

Women, Sex Work & Drugs

**A Presentation on
Harm Reduction & Policing**

COUNTERfit Harm Reduction Program

Slide 1

MB1 Molly Bannerman, 2011/01/13

MB2 Molly Bannerman, 2011/02/16

COUNTERfit Harm Reduction Program & **WOMEN**

COUNTERfit acknowledges the inequities for certain groups within the drug using population. In 2007, COUNTERfit observed gender specific trends such as:

- Women access harm reduction & support services less than men *
- Rates of Sexually Transmitted Infections including HIV/AIDS and Hep C are increasing amongst women who use illicit drugs / engage in sex work
- Women who use illicit drugs / engage in sex work face significantly higher rates of **violence** than other groups of women *

When we looked further at the issues women were experiencing, we found:

- The rates of violence against women who use drugs and engage in sex work are higher than most women *
- Most of these women do not access supports if they experience violence
- These women do not seek support from the police
- Many women felt their safety would be further compromised police were involved *

Consistent with research done by BC's Kate Shannon (2009), we found a critical need to “...scale up violence prevention efforts, including police – sex worker partnerships...to stem violence against female sex workers.”

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MB1

Molly Bannerman, 2011/02/16

In response to the trends, COUNTERfit received funding from the AIDS Bureau to develop a Women's Harm Reduction Program:

- Women's Harm Reduction Drop In
- Health & Wellness initiatives
- Sex Worker Outreach
- Sex Worker Safety Planning
- Sexual Assault Support
- Women specific educational workshops
- Community based research & education initiatives

Programming intersected with police in 2 ways:

1. Women as 'victims' of crime
2. Women as 'perpetrators of crime'

Women a 'Victims' of Crime:

- High number of women reporting assaults & sexual assaults
- COUNTERfit was working to build knowledge amongst women about their options when assaulted
- Conducted education about Special Victim's Unit of Toronto Police Services and other resources
- SVU came and conducted an information session about their work

Special Victims Unit

Toronto Police Services

Some of the strengths SVU presented:

- the need to partner with community organizations
- the importance of building trust
- the need to work with women where they are at *
- multiple levels of reporting options

Special Victims Unit

Toronto Police Services

Some of the challenges we encountered:

- limitations of police role in supporting victims (i.e. safety of women on the street)
- communication about court processes for victims
- fluctuating flexibility in supporting women (i.e. warrant at time of report versus at time of court)
- defining boundaries & role of power innately held by police

Women as ‘Perpetrators of Crime’:

- High number of women reported being questioned by police. In many cases, women were questioned repeatedly, and brutally *
- Women were fearful about making complaints against police
- Sex Workers / Drug Using Women reported being stopped after accessing Sex Worker Outreach services
- Outreach Workers were questioned by Police

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ZH1 Dates? When was this happening? When did you start the project?

Also, I'd do the part about being invited by police as a separate slide. Or, if you want to keep it there, I'd have a separate slide that indicates the beginning of talking about the research project.

Zoe Hayes, 2011/02/16

- Police invited COUNTERfit to come and talk to police about our work with women who use drugs and work in the sex trade.
- In September, 2008, we began developing a community based initiative to share women's experiences with police while also protecting their anonymity *

Method

How we did the research. . .

↙ Developed framework, reviewed by police

↙ Recruited peer researchers

↙ Developed questions, reviewed by police

↙ Round 1: Interviews *

↙ Round 2: Interviews

↙ Analyzing Data

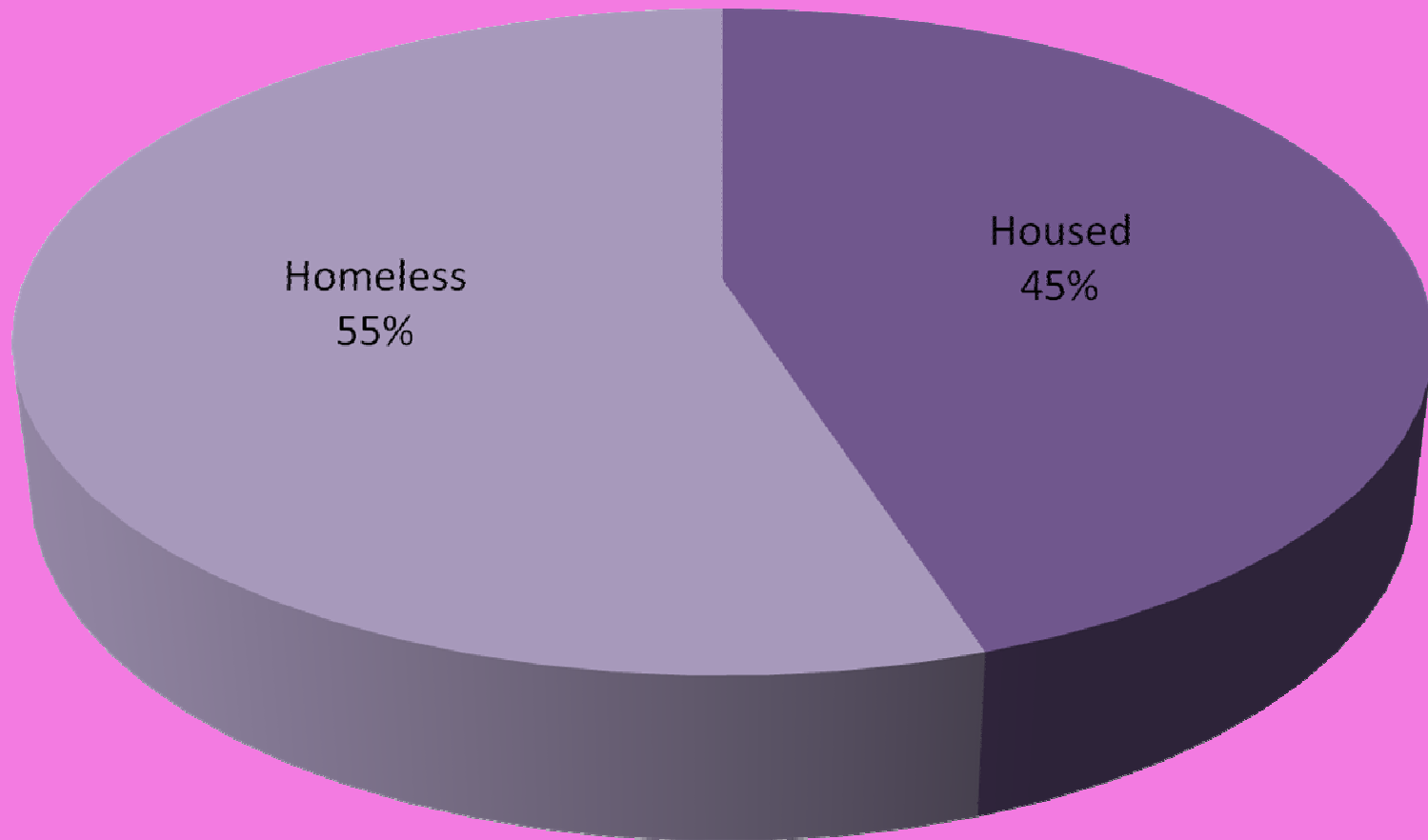
↙ Sharing the findings *

↙ Next Steps

Participant Demographics

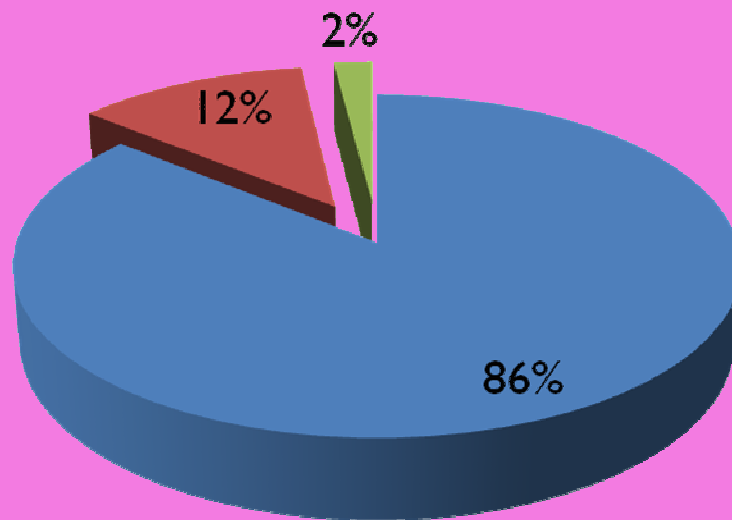
02/15/11

Housing Status

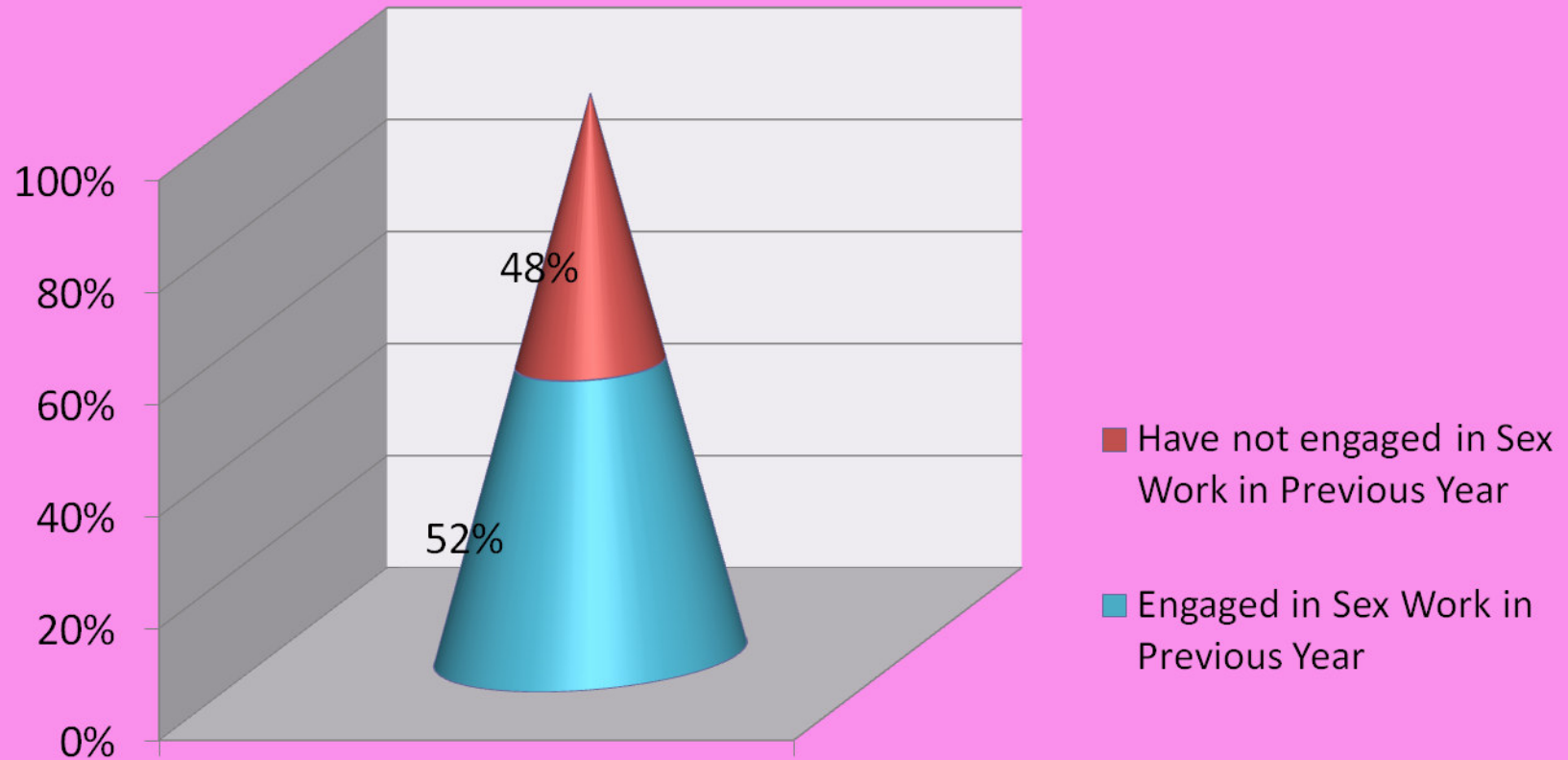


Prevalence of Drug Use

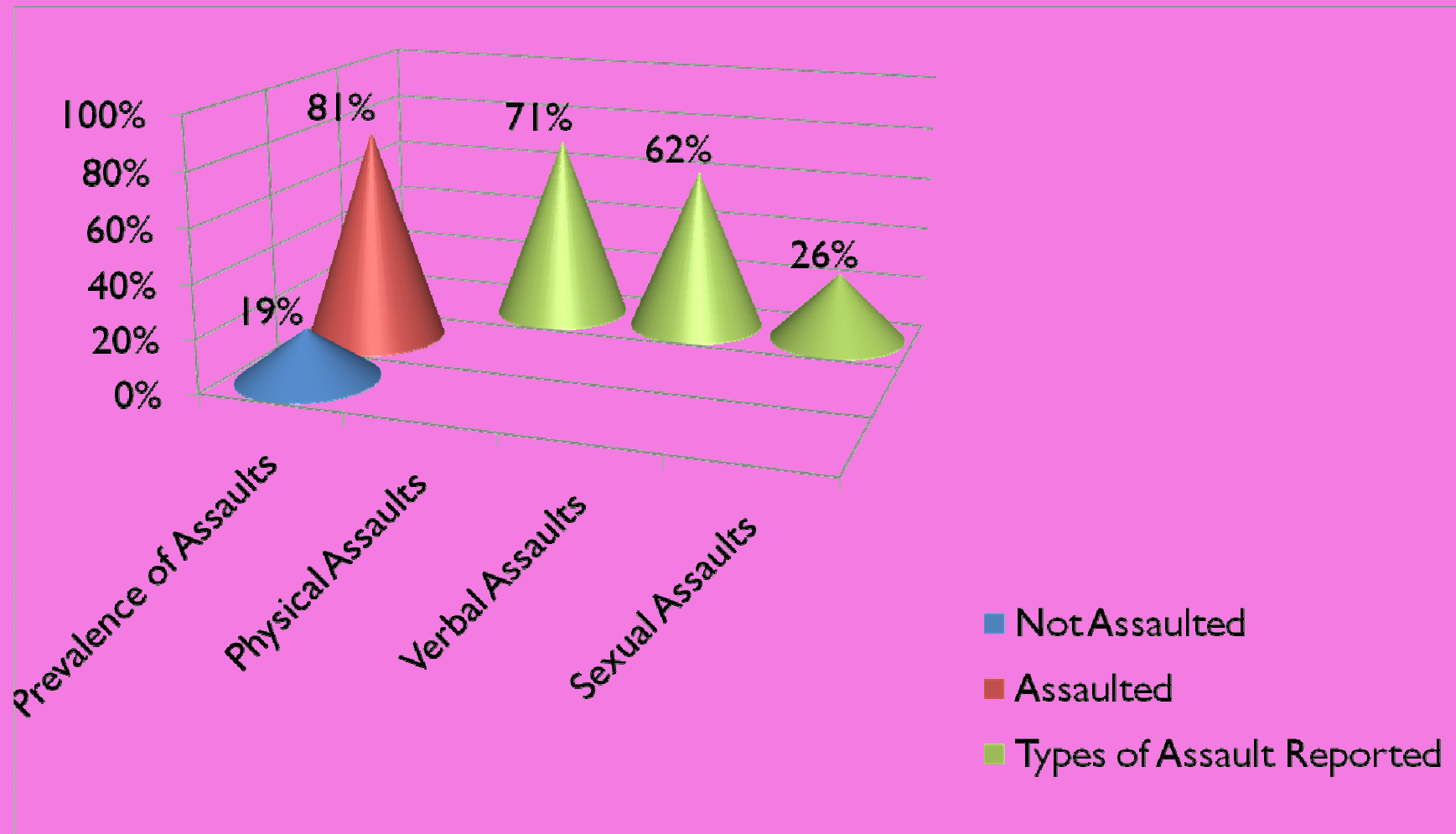
■ Current Drug User ■ Past Drug User ■ Non Drug User



Sex Work in Previous Year



Assault Prevalence in Previous Year



Interactions with police

From our interviews, we drew out a few main trends that we wanted to share with police:

- Women experienced police questioning over and over again. 86% of the women we spoke with reported being stopped more than once in the previous year
- Women had experienced repeated forms of violence
 - Over half reported being assaulted more than once in the previous year
 - Over half reported being assaulted by either their partner or a friend
 - 22% reported being assaulted by a John / Date while Sex Working
 - 11% reported being assaulted by Police
- Women were more likely to be stopped if:
 - They had a criminal record (77%)
 - They had experienced violence (70%)
- Women who have experienced violence are substantially more likely to be stopped by police (70%)
 - Women are less likely to report assaults the more they are stopped by the police

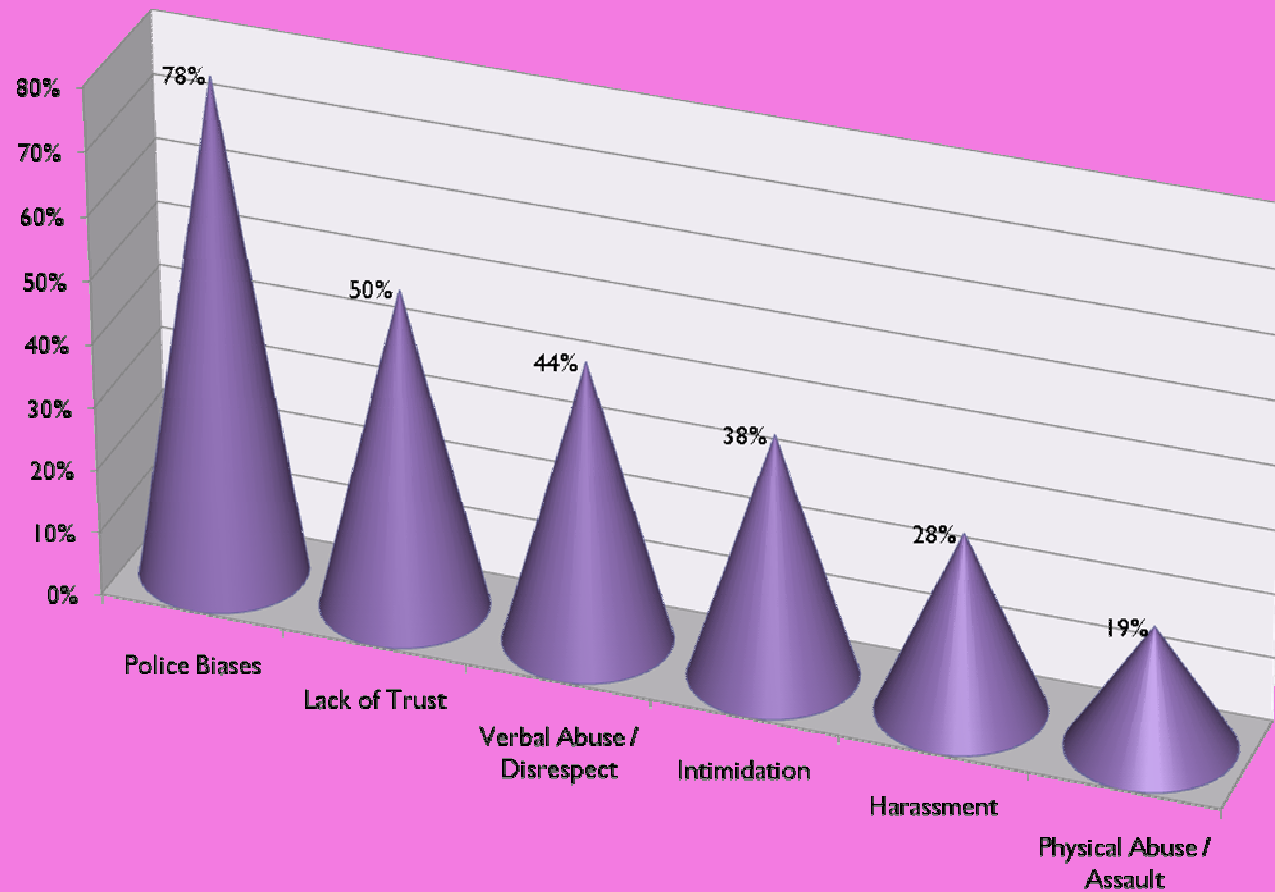
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Qualitative Findings

We gathered information from women about:

- Their relationship with police (+ & -)
- How they felt about policing strategies (+ & -)
- What women could do to help improve safety
- What we could do to help improve safety

What are women's main concerns about policing?



Women are interested in creating change.

When we asked women about experiences where policing strategies were **HELPFUL** to them, women talked about:

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ZH1

It could be useful to do a summary slide summarising the above concerns and how it affects women's safety.

Zoe Hayes, 2011/02/16

Women reported having the most **positive** interactions with:

- Women Officers
- Officers with experience (senior officers)
- Sexual Assault Officers
- Toronto Special Victim's Unit

Women noted the following as helpful policing strategies:

- Willing to work at building trust
- Compassion
- Understanding
- Respect
- Treating women with humanity
- Being willing to listen
- Kindness
- Trying to understand where women are coming from and where they're at
- Concern

What Women Would Like Police to do to Improve Safety:

When we asked women what they would like to see police do differently to make the community safer, women suggested:

- Increasing the number of female officers, sexual assault officers, and officers with Special Victim's Unit
- Being aware of the power differential between police and women who are using illicit drugs and working in the sex trade
- Having a respectful attitude towards women who work in the sex trade and use illicit drugs
- Instead of running women's names through the system, asking women if everything is okay without lingering and asking more questions
- Engaging women in ways that are "less aggressive" (i.e. being caring, compassionate and understanding towards women)
- Being knowledgeable: for example, knowing that sex workers work at night and therefore they are likely to be out on the street at night (therefore not stopping and questioning them about why they are out at that time of the night)

Women recognized that the policing strategies are not the only thing that can improve safety for women and the community. Women also need to take initiative in creating changes.

The last thing we talked with women about is how we could work with them to improve safety.

Where we're at now

- Our initial plan was to share our findings with Toronto Police Services
- We have been sharing our findings with community groups in hopes of
 - educating workers about women's experiences, and
 - validating women's experiences
- We've conduct workshops with women on topics they identified
- We've applied for funding to carry on the work
- We're hoping to create a working group to carry the project forward and strategize about how to use the information to create change

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