

Adapting the violence against women systems response to the COVID-19 pandemic: the MARCO VAW study

Presenter: Priya Shastri (WomanACT- Network & Strategic Partnership Manager)

Alexa Yakubovich (Academic Lead), Priya Shastri (Community Lead), Bridget Steele, Catherine Moses, Monique, Elizabeth Tremblay, Maria Huijbregts, Janice Du Mont, Robin Mason, Lauren Hough, Amanda Sim, Kimia Khoe, Ahmed Bayoumi, Michelle Firestone, Patricia O'Campo



DALHOUSIE
UNIVERSITY

Department of Community Health &
Epidemiology



Toronto Region
VAWCC



WomanACT
WOMAN ABUSE COUNCIL OF TORONTO

About the MARCO-VAW Study

Goal: Build shared understanding of challenges and strengths in Toronto's response to violence against women (VAW) during the COVID-19 pandemic and develop actionable recommendations

1. How have VAW organizations adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How have contextual factors (e.g., funding) influenced these adaptations and service delivery?
3. How well are services meeting the needs of survivors?

WHEN COVID-19 MEETS THE EXISTING PANDEMIC OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN CANADA A NATIONAL SURVEY AT A GLANCE

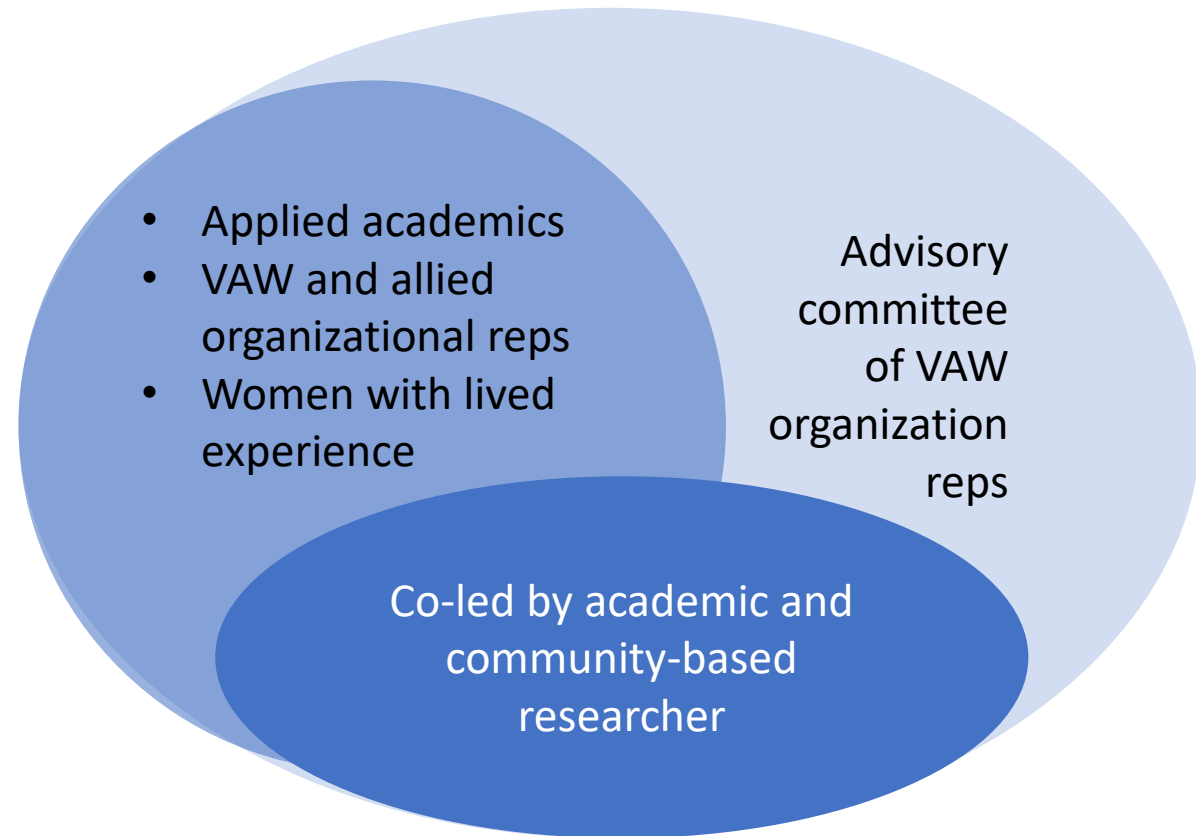


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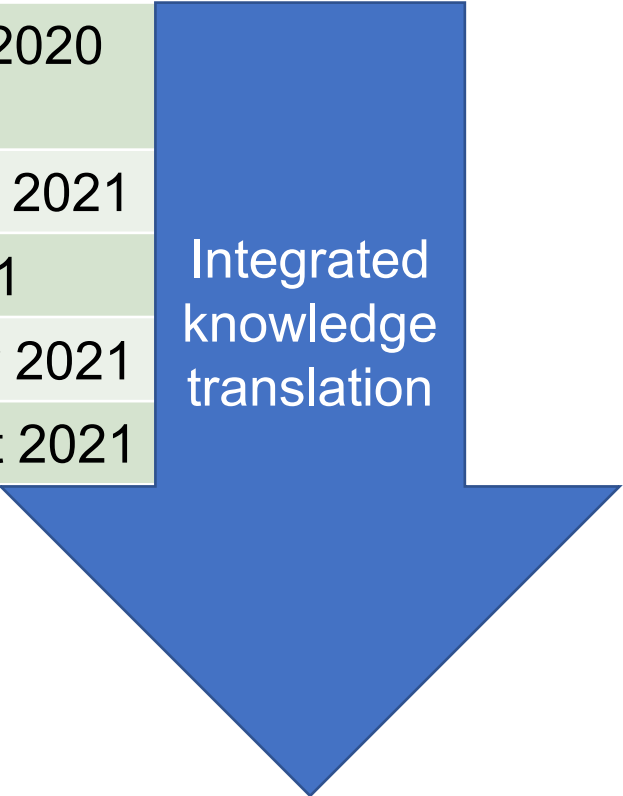
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Community-based mixed-methods design

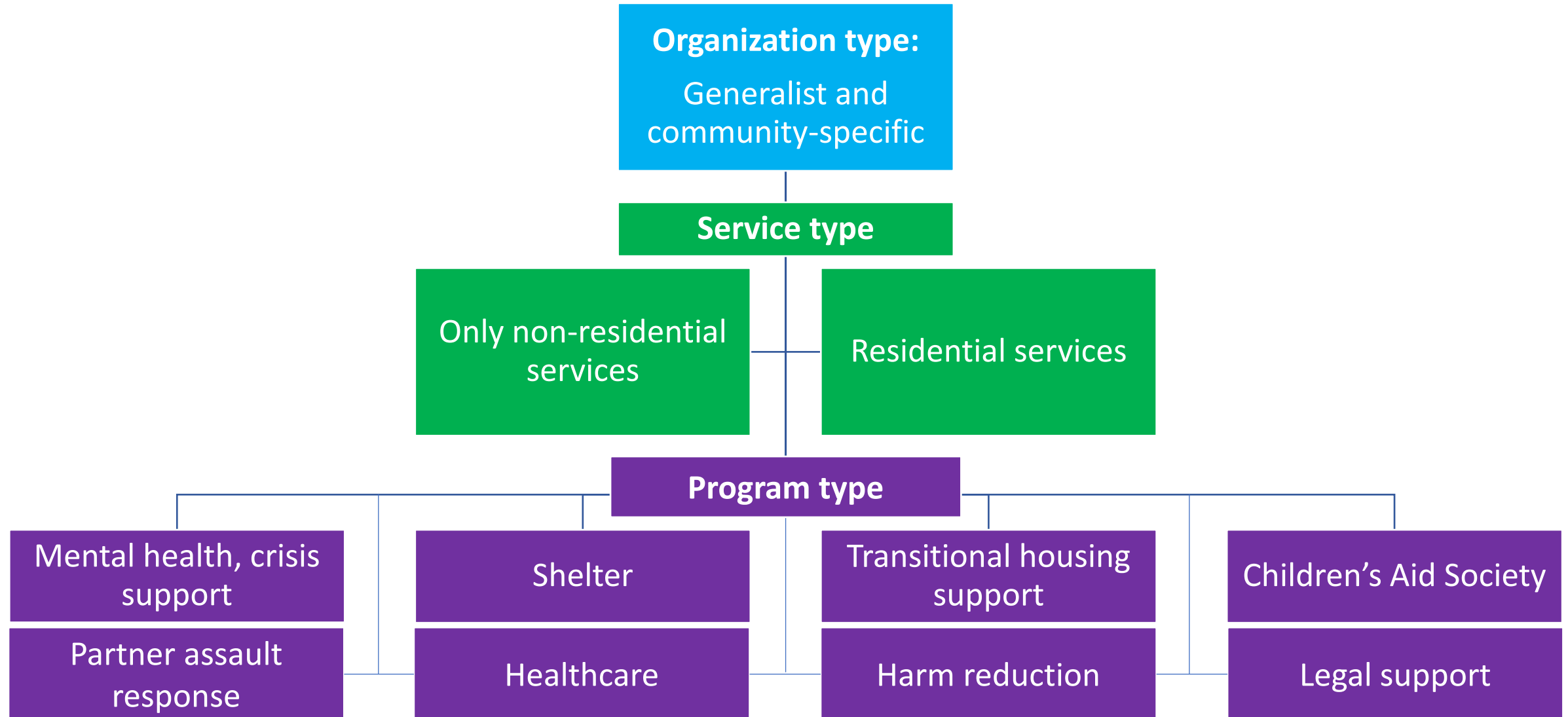


About the MARCO-VAW Study

1. Development of conceptual framework with research team, VAW organization reps, and Advisory	October 2020	Integrated knowledge translation
2. Survey of 127 VAW staff	Feb-April 2021	
3. Focus group with Advisory	April 2021	
4. Interviews with purposive sample of 18 VAW staff	April-July 2021	
5. Interviews with purposive sample of 10 clients/survivors	July-Sept 2021	



Results: participation across the VAW system



Results: VAW service delivery

- Most VAW organizations added virtual programming during the pandemic, residential services had to maintain in-person services.
- Provincial mandates required VAW organizations implement COVID-19 restrictions for safety.
- Some organizations benefitted from strong internal knowledge or individual relationships with public health or healthcare professionals. However, many left without public health guidance and support on how to best meet survivor needs



We weren't given any contact [with Public Health]. Like, this should have been a streamlined process for VAW shelters to be in contact with Public Health. That – because, I mean, congregate setting, hello?

Leadership participant

Results: COVID-19 restrictions & survivor needs

”

“*In one of our meetings, we said we missed that point, because when we were asking a woman to stay in quarantine for 14 days, we didn't take into consideration what if she has addiction issues and she needed to get out to get something to cope with? Or if you're alcohol dependent, like did we create a dangerous situation for the women?”*

Frontline participant

”

“*I remember being behind the Plexiglass saying, ‘What is this going to look like? Like how are you going to feed us then? Can you tell me now what your policies are about this?’ And they said, ‘We don't know. We're going to have to talk to management.’*

Survivor participant

”

“*One time they isolated for personal reason, like to punish me, they isolated me in the room for four days. [...] And they said, ‘You can't come out of this room until we ask you to come out.’*

Survivor participant

Results: Fostering a sense of belonging

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“ Staff was always there 24/7, [...] They would literally sit down with me. [...] So we could actually physically talk. Like, I had some awesome mornings just standing right by the door and like talking to them.

Survivor participant

”
“ She was treating me with love. 'Honey', you know? For me these words are like [a] big thing. And I was so emotional, I wanted to give her a hug. And for [so] long we wanted that thing: somebody treat us, like, with love. And I was crying. I told her my story.

Survivor participant

Results: increase in housing precarity

- **72%** of frontline participants reported that more of their clients were experiencing homelessness or housing precarity during the pandemic compared to before
- Some VAW survivors had to stay in abusive situations because they could not access shelter or housing, a form of 'hidden homelessness'



I started calling all the time to see what was available in shelters because I wasn't sure. [...] And the search went from Toronto to... I'm looking, I'm talking to people in Oakville, I'm talking to people in Oshawa and Ajax and Curtis and everywhere in southern Ontario. I have no car, but I can't let that stop me. And there's nothing available. So, we stay.

Survivor participant

Results: increase in housing precarity

”
“

The landlord refused to have them as a tenant. It's not legal, but when they interview each other, [...] the owner directly asked her how many kids you have and if their children's age is younger, then they say no. Or when they say yes, they charge them more, extra money.

Frontline participant

Results: challenges in securing housing

- More than **1 in 2** frontline participants reported facing challenges in referring their clients to shelter or housing services because services were closed, disrupted, or at maximum capacity during the pandemic.
- Challenges in securing housing were exacerbated for newcomers



If a client doesn't have status, they are not able to apply to housing. [...] If they separate from the abuser, we only have three months to apply. After the three months, they [do] not qualify. So, getting the status is sometimes get more than three months, right? And now, more. So, yeah, immigration is like, it's very bad.

Frontline participant

Results: transformative capacity of housing



I got the permanent residence. My child got the proper housing. Now I can cook my food for me. This stove thing, this personal fridge, like it means a lot. [...] Each and every corner of this house is important that I got that freedom. I got my house. I can sleep on my own. I can think on my own.

Survivor participant

Recommendations

1. Increased funding to VAW organizations for...
2. Invest in more affordable and accessible housing in safe neighbourhoods for women experiencing violence, in coordination with VAW and associated services to ensure wrap-around supports
3. Deem VAW services as essential services in public health emergencies and mandate appropriate PPE access and training on PPE use
4. Public health units work in collaboration with VAW organizations, survivors, and other experts to design infection prevention and control protocols for congregate care settings
5. All levels of government should invest in more affordable and accessible housing in safe neighbourhoods for women experiencing violence, in coordination with VAW and associated services to ensure wrap-around supports are provided as needed

Recommendation In Action- Value of Coordinated Systems

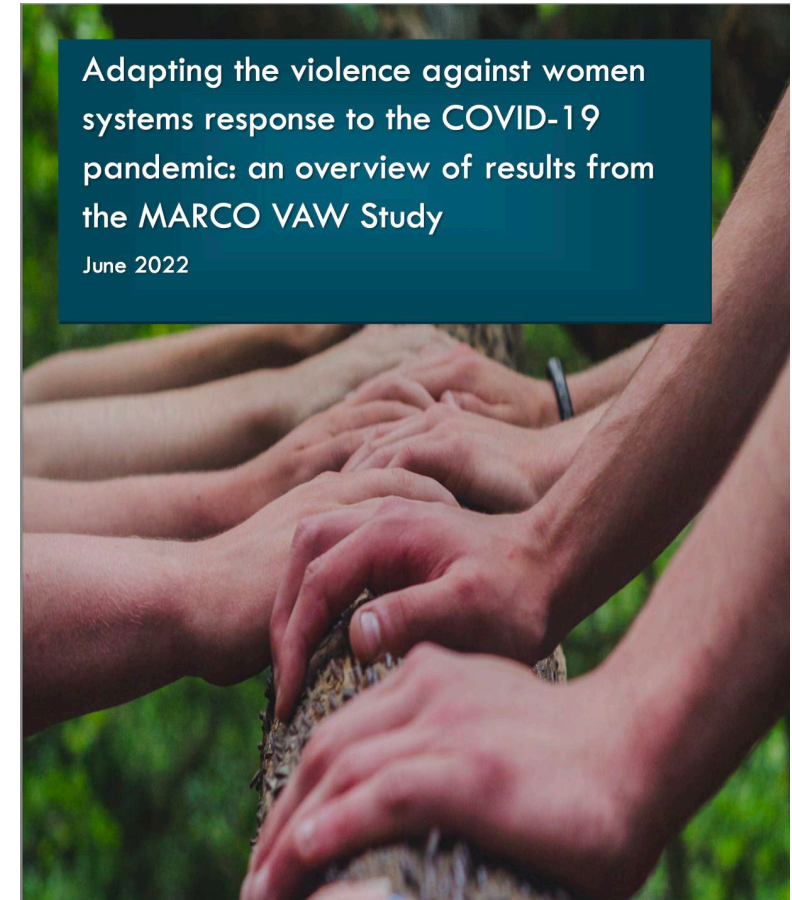
MOU between the City of Toronto Shelter, Support and Housing Administration and Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services including the Toronto Region VAWCC

- Increase in engagement between cross-sectoral partners towards an integrated system response
- Supported the sharing of rapidly changing information related to housing
- Capacity building and respond using a trauma-informed approach



Upcoming

Please visit www.vawresearch.com for full report, infographics, and registration for upcoming activities.



Thank you!

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Contact: alexa.yakubovich@dal.ca
More information: www.vawresearch.com



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