

# GETTING TO THE ROOTS RECONVENED

*Exploring Systemic  
Violence Against Women  
in the Downtown  
Eastside of Vancouver.*



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# DTES WOMEN'S COALITION SUMMARY

## BACKGROUND

In 2011 a series of sexual assaults took place in the First United Church's co-ed shelter. The women who were victimized and the organizations and advocates who supported them experienced inaction, cover-ups, and minimization. The Downtown Eastside (DTES) Women's Coalition ("The Coalition"), was formed in response to this gendered violence within the endemic culture in the community. In 2014, the Coalition released the 'Getting to the Roots Report'. While some changes were made, many of the recommendations failed to get off the ground.

In May 2018, The Coalition reconvened to continue the calls to action by collaboratively strategizing & collectively advocating for vulnerable, service-barriered women in the DTES (made possible with funding support from BC Housing, Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, and the City of Vancouver).

## 3 GOALS OF THE DTES COALITION

- Decrease and prevent gendered violence against women (esp. for Indigenous women)
- Increase quantity/quality of full continuum services/support for women's-only/women-led/dominant spaces
- Reallocate resources to better reflect gender representation

## 7 PRIORITY AREAS

The Coalition reviewed the previous work, updated any present-day issues and concerns, and identified these top 7 Priority Areas. These areas will focus the Coalition's work so that sustainable, systemic-wide change can occur.

## GENERAL

These areas cross all 7 Priority Areas:

- Public education and awareness campaign
- Update research where possible (i.e. update Getting to the Roots, compile existing community based research/recommendations such as Red Women Rising, Change in Our Backyard, and Sex Worker Rights Collective's Written Submission to the National Inquiry), Compile data on the declining level of safety for women in existing housing, and community spaces, undertake review of homeless count, conduct headcounts of usage of co-ed spaces, etc.)
- Ensure decolonizing lens is applied

## PROJECT MANAGEMENT

In order to ensure the execution of these steps, funding for a Project Manager would also be required.

*“I’m having a housing problem. So are many other women. I’m in supportive housing, and it sucks. There are pass keys, so the staff can enter my suite at any time. There are suite inspections every three months, which is a total invasion of my privacy. The staff are obnoxious, rude and thieves. I have no balcony, and I feel like I’m in jail.”*

– Participant, Change in our backyard:  
A peer study about the lives of sex workers in the DTES

*“Instead of making sure women are safe by talking to us, the social housing providers just make more rules on us like ‘no visitors allowed’. More rules aren’t the solution to women’s safety.”*

–Interviewee, Red Women Rising:  
Indigenous Women Survivors in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (p.98)

- Develop and implement definitive plans for an increase in adequate, appropriate, sustainable, full spectrum women-only and women-dominant housing for women and children.
- Critical review of homeless count with a gender lens.
- Collect appropriate and comprehensive data about women in the DTES and women’s usage of spaces and services in the DTES. While women and women’s organizations report decreasing women’s safety in existing housing, there is very little (and/or incomplete) data that appropriately reflects women in the DTES and women’s use of spaces and services in the DTES.

*“I don’t trust cops.” “Will they believe me?”  
 “Police are discriminatory.” “Don’t want to be called a rat.”*

– Interviewees, Change in our backyard:  
 A peer study about the lives of sex workers in the DTES

*“A guy rapes you and beats you up so bad, you get black eyes and a broken nose. But the cops don’t do nothing and don’t charge him. The next time you try to stop him and stand up for yourself because no one else will, and you end up getting arrested.”*

– Interviewee, Red Women Rising:  
 Indigenous Women Survivors in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (p.133)

*“A guy smashed my head in once and the cops made me believe I had provoked it.”*

– Interviewee, Red Women Rising:  
 Indigenous Women Survivors in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (p.137)

- Prioritize the safety of vulnerable and marginalized DTES women.
- Acknowledge complaints about police treatment and lack of trust in police expressed by community.
- Acknowledge and address internal systemic problems associated with marginalized populations (particularly women).
- Initiate a community-based review of SisterWatch, following the release of the June 2015 SisterWatch Evaluation Report by Alison Brewin Consulting. Address SisterWatch’s drift away from original mandate and original purpose to address violence against women at a systemic level. Participation, engagement, and facilitation of SisterWatch should reflect and be respectfully inclusive of the diversity of women and women’s experiences throughout the DTES.

*“There aren’t a ton of safe spaces to bring kids; you always have to be hyper-vigilant about your kid’s safety.”*

– Participant, Change in our backyard:  
A peer study about the lives of sex workers in the DTES

*“Co-ed shelters are not safe for women.”*

– Interviewee, Red Women Rising:  
Indigenous Women Survivors in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (p....)

- Redress allocation of resources towards women, reflective of demographics.
- Ensure that all spaces (including co-ed, women-led, women-only or women-dominant) design and deliver programs and services that are safe(r) for women. An intersectional gender lens that includes gender frameworks, safety training, representative staffing, etc must be part of the design and implementation of spaces, programs, and services.
- Collaborate with City, Province, VCH, etc. to plan and fund safer spaces, starting with those programs, services, and spaces women already use and feel safe accessing.
- Secure space and funding to support an Indigenous women’s centre operated by Indigenous women with lived experience (see also Indigenous Women).

*“I’m worried about my confidentiality.”  
“Too many men.”*

- Two participants comments in response to barriers faced when accessing healthcare in the DTES. Change in our backyard: A peer study about the lives of sex workers in the DTES

*“If you are arrested in the midst of a mental meltdown, why aren’t you getting a proper assessment and referral to counseling psychiatric help, or ongoing outpatient treatment?”*

- Interviewee, Red Women Rising:  
Indigenous Women Survivors in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (p. 147)

*“When we seek help for anything for our mental health, we need our own people to be the ones listening to us. Our own people who understand we are not crazy but that this system makes us crazy.”*

- Interviewee, Red Women Rising:  
Indigenous Women Survivors in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (p. 148)

- Establish a Women’s Health Centre that meets the spectrum of women’s health needs in a safe, accessible, and responsive manner.
- Increase funding sustainability and long term accountability for women-only and women-dominant health services. Women must be able to easily, readily, and safely access a broad spectrum of health services within existing women-led, and women-only spaces, as well as be able to better access health services within co-ed spaces. Women’s organizations must be able to confidently and immediately refer the most vulnerable women to health services.

*“I stayed in sex work because of my addiction to drugs and fast cash. I started chasing cops around to take me to jail, I wanted treatment. That moment of clarity. The lineup (for treatment) was so long.”*

– Participant quote from the Vancouver Sex Worker Rights Collective’s written submission to The National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls.

*“We need detox and demand for people trying to clean up. You should not have to wait for detox. By the time your date comes up, you no longer want to get clean. We need resources to provide immediate detox especially for our women.”*

– Interviewee, Red Women Rising:  
Indigenous Women Survivors in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (p. 144)

- Develop education and awareness training to be mandated in publicly-funded detox/treatment centres.
- Support full spectrum care for women.
- Increase publicly funded family treatment to keep women and their children together (community led, trauma-informed, culturally safe with after treatment housing).
- Create Indigenous-led/run healing centre (see also Indigenous Women).
- Ensure fair and equal access for women who want/choose to recover from addiction/untreated mental health (e.g. eating disorders, trauma, domestic violence, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome).



*“We only get hired as volunteers to work for free or \$2 an hour.”*

– Interviewee, Red Women Rising:

Indigenous Women Survivors in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (p. 71)

*“As a poor native woman in the DTES, I have been called a dirty dog so many times and even my children are threatened. I happens in grocery stores, transit, everywhere. And everyone who witnesses it doesn’t say anything.”*

– Interviewee, Red Women Rising:

Indigenous Women Survivors in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (p. 78)

*“We are mothers, sisters, trans women, matriarchs and knowledge keepers. We are two spirit, and that means so much. We participate and give back to our communities. We engage in every day activities like all human beings. We are courageous, resilient, caring, artistic and intelligent. We deserve love and respect. We are beautiful inside and out.”*

– Excerpt from the Vancouver Sex Worker Rights Collective’s written submission to The National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls.

- Secure space and funding to support an Indigenous women’s centre operated by Indigenous women with lived experience.
- Initiate an Indigenous women’s residential centre (full spectrum of services with a decolonized approach i.e. Indigenous led, developed, and run).
- Support an Indigenous Women’s Coalition (will provide education and awareness to existing organizations) that works in close collaboration with the DTES Women’s Coalition, closely informing and supporting each other’s’ efforts and findings.
- Create Indigenous-led/run healing centre.
- Work with Indigenous communities/groups to educate ourselves on the realities/truths of Indigenous women who previously or currently trade sex (Indigenous-led with traditional teachings).

*“Women who participate in sex work are often stigmatized and shamed in their Indigenous communities, and by Indigenous women’s organizations. Due to shame and stigma, individuals who provide sexual services are often silenced, marginalized and face barriers to accessing housing, employment, health care and other services.”*

– Excerpt from the Vancouver Sex Worker Rights Collective’s written submission to The National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls.

*“Sex work is not a choice for most street level native women on the street, and so if we do have to work it should at least be safe and legal, and also we need more options to not have to work the street and not to live in poverty.”*

– Interviewee, Red Women Rising:  
Indigenous Women Survivors in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (p. 127)

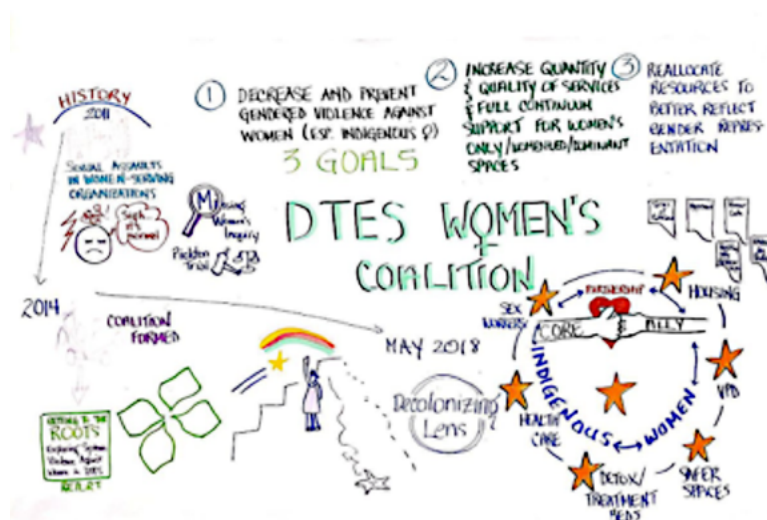
*“I stayed in sex work because of my addiction to drugs and fast cash. I started chasing cops around to take me to jail, I wanted treatment. That moment of clarity. The lineup (for treatment) was so long.”*

– Participant quote from the Vancouver Sex Worker Rights Collective’s written submission to The National Inquiry Into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls.

- Pursue legislation (including towards decriminalization) and policy that genuinely supports and reflects sex worker safety.
- Ensure sustainable funding for a comprehensive continuum of support services.
- Work with Indigenous communities/groups to educate ourselves on the realities/truths of Indigenous women who previously or currently trade sex (Indigenous-led with traditional teachings).

# TERMS OF REFERENCE

- “Women” is used inclusively and refers to all individuals who self-identify as women
- “Women” collectively refers to, but is not limited to: Indigenous women, sex working women, women of colour, immigrant women, elder/senior women, drug-using women, trans women, single mothers, and women living in poverty
- “Vulnerable women” refers to women living with vulnerability and risk in and out of the DTES, although the Coalition’s goals and objectives focus primarily on the issues and needs of women and women- serving organizations in the DTES
- The Coalition is both Sex Worker inclusive, and trans inclusive
- “Core group” refers to women-led, women-serving organizations that focus on providing service and supports to women in the DTES
- “Allies” refers to organizations/groups identified by the Coalition’s core group as sharing the mandate; providing [cis and trans] women only services.



# COLLABORATIVE FRAMEWORK

## ROLE CLARITY

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Source: adapted from “Leading Communities BC” and revised with information from Core Group.

### 1. MISSION ALIGNMENT

We see our work with the DTES Women’s Coalition as consistent with our own mission. This Coalition and its partnerships represents a means for us all to carry out our own work more effectively.

### 2. INCLUSION AND ENGAGEMENT

We are committed to active roles and we recognize members for their contributions.

### 3. CLEAR GOALS AND ASSESSMENT

We stick to our vision and goals and help set objectives. We conduct ongoing evaluation and feedback loops to ensure goals are being achieved.

### 4. KEEPING BENEFITS VISIBLE AND CELEBRATING SUCCESS

We recognize collective achievements which reinforces the value of collaborating. Sharing credit is essential to our project and helps minimize power imbalances.

### 5. HONOUR CODE

Respect, Trust, and Power Awareness will be established and maintained.

### 6. CLEAR LINES OF COMMUNICATION

We are clear about how, when and where communication takes place with all Coalition members.

### 7. CLEAR, ACCEPTABLE EXIT STRATEGY

Members will not need to participate beyond their interest, capacity, or relevance.

# APPROACH

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*“Women should be thriving, not just surviving.”*

- Integrated from previous, important work, consultation and research that was previously performed
- Positive, strength-based frame of reference
- Focus on what is working and building on that foundation
- Fact-based information sharing and decision- making
- Turning problems and patterns into prioritized projects (what is possible with more effective resources?)
- Long term systemic change not just short- term, reactive change.



8' x 6' wall-mounted wood panels created by women of the DTES during the participatory peer research project that resulted in 2014's [Getting to the Roots](#) report.

# PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

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The Downtown Eastside (DTES) Women's Coalition and ally groups that participated in this process has included:

- Aboriginal Front Door Society
- Aboriginal Mother Centre Society
- Atira Women's Resource Society
- Bloom Group
- BWSS – Battered Women's Support Services
- Chrysalis Society
- DEWC - Downtown Eastside Women's Organization
- First united Church
- Helping Spirit Lodge Society
- Inner City Women's Initiative Society
- Living in Community
- PACE Society
- PAFNW - Pacific Association of First Nations Women
- PHS Community Services
- RainCity Housing
- RayCam Cooperative Centre
- Saa'Ust Centre
- Vancouver Aboriginal Community Policing Centre
- Vancouver Native Health Elders' Program
- VWHC - Vancouver Women's Health Collective
- WAVAW
- WISH Drop-In Centre Society
- YWCA Crabtree Corner

## RECOGNITION

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We would also like to thank Brenda Prosken (BC Housing) who initially made funds available and then reached out to the City of Vancouver and Vancouver Coastal Health for them to each match the same amount.



# REPORTS REFERENCED

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