Between March 10-11, 2017, 60 women members of the British Columbia Government and Service Employees’ Union (BCGEU) gathered at union headquarters in Burnaby, B.C. to participate in a strategic dialogue to discuss and explore both the challenges and opportunities they face in their work in women’s services across the province.

This was an opportunity for workers in the women’s services subsector, which includes transition houses, anti-violence programs, and community outreach services (among others), to share their experiences with one another, and bring clarity to the significant struggles they encounter in their efforts to deliver quality services and supports to society’s most vulnerable women.

Through presentations and structured dialogue exercises, participants shared their knowledge and experience, and carefully articulated a range of challenges. They also inventoried essential strengths and assets, envisioning opportunities to better influence and enhance society’s capacity (and obligation) to support and empower the women and children they serve.

What emerged was their collective wisdom: a shared account of the historical, cultural, political and policy-related aspects of a sector—and broader movement—in urgent need of greater public awareness, understanding and resources.

This report outlines the social, philosophical, planning and resource-related discoveries and recommendations of those who participated in the BCGEU women’s services gathering and dialogue. It explains and describes: 1) the core professional and personal values and experiences of those who have dedicated themselves to this work; 2) the challenges they encounter on a day-to-day basis in their work; 3) the tensions they experience in their work related to identity, prejudice and perception; and 4) the visions they share for improving the women’s services subsector, including outcomes for its clients and communities.
Background

The BCGEU represents more than 1,500 members working in women’s services throughout British Columbia. These members—almost entirely women—work to provide supportive services to other women who are vulnerable and in need, usually facing serious personal crises and often gender-based violence.

BCGEU women’s services members work in transition houses and victim services, community women’s centres, community outreach programs, and Indigenous women’s support services. They provide services and supports to a diverse community of vulnerable women, including immigrant and Indigenous women, and other racialized groups. While most of these workers are employed by organizations whose principal objective is to provide safe temporary housing, their work often involves a much broader range of skills, responsibilities and services.

As the demands of the sector and its client population have become more complex, so have the workload pressures and service expectations increased. Today, BCGEU’s women’s services members regularly provide services and support to women of all ages, including specialized services to youth, the elderly, and women living with disabilities. Their work includes: counselling, housing assistance; mental health and addictions services; support for immigration issues; anti-poverty advocacy; legal counselling, and various cross-sectoral coordination of activities and community outreach services. The work is as demanding as it is diverse, and the frontline workers who perform it do so with limited resources in a politically charged environment.

Programs and facilities that employ these workers often have a complex mix of funding sources that include various provincial ministries, agencies and federal departments, public grants, and not-for-profit organizations.

While expectations and demands on such programs has grown considerably, direct public funding has remained largely static, imposing increased reliance on charitable funding to supplement operating resources, and, as told by members, the requirement that workers simply “do more with less.”

Overlaid on these pressures are additional challenges based on shifting perceptions and social attitudes about the gender and identity-based foundations of the sector, including from among workers, clients, organizations, employers, and political activists. Having grown up from a
Challenges and Opportunities in B.C. Women’s Services

• Inadequate government funding for services, resources, and staffing
• Challenging workplaces and issues with management
• Politics, identity and voice

The grassroots network of non-profits with a basis in feminist thinking and theory, what was once a “movement” is now a subsector of community social services that experiences pressure to integrate and/or conform to a more inclusive political and sociological viewpoint.

This is a challenging atmosphere for the women involved, both as workers and individuals. At stake is their work, the quality of their workplace experiences, the women, children and communities they support and serve, their own wellbeing and that of their families, and their deeply held principles.

It is in this context that the BCGEU brought together its members in women’s services to participate in a gathering and dialogue on the challenges they individually and collectively face, and to chart a course toward a healthy, well-supported and resourced sector.

The broad discussion areas that emerged during the dialogue session included:

The 2017 women’s service gathering and dialogue kicked off on Friday evening, March 10, 2017 with a keynote presentation from women’s rights thinker and long-time activist, Vikki Reynolds. This presentation drew on essential themes of power, oppression, resistance, identity and social justice, helping to frame a subsequent discussion for how these ideas connect with and relate to women’s services work today and the core principles of feminist thinking that continue to underlie it.
In this evening session, participants also watched a documentary video on the history and leadership of women in the BCGEU. Together, these introductory components set the stage for the next day’s discussion and dialogue by exploring the intersecting roles held by the participants as women, citizens, workers, union members, and social justice activists.

**Participant dialogue**

For the Saturday dialogue, participants were broken into separate working groups for a series of structured dialogue exercises that took place throughout the day. These groups were carefully assigned by the facilitators such that each had a varied mixture of voices from different employers, specialized service streams, and various regions of the province.

Throughout the program, individual groups, and, in some cases, pairs from within each group, would approach a series of questions together and then report back their findings within the larger group for discussion. This began with an exercise done in pairs where participants shared personal narratives about their early days in women’s services, significant experiences, and their dreams for the future of the sector.

Understandably, participants’ stories were varied, yet each described their personal visions and journeys as rooted in a common understanding, deep awareness, compassion and respect. What motivates these women (and workers) is the possibility, regardless of the circumstances and the odds, of providing another woman a chance at something better, whether through counselling, legal support, or often times, just basic safety. This simple but powerful motivation was expressed succinctly by one member in particular: “Help women today—period.”

For the remainder of the day, groups worked collaboratively toward solution-oriented understandings of the challenges and opportunities they face in their work through two separate dialogue sessions and exercises. They shared personal experiences and listened to each other's views and concerns. At the end of each session, groups were asked to report back on their top five findings on a series of questions. These explored challenges, opportunities and visions, and ultimately recommendations.
They highlighted child protection programs that have been cutback through underfunding in the Ministry of Children and Family Development; mental health and addictions programs with waitlists and access barriers; legal aid and justice services that are backlogged, out of reach, or no longer exist; income assistance rates that remain frozen below the poverty line; a lack of programs and financial supports for a growing vulnerable seniors population; and above all, a near complete failure to provide enough safe and affordable housing for society's most vulnerable, especially women and children.

As participants in the dialogue explained, an effect of this has been growing pressure to accommodate a wider range of cases and clients within the already-stretched women’s services sector. Not only do workers feel unable to cope with escalating demands—for example, a large and growing population of residents in need of addictions treatment—but that the original purpose and unique nature of their service is being lost.

Finally, many participants stressed how a lack of funding and resources is most intensely felt in communities that are outside B.C.’s main urban areas. This includes an absence of local supports and services in many rural and remote communities, and on First Nations reserves especially; no safe house or short-term housing; transportation options to larger areas that either have not been planned for, or themselves have been defunded and shut down.

Challenging workplaces and issues with management

In identifying challenges, much of the discussion focused on struggles with management and the day-to-day issues experienced in the workplace. Participants were careful to acknowledge the importance of senior leadership and direction, but shared that they often show a lack of connection, appreciation and understanding of the workers and the work.
Many participants reported that their managers and directors typically lack the grassroots, frontline training and experience of workers, and may not possess the same compassion and empathy skills.

Some groups expressed concern that, increasingly, boards of directors for non-profit organizations and societies are made up of people with no particular experience or understanding of women’s services work, women’s issues, or feminist thinking in general.

Group discussion and feedback revealed that these issues contribute to troubled communications, and overall difficulty discussing and processing widely experienced issues in the workplace. What participants outlined was their experience of a growing distrust and confidence problem between workers and managers in agencies, and throughout the sector more broadly.
Many individuals and group reports also pointed to significant and growing staff safety concerns. These were largely associated with short-staffing and working alone, a lack of time and resources for proper safety planning, and a shortage of up-to-date communications and phone devices for those working in remote locations.

Lastly, there was a discussion of instances of bullying in the workplace, both from managers and directors as well as between frontline workers. Many participants expressed concern that a sector based fundamentally on care, compassion and understanding had itself fallen victim to toxic behaviours and relations in some instances.

**Politics, identity and voice**

The full-day dialogue helped participants identify and extract a variety of issues and themes in their work with remarkable, widespread agreement. It also led to discussion of other powerful questions and uncertainties where there were differing
interpretations and personal experiences, despite a common feeling of concern. These differences depended on one's particular service stream, geographic location, personal background and history in the women’s services sector.

What surfaced in the course of this conversation was an articulation of the changing identity of women’s services—both as a professional subsector of community social services, and as a unique social and political movement. Deep concerns were also raised about the outward, public perception and (lack of) understanding of women’s services and women’s issues generally. Participants identified public apathy toward the realities faced by society’s most vulnerable women and the sector that serves them.

In this way, the story and overall experience that was shared by many participants was one of isolation in various forms: social, emotional, professional, gender/sexual, ethnic, cultural and linguistic, and often physical and geographic as well.

Closely related were the participants’ reflections on “voice,” and the many ways in which it has been misunderstood, distorted, suppressed and sometimes silenced. These women spoke at length about how they and their colleagues might rediscover a stronger, more audible and common voice, both on behalf of the women they serve, as well as for themselves.

Groups also explored the experiences of changing self-identity from within women’s services, where many shared their feelings that traditional feminist roots have been shifted, suppressed or altogether abandoned in some cases. For several participants, the dialogue represented an important opportunity for reasserting these foundations and for making the call to revitalize the political activist underpinnings of this sector and its community of workers.

What also emerged, however, were the relative experiences of individual workers depending on their exact place in women’s services, their employer or agency, age, or history in the women’s movement. Not all were agreed on the precise forms of discrimination and prejudice they themselves had been subject to in the workplace, the sector, and society as a whole. Nor were all the participants resolved of the exact political direction from which the women’s services sector and movement would most benefit.

Despite these differences in experience and interpretation, what was clear was the strength of a shared vision for advancing the education, awareness and public consciousness of unique women’s issues and those who advocate for their recognition.

To this end, all participants found unity in reaffirming the common objectives of those who work in the sector: respect for diversity and fundamental equality, for one another, and for an unconditional commitment to non-judgmental care and support for vulnerable women in need.
Recommendations

The following 10 recommendations emerged from the women’s services dialogue:

1.) Increase government funding

Increase stable, core operating funding to women’s services agencies and organizations. Establish and implement a clearer and more direct funding process that spans the relevant public ministries, departments and agencies involved in resourcing B.C. women’s services.

Increased funding should use an equitable, strategic and longer-term approach to allocation in order to directly support staffing and stable operating resources for service providers and facilities. New funding should also include a separate rural and remote plan to address service gaps by community and geographic location. This should incorporate specific resources to expand on-reserve programs for women in Indigenous communities.

2.) Reinvest in vital public and social services

Immediately raise income assistance rates in B.C. using the market basket measure, and eliminate access barriers to income and disability assistance services through the Ministry of Social Development and Social Innovation.

3.) Restore needed funding to legal aid services

Continue to improve funding and support for child, youth and family services through the Ministry of Children and Family Development, and provide enhanced resources for agencies and programs specific to Indigenous families and communities.

Expand and improve mental health and addictions services through the Ministry of Health and B.C. regional health authorities. This should include...
special targeted support for services and programs specific to women, rural and remote communities, as well as culturally appropriate options for Indigenous communities and other minorities.

4.) **Expedite investments in safe, affordable housing**

Prioritize expansion of safe housing for vulnerable women and their children through BC Housing and the Ministry of Natural Gas Development and Minister Responsible for Housing.

Establish a working group with women’s services providers, workers and other relevant stakeholders to direct strategic projects and investments, and to build direct linkages with existing women’s transition houses, as well as second- and third-stage housing programs.

Ensure separate additional planning for safe housing options in rural and remote communities, and communities without existing resources.

5.) **Develop a human resources strategy for the women’s services sector**

Support development of a multi-stakeholder workforce planning and human resource framework for women’s services to strengthen training, professional development, and recruitment and retention across service streams.

Planning should emphasize building required skills, competencies and experience for frontline workers, as well as managers and executive directors. It should also give consideration to developing recommended guidelines for staffing levels in funded programs and transition houses.

6.) **Fund a mentorship and peer education program**

Provide funding support for the creation of a network and forum to advance leadership in women’s services work using woman-to-woman mentoring and education, and grassroots feminist dialogues.

7.) **Build public awareness and support**

Promote stronger and broader public awareness and support for women’s services through sustained campaign work, public advocacy, research and publishing, media relations, community work, and new education partnerships with public programs and institutions.

8.) **Develop new consolidated public information resources for women’s services**

Sponsor a new public website resource with up-to-date statistics and data, navigable links to service providers and advocates, including existing regional websites and other essential resources.

9.) **Establish a service providers’ networking forum and roundtable**

Fund and support an ongoing networking forum and roundtable (both provincial and regional in scope) to discuss and explore collaboration and relationship-building between public sector and community social services women’s services agencies.

Objectives should include mapping out mandates between key actors and agencies to create a coordination and referral framework that best serves the needs vulnerable women.

10.) **Create and assign sectoral reporting responsibilities**

Take measures to enhance accountability and transparency in the sector by assigning reporting, accounting and performance monitoring responsibilities to a central public advocate or body.