

A report on how entrepreneurship, combined with peer support, can provide innovative opportunities for women to achieve financial independence and sustainable livelihoods as they move forward from violence.

Entrepreneurship with Peer Support:

An Innovative Approach to VAW Service

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Shannon Stanley is a Peer Support Advocate and participant in the One Spark Entrepreneurship Program. She has been drawing from her personal experience as a survivor of domestic abuse, and her exceptional knowledge of complex systems navigation, to provide in-depth assistance to women impacted by violence on a volunteer basis for the past decade. Through One Spark's Entrepreneurship Program, Shannon developed her peer support experience into a business concept and registered her peer advocacy and systems navigation company called Ginger SNAPS (Systems Navigation and Peer Support). Her goal is to highlight the evidence-based benefits and outcomes of peer support and to assist organizations to incorporate peer support into their programs and services.

INTRODUCTION: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH

One Spark was founded in 2013 as a response to the critical affordable housing crisis in Ontario and its specific impact on women experiencing violence in their relationships. In the words of the Ontario Association of Interval and Transitional Housing (OAITH) in their 2009 Response to the Long-Term Affordable Housing Strategy Consultation, “Quite simply, women are in danger if they are unable to secure safe, affordable housing in a timely way. Women have died as a result”. OAITH goes on to say:

Without housing, women must remain with or return to abusers—or become homeless. Homeless women experience up to 10 times the death rate of housed women. Given the deterioration in housing availability and access since the mid-1990s in Ontario, women’s housing ‘options’ are increasingly unstable and unsafe, giving rise to discrimination and harassment in many situations.ⁱ

Additionally, OAITH notes that “violence becomes both the cause of homelessness, and the result.

Miloon Kothari, UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, in reports to the UN, has identified the need for housing programs and strategies that focus on housing for women, and in particular for women facing multiple forms of discrimination and vulnerability. He has noted the link between violence against women and housing, for example, saying: “...the reciprocal relationship between violence against women and women’s adequate housing can make women more vulnerable to various forms of violence and, conversely, violence against women can lead to the violation of women’s rights to adequate housing.”ⁱⁱ

Housing access issues involve layers of complexity and extend well beyond the number of available rent-geared-to-income units: new, flexible models of housing assistance are emerging, and housing policies and programs are increasingly tailored to local contexts necessitating increasingly sophisticated analysis of housing realities across the province. Having said that, the following 2016 statistics published by the Ontario Non-Profit Housing Association, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. provide a broad overview of key elements of the housing shortage.ⁱⁱⁱ

AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN ONTARIO BY THE NUMBERS, 2016

171,360: NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS WAITING FOR RENT-GEARED-TO-INCOME HOUSING IN 2015.

45,000: INCREASE IN NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS WAITING SINCE 2003.

3.9: AVERAGE NUMBER OF YEARS A HOUSEHOLD WAITS FOR AN ASSISTED UNIT.

82,414: NUMBER OF TORONTO HOUSEHOLDS WAITING FOR AN AFFORDABLE UNIT.

8.4: AVERAGE NUMBER OF YEARS A TORONTO HOUSEHOLD WAITS FOR AN AFFORDABLE UNIT.

\$1,274: AVERAGE RENT FOR TWO-BEDROOM APARTMENT IN TORONTO IN OCTOBER 2015.

Although women fleeing violence are designated as special priority on subsidized housing wait lists, they must meet specific criteria to be eligible and the wait times (in Toronto) are, on average, 10 months. As of September 2016, there were 1,500 households on the special priority wait list.

Recognizing that a commitment to an increased affordable housing supply plays a critical role in alleviating the current need, One Spark was founded on the principle of considering how supports that could lead to incremental income generation for women could contribute to a sustainable solution: entrepreneurship and self-employment were seen as potential solutions that could be more immediately available to women as an alternative to facing ongoing violence and danger as they wait out the requisite time to access affordable housing.

BARRIERS TO LEAVING VIOLENT RELATIONSHIPS

To understand the inherent dangers women face when in violent relationships, it is important to understand that there are many complex reasons women may stay or go back to abusive relationships (*Source Canadian Women's Foundation*):^{iv}

- Women often stay because the abuser has threatened to kill them if they leave, or to kill himself, or to kill the children. Women believe these threats for good reason—the most dangerous time for an abused woman is when she attempts to leave her abuser:
 - About 26% of all women who are murdered by their spouse had left the relationship.
 - In one study, half of the murdered women were killed within two months of leaving the relationship.
 - Women are 6 times more likely to be killed by an ex-partner than by a current partner.
 - Many women say that they were abused by a partner after the relationship ended, and that the violence escalated following a break-up.
- Some women stay because they have strong beliefs about keeping the family together. Sometimes, relatives or in-laws blame the woman for the violence and insist she stay.
- Some women stay because the abuser has threatened to harm or kill a household pet. In one study, 57% of survivors of domestic violence had their pet killed by an abusive partner.
- The mental health consequences of abuse can make it difficult for women to leave a relationship. Sixty-four per cent of abused women exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- Domestic abuse is often a gradual process, with the frequency of assaults and seriousness of the violence slowly escalating over time. Since abusers often express

deep remorse and promise to change, it can take years for women to admit that the violence will never stop and the relationship is unsalvageable. The long-term experience of being abused can destroy a woman's self-confidence, making it more difficult for her to believe that she deserves better treatment, that she can find the courage to leave, or that she can manage on her own.

FINANCIAL BARRIERS TO ESCAPING VIOLENCE

While there is complexity to and intersection of the multiple reasons a woman may stay in a violent relationship or return to her abuser, one of the most prevalent barriers to escaping violence is a woman's financial dependence on their partner: leaving an abusive relationship may involve the untenable choice between violence and poverty. Economic instability has been identified as one of the most influential factors preventing women from leaving abusive relationships.^v For women who work outside the home and for those who do not, economic losses associated with leaving can be crippling.^{vi} The loss of belongings, home, salary, health, and dental benefits are examples of the burden a woman must carry with her the moment she leaves.

Statistically, the trade-off between poverty and safety is well documented: women who leave a partner to raise children on their own are five times more likely to be poor than if they had stayed. More than 1.5 million women in Canada live on a low income, and approximately 1 in 5 single mothers in Canada live on a low income.

In short, economic self-sufficiency can be the critical difference between violence and safety for women experiencing abuse.

Shannon's Perspective

Domestic violence does not discriminate: it knows no boundaries. It can affect any woman regardless of age, ethnicity, social or economic class. Many women make several attempts to leave, but end up returning due to economic reasons.

Living in abusive situations impact women on so many levels. The magnitude can be incomprehensible for those who have not experienced it. Leaving sounds way easier than it really is. Physical injuries may heal, but psychological and emotional wounds take longer to heal and can leave lasting scars. Trauma is a reality for women impacted by violence, yet proper counseling, psychotherapy, and treatment are out of reach due to the lack of affordable resources.

Trying to leave is difficult, even if the woman is employed. It is not as simple as packing up and leaving. There are many cases where there is no time for planning and women are forced to leave with little or nothing. Maintaining employment can be unsafe or physically/emotionally impossible for some women. Often, women will reach out to VAW services to provide assistance during this difficult time.

Economic self-sufficiency can be the difference between violence and safety for women.

While accessing service, most women recognize that, although our situations may differ, we are often left with the same choices when transitioning out of the situation. The majority of women cannot immediately return to work - or seek work - and end up applying for social assistance while in shelter to have some form of income to plan her next steps.

Depending on the woman's situation, social assistance may be foreign territory for her and a complex system to navigate. My experience with social assistance brought me to the realization that I was choosing poverty for safety. I could not adequately prepare myself for the many barriers that would present themselves as I tried to start my life over.

The meager amounts of social assistance limit the type of housing that a woman can seek. Social housing waitlists are upwards of two years in some communities. Some women are forced to live beyond their means in market rent apartments and go without money for food, bills, transportation, etc.

The struggles of living in poverty can perpetuate problems and lead to other issues. A woman can leave a violent situation, only to end up living in a different form of crisis. In fact, she often faces ongoing crisis and a rut of needing to rely on systems and agencies to get by....and never get ahead.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP: AN INNOVATIVE RESPONSE

With the goal of fostering an innovative approach to ensuring women have the financial and economic means to move forward from violence and, specifically, to afford housing and other basic needs, One Spark has focused on the income-generating opportunities presented by self-employment and entrepreneurship.

As noted in the overview of the Verizon Wireless Domestic Violence Entrepreneurship Program,

There is a strong likelihood that many domestic violence survivors...are particularly well-positioned to benefit from self-sufficiency programs that focus on entrepreneurship models over traditional job-training options. Domestic violence survivors have well developed strong coping and problem solving skills, many were employed prior to violence, and all have a strong incentive to be self-sufficient and violence free. The successful development of a home or small business can bring increased control over their working lives, create important financial and social opportunities for them, and help ensure the survivor's long-term safety and stability.^{vii}

In their report for the U.S. Department of Justice, "Supporting Survivors in Business and Entrepreneurship", Sarah Gonzalez Budinski and Alona Del Rosario highlight that

Like many women entrepreneurs, survivors of sexual and domestic violence often face many misconceptions about their strength, ability and resilience. When it comes to day to day reality of living with and/or managing a relationship with an abusive partner, many advocates suggest that survivors employ the same skills exhibited by the most successful CEOs- calculated risk taking, thoughtful action, tough-mindedness, the ability to read people, and determination. Growing interest in entrepreneurship as a pathway to economic security and independence has led some domestic violence programs to develop trauma-informed business development programs that provide an array of supports such as small grants or loans, training and education, business planning, networking and mentorship, while providing supportive counseling and advocacy.^{viii}

They go on to note that

Gaining financial independence is one of the most effective ways for women to break the long-term hold of domestic abuse and violence on their lives. When women control their access to fundamentals like food, clothing and shelter, they control their circumstances, futures, and fate. They are more able to leave and more able to stay out of abusive relationships, ensure the wellbeing of their children and break the multi-generational cycles of abuse, experts say. Less recognized, is the role that entrepreneurship can play in women gaining that financial freedom.^{ix}

In short, entrepreneurship offers an effective path to economic independence, safety, and healing.

BUILDING MULTIPLE FORMS OF CAPITAL THROUGH ENTREPRENEURSHIP

One Spark's Entrepreneurship model incorporates the understanding that a woman's transition from poverty and sustainable livelihood requires that she build multiple forms of capital that will provide a strong foundation over the long term. In addition to financial assets, we have seen that participation in the One Spark program has additionally built critical personal assets such as self confidence and self esteem, as well as knowledge and skills that enhance employability, and – through the incorporation of peer support – One Spark is working to build the critical social assets required to work towards sustainable livelihoods. The impact of building multiple assets has best been summarized by the Canadian Women's Foundation Sustainable Livelihoods Framework:

The Sustainable Livelihoods framework is based upon the concept that women are vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion when they have a limited range of assets. Assets are the building blocks of a sustainable livelihood. When women are supported to create the conditions for economic participation they can build their assets and gradually begin to transition out of poverty and towards a sustainable livelihood, which we define as “long-term financial security.” At this point, their livelihood is sustainable over the long term because they have developed a strong foundation of assets, making them much less vulnerable to falling back into poverty. A woman's assets are largely determined by the context in which she lives: her personal circumstances and the external policies and institutions that shape her economic choices.

There are five types of assets that combine to create a holistic picture of women's resources and capabilities:

- 1. Physical Assets: Access to housing, food, plus the information and services required to build a livelihood. If physical assets are inadequate, it is extremely difficult to build other assets.**
- 2. Social Assets: Connections, networks, and contacts. By building a foundation of new social assets, women enhance their personal support systems and make it easier to develop other assets and achieve their goals.**
- 3. Personal Assets: One's sense of personal and cultural identity and the motivation and strength to achieve personal transformation. This includes self-confidence and self-esteem, and personal values and beliefs.**
- 4. Human Assets: Capabilities that enhance employability, such as knowledge, skills, education, and leadership. Health is another important human asset that affects women's ability to participate in the economy. Although Human Assets are central to all livelihood strategies, on their own they are not sufficient to ensure a sustainable livelihood.**
- 5. Financial Assets: Earnings from employment, government benefits, other income, savings, possessions, and financial literacy. Financial assets are important entry points to transformation and development. The ability to earn money and decide how it should be spent provides women with a powerful way to reverse the downward spiral into poverty and build her assets (financial and other).***

Shannon's Perspective

Entrepreneurship could play a valuable role to women who have been impacted by violence.

First and foremost, by providing a way of generating an income to allow a woman to be self-sufficient and violence free.

I see entrepreneurship as a welcome option to what has traditionally been offered to women impacted by violence: an alternative to the struggle that living in poverty and/or on social assistance creates. It is a human and dignified experience that can eliminate shame and stigma and the traumatization of re-telling the story of abuse.

Women who have lived in abusive situations often feel powerless and hopeless. When forced to make the choice of poverty for safety, those feelings of powerlessness can be perpetuated by our systems. Women continue to feel like they are not in control of their lives and constantly have to re-tell their stories to get their needs met, essentially retraumatizing herself each time. Systems and services for those in poverty are not always designed to work together and can not only be frustrating and difficult to navigate, but can further marginalize some women.

Abuse in any form can make a woman feel tiny and worthless and not in control of her life. It can take away much more than material things such as confidence, self esteem, purpose, and the ability to believe in oneself. Entrepreneurship programs entail a great deal of self exploration. This process can be instrumental in helping a woman to value herself and her worth while regaining her voice and power.

Survivors seem to have natural entrepreneurial spirits. Attributes like courage, strength, resilience, critical thinking, problem solving and determination make survivors a great fit for entrepreneurship. Participation in an entrepreneurship program can help a woman celebrate these attributes rather than dwell on why these skills were developed. It can help her discover her gifts or talents and help her create a plan to generate an income from them. The process of self exploration, creating a business plan and promoting one's self is also a valuable healing experience. The sense of regaining one's power and working toward future goals can potentially change the future story for many women. It can also help to reduce the cycle back to abuse.

All Canadians pay a steep price for violence against women. It's estimated that each year, Canadians collectively spend \$7.4 billion to deal with the aftermath of spousal violence alone, according to Justice Canada. This figure includes immediate costs, such as emergency room visits and related costs, such as loss of income. It also includes tangible costs such as funerals, and intangible costs such as pain and suffering. (The Facts About Violence Against Women: canadianwomen.org)

Alternative options such as entrepreneurship could potentially reduce the case loads of some services and agencies. Entrepreneurship programs can provide an uplifting, dignified experience that allow a woman (impacted by violence) to find a way to financially meet her needs without judgement, shame, stigma, or traumatization. As a successful entrepreneur, a woman can continue to heal, move forward, and truly rise above all that she has been through. Regaining confidence and her power each step of the way can greatly reduce the probability of returning to an unhealthy relationship.

THE ROLE OF PEER SUPPORT

As One Spark works to ensure optimal support for the women we work with, our goal is to provide a support system that will maximize a woman's opportunities to build multiple forms of capital and ultimately become financially independent. Peer support is an integral component of holistic wrap-around services, particularly for women who have experienced trauma.

As noted in the American National Center for Trauma Informed Care's (NCTIC) guidebook, "Engaging Women in Trauma-Informed Peer Support",

Scientific findings confirm that trauma affects the mind and body and can have a lasting impact. One study looked at the "adverse childhood experiences" (ACEs) of about 17,000 people enrolled in an HMO, correlating their "ACE score" with a range of medical and social problems. The relationships are staggering. People with high ACE scores are much more likely to develop mental health problems, abuse substances, have chronic physical illnesses, and die early. Women are significantly more likely than men to have high ACE scores.^{xi}

The guidebook goes on to say,

Adverse events can impact people in two ways. First, trauma affects the developing brain and body and alters the body's natural stress response mechanisms. Second, trauma increases health risk behaviors such as smoking, drinking, over-eating, and engaging in risky sex—things that trauma survivors sometimes do to cope. Recognizing these behaviors as coping responses rather than "bad choices" is essential to an effective peer support relationship. Over time, trauma can alter everything about a person's life and behavior. Because it shatters trust and safety and leaves people feeling powerless, trauma can lead to profound disconnection from others. Survivors may always be on guard or feel overwhelming despair. Coping mechanisms can become habits that are hard to quit. Trauma can lead to problems at home, at school, or at work.^{xii}

In the U.S., a national dialogue about women, violence and trauma was stimulated by a series of national conferences and the Women Co-Occurring Disorders and Violence Study (WCDVS), a five-year Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The study explored the interrelation among violence, trauma, and co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders among women, provided recommendations for trauma-integrated services for these women, and sparked the development of guiding principles for positive change. These efforts emphasized peer support, the re-traumatization that too often happens within service systems, and the importance of focusing on gender.^{xiii}

Peer support is increasingly being recognized as an effective and impactful model of working with individuals that are facing personal and systemic challenges and barriers to achieve positive outcomes. The peer support movement is grounded in principles of mutuality, reciprocity, non-judgmental respect, and empathy, all of which can counter the negative impacts of trauma and support healing. Trauma-informed peer support offers opportunities for relationships to be based upon power-sharing and transparency and are consistent with the values of women's advocacy.

Peer support is a system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful. Peer support is not based on psychiatric models and diagnostic criteria. It is about understanding another's situation empathically through the shared experience of emotional and psychological pain. When people find affiliation with others they feel are "like" them, they feel a connection. This connection, or affiliation, is a deep, holistic understanding based on mutual experience where people are able to "be" with each other without the constraints of traditional (expert/patient) relationships. Further, as trust in the relationship builds, both people are able to respectfully challenge each other when they find themselves in conflict. This allows members of the peer community to try out new behaviours with one another and move beyond previously held self-concepts built on disability and diagnosis. The Stone Centre refers to this as "mutual empowerment".^{xiv}

As described in the NCTIC's guidebook,

Research on peer support has consistently shown that people benefit by participating. Ed Knight, a researcher with mental health and substance abuse histories, reviewed the findings of six peer support studies. He reported that people with serious psychiatric diagnoses get great benefit from being part of peer support activities. Emotional distress and substance use problems decrease. Participants do not have as many crises and are hospitalized less often. Peer support participants feel better about themselves and have more social skills and broader networks of friends. Other studies have had similar results. These include improvements in self-esteem, hopelessness, and inner strength. Participants also report greater awareness of their rights and social justice issues and greater feelings of empowerment.^{xv}

In its 2010 report, "Making the Case for Peer Support", the Mental Health Commission of Canada noted that, "Research knowledge, as well as the knowledge gained from the lived experience of people who take part in peer support, shows the remarkable improvements in people's lives that can occur even with relatively small investments".^{xvi} The report goes on to say that "A growing body of literature has increasingly been able to demonstrate positive outcomes for peer support in the context of self-help groups, consumer-run organizations and services, as well as peer specialists in mainstream services".^{xvii}

The conclusion of the Mental Health Commission is that "Peer support works. Peer support is effective." Furthermore, it was concluded that:

- People with lived experience of mental health problems or illnesses can offer huge benefits to each other.
- The development of personal resourcefulness and self-belief, which is the foundation of peer support, can not only improve people's lives but can also reduce the use of formal mental health, medical and social services. By doing so, peer support can save money.
- Canadian research has contributed significantly to our knowledge base. Several experimental and quasi-experimental studies have demonstrated not only the benefits to individuals involved, but also to the mental health system and

communities by saving millions of tax-payers dollars through reducing the use of the most expensive types of services.^{xviii}

One of the most extensive available reports on the impact of peer support in working with women with lived experience of violence was published by Christchurch Women's Refuge in New Zealand ("Reframing the Journey from Lived Experience of Domestic Violence", 2012).

This report highlights that the literature related to peer support outcomes identifies numerous benefits for clients from working with peer support specialists. The following is an excerpt from the report:

Davidson et al., (2006) in their review of various peer support services among individuals with severe mental illness suggested that such services have the potential to offer users exposure to "hope, information and coping and problem-solving skills in a supportive, accepting, and empathetic milieu." Particular benefits include:

Acceptance, Empathy, and Respect: Campbell & Leaver (2003) explain that one of the key benefits for clients is that the peer support specialist has greater perceived empathy for them and their situation. Clay (2005) describes this empathy as a deep compassion which in turn builds a trusting relationship where the client is not pathologized, but rather accepted. This acceptance creates a positive environment for the client to share their innermost thoughts and feelings. This in turn provides the peer support specialist with the opportunity to highlight the client's strengths, capabilities, skills, and abilities, rather than focusing on their pathological weaknesses.

Sharing Effective Strategies for Recovery and Fostering Hope: Mead et al. (2003) suggest that when the peer support specialist and the client interact they identify a 'like' lived experience and this in turn enables a strong connection to be made. This connection, it is suggested, is what enables the worker to offer suggestions and recovery tips in a credible manner that is more readily accepted by the client. Moreover, this connection also makes it possible for the client to try out different strategies in a safe and controlled manner with the support of their fellow peer (Mead et al., 2003). Clay (2005) states that by sharing their own experiences the peer support specialist provides a credible role model for the client to show recovery is possible. This sharing of experiences offers the client encouragement and an avenue for picking up practical assistance to aide their own recovery.

Empowerment: A foundation principle of peer support is that clients will take responsibility for their own recovery. Campbell and Leaver (2003) maintain that peer support specialists demonstrate this principle by encouraging clients to define their own needs, consider the choices offered to them and support clients to use innovative strategies that have the potential to aid recovery.

Holistic Approach: Mead et al. (2001) state that peer support promotes a culture of wellbeing and ability rather than defectiveness and deficiency.

Enhanced Connectedness and Social Support: Forchuk et al. (2005) suggest that the peer support specialist can enhance the consumer's social skills and reduce their isolation. It is suggested that this may be particularly helpful for those who have been out of their

community for a period of time and need support to reintegrate. Humphreys (1997) writes that peer support groups “are also small communities in which members make friends and gain a sense of connectedness to others.” For example, Humphreys and Noke (1997) showed that substance abuse clients who were involved with peer support services experienced a 16 percent increase in their number of friends by 1-year follow-up, compared to no change in friendship networks for non-attenders. Moreover, the majority of these friendships were with nonsubstance users. Lieberman and Videka-Sherman (1986) also established the link between peer support service attendance, the development of strong social ties, and improved mental health.

Enriched Spirituality: Regardless of whether peer support services address spirituality directly or not, studies indicate that service users experience spiritual realisation: participation brings meaning to users’ lives (Kennedy and Humphreys, 1994; Humphreys, 1996; Fowler, 1993). Of the supportive settings created by peer support services, Humphreys (1997:4) writes that such settings provide an “... experience of learning that we need not suffer life burdens alone, that we have a place in the human community, and that we have something both to offer and to receive from other human beings...”

Potential for Enhanced Access to Diverse Groups: Studies focusing on consumer-run services identified that there seemed to be a strong minority representation in the target group served (Kaufmann, 1995; Mowbray & Tan, 1993; Segal et al., 1995). Davidson et al., (2006) hypothesized that since both those with experience of mental health conditions and those from ethnic minorities share experiences of discrimination, the former are more sensitive to these issues, and design services that are responsive to these groups.

Ultimately, the report found that for clients, their engagement with peer support services led to:

- enhanced personal resilience and resourcefulness through their development of a range of coping and life skills
- motivation, ownership and self-belief to engage in and maintain behavioural and attitudinal changes
- enhanced social connection that reduces the incidence of psychologically negative outcomes from domestic violence, including mental health issues, and reduces the incidence of violence
- healthier future relationships through exposure to and integration of alternative and non-abusive ways of relating to others

For agencies that employ peer support specialists, the report found that benefits included:

- enhanced organizational resilience – an injection of hope and optimism as non-peers interact with colleagues with ‘lived experience’ who are the evidence of positive and maintained change
- enhanced access to hard-to-reach societal groups

- professionals delivering more responsive client services through their greater understanding of the 'lived experience' and the acquisition of knowledge about 'what works' to deliver desired outcomes
- enhanced diversity in the workforce that reflects the diversity of societal groups in the community and thereby enhances the accessibility and responsiveness of the service for clients
- a cost-effective way to achieve desired client outcomes with increased adherence to mainstream programmes and effective maintenance of post programme behavioural and attitudinal changes as well as cost savings through a reduction in clients' use of high-cost crisis and specialist services within the domestic violence, health, mental health and social care sectors
- peer leadership within the sector that introduces a different foundational framework – one that offers a longer-term, more holistic and strengths perspective, including the use of instrumental, informational, emotional and social support to complement the more singular and immediate focus of many currently delivered domestic violence services^{xix}

Given the extensive research and evidence that point to the benefits of peer support, there is a significant opportunity for One Spark to enhance its program offerings by providing access to peer support. This will allow women to access an important channel for emotional connection and support in tandem with building their various forms of capital while working towards financial independence. The end result will be a holistic wrap-around approach to helping women achieve financial sustainability.

Shannon's Perspective

In addition to a lack of financial resources, there are multiple other barriers that women fleeing violence face. Sometimes these barriers can cause a woman to be unsuccessful in moving forward with her life and re-establishing herself. These barriers can range from personal to community to systemic. Often there are numerous referrals made to different agencies, services, and systems. There are often mountains of confusing paperwork and lots of appointments: sometimes there are legal and/or health issues. Leaving is not easy and the complexity of the process can be so overwhelming and difficult to navigate that it can cause women to go back to living in violent situations.

When women leave abusive situations, their natural support systems are often damaged or broken down. One of the biggest gaps in services that I have identified is the lack of support for women once they transition out of shelters, leaving women vulnerable to falling through cracks and ending up back in crisis. Offering a woman consistent, reliable, and ongoing peer support until she is financially independent can greatly reduce the probability of her returning to an abusive situation and increase her chances at successfully living a life free from violence.

In the last 10 years, I have supported and advocated for women fleeing violence. I have assisted women with whatever they need as they make monumental decisions in their lives. I have supported women at all stages from crisis through transition. Specifically, I have assisted women with:

safety planning | finding safe affordable housing | landlord/tenant issues | packing, moving, or finding furnishings for housing | dealing with police transportation to appointments and programs | employment insurance application | assistance finding resources within the community | long term disability applications | job searching, resume building, job interviews | victim services | social assistance and disability applications | children's aid | family services | legal aid, support in lawyer's appointments and courtroom | youth services | mental health/addiction services | criminal injuries compensation board | ministry of labour | human rights tribunal | personal action plans | goal setting

One Spark can and should incorporate peer support into their programming with the creation of a method of discussing women's barriers. This could happen either as part of the intake process, or as a segment of the entrepreneurship program. If a woman is comfortable to share what she feels is standing in her way of success, peer support/advocacy could be offered to her to address these issues.

Peer support is a powerful opportunity for a person (Peer) living with challenges that stem from the impacts of violence to connect with another person (Peer Supporter) who has experienced similar challenges and has gone through their own healing process. The expertise or lived experience of the Peer Supporter can give the Peer a unique perspective on finding and maintaining a life free from violence. The commonality of, "I get it. I have been there too." can build an authentic, therapeutic rapport of empowerment and hope.

My lived experience allows me to build empathetic relationships. I, myself, have reaped the benefits of peer support. There is a vicarious sense of strength and hope when accessing assistance from someone who has walked the walk. Peer support could help to increase the chances for success for One Spark's future entrepreneurs.

CONCLUSION

As housing wait lists continue to provide formidable barriers to women accessing safe, permanent shelter as they move forward from abuse, we must continue to explore responsive, innovative, and effective solutions. One Spark has witnessed the outcomes when women can access self-employment income: they are able to afford basic needs and they have access to the multiple forms of capital that lead to sustainable livelihoods. As we work to build a comprehensive support system to ensure barriers are dismantled and women are optimally supported, there is a clear and critical role for peer support to play. We will continue to explore and implement peer support opportunities and share outcomes to encourage the ongoing development of systems that holistically and impactfully ensure no woman faces financial barriers to living a life without violence.

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