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BARELY KEEPING IT TOGETHER

Final Evaluation Report
Rebuilding Lives Grant
Stream 2020-2023

Prepared by
Sustainable Livelihoods Canada
January 2024



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PROJECT BACKGROUND

This report is Sustainable Livelihoods Canada’s (SLC) final evaluation summary designed to share the learning and outcomes of Canadian Women’s Foundation’s three-year Rebuilding Lives grant fund.

The goal of Rebuilding Lives is to “support organizations delivering direct programs and services to survivors of gender-based violence to rebuild their lives, and to organizations undertaking regional or national initiatives that advance systemic approaches and effective practices to support survivors of gender-based violence.”

A key element of Canadian Women’s Foundation’s strategy has been to support:

1. **Rebuilding Lives Programs:** Programs and services that that support women, two spirit, trans, and non-binary people who have experienced gender-based violence, and their children; and
2. **Collaborative Projects:** Sectoral capacity-building, policy and research, advocacy, and collective action initiatives that support systemic change efforts on a regional or national scale. Canadian Women’s Foundation also promotes mutual learning through the development of Communities of Practice, and external evaluation of its programs.

The Rebuilding Lives Grants and evaluation were made possible by Women and Gender Equality Canada and the many generous corporate partners, individual donors and private family foundations throughout the country.

The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of Canadian Women’s Foundation and its funding partners.

ACRONYMS AND TERMS

- **BIPOC:** Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour
- **CoP:** Community of Practice
- **GBV:** Gender-based violence
- **IT:** Information technology
- **RL:** Canadian Women’s Foundation Rebuilding Lives granting stream
- **SL:** Sustainable Livelihoods
- **SLC:** Sustainable Livelihoods Canada

Note: Throughout the report, the terms “*grantees*” and “*organizations*” are used interchangeably to refer to the RL grantees, although in some cases we refer to organizations more broadly, as for example in the Gender Based Violence sector generally.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable Livelihoods Canada (SLC) was contracted by **Canadian Women's Foundation's Rebuilding Lives Grant Program** in 2020 to plan and conduct a multi-faceted evaluation of the Fund. The SLC team worked collaboratively with Canadian Women's Foundation program staff from 2020 to 2023 to develop and implement an iterative evaluation changed substantially given the dramatic circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rebuilding Lives (RL) is a national grant-making initiative of the **Canadian Women's Foundation**. The program was initiated in 2002 with the goal of supporting practical and strategic responses to gender-based violence (GBV) including: 1) funding direct programming and services to people with experience of GBV, and 2) promoting sectoral capacity for policy research and advocacy through collective action on a regional or national scale. RL provided an average annual funding of \$40K/year to each of 16 grantees from across Canada.

SLC's evaluation activities were implemented in three phases which rolled out annually, with a main focus as follows:

- *Phase 1: the facilitation of grantee journalling and organizational asset mapping;*
- *Phase 2: support for a process of documenting changes in a holistic range of assets in livelihoods of participants; and*
- *Phase 3: documenting grantee reflections about the impacts of the policy and institutional context on their work.*

SLC has already produced two detailed interim reports for Canadian Women's Foundation on evaluation findings and conclusions from Phases 1 and 2. After a brief overview of these, the present report will focus mainly on the process and findings of Phase 3 and on overall conclusions and recommendations emerging from the Rebuilding Lives initiative.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

As noted, the evaluation process was organized into three phases that corresponded to Canadian Women’s Foundation’s three objectives and to the years of the funding which it provided.

SLC used the Sustainable Livelihoods (SL) Framework to structure the evaluation process for this project. Sustainable Livelihoods is an asset-based poverty reduction and community economic development approach that strengthens the effectiveness of frontline work with survivors of gender-based violence and provides an empowering context for program development.

The SL approach focuses on building people’s assets and reducing their vulnerability, acknowledging the contextual factors that can create vulnerability while also identifying the practical and strategic ways that interventions can change the context, and/or contribute to individual livelihood development. (For more information on the approach, visit www.slcanada.org).

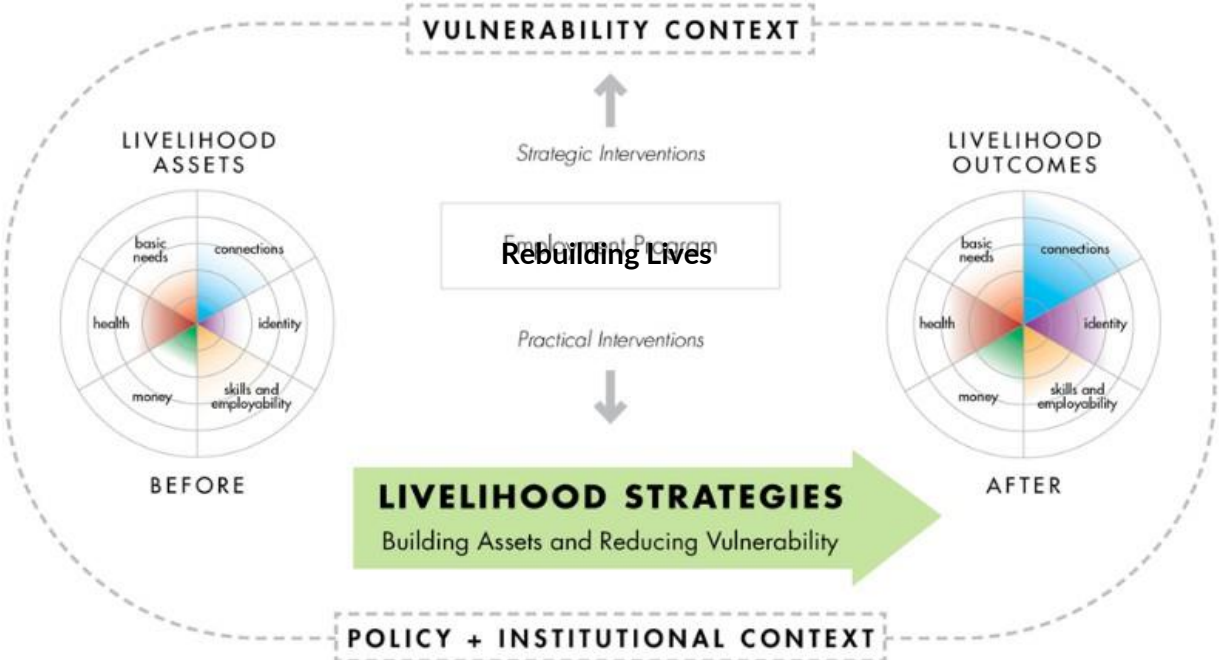


Figure 1: An Overview of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework

For this mixed-method evaluation, two SLC evaluators were each assigned specific grantees to work with over the life of the evaluation. In Phase 1, they would develop relationships with staff from each grantee organization, conduct annual semi-structured interviews, and support monthly journaling to support the process of documenting the work of grantees and gaining a holistic picture of their organizational assets. The focus of Phase 2 was on assessing changes in

the lives of the women being served. Phase 3 was designed to explore the policy and institutional ecosystem within which the women and the grantees work to access services and supports.

The chart below summarizes key evaluation activities and timelines.

CHART 1: SLC Learning and Evaluation Activities

	PHASE 1: The Grantee Organizations	PHASE 2: The Women Being Served	PHASE 3: The Policy and Institutional Ecosystem
Grantee Interviews	X	X	X
Participation in Community of Practice Events	X	X	X
Pre/Post Retrospective Survey		X	
Canadian Women's Foundation Report Review	X	X	X
Organizational Asset Map Journaling	X		
Individual Asset Mapping		X	
Annotated Bibliography			X
Problem Statement Infographic Development			X
Orientation of Grantees to the Policy Research		X	X

Ten of the 16 grantees received training in the Sustainable Livelihoods approach and asset mapping processes over two webinars facilitated by SLC in the Winter of 2021. The holistic asset mapping process was implemented first as a grantee assessment of existing strengths, vulnerabilities and opportunities in Phase 1 using a map of organizational asset areas; and then implemented in Phase 2 by the grantees in their programs using a map of individual participant asset areas to assess participants' strengths.

“

“I found there was extra work involved in this [evaluation]. It’s not easy for me to attend these things or do extra paperwork, but it is because we’re a small organization with little capacity and me doing a lot of it.” (Grantee)

“I liked the journaling. With past funders, if they said to do a journaling activity, I probably wouldn’t be honest, but this is a safe and supportive process... Such a pause to sit and think and reflect. I enjoyed this piece.” (Grantee)

LIMITATIONS

The pandemic had a major effect on the evaluation planning process, design and roll out; the SLC team commented how this had been the most flexible approach to evaluation they had ever taken, as grantees had to focus so much of their attention, resources and energy on addressing participants’ emergencies and on continuing to provide programming in very difficult circumstances. Canadian Women’s Foundation and SLC worked closely together to adapt to the context and needs of the grantees by making some evaluation activities optional.

Grantees participated generously in the evaluation process in spite of their stretched schedules, and were particularly candid in their journal responses and assessments of their organizations.

Efforts to reduce the evaluative burden on grantees had a particular impact on Phase 2 activities, limiting the scope of SLC’s implementation of:

- *participant asset mapping practice and*
- *a new pre-/post-survey instrument pilot to document participant outcomes.*

While the tools were implemented with a smaller group of committed grantees, data collected from these sites lacked the statistical power to justify full reporting.

We should also note that the context of COVID dramatically altered the context of programming, and undermined the work and outcomes of grantees. Such extraordinary circumstances introduced a range of biases that make it impossible to offer any more than qualitative speculation about the results of RL Grantees’ work.

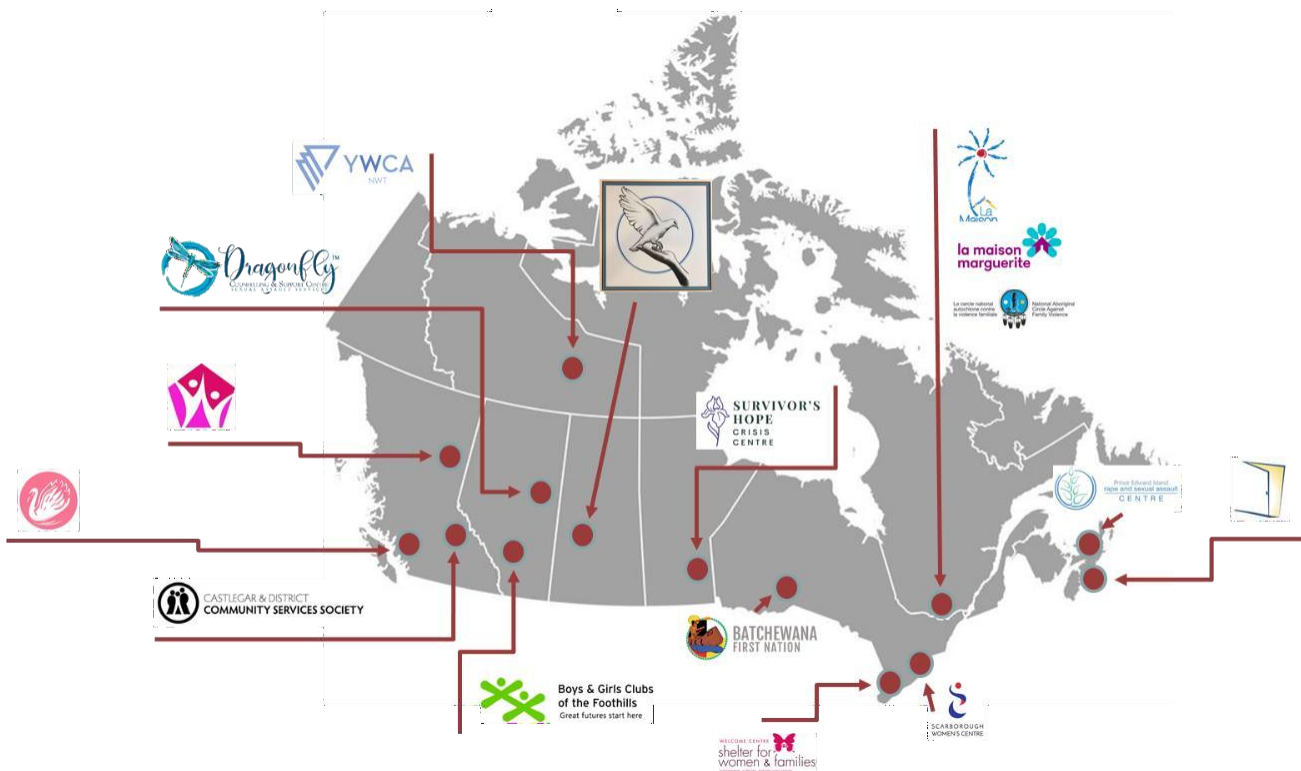
WHO WERE THE REBUILDING LIVES GRANTEES AND PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS?

From a highly competitive field of applicants, Canadian Women’s Foundation selected 16 diverse GBV organizations across Canada to participate in the RL fund cohort. They

represented a wide range of projects designed to fill gaps in local services and offer new approaches in programming (see Acknowledgements for a full list of organizations).

With the exception of one grantee working in the area of policy/advocacy, all were community-based organizations and included women’s centres, sexual assault centres, women’s shelters, and those that specialized in serving specific populations, e.g., sex workers, marginalized racialized populations such as Black women. A snapshot of profiles of all grantee organizations can be viewed by following this link: <https://ekonomos.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Grantee-Snapshots-English-.pdf>

Figure 2: 16 Canadian Women’s Foundation Rebuilding Lives Grantees Across Canada 2020-2023



GRANTEE PROFILE

- *The majority of organizations had mainly part-time staff.*
- *Five (31%) had more than 25 staff; 4 (25%) had 10-24 staff; and seven (44%) had fewer than 10.*
- *Program populations: Eight served primarily Indigenous women¹, five served children and youth, three served newcomer/immigrant/refugee participants and their families, and one served disabled women.*
- *All also identified serving diverse other female-identifying participants of a range of ages and gender and sexual identities. All organizations pursued customized, culturally appropriate, local counselling and programmatic responses to GBV grounded in strong feminist, anti-oppression analysis and approaches; and in the case of Indigenous-serving organizations, strong anti-colonial approaches.*
- *Scale of service: Of the 15 organizations providing direct service to women who have experienced violence, they each confirmed working with an average of 201 active participants annually during the Fund², amounting to a total of \$2,225,904.00 across the RL portfolio over the course of three years. Actual numbers worked with were an estimated 15% below the numbers projected in RL grant applications as a result of pandemic-related disruptions*
- *Geography: Six (38%) were urban/peri-urban, two (13%) were rural, and of the seven (44%) indigenous programs, five (31%) served women in rural/reserve settings and two (13%) bridged reserve/urban settings. One was national. Some rural and northern organizations had extensive catchment areas.*
- *Housing: Six (31%) offer shelter and housing to women as a part of their service offerings.³*

C RL - Typology of Canadian Women's Foundation-funded GBV Programs (N=16)

- 1 policy research
- 1 legal system navigation
- 6 housing: emergency/temporary shelter and second stage housing
- Violence prevention and response:
- 4 sexual violence: sexual assault/sexualized violence
- 3 domestic violence/assault
- 1 violence within the context of disability
- 2 survivors of trauma
- 1 youth abuse/trauma
- 1 peer support - sex

¹ Most were not Indigenous-led organizations but had focused on adapting their analysis and activities to Indigenous culture. They have had to make a substantial investment in recruiting Indigenous leaders, learning about appropriate language and methods, understanding colonization and treaties, and exploring Truth and Reconciliation strategies.

² Program participant numbers varied substantially across organizations, ranging from 12-1635 (year 1 data) depending on type of program funded and scale of organization.

The RL grants enabled grantees to pursue diverse strategies (see the sidebar on the previous page) to deepen existing work or to add new activities to protect and serve women as they rebuild their lives. These included: violence prevention, accompaniment, safety planning, counselling and one-on-one supports, trauma-informed care, housing support, upskilling, navigation of services, access to legal services, education and resources on the experiences of women with disabilities, and policy research.

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Almost all the organizations that provided demographic data (N= 10; 71%) **target and work with specific populations** including:

Black; First Nations, Métis, or Inuit; refugee, immigrant newcomer, or non-status. Most focused on serving marginalized participants living on low income. All reported working with participants who identified as being 2SLGBTQ+. While most participants were working-age adults, there was still representation of older individuals and youth.⁴

³ Two offered emergency housing only, one offered both emergency and second stage housing, one offered temporary housing, and one offered second stage housing only.

⁴ 11 grantees identified that at least 10% of their participants were youth (under the age of 30).

From the advent of COVID-19 and resulting lockdown in March 2020, the pandemic exerted a huge influence on the GBV sector that was felt throughout the subsequent course of the Canadian Women's Foundation Rebuilding Lives initiative and persists to this day.

These data demonstrate the diversity of the grantees in the Rebuilding Lives stream:

- **100% of 10 responding organizations' participants identified as either (a) First Nations, Métis, or Inuit; (b) refugee, immigrant newcomer, or non-status; or (c) living on low income.**
- **2 organizations had 10% or more of their participants identify as older people or a member of the 2SLGBTQ+ community.**
- **11 of the 14 organizations had 10% or more of their participants identify as young people.**

From the advent of COVID-19 and resulting lockdown in March 2020, the pandemic exerted a huge influence on the GBV sector that was felt throughout the subsequent course of the Canadian Women's Foundation Rebuilding Lives initiative and persists to this day. Grantees were reeling from the multiple impacts, including a sudden increase in need for services, and as well as the need to make the rapid and often shifting changes required by pandemic protocols.

Organizations had to pivot some of their services online, while residential programs became extremely limited in their ability to support participants to transition into the community.

Organizations had to pivot some of their services online, while residential programs became extremely limited in their ability to support participants to transition into the community. All grantees managed to continue to offer services and adapted as best they could by working diligently in teams, and by seeking additional funding to address increased demands.

For more detail about such challenges, see below, Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Organizational Assets.

RL GRANTEE ORGANIZATIONAL ASSET MAPPING FINDINGS

The organizational asset mapping activity was introduced during a Canadian Women's Foundation Community of Practice meeting in Winter 2021. Data collected online monthly consisted of a guided journaling and reflection exercise grounded in an introduction to the Sustainable Livelihoods (SL) approach and mapping strengths in each of five holistic SL organizational asset areas: Human, Social, Financial, Physical & Structural, and Identity & Motivational.

Figure 3 below highlights an overall summary of the prominent themes shared by grantees for each asset area and the average numeric rating of their assets in each area (out of 10, where 10 is the highest score).

Figure 3: RL Grantee Organizational Assets

SLC’s collective analysis offered a snapshot of grantee organizational asset patterns at the beginning of the RL Fund which coincided with the advent of COVID. The evaluation team and Canadian Women’s Foundation observed that it was remarkably consistent with other research about the key strengths and vulnerabilities facing the GBV sector at the outset of the pandemic.

Rebuilding Lives

GRANTEE ORGANIZATIONAL ASSETS



FINANCIAL ASSETS

Current financial assets and systems

- Federal and provincial government funding
- Enough funds for core services, operations, salary and rent
- Long-term local community funders
- Robust financial systems and practices
- Access to third party organizations for audits, reviews, and bookkeeping
- Income generation (e.g., user fees associated with programming and training)



HUMAN ASSETS

Staff/board/consultant skills and expertise currently available (internally or easily accessible) to carry out work

- Skilled front-line staff
- Lived and professional experience
- Engaged board of directors



IDENTITY AND MOTIVATIONAL ASSETS

Current identity or brand

- Trauma Informed Care
- Inclusive and progressive
- Flexible
- Women-centered
- Community-based
- Empowering
- Collective sense of ownership



SOCIAL ASSETS

Stakeholder networks, allies, and connections on which to build future strategic impact?

- Indigenous contacts, including local organizations, Elders, Chief and Council, Band CAO, hunters, gatherers, farmers, and medicine people
- Contacts at health organizations such as hospitals and mental health facilities
- Contacts at sexual assault/women’s shelters
- Connections with equity-seeking and feminist groups including national organizations and advisory boards
- Contacts at educational institutions such as school divisions and universities
- Contacts at housing and income assistance organizations
- Involved in Inter-agency advisory committees and collaboratives
- Contacts at non-profits, funding organizations, and various levels of government
- Connections to specialized services in the community (e.g., RCMP, consultants)



PHYSICAL AND STRUCTURAL ASSETS

Location, data, knowledge and information, resource materials, office, operational policies and systems (other than financial)?

- Sufficient owned, donated or rental space to effectively carry out day-to-day operations
- Adequate technical equipment and furniture to effectively carry out day-to-day operations
- Secure policies, platforms, and practices regarding client files, release and access of information and records storage
- Sound inclusion & diversity, and health & safety policies



Sustainable Livelihoods CANADA

IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON ORGANIZATIONAL ASSETS

Grantees noted that many organizations in the GBV sector had come into the pandemic already facing many serious challenges related a range of often intersecting factors, such as: funding terms and lack of financial resources; human resources such as staffing; weak public awareness and support for women dealing with abuse and violence; and the policy and institutional issues to be explored in Phase Three. The pandemic exacerbated many of these challenges, in some cases making them more visible to broader society. Grantees struggled to navigate the changing circumstances of COVID. Most were forced to shut down programs during lockdown and later to make major adaptations to their program plans. The shifts in public health regulations, with all the stops and starts and uncertainties for public-facing encounters, dramatically affected their ability to offer participants consistent, reliable and appropriate supports and services. In some cases, the pandemic undermined the results of their work by forcing them to switch priorities from a long-term focus on healing, empowerment and rebuilding lives to more immediate emergency efforts. At the same time, however, some grantees noted that the crisis had not been entirely a negative experience for their organization.



I'm feeling hopeful that as COVID restrictions ease, more possibilities will develop. In a way, COVID has made us move at a different pace (slower, reflective, baby steps), which is not necessarily a bad thing!" (Grantee)



Because of being web-based, we've been able to connect with more people, and there is accessibility." (Grantee)

HUMAN ASSETS

Related to organizational human resources, skills, and capacity to design and deliver programming (Aggregate Grantee Average 7.6 out of 10 (N= 16))

Grantee organizations came into the program with real strengths in this asset area grown over the years in response to the challenges they face. GBV practitioners and other staff are passionately committed to the people they serve, and to transforming the context and culture of GBV. They are dedicated to offering high quality, appropriate responses to participants' individual situations and circumstances. They pride themselves on creating and delivering excellent programs and services, and in their commitment to advocacy to advance their participants' progress towards safety and stability.



Given our identified skills, experience, and risks, we feel that we are doing a pretty good job in supporting the women we serve, but that there is always room for improvement and growth!" (Grantee)



Our staff are amazing at problem solving and working together to serve our participants in the best way we can! We hope there will be more services available to us, but in the meantime we will continue to improvise in the best way possible.” (Grantee)

Organizations are anchored and led by highly experienced and educated practitioners who specialize in sophisticated responses to participant needs and preferences, and take an empowering, non-judgmental, trauma-informed and anti-oppressive approach to their practices. Grantee staff have accumulated a collective bank of constantly updated resources and expertise in the area of laws and rules and regulations affecting their participants, and about the most effective strategies to access supports and entitlements, along with other welcoming services and supports available in their communities. They act as institutional navigators, identifying and often averting many of the potential roadblocks along the path to stability that participants are likely to face.

The people organizations serve are themselves a huge asset, as the authors of their own futures. Their pre-existing resilience, courage and determination act as an essential foundation for rebuilding their lives. They provide the knowledge and leadership critical to addressing GBV and other related issues in their communities, drawing on their lived experience and nurtured by their solidarity with other participants.

VULNERABILITIES

Coming into the RL fund, organizations already faced labour market and other contextual conditions that made it difficult to pay a competitive salary to hire and retain skilled practitioners. Below is a sampling of grantee comments on this challenge:

Along with the issues noted above, grantees highlighted a number of common themes in this area:

- *Short-term funding not only makes it difficult to keep staff and offer stability, underfunded organizations must rely on fluctuating donations and grants, which creates constant insecurity for the staff.*
- *Their work often demands hours beyond what the funding allows for, e.g., overtime of seven hours on a 28-hours paid job.*
- *Project-based funding often comes with high expectations while allowing for only one-to-two year contracts, which create high staff turnover.*
- *Funding is often insufficient to allow for positions accessible for women with disabilities.*
- *Pressure to respond to participants’ immediate needs prevents staff from creating and nurturing long-term stable funding opportunities.*



[Staffing] has been the biggest problem we’re having. We’ve rejigged posting, renamed titles, rewritten things, etc. and we’re not getting relevant applications in. The people we’re getting are either students returning to school, or they get snapped up by higher-paying permanent positions. Our wages are low (\$18/hour) and locally, you can start as a personal support worker for \$23/hour. It is hard to compete, since there are probably less stressful jobs that pay \$5/hour more.”



Dependence on government grants and/or one-year project grants continues to create vulnerability”



Hiring and retention continue to be an issue (...) It is hard to secure staff with experience, especially when the pay is entry or mid-level.”



There is a small pool of skilled people that can do this important work, so compensating them in a way that will retain them is difficult.”

Overwork sometimes to the point of burnout was mentioned as just one result of this under-sourcing, particularly at smaller organizations where staff have to cover multiple functions and roles on a responsive basis. When interviewing grantees, the SLC team noted many instances of low staff morale. All organizations expressed frustration about the lack of funding to invest in the upgrading of staff knowledge and skills so that they could continue to test out promising new evidence-based practices. They also identified the need for greater investments in programs to prevent all forms of violence and abuse.

Fewer participants were served by grantees during COVID as a result of these staffing challenges and the increased barriers to access faced by participants, especially when grantees were trying to continue their work in the setting of Indigenous reserves yet more heavily affected by emergency health orders. For most grantees, problems in hiring and retaining staff also created complications in service delivery and affected their ability to participate fully in the evaluation activities. As they noted, they had to put their own mental health first when confronted with a whole new layer of complexity to offering their services, and with the consequent increased workload and time management constraints.

While many similarities/commonalities emerged across the grantees, there were also distinct differences related to their particular contexts. For example, organizations in rural, remote and/or northern contexts experienced additional challenges in finding qualified staff. Some of these unique vulnerabilities are noted below, offering a possible base for advocacy.

- ***Rural and urban: organizations often faced the retirement of their most experienced and stable staff, leaving them challenged to prepare succession plans. Some staff were retiring early due to burn-out, family circumstances, and/or***

because of the pandemic. In response, a few grantees have been looking for alternative ways to support project management, through community/board involvement taking an intersectional perspective.

- *Indigenous Reserves and BIPOC populations: organizations experienced challenges related to finding professionals with appropriate cultural competency/relevancy and expertise who could build trust with participants.*
- *On reserve and off reserve: organizations faced issues when seeking therapists to work with Indigenous participants, since many Indigenous therapists could themselves be living through trauma.*
- *Northern, rural and/or remote areas experienced high staff turnover due to geographical distance and related costs.*
- *Organisations working with participants who have experience of sexual violence/assault and those working with participants involved in the criminal justice system (e.g., due to sex work, crimes of desperation) reported facing stigmatization*
- *and negative perceptions of their agency in the community because of the socially taboo areas that their work addresses.*
- *Services are inadequate, especially in rural and remote areas, and particularly for specialized skills such as translation, to address the current refugee crisis (including immediate mental and physical health concerns for families fleeing violence and persecution).*

SOCIAL ASSETS

Related to organizations' connections and relationships (Aggregate Grantee Average 7.4 out of 10 (N= 16))

Most grantee organizations build these assets intentionally by pursuing collective approaches to service delivery and advocacy which support them to increase resources, limit service overlaps, and build collective knowledge by sharing promising learning and practices. They also play versatile leadership roles through their strategies to involve and organize participants, local partner organizations, their communities, and regional and national networks; and they cultivate participant leadership as an entry point to rebuilding lives. A number of grantees noted that Canadian Women's Foundation's RL funding had assisted them to heighten their profile and credibility, thereby increasing their local influence.



I think this [RL] project was a huge step forward for the agency towards really creating and simultaneously strengthening 'family' service provider and support relationships" (Grantee)

Grantees have recruited strong and committed boards of directors who typically come from diverse backgrounds, and have pre-existing, often shared, expertise in the issues facing participants. Many board members have also represented local organizations and can contribute important knowledge of their organization's Environment and community context to the picture. Grantees have also hired external consultants to assist with tasks such as strategic planning, research and evaluation, program development, training, and succession planning; and they have working relationships with such bodies as universities, business associations, and city councils. Several drew on social service professionals to help fill capacity gaps exacerbated during the pandemic, although for rural and remote areas this support proved more difficult to access.

VULNERABILITIES

A key challenge for GBV organizations (and their sister organizations in the not-for-profit sector) is that they operate in a highly competitive funding environment which can erode community relationships of support. Although grantees managed nonetheless to cultivate strong social assets through partnerships, networks, and allyships, many have to take on such work "off the corner of their desks." Throughout lockdown and with social distancing, all grantees were challenged to maintain such working relationships and partnerships. The pandemic eroded their partners' ability to deliver key programs and services, resulting in a negative impact on referrals, collaboration, program access and continuity.

FINANCIAL ASSETS

Related to organizational finance and sustainability (Aggregate Grantee Average 6.5 out of 10 (N= 16))

Grantees mentioned already becoming more proactive in promoting their financial stability and sustainability. They have begun to cultivate plans for longer-term funding by increasing their internal capacity for fund development and outcomes data collection, and make investments in mortgages and mid-term interest-bearing products such as GICs, and in developing reserve capital. Many have professionalized bookkeeping, accounting and financial management systems to match the increasing financial complexity of their operations, and have hired professionals to provide specialized advice and create their reports. They are more informed about the various finance-related and fundraising platforms available to professionalize cashflow planning, manage grant seeking activities, and strengthen their evidence-base to tell a compelling story about their work. They have enhanced their fundraising to try to reduce reliance on government grants, to be less vulnerable to the changing terms and priorities of such funding. Some are pursuing social enterprise and income generating activities that complement their missions.⁵ Yet all of these strategies and efforts require changes in their boards' roles and more intensive organizational change management.

⁵ Grantees generate unallocated revenue to core by charging fees for programming and professional presentations, as well as professional fee-for-service work relating (e.g. providing counselling services to community partners).

VULNERABILITIES

As grantees stressed, the great overarching challenge for GBV organizations and their vital community services is that they exist in a state of ongoing precarity which is mitigated by dedicated leadership and staff who do their best to ensure programs continue despite the inadequacy of resources. They battle a context of insufficient funding based on short-term projects for which they must constantly reapply; and each funder/project may have specific mandates, deliverables and outcomes reporting requirements. Some grantees worried about a future vulnerability related to post-pandemic austerity measures that might be implemented to recoup high levels of government spending during the pandemic. Grantees also noted that governments tend to undervalue specialization of regional services and, in the context of austerity measures, might mandate the centralization of services in urban areas. This would result, for example, in people with experience of GBV being transferred from regional hospital emergency rooms to the city for specialized medical care and forensic exams.

Grantees further mentioned that much funding is conditional and tied to externally determined funder priorities that reflect only part of the holistic response they know is needed to support women to rebuild their lives. Many funders explicitly require new innovations, rather than supporting evidence-based responses that have long been identified as effective. To add to these difficulties, organizations have to depend on a small number of funders/funding sources. This creates a cascading effect: undermined operational stability has a negative impact on the quality and continuity of staffing; which in turn erodes organizations' ability to offer the same quality and consistency of programming and services.

In such an environment of financial uncertainty, it is extremely hard to develop long-term strategies and sustainability plans. Grantees highlighted the urgent importance of core long-term funding, and yet they identified an opposite trend happening: they are being asked to do the work of broadening their own funding activities/sources in order to promote organizational sustainability. They are well aware that increasing and diversifying their financial assets is a desirable goal, but they simply do not have the time, dedicated expertise and other resources to tackle this work.

In many ways, the trend is a 'Catch 22': without resources to pursue new resources, organizations will be increasingly depleted in their resilience to the Vulnerability Context. Grantees noted how the weakening of the social safety net and its inability to meet people's basic needs have further undermined the results of organizations' work. One grantee even remarked that their staff face many of the same vulnerabilities as the participants they serve. They are often working for low wages and/or put in many unpaid hours, often with uncertain job security due to the insufficiency and/or inconsistency of funding for their positions.

PHYSICAL & STRUCTURAL ASSETS

Related to organizations' operations, infrastructure and technology (Aggregate Grantee Average 7.6 out of 10 (N= 16))

On average, grantees gave a high rating to this asset area. They reported having already made investments in equipment, computers, IT, resource libraries and other physical assets that support them to deliver programming. Some have invested in capital projects and ownership of facilities. Many manage large-scale infrastructure such as running shelters and second-stage housing facilities. In response to space and facility constraints that limit accessibility and outreach, many organizations have partnered in their communities to expand service delivery and outreach, establishing satellite office locations, co-location models and hub models that combine to provide wrap-around services.

VULNERABILITIES

Size and location were major factors in this asset area. Although often deeply connected to and visible in their communities, many small organizations were challenged to offer participants appropriate facilities and accessibility. Most of these were also in rural and northern locations, and were tasked with serving vast catchment areas (in one case larger than 70,000 square kilometers). They experience regular seasonal expenses and disruptions (e.g., weather conditions that limit travel). They have to deal with issues such as safety concerns in poor weather, the need for extra time for service delivery, and particular difficulties in retaining employees. Participants from remote/rural communities face corresponding challenges of expense and disruption to their lives when trying to access services.

The cost of buying or renting infrastructure, and maintaining office and programming spaces, can be a huge challenge for many. Some mentioned how hard it was to find capital funding for renovations and upgrades to facilities, in order to serve and be accessible to more participants. Meanwhile, the pandemic has clearly highlighted the need for greater access to reliable technology, an updated web presence (e.g., on social media), remote applications, and chat spaces. For some participants the technology needed for service delivery, such as Internet connectivity, is still not available. Further concerns expressed by grantees include the lack of online service delivery in languages other than English, as well as accessibility issues for those living with disabilities.

IDENTITY & MOTIVATION ASSETS

Related to organizations' perspectives, politics, culture and vision (Aggregate Grantee Average 6.6 out of 10 (N= 15))

Grantees view their mission and programming as foundational to this asset area. They have a strong internal identity, including a vibrant and passionate staff culture grounded in shared commitment to the women they serve. Their intersectional feminist analysis informs their understanding of the long-term systemic causes of GBV and guides every aspect of their practice. They take a “nothing about us without us” approach that seeks to embed women’s voices into all aspects of their work as activist organizations with a mission to address the impacts of sexual violence, economic violence and institutional discrimination in their communities.



We need to continue to build emotional connections between audiences and brand identity. Motivate people to donate and/or support programs. Create credibility and trust by continuing to provide high-quality, women-centred, non-judgmental support and programs. Launch large public awareness campaigns while still maintaining client confidentiality.” (Grantee)

Many shared identity assets were common across organizations, such as being well-known in their communities for providing creative top-quality services for many participants who have often been overlooked and undervalued within the current system. Their thoughtful, evidence-based programming reflects the deep experience and professionalism of the GBV sector. All grantees offer inclusive, non-judgmental, women-focused, trauma-informed, anti-oppressive approaches to organizing, counselling, support and training.

VULNERABILITIES

This area was rated the lowest by grantees. From their observations, the SLC noted how strong a “culture gap” persists in the way GBV is viewed: women still face stigma, judgment and shame from the institutions that are supposed to be serving them and from the public in general. Negative stereotypes also constrain GBV organizations and programs, making it difficult for them to build trustful relationships with local leaders, funders and communities.⁶ They expressed frustration about the marginalization and low profile of the sector. And yet marketing to enhance their profile can be a delicate balancing act between maintaining a low profile to minimize the risks to the women who use their facilities and cultivating a positive public presence in communities to ensure the public support and donations to continue their work.

Communication can be another issue: organizations and their staff often talk about the interests of and challenges facing women in their communities using a politicized analysis, language and approach that may not be well understood or accepted by the institutions with which they need to work.

⁶ For example, community members can be reluctant to engage as volunteers with these organizations out of fear that they may be mistaken for women escaping domestic violence.

A NOTE ON LEARNING ABOUT ASSET BUILDING IN INDIGENOUS-SERVING ORGANIZATIONS:

Too many First Nations, Metis and Inuit (FNMI) communities are already in a state of crisis, facing urgent issues such as unclean water, suicides, addictions, and poverty. The pandemic simply layered yet another crisis on top of these.

Although Rebuilding Lives made a substantial investment in Indigenous programming, the pandemic had such a marked impact on Indigenous communities that it was extremely difficult to capture learning at a time when resources had to be shifted to address emergency situations.

Most of the 16 grantees are engaged to some extent in direct service of Indigenous women and Two Spirit people. Most of the seven grantee initiatives focused on Indigenous women were led by Indigenous-serving organizations with considerable prior learning about how to integrate Indigenous cultural practices and ways of knowing into their programming.

Many grantees reported accessing supports in the form of Indigenous relations management. These supports included improved understanding of Indigenous knowledge for program delivery, Indigenous ways of healing, and access to knowledge keepers and Elders with diverse worldviews and cultures.

Continuous learning about working with Indigenous women and communities remains a high priority for organizations, with a focus on:

- *Trust and relationship building*
- *Analysis of the particular issues facing Indigenous women in a GBV context*
- *Understanding the culture and pace of working with Indigenous women and their communities*
- *Truth and Reconciliation - importance of understanding treaties and the roots of colonial oppression*
- *Indigenous-led programming and the First Nations Principles of ownership, control, access and possession (OCAP) approaches to GBV*
- *Boards continue to express an interest in strengthening their Indigenous relations expertise*

In spite of having to deal with the radical changes emerging from the context of the pandemic, the grantees were able to identify some of their asset building priorities and strategies going forward. These are highlighted below in Figure 4 and explored in more detail in Appendix 2.



Great support / resources to help with every step I needed to get my life back on track for my kids and myself.” (Participant)



[The Program] brings everyone in a broken community together and helps build community among us.” (Participant)

RL PARTICIPANT ASSET MAPPING FINDINGS

Asset Mapping with the individual participants was originally intended to be a mandatory evaluation activity undertaken by the 15 organizations that were working directly with participants. Given the strain and stress created by the pandemic, the evaluation team and Canadian Women’s Foundation decided to make this activity optional. As a result, SLC was significantly limited in its ability to collect enough data to draw conclusions about the participants being served. Nonetheless, we did conduct an analysis of the data collected in Summer and Fall of 2022 from 35 participants who completed pre-/post-asset maps from the seven grantee organizations that opted into the process. These findings offer highlights from the very small sample.⁷

While asset-mapping participants generally reported high asset scores when completing the first asset map, there were significant increases in Identity and Health assets from the first to second asset map. When asked what is important in life, many mentioned achieving stable mental health or improving their mental health as their key aspiration.

Indigenous participants’ social assets were significantly lower than those of non-Indigenous participants. Some participants mentioned connections with family being the most important thing for them. Getting along well and being able to support family was key in their lives, which may also include the desire to improve relationships with family or to be able to take care of their children. Regarding Money and Employability, participants also indicated the importance of education and employment to generate financial resources and beyond; and also, a desire to have stable and safe housing.

⁷ For the livelihood asset areas explored with individual participants, see Figure 1 above. For detail on the individual data, see the Phase 2 Interim Report.



Having social and mental health supports, like those offered through the agency, have been helpful and I don't know what I would have done without them..."
(Participant)



I want to live a good life and be happily out in the world, not always hiding in the shadows, thinking I am not worthy of attention and approval. This is my goal, to learn to love and appreciate all that is me!" (Participant)



Being successful at school is difficult without stable and safe housing."
(Participant)

At the time of their first asset map, most participants were at the foundation-building stage of movement towards a sustainable livelihood, but by the time of their second map (at least three months later), many had moved on to the more advanced stage of consolidating their livelihoods.

When asked what factors make it hard to build assets, participants noted the following: violent sexual assault; poor sense of self; custody disputes of children; old patterns of behavior; and fear. In their comments about the grantee programs, participants reported benefiting from high-quality programming and services that had supported them to strengthen their assets.

In terms of barriers to access to Basic Needs, many participants noted: legal services; healthy food; internet access; personal safety; reliable transportation; and stable, quality housing. Findings from this small sample further suggest that the vulnerability of participants persists and has deepened with the COVID-19 pandemic.

GRANTEE REFLECTIONS ON THE POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

This section presents the key findings of Phase Three of SLC's evaluation activities, which focused on facilitating grantee reflection about the impact of the policy and institutional context on their work based on their experience and observations.

WHAT IS THE “POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT”?

The Sustainable Livelihoods approach recognizes that both the circumstances of people’s lives and larger external factors, termed the “Vulnerability Context,” can affect their progress often in ways beyond their control. Life circumstances can include patterns connected to where people are in their lives: for example, their reproductive choices, family roles, social relationships, etc. Larger external factors can include trends such as the effects of climate crisis, and sudden shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Part of the larger context is the “Policy and Institutional Context”, which refers to the human-made external ecosystem that has grown up over time and is constantly changing. The Policy and Institutional Context shapes the wider Vulnerability Context.

It includes formal and informal socio-economic and political forces such as the institutional and governmental policy context, racism, gender discrimination, and other frequently intersecting systems and influences that affect our opportunities in life. The Policy and Institutional Context also shapes women’s options/choices and the responses of organizations seeking to support women’s movement towards sustainable livelihoods, and their efforts to advocate for positive changes within the ecosystem.

Because these forces are so complex and entangled in unexpected ways, they are hard to analyze in isolation. Yet a focus on this context can help us begin to identify both barriers and opportunities for building livelihoods, and as a result to design more effective interventions to improve people’s livelihood outcomes.

The SLC team sought to deepen project learning about the practical and strategic efforts GBV organizations use to promote positive livelihood outcomes for their participants, as well as the specific challenges of the policy ecosystem, in order both to promote promising practices and inform broader sectoral advocacy for systemic change.

We also draw on a case study from the grantee research to illustrate some of the intersecting difficulties that people experiencing GBV can face in navigating the web of systems and services designed to serve their needs.

ABOUT THE PHASE 3 EVALUATION

The team implemented methodologies for this phase by:

- *Engaging grantee staff in three annual interviews reflecting on their context and practice⁸*
- *Developing a literature scan and bibliography exploring policy issues and interactions*
- *Introducing the policy activities at a Canadian Women’s Foundation Community of Practice session*

- *Inserting policy-specific questions into Canadian Women’s Foundation’s year two RL annual reporting requirements, asking for examples from the Fund’s experience of policy interactions that have created barriers for the women it serves*

SUMMARY OF LEARNING

The collaborative learning process with grantees has revealed how the various layers of policies and services designed to support people experiencing GBV can in fact combine or operate at cross purposes to create further difficulties for them. Taken in isolation, many individual policies, systems and laws may be designed effectively to support people experiencing GBV, whereas others are intrinsically ill-conceived. Furthermore, because our national, provincial, and organizational policies and systems operate simultaneously in practice, they often tend to work in siloes and/or may converge in unplanned/unexpected ways. As a consequence, they sometimes produce results detrimental to the individuals they are designed to advocate for, serve and protect, and can amplify the very problems they exist to solve.

These policy interactions can risk people’s safety through their specific effects on such critical determinants as income security, housing security, child custody and access, accessibility of services and support, criminal justice/criminalization, and status. This situation perpetuates and can even exacerbate the cycle of gender-based violence by hampering people’s efforts to build a foundation of safety and stability and by limiting the effectiveness of service providers who work with them. While stretched daily to address a complex host of participants’ individual issues, grantees made it clear that they are acutely aware of the bigger contextual picture but lack the time and resources to advocate for, let alone to bring about, the systemic changes they know are needed. Although small in number, the RL grantee organizations are representative of thousands of others in the GBV sector operating in the same ecosystem, so these dynamics are likely a pattern across jurisdictions in Canada.

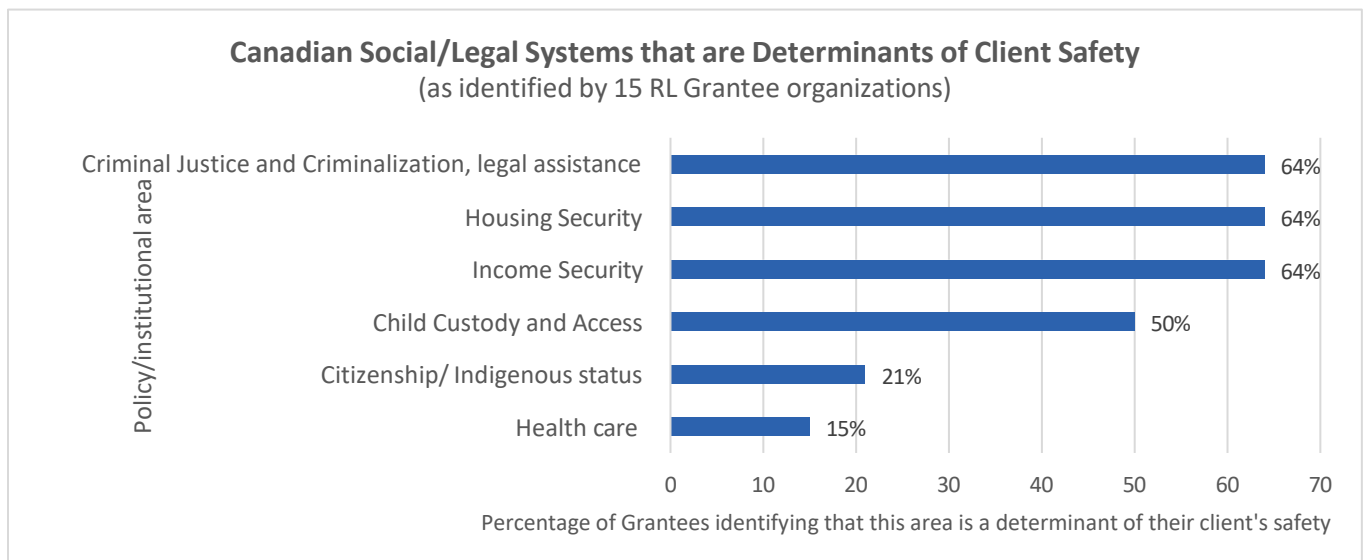
A range of formal and informal policies and institutions appear to shape the ecosystem within which these GBV organizations operate to support participants’ movement towards greater socio-economic stability and security. Here is a brief overview of some key common themes and patterns highlighted through the evaluation with grantees.

⁸ The Rebuilding Lives Literature Scan and Bibliography can be accessed at: Bibliography: <https://atrium.lib.uoguelph.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/a66bbe4a-bf5f-4431-b5f7-f56fc9a9dcd5/content>

Literature Review: <https://atrium.lib.uoguelph.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/3933b212-ad1d-4577-bf34-a84c31c809d5/content>

SYSTEMS MOST COMMONLY ACCESSED BY GRANTEES IN THEIR GBV WORK WITH PARTICIPANTS

In Phase 3, grantees identified some of the specific systems they work with to support their participants. Seventy-nine percent of the 15 grantees⁹ reported that they spend a great deal of time helping their participants to navigate systems to access basic needs such as safety, social assistance income, housing, food security, child care, legal services, and transportation. The aim is to promote a foundation of stability and security through access to income, entitlements, supports and services. The table below shows the main policy areas of these systems that can determine participants' safety, and the percentage of organizations that had interactions in these areas.



⁹ Only one organization that was doing research noted that systems navigation was not applicable to their work.

GRANTEE REFLECTIONS ON HOW THESE SYSTEMS FUNCTION IN PRACTICE

When asked about the ways in which policies and systems can interact and/or operate in siloes to create barriers to rebuilding participants' lives, grantees noted challenges: 1) within specific siloed policy/institutional areas; and 2) among policy/institutional areas in the larger ecosystem.

1. Within specific policy/institutional areas

Grantees identified many common challenges related to institutional cultures that make it difficult to learn about and access their basic needs and entitlements. For example, a culture of reduced staffing and resources of these social safety net services has resulted in a self-service approach and a reliance on IT with text-heavy websites. Participants often do not possess the language and computer literacy to engage these systems; nor do they have access to computer technology. Just to deal with these systems successfully, they require the assistance of a navigator who has accumulated an extensive in-depth knowledge of a vast web of current policies, programs and regulations, as well as experience with online bureaucratic processes, helping participants fill in forms, book appropriate medical and mental health services, and access housing, immigration services and legal assistance. Northern, rural and remote communities also do not have access to communication infrastructure which adds additional barriers for participants and the organizations.

Grantees also noted how these services, such as Social Assistance, frequently offer responses and benefits that are inadequate to meet the needs of participants and their families. Many are designed to prevent fraud, and are full of complicated caveats, claw backs and restrictions on earning income, and "small print" requirements. These factors combined with the challenges identified above make them yet harder to access, and they often penalize the people they are supposed to be assisting. This in turn further undermines people's stability and assets, often costing public systems and services more over the long-term.

Also mentioned was how movement to employment can undermine retention of critical stabilizing supports, such as rent-geared-to-income housing, Social Assistance benefits, and transportation and childcare subsidies. Meanwhile, legal processes related to violence and family law often show a marked lack of understanding of and attention to the dangers of renewed violence and trauma.¹⁰ Furthermore, many people with experience of GBV are

¹⁰ Example given were of crowded courtrooms where inappropriate conversations are held around people waiting to testify; and a person having to walk into court side-by-side with their offender. Changes in court processes during the COVID-19 pandemic were noted as exacerbating these problems.

involved with the court system at multiple levels, often fighting on more than one front, such as concurrent court cases related to intimate partner violence and family law, and the intersections of facing criminal law charges due to being involved in crimes of desperation.

2. Among policies/institutional areas in the larger ecosystem

Grantees noted that many program/policy areas are designed to operate in siloes, without a holistic, intersectional comprehension of the multifaceted conditions that people experiencing GBV face. This often results in negative policy interactions that can magnify the challenges to their safety, security and wellbeing. Some key themes mentioned were:

- *Processes/requirements for accessing housing and income supports that can negatively impact a person's ability to regain custody of their children (see the case study below).*
- *Inability of some refugee and immigrant women who have been sponsored by their partner/partner's family to report their partner's abusive behaviour for fear of deportation or immigration detention.*
- *The constraints of leaving violent relationships while living in small First Nations communities or rural, remote and northern communities, including: lack of privacy/confidentiality constraining women's ability to ask for help and apply for transitional housing and income, and fear of losing custody of children.*
- *Immigration status-related restrictions on public supports and services that can put basic rent and food affordability out of the reach of undocumented people in particular.*
- *Prohibitions on sex work that can result in an absence of legal and policy protection from violence for women sex workers, particularly those who are undocumented migrants and sex workers are criminalized at the intersections of immigration and criminal justice policy.¹¹*

¹¹ Perpetrators are aware of this vulnerability and use it to their advantage, knowing that victims cannot safely report the crimes against them. If they do report, the victim may become the target of a prostitution or trafficking investigation. Or, the victim may be arrested, detained, and even deported due to an immigration violation.

- *Black, Indigenous, and racialized women and gender diverse people are vulnerable to structural and state abuse, exploitation and confinement; and they face structural violence and stigmatization at multiple state or state-funded institutions.*
- *Black, Indigenous and racialized women and gender diverse people, and refugees are under surveillance and criminalized across the justice, immigration, education, housing, employment/income security, social service and child welfare systems, and are disproportionately represented in incarcerated populations. All of these factors make it harder to seek support for, report, or leave an abusive situation.*
- *For women with disabilities have experienced emotional, financial, physical, sexual violence, or abuse: it will be vital for funders, policy makers and advocates to address the unique challenges faced by survivors with disabilities as well as ensuring that they are at the forefront of efforts to prevent and respond to gender-based violence.*



People don't care about incarcerated women or women in the justice system. These women are the least thought-about and most marginalized intersectional and diverse populations.

These are women who have been failed by the foster care system, victimized by violence, experiencing homelessness and poverty, the impacts of colonialism and racism (especially Indigenous women who are the fastest growing prison population in Canada)...This is frustrating because you're minimizing harm (which is important!) but you're not moving the system or changing it or impacting it." (Grantee)

3. The Less Visible Influences of the Ecosystem

Grantees also explored the influences of less obvious, informal institutional cultures, such as implicit biases based on race, gender and class that can impact the quality of treatment and service and unevenly generate access, benefits and privilege. This situation has been characterized as “poverty by postal code”: historical and persistent variations on the distribution of supports and services. Grantees stressed the negative impact of these systems on people’s mental health, and how decreased feelings of well-being and stability can create a spiral that undermines healing and rebuilding.

The end result is to perpetuate bias in the ecosystem; for instance, the oppression of Indigenous women continues (including the exponential over-representation of Indigenous women involved with the criminal justice system and racist child welfare processes).

CASE EXAMPLE: ONE WOMAN’S JOURNEY THROUGH THE ECOSYSTEM

As an illustration of the many intersecting challenges that one individual¹² can face within the policy and institutional context, we present an example drawing on a real-life situation reported to us by a grantee, identifying their responses to support this participant with access to her needs. We have highlighted here the main areas of services and policy regulations that she is expected to navigate.

GAPS AND TRAPS—ONE WOMAN’S JOURNEY

Ruby is an Indigenous woman, a single mother on social assistance who has limited work experience and is presently caring for two of her children who are both under the age of seven. In the past, she has self-medicated with substances to support her with the experience of partner abuse and other related traumas.

According to child welfare policies, housing must include a separate room for your children, and sharing should be only with similar ages and the same gender which meant that she would require a three-bedroom house. But the current housing market makes it both unaffordable and unrealistic for her to conform with these regulations in her socio-economic circumstances, so

she is living in below “standard” accommodation. Because of this, child welfare services are more involved in her life than she would like. So she chooses not to engage with these services and to move into a friend’s house and couch-surf with her children instead. Because she is couch-surfing, she has no “permanent address” to provide to the children’s school. As a result, child welfare becomes involved again.

By now in terrible stress, she has started using again. She wants to get into treatment, but because few treatment facilities allow women to take their children with them, she cannot find a place to go. She is also trying to have her name put on highest priority on a housing list (for women with experience of GBV). But according to social housing policy, she is not “really” at-risk of further abuse as her abuser is out of the city and she is presently living in the city. Since she is on social assistance, she is advised by her service provider to take a local free program to involve women in trades - and it even has a free pai apprenticeship!

But how can she possibly engage in or keep attending such a program without stable housing, childcare or adequate healthcare, and while caring for two kids under the age of seven?

¹² This case is based on an actual story that has been anonymized to protect the woman’s identity.

GAPS AND TRAPS—ONE WOMAN’S JOURNEY (CONTINUED)

Meanwhile, time is at a premium for her. And if her life circumstances change - for example, if she is pursued by her abuser - she may have to begin all over again with this tangled web of systems. And there will be huge repercussions for her in terms of accessibility, eligibility, income, basic needs, health and well-being and her ability to keep her children. A game of snakes and ladders, with more and longer snakes than ladders.

Systems involved:

Social assistance Child welfare

Social housing/ Housing programs for women with experience of GBV

Health/addictions/mental health and personal wellbeing

Job training programs/ quick-fix solutions offered that are inappropriate/impossible due to age and/or other life circumstances

Childcare

School system

Other related factors not explicitly included in this picture:

Food insecurity; inaccessibility of systems; literacy issues; lack of access to IT and a computer; benefits/entitlements missed as a result; and

Systemic racism and gender discrimination; colonial oppression; intergenerational poverty and disadvantage; adverse effects of social determinants of health.

THE GRANTEE ORGANIZATION WORKING WITH THIS PARTICIPANT PROVIDED

Anchor relationships:

One-on-one meetings; extensive emotional supports; drop-in referral; assistance with cleaning

her shelter unit when it was her “depression den”

Systems Navigation:

Escorts to doctors’ and Children’s Aid Society appointments

Advocacy to have her placed on the “high priority” housing list; assistance with deposits for housing

Connecting her with a warm referral at a local employment centre, rather than a trades-program focused on youth

Registering her kids locally at school using the grantee organization’s address; assisting with volunteers to drive them to school, so that she had breaks during day and they had stability during the week.

SLC's analysis has revealed that because these multiple systems fail to address the holistic picture of a person's situation, organizations end up playing the vital role of mediating between participants and systems.

They navigate and disentangle rules and regulations, and work to provide women's access to the separate and sometimes counter-opposing supports and entitlements along the different stages of building stability and security.

To do their highly specialized work effectively, they need to draw on their reserve of accumulated knowledge and expertise about the tangled policy and institutional web. They must constantly update the reserve, to keep up with changes to the ecosystem and the Vulnerability Context of a person's life journey. The magnitude of this endeavour is often not seen or recognized by others in the ecosystem. For example, a focus on results-based measurable outcomes can hide from some funders just how much time, effort and depth of experience and other resources are required to support participants to negotiate these many frustrating hoops and stumbling blocks.

As explored through their organizational assets and vulnerabilities, grantees themselves are struggling to keep afloat in an increasingly treacherous environment of unstable project-based funding; a host of exhausting rules and regulations; labour-intensive documentation and reporting; stretched and insufficiently resourced staff; and a lack of time and other resources to invest in advocacy for the GBV sector. The good news, however, is that because this Institutional and Policy Context is human-made and in constant flux, it can be changed to support women better as they rebuild their lives.

CONCLUSION

SLC's findings and learnings from the three phases of the Canadian Women's Foundation Rebuilding Lives initiative ultimately echo those of our RL literature scan, all of which further confirms to us how representative the 16 RL grantees likely were of the GBV sector across Canada. In acknowledgement of the trouble they took during extremely difficult times to share their experience and reflections with the evaluation team, we have included some powerful quotes here in their voice.

The participants served by grantees continue to work too hard simply to "Keep It Together". From the small sampling of participants reporting, we gathered that they did observe some growth in assets as a result of involvement in programs despite the increased precarity of lives and livelihoods during the pandemic. Yet systems and policies have continued to work against them, depleting their assets and endangering them and their families. As a consequence of the pandemic, fewer individuals could access programs, especially when their communities had to cope with shifting emergency orders and severe

The participants served by grantees continue to work too hard simply to "Keep It Together."

Yet systems and policies have continued to work against them, depleting their assets and endangering them and their families.

restrictions on access, as in the case of Indigenous reserves.

The grantee organizations also worked very hard to “Keep It Together” during and in the immediate post-pandemic period, hampered as they were by its multiple challenges over and above those of the pre-existing ecosystem.

“ We are seeing individuals coming forward in crisis versus ready to process trauma. The complexities of COVID... overwhelmed participants and they’re experiencing ...the consistent fact that there’s financial, housing issues, employment, wellness, and mental illness, then the trauma is still the root cause. There were 231 critical incidents last year (i.e., suicidal ideations or attempts). [Provincial supports] were closed for most of the pandemic... It did fall on our shoulders to make sure clients are surviving.” (Grantee)

“ Staff wellness and health is a top priority. Folks are dealing with a lot, our staff included. So many are overwhelmed.” (Grantee)

Challenges related to hiring and retaining staff created huge complications in service delivery and in full participation in the evaluation activities for the majority of grantees; a situation that persisted throughout the funding term. Grantees were driven to rely on their partners and community assets, along with adaptations to the realities of a pandemic which had exacerbated the many difficulties they and their participants already faced. Grappling with an increased workload, a new complexity of necessary supports and time management constraints, most of the grantees mentioned having to prioritize staff mental health just to get through.

Under these circumstances, they have achieved remarkable results with participants.

But their very dedication, agility, resourcefulness and resilience combine to mask the true precarity of the GBV sector. They are struggling to plan for and manage their organizations, and participate in projects such as this RL initiative, on top of their daily frontline work; and in a time of decreased staffing to address increased needs among those experiencing GBV.

Challenges related to hiring and retaining staff created huge complications in service delivery and in full participation in the evaluation activities for the majority of grantees; a situation that persisted throughout the funding term.

“ It has taken 20 years to figure out and have resources to have [participants] trust us enough to stay. Three years [of RL funding] is a short period... We are trying to build on the momentum and build on that trust that we have worked hard to build. We want to be able to build [this program] into a core program at [our organization]”
(Grantee)

“ We are literally scraping anywhere we can to help these women. Pivoting and using community resources has been an act of desperation at this point. We’re short on everything and we could definitely use additional staff members to help with programming. It sucks so I don’t know how we’ll fund things after RLE funding ends.”
(Grantee)

What they are expected to accomplish with such limited and often dwindling means directly reflects how the GBV sector is viewed and valued, and is in turn a dismal reflection of how people experiencing GBV are generally stigmatized and undervalued. Organizations are having to patch together these irregular and uncertain sources of funding to provide the evolving

continuum of wrap-around supports and services that have long been shown to be the most effective; precisely as participants must patch together what resources they can to build safer and more stable lives.

Meanwhile, all of the grantees are operating in a context where the web of services and supports designed to support people in need is itself in vital need of thorough review and fundamental restructuring and repair. This context simultaneously complicates the task of individuals seeking to rebuild their lives, and frustrates the efforts of organizations. It is yet more cruel to those whose intersecting identities - factors such as age, racism, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, status, etc. - combine to create additional barriers, leading to perpetuated dire poverty, personal danger, over-surveillance, and criminalization.

These organizations and the participants they serve are running a long distance race in tough conditions. The question remains at the end of this Rebuilding Lives initiative: What happens when the funding runs out?

Meanwhile, all of the grantees are operating in a context where the web of services and supports designed to support people in need is itself in vital need of thorough review and fundamental restructuring and repair.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

For over 20 years Canadian Women's Foundation has been striving to build and strengthen the services available to diverse individuals who have experienced GBV, yet the grantees and participants from the Rebuilding Lives initiative appear to be facing many of the same challenges as when the Foundation first began its work. The pandemic happened to strip bare quite how precarious the existing state of health of the GBV sector truly is, and how urgently it needs to be addressed.

Below are recommendations about how Canadian Women's Foundation can best amplify learnings from this small cluster of organizations to start some immediate concerted action for positive change.

1. ADVOCATE FOR LONG-TERM, ADEQUATE, AND FLEXIBLE CORE FUNDING

Place changes to the funding culture and system at the top of the list and increase funding amounts to acknowledge the real cost of these critical GBV services. Convey the message to all stakeholders and players in the ecosystem that short-term contracts and project-based funding cycles make it difficult if not impossible to sustain organizations or to offer their expert and passionate staff the salary and job security necessary for a sustainable livelihood. Make it clear that short-term is in the end short-sighted. It creates a false economy that results in often irreparable losses of people's lives and families and livelihoods, and of precious GBV organizational assets in all areas. This approach to funding will continue to deplete the GBV sector and aggravate the harm to our communities. When organizations cannot even sustain themselves, we also end up wasting the valuable investment in knowledge translation projects such as this RL initiative. Organizations need time and resources to engage in advocacy to remedy such profound socio-economic injustices, or they and their participants will continue to struggle to stay afloat in the current policy and institutional ecosystem.

Convey the message to all stakeholders and players in the ecosystem that short-term contracts and project-based funding cycles make it difficult if not impossible to sustain organizations or to offer their expert and passionate staff the salary and job security necessary for a sustainable livelihood.

2. DRAW ON THE STATUS OF CANADIAN WOMEN'S FOUNDATION TO SUPPORT AND AMPLIFY AWARENESS OF THE GRANTEE'S IMPORTANT WORK

Canadian Women's Foundation could draw on its status to amplify awareness of the grantee organizations' profiles and their work through leveraging its proximity to policymakers, and through social media. The Foundation could also identify and provide funding for a community of experts to support grantees' emerging needs in areas such as diversity and inclusion, trauma-informed support, continuing training on policies, grant writing, and partnership development. It could expand its areas of impact to include work related to financial literacy, accompanied by funding to support staff to do this work with participants.

Canadian Women's Foundation could also engage in supporting staff who are experiencing issues such as vicarious trauma, financial vulnerability, etc. due to the demands of their work. It could advocate more proactively for the better recognition of staff's invaluable expertise and the huge importance of stable human resources in the GBV sector, by exposing the consequences of the wage gap - both within the sector, and between public and not-for-profit entities. As a corollary to these recommendations, it should also continue in its efforts to adapt to the emerging needs of the diverse individuals served by the GBV sector, boosting and promoting the impact of its cultural relevance and leadership.

3. START WITH PRACTICAL STEPS TO STRENGTHEN THE ASSETS OF ORGANIZATIONS AND THE PARTICIPANTS THEY SERVE

Advocate for effective steps to ensure user-friendly access to services and supports for women with experience of GBV, including: child custody access; improved legal supports in the area of criminal justice and status; better disability supports; and greater security of income, status, and safe, affordable and decent housing. Investment must continue and be sustained to provide safe emergency escapes for those whose lives are in danger from GBV; and to keep offering quality violence prevention programs and trauma-informed supports. Organizations will need more investment in physical infrastructure, to provide their participants with access to stable, healthy facilities within their communities.

Advocate for effective steps to ensure user-friendly access to services and supports for women with experience of GBV, including: child custody access; improved legal supports in the area of criminal justice and status; better disability supports; and greater security of income, status, and safe, affordable and decent housing.

4. BUILD SOLIDARITY NETWORKS COLLECTIVELY TO RESIST THE STRUCTURAL ABANDONMENT OF SURVIVORS. INVOLVE WOMEN AND THE GBV SECTOR IN SHAPING SECTORAL LANGUAGE AND STRATEGIES OF ADVOCACY

Continue to bring together the voices of individuals with experience of GBV and those within the sector, and advocate more strategically for them to be heard and clearly understood by powerful players in the ecosystem. While promoting a feminist gender-plus focused analysis, it will be important for Canadian Women’s Foundation to keep listening to the voices of those on the frontlines.

Practitioners of GBV are expert communicators and know their participants best. Grantees recommended *“communicating in a relatable way so that folks do not struggle to ‘translate’ words used in programs and services”*. The more inaccessible the language and terminology, the less accountable organizational processes can become to those they are designed to serve.

Transparent and accessible language can also be the most transformative when seeking to reach and raise awareness about GBV with a broader audience.

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“

We don’t use the same language as Canadian Women’s Foundation, so there’s all this jargon that gets thrown around and it’s confusing based on the term. We know the concepts once they’re explained to us. [But] ‘gender-based’ and ‘feminist,’ it’s not the way we talk.”
(Grantee)

5. KEEP EDUCATING KEY PLAYERS IN THE POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL ECOSYSTEM ABOUT THE GBV SECTOR

As part of advocacy for the sector, decision-makers need to learn more about the unique ways in which individuals experience violence, and about the gaps and traps relating to services and supports, in order to make effective changes to policy. More specifically, there should be a focus on more widespread knowledge about GBV itself and what responses, programs and trainings are available for those who work in the systems often involved in people's journeys to escape violence and rebuild their lives, such as the healthcare, legal, and financial systems. For example, these professionals in their fields need to learn more about coercive control in relationships, and how to ensure that individuals are listened to, and believed, and treated with the respect they deserve.

6. INCREASED USE OF TRUST-BASED PHILANTHROPY MODEL

This RL evaluation has revealed the picture of a critically stretched GBV sector, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic. Immediate action is needed to prevent its weakening still further, with all of the tragic consequences to women experiencing violence, to their families and to communities. Our analysis of the policy and institutional ecosystem leads to the conclusion that more flexible and responsive models of funding are urgently required; both to circumvent the existing tangled regulatory context, and to allow those most knowledgeable about GBV issues to direct and allocate resources based on their experience and long-tested strategies. We therefore recommend that Canadian Women's Foundation continue adopting and/or adapting a trust-based philanthropy approach as explored here: <https://www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/>

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APPENDIX 1: GRANTEE ACTIONS TO MOVE THEIR ASSETS FORWARD

HUMAN ASSETS

Relating to organizational human resources, skills, and capacity to design and deliver programming (aggregate asset mapping average 7.6 out of 10 [N=16])

Remaining resilient and optimistic throughout the pandemic, and drawing upon their existing assets, grantees worked exceptionally hard to maintain their high-quality services in the face of multiple setbacks and hardships. While they continued to provide emergency responses in the second year of the pandemic, grantees were seeking to rebalance priorities and reintroduce the public education, violence prevention and social justice activities that they had to pause at the height of the crisis. Once the first complete lockdown was over, grantees moved rapidly to plan and launch innovative new programs and approaches in response to changing conditions.¹³ Common across the sector were innovations in the use of new communication technologies, home-based and hybrid staff work, and at-a-distance counselling. Grantees focused on building staff capacity through enhancing skills and adapting to new ways of engaging in counselling, advocacy, and financial capability programming.

SOCIAL ASSETS

Relating to organizations' connections and relationships (aggregate asset mapping average 7.4 out of 10 (N=16))

When there were signs of opening up from the pandemic restrictions, grantees focused their next steps on rebuilding these connections. Individual grantees want to engage in still more sharing of knowledge and effective practices/models of delivery, along with promoting more local research, and offering new forms of staff training. Participation in the Canadian Women's Foundation RL Community of Practice seems to have contributed to an interest in strengthening their partnership base and building new vertical and horizontal relationships to exchange knowledge and promote collective advocacy.¹⁴

¹³ Responding to participants' increased isolation and heightened rates of domestic violence was a critical challenge.

¹⁴ Many grantees spoke of a desire to grow their networks and alliances vertically (to expand the efficiency of networks with similar organizations, as co-partners to support women), as well as horizontally (strategies to expand up to the national to international level, with institutions, governments, private sector partnerships, etc.) to move forward and recover from the pandemic.

“ *Understanding the needs, issues, successes, and failures of organizations doing similar work in other areas around the world could potentially greatly improve the innovation, influence, and impact for all of our organizations.”* (Grantee)

Grantees wanted to learn more about stakeholder engagement related to COVID and to be involved in shaping the post-pandemic recovery, to ensure that new forms of service navigation and delivery would result in changes empowering to the women they serve. Changes identified include: engaging again in in-person services, such as individual counselling, peer groups, workshops, and group work, while continuing to offer hybrid work arrangements for staff.

FINANCIAL ASSETS

relating to organizational finance and sustainability (aggregate asset mapping average 6.5 out of 10 [N=16])

Grantees appreciated the emergency responses of funders that recognized the system-wide financial crisis created by the pandemic, and the new funding and increased flexibility offered to sustain their organizations. Plans going forward focused on the kinds of responses and strategies that many had identified in the assessment of their assets: a more sophisticated, planned response to professionalizing their fundraising, financial management and sustainability plans.

PHYSICAL & STRUCTURAL ASSETS

Relating to organizations’ operations, infrastructure and technology (aggregate asset mapping average 7.6 out of 10 [N=16])

Grantees have identified ways to leverage structural assets by dedicating funds to data management software and IT systems for tracking and planning infrastructure investments. They were also strategizing about how to use social media, chat spaces and updates to websites for this purpose.

The pandemic highlighted the need for an upgraded web presence (e.g., on social media), remote applications, and chat spaces. For some participants, the technology required for service delivery (e.g., Internet connectivity/broadband) is not available. Programs also have to address further concerns related to language of service, and access for those living with disabilities.

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*Physical and structural assets need to be: 1) Safe and safeguarded: including staff and buildings, vehicle, client data, access to our agency information; and 2) Sustainable: physical and structural assets need to be maintained to achieve the optimal lifespan. This is achieved by inventory tracking, program assessment, and evaluation.”
(Grantee)*

IDENTITY & MOTIVATIONAL ASSETS

Relating to organizations’ perspective, politics, culture and vision (aggregate asset mapping average 6.6 out of 10 [N=16])

Grantees expressed a desire to communicate their purpose more clearly. They outlined plans to enhance their identity through better communication strategies to promote their services and strengthen community connections and support. Yet as they noted, the challenge of maintaining participants’ confidentiality and privacy while marketing the organization can be a balancing act.