigma, combined with their overall lack of trust in the system, many people are afraid to report to police or speak about their experiences of gender-based violence (Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2023). A lack of trust in the system is a commonly held attitude among those with both lived and professional experience. All participants of OOT lacked trust, to at least some degree, in policing. For example, one person said, “I tell my friends not to call the police. They don’t like us, I tell them. We are women- they won’t believe us.” We can also refer to statistics surrounding sexual assault to better understand how profoundly survivors lack access to justice, and how this insufficiency would reasonably foster a sense of distrust. It is reported by the Canadian Women’s Foundation (2022) that only six per cent of assaults are reported to police, and only about one per cent of those reports result in a conviction for the offence. When asked why they do not report, half of sexual assault survivors will say they do not think the incident was important enough, nearly half of survivors say that they do not want police involved, and one in five believe they will not receive help from the police at all (Government of Canada, 2022). This is to say, in addition to low numbers of reporting due to the fear of stigma and bias, survivors who report violence are statistically unlikely to achieve justice. Survivors also indicate experiencing a high level of re-traumatization through the criminal justice system (Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2022). One OOT participant said, “As a victim, you are harmed. That should be a given, but people forget that all the time. As a victim, your harms are being tossed back and forth between the

prosecution and the defense and accused. It is like being raped and then having to be raped again and again, or, at minimum, having to listen to other people talk about you being raped while you sit in silence.”

The experience of stigma has a range of impacts on an individual’s perception and behavior. Research conducted through the University of Toronto explores the concept of the “stereotype threat,” which refers to the social and psychological threat that is perceived via the experience of stigmatization. Their study found that the social threat of stigmatization leads to a decrease in rational thinking and emotional control for study participants. The cognitive stress placed on a person due to stigma made them more likely to act out aggressively or make risky decisions (Inzlicht, 2010). If we apply this knowledge to understanding the behaviors of women who are experiencing abuse, we can begin to understand their responses through a more nuanced lens. For example, it might be difficult for some women to make the decision to leave an abuser when experiencing the stigmatization of being victimized, which, according to this research, could inhibit a person’s ability to make rational decisions in high-risk situations. The threat of stereotyping, which is reported to cause a decrease in emotional regulation and an increase in aggression, could also contribute to people who experience victimization, and the associated stigma, later acting out in violence themselves (Inzlicht, 2010). This invites the realization that stigmatization increases a victim’s likelihood of becoming criminalized. Not only does self-stigma, and the anticipation of stigmatization, create hesitance for survivors in reaching out for help, but it also causes cognitive impairment directly impacting their judgement. This research also highlights the probability that the stigmatization of both experiencing violence and becoming criminalized could lead to increased recidivism. This perspective also shines light on the value of restorative approaches for working with people who have caused harm. Through any approach that reduces stigma and contextualizes root causes, we give individuals the opportunity to recover beyond labels and stereotypes.

It is important that we also consider how stereotypes are internalized and manifest as shame and self blame. When a person begins to experience cyclical abuse from someone they love, it cues a sequence of internal and external stigmatic experiences and many people begin to self-stigmatize which often prevents them from reaching out for help sooner. They may tell themselves, “I’m too smart to be a victim” or “it’s my fault for choosing this partner.” Additionally, a person is likely to be experiencing abuse through the weaponization of stigma; to elaborate, an abuser may be utilizing the concept of stigma power to maintain control over their partner. Many survivors have been told, or have heard of others being told, “you’re unstable, no one will believe you.” Self-stigmatization is a significant component of the broader stigmatic

experience. Survivors internalize stigmatic messages from society and learn to adjust their behavior, which is demonstrated by an OOT participant's experience of expressing anger after being subjected to violence: "I wasn't able to identify that I was angry. Being angry was not allowed. That was a word that was shunned. The day that I said I'm angry, it felt like it was a betrayal because I'm not supposed to be the angry one." Another participant described that by the time they had experienced their first instance of gender-based violence, they had already learned through cultural norms that it would not be productive to seek help. They had already internalized the idea that it was their fault for having chosen the wrong partner and that they would be made responsible for this failure in the relationship. They believed women were responsible for holding relationships together. The act of violence experienced by this participant, who was only 19 years old at the time, was a potentially lethal physical assault. Through stories like hers, we learn that the anticipation of stigma, combined with self-stigmatization, prevents women from accessing support, regardless of the severity of the violence they have experienced.

When we work to address violence, we must do so equitably. While the experience of suffering and vulnerability may be universally human, our experiences and their impacts are deeply shaped and influenced by our identities. We must honor the complexities of this truth, accepting the relevance of identity, if we hope to reduce systemic re-traumatization. If within their abusive relationship, women are policed based on how they dress and speak because they are women, and within the courtroom their credibility is pulled into question based on similar measures, then we have a justice system that recreates harmful psychological conditions similar to those found in situations of intimate partner violence. If we authentically aim to change the system, the first step must be recognizing that it is built on a foundation of bias; especially gendered and racial bias. Actors within the system must be accountable to the reality that the same culturally embedded norms of sexism, ableism, and racism that enable abusers to perpetuate harm also sway the judgment of the court, in ways that are sometimes more subtle, socially acceptable, or unnoticed to those in positions of privilege.

"SO MANY PEOPLE IN OUR SYSTEMS HAVE NOT DEALT WITH THEIR OWN TRAUMAS AND HARMS AND THE THINGS INSIDE OF THEM THAT THEY ARE STRUGGLING WITH. WHEN A SURVIVOR SPEAKS OR SPEAKS TO THEIR OWN TRAUMA IN COURT CASES OR LEGAL ENVIRONMENTS, THE RESPONSE FROM THE SYSTEM PLAYER IS TO SHUT IT DOWN. TO SILENCE IT. IT TRIGGERS SOMETHING INSIDE THEM THAT IS SCARY. AND EVERYONE IS SCARED OF FEELING." -OOT PARTICIPANT

The indoctrination into a culture that normalizes shifting blame onto victims begins early. The following analogy is used during the Elizabeth Fry Society's Healthy Relationships program: "If you put a frog in boiling water, it will jump out, but if you put a frog in cold water and slowly increase the heat, the frog will stay submerged until it's too late to jump out." This is an analogy used to explain why people stay in abusive relationships, and to describe the tactics that abusive people use for priming their victims to adapt to abusive environments. If we apply this same concept on a societal level, we can understand how seemingly harmless ideas such as "if a boy teases you on the playground, it just means he likes you" prime us unconsciously to accept more harmful ideas like "he's possessive because he loves you." The normalization of such concepts invalidates the seriousness of circumstances that lead to escalation, such as when jealousy becomes a feature of coercive control. What we fail to acknowledge is that our society creates the perfect environment for violence. As we are taught to be complacent toward less severe forms of violence, we become vulnerable to complacency with acts that are more severe. If we truly wish to address the issue of gender-based violence, and to destigmatize victimization, we need a widespread understanding that in this society, all of us are boiling frogs. Just as many survivors of violence have come to normalize their own experiences, we each contribute to a society that has normalized their victimization. Anyone who has been a little girl will recall being told how greatly at risk of being a victim they were, and depending on which community or cultural background you were from you'd have been taught how to mitigate that risk accordingly. Elements of culture that act as a vehicle for violence, such as rigid gender norms, are considered inherent, fixed, and unquestionable. Because of this perspective, once violence occurs, we have already dismissed every opportunity to build a culture conducive to prevention. We continue to seek solutions to violence that are one dimensional, and that place the onus on individuals, but systemic violence is a multi dimensional issue. The face of violence is one that shape shifts to meet the needs of people, or systems, seeking power, which is why it is crucial that we ground our prevention efforts in the knowledge of people with lived experience.

“LARGER SCALE ABUSE IN OUR SYSTEMS CONTINUES TO BE A WAY TO HAVE POWER AND CONTROL OVER OTHER PEOPLE, AND THE LESS DOMINANT GROUP STAYS OPPRESSED AND AFRAID.” -OOT PARTICIPANT

THE GENDER BINARY AND VICTIMHOOD

“I GREW UP KNOWING THAT AS A WOMAN YOU WILL BE SHAMED PUBLICLY FOR STEPPING OUT OF LINE. YOU HAVE STAY IN LINE.” -OOT PARTICIPANT

Within our society and systems alike, people, throughout their experiences of violence and survival, face a wide range of judgements, labels, and stereotypes. An OOT participant, a survivor of sexual violence in the workplace, shared her experience of being stigmatized and labeled as an imperfect victim: “My employer investigated my claims, and I was found to be truthful, but the company justified their behavior stating that I was a “foul-mouthed girl”, and my potty mouth was something that would make the men want to touch me and I was bringing it on myself.” Labeling is a core mechanism for stigmatization to function successfully, and further, labels cue our biases. The “victim” label itself has been culturally associated with an image of a woman who is weak, passive, trapped, and therefore, blameworthy for their victimization (Dunn, 2005). Additionally, this label is associated with a lack of agency, which is why many of those who have experienced gender-based violence choose to identify as “survivors.” Interestingly, the less conventionally a woman behaves in the context of gendered roles, the more likely she is to be held responsible for abuse (Dunn, 2005). Again, we see the “ideal victim” narrative upholding patriarchal standards: perfect victims must act like perfect women according to gendered norms within the gender binary. The gender binary itself is another oppressive system that works against survivors. It is a framework commonly weaponized to perpetuate abuse within relationships or to further burden people as they navigate systems (Turcotte, 2023). As previously mentioned, survivors of violence learn to anticipate both stigma and judgement from family, health care practitioners, and employers. This expectation can result in poor outcomes for the person recovering after experiencing violence and fear of stigmatization has been identified as a key factor preventing women from seeking supportive services (Overstreet & Quinn, 2013). Stigmatization is complicated further when women face intersecting stigmas. For example, stigma of victimization can intertwine with the stigma of disability, mental illness, poverty, addiction, criminalization, or of being racialized (Turan et al., 2019). This point should help us to understand why one's identity has an influence on their experience of violence. We also must understand that for many who have experienced emotional and psychological abuse, stigma was weaponized as a feature of the abuse to silence them from speaking out. A frequently arising theme in survivors' stories encompasses the weaponization of vulnerabilities, such as mental illness or addiction, to manipulate them into silence and complacency with abuse. This is a vivid example of “stigma power” in action. This can manifest as common tropes such as “no one will believe you, you're crazy” or “you can't remember things correctly, you're an addict.”

Such accusations are intentionally reliant upon stereotypes. Amongst the public and within the court system, a common misperception is that women with mental health issues would be less believable and more likely to make false accusations of abuse (Cole, 2021). Through sexist narratives about mental health, rooted in psychiatry practices that have historically and harmfully pathologized women, this tactic is a uniquely effective means of silencing women (CBC, 2018). It's important to include that members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community have also faced a great deal of stigma as it relates to stereotypes about mental health. Thus, it is no coincidence that women, femmes, and gender diverse people who are survivors of psychological abuse or coercive control frequently identify their experiences with these forms of violence are characterized by gendered themes and that re-traumatization occurs as they navigate justice systems.

“SOMETIMES WHEN I GET REALLY IN MY FEELINGS I THINK I MUST JUST BE CRAZY OR LYING OR MENTAL ILLNESS THAT CAUSED ME TO CREATE THIS NARRATIVE. THAT’S NOT ACTUALLY TRUE BUT THAT’S HOW IT FEELS SOMETIMES. I’VE BEEN SO LET DOWN BY SYSTEMS.” -OOT PARTICIPANT

“SO WHEN WORDS WERE USED AGAINST ME- WORDS LIKE TRAUMA, SLUT, LAZY, USELESS, WORTHLESS, UGLY, FAT- I BELIEVED IT. IT MUST BE TRUE.”

“MENTAL HEALTH WAS WEAPONIZED.” -OOT PARTICIPANT

-OOT PARTICIPANT

In general, we live in a society that fixates on the myth that false accusations of intimate partner violence or sexual assault are prevalent; yet, statistically, this assumption has little factual coherence. In 2018, the Department of Justice reported that although false accusations are rare, the myth, on a societal scale, prevails to such a degree that lawyers frequently advise women against raising the concern of intimate partner violence in family courts, as to avoid the counter that they are falsifying the report to alienate the co-parent (Justice Canada, 2018; Rise Women's Center, 2021). When women do choose to press charges after experiencing abuse, how they emote in a courtroom is also likely to sway the opinions of observers. Studies show that the expression of anger, for example, is an emotion that can cause a victim to be seen as less credible, as people generally expect victims to be fearful and sad (Bosma et al., 2018). The emotional tapestry woven through survival is of course more complex. Responses to trauma can also be influenced by a person's sociocultural history, meaning that their identity and cultural influences will impact their behavior (Ford, 2015). Moreover, while sadness or fear may be common, anger, as well as the opposite experience of emotional suppression and numbness, are also common (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

We can rationally expect that someone who grew up in a safe environment may be more comfortable showing fearfulness, in contrast to an individual who was raised in an environment where revealing vulnerability could increase their risk of being harmed. Additionally, one's identity has a recognizable impact on how they perceive their experiences and how they should behave when impacted by victimization.

“IT WAS MY FAULT BECAUSE I DIDN’T HAVE A SMILE, OR IT WAS MY TONE, OR MY FACE. I THOUGHT, IF I LOVE HIM ENOUGH AND NURTURE HIM ENOUGH, I CAN FIX IT.”

-OOT PARTICIPANT

“MEN UNDERESTIMATED ME AS A WOMAN OR PUT ME IN A BOX BASED ON MY SEXUALITY OR WHAT I COULD OFFER.”

-OOT PARTICIPANT

It is through a strict binary that we perceive victims who do not behave according to gendered expectations as more likely to have provoked their own abuse in some way. For example, many people question what a woman was wearing at the time of a sexual assault. Was she dressed respectably as we might expect “respectable” women to dress? If not, then she “brought on this attack herself.” The same logic, however, is never applied when men or boys are sexually assaulted; this difference in experience is directly correlated to gender stereotypes. The notion that victims can be responsible for their abuse is uniquely applied to experiences of Black and Indigenous women who, through white supremacy and colonialism, are seen as inherently less feminine and therefore less deserving of empathy (Capezza & Arriaga, 2008; Esqueda & Harrison, 2005; Kern, Libkuman, & Temple, 2007). The gender binary, a culturally reinforced system through which we divide gender into two distinct and immutable categories, man and woman, is a system that contributes directly to the perpetuation of gender-based violence, both historically and in the present day. This system influences how we respond to violence and the justification of the binary created conditions that stigmatize and project bias onto survivors of all genders. The gender binary and gender essentialism function as reference points for justifying human behavior within gendered categories. As it is noted throughout this report, violence against women and femmes is largely perpetuated through bias, control, and judgement toward one's expression of their femininity and gender. Unsurprisingly, rigid gender roles have also been studied in correlation to a man's likelihood of intimate partner violence perpetration. Research has found that men who perpetrate intimate partner violence are likely to have either a strong inclination toward adherence to stereotypical roles and traits of masculinity or experience a feeling of inadequacy in their masculinity because of gender role discrepancies. The term “masculine discrepancy stress” refers to the experiences of men who are plagued with a form of “intrapsychic strain that results when men perceive that they have failed to meet the masculine ideals they have internalized through years of gender socialization” (Eisler and Skidmore, YEAR). Additionally, researchers Eisler and

Skidmore explain that this stress occurs when men subscribing to traditional gender roles struggle to “cope with the imperatives of the male role,” these researchers found that masculine discrepancy stress is linked to intimate partner violence perpetrated by men (1987). On intimate partner violence danger and risk assessments, such as the Jacqueline Campbell Danger Assessment, a perpetrator’s job loss or unemployment is listed as a risk-influencing factor. Because providing for a household is traditionally considered a man’s role, we can see how this risk factor relates to masculine discrepancy stress.

“HE IS SOMEONE WHO HAS VALID TRAUMA...AND SO HE SEEKS TO CONTROL WOMEN AS A WAY TO FEEL MORE MASCULINE IN A WORLD THAT TELLS HIM HE CANNOT BE MASCULINE BECAUSE HE IS MENTALLY ILL...I HAVE COMPASSION AND UNDERSTANDING FOR HIM.” -OOT PARTICIPANT

It is due to these same sociocultural influences that men are so reluctant to identify as victims at all, let alone as fearful. This is the double edged sword of patriarchy, men face a continuous pressure to maintain the image of strength. This leaves men and boys who have faced victimization without the supports needed for wellness and recovery; a problem which can only be meaningfully resolved by men themselves. It is apparent that our cultural subscription to gender roles within the binary, and the subsequent associated biases, are serving to perpetuate intimate partner violence and violence-against women, in ways which harm everyone. While it is true that violence-against women perpetuated by men is a serious crisis, it is also true that violence within same sex relationships and violence against men and boys are prevalent. Within a binary, and within a culture dominated by gender essentialism, is there space for the victimization of these groups to be centered? If we view victimization as being an inherently effeminate experience, will boys ever come forward to report their experiences of violence? When women do advocate against sexual violence, and center it as a women’s issue, this is when we will see the issue that men and boys can be victimized is brought into the conversation. This exemplifies a power struggle: men and boys are only centered as victims if it serves to disempower the plight of women fighting against patriarchal violence. It is also lost in this conversation that men and boys are not excluded; rather, they are rarely represented as victims by one another because of masculinity norms that result from patriarchy. If we are to have truly inclusive services and responses to sexual and intimate partner violence, we must always begin with the dismantling of oppressive systems that dictate our cultural attitudes surrounding the topics. The gender binary, patriarchy, white supremacy, and colonialism are all such systems that must be challenged in order to uproot misconceptions, bias, and stigma. The key to dismantling and challenging these systems lies within the lived experience and knowledge of peoples who have experienced oppression within them.

THE CRIMINALIZATION OF SURVIVAL

The Elizabeth Fry Societies across Canada share a common concern for the frequent criminalization of those who've experienced gender-based violence. Through community-based work, they have a vantage point to witness the stories and timelines of women who navigate the criminal justice system. Emma Halpern, the executive director of Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia, has noted that there is a distinct correlation between stigma and criminalization. Demonstrating this reality, almost all members of the OOT project are survivors who have either faced criminalization or have been criminalized, or have been incarcerated. Why and how do survivors become criminalized? Their stories create opportunities for deeper comprehension of how systemic oppression, culture, stigma, and policy combine to create barriers and increase vulnerabilities for survivors of GBV. The experiences of women who have been impacted by pro-arrest policies is one example. Since the implementation of pro-arrest and pro-charge policies across Canada, a significant increase in the arrests of women has been documented. Back in 2005, the Women Abuse Council of Toronto released a report on the consequences of these policies. Their research uncovered that women who were arrested for assault had usually been living with abusive men, and that criminalizing women's responses to male violence increased their vulnerability to future victimization. It is not uncommon for women to respond with reactive physical violence when they are experiencing coercive control within intimate relationships, even if the abuse they are experiencing is primarily psychological or emotional in nature (Women Abuse Council of Toronto, 2005). Coercive control is a criminal offence in various parts of the world, including the United Kingdom, but it is not yet in Canada, even while research demonstrates that many of the behaviors occurring within coercive control contribute to increased risk of intimate partner homicide (Global News, 2023). Reasonably, the experience of being controlled through coercion causes fear-based responses in those targeted, which is a commonly shared experience among criminalized survivors that access support at the Elizabeth Fry Societies. Court support workers at this organization predominantly see women accessing their healthy relationship programming who have been charged with assaulting an intimate partner, although they themselves had been previously victimized by that partner.

“I WAS FACED WITH A FELONY CHARGE AGAINST SOMEBODY THAT ABUSED ME FOR 25 YEARS OF MY LIFE. I COULDN'T UNDERSTAND, HOW I AM NOW THE OFFENDER? THERE WAS A POINT THAT THIS COULD HAVE BEEN PREVENTED IF SOMEBODY HAD JUST LISTENED, SAID, HOW CAN I HELP?” -OOT PARTICIPANT

Pro-arrest policies were created with the good intention of placing the responsibility of pressing charges on police officers, rather than on the victims. However, many front-line workers who respond to domestic violence, and many survivors, would argue that these policies often cause harm to those impacted through the erasure of their autonomy. Researchers at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia completed a review of the province's pro-arrest and pro-charge policies, and through their research, they discovered that only one per cent of the literature reviewed supported these policies as an effective response to domestic violence in Canada. Their systematic literature review additionally confirmed that discrimination, based on race, gender, sexuality, and immigration status, exists within the court system (Ross, 2021). One OOT participant, who had been experiencing physical violence and coercive control, assaulted her partner and fled their home when he attempted to coerce her into suicide. She shared her experience of the arrest: "When police found me, I was terrified. I had to fight for my life- and now you're going to tell me I need to get in the back of this van like a dog who doesn't deserve the human decency of sitting in a vehicle with a window?" When we criminalize survival, and when we label people as criminals for any self-protective use of force, what message does this send?

"THE IMPACTS OF BEING ARRESTED WERE...MY ENTIRE IDENTITY SHIFTED...SUDDENLY I'M A CRIMINAL...WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? IT HAS SHIFTED EVERYTHING I THINK ABOUT SOCIETY, HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE ARE CRIMINALIZED EVERY DAY FOR THEIR SURVIVAL." -OOT PARTICIPANT

As many women's lived experiences demonstrate, and as researchers have determined through analysis, women's use of force is different than that of their male partners in intimate relationships (Jansen et al., 2021). Several studies have reviewed cases of women who had been arrested for domestic violence in heterosexual relationships and found that in almost all cases, they were not the primary aggressor. Through these studies, we learn that in most cases, women who behave violently within intimate relationships are responding to victimization (Allen, 2011; Jansen et al., 2021). This trend has also been observed by domestic violence court support workers at the Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia. A participant of OOT who had been criminalized shared, "When I went away, I was treated less than human. I had what was left of my dignity stripped. I was a victim of decades of violence and now I was being held in a pen, again." From research, as well as anecdotal evidence from within the sector, we can conclude that it is common for women who are personally victimized to become criminalized for their responses to violence they experience. Further, studies show that women are significantly more likely than men to be seriously or fatally injured by acts of domestic violence and they exhibit higher degrees of fear in violent domestic situations (Jansen et al., 2021; National Institute of Justice, 2013).

“DESPITE THE EVIDENCE THAT WOMEN’S USE OF FORCE IS DIFFERENT, A COMMON NOTION IS THAT GENDER EQUALITY CAN BE ACHIEVED IF WE TREAT BEHAVIORS OF WOMEN AND MEN EQUALLY. UNFORTUNATELY, TO TREAT WOMEN’S USE OF FORCE AS EQUAL TO MEN’S IGNORES THE FACTS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF IDENTITY, CULTURE, OR OPPRESSION.”

REACTIVE VIOLENCE & HYPER RESPONSIBILITIZATION

Coercive control, a common form of domestic violence that encompasses efforts to control another persons autonomy, is frequently facilitated through the enforcement of gendered roles (Lukes Place, 2022). Moreover, it has been found to be an indicator of lethal violence and is substantially less accessible as a tool of violence for women. Within our society, it is normalized that men should control or critique the autonomy of women; therefore, coercive control is inherently more accessible to men, as this violence will be minimized by justification of cultural norms (Swan et al., 2002). By contextualizing men’s use of violence with gender essentialist concepts, which pose that their gender predisposes them to act out of a biological need for dominance, acts of male aggression are frequently minimized (Kimmel, 2000). Gendered norms also influence how people perceive their own acts of violence, with women being more likely to confess to transgression because they recognize that acting in violence breaks their prescribed gender role (Kimmel, 2002). We have socially constructed the image of a victim that does not fight back, and thus, women who do fight back are often seen as less deserving of claiming victimhood (Das Dasgupta, 2001). Despite the evidence that women’s use of force is different, a common notion is that gender equality can be achieved if we treat behaviors of women and men equally. Unfortunately, to treat women’s use of force as equal to men’s ignores the facts within the context of identity, culture, or oppression. All violence occurs within unique context. Hence, holding people responsible for acts of violence with standardized approaches is not equitable, and subsequently, causes further harm to and marginalization of certain communities/groups. We often see that women are held responsible for both experiencing violence and acting in violence to a higher degree than others. A commonly observed response to women acting in violence might sound something like, “we can’t let her get away with this just because she is a woman.” Statements like this demonstrate our gendered perceptions and their implications on our responses to violence, and when we hyper fixate on treating people as “equal”, we often erase the need for equity.

“AS IT IS CONSIDERED A BY-PRODUCT OF PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY, HYPER-RESPONSIBILIZATION IS SEEN PRIMARILY WITH WOMEN AND SUGGESTS THAT WOMEN ARE EXPECTED TO TAKE MORE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR ACTIONS THAN MEN”

In their submissions to the Mass Casualty Commission, the Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia stated, “As it is considered a by-product of patriarchal society, hyper-responsibilization is seen primarily with women and suggests that women are expected to take more responsibility for their actions than men”. They also noted that this trend is even greater among perceptions of Indigenous women. The Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies and the Native Women’s Association of Canada released a report examining the hyper-responsibility placed on women within the legal system. Through the work of these organizations, trends have been observed in which women, especially those who are racialized, mentally ill, or living with disability, are expected to take more responsibility than others. Hyper-responsibilization is especially noticeable when women use violence to resist violence, such as when they are facing criminalization for protecting themselves physically from batterer (CAEFS & NWAC, 2017). Through engagement with women who have gone through the Domestic Violence Court Program in Nova Scotia, we at the Elizabeth Fry Society of MNS hear often that women who are charged enter guilty pleas to protect their children, to protect the batterer, or because they felt this was their only option for a positive outcome.

“I’D BEEN EXPERIENCING PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE AND COERCION, AND PHYSICAL ABUSE, AND I CALLED VICTIM SERVICES BUT THEY SAID THAT BECAUSE I WAS CHARGED I COULDN’T ACCESS THEIR SERVICES. I PLED GUILTY BECAUSE I WAS TOLD THERE WAS A PROGRAM AT E FRY AND THEY COULD HELP ME, AND THEY DID, BUT I KNOW I WAS ACTING IN SELF-DEFENSE” -OOT PARTICIPANT

A primary avenue for the hyper-responsibilization of women is victim blaming, which, drawing from the Mass Casualty Commission’s final report, “...is itself the product of unfounded myths and stereotypes about gender-based violence” (2023). Lisa Banfield was held responsible by both the public and the justice system through the public backlash and criminal charges she faced for providing ammunition to her abuser. Ms. Banfield’s story provides context to the realities that both our society and system fail to contextualize (Mass Casualty Commission, 2023). These findings are consistent with the stories told by survivors through OOT. Many survivors who participated in the project shared that they feared being blamed for the abuse they experienced, and additionally, feared being held responsible for “fixing” their relationships.

“I WAS CHARGED BECAUSE MY PARTNER CALLED POLICE AFTER HE WAS VIOLENT WITH ME AND I RESPONDED TO PROTECT MYSELF. NOW I HAVE TO LIVE WITH A CRIMINAL RECORD AND THE FALLOUT OF THAT BECAUSE NO ONE EVER ASKED ME ABOUT THE EVENING AND ONLY ADVISED THAT I PLEAD GUILTY TO MAKE IT “DISAPPEAR.”

-OOT PARTICIPANT

For many reasons women are reluctant to report their experiences of victimization. Stigma faced from all angles creates a barrier which leaves women in complex and vulnerable situations. Through On Our Terms, we spoke to women who felt they were left to ultimately fend for themselves. Victims who are left without appropriate and accessible supports will continue to fight back against abuse, and when they do, another level of stigmatization is encountered. Culturally, we tend to respond strongly, and often in favor of penalizing a woman for having perpetrated violence. As previously discussed, our perceptions dictate the conversation around who is *expected* to be violent and how we should respond; in colonial culture we expect women to be nurturing, submissive, and gentle, and our response to violence perpetrated by women often indicates they've broken some gendered expectation. The women who stand at the vulnerable end of this reality, the women who find themselves standing outside of our cultural narrative of ideal victimhood, are often the women deemed as having brought violence upon themselves. An important takeaway from On Our Terms is one that might defy cultural assumptions about how women may seek to penalize intimate partner violence. Several members of On Our Terms expressed a desire to protect the person who had caused them harm. More than one participant told stories of compassionately advocating that their partners receive intervention during mental health crises despite that they were experiencing violence. One participant described calling police to ask for help, but being pressured by police to criminalize him. What we hear frequently through working with community is that people who have experienced violence just wanted the violence to stop and wished there had been justice system alternatives to addressing violence. Just as many leading reports recommend, people with lived experience want restorative solutions.

“DO YOU WANT THE SYSTEM TO HARM YOUR PARTNER, OR DO YOU WANT YOUR PARTNER TO HARM YOU? THOSE ARE YOUR CHOICES.”

-OOT PARTICIPANT

REDEFINING POWER - THE KEY TO VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Women can and always have been capable of violence, people of all genders are equally capable of violence. The importance of bringing into focus how violence impacts women or gender diverse people is relevant because of how power is distributed, and perceived, in society. Within most oppressive systems there are double standards, these standards often center around themes of power. In the context of sexism and patriarchy, women are expected to accept that they need the protection of men from male violence, that they are the weaker sex, and yet, when they act in violence, they are often made to carry a brunt of responsibility and expectation. The flip side is that men and boys rarely have the opportunity to be seen and validated as victims of violence because they are presumed to have power, and gender diverse people are often left out of this conversation entirely. It's essential to be clear, the narrative that men can't be victims is upheld as a function of patriarchy, not feminism. The narrative that it's "men vs women", serves to reinforce the gender binary, patriarchy, and colonialism. While people of all genders can be victimized, our social scripts about power play out in ways that influence one's inherent sense of safety within one's identity, and subsequently, how they will be impacted if they do experience violence. Understanding power as both a social concept and a force in our lives is a vital component of the healing process. All stories submitted by OOT participants directly or indirectly reference the theme of power. We heard stories through OOT in which people in positions of power and authority abused their power. We heard stories of survivors whose intimate partners had themselves experienced oppression and disempowerment, and were seeking to claim back their power through violence and control. We heard stories about survivors searching for empowerment, and the most impactful commonality was that we heard of survivors finally finding their power in the communities that created space for them to use their voice.

“POWER IS A CENTRAL THEME IN MY LIFE; THE BATTLES AND STRUGGLES AND DYNAMICS. WHEN I WAS A LITTLE GIRL, I FELT LIKE I WAS PRETTY POWERFUL, LIKE I COULD DO ANYTHING I WANTED. UNTIL I HAD MY POWER STOLEN FROM ME BY A MAN. I DIDN'T LIKE THAT FEELING OF HAVING THAT POWER STOLEN, I SHUT MYSELF OFF AFTER THAT.” -OOT PARTICIPANT

“I FEEL LIKE I LOST CONTROL AND POWER BUT THE REAL POWER OF TALKING AND FEELING THAT SENSE OF COMMUNITY IS LIKE A NET. THAT GAVE ME TRUE POWER”

-OOT PARTICIPANT

Many people move through the world without an awareness of the power they do or do not hold. It is often not until we have our power taken from us, or have power held over us, that we begin to see the world through this lens. Each of us have the capacity to wield power over others in ways that cause harm, but power is more accessible to those who already hold privilege. The re-traumatization of survivors often occurs when others act in ignorance of their power or privilege, or when people entirely deny that someone might have experienced violence or disempowerment. Any productive conversation about gender based violence must also include an awareness of power dynamics, an openness to hear how another's lived experience may differ from our own. This also becomes a barrier within survivor communities, because those who are marginalized in some ways often still have access to privilege in others. When we turn a blind eye to intersectionality, it reduces our understanding of the diversity in our collective experiences of violence, leaving us with narrow definitions of survivorhood and incomplete solutions. For example, white survivors have access to power which they can and do use to empower themselves at the cost of others, sometimes by favoring and advocating for colonial responses to violence which may in practice cause further harm to non-white communities.

We can learn a great deal about power by listening to survivor stories. On a personal level, we each must define our relationship to power. Do we have it? Do we desire it? How does our relationship to power impact our relationships with others and our broader community? Those who have experienced gender based violence will tell you that the people who harmed them were actively seeking power or acting to protect the power they already held. With this as focus, we can begin to navigate our pathways to prevention.

“IF WE WANT TO START MOVING IN THE DIRECTION OF CHANGE AND SEE HEALTHIER RELATIONSHIPS AND HEALTHIER SYSTEMS, WE NEED TO BE ABLE TO TELL OUR STORIES WITHOUT FEELING JUDGED OR LOOKED AT WITH TABOO, OR THAT WE’RE NOT STRONG OR INTELLIGENT. WE NEED TO START OPENING OUR MINDS TO BEING OKAY WITH HEARING THINGS THAT MIGHT MAKE US UNCOMFORTABLE. IT TAKES LOOKING AT OUR SYSTEM IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT”

-OOT PARTICIPANT

HONORING FIRST VOICE



What if actors within systems witnessed the hurt and anger of survivors through a different lens? What if they understood that a survivor's anger comes from the deepest place of love for self and for others, and that from it, we can source the energy and inspiration needed to transform the conditions within systems that cause us to hurt ourselves and each other? A survivor's anger is a deep and loving call to honor their own humanity, and to seek justice for the ways in which their humanity has been dismissed or tamped down. Witnessing a survivor's anger is an invitation for those working within systems to step into a relationship with their own humanity too. Survivors understand that identities are fragile things: one day they can be a mother, a wife, a professional, but the next, they can be a victim, or even perhaps a victim who is labeled a criminal. Survivors are angry that the stigmatization that has impacted them so deeply has also convinced a majority of society that it could “never be me.” As a result of this othering, survivors carry the pain of being devalued in their own expertise: a secondary wounding that only non-survivors and people within systems have the power to prevent.

The stigmatic division of survivors and service providers, of survivors, and system operators is one of the major obstacles to meaningful co-production. Survivor stories expose the effects of stigma more indisputably than any research method could, yet, due to the esteem of academia, the first voice itself is only esteemed once it has been filtered through the academic institution. Transformed from a dynamic and living story into a statistical or qualitative summary. While it is of valued importance, it is not enough to pay community members for their first voice perspective so that we might transform their insight, at our own discretion, into practices that benefit institutions. If our advocacy and systems change work stops here, we perpetuate inequity and the division of service users and service providers. Overall, survivors of gender-based violence say that they have better experiences receiving supportive services from community-based organizations that employ people with lived experience. They report experiencing less judgement from those delivering these services (Hearing Them, 2021). This first voice perspective reiterates why survivor-led services, and alternatives to police reporting, are needed. When a person has been harmed through violence, they deserve to receive trusted support free of bias and created with their diverse needs in mind. Through collaboration with communities that have experienced gender-based violence; in particular, communities which include voices that represent diversity in gender, ability, culture, and economic class, we can develop services that are authentically human centered and adaptable to individual need.

This brings us back to the work of those researching co-production and developing tools to work with survivors. Their work invites the question, what would meaningful co-production look like? What would a system that respects the autonomy of survivors look like? Foundationally, none of this can be done without the input from people with lived experience. We aren't starting this work from scratch; there are already many existing models for working with survivors and many recommendations from researchers and community-based organizations. Through the process of researching and developing a framework for working with survivors, the University of Melbourne identified that successful co-production involves a "reduction of traditional boundaries between 'professionals' and 'service users' to allow for a more equal exchange of knowledge" (2018). Further, they uncovered through their research that dynamics of power and privilege can still impact the working relationship with survivors, even when other barriers are removed. Often, the same stigmas and power imbalances that survivors face within their relationships, and then within the system, become the barriers to co-production. While survivors generally express that they enjoy engaging in co-production and service advisory roles, some studies received feedback from survivors indicating that they face stigma through assumptions made surrounding their capacity for work. They additionally share that service providers seem hesitant to work with them for fear of re-traumatization. This being said, drawing from a different study, many service providers themselves perceive that the greatest barrier to involving survivors is the lower value placed on their perspectives compared to those of university educated people. Again, we return to the theme of stigma and bias as a barrier. Certainly, if we continue to work with survivors in ways that are tokenizing, and that reinforce power imbalances, re-traumatization is inevitable; but if we can work collaboratively to co-produce, with an equal distribution of power among participants, we can forge promising practices for tomorrow. A collaborative discussion paper by Boyle et al. discusses co-production and highlights the barriers to meaningfully implementing this model. The authors note that, "the way public services are currently measured by narrow output targets within an increasingly risk-averse culture has limited opportunities for co-production." This statement points to an underpinning cultural factor which prevents us from meaningfully collaborating: *risk aversion*. While it is understandable that those in positions of authority are cautious to make mistakes, in a system and society that has equated justice with punishment there is limited space for trying new ways of working together. As we have learned through On Our Terms, survivors are likely to bring forth ideas that challenge existing systemic norms. Ideas about law reform, changing our way of sharing information, adjusting the language we use, ideas about creating non-police led responses to violence, prevention programming; concepts which challenge and unravel our cultural fabric. Survivors are often the ones putting forth ideas that prompt a risk averse response, a knee jerk, "that's not how things are done."

At the Elizabeth Fry Society, we watch this play out time and time again, but there is something occurring within this dynamic that goes far beyond policy and procedure; our risk averse behavior is a product of our culture. The stories of survivors remind us, to our great discomfort, that risk is inherent in life, and that victimization can happen to anyone, anywhere, anytime. It's possible that, in part, we adopt certain narratives, not because they are true, but because they comforts us. Engaging in victim blaming comforts a person by reinforcing their belief, "I'll never be a victim because I am in control", or, "I can't have caused harm because it was their fault." Survivor's can also tell you that the act of intimate partner violence itself often stems from the need to control one's environment, their sense of power and place. To transform the system, and our society, into one in which we can collaborate effectively to prevent gender based and intimate partner violence, we need to look far beyond policy. We need to change culture, and must first work to create environments in which it is safe to try new things, and to learn from our failures, without fear of punishment (we must be less risk averse). We must co-create environments that center our humanity. We must individually assess our bias, and come forward with consciousness about how our identities and experiences have shaped us. Working with survivors throughout this process will require so much more than consultation, it requires a collective commitment to transformation. It requires a cultural shift in how we view power, control, and victimization. As Emma Halpern, the director of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Mainland Nova Scotia, very eloquently posed the question, *"how do we make justice about healing?"*



MEMBERS OF THE OOT PROJECT
GATHER AT THE CLOSING OF AN
OOT ART EXHIBIT HOSTED BY
EFRY MNS

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