

Project History

The idea for this work began in September 1997 when the Durham Family Court Clinic initiated a meeting to begin a community discussion about custody and access issues. A primary concern raised by participants during the initial meetings was the treatment and safety of women and children in the custody and access proceedings when woman abuse was involved. A decision was made to apply for funding for a research and community response project to explore this issue with women who had survived abusive relationships and experienced custody and access proceedings.

The original group was designated as the Community Coalition (Refer to [Appendix A](#) for a list of Members of the Community Coalition). A Steering Committee was established to oversee and organize this project when initial funding was obtained from The Ontario Women's Directorate. As the project developed, Status of Women Canada provided additional funding.

The overall objectives of the Custody and Access Project are:

To explore avenues for systemic change in order to help ensure the safety of women and children who have left an abusive relationship and are dealing with custody and access issues.

To develop action plans in consultation with survivors and key stakeholders to develop commitments for change in areas such as social development, policy effectiveness, encouraging legislative change, increasing national networking and public education.

To provide a forum offering woman abuse survivors the opportunity to come together to generate social support and development as a united group, rather than acting as isolated individuals.

In 1998 and early 1999, focus group research was conducted in which 52 woman abuse survivors offered detailed input, insight and testimonials around their experiences with custody and access issues. Along with an extensive literature review, these findings were summarized in the report "**In the Centre of the Storm - 52 Women Speak Out**". One of the following sections contains this report.

Members of the Community Coalition continued to meet, increasing their understanding of each agency's parameters, modes of operation and concerns about custody and access issues.

On March 23, 1999 and March 25, 1999 the **Steps for Change Conference** was held with participation from more than 200 community members and with active participation and presentations from focus group participants (woman abuse survivors). As part of the conference, members of the Steering Committee and the Community Coalition cooperated in facilitating seven working groups to look at findings of the research and potential solutions for problems and difficulties raised by the survivors. One of the following sections summarizes the conference and the resulting recommendations.

Based on recommendations from the conference and in consultation with focus group participants, four working groups were established*:

Luke's Place (Resource Centre) to look at establishing a resource centre available to woman abuse survivors dealing with custody and access issues;

Task Force on Court, Police and Legal Issues to coordinate systems for more effective wording and enforcement of custody and access orders and explore other issues within these systems;

Woman Abuse Review Committee to establish a multi-disciplinary accountability network for the purpose of collaboration on woman abuse cases and related issues; and

4. *Lawyers' Working Group* to look at Best Practice Guidelines for lawyers in custody and access cases involving woman abuse.

There are more than 60 representatives involved in these four working groups from a broad range of community agencies including the Court system, social service agencies, Durham Regional Police, survivors of woman abuse, shelters, Children's Aid Society, Supervised Access Centre, and many others. Following are reports and recommendations from each of these working groups.



It is important to recognize that the work presented here is **work in progress** as opposed to a final product. Each committee is dealing with a complexity of issues and requires further discussion, consultation, and action on their work. Further funding has been obtained from the Ontario Trillium Foundation that includes continuing on with the work of these groups. It is our hope that our work to this point as summarized in this report will provide important input and food for thought on these important issues.