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# Groups Served by VAW Shelters

## KEY FINDINGS

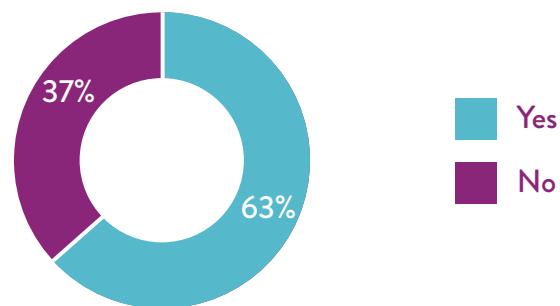
- VAW shelters are increasingly serving a broader group of women fleeing violence. Over one-third (37%) of responding VAW shelters reported that they served women escaping different forms of violence and abuse in addition to IPV.
- 79% of respondents that had served women with complex mental health concerns and 79% that had served women with substance use concerns reported that it was a “major challenge” for their shelter.
- Half (50%) of VAW shelters reported that they had served trans, gender fluid, or intersex individuals fleeing violence. Among this group, 57% indicated that they could “always” and 42% said that they could “sometimes” accommodate this group.

Historically, most VAW shelters opened their doors specifically to provide safe spaces and supports to women and children fleeing IPV and domestic violence. However, they also assisted “wayward girls” and women experiencing homelessness, who often had histories of trauma.<sup>52</sup>

As reflected in other studies,<sup>53</sup> VAW shelters are increasingly serving a broader group of women fleeing violence. According to Wathen et al. (2015: 135), “[t]he primary reason cited by EDs for adopting a more inclusive approach about those who should be covered by their shelter’s mandate was a concern that there may be no other help available to a woman.”

To capture this, we asked shelters if their mandate was to serve victims/survivors of IPV exclusively. Of the 281 who responded, over one-third (37%) reported that they supported women escaping different forms of violence and abuse in addition to IPV (Figure 18).

Figure 18: Is Your Official Mandate to Serve Exclusively Victims/Survivors of IPV? (n=281)



## 5 GROUPS SERVED BY VAW SHELTERS

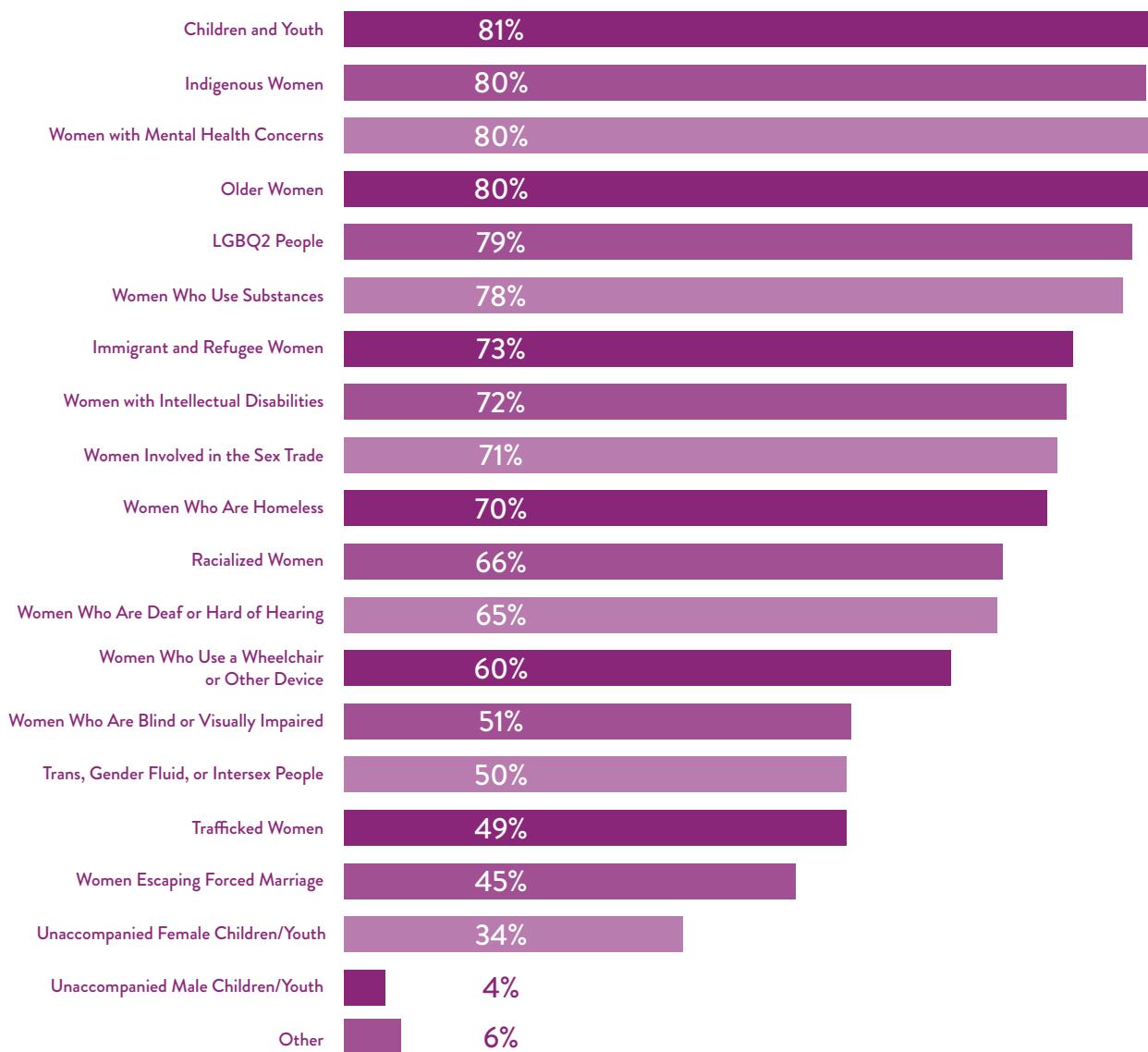
Mandates vary across the country. Respondents in the Atlantic provinces (77%, 24 of 31) and Quebec (76% 58 of 76) reported that they primarily served women experiencing IPV. In Alberta, 73% (19 of 26) noted a broader mandate to support women fleeing different kinds of violence,<sup>54</sup> as did 56% (5 of 9) of respondents from the territories.

Of the 96 respondents from larger urban centres, 67% reported that their shelter was exclusively for women fleeing of IPV. Of the 75 respondents from

medium-sized centres, 61% were exclusively for IPV, as were 61% of the 110 shelters in small/rural sized communities.

To better understand who is seeking VAW shelter supports, we asked respondents to indicate the different groups they had served (Figure 19). Note that this is not the groups they could or would serve, but groups they have knowingly served in the past. For example, VAW shelters may have supported lesbian or bisexual women without these women disclosing their sexuality.

Figure 19: Groups Served by VAW Shelters (n=281)



## **5 GROUPS SERVED BY VAW SHELTERS**

The majority of VAW shelters reported serving: children and youth accompanying residents (81%), Indigenous women (80%), women with significant mental health concerns (80%), older women (80%), LGBTQ2S+ people (79%), women struggling with substance use (78%), and immigrant and refugee women (73%) (Figure 19).

Respondents also indicated serving women who were not fleeing IPV, namely women involved in or exiting sex work (71%), women experiencing homelessness (70%), and survivors of human trafficking (49%) (Figure 19).

Comments provided by survey respondents noted that some VAW shelters had served women experiencing family violence perpetrated by someone other than an intimate partner. Several VAW shelters allowed family members, in addition to dependent children, to stay in the shelter with the women fleeing violence. The remainder of this section explores in greater detail some of the groups served.

### **Women with Complex Needs**

Shelters are increasingly serving women living with significant mental health and/or substance use concerns. Statistics Canada has reported that individuals with mental health-related disabilities

"experience more repeat violence, more violence at the hands of someone they know" and that spousal violence is four times more common for these individuals than it is among the general population.<sup>56</sup> Of the 223 VAW shelters who reported that they had served women living with significant mental health concerns and responded to the question on accommodation, over half (59%) indicated that they could "always" accommodate them.

Historically, VAW shelters have had zero tolerance policies for drug and alcohol use. However, some shelters have moved towards low barrier,

### **CHALLENGE: SUPPORTING SURVIVORS WITH COMPLEX NEEDS**

While VAW shelters are serving different groups of women experiencing many types of violence with various complex needs, survey findings suggest that they may not necessarily have the capacity (staffing, resources, training, space, etc.) to serve them adequately. For example, of the 203 shelters that had supported women with complex mental health concerns and responded to the question on challenges, the majority (160 or 79%) reported that it was a "major challenge" to serve these women, 17% said it was a "minor issue," and only 4% indicated that it was "not an issue" for their shelter.

Of the 196 VAW shelters that had served women with substance use concerns and responded, 79% indicated that it was a "major challenge" and 17% a "minor issue," with only 4% saying it was "not an issue."

trauma-informed service delivery and have adopted a harm reduction approach to meet women where they are at.<sup>57</sup> For the 213 VAW shelters that reported having served women with substance use concerns and responded to the question on accommodation, 60% indicated that they could “always” accommodate them and 39% could “sometimes” accommodate.

## Women Living with Disabilities and Deaf Women

DAWN Canada does extensive advocacy and research into the intersection of women with disabilities and violence.<sup>58</sup> Statistics show that women living with disabilities experience disproportionately high rates of violence.<sup>59</sup>

According to the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics’ 2018 report, “Violent Victimization of Women with Disabilities,” in 45% of all incidents of violent victimization (defined as sexual assault, robbery, or physical assault) with a female victim, the victim had a disability.<sup>60</sup> Specific to IPV, among victims with a disability, women were more likely to experience “the most serious forms of spousal violence” than men.<sup>61</sup>

Of the 281 shelter respondents, the majority reported having served women living with an intellectual disability (72%), women who use a wheelchair or other mobility device (60%), and women who are blind or visually impaired (51%) (Figure 19). Additionally, 65% of respondents reported having served women who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

WSC is working with DAWN Canada to examine further the data regarding accessibility in VAW shelters.

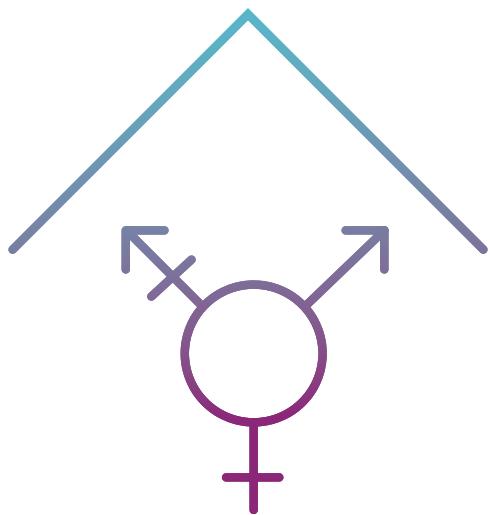
## Transgender, Gender Fluid, and Intersex People

In Canada, there is a growing body of research examining and documenting transgender and gender diverse individuals’ experiences of violence.<sup>62</sup> However, less is known about trans and gender diverse people’s experiences of IPV specifically. Some new insights have emerged from the *Domestic Violence in the Workplace* survey, conducted by researchers at the University of Western Ontario and the Canadian Labour Congress, which examined how IPV impacts workers as well as their workplaces. Gender and sexual minorities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and other gender non-conforming) were more likely to report IPV and state that it was negatively affecting their work performance and health outcomes.<sup>63</sup> Among those surveyed, transgender individuals were twice as likely to report experiencing IPV in their lifetimes compared to cisgender women and four times as likely as cisgender men.<sup>64</sup>

**TRANSGENDER<sup>65</sup>:** A person who identifies either fully or in part with a gender other than the gender associated with their birth-assigned sex – often used as an umbrella term to represent a wide range of gender identities and expressions. Transgender people, like cisgender people, can claim any identity in relation to their sexual/romantic orientation.

WSC's national survey found that, of the 281 respondents, half (50%) reported that they had served trans, gender fluid, or intersex individuals fleeing violence. However, the accuracy of this number is dependent on residents disclosing their gender identity. Of the 140 VAW shelters that reported that they had supported transgender, intersex, or gender fluid people and responded to the question on accommodation, 57% indicated that they could "always" accommodate this group and 42% of respondents said that they could "sometimes" accommodate them.<sup>66</sup>

While some VAW shelters are making efforts to better serve trans women by providing training for staff and developing inclusive policies for transgender women,<sup>67</sup> less is known about how VAW shelters are accommodating non-binary, gender fluid, intersex, and non-conforming individuals.<sup>68</sup>



**GENDER FLUID:** *Gender fluidity conveys a wider, more flexible range of gender expression, with interests and behaviors that may change from day to day. Gender fluid people do not feel confined by restrictive boundaries of stereotypical expectations of women or men. In other words, they may feel they are a woman some days and a man on others, or possibly feel that neither term describes them accurately.*

**INTERSEX:** *A term used to describe people who are born with anatomy or chromosome patterns that do not fit typical definitions of male or female. Intersex persons are often subjected to surgical intervention at birth, with or without parental consent or even knowledge.*

**CISGENDER:** *A term used to describe people for whom their gender identity and assigned sex match, and who fit the societal expectations surrounding their birth-assigned sex. It is the opposite of transgender.*

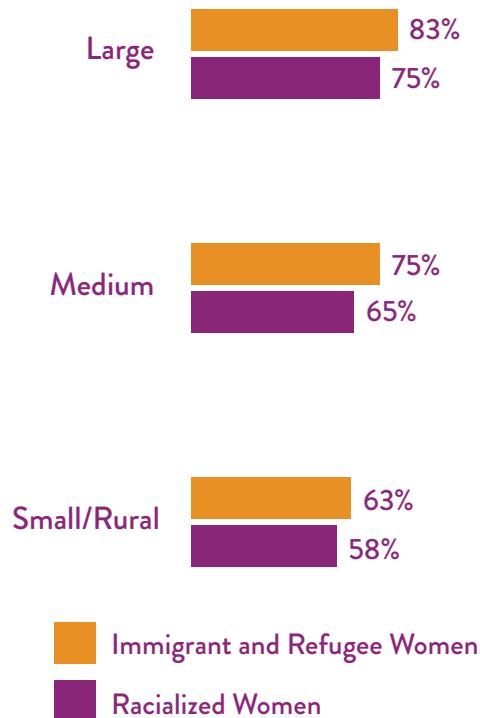


## Immigrant, Refugee, and Racialized Women

Immigrant and refugee women who experience IPV navigate multiple complex systems and face additional barriers when trying to access supports and services that could assist them.<sup>69</sup> Overall, survey respondents indicated that 73% had served immigrant and refugee women and 66% had served racialized women (see Figure 19). Figure 20 shows that VAW shelters located in larger urban centres were more likely to report having served immigrant, refugee, and racialized women fleeing violence compared to medium and small/rural population centres.<sup>70</sup>

Among the 267 respondents who answered whether they provided services to help women apply for permanent residency in Canada and with refugee/immigration applications, one quarter (25%) indicated that they "often" provided this support (see Section 6, Figure 24). Of those, 70% were located in large population centres, 17% were in medium centres, and 14% were in small/rural communities. Only one shelter in a rural community (population under 1,000, 60% of which are on-reserve shelters) reported providing this service.

**Figure 20: Percentage of VAW Shelters that Have Served Immigrant, Refugee, and Racialized Women by Population Size (n=281)**



## CHALLENGE: PROVIDING CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE SUPPORTS

An intersectional feminist approach to service delivery values inclusivity and reducing barriers to access. However, VAW shelters may not have the capacity to provide all services in a manner that fully meets the needs of women from different cultural, ethnic, and language backgrounds. Specifically, of the 239 who responded, 34% reported that providing culturally appropriate supports and services was a "major challenge," 49% a "minor issue," and 17% "not an issue."

**“ A shelter should be a place  
where no woman is ever  
turned away and where  
every woman can feel safe  
and autonomous while  
being supported.”**

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Ontario respondent

