

# Violence Against Women (VAW) Program's Intersectional Feminist Statement

The aim of Family Service Toronto's Violence against Women (VAW) program is to promote non-violence and to work towards the eventual elimination of violence against women. Underpinning all our violence against women work are the philosophies of feminism and of intersectionality and are implemented within an anti-oppressive, trauma and violence informed approach.

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## Feminism

*"Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression"*  
(Bell Hooks)

*"Feminism isn't about making women stronger, women are already strong, it's about changing the way the world perceives that strength"* (G. Anderson)

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## Key intersectional feminist principles:

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### 1. Woman Identified

*"A woman should not be identified by the dress she wears but by the heart she adheres"*  
(Sayantika Bhattacharya)

- a. Woman-identified includes both trans and cis women
- b. Seeing women's experiences through a woman's lens/eyes

#### How we implement this in our work:

- In our programs and services, trans women and cis women are included under the term 'woman'
- Both staff and clients identify as a woman
- Job postings state 'woman-identified' applicants or 'lived experience' as a woman
- Clients have a right to self-identify if they choose to and VAW Counsellors will advocate for this right

## 2. Recognizing Intersectionality

*“The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, as they apply to women, are regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. By adding the idea of intersectionality to feminism, this movement becomes truly inclusive, and allows women of all races, economic standings, religions, identities and orientations for their voices to be heard” (Kimberle Crenshaw)*

- a. Intersectionality – how a woman's experience is also determined by her race, class, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, faith, and gender identity
- b. Using an anti-racist and anti-oppressive approach recognizes that woman experience both privilege and oppression
- c. Regardless of a woman's social location, women can experience all forms of violence including racism, sexism and other oppressive isms

### Examples of how we implement this:

- We don't make assumptions that we know a woman's experience, as we are all different
- A woman's social location is always considered during counselling and client assessments
- A counsellor, when relevant, informs the client of her own social location
- Women have the right to choose the language she prefers, for counselling purposes. This may be her first language or not. If this language is not spoken by an available counsellor, we will provide an interpreter.
- We do not assume that all women would want a counsellor who is from their own community and will offer alternative counsellors.
- We endeavor to partner with other community agencies, including those that are culturally and linguistically specific.
- We use accessible language in therapy and advocate for the use of clear language on forms and flyers
- We use physically accessible rooms and spaces (internal and externally) and are ready to accommodate (i.e. Braille, ASL) as required.

## 3. Trauma and Violence Informed Approach

*“This approach is built upon a foundational understanding of the impact that trauma and violence have on women's lives, health and behaviours” (Dept of Justice, BC)*

This approach....

- a. realizes the widespread impact of trauma on women who have experienced violence;
- b. emphasizes a woman's history of past and ongoing violence as the cause of the trauma;
- c. avoids seeing the problem as only a woman's psychological state;
- d. understands potential paths for recovery;

- e. recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved within the Gender-based Violence/Violence Against Women system;
- f. responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and seeks to actively resist *re-traumatization* (adapted from SAMHSA)

#### How we implement these principles:

- Supervisors will understand the possibility of staff experiencing vicarious trauma, and will ensure their staff have a balanced workload and will promote self-care
- We endeavour to create a safe and supportive environment (physical, emotional, spiritual and cultural) for clients who identify as a woman and advocate for a trauma informed approach both at the service and system level

## 4. Understanding that personal is the political, which furthers social change

*“Human rights are women’s rights and women’s rights are human rights, once and for all” (Hillary Clinton)*

- a. The experiences of women are rooted in their political situation and gender inequality
- b. Discrimination, marginalization, and stigma remain an ongoing experience for many women within systems such as child protection, health care and criminal justice.

#### How we implement this:

- We work to change systems that oppress women, and help women overcome systemic and societal barriers
- We actively advocate for social change and the elimination of systemic barriers through participating in coalitions, rallies and events such as Take Back the Night and women’s marches on poverty and oppression
- We contextualize societal norms with clients
- We support women to self-advocate and join advocacy groups
- In counselling we work with women to identify their strengths, help them heal from the violence and trauma they experience, and support them to take control of their lives.
- In order to further social change, we endorse and implement public awareness campaigns and hold conferences open to the general public, on the issue of GBV.
- We support clients and others, by sharing tools and support, when current culture and social media shares news that can be triggering.

## 5. Empowerment of Women: Recognizing women are experts of their own lives

*"Empowered Women, Empower Women" (Lindsay Leifken)*

- a. Women have the inherent right to reclaim power and control over their own lives
- b. Women have the right to choose
- c. Information and knowledge, as well as societal context for women's issues, all bring women power and should not be withheld by service providers.

### How we implement this:

- We provide women and their community with critical information (their rights, the law, impact of trauma etc) to support them to make the choice that is in the best interests of themselves and their family
- Our VAW services are client centered and directed
- We ensure that VAW clients understand why counsellor's write notes and they understand they have the right to see their notes
- We explain feminist principles to clients
- We encourage and support women to speak out about services and systems that they deem oppressive.
- Our clients not only receive counselling, but also key information and relevant education, both on a one to one basis and through information sessions and educational workshops
- We use a strength-based approach
- We believe that women have the choice to stop or change their counselling modality or counsellor, to ensure 'right fit'.
- We meet women where they're at in their healing journey
- Women decide on what they want to accomplish and what they want to disclose in counselling
- Emotional awareness gives space for emotions and other forms of expression
- We recognize that peer support is a powerful model where women can support, educate, inform and connect with each other.
- VAW staff training includes information related to intersectional feminism and uses a trauma and violence informed anti-oppression lens

## 6. Working collaboratively

*"I can promise that when women work together, linked, informed and educated, it can bring peace and prosperity to this forsaken planet"*

Isabel Allende

### How we implement this:

- The VAW team works together and supports each other through team and peer meetings
- We encourage women clients to work together through peer support
- In community we encourage partnerships with other like-minded agencies

- VAW team members collaborate with others through networks and coalitions
- Counsellors and community staff encourage women to give input and feedback regarding programs and materials
- We are committed to continued education in order to provide clients with choices in terms of counselling modality.

## We abide by our feminist principals when using different counselling modalities such as:

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### Frameworks & Approaches

#### Trauma-Informed Practice

Trauma-Informed Practice realizes “the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization.” (SAMHSA)

#### Intersectional Feminist Framework

An Intersectional Feminist Framework identifies “the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, as they apply to women, are regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. By adding the idea of intersectionality to feminism, this movement becomes truly inclusive, and allows women of all races, economic standings, religions, identities and orientations for their voices to be heard.” (Kimberle Crenshaw)

#### Anti-Oppressive/Anti-Racist Framework

“Anti-Oppression work seeks to recognize the oppression that exists in our society and attempts to mitigate its affects and eventually equalize the power imbalance in our communities.” (Anti-Violence Project)

"Anti-racism is the active process of identifying and eliminating racism by changing systems, organizational structures, policies and practices and attitudes, so that power is redistributed and shared equitably." (NAC International Perspectives: Women and Global Solidarity)

#### Attachment based approach

An attachment-based approach to therapy looks at the connection between an infant's early attachment experiences with primary caregivers, and the infant's ability to develop normally, and ultimately form healthy emotional and physical relationships as an adult. It can help clients mend or recover from fractured family relationships

## Strengths-Based Approach

A Strengths-Based Approach “focuses more on your internal strengths and resourcefulness, and less on weaknesses, failures, and shortcomings.” (Psychology Today)

## Harm Reduction Approach

“Harm Reduction is an evidence-based, client-centred approach that seeks to reduce the health and social harms associated with addiction and substance use, without necessarily requiring people who use substances from abstaining or stopping.” (Canadian Mental Health Association)

## Treatment Modalities & Interventions

### Narrative Therapy

“Narrative therapy seeks to be a respectful, non-blaming approach to counselling and community work, which centres people as the experts in their own lives. It views problems as separate from people and assumes people have many skills, competencies, beliefs, values, commitments and abilities that will assist them to reduce the influence of problems in their lives.” (The Dulwich Centre)

### Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

“CBT is a psychotherapy that is based on the cognitive model: the way that individuals perceive a situation is more closely connected to their reaction than the situation itself. One important part of CBT is helping clients change their unhelpful thinking and behavior that lead to enduring improvement in their mood and functioning.” (The Beck Institute)

### Solution-Focused Therapy

Solution-Focused Therapy “is future-focused, goal-directed, and focuses on solutions, rather than on the problems that brought clients to seek therapy” (Institute for Solution-Focused Therapy)

### Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (DBT)

“Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) provides clients with new skills to manage painful emotions and decrease conflict in relationships.” (Psychology Today)

### Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT)

“Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) is a short-term form of therapy that focuses on adult relationships and attachment/bonding. The therapist and clients look at patterns in the relationship and take steps to create a more secure bond and develop more trust to move the relationship in a healthier, more positive direction.” (Psychology Today)

### Motivational Interviewing (MI)

“Motivational interviewing is a counseling method that helps people resolve ambivalent feelings and insecurities to find the internal motivation they need to change their behavior. It is a practical, empathetic, and short-term process that takes into consideration how difficult it is to make life changes.” (Psychology Today)

## Sensorimotor Psychotherapy

*“Sensorimotor Psychotherapy is a style of therapy that is aimed at the treatment of PTSD. This technique uses “physical modification” (massage and body movement) at the “sensorimotor” level (the level at which the body and emotions connect). This approach postulates that traumatic memories are stored in the muscles and nerves and these memories can be treated and released through releasing the stored tension.” (Alley Dog)*

## Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IPT)

*“Interpersonal psychotherapy (IPT) is a form of psychotherapy that focuses on relieving symptoms by improving interpersonal functioning. A central idea in IPT is that psychological symptoms can be understood as a response to current difficulties in everyday relationships with other people.” (CAMH)*

## Expressive Arts Therapy

*“Expressive arts therapy combines psychology and the creative process to promote emotional growth and healing. This multi-arts, or intermodal, approach to psychotherapy and counseling uses our inborn desire to create—be it music, theater, poetry, dance, or other artistic form—as a therapeutic tool to help initiate change.” (Psychology Today)*

## Mindfulness Training

*“Mindfulness is a way of paying attention to whatever is happening in our lives, inside and out, in the present moment. When we connect with the present, we become aware of habitual patterns of thought, emotion and behaviour.” (The Centre for Mindfulness Studies)*