Clearing the Path to Recovery for Women

Removing barriers and strengthening multi-sectoral collaboration and partnerships

Women's substance use recovery is often overlooked in Canada. Sex related impacts of substance use and gender-specific recovery needs, along with a range of gendered social and economic factors — such as caregiving burdens, gender-based violence, and income and employment inequities — directly influence women's substance use and shape their treatment and recovery pathways.

Systemic level change is needed to reduce the gender-related barriers facing women in accessing, remaining in, and completing treatment, and in pursuing long-term recovery. These barriers include caregiving responsibilities, fear of child apprehension, guilt and shame, and experiences of violence and trauma that often accompany substance use. For some women, barriers to recovery are further compounded by racism, classism and other factors such as ability, age, and mental health status, all of which require tailored interventions.

With funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the Centre of Excellence for Women's Health and partners have developed a **framework** for acting on structural factors that impede women's substance use and recovery. The framework is for use by policy makers, system planners, service providers and practitioners, community-based organizations, educators, researchers, advocates, and all others working to improve women's treatment and recovery pathways.

Recommended Policy Actions

There is an urgent need to address a range of systemic barriers and structural changes to clear the path to recovery in light of the longstanding lack of research and funding of women's substance use services. Government wide action is possible such as that of BC's Child and Youth Well-Being Action Plan that commits government systems to "act early, work together and remove barriers rather than create them". Given this potential for action at a structural level, the following policy actions are recommended to clear the path to recovery for women:

- **Commit to substance use support 'in all policies' –** Coordinated attention to recovery is needed in all policy areas - housing, child welfare, income assistance, mental health, health, corrections, labour, education, etc. Interministerial and intra-ministerial coordination and collaboration would structure multi-ministry funding for community based wraparound programs addressing multiple determinants of health.
- **Act on the recovery needs of mothers and children together –** Persistent barriers to recovery for pregnant and parenting women need to be acknowledged and addressed. It is vital to fund integrated, family-centered supports for pregnant and parenting women by advancing child-inclusive treatment programs that include attachment and parenting support and reduce fear of apprehension among women.
- **Recognize the epidemic level of violence against women** and support the incorporation of tailored, trauma-informed support to address its physical and mental health impacts in service delivery. It is crucial to address gender-based violence and support women's dual recovery from substance use and violence by providing merged recovery from violence and substance use in both anti-violence and substance use services.
- **Contribute to stigma reduction –** Multi-level, structural and compounding sources of stigma need to be addressed by rooting out the sources and manifestations of institutional and social stigma that keep alive sexist, racist and classist views of women who use substances, and what tailored support for recovery is needed.
- **Provide a social safety net for women –** Government support for local community centres, women's resource centres, immigrant and refugee organizations, community kitchens, supportive housing, empowerment groups and Indigenous agencies is key to providing health promotion, prevention and recovery routes for women with substance use concerns.

Thank you to those who contributed to the Clearing the Path to Recovery for Women framework, including representatives from the following organizations: Addictions and Mental Health Ontario, Aventa Centre of Excellence for Women with Addictions, BC Ministry of Health, BC Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions, BC Women's Hospital Reproductive Mental Health and Substance Use Program, Calder Centre, Canada FASD Research Network, Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, ChangeMakers, Child & Family WISE Lab at Toronto Metropolitan University, Chrysalis Society, Dr. Peter Centre, Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver, Government of Manitoba Department of Families, Heartwood Centre for Women, InsideOut Policy Research, Jean Tweed Centre, Karis Support Society, Manitoba Centre for Health Policy, Mothercraft Breaking the Cycle, Note Bene Consulting, Recovery Alberta, SHE RECOVERS Foundation Canada, Sophia Recovery Centre for Women.

For support in applying these recommendations to policy and practice, or to discuss opportunities for collaboration, please contact: bccewh@gmail.com.

centre of excellence for women's health

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