



**ASSOCIATION OF BLACK SOCIAL WORKERS**

# Kitchen Table Talks in the African Nova Scotian Community

PATHWAYS 2 JUSTICE, YEAR TWO

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Prepared by: Courtney Brown, Outreach  
Social Worker

# PROJECT OVERVIEW

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The Nova Scotia Association of Black Social Workers (ABSW) and Be the Peace Institute (BTPI) applied to and received 3 years of funding from Status of Women Canada (SWC) to explore:

- What justice looks like for women affected by gendered violence
- How to use a restorative lens when working with women who have been impacted by gender violence.
- Conduct a gender-based intersectional analysis and
- Implement a women's leadership forum to implement pathways to achieve the above.

The Nova Scotia Advisory Council on the Status of Women and the Nova Scotia Barristers' Society Equity and Access Office are pivotal partners.

ABSW facilitated Kitchen Table Talks (KTT) to enable dialogue within the African Nova Scotia (ANS) community that is informal and relaxed. Often the discussion is part of a group of community engagement tools, and participants can receive a guide to the issue at hand, and possible questions they might want to discuss. The conversation can be about something broad like "what is important to you?" to a specific question like "do you believe sexual violence is a problem in your community?"

Kitchen table talks aim to build and deepen a sense of community and explore the range of opinions on an issue. It fosters community organizing and can stimulate and nurture public debate:

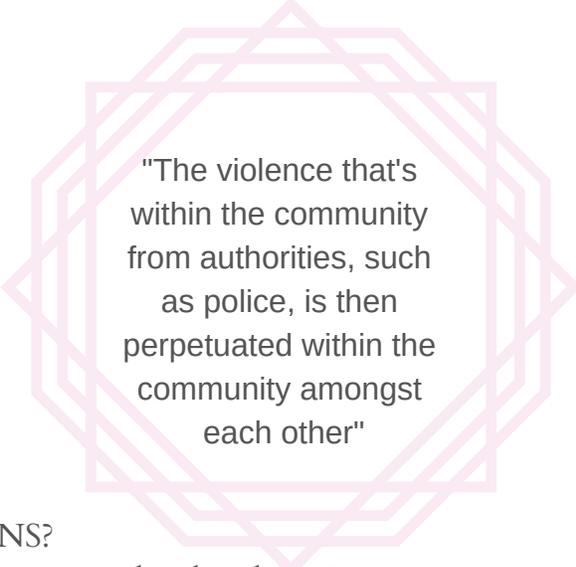
"A main objective is to give interested parties an opportunity to learn from and share with each other, create a sense of community, and discuss options and alternatives" (NERRA, 2016)

Throughout the participatory processes of soliciting critical and marginalized voices, bridging diverse viewpoints for common ground, and vetting promising practices and models, the objective is to identify leverage points for change in the justice system where there is potential for positive short and long-term results. This will involve regularly engaging various key stakeholders, knowledge-keepers and decision-makers, using the GBA+ lens to chart a feasible path through the system for action. Some ideas, remedies and innovations posed by legal experts, government departments and women's advocates both in Nova Scotia, and other parts of Canada and the world, may be ripe for action with proper supports and allies.

While this project seeks to engage survivors' voices as key informants, it is only if they freely choose to do so. Some will choose not to participate for a variety of sound reasons, including the need to move on or have space from being steeped in their traumatic experiences. Encouraging and honouring the choices women make about whether or how they'll participate is a guiding principle in our commitment to their agency and integrity.

# WHAT DO WE WANT TO KNOW IN THE KITCHEN TABLE TALKS?

1. What do we know about domestic violence?
2. What do we know about sexualized violence?
3. How do both present in our communities?
4. In general, how do you feel about reporting?
5. What are some reasons why ANS women don't report?
6. In general, what are your thoughts about the justice system?
7. What do we think the justice system can do to better serve ANS?
8. What can we do as a community to address the issue of domestic/sexualized violence?



"The violence that's within the community from authorities, such as police, is then perpetuated within the community amongst each other"

Voice and agency are powerful tools for social change that for women are often underdeveloped, denied, dismissed, disregarded, even ridiculed, profoundly diminishing women's' critical contributions to structures and systems that tend to marginalize them. Systemic barriers must be overcome to ensure those who are most vulnerable to injustice are better served, and so the end-users have a seat at the table with system leaders in determining the path forward.

It is rare that communities, community-based organizations, academia, media and government institutions work closely on equal ground to address system issues. These relationships can be fraught with defensiveness, demand, protectionism and the typical power imbalances of authoritarian structures. Yet all the vantage points must be in the room in order to fully understand the issues from multiple perspectives and take wise action that doesn't further compound the problems. In elevating women's voices of both their critique and recommendations, we can forge a committed partnership among key people in all these groups toward solutions that can serve all.

# FIRST VOICE EXPERIENCES

ABSW completed a total of 7 kitchen table talks in various ANS communities in the Province. We had roughly 60 ANS women participate in the discussion.

ANS women explained the definition of gendered violence, and what it means to them. The majority of women felt that gendered violence assumes that most affected are women, and the lack of recognition of the LGBTQ+ community and suicide rates. Women spoke about how gendered violence does not consider the violence of words and the lasting impact that has on us as black women.

When asked if gendered violence happens in our communities, all agreed it does. A concern was voiced about a guy dating a number of women at the same time. One participant posed the question. How do we teach young girls to value themselves? Some felt that people don't know about real love, therefore many girls are being exploited. Love and respect have been lost. The question that women seemed to engage in the most was how ANS women don't report. The majority referenced fear as a factor that prevents women from reporting the abuse. ANS women wonder where they can go and what if the abuser comes after them. Majority of women felt that reporting is not done due to the lack of trust in the system. Other circumstances such as fear of children being taken away, fear of losing everything, fear of being judged by family, and fear of abuse getting worse were all mentioned in the Kitchen Table Talks. Women of colour do not report sexual violence as they will be criticized by family members and re-victimized by the police and the court system. Some gave example of remarks made such as: they probably got what they deserved or they shouldn't have worn a certain kind of clothing. As well, shame and guilt are other reasons why Black women don't report. They worry about how others will look at them. In the past, if you told your parents that someone molested you; were told not to talk about it.



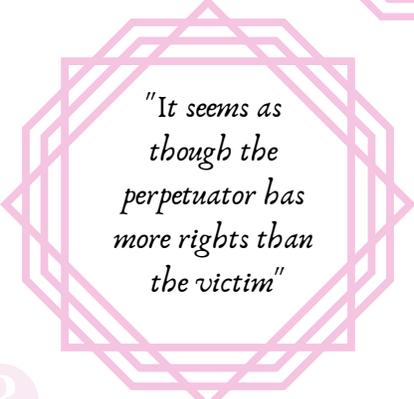
*"Services meant to help women aren't working for women of colour"*



*"It's a long process for both the victims and those accused going through the system"*



*"Fear stops women from reporting the abuse"*



*"It seems as though the perpetrator has more rights than the victim"*

# FIRST VOICE EXPERIENCES

All participants agreed that the KTT was a good opportunity to discuss gendered violence and that men should have the same opportunity. Participants felt that we have to start teaching our boys and young men. Many boys are raised by single parents and grandparents and are exposed to violence in the home and through the media. Sometimes parents are not parenting their children. They need to be going into the school with this information.

We asked women what they feel the justice system could do better to serve the African Nova Scotian Community, and they responded by saying they could provide better training for officers, hire workers who are African Nova Scotian who understand our cultural experiences. The main problem that was expressed during this question was the fact that majority of the workers in the justice system are white. The women explained the issue is the poor legal representation that we received as African Nova Scotians.

The final question that was asked was, how do we respond in our communities, and what can we do better as a community? Women expressed that we do not respond because we do not want to get into other people's business. "We often present with a strong persona and sense of pride and don't want people to see our weaknesses or faults". Women felt that conversations need to be held regarding awareness and education on healthy relationships.

Some participants talked about how the parent's past experiences affect their parenting. One said "sometime what we face affects how we raise our children" such as poverty, poor transportation, no supports etc.



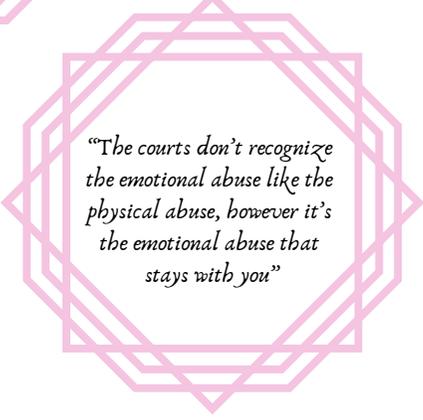
*"When you do come forward, you are usually penalized by the system and sometimes even your own community"*



*"There needs to be a better way for us to tell our story"*



*"Supports are needed for people but aren't currently in place, especially for those who need to go to shelters"*



*"The courts don't recognize the emotional abuse like the physical abuse, however it's the emotional abuse that stays with you"*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

*Below are a list of recommendations from ANS women who participated in their community Kitchen Table Talk*

## CULTURAL SAFETY

- Culturally safe spaces need to be present in the African Nova Scotian Community. (example was given of a Black Family/Friendship Centre)
- Culturally appropriate and accessible information about violence and abuse

## BLACK MOBILE CRISIS TEAM

- Consists of a black psychologist, black social worker, black doctor, black lawyer, and ANS community outreach member.
- Help people get urgent help faster: Offer specialized training to existing support lines to ensure that there are options for a 24/7 crisis line for victims
- Apply new technology to provide immediate and anonymous support to victim

## CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE PROGRAMMING, RESOURCES, AND SERVICES SPECIFIC TO THE NEEDS OF THE ANS COMMUNITY

- Black Men's intervention programming
- Africentric women's leadership and empowerment program
- Youth programming on sexual violence, self-esteem, self-care and safety
- ANS Addictions Counsellors and Programs
- Africentric Child Care and infant development programs
- Africentric Child and Family Services Agencies
- Literacy Programs
- - Healing Programs

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING

- More culturally diverse workers who not only work in government positions, but who are also connected to the ANS community. This also includes diverse workers in women's shelters, men's intervention program
- ANS Mental Health Counsellors
- Black Court Workers and Counsellors
- Health Center Staff
- ANS Home Care Nurses and Workers
- ANS Community Health Nurses
- Education for perpetrators (all genders)
- Education to youth
- Areas of training for professionals: Trauma-informed care, Africentric Sensitivity Training, Unconscious Bias Training, Community organization symposium,
- Education to create empowerment for women
- Public meetings with community and people within the justice system where people can share their experiences anonymously but still get help from those within the justice system.
- Pre-process of understanding and knowing the system for African Nova Scotians, so when they get into the justice system they are not torn down.

## AFRICAN NOVA SCOTIAN COURT NAVIGATOR

- ANS worker to liaison between family court, criminal court, DV court, and community.

# CONCLUSION

A key challenge faced by survivors of gender-based violence is not feeling heard or believed, along with shame, guilt, fear and anxiety that almost always accompany the sharing of stories of violence and oppression. Any number of the women we engage with may have relationship violence in their histories, whether disclosed or not. Creating inclusive, 'safe as possible' spaces for survivors of all kinds will involve acknowledging the courage it takes to be involved in this work, soliciting commitment from all participants that first voice stories be received with compassion, respect, and remain confidential, articulating that "triggering" may occur for some participants (both survivors and professionals), and arranging for supportive resources, will be needed.

ABSW and partners will continually and critically reflect on our own behavior to avoid replicating the power dynamics and inequities mirrored in abusive relationships and patriarchal structures. Our engagement strategies were designed to encourage non-hierarchical, inclusive and equitable interactions among participants and facilitators. We hoped to create leadership environments for rigorous discourse while avoiding common turf protection battles for power and control. Solving complex issues collaboratively will take precedence over simply occupying moral high ground and authority.

Women alone cannot solve the issue of gender-based violence. The traditional absence of men and boys in conversations and roles in addressing violence against women has relegated this to be a "women's issue" that not only tends to exclude, but also alienate and blame a significant number of people who can intervene and influence male peers when they witness misogynistic or abusive behavior. The gender binary of women as victims who need to be helped, and men as perpetrators who need to be punished, is not only inaccurate, but unhelpful in understanding the complexities and nuances of gender dynamics, power and privilege, social acculturation, learned behavior and the multiple and varied impacts and consequences of trauma. By being inclusive of people of all genders we can open possibilities for modeling equality. If we can, together, speak openly, foster skills in communication and mutual understanding, then we can take action on the common ground of how gender-based violence and confined gender boxes and stereotypes harm us all.

We would also like to note that after several attempts one of our designated ANS communities was not able to participate in our Kitchen Table Talk. We recognize that this is a sensitive topic for that community in particular and perhaps members are not in the position to speak at this time. A number of individuals were approached to host the KTT and promises were made however upon follow up for a date they would cancel, We feel this suggests that there is still a lack of trust from the justice system in regard to sexual violence, and the fear that exist within African Nova Scotian Women.

Moving forward, we would like to see these recommendations brought to the attention of policy makers, system actors, Judges, police officials, government workers, and any other employee involved with the criminal justice system to take into account this data, and to understand the voices of African Nova Scotian Women who have told their experiences.