



Women's Centres Connect

Annual Report 2020-2021

The Provincial Association of Women's Centres

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Contents

Introduction.....	3
Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic	3
Community Development Initiatives	4
Collaborations/Partnerships	4
Public/Professional Education	8
Policy Engagement and Advocacy.....	8
Top Issues for 2020-2021	8

Introduction

As the collective voice of Women's Centres in Nova Scotia, Connect aims to address the needs and concerns of women and adolescent girls by coordinating services and programs and completing advocacy work to change public policy. The leadership of the Executive Directors of Women's Centres around the Connect table ensures that the voices of all women are heard by decision makers and those that lead change.

This report outlines the activities of Connect for the period April 1, 2020 to April 27, 2021 on a broad range of issues including service delivery, community engagement and advocacy with government partners. Connect members had 24 meetings via Zoom during this time, as well as multiple calls and updates regarding Covid-19 and its subsequent impact on women and girls throughout Nova Scotia.

Obviously, a significant event this year was the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic had a serious impact on the populations we serve and the ways we could assist them. To maintain a steady dissemination of information during this time, we were consistent with calls, updates and virtual meetings regarding the status of the pandemic, its effect and our response. A detailed report of the pandemic impact and response is contained in the attached appendix. Below is a brief summary:

Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic

A report released by the United Nations confirmed that Covid-19 has disproportionately impacted the daily life of women and girls.¹ Every aspect of life—from health to finances and social protection—has been negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. According to a report from the Royal Bank of Canada, as many as 1.5 million Canadian women lost their jobs in the first two months of the pandemic.² Women-owned businesses laid off a disproportionately higher percentage of 62-80% of their employees—a figure much higher than the 45% observed by many businesses in Canada.³ The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development notes that since women make up as much as 70% of the healthcare workforce, they are leading the fight against Covid-19.⁴ Many of those jobs put women at increased risk during the pandemic and under increased stress when it comes to looking after children who have been home from school and day care. In addition to having a disproportionate impact on economic lives of women, the pandemic has also directly and indirectly affected the health of women. Covid-19 has led to a reallocation of healthcare resources and priorities such as mental, sexual and reproductive health services.

¹ United Nations. (2020a). Policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women. United Nations. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/report/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en-1.pdf>

² Royal Bank of Canada [RBC]. (2020, July 16). Pandemic threatens decades of women's labour force gains. RBC. Retrieved from <https://thoughtleadership.rbc.com/pandemic-threatens-decades-of-womens-labour-force-gains/>

³ Statistics Canada. (2020). Table 33-10-0232-01 Percentage of workforce laid off because of COVID-19, by business characteristics. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3310023201>

⁴ Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD]. (2020). Women at the core of the fight against COVID-19 crisis. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/women-at-the-core-of-the-fight-against-covid-19-crisis-553a8269/>

Women's Centres staff were on the frontlines observing the impact of the pandemic on women in rural Nova Scotia. The danger to rural women facing violence is higher than ever due to the COVID-19 crisis. Social distancing measures during the pandemic can put women in even tighter quarters with their abuser, further limiting their ability to reach out for help.

To comply with the provincial state of emergency, the centre offices were closed to the public for a large portion of this reporting period. However, support was offered by email, web and phone, and we made sure to check in more frequently with known higher risk clients, due to the added layer of isolation. During the pandemic our centres have seen a change from in person programming needs to increased demand for information, emotional support and advocacy

Like many organizations, the Women's Centres had to innovate, adapt and transform the way we work. The various challenges that the centres had to overcome included financial, technological, service delivery, human resources and administrative elements.

The Women's Resources Centres in Nova Scotia never truly stopped providing serviced; we adapted so we could provide essential care and support to women in need. Throughout the pandemic we continued to address societal barriers affecting women and girls that were exacerbated by job loss, social isolation and distress caused by the pandemic. We never stopped advocating for changes that would have a positive impact on clients, their families and communities by lobbying for better cell phone and Wi-Fi coverage and universal childcare. In every client call and meeting we applied a trauma-informed, anti-oppressive, gender-based, rural lens to our work that created trusting and constructive relationships, allowing women to get the support and service they needed when they needed it.

We used the established collaborative practices with other non-government organizations and diverse communities and engaged with elected officials to inform policy around pandemic support, including emergency transportation needs facing rural women.

Valuable lessons were learned in this pandemic that will be applied to future emergencies. The major takeaways are that guidelines need to be adapted, communication must be clear and consistent, improvising with solutions as problems arise is possible, self-care is crucial and listening is vital during catastrophic circumstances.

Community Development Initiatives

Work that creates social and systems change is a key element to members of Connect. Impacting systems to the benefit of our clients is a driving factor in the daily work of our Centres. To this end, Connect members:

- Worked on *Understanding the Law: A Guide for Women in Nova Scotia*.
- Began the work to create a network for women-serving organizations to support each other in this work and share ways to help women in Nova Scotia.

Collaborations/Partnerships

One of the key activities for Connect is the opportunity to collaborate and partner with organizations and agencies in our communities and around the province. Below is a list of projects, conversations and partnerships that Connect maintained this past year.

Affordable Energy Collation (AEC)

The Connect Coordinator and other Executive Directors attending meetings regularly to stay informed about issues that relate to power utility.

Affordable Housing Association of NS (AHANS)

We made the decision to reinvest with AHANS as of April 2021 for a period of 12 months to facilitate the HIFIS initiative; an online database system that will allow us to track client statistics and trends more efficiently e. During this time, we will work closely with AHANS to ensure that support is provided to capture the necessary data. This work will hopefully result in a new Service Level Agreement between Connect and AHANS to launch a provincial database.

African Nova Scotia Affairs

ANSA discussed interest in working with us on the idea of creating a provincial African Women Focused Women's Centre. This opportunity and conversation is ongoing.

Canadian Foundation

Several centres applied for the United Way Compassion Fund for projects to support workers and supplement other sources of funding at the centre level.

Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women

Several new tools were released that we used this past year, including:

- An illustrated primer that is geared towards explaining what feminist intersectionality is and why it is important
- Feminist intersectionality poster
- Gender equality and intersectional analysis toolkit

Community Health Board

Several centres worked closely with their local Community Health Board to assist with food bank stocking and flu vaccine clinics so we could better serve our clients.

Community Society to End Poverty/Employment Support Income Assistance (CSEP/ESIA)

Several members of Connect attended committee meetings and support initiatives. Results were:

- Campaigning to Minister Regan about Income Assistance concerns experienced on a daily basis by recipients, but also informing her of the gendered impacts of Covid-19.
- One campaign recommended that we all follow/read Bill 43—Housing as a Human Right Act.

Covid-19 Network Participation

Regular town hall style meetings with Public Health and Dr. Strang, to stay informed and to coordinate a safe plan to be able to continue to serve clients in a nonhazardous manner

Engage Nova Scotia

NS Quality of Life Presentation: Engage NS offered to work with organizations in Nova Scotia to create a customized eight-page document with relevant information. They requested volunteers to meet with them to discuss their data needs and to consider serving on several committees. Connect responded with representation from our group.

Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS) database

After much discussion around the pros and cons, all centres recommitted to moving forward with HFIS training and implementation but recognized that this database may not work for all centres long term. Major actions/points of discussion that took place this year regarding HIFIS were:

- Worked on HIFIS Service Level Agreement (SLA) and discussed questions regarding the service level agreement related to data ownership, reporting and cluster integrity. We resisted the idea of sharing data ownership with AHANS. We do want to send reports to others but feel strongly that those reports should come from us. With the outstanding questions and comments from our lawyer, we had a special HIFIS SLA meeting 9/29/20. Ideal arrangement would be to have sole ownership of our data, with AHANS being stewards. SLA was approved by each of the Women's Centre boards.
- Joined HIFIS Community of Practice table to represent Women's Centres' end users.
- Ensured each centre will stay independent.
- Prepared for Privacy Officer training.
- Completed a common data dictionary to ensure data integrity across the province. HIFIS data dictionary was completed and final draft sent to AHANS, so the database will be reflective of the types of fields used at the centres.
- Coordinated data entry training on a version of HIFIS database that is appropriate for centre staff.
- Completed Standing Together Evaluation.

Immigrant/Migrant Women's Association of Halifax (IMWAH)

Met with us to share a presentation of who they are and what they do; discussed the desire to participate with us more regularly, especially if they can secure some stability funding, as they are currently all volunteers

Jane Paul's Indigenous Women's Resource Center

Attended several meetings with their new Executive Director Karen Bernard at the Jane Paul Indigenous Women's Centre. We shared a few of our policies and practices to help them get up and running more quickly.

Metro Interagency/Restorative Conversations (MI/RJ)

The Connect Coordinator attends monthly meetings with this group to ensure the voice of both rural women and rural organizations are brought to this metro-based table and reports back on items and initiatives that would be of interest to Connect.

Nova Scotia Non-Profit Covid-19 Coalition – Nova Scotia Community Sector Council

Several EDs attended a meeting with them and shared on it. All showed interest in attending, so weekly meetings were moved to accommodate. From this last meeting, discussions included coming out of Phase 1, status of pandemic, advice on precautions and taking special care with vulnerable populations.

NS Action Coalition for Community Well Being (NSACCW)

A few members of Connect attend these meetings and share with the larger table, reporting back as needed.

NS Advisory Council on the Status of Women (NSACSW)

As the major funder of women's resource centres across the province, it is important to work and communicate consistently with NSACSW. This year Connect moved out of Pat Gorham's portfolio and over to Diane Govindsamy as Pat prepares to retire. Much of the work with the NSACSW this year involved lobbying for resources, advocating for clarity related to funding, and policies related to HIFIS and other women-serving organizations. Specifically, we:

- 2020 Service level agreement signed by each Centre and
- Met with Advisory council 8 times
- Lobbied for a cost-of-living raise, given the centres have not received an increase in funding in nearly seven years.

- Discussed developing key messages about value of our organizations as value to our communities.
- Brought turnover in staff to their attention, as a number of Women Centre staff will leave for transition house opportunities since the pay is better; NSACSW offered to investigate alternative, equitable pay for centre staff similar to transition houses.
- Shared client and centre needs and pandemic plans.
- Have requested and granted permission to submit biannual reports, as per the SLA, in June and December to coincide with financial reporting and AGMs.
- Asked for support from NSACSW to lobby the Dept. of Health for therapist and raise awareness of the increase in demand.
- Worked with NSACSW to draft an SLA with AHANS that protects the centres when entering data into HIFIS.

Persons Against Non-State Torture

Met with founders of Persons Against Non-State Torture, learned about what they do, worked with them on presentation to NDP party

Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE)

- Met to discuss national action plan to combat gender-based violence
- Were invited to join the Equal Futures Network, which was formally launched Dec 7, 2020 to mark the anniversary of the Royal Commission of the Status of Women, in partnership with the federal Department for Women and Gender Equality

Public/Professional Education

Connect is committed to the professional education of our team and also to educating the public on matters that are important to us and the Centres' clients. This year we decided to raise awareness on these important issues and offer additional public education opportunities by committing to the regular use of social media. Connect chose to revamp its social media presence and has been using Facebook and to start a LinkedIn Profile. Content for our social media engagement will follow selected "Awareness Days" that are important to women. During this year Connect:

- Produced 7 newsletters with 113 people reading it regularly and an over 40% open rate
- Started with 32 followers on FB and grew our following to 149.
- Followers come from 7 different countries
- Through our FB posts we have engaged with nearly people nearly 12,000 times
- Wrote and circulated 11 blog postings
- Responded to 4 inquiries from the public via social media

Policy Engagement and Advocacy

- Meetings with PC and NDP Caucus to discuss funding and impact of pandemic on women
- Meetings with and letters to local MLAs who offered to support our request for the cost of living raise and will continue to lobby for rural housing and services
- Provided feedback to the PC Caucus on their mental health plan
- Composed a news brief against human trafficking that was sent to several ministers, local politicians and to media folks to review and to be added to our website
- Lobbying: Cost of Living Increase Request—All centres sent letters to their MLAs; discussed meeting with each political caucus and Minister Regan to present who we are, what we do, and pandemic impact
- National Action Plan to address gender-based violence in rural areas; ideas provided by EDs on media strategy for gender-based violence

Top Issues for 2020-2021

While there were many topics and issues tackled throughout this year, below are a list of issues that took a great deal of our time and energy:

- Covid-19 Pandemic response and planning that continues into the next year
- HIFIS SLA with AHANS and ensuring data ownership remains with each centre
- Seeking additional financial and programming support from NSACSW
- Insurance Coverage for centres, staff and directors
- The ongoing interest and inquiries from other organizations regarding opening new Women's Centres

Covid-19 has impacted each staff member and every single client, yet the Women's Centres continue to provide care and offer support. Despite the fatigue of lobbying for support and change, along with the chronic condition of running on inadequate funding, each Women's Centre has demonstrated unprecedented levels of innovation and resiliency this past year. While it seems a state of emergency will stay with us a while yet, Connect is proud of each and every Women's Centre.