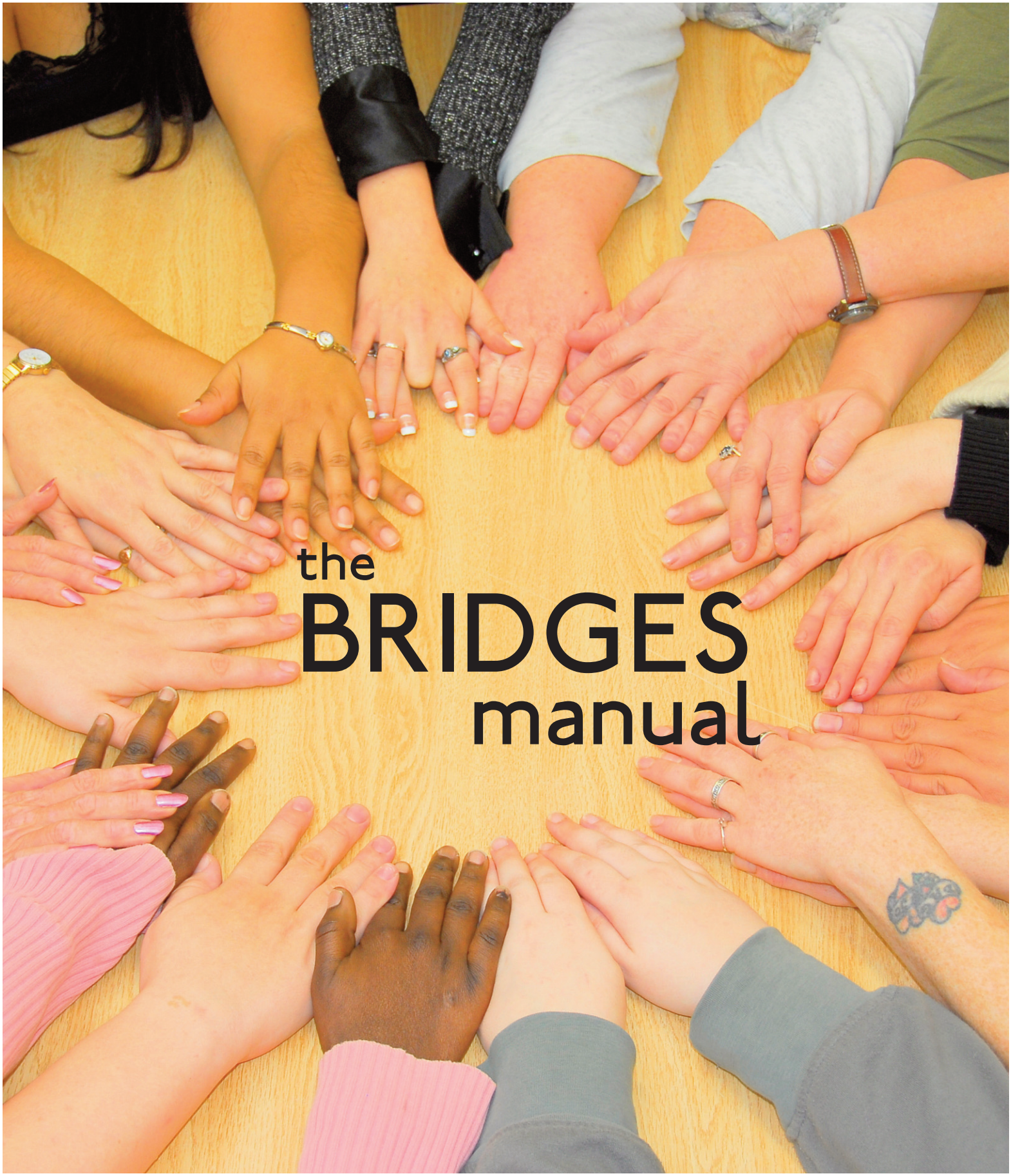

# the BRIDGES manual

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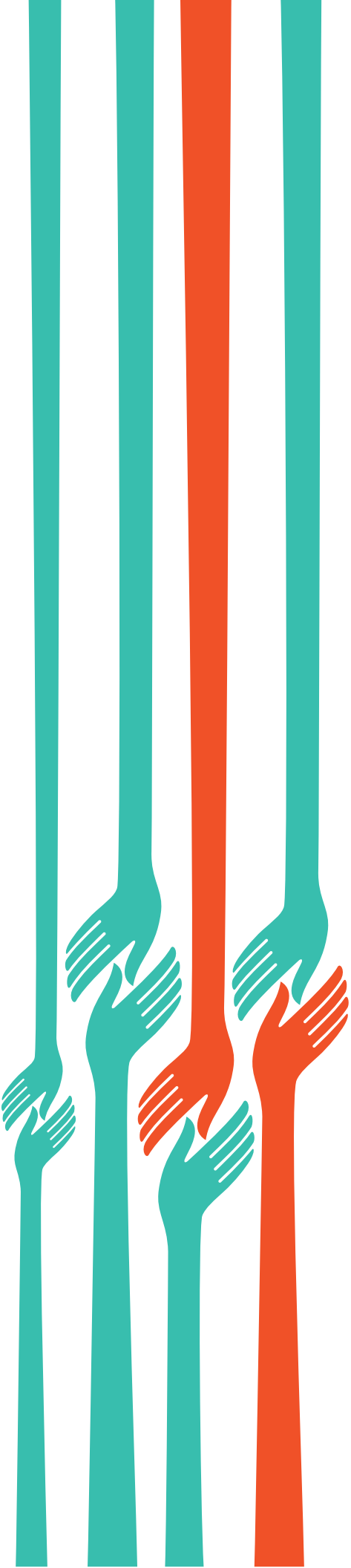

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# PREFACE

This manual represents the collective hopes, dreams, hard work, and vision of a wonderful group of people who came together with The Bridges Project. The first time I learned about the impact of violence on learning was as a volunteer in an adult classroom in the 1980s. A woman—an immigrant from Italy—was de-registered from her classes numerous times because of her lack of "commitment" and so I was assigned as her tutor. She had a hard time learning to speak English clearly, mostly because of all the injuries inflicted by her husband's fists and leather boots. She was compelled to return to classes, even in the face of considerable barriers, because she wanted to be able to speak English so her children would be proud of her. When I became an academic, I was presented with a most glorious opportunity: develop a research program. As a school and counselling psychologist, there was no question that my research program had to include education, because of the central role it plays in life satisfaction. As a feminist, there was no question that my research project would speak to the experiences of women and "shine the light" on power and oppression. Bringing together people who worked in education, health, and the violence against women sectors, gave the research an immediate sense of purpose. The women who were trying to go back to school in the face of structural barriers that had everything to do with violence and organizational blindness, and nothing to do with lack of intelligence or motivation, were the glue that brought it all together. As one Bridges participant said, "I want them to hear me and I don't want to be invisible no more." The Bridges Project was born to shine the light, help women build and sustain hope, and celebrate their successes in school and in life.

# THANKS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The list of people who made The Bridges Project possible is impossibly long, but here goes. My thanks, from the bottom of my heart, to each and every one of you.

Research Team: Dr. Roma Harris, Dr. Anne Cummings, Dr. Jason Brown, and Dr. Alan Leschied; graduate student research assistants Andrea Carter, Jenn Caron, Angele Palmer, Rebecca Machado, Leticia Yansen, Sharon Hannaford, Sarah Yaremko, Shannon Ross, Jessica Wilkins, Rosalynn Harris, Tara Ford, Jennifer Andersen, Felicia Epp, Janet Mockler, and Kayla Janes.

Counsellors: Andrea Carter and Terri-Lynn Oliver

Teachers: Barbara O'Brien and Suzanne Anderson

Agency/Community collaborators: London Abused Women's Centre, Women's Community House, London Public Library, Family Services Thames Valley, Ministry of the Attorney General, Thames Valley Board of Education, Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children, Childreach, London Women Artists Cooperative, City of London, Second Stage Women's Shelter, Fanshawe College, London Police Services.

Supporters: Dr. Bob MacMillan (Western University), Jill Wilcox (Jill's Table, London, ON)

An enormous thank you to the women who, when they signed on to attend The Bridges Project as students, brought their strength and support for one another, and their vulnerability and willingness to take another risk, to share their stories, and try one more time. We learned together, laughed and cried, shared our story, celebrated and mourned, and always, always, we did it together. Thank you.

chapter 1

# HISTORY AND PRACTICAL MATTERS

The Bridges Project was an alternative adult education program for women who had experienced violence in their intimate or close relationships as a child or as an adult and who did not have a secondary school diploma. Over the three years that the project ran, 51 women were officially enrolled and attended classes. Three teachers guided the learning for The Bridges Project, and 13 students in a graduate program in Counselling Psychology worked with the women, guiding activities, providing support, and conducting research. Two therapists provided individual and group counselling, and one psychologist led the project.

The women of The Bridges Project – those who attended, those who wanted to come and learn but could not, as well as the project facilitators – taught us a great deal about the things that are necessary for a teaching and learning experience that meets the needs of learners, teachers, education systems, and communities. Our hope is that this manual makes its way into classrooms and other learning spaces across the country.

This description of The Bridges Project and the experiences of the people who were part of it is intended as a guide for those who might be contemplating organizing, supporting, teaching, or taking part in adult education for women who have experienced violence. The goal of this manual is to tell our story, share the lessons learned, and encourage others to examine and implement

non-traditional methods in adult education. We have offered our stories here, describing what we did and how we did it. We have also given enough detail to frame methods and ways of learning, but this is in no way presented as a comprehensive explanation of the why. The answer to that lies in a world view that is framed by social justice and a commitment to change; working in the service of others, understanding that as a community we must hold ourselves responsible for the conditions that continue to allow violence against women and children. Silence is not neutral, and we aim to amplify the voices of women who want to return to school so that they can learn what is needed to take their place in the world of paid employment, and be able to provide a stable life for themselves and their children. We tried something different. This manual is a record of what we tried.

At the end of the manual, we have provided suggested readings and resources to learn more about violence against women, as well as learning and teaching in the context of violence. Throughout the manual you will read the words of the women who were a part of Bridges. We have also included their art, which communicates in a different way. These contributions are incorporated here with the permission of those who created them.

The Bridges Project was developed to meet the needs of women in our community. As a psychologist and researcher working with women who had experienced violence, I was aware that many women who came through the doors of frontline, or direct client service agencies, such as women's shelters and counselling services, social welfare organizations, and child protective services, did not have a secondary school diploma. This isn't to say that this is the case with all women who seek these services, but it was clear that there was a need and desire for education for many women and what was available was somehow, not working. This is of particular importance because in Canada, a woman's education is the biggest predictor of her income, and financial dependence on her abuser is one of the most frequently cited reasons why women stay in violent relationships. Providing tangible and meaningful opportunities for education can help women obtain stable employment and financial independence from abusers and from social assistance.

We didn't follow a straight path with Bridges. It wasn't always clear what teaching or counselling methods were most effective, or how we should measure results and outcomes. We developed our methodology—or procedures and approaches—through practice. We established a gender-segregated adult education classroom for women who had experienced violence because the usual or existing service models of adult education did not work.

We wanted to help women make change in their own lives and the lives of their children through education and support. We also wanted to provide research evidence that such a program could make an important difference. We set out to do this by building a program with women, not for them. This required working together in both service and research. The main funder for the Bridges Project was the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), a national program that funds research and researchers in Canadian universities, along with their community partners.

Research was an integral part of Bridges, but the women involved did not have to agree to participate in the research in order to be a member of the Bridges classroom. They could agree to take part in research at any point, and they could withdraw at any point as well. And some did. Our position was: "women first, research second." Although there were times when we wished we could include a particular woman, her experience, or her words, because her story was important to the Bridges story, we were strengthened by the knowledge that each participant felt safe enough to say "no".

chapter 2

# THE PROCESS

As with any project, there needs to be a clear aim. Outcomes may differ, but knowing what you want to do is the first step. The Bridges Project came out of a desire to make a change with and for our community. It has its roots in a commitment to social justice, community development, feminist practices, and education.

The academic home of this project is the Faculty of Education at Western University and the discipline from which it grew was Counselling Psychology. This type of psychology is strengths-based and focuses on individuals and their communities, including their resources, abilities, and capabilities. It takes a careful look at systematic oppression, victimization, and power structures that support it. Counselling psychology has historically been part of education because it is through education that people may find their own path to hope, healthy futures, and active participation in healthy communities. It is important to mention that counselling psychology has a long history of research that is grounded in communities, and serving the needs of people locally, regionally, and nationally while also making significant contributions to the research literature. Groups or individuals wishing to replicate the Bridges program would do best to have a commitment to the principals upon which it was developed.

# THE PROCESS, STEP BY STEP

## Step 1: Recruit an Advisory Committee:

We brought together an advisory committee that met regularly—more often in the planning than in the implementation and evaluation stages. The advisory committee had three goals:

1. Building partnerships: We knew that we would need strong partnerships with local frontline or direct client service agencies in order to build and implement The Bridges Project. The advisory committee gave us the opportunity to work together with people who had knowledge of services and a commitment to our goals. This allowed us to maximize resources and use existing community expertise and energy. Ultimately, this also helped us find women who would become Bridges participants.

2. Visioning: At the time we established Bridges, there were no other projects like it, so we were creating something quite innovative. An advisory committee gave us multiple perspectives "around the table". It helped to develop the project, anticipate and plan for challenges, and build a support network for everyone involved.

3. Social action and social justice: It is our firm belief that oppression and violence need to be acknowledged and named. The members of our advisory group were already engaged in the community in breaking the silence and advocating for women and children living with violence. Together, we amplified our individual agency and community voices.

# GIVING DIRECTION TO THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Developing terms of reference for the advisory committee helped focus the work to be done. Based on our experience, here are a few ideas for organizing and keeping the committee on track:

- Establish meeting dates. Have the committee meet a minimum of three times per year.

- Ask the committee to provide input about research activities to ensure they are relevant to community concerns and address the diverse nature of all the communities affected by violence against women and its effects on education.

- Ensure that the committee is aware of, and supports how the project promotes and develops community-centred action research, and is guided by operating principles that recognize the relationship between violence, mental health, education, and poverty.

- Ensure collaboration by maintaining links with the founding partners and community-based organizations in your region.

Members of the Bridges Project Advisory Committee included representatives from:

London Abused Women's Centre
Women's Community House
Ministry of the Attorney General — Victims Support Services
The Thames Valley District Board of Education
The University of Western Ontario – Faculty of Education, Faculty of Information and Media Studies
The Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children
London Public Library
London Police Services

## STEP 2: Develop Your Vision:

Take the time to think through what you want to achieve, and work with your stakeholders (including your advisory committee) to develop a clear vision. Good programs are guided by principles, so developing them at this stage can be very helpful for your future work. It's also a terrific way to create a shared sense of purpose. Here is the vision for The Bridges Project:

*Using a feminist, strengths-based and social justice model, and working from each woman's strength, Bridges addresses the barriers that exist in current educational systems. Bridges seeks to facilitate growth and experiences of success for women who have experienced abuse at the hands of their intimate partners and who would like to work toward literacy and the completion of their secondary school education.*

*Bridges is an alternative education program that features women-only classrooms, and learning designed for the needs of survivors of trauma. Bridges provides supportive individual and group counselling, advocacy and non-judgment, and a commitment to each woman's right to feel a partnership in learning, based on mutual respect and understanding. Bridges pledges to be an active participant in a dynamic, caring, and connected community.*

## STEP 3: Design the Program and Write Grant Applications

When you design your research plan, it is important to keep in mind that program evaluation is an important part of any service. Whether you are doing something innovative or tried-and-true, keeping track of outcomes adds to knowledge and contributes to the best service possible. One key component iis to decide what outcomes are important to you, and to develop a plan to measure them. If you are interested in learning measures, you might consider designing simple tests of knowledge and skills for women to complete before they begin learning, and then after they have completed a unit or the entire program, to develop an understanding about what has changed as a result of the instruction. If mental health and personal wellness are desired outcomes, decide on how you will measure these. For example, interview data, functional assessments, or health scans could all be used. Whatever you are measuring, it is important to clearly articulate your vision, the goals that are connected to the vision, what you will use as "evidence" that you are making progress toward your goals, and how you will measure or document any changes. In other words, before you begin, know how you will recognize when you have achieved success.

It is important to ensure that there is awareness and at least some compatibility in the goals that you, your collaborators, and the students have. For example, one of our goals with Bridges was to keep women coming to, or attending school for as long as they needed to in order to meet their educational goals. The goal of the Adult Basic Education Program (where our program was located) was different. The ABEP wanted students to move on or through the process within three months, as this was the limit of their funding window. In other words, we wanted women to be able to do this within their own time, so as not to be pressured, but the ABEP needed to show its funders that it could produce a successful student every three months. It took some time before we were able to identify that these competing goals even existed, and had to be resolved. The Director of the AEBP and I spent considerable time together, trying to resolve the competing goals, before I realized what was at the heart of this challenge. Once we were able to clearly identify that the two goals were in direct conflict, we were able to prepare and present a case for exceptions to be made to the funder, who then extended the support for women in Bridges.

When it comes to program evaluation, it should be remembered that the key is to be systematic. In evaluation, you need to tie the goals, activities, and measurement of outcomes together in a cohesive way.

## THE GRANT FUNDING PROCESS

Developing the proposal for a program grant started early and continued with feedback from the Advisory Committee. The original grant application was to the Standard Grants Program, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). This national funder is one of the main sources of grants for university-based research and requires the grant to be research (as compared to program or project), oriented.

We were able to secure a critical partnership with the Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB). The TVDSB donated the classroom space and basic supplies (furniture, one computer, and basic materials), and covered the cost of one teacher who worked half-time. With this “in-kind” agreement in place, we developed the research proposal and budget necessary for the funding applications. This was important because funders often want to see that others are contributing.

## NINE-SIX-ONE

All told, during 2003-2005, we applied nine times to six different agencies...and in the end, we got the funding we needed. Feedback on unsuccessful applications was sometimes very helpful in the next effort, but other times it left us feeling quite frustrated. Some funders thought the project was too research oriented, others thought it was too “applied”. It depended on who the funder was (community versus university), and if a particular request for proposals (RFP) was a good fit with our project. Taking time to make sure the objectives of the RFP match with the goal of your project is key to success, as is—in our experience—perseverance. Once you get a draft of your funding proposal, get as many people to read it as possible, especially people who have been successful in getting grants. Ask people from different sectors (for example, front line agencies, universities, and policy groups) to suggest funding streams or programs.

### STEP 4: Don't Wait, Act

Waiting to hear about funding can often be a long and anxious process. It is important not to lose hope and momentum. While we were waiting for the news, we continued to do the project "legwork" such as talking to women who had experienced violence, women who had completed school, and those who had not, as well as direct client service workers, local educators and education administrators, agency managers, and policy makers, about what we would need to do in order to make The Bridges Project relevant and responsive to the needs of women in our community.

## THE ENROLLMENT PROCESS

1. The women interested in being part of The Bridges Project met with two of the researchers, who screened to them to make sure each met the basic inclusion criteria (she had experienced violence as a child and/or adult, and she did not have her secondary school diploma). The only exclusion criteria (that is, a reason why she would not be allowed to participate) was that in coming to Bridges, her own physical safety or that of the class would not be compromised. For instance, we had one woman who wanted to come to school but who was locked in her bedroom by her abuser each day. She had developed a method to escape the room while he was at work and did so fairly often, but the consequences of such escape, if detected, were severe. She proposed that she would continue to do this in order to attend Bridges, but together we decided that coming to class would place her at an unacceptable level of risk of further harm.

2. The resesearchers also explained the research and learning format to potential participants. If a woman wanted to be part of  to the program and participate in the research, an intake interview was arranged at a place that was familiar and safe. Informed consent was obtained, women were interviewed, and they completed a set of "baseline" assessments, or "current levels", of mental health, resources and supports, and knowledge as well as information about education history, experience with violence, motivation for education, and how they coped with stress. We gathered data at 10 week intervals throughout a woman's participation, and informed consent was obtained at each stage. If women decided they wanted to be part of the classroom but not the research, she then went directly to the next step.

3. Each woman made an initial visit to the classroom and, in partnership with the teacher, provided or applied for records of earned secondary school credits (if these existed). Together, they also set learning goals and created an individualized learning plan.

4. Each woman met with a counsellor or principle researcher to talk about the supports she needed to participate (for example, transportation), and in the context of important factors such as her health, her children, and her income needs, how often she could plan to attend class.

5. Women attended classes and their progress (defined by the women themselves, according to their goals) was tracked.

6. When a woman was sensing that she was approaching her goals, either new goals were set and she continued in the program, or support was provided to find and transition to the next step. The next step included getting involved in volunteer work, taking secondary school credit courses, taking part in employment training, participating in post-secondary education, and/or taking steps to make changes in their personal lives (moving to a new home, for example).

# PRACTICAL MATTERS

## Allocating Resources

The local adult education centre donated the space, basic supplies, and paid the salary of our half-time teacher. This enabled us to to stretch our available financial resources to provide:

## Transportation –

Getting to and from school was identified as a barrier for women, so we made it a priority to support women's transportation needs. Aside from research assistant and counselor salaries, this was our biggest expense. Most women in the Bridges program were receiving disability benefits or allowances and not get a bus pass, despite our best efforts at advocacy. Women who were receiving social assistance could get a bus pass as a "discretionary benefit", but this had to be approved by their case worker. For some, this proved to be a challenge. The teacher provided them with two bus tickets per day if needed, on a weekly basis. There were also some learners who could not take public transit because of high levels of anxiety and fears for safety. In those cases, we contracted with a local taxi company to provide transportation. As many of these women became more comfortable in Bridges, their anxiety lessened to the point where they were able to switch back to public transit and, indeed, help others who were experiencing similar anxiety.

## Food

It is difficult to learn when you are hungry, so the Bridges classroom always had plenty of nutritious food on hand. It was important that the food meet dietary requirements (for example, religious restrictions,or dietary restrictions such as gluten-free, lactose-free). As part of a shared learning activity that was embedded in the curriculum, the women made lists, learned about cost per serving, nutritional content, budgeting, and shopping. They often took the weekly food budget and did the shopping for the class. We also had our own food bank (women brought food into the classroom in times of relative plenty), emergency grocery store gift cards for those in need, and groceries for our community kitchen (more on that later). When food ran low at home, women were welcome to take food from the classroom if they needed it for themselves or their children outside of school. This was our second biggest cash expense.

## School related expenses

Some of the women were concurrently taking self-study credit courses that required a book deposit, and we would pay this deposit if needed. We bought supplies for classroom learning activities that the school could not provide, such as arts and crafts supplies, and scrapbooks and notebooks for school projects.

## Emergency fund

We had a small ($100) emergency fund the women could access. Once it had all been loaned, the women had to wait until borrowers had repaid before another loan could be made. This money was most often loaned in small amounts ($5-$25), and for things that would otherwise be a barrier to coming to school. For example, one woman's abuser took her only pair of shoes, and another needed plasticine and straws to make a molecule model for her self-study science class.

## Celebrations

We celebrated many successes large and small, and these always involved food, crafts for any children jjoining us, simple decorations, and cards for the person who was being honoured.

## Classroom needs

We bought a small refrigerator to keep milk for tea and coffee and other items, and purchased or had other things donated such as a big reclining chair for women to use when they were tired or in pain, cushions for the hard classroom chairs for the women with chronic pain, and cosy blankets and pillows to soothe frayed bodies.

## Research Assistants

As this project was funded by the SSHRC, and research was a key component, each year we hired between two and four graduate research assistants (GRAs). These GRAs were graduate students in Counselling Psychology, who each worked ten hours per week during the school year. Their duties included: obtaining informed consent for women taking part in research and doing the interviews and data collection that were part of this, analysing the data, and working with the women in the afternoons. Women identified their needs and wants for this program and, together with the GRAs, workshops and other learning experiences were developed. GRAs also helped the women with homework in the afternoons.

## Counsellors

Supportive individual and group counselling was available to women in Bridges, and was provided by a llocal therapist with experience in working with women survivors of abuse. Group therapy was open and ongoing; a guide was developed by the therapists involved and can be found in the appendix. Individual counselling was available for those who wanted this, and was arranged between the therapist and the women. The therapist worked ten hours per week for about 40 weeks per year, following the school schedule. Individual counselling took place in a private office at the school, and group counselling took place in the classroom. The counselling was confidential, and not included in the research.

## Recruitment

During the summer months prior to our first fall intake, we sent brochures and announcements to all front line or direct client service agencies such as shelters, social welfare organizations and offices, churches, schools, and health care settings. We put up posters at places where we thought women might see them, such as bus stops, community centres, child care centres, child welfare agencies, grocery stores, and libraries.

## Classroom

Our classroom was located in an adult learning centre in London, Ontario. The school had on-site day care, and another day care centre just down the street. It was accessible, and on a number of major bus routes. We chose the room carefully; it had two entrances, one on the main hallway and one that was accessible through the school's resource centre. It had windows that overlooked the nearest building exit, and was large enough so that women could arrange their desks to suit their needs and not feel crowded.

Women arranged the desks so that they all had a view of both doors; sometimes they grouped the desks together, and when they needed space, they separated them. Each woman had a "cubby", or a space where she could store her books, supplies, and personal items. Some women had previously experienced destruction of these items by an angry abuser when she had taken them home, and some women felt secure storing a change of clothing, a journal, or other personal items for privacy and in case of an emergency. The cubbies freed them from the anxiety of worrying about their personal possessions. Although we were initially concerned about security of these items (these cubbies were open to the classroom), these possessions remained safe.

## Advocacy

Although we did not provide day care or funding for day care, we advocated on the behalf of women who were having difficulty obtaining care for their children so they could come to school. This involved working with a woman and any caseworker involved by providing documentation that she was enrolled in school, keeping track of wait lists for daycare, and spaces where they became available, and helping a woman maintain the spot once she got it. For some women, this was a constant struggle. One woman had nearly completed her grade 12 (self-study) English credit when summer break for Bridges started. She took a job picking peppers and earned an income for three weeks. As a result, she lost her subsidized day care spot, and had to wait four months for another spot to become available. By that time she had lost track in her learning and lost the confidence to complete the credit. She did start over and was successful, but it meant a delay of nearly six months.

When requested by the women, we also provided support with child welfare authorities (helping women access parenting resources and documenting this), housing authorities (writing letters of support for the urgent need for safe, secure, and subsidized housing), health care providers (asking local optometrists and dentists for free or reduced-cost services for women who were not eligible for support), and post-secondary education institutions (writing letters of support for women's applications to college and university, arranging tours, and helping to get necessary support services in place). Our main goal here

was, without taking a woman's power away from her, to work with her to overcome barriers to attending school, staying in school, and moving on from school. It sounds simple, and in many cases it was, but this kind of support was crucial to each woman's participation and feelings of self-worth.

The Bridges school day and school week were very predictable, with routines and rituals that were most often developed by the women to suit their needs for safety and to support their success. This made school a stable and steady presence in their lives. School began at 9:30 a.m. to allow women enough time to get their children to school or day care. However, the doors were unlocked at 7 a.m. for those who needed to get to their "safe place" as soon as they could in the morning. Schedules were created and posted detailing which graduate students would be there on which days and the activities that would take place. Schedules were also posted for the morning curriculum, for the weekly group lunches, consultations and celebrations, and for the research activities. Classroom furniture and supplies were arranged or moved by the women in consultation with the teacher, and a woman's possessions were not moved unless she was there to do it. The teacher gave as much notice as possible if she was going to be away, and arranged an occasional teacher ahead of time so women would know who would be there. Predictability and stability were given priority, as the nature of violence can create hypervigilence and difficulty in adapting to change, as women's attention and emotional resources are focused on staying safe in an unsafe environment.

Even with all of these practices in place, the extent of  the impact of instability for women was often evident. One day in April when the research team was sharing lunch with the women, our first teacher, Barb, asked everyone to gather around because she had something to share. Most of the women reacted with tears, fears, and even aggression: "Are you going to die?" "Do you have cancer?" "Has somebody decided to close the program?" "Is someone getting kicked out?". Barb went on to share that she had decided to retire at the end of the school year. During the coming weeks, many women shared their feelings of abandonment and disappointment with Barb and the research team, as well as one another. But as time went on, they were able to share their appreciation for her help and compassion. Together, they took on the daunting task of welcoming a new teacher with an added awareness of just how important their relationships were.

## The Teacher

The teacher's salary was paid by the local school board (Thames Valley Disctrict School Board), but the teacher was considered part of the research team and spent considerable time in consultation and collaboration with us. We had three teachers in total, all of whom were women. Our first teacher was with us for the first year and then retired. The second was with us for two weeks in the fall of our second year, and then moved on. Our third was with us for the balance of the second and third years. The Bridges project principal researcher met weekly with the teacher to discuss the challenges the teacher was experiencing in the classroom. Challenges included  attendance patterns, reactivity to curriculum materials, and interpersonal conflicts. The principal researcher also provided support, and was available during school hours by cell phone for urgent matters (for example, assisting when a student arrived and appeared to be under the influence of substances). Together, the principal researcher and the teacher problem-solved, planned, shared resources and ideas, and generally provided support to each other, the rest of the research team, and the women.

## Community Resource People

Bridges formed strong partnerships with local agencies that provided direct client services. We were able to call on these agencies to provide services and assist women when they had nowhere else to turn. For example, many women came to Bridges soon after leaving an abuser. Safety planning was the priority for them, as women are at most risk for serious injury or death during this period. We counted on the professionals in the violence against women sector to create safety plans with the women, taking into account their desire and plan to go to school.

## The Research Team

The teacher, graduate students, counsellor, and principal researcher met regularly. As anyone who works in community-based violence prevention knows, the work can take a great deal of energy, and the need to support one another as colleagues is important. We shared experiences with one another, and came together as a team. We made time to provide support to each other, as well as to debrief, celebrate, and grieve when needed, and to work with the sensitive and personal experiences and data that the women were sharing with us

chapter 3

# VIOLENCE AND WOMEN

> When I first did my interview with (...) I remember telling her how many people just don't know the realities of the world, and live sheltered lives. They hear about the violence and crime on television but how does this really affect them?
>
> (Bridges Student)

In the Bridges classroom a familiar quote was placed where everyone could see. It said: "the journey across the universe begins with a single step." Another saying was important, too: "No one walks this journey alone." This section gives a very brief overview about violence against women, to help learners and educators build awareness and prepare to work together on the learning and teaching journey ahead. This awareness isn't just about violence in the lives of students, but how it impacts the teachers, administrators, and support people as well. Violence happens in every community and across cultures, within every economic class, and in all kinds of families.

## HOW MANY WOMEN EXPERIENCE VIOLENCE?

**25 percent of children experience maltreatment, 51 percent of Canadian women have experienced some form of violence since age 16, and 25 percent of women experience violence at the hands of an intimate partner during their lifetime.**

The numbers cited here come from surveys done across Canada and in all types of neighbourhoods, cities, and rural locations. When we asked women who were attending adult

education—the ones who live with multiple "risk factors"—67 percent of women reported violence in their current intimate relationships. Risk factors included things in life associated with violence, such as poverty, being young, having small children, and not having a high school education. In Canada, violence against women is a serious social problem that goes largely unreported. It is estimated that only 10 to15 percent of women who experience violence seek help. One hundred percent of the women in The Bridges Project had experienced maltreatment as children, and nearly all had experienced childhood sexual abuse.

## WHY DON'T WOMEN LEAVE?

We know that it takes an average of seven attempts to leave before it actually works out for women, and that for those who make the plan, or actually do leave:

- Incomes usually drop by more than half when they leave their abuser, so they may feel it is more important to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table, especially if they have children. Poverty is a powerful motivator to stay.
- They fear retaliation or more violence from their abuser if they seek help.
- They fear that police, friends, and family won't believe or support them.
- They believe this is part of their daily lives and there is no hope of escape.

## WHAT IS VIOLENCE?

Violence is a term that describes many different, negative things that one person does to, or withholds from, another person. Violence has two important parts:

1. The person who is doing the hurting has more power than the person being hurt. This power can come from many different sources, for example, physical strength, intimidation, or resources (for example, money or food).
2. The act of violence harms someone.

Violence includes the acts of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, intimidation and threats, blaming the one being hurt for the violence, and minimizing or denying the violent act(s), as well as isolation, and using children against someone. You can find some great information, posters, and handouts that describe the different types of violence at this website:

http://www.ncdsv.org/images/powercontrolwheelnoshading.pdf

Acts of violence are not limited to things we can see (such as bruises or broken teeth), and they do not have to happen frequently in order to be devastating. Threats can be very powerful as a means of maintaining control over other people.

# WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE?

Let us be clear from the start. Not all women who experience violence will experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and/or any of the effects listed below, but some women will. And when they do, each woman's experience is her own—meaning, that the way she feels the lasting effects will be unique and distinctive to her. From research, statistics, and experience, we know what factors can make the difference in coping with violence:

- A good support network of friends, family, and caring professional helpers such as physicians, counsellors, and social service case managers -
- Good physical and mental health
- Placing the responsibility for the violence with the abuser, not themselves.
- Education
- Being  financially independent.

So, what are the effects of violence? We've put them into five categories that make sense here: mental health, physical health, safety, daily life, and relationships.

1. **Mental Health**: Some women will experience anxiety, depression, PTSD, panic attacks, and substance abuse. These issues can make it very difficult to pay attention, study, recall information, and be evaluated.

2. **Physical health**: Physical injuries (such as broken bones) and chronic health problems (such as chronic pain, irritable bowel syndrome, and headaches) can make it difficult to come to school regularly. Head injuries (from blows to the head or choking) can mean brain injuries that affect attention, concentration, and memory. Women often have stomach and digestive problems and trouble with sleeping, insomnia, and nightmares.

3. **Safety**: When women return to school, violence from an abuser may increase because her abuser feels threatened that she is building new relationships and a new life. Experience with violence often makes women feel unsafe so they may not feel comfortable with loud noises, crowds, and unpredictable or unstructured situations. If a woman is living with an abuser, it may not be safe to take books, assignments, or supplies home. Abusers often destroy or hide these items in an attempt to make her quit going to school. An abuser might deny access to clothing, money, or transportation in an effort to control a woman, or might make her stay up all night so she is too tired to go to school, or hit her where it will leave visible marks so she will be too self-conscious to go to school. This is called sabotage.

4. **Daily Life :** The lingering effects of psychological abuse—for example, being told you are stupid and worthless—can make it very difficult to build the confidence necessary to take on the challenges of learning. Women who are trying to return to school and make significant changes in their lives, often find it doubly challenging to deal with the stress of daily life and self doubt.

5. **Relationships:** When you have been hurt by someone close to you, it can affect your ability to form strong and healthy relationships with others. Women who have experienced violence may question their own judgment ("Why did I trust him?"), blame themselves ("I got what I deserved"), and be reluctant to let anyone else become close ("I'm not doing that again"). All of these things can make it difficult to meet new people, develop trusting relationships with them, and have faith in the future.

# Lisa's Story

"My younger years, were for the most part, relatively normal. I grew up here in London. One of my main mentors was my grandmother. She taught me that if you want something, then you must be the one to get it. She also told me that life is full of obstacles and it's not a shame to fail as long as you have learned from your mistakes and don't allow them to define you.

When I was 15 years old I was a typical adolescent who rebelled against my parents. I thought I knew it all. I could not wait to get out and take on the world and show my parents what life really had to offer. So, once I became 16 years old, I moved out of my own—much to my parent's horror. I had decided at that point in time that I didn't see the relevance of staying in high school so I quit in Grade 11 and was relatively successful at jobs. Eventually, I met a man I thought I was in love with.

Very quickly, and without much planning, I became pregnant. I also began to be controlled. I was questioned as to whom I talked to, where I went, what I was doing at any given time (including while I slept). For the longest time, I made excuses and tried to reason in my own head what I had done to provoke such constant interrogation. Eventually, two children, six years, numerous police interventions, tons of bruises, and thousands, and I do mean thousands, of internal scars from the verbal abuse later, the excuses ran dry. But so did my mental health. One night, he came home drunk (again) and history began to repeat itself until, I snapped and pulled a huge butcher's deboning knife and called London city police and told them that if they didn't come within the next three minutes to stop him, I would kill him. At the time my children were witness to all this. At that time, the remedy by the police was to have Children's Aid take my children. Their father was to leave the house for a night and I was told to calm down and it would resolve itself in the near future. I believe that this was the beginning of my road to hell. My children

ended up being placed with my parents and then in the custody of their father. I was penalized by the courts because I had chosen to stay and endure the abuse, thinking that eventually we could have a happy family. Now I realize I was allowing my children to see abuse and neglect. I will live with that guilt 'til I die.

For the next few years, I struggled at menial jobs and tried to kill the guilt inside of me caused by losing my children. Because I never sought counselling or asked for help, no one really believed the extent of the abuse and torment. In order to hide my pain, I started to make new friends who didn't know my history. I would never tell them. Some of my new friends were great and others—not so much. Eventually, I decided to try and date again. Pretty much immediately, I was pregnant. This time, almost immediately I was told I would not work. I came to find out my new partner was affiliated with organized crime (a motorcycle gang that is very prominent on this continent). I must say when I first met him he wore a business suit and seemed to be respectable, and very generous and caring. That ended very fast as soon as he felt he owned me and the child I was carrying. After seeing this exact same pattern of behaviour, I ran away from him. As of today, we still talk about my son and now he asks me for help in how he can change his bad choices.

Once my son was born I decided that my jobs as a bartender/waitress could not continue to provide us with a stable life. So, I chose to go back to school and get a trade. I went back to school while working and obtained my heavy equipment operator's permit and my AZ licence. After graduating, I began working and got a subcontract through the city of London in the recycling program. At the time I felt pretty fortunate to be picked up, considering I was the first woman they had ever hired to work operating machines and doing curbside pickup. Within three weeks of working there, I broke my back while on the job.

That's when my world was shattered. I was in the hospital and eventually released and sent home with full time care, full time physiotherapy appointments, and full time medication that I had no conception of, or knowledge or information about how it would affect my body and mind. I was over-medicated and I couldn't maintain a conversation because I was always sleeping. I lost contact with my family and son as they couldn't handle that I was no longer their daughter. I was just a body lying on a couch/bed. Over a year later, my pain and spinal damage was so bad a spinal neurologist said that I would have to have spinal surgery, or would have to come to the realization that I was going to be a paraplegic. With the surgery, there was a very real chance that once they operated, I could end up being paralyzed anyways. I don't know what made me decide to have the surgery, but that's the path I chose. After weeks in the hospital, I was sent home with care and a regimen of physiotherapy in order to walk again. I do not remember a single person talking to me about my feelings, my fears, or trying in any way, shape, or form to educate me in what it was going to be like now that I had a massive trauma to my body and would be permanently disabled. I find sometimes that professionals get stuck in their silos and can't see beyond their immediate profession. I believe fully that some of what happened later in my life could've been avoided if I would've had some kind of mental counselling and preparation for what my life was going to be like as a person who had a permanent disability. Counselling might have helped me

learn how to live on medication that altered the way my mind works. It might have helped with the stigma that I had associated with all of it.

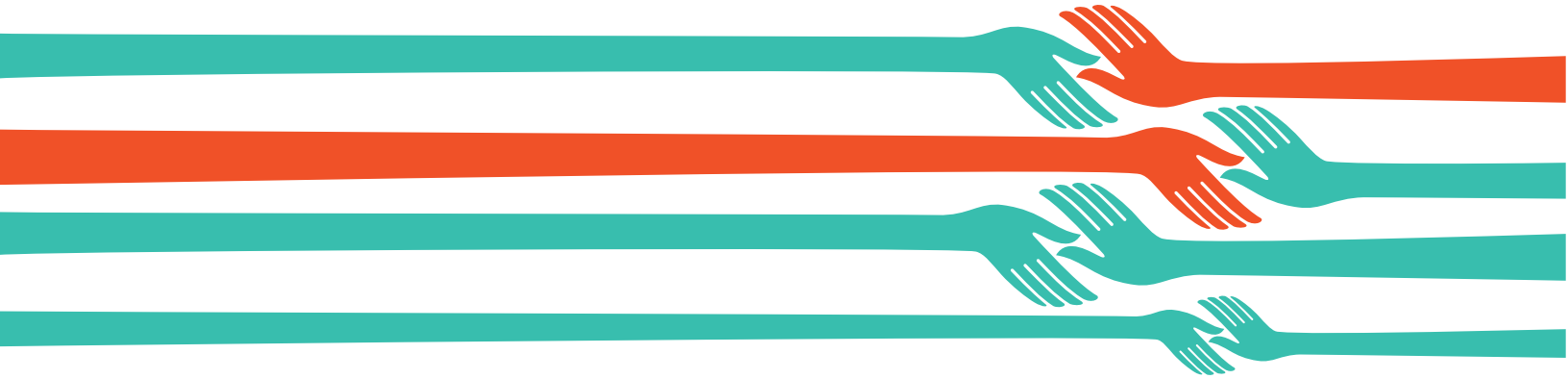
Upon being released from the hospital, some friends came to my house and tried to cheer me up. Their way of cheering me up was to introduce me to cocaine. At first I resisted, but the temptation was too much and I tried cocaine. Wow, did I like that drug! The euphoric effects made me feel invincible. I didn't feel the pain in my back anymore. I felt strong and powerful, like I could take on the world. Little did I know, it was the exact opposite. In addition to my prescription meds, I rapidly became addicted to cocaine. I didn't realize I was an addict, I thought I could control it. This drug for the first time in over a year and a half, made me feel strong. Well, as most of us know, cocaine is expensive. I started missing bill payments, and appointments, which led me to being suspended from worker's compensation benefits. I basically lost control. This led to some "unconventional" ways of making money. I started breaking the law. The crimes I'm talking about are identity theft, fraud, and basically almost anything that would make me enough money to support my habit. As the saying goes, all good things must come to an end. One day the police came to my door and arrested me. I was charged with 123 counts of fraud, possession of stolen property, forgery and mischief. I had stolen over $142,000 from two different sets of identities (incidentally, my "friends" helped me consume all of my new wealth within three months time). At that time, I wasn't really very scared because I knew I had never had a criminal record before and I also had an idea of how the system works. Upon being admitted into the Middlesex Detention Center and waiting for a bail hearing, I started going through mass opiate withdrawal, with convulsions. I never realized that the medication my doctor gave me would actually make my body become so addicted! My body had been taking this medication daily for years. Inside the detention center, opiates are absolutely restricted. That was my first time in the correctional system and it was also the first time I met a wonderful person named"Jane", who didn't look at me with judgment or disdain and actually saw me as human being who was worth something.

While I was busy beating myself up about my stupidity, "Jane" and the unit social worker were helping me realize that I was a worthwhile person who made poor choices. As the cycle of addiction goes, relapse is very common. Myself, I believe relapse can be one of the best learning tools for an addict. I continued to use the revolving door at the detention centre but I also continued to see "Jane". My final tipping point in my addiction was after a day that I had been released from the courthouse on bail. Someone who I thought was a friend took me to a house where I was mistaken for another girl named Lisa who had also had a huge cocaine habit and had stolen a lot of someone else's drugs. It was not hard to understand why they thought it was me. I was held in that house for three days and I was injected regularly with heroin and beaten regularly to tell them where their drugs were. Eventually, it was realized that I was the wrong Lisa. Then they didn't know exactly what they were going to do with me because I was affiliated with a bike gang because of my son. But mostly they just looked at me as a junkie addict who didn't deserve respect. I ended up escaping from that house and was scared enough to go to a hospital and the hospital contacted the police. After a thorough exam, I was told that I had been sexually assaulted during my abduction and was treated for

that. I thank God everyday that I do not remember being sexually assaulted. At that time, the police continually questioned me as to what drugs I was on and then started to question me to what I had done to these people. I immediately shut down was not very cooperative. Eventually the police hid me at a women's community house and decided my story could not be fully substantiated.

For a long time, I was scared to even walk out of the door. I still had to complete my sentence, but at least I knew inside they wouldn't get me. I also knew that inside there were people who would listen to me and my story without judging me and making me feel more inadequate than I already felt. "Jane" helped me access agencies and programs to help me deal with how and why my life had spun out of control. Ultimately, it's taken a long time and a lot of forgiving myself and also forgiving those around me. At one meeting, "Jane" suggested that I join a group that was doing a trial project for women who have experienced violence and wanted to go back to school in a safe environment and complete their education. It was called, The Bridges Project. It was not easy being there because I was the initially the only addict in the group. At that time I wasn't dealing just with addiction I was dealing with a lengthy list of other psychological issues that I had. Most significantly now I see was the fact that I am disabled and because of years of abuse I felt I wasn't worth anything and didn't deserve success. With lots of therapy, relapses, patience, persistence, and people seeing more in me than I was capable of seeing in myself, I began to forgive myself and I completed my high school diploma. That was one of the biggest milestones in helping me restore my self-esteem and self-confidence. I really wonder if I would even be alive if not for this program and the supports and referrals to other agencies that it provided. Not long after that, I regained custody of my son and I started college. I also chose to fight Worker's Compensation which took a long time and a lot of money but I won and received a significant settlement. They also had to assume responsibility for not educating me on what it is to be a person with a significant disability and the effects of the drugs that were being prescribed to me. I realize nothing will ever be normal, but what is normal?

That was three years ago. I've been sober now for over four years from any illegal narcotics. In addition to continuing with school and raising my son, I have decided on following through with supporting some of the causes I find near to my heart and helping others. ”



## BEING POOR AND BEING A MOTHER

Although violence occurs in all social classes, poverty is a significant factor in the lives of many women who have lived with violence.

Women who live in poverty are at greater risk for violence and have fewer resources to help them deal with the effects of violence, such as money to leave an abusive relationship, an education that will help them get and keep a good job, safe housing, and access to legal counsel in the case of divorce or child custody disputes. About one in seven women and one in four children in Canada, (or 2.4 million) live in poverty. They are at higher risk for abuse because the realities of poverty make it difficult to escape from violence at home.

Violence, poverty, maternal emotional and physical health, and maternal education are all related to child well being. When mothers are poor, their children are poor, and there are more than one million children living in poverty in Canada. Growing up in poverty is linked to poor academic achievement for children.

The quality of relationships that mothers have with their children is a good predictor of their children's future development. Does being poor and in a violent relationship mean you are not a good mother? Research and experience tells us that many mothers of children exposed to woman abuse are very sensitive and responsive to their children's needs. We also know that when mothers achieve a better education, their parenting skills improve and there are better long-term child outcomes.

## CONNECTIONS TO EDUCATION AND LITERACY

It is estimated that 22 to 46 percent of Canadians age 16 and older have some difficulty with literacy and that 80 percent of those with literacy issues are not aware of their deficit. Adequate levels of literacy are required to access employment, resources, and supports in Canada. Women who have experienced violence and have low levels of literacy often have difficulty getting the help they need. Efforts throughout the globe are focused on improving the literacy of girls and women in order to both prevent violence against women and help them access necessary supports.

Completion of secondary education is a very important area of concern as it is clearly associated with employment opportunities and women's empowerment. Women may consider higher learning as a place of mastery and independence, as freedom from oppression, and as an opportunity for achievement.

There is good evidence to support a return to school for women. Research has found that many women who returned to school later in their lives successfully balanced work and school, and often parenthood, while earning a degree. Some women have indicated that the effort of meeting the demands of work or school assisted in managing distress.

## LET'S TALK ABOUT PRIVILEGE

When we talk about privilege, we are talking about what we have in our lives that we have not earned—the rights, advantages, and opportunities that some people have in life by virtue of their class, race, gender, or physical and intellectual abilities. Being born with white skin, or into a stable family with adequate financial resources, are examples of privilege in modern first world societies, as is having

English as a first language. These are things that were not earned—they just are. It is important to reflect on how our own experience has been affected by our privilege. All of these circumstances of birth and community make an important difference in a person's worldview, or the way we view or interact with people and events in our world. All of these circumstances make a difference in education engagement, performance, and motivation, but they are not the sole responsibility of learners.

About half of the women who took part in Bridges were from cultures that were non-dominant—representing newcomers to Canada, women with brown skin, women who did not have English as a first language, and women who were poor. Women who identified as Aboriginal (First Nations and Métis) came to Bridges, as did women who were from families and communities where violence was normalized, and educational achievement was not. Many women believed themselves to be "stupid", because they had been told this both implicitly and explicitly by parents and others who were in positions of trust. Many did not expect to succeed because they had no faith in their own abilities, only a hope to make their children proud. Many of the women had never earned an income in a stable job, and most felt they did not have the support of their closest family and friends in pursuing education. All of these realities created great challenges for them in staying positive in the face of challenges, and maintaining forward motion in the face of setbacks.

## THE FRAMEWORK FOR THE BRIDGES PROJECT: GETTING READY TO WORK

We use theories every day in order to make sense of the world, decide on what actions to take, and anticipate the consequences of our actions. In everyday life, a theory is a set of ideas that explain something. For example, If you believe that hard work leads to success, and you want to experience success, that belief will influence you to work harder. If you believe that no matter how hard you work, you have to have good luck in order to success, then you may decide that you don't need to work hard in order to achieve your goals, but sit quietly and hope you get some good luck. The way we look at things changes what we notice, what we do, what we expect, and what we learn from our experiences. In science and social science, theories are tools used to interpret the world. Theories guide research in useful ways. They help establish causal relationships (and can be tested), and they inform research methodologies.

By using a theory as a framework, it helped us make decisions about The Bridges Project, including what our goals and dreams were, how we planned to achieve them, and what we would look at as measurable outcomes. Relational Cultural Theory is a feminist theory of human development that was developed by a group of people at the Stone Centre in Wellesley, Massachusetts. Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) provided our framework. (If you are interested in learning more about Relational Cultural Theory, there is a list of books and suggestions for further reading in the Further Resources section.)

As a feminist theory, RCT takes into account women's experiences of living in a world that, for many, iis an unfriendly place where some people have a lot of power and the ability to cause harm to others. Feminist theories view abuse as the responsibility of the abuser and the society and not the fault of the victim.

When we look at many theories of child and adult development, one of the important concepts is, "What iis the goal of healthy human development?" In many traditional theories, the goal is to have children grow up to be independent, competitive, and to be able to "stand on their own two feet". Relational

Cultural Theory takes a different view, and the main goal is to have people be engaged in healthy and mutual relationships. It's quite a different goal but when you think about it, it makes sense: relationships are the key to living a healthy and happy life. So, we asked the women of Bridges about their relationships and talked about the friendships they developed, and the interactions they had. It turned out that this was one of the most important parts of their experience.

## Here is a very brief description of Relational Cultural Theory:

This document highlights key elements from Judith V. Jordan's "Relational Cultural Theory". (Jordan, J. V., 2010. Relational-Cultural Therapy. Washington: American Psychological Association.)

Applications to the women's alternative classroom are discussed.

"Growth-fostering relationships", which are the goal in the classroom, bring about what Relational Cultural theorist Jean Baker Miller calls the "Five Good Things". These are:

- A sense of zest, or energy.
- A better understanding of self, other and the relationship.
- A sense of worth.
- An enhanced capacity to act or be productive.
- An increased desire for more connection.

There are a few basic concepts of RCT that we used to create our daily classroom activities and guide us:

1. **People grow through and toward relationships throughout the life span.**
    - We provided as many opportunities as possible for people to work together in a collaborative way, through group writing workshops, community kitchens, personal growth oriented activities such as self-esteem workshops, and group projects such as a class newsletter. Women could work on any of these on their own if they wished, of course, but these were designed with relationship-building in mind.

2. **Movement toward mutuality (each one being important to the other),**
    - Mutuality is a key part in the development of healthy relationships, so in the learning and personal growth activities listed above, we encouraged the women to teach each other, to listen to and support one another, and to engage with members of the research team as part of the team, not the recipient of services.
    - There must also be mutuality between teachers, support people, and the women, in the sense that no one has power over the women. (That sort of power-over relationship is precisely what they have dealt with in their past relationships.)

3. **Relationship differentiation and elaboration characterize growth. Where relationships are based on power and being hurt, many people come to expect this of all people and all relationships. With time and knowledge, we can change this.**
    - We talked about relationships, past, present, and future. We determined that we would break the silence about abuse and oppression and create an environment that provided safety. We talked openly about power and the "power with" stance of The Bridges Project. We discussed how to do things differently, such as how to be in a relationship that is healthy. We gave a lot of opportunities to "practice" healthy relationships. For the teacher, counselor, graduate student assistants, and the psychologist, it was important to give consistent messages so the women might come to trust us, and trust one another. In our actions and words, we used some simple principles that guided all our interactions with women, such as:
        - You matter to me; I matter to you; we matter to each other.
        - Welcome. I am so glad you are here. You are always welcome here.
        - You have the power to make your own decisions here.
        - No one is perfect, we all make mistakes and when we do, we ask for understanding and acceptance from one another—not judgment.

4. **Mutual empathy and mutual empowerment are at the core of growth-fostering relationships.**
    - Mutual empathy and empowerment is key to the foundation of the Bridges Project. These concepts were applied to relationships between students, between members of the research team, and between members of the research team and the students. At first, these concepts may need to be modelled within the teacher-student relationship, simply because the students may not know how to show mutual empathy and empowerment. Students may also be quite bogged down with the issues of their everyday life, and may be hurting so badly that they may not currently have room to empathize with a fellow classmate. (It may be too painful, or triggering, to hear of another woman's suffering.)

5. **Authenticity is necessary for real engagement and full participation in growth-fostering relationships.**
    - Authenticity can be thought of as a genuine presentation of the whole self, with openness and receptivity to the other.

    - As teachers and research team members we tried to model this in order to be genuine in everyday interactions with the women. In doing so, our goal was to develop trust with women and show, not just tell, them that who they were as people was valued and important and that they could be their authentic selves without fear of being hurt or judged. This was a very difficult journey for most women, as they had received messages from many people in their lives that who they were wasn't good enough, or smart enough, or pretty enough, or worthy of love.

6. **In growth-fostering relationships, all people contribute and grow or benefit. Development is not a one-way street.**
    - We designed The Bridges Project so that everyone would be in a position to learn from one another, and so that we would have opportunities to recognize and celebrate the contributions of others in our lives. We had lunch together

every week where we talked about our experiences and what was changing. We took a field trip to a strawberry patch and picked berries together. We made presentations at local conferences and meetings about violence against women. We presented at education and literacy forums, and we worked together to create a learning and growing environment that was strengthening for all.

7. **One of the goals of development from a relational perspective is the development of increased relational competence and capacities over the life span.**
    - We did some direct instruction and some workshops that specifically addressed relational competence and non-verbal communication. Empathy, self-empathy, self-esteem, and conflict management skills were some of our topics. Many of the women had not experienced conflict that ended in any other way than being hurt, and so they didn't have any other reference point. We provided the atmosphere and encouragement needed to build new skills and competencies such as using "I" messages. The classroom and the relationships made there, made it a safe place to practice these new skills.

# OTHER KEY CONCEPTS

## Power

> When an injured person, particularly one who has less power, can represent her or his experience of disconnection or pain to the more powerful person and be responded to with interest or concern, the less powerful hurt person has a sense of "mattering", or of having an effect on the other.

- The teachers the classrooms are in the wonderful position of helping students see that they really do matter. They must remember though, to not exert power over the students. The position of "teacher" it often a created position of power, but this power dynamic must not be used to the detriment of the student.

- The classrooms need to be safe spaces where the students can freely and easily express their experiences, both current and past.

## Politics

> ...the personal is political, the political is personal, and the rewriting of a psychological paradigm becomes an act of social justice.

- In this sense, the teachers in these classrooms are working for social justice through their everyday practice. The work takes a positive—and very political—position that will not "stand for", accept, or ignore violence against women.

## Condemned Isolation

> In condemned isolation (which often results from abusive situations), we feel immobilized, unworthy, and alone, and we feel that we have created this reality. The individual feels that she or he is to blame for his or her powerlessness and hopelessness and there is something intrinsically "wrong" with her or him.

- Coming to school is a significant risk to take for most people. They are coming to a place where in the past, they have experienced failure or unsuccessful performance because they didn't finish their education as a young person in the regular secondary school system. In coming back to school, they often have a great deal of anxiety about their ability to be successful. This leaves them vulnerable to all the negative messages in their lives. When we feel vulnerable we take action to protect ourselves. We might push people away, withdraw, or become aggressive in our attempt to put some distance between ourselves and those feelings of vulnerability. This "dance" of approaching risk and vulnerability and retreating from the anxiety and unsafe feelings that can result, can create more self-blame and tension, that if not addressed, lead to a loss of hope that anything can ever change. Our solution was to talk about it. We broke the silence and engaged in activities designed to strengthen women's goals and resolve. These activities included field trips to post-secondary learning programs and volunteer sites. We situated their feelings of fear, anxiety, inadequacy, and vulnerability by helping everyone to know that these feelings were a normal reaction to the abnormal situation (the abuse), and they were the ways they protected themselves against further harm. We also worked on showing that where once these strategies kept them safe from more harm, they were now posing barriers to further growth and development. We encouraged them to change, trust, and grow.

## Relational Resilience

**Relational resilience is "the capacity to move back into connection following disconnection, and the capacity to reach out for help". It is absolutely necessary for healing to take place.**

## What we did:

iIn a safe and constructive way, we encouraged women to talk to one another when something was wrong. Early on in the project, two women (we will call them Peggy and Maureen) who were friends got into a conflict. In response to threats on her personal safety from Maureen, Peggy made an anonymous call to the local child welfare organization and suggested that Maureen was maltreating her children. Based on the information given to the child welfare authorities, it didn't take long for Maureen to

figure out it was Peggy who made the call. They arrived at the classroom engaged in a bitter confrontation. I was there, as was Barb, and we helped the women talk about what was at the heart of the matter ("You made me angry so I lashed out". "I was scared when you threatened to hurt me"), how the next step was to return the threat in a way that strikes fear into the hearts of many women living with violence ("You are not a good mother, and your children should be taken away from you". "I'm going to lose my kids"), and how all of this is wrapped up in experience with violence. We modelled respect and authenticity, and we created a safe environment to talk about the conflict and how it felt. We also encouraged them in their skills and abilities to hear one another and make each other feel safe. Peggy and Maureen learned that it was possible to resolve conflict in a way where there was not a "winner" and "loser", and in a way that promotes learning and growth for all. Although they were never close after that incident, they did show one another respect, helped each other out, and never again engaged in conflict in the classroom.

## Relational Courage

**Relational courage involves finding one's fears (especially surrounding relational issues), and then finding the necessary support from others to deal with the fears. This can be boosted by encouraging students to encourage each other.**

## What we did:

Our guiding principles for The Bridges Project were developed as a result of conversations and consultations with women who had experienced violence and those who worked on the front lines with them. Each of the guiding principles was based on research, theory, and a shared sense of vision:

- Safety first. We recognized that safety was a priority for everyone, but not all women really knew what safety was. Imagine that being hurt (physically, emotionally, psychologically, or in countless other ways) signals the anticipation that it will happen at any moment. Many women did not know, or had forgotten, what life without violence, or the threat of violence was like. They didn't always trust the absence of violence that we promoted in the classroom, because to them it was temporary. How did we address safety?

    a. We used safety planning, in co-operation with front line VAW workers to help women develop plans for what they would do if confronted with abuse from an intimate partner. This included establishing escape routes, having a cell phone with them at all times, and using the buddy system when they were going back and forth to school.

    b. We started each day with a "check-in", where the women were invited to share how they were feeling ("I couldn't sleep and then finally, when I dozed off, I had an awful dream that my boyfriend was breaking in and going to kill me"), what they needed that day ("I just want to put my head down and take a nap"), and how they could help one another. By breaking the silence about not feeling safe, women could take come control over their fear, and help others in the process.

c. Stability. Every day was similar to the others, with routines and plans posted on paper and on the blackboards throughout the room. Calendars (individual and class) were kept current and prominently displayed, so women always knew what was scheduled.

d. Classroom guidelines.The women, in collaboration with the teacher and therapist, came up with their own "code", and this was prominently displayed. The code included behavioural rules that would make the classroom a safe environment such as no loud voices, no angry words, and no drugs or alcohol. By setting these rules, women established a sense of order.

- Patience. Everything took much more time than we planned, including learning for us all, from arithmetic, to lesson planning, and data analysis, building trusting relationships, and developing a sense of safety. We planned a lot of fun activities where we learned together, to break down barriers and create a sense of "shared skill". We learned how to paint watercolours together, and make jewelry, and use new computer programs. None of us knew exactly what we were doing in the early days of those experiences, and we worked hard to give ourselves and each other the time to explore. The "shared skill" also served to help the women understand their own importance and that everyone involved with the Bridges Project, regardless of position or education, had something valuable to offer in terms of knowledge, life skills, and experiences.

- We all have something to share. We created activities and learning opportunities that encouraged the women to be supportive of one another, and to share their expertise. We had a community kitchen. The research team members helped the women identify what they wanted to learn and what they needed in order to do it, and we applied for and obtained funding and resources to support the kitchen. The women shared favourite recipes, as well as cultural traditions and knowledge. They learned to make strawberry jam, traditional corn soup from a First Nations student, and cabbage rolls from a woman whose recipe won the blue ribbon at a local fair. The teacher worked this into the curriculum so they researched the history behind traditional foods, calculated cost per serving, and learned about nutrition. They did all of this as a group.

- Each person made their own decisions. In order to be part of The Bridges Project, women did not have to make a decision to leave their abuser. Each woman made the best decisions she could, and that was respected. It was not, however, accepted without question. The women were very good at recognizing and naming violence. One day, 19 year-old Arielle arrived at school with fresh bruises and scratches on her face and arms. When questioned by the other women she said "No big deal, it was just about a pop and a bag of chips. I shouldn't have taken them." Ramona, an older student who had a long marriage to an abusive man said: "That's what I used to say when I your age. We know

what it is and it's okay if you don't want to talk about it. But no b**t please!" Mutual empowerment was a key guiding principle and we supported women taking power over their decisions in every way possible. From setting learning goals to not judging her when she came to school with bruises—the women experienced acceptance.

- Talk about it. We talked about everything, and often. Conflict in the classroom was common, and women were invited to talk about it with one another and members of the research team. Learning that conflict could be managed without damage was an important thing for everyone. We talked about mental health diagnoses that ranged from depression to anxiety, PTSD, and Borderline Personality Disorder and what these diagnoses meant. The women learned that diagnoses were a way for professionals to communicate with one another and help the diagnosed get services. We talked about their fears and the things a diagnosis didn't mean ("you're not crazy" was one of the most common phrases!).

- We will all fall short sometime and when we do, others will be there to help us. None of us are perfect, and all of us need one another to share the hurts, the joys, the failures and successes.

chapter 4

# LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF VIOLENCE

Many women who have experienced violence experience challenges going back to school because their lives are complicated by other issues related to poverty, lack of resources, privacy, security, and lack of a stable social network of friends and family. They often have to figure out child care, health care, housing, money, transportation, and other issues in order to return to school.

Learning challenges may be the direct result of woman abuse, or they may be the cumulative result of childhood learning issues. Examples of the way that women's learning can be affected by violence include:

1. **Memory problems:** Concussions and brain injuries, as recent research bears out, can make it difficult to remember what you are learning, such as the steps in a process, or the methods to follow in writing an essay.

2. **Concentration difficulties:** Attention wanders, sometimes because learners are hungry or tired, or are in physical or emotional pain, or because they are fearful of not being able to learn successfully, or that an abuser may find and hurt them or their children.

3. **A lifetime of learning losses**: Many learners experienced a number of moves as a child, and there are gaps in their knowledge because they missed a lot of school.

4. **Fears**: It can be difficult to walk through crowded hallways and into unfamiliar places, and not know how to escape from a room or building if you are feeling afraid or threatened. Sitting with your back to doors and windows is especially hard.

5. **Health**: Headaches, stomach and bowel pain, back and neck pain, are all common among women who have experienced violence. These conditions make it difficult to maintain regular attendance and sit for long periods of time.

6. **Doubts**: Being told with words or actions by people who are close to you that you "can't learn", or that you can't change things, and that you don't "deserve" to go back to school can make it difficult to believe in yourself. Some learners might have been called hurtful names like lazy, or stupid, or useless—and when it comes time to sit down and learn, those voices in their head can get pretty loud.

# RESILIENCE AND HOPE

Resilience, or strength, describes how people live and thrive in the face of trauma and violence. Resilience is "multidimensional", meaning that it is made up of things that are in the environment a person grows up in (for example, research shows that having at least one caring adult in a child's life can increase their resilience), genetic (for example, having good health history in the family), interpersonal (having good friends you can count on), and learned traits (for example, having experiences of taking action or changing things in your life, like when you take a summer job as a youth and earn and learn to save money for something special). Success in education or through employment is a major factor in women's resilience.

Hope is another important factor that can influence learning and educational success. It is normal for women to want to return to school as part of their planning for the future when leaving, or planning to leave, an abusive relationship. In fact, getting an education that leads to stable employment to support themselves and their families is often a motivation for experienced women to return to school.

# VIOLENCE AND LEARNING

The experience of interpersonal violence plays a role in how women learn and engage with the education system. There are institutional, personal, safety, and classroom factors that require consideration.

## a) Institutional factors

Educational institutions often reflect the neighbourhoods where they are housed. For example, schools in affluent neighbourhoods are more modern and perceived as safer and may have the funding for better materials and programs, whereas institutions in inner city locations are often overcrowded and

underfunded. Inner city neighbourhoods generally have higher crime rates and this is reflected in the school system as well. Schools in inner city neighbourhoods often have issues with violence and substance use. Attending night classes in an inner city neighbourhood poses its own safety risks.

School experiences typically follow a rigid framework, with classes generally held between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. in large public buildings. Schedules and day long, regular attendance may pose a serious conflict for women with young children. Few schools provide childcare and alternative schedules, and those that do may be located far from a woman's neighbourhood. It was not unusual for women in The Bridges Project to spend three hours per day on the bus in order to drop off and pick up children at day care centres or elementary schools, and then attend school themselves. Mandatory attendance policies—in our case, the traditional adult education policy was to de-register anyone who missed 20 percent or more of classes—can be a challenge for women who experience poor health and involvement with social service, corrections, and health systems. Time spent attending court, or doctor's appointments, is time llost from school.

> "I have missed a lot of days and I have had a lot of teachers say, 'you're missing too much time and that's totally unacceptable'. But the work was done and completed, so they were failing me on attendance only. But, it's huge in my life to get these credits, and its huge in my life to complete this and I can't take forever to do it."
>
> Alana

> "Attendance and missed assignments. And it's homework too. Like the math program...it's such a condensed program that you learn something new every day. Well, if I'm not here today then I didn't hand in the homework from yesterday, I'm not learning the assignment from today, I'm not getting the assignment from today, so when I come in tomorrow, I'm not handing in the homework from today. And I have no time to learn that information. So, when it comes to the test, it's like three days missed for that one day. So, that really makes it hard."
>
> Beth

### b) Personal factors

Women may be trying to learn in the face of pain, chronic illness, hunger, and lack of sleep. Violence causes significant stress in a woman's life, and exposure to chronic stress can make it challenging to cope with additional stressors like learning. A number of studies have found there to be a strong association between sexual violence, childhood maltreatment or trauma exposure, and memory impairment. The link appears to be the long-term exposure to a chemical called Cortisol, which is released by the brain under stress. Chronic exposure has also been linked with difficulty in learning new information, a task that relies in part on memory.

Significant impairments in working memory have been found in samples of trauma-exposed people, with and without a diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Women talked about how difficult it was to focus on school work:

> ... a lot of anxiety, you know...I'd be sitting in class, not able to focus cause I'd be thinking, oh my god, I left this morning and he's sleeping and I gotta come home...and what am I coming home to? Every day, what am I coming home to? Am I gonna walk in and the house is trashed and he's drunk and everybody's there and he's gonna be yelling and screaming about who I talked to and what I did. And just...every day. For a while ...every day I didn't know what I was coming home to, so I didn't want to go home. And as much as I wanted to be here... how do you concentrate on your schoolwork?
>
> Maria

The effects of long-term stress on physical health are well documented. Exposure to stress over long periods of time is related to the development of a number of painful or debilitating physical conditions including irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), stomach complaints, reproductive and urinary tract complications (Pre-Menstrual Syndrome or PMS, and overactive bladder), migraines and stress headaches, fatigue, and fibromyalgia. Long term neglect of physical health can also result in a depressed immune system and this makes women more likely to experience common colds and flus. Mobility issues resulting from injury are an additional concern for women. Medication taken for health or psychiatric concerns may also contribute to difficulties with learning.

### c) Safety factors

Fear can influence women's ability to learn in a classroom, in large part because when we live in fear for our safety it is difficult to concentrate on the task at hand. Some women are afraid of punishment from abusers:

> ... I was afraid...very nervous all the time that I would talk to someone at school and get caught. Or if I went for coffee with friends I was afraid the whole time he would see. When I was driving with him I always had to look forward. I couldn't look out the window because he would think I was looking at other men.
>
> Laura

Abusers may not allow the women to attend school or classes, taking car keys or bus tickets, or destroying assignments or homework, all in attempts to control the women and stop them from going to school. The women may then stop attending out of fear of their partner, or through feeling ashamed to tell anyone, thus creating gaps in their learning and educational experience.

If women have left a violent relationship, they may be in transitional housing or trying to find a new place to live, possibly with children. Safety and stability are extremely important for learning and it can be extremely challenging without them. Lastly, women may experience gaps in learning due to physical or mental health issues that make regular attendance difficult.

Here is the story of a woman, in her own words, about the challenges she faced when she returned to an adult education classroom:

> At first, okay, the school, right....things were okay, I mean, when we first started seeing each other for the few months.... ... it wasn't until he started basically moving in and being there all the time...he's very, very, very needy, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week he needs you there with him. Just for him even to survive. At the point he was at in his life with the addictions, and everything else, he needed me there 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. And then when I started school, I was gone all day and that was really hard for him. With the addictions, I would be up for four days straight. And then I might make it to school, I might be late, I might not even be able to make it to school since I'd been up for four or five days. Maybe I'd have...you know I would beg him, 'just let me sleep for an hour' and he's let me sleep for 10 minutes and set the clocks forward and tell me I'd slept for an hour. But then he would tell me later, 'you know, I set the clocks ahead, they're not right, cause I wanted you awake...I didn't want you to sleep.' So, then I'm coming to school and I'm tired. And lack of sleep really affects your judgment too in a lot of things. So, it kind of became...it took over, it totally consumed me. And at the same time, I'm looking after my kids, I'm still trying to come to school, I've still got those routines to follow and I've got things to do, and those responsibilities...yet I'm taking care of him too, right?
>
> Jessica

### d) Classroom factors

Teaching practices, such as when the pace of instruction is too fast, make it difficult for women to come to school and learn. The classroom itself can be a fearful experience for women. If there is overcrowding, or the pace of instruction is too fast, or there are men present at the school, women may drop the course or even withdraw from school completely.

Fear may also lead to absences from school, creating gaps in learning. The topics being discussed in the classroom may also be difficult for women; for example, topics such as oppression or violence may be difficult for women who have experienced violence, thus causing gaps in learning and absences from school. Women often feel ashamed to attend school if they have recently been abused and fear what peers or friends will say or think. They may stop attending until the evidence of abuse is gone.

## THE JOURNEY

### The women: Normal reactions to abnormal situations

Many women who have experienced intimate violence have thought a great deal about returning to school. It is usually described by them as being both an exciting and "scary" time. Whenever people make big changes—and returning to school is certainly a big change—things become more unstable and less predictable. For some, this is exciting, and for others, it can be scary. For those who experience change with excitement, there are challenges to be figured out and overcome. Anxiety can make challenges seem insurmountable and this can cause people to focus on their weaknesses instead of their strengths. This is normal. Women getting ready to go back to school will face many barriers and difficulties. The violence they have experienced throughout their life has not left them unscathed. But they also have many strengths they can rely on to help them through this journey.

## THE MIND AND BODYCONNECTION

Many women who have experienced violence in either childhood or in their intimate relationships report that they have trouble learning new information, focusing on a task, and concentrating.

> "I didn't realize that I had a cognitive disability in what it takes for me to retain and when like I know now when, only, well its not only but I retain best in the morning or when I first go to bed. I know now that I can only read so much for a certain period of time, and I know also that I need to re-read that within so many hours or it won't stay...I know also that I need the technologies that they gave me to help me do all these retentions. All of a sudden its like boom! Like my brain opened up, but once I learned how to learn, that was the biggest thing."
>
> Leticia

Another common experience for survivors of violence is fatigue or tiredness. Women who return to school report that they often feel exhausted after a day, or even half a day, at school. This is because learning new material, and concentrating and dealing with so many people is mentally draining. Here are the words of one woman who took part in The Bridges Project:

> I have chronic fatigue syndrome, so everyday when I'm done at school, I go home, I drop my book bag off, which seems to be heavier every day. I take my coat off, I pet my cat, I feed him treats, and I lay on my couch and that's it until 5 o'clock. Then I get up and I make my dinner. And then I'm back on my couch until 7:30. I take my antipsychotics like a good little girl, and when I forget, my cat knocks them off the table so I can remember. That happened once and then I'm in bed for the night by 8:30. I'm up at 6, and I do the same thing. Friday—no, Saturday and Sunday, I sleep all day and all night, just to recover from the week. but nobody knew that until now.
>
> Delia

Because most women who experience violence do not seek medical attention, they do not receive screening for the physical or emotional impact of abuse. They are also likely to experience shame and self-doubt when it comes to the effects of the violence. Women who live in isolation and fear tend to take full responsibility for their perceived weaknesses and faults, and believe that all of their physical and learning problems are because they have a deficit or a problem. This means they are more likely to not ask a teacher for help with a learning task. Or they may ask for clarification, but may keep going to school in spite of not understanding the subject matter. This results in them getting even more behind, and having more difficulty keeping up.

## BREAK THE SILENCE

Breaking the silence is one of the most important lessons we learned in The Bridges Project. Once we broke the silence, talked about the experience of violence and the effects violence has on women, and communicated with one another honestly and with empathy, we began to break down the barriers to creating a safe space. When women can teach and learn knowing that they are valued, and that other women have walked this path before, it means that many things are possible. To live with shame and self doubt as a learner or an educator means being isolated and disconnected from others. The pattern is circular. A person who is isolated and disconnected is vulnerable to shame and self-doubt. It is critical to reach out and make connections.

# SOCIAL AND RELATIONAL ISSUES

It can't be stated enough that going to school can be very difficult for women who have experienced violence. It is not unusual for them to feel nervous or scared to go to school. In fact, it is very common for women to have doubts about their return to school, or to have worries about it. Women have reported that they worry about being judged or told that they are stupid. Some are nervous about meeting new people, or working in groups. It is not uncommon for women to feel alone and isolated from others at their school, one reason being they might be older than other students.

Interviewer: You were afraid you were too old to go back to school?

C: Very true (laughs)

Interviewer: Yeah? But you're only 20!

C: I thought I would be too old for it (laughs)

One reason women report being nervous is because they are parents and many other students are not. Women who are with an abusive partner may also feel like everyone knows their experiences and they are being judged. They may feel as though they stick out "like a sore thumb."

Interviewer: What would you consider your barriers to education? What makes it difficult for you to be successful?

P: Many things ...when I got a beating the last time, I didn't come to school because I didn't know how to explain the mark on my face. So, I didn't come to school for three days.

Interviewer: And how did it affect you, was it difficult when you came back?

P: Ya, my friends asked me, "what is wrong with your face?" And I said that I was riding a bike and I fell.

Women have shared that they felt misunderstood and had trouble communicating in class. It is normal to be nervous about participating in class or giving presentations. The women of The Bridges Project talked about feeling both very sensitive to criticism and negatively judged when they did not do well on an assignment. It is natural when you have experienced violence, and especially spent time trying to hide the violence, to be uncomfortable in social situations. It is important to remember that you are not alone in these feelings, and that others share your fears and insecurities.

# RETURNING TO SCHOOL

Some women have found that returning to school can lead to an increase in tension at home. A women's partner may feel threatened by her choice to become more educated. He may feel left out or abandoned and that may cause increased problems at home or within the school setting. The following is an excerpt from a woman in The Bridges Project talking about her partner's feelings about her being in school:

> **"When I first started school it was like, 'you can't sit next to a guy in class, you can't talk to a guy in class, and if you have a group assignment...it better all be girls in that group or you better not participate. So, if it is a group assignment..either tell the teacher that you want to do it on your own or leave...and don't do it...take the zero.**
>
> **Student"**

**Interviewer:** And does he, when you go to school, does he try to create barriers in terms of your school or is he supportive, and does he do things to always keep you at home?

**Student:** Well, yes and no. Homework, you know, he says, 'you're at school all day...you can't do homework, you're supposed to spend time with me'."

Most of the women who came to Bridges experienced an increase, or escalation, in the violence they were experiencing. Even though most of them were not living with their abuser when they started school, most still had contact because of shared parenting, financial dependence, living in the same neighbourhood, or contact though friends and families. Women were given very negative messages by those who were supposed to love and support them (boyfriends, husbands, parents or siblings). Examples of these negative messages include, that the people at the school didn't really care about them, that they were helping just because they were getting paid to do it, and that they were taking up a valuable spot that would be more helpful for someone who wasn't so stupid and hopeless. Many women were faced with a lack of support when they first came to school. This was reinforced by active sabotage or increased violence once an abuser realized that she was going to keep going to school and not quit, and that she was expanding her social world and learning new things. One woman was abducted on her way to school and kept locked in an apartment until her abuser thought she would be kicked out of school. Another had her husband tell her that he would no longer care for the children while she was at school, and that she had to make a choice between keeping her children and remaining in school. Many women experienced more emotional abuse, more financial restrictions, more physical harm, and more humiliation when they committed to school. We tried to removed the shame from this whenever we

could, and talked about what was going on, determined to not be silent about it. Women learned they could lean on one another, and that they were not alone. For them, this was an incredible realization.

Women with children experience similar conflict and often, guilt. Children may initially resent being left at home with a babysitter, or they may be upset when mom has to do homework. They may act out at home or at school. This can be very difficult for the women. They may find that they experience an increase in their trauma symptoms. For example, women may feel more depressed, or have trouble sleeping. They may experience flashbacks that are more frequent or an increased dependence on substances to cope with the increased stress.

## DISCOVERING STRENGTHS

There are numerous challenges and stresses associated with returning to school. Despite this, women who have made the choice to commit to their education have reported many positive experiences. Simply being in school can provide stability and predictability for women. It can help them feel more like they belong and that they are doing something productive. School provides structure and going to school can feel like something "normal" in a chaotic world. As one of the women who was involved in The Bridges Program said:

> **"Well, that is the only way to get some help. I am starting a new way of living. I got one of my goals. I am going to school."**

> **"I get to prove to myself that I'm still smart. Even through all of the abuse and everything, I've still managed to maintain a fairly decent average. So, it's good. And it keeps me from being isolated, which is my biggest most favourite thing to do. Hide away from the world."**

## BEING "READY FOR CHANGE"

For many people, education is viewed as both a right and as a "normal" experience. For others, education is a privilege, a special right, an advantage afforded to some but not them. Lack of educational opportunities is seen as a barrier to normalcy. When the women decide to return to school they are doing so in order to reach what is on the other side of education—access to a safe, socially and economically sustainable and "respectable" identity. In short, they are seeking to belong to the privileged majority by moving from the margins of society to the centre.

Bridges participants shared their ideas, thoughts, and feelings about their journeys to education, self-empowerment, and solidarity in poems, stories, and interviews. Many came to see themselves differently —as people who have struggled and worked hard to survive and who understand their rights as innate.

When there is no light
When you can no longer fight
When you need a helping hand
Cause it is time to make a stand
Bridges is here
To help make it clear
Bridges cares for all
No matter the call
We all work together
On making things better
We all have our own pain
Bridges shows what we have to gain.
With Bridges there is no end.
They are always a good friend.
No matter what you need for yourself
Bridges is there with no doubt
Anger, pain and fear
You will never find it here
Bridges is security, loyalty, and trust
For Bridges this is a must.
Now ask yourself "is it time?"
So I take back what is mine!
If you say yes then take a stand
Bridges is there with a helping hand

-Yolanda

"I try to do everything very fast. As a child, I was given 10 minutes to do the supper dishes—cleaning off the table, washing and drying, and putting away. If you went over the 10 minutes, you had to wash every dish in the house. And I got beat. So speed became important, and I tried to do homework just as fast, because sometimes if you spent too long, your books would get taken away and thrown in the garbage. It's so hard to learn new things so fast, when you're afraid."

— Evelyn

# MY SOLDIERS

When you think of the word soldier
The first thing that comes to mind
Is uniform, guns, and war.

But the soldiers that I'm talking about are my feet. My feet have taken me to many places in Africa and yet they're still with me. They have walked three different countries in my homeland "Mother Africa".

My feet have walked through the hottest heat possible. Rain, mud, that comes up to your hips.

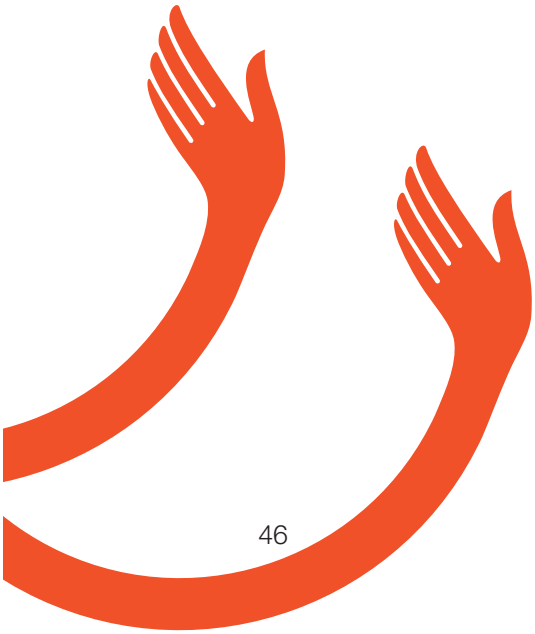
My feet will never be the same again. I want to go to the salon and get them done but shit! My feet are beated. My feet have fought their own war against Mother Nature. They have been cut, poked by rusted nails, and infected by bacteria.

No matter what life brought their way they took it like true soldiers. Each day is a battle for them. Without my feet I could not stand. Without my feet I could not walk.

They do what I tell them to do.

They go where I want them to go.
They obey my every command.
They have been used and abused,
And yet they still stand. Strong and
They will always be my soldiers.

—Ayen



## I AM

Movies, Friends, Fishing
I like fishing and camping
Honesty, Loyality and commitment are important to me
I like to entertain friends and family
I dislike being a pushover, but with time I can change that
I don't like sleeping in
I love Chinese food
Weekends are the greatest!
This is me. I am. —Deb

## I AM

Movies. Bingo. Walking through the store
I live to learn more about thing around the world. And
their disabled prob
Honesty. Truth. How they are with their family
I like to watch Bonnie with the kids
I dount like to be told wate to do in a collided way
I dount like to hurt the kids
I hate to be out of space
I like food to eat
I like to go camping and playing
with the kids by going to the beach playing
in the sand and bury are self
I dou'nt like to see Girls get Hurt
Or to her about it
This is me. I'm a Good Girl —Diane

## I AM

Good friends, gossip magazines, watching TV
Trust, honesty, and dependability are important to me
I am a survivor
I don't like my weight
But I can diet
I love my children
I hate people who lie & steal
I like chocolate
This me. I am!! —Patti

chapter 5

# TEACHING IN THE CONTEXT OF VIOLENCE

> I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. I possess tremendous power to make life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humour, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis is escalated or de-escalated, and a person is humanized or de-humanized. If we treat people as they are, we make them worse. If we treat people as they ought to be, we help them become what they are capable of becoming.
>
> – Goethe

Teaching in the context of violence isn't really so different than teaching in any other context, except that what we do matters in very important ways. For a woman who has lived a life marked by pain and chaos, the classroom will be a safe haven, and place of opportunity, as well as a painful reminder of how different her life outside the classroom really is. For a teacher who is faced with students who have lived in very difficult circumstances, we might be afraid to teach for fear of inadvertently causing harm; afraid to listen because it brings up painful memories of our own experiences with violence (because all women are at risk, not just the students); afraid to speak because we are afraid of saying the wrong thing.

The principles of excellent teaching apply here, too. Get to know your students, and let them know you notice, and you care. Know the curriculum and what may be especially challenging for

some students, and how to help. Know the context of your students' lives and how the world can come into your classroom. Make it a safe place to teach, learn, and explore, and forgive yourself—and them—if some days, it is not.

## ADVOCACY

You will find yourself in the position, at some point, of being asked to help. This may take the form of writing a letter or making a call about daycare. Melanie had returned to school and was working on her final two credits for her high school diploma. She also had two small children in a government-subsidized day care centre. During the six week summer break, she took a temporary job picking produce at a local farm. She made $300 in four weeks and when she declared this income to her welfare caseworker, her daycare subsidy was taken away. When classes resumed in the fall, she could not return and had to wait another five months before two more spots opened up for her children. Throughout this, we wrote letters and supported her petition for an exception, but it made no difference to the authorities. It did make a tremendous difference for Melanie, though. She continued to work on her courses at home, attended our weekly pot-luck lunches with her children, and stayed connected and engaged. She felt supported, and in turn, she provided continuing support for the other women in the class.

## DON'T ASSUME YOU ARE UNDERSTOOD

The provincial authorities paid The Bridges Project a visit once they realized that students were staying beyond three months, the accepted length (and the time limit for funding) for an adult basic education class. Although they were very happy that women were maintaining their enrolment and engagement, it was at cross-purposes with their protocol. Once we realized this, we requested a meeting with the authorities in charge and they were very accepting and sympathetic to our methods; they had previously simply not understood. This was an important lesson in assumptions for us!

## CURRICULUM

Some barriers can be presented in terms of the topic being presented. During the first week of The Bridges Project, in what was a regular weekly meeting, the teacher laid out her lesson plan for the coming unit for English—a series of activities about writing. By studying a current event, the women would be exposed to editorial writing and news reporting. By writing different pieces, they would engage in narrative, expository, descriptive, and persuasive writing methods. The teacher had walked many students through this plan over the years, changing the current news story to remain current and relevant. In this case, she had chosen a news story about a custody dispute between an adoptive and a biological mother; the news stories were sensational, the issues compelling and heart-breaking. The challenge here, though, was that each woman in the class had either lost custody of one or more of her children, or had good reason to believe that this would happen. To try to engage them in this topic would prevent them from the task of learning how to write four different paragraphs; it would simply be too emotionally difficult. Instead, the teacher switched topics and all was well.

Looking through the lens of the people with whom you are working can help identify stumbling blocks and missteps, as well as opportunities.

# PEDAGOGY

The consistent theme in our weekly meetings was about pace and repetition of instruction. Most of the women had been out of school for years, so their ability to maintain concentration and focus was not the same as someone who was used to being in school. While it might be typical to break a lesson up into 20 minute "chunks" in a regular class, changing up the activities or method of instruction at these times to maintain focus and engagement, it was often necessary to plan in ten or even five minute chunks. By breaking things down into very small pieces, the women would feel a sense of accomplishment that they had been able to "stay with it".

The teachers found it worked well to give the women control over the daily schedule: what time would the class take a break? How much time should be devoted to journaling or independent work? Having control over these aspects reinforced their agency, or ability to engage, make choices, and take action.

Be prepared for slow pace, because women in the class may think slowly and need to have things repeated many times. We are often working in opposition to all the voices from the past that told them (in words or otherwise) that they were stupid, lazy, and unable to learn. These are powerful forces and ghosts of the near and distant past that are difficult to counteract.

Plan for review sessions and provide resources for women to use on their own. Peer tutoring can work very well, and we often had women bring their children into the classroom when the kids had the day off, or late in the afternoon, when school was done. The women got a lot of practice reading to their children, helping them with their homework, and encouraging them.

# THE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Growing up as a child, and/or experiencing woman abuse, can result in complex trauma. Complex trauma is experienced when the violence is unpredictable, is terrifying and severe, when no comfort or support is offered in the aftermath, and when it occurs at a young age and memories are not fully formed.

There are particular features of complex trauma that can have an enormous impact in the classroom:

1. **Emotion regulation**—often those who have experienced complex trauma can have difficulty in understanding the effect they have on others. This is likely related to keeping themselves safe in terrifying circumstances. They also have difficulty being able to recognize and name the emotions they are experiencing. In a classroom situation, a student might make an offhand comment about the length of time it is taking a peer to read a page in a book. The person reading may feel like they are being made fun of, or thought of as stupid, and they feel fear and dread that they may never learn how to read easily. This fear is then turned to anger, lashing out at the person who made the comment as a way to preserve their own dignity. This can all happen in a moment, and without conscious thought.

## What can you do?

Model appropriate communication, give women the opportunity to see that they can have a positive effect on one another through activities such as sharing one quality they admire in another person, or decorating boxes with what they think people see on the outside, and what they really feel like, on the inside.

2. **Arousal**—because women are always "on the look-out" for danger, their "resting" level of arousal is much high than normal, and they can be triggered quite easily. Consider this scenario: there was always a supply of food in the classroom (because it is so hard to learn when you are hungry). Jasmine remembers, and still experiences, hunger. There was never enough food as a child and now, she has little money and cannot provide enough food for herself and her three children. She feels shame about this, and is fearful that even though everyone says it is okay to take the food, she will get into trouble. Women were invited to take what they needed, and taking it home was okay. So, Jasmine would stuff her bag full of granola bars and packets of hot chocolate. Ruth would see Jasmine do this and get very angry. "Jasmine is stealing from the class, she is stealing food that is meant for all of us," Ruth would say. Jasmine would look at Ruth with defiance, ready for a fight. Ruth would yell and point at Jasmine, ready to point out the "wrong". Both women would be upset from experiencing a threat in the classroom. You may have heard of the "fight, flight, or freeze" response to danger. When something bad happens, people can take on superhuman strength and snatch a child from the path of an oncoming car, or they can outrun a person who is threatening them, or they can become frozen, unable to move. Think of this in terms of behaviours you might see in a classroom: a "fight" response can look like anger: "I am NOT doing this". The "flight" response can take the form of dissociation, "going away in the mind", or retreating when it is too threatening. The "freeze" response can look oppositional, like a woman sitting at her desk with an unopened book in front of her, when you have asked her to turn to page 32.

## What can you do?

Have frequently scheduled meetings to go over class rules and expectations. Be clear about policies and rules and why they are being put in place. Give women the opportunity to have a say. Learning to talk through emotional times is a skill, and the skill needs to be practised.

3. Researchers who look at how the brain is affected by violence often refer to the "survival" brain and the "learning" brain. The "survival" brain is the primitive part of the brain that regulates our survival responses, such as running from danger. When it is activated (when a person is afraid for their life), thinking and responding comes down to basic instincts for survival such as "run" or "hide". The "learning" brain functions at a much higher cognitive level, where rational

thought prevails. A person's learning brain cannot engage if the survival brain is activated. This is referred to allostasis (always on), as compared to homeostasis (balanced). Too much stimulation is toxic to the brain, and the mechanisms for switching from the survival brain to the learning brain are damaged by this overload. If a woman comes to school after a night filled with nightmares about her abuser, she may be in allostasis and not ready or able to learn.

## What can you do?

Provide opportunities for women to practice self care. This might be through grounding techniques (strategies to detach from emotional pain). Women in The Bridges Project always had mental, physical, and soothing strategies at hand:

**Mental**: a safe saying, such as "my name is Ruth. I am safe. My children are safe. This is a safe place. I am in the present, not in the past."

**Physical**: focus on breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth; hold on to manipulatives such as smooth stones, play-doh, or stress balls.

**Soothing**: picture someone who you care about, or a calm and peaceful place; think of something you are looking forward to, like coffee with a friend

4. **Paying attention**—women who have experienced violence may be on the lookout for danger, so they can be hyper-vigilant, always aware and feeling threat. This means that they only look for danger. They do not see the note on the board about the pot-luck lunch coming up tomorrow, they only read about unsolved crime or violence against women in the newspaper, and they dismiss information (or sources of information) that are benign or friendly. By only looking for things that signal danger, they may be very good at visually scanning a room to make sure nothing is out of place (because if there is a mess, their experience has been harsh punishment), but they may not be able to notice the minus sign and plus signs on a math sheet. Looking for danger has developed as an adaptive response to threat, but it doesn't support learning. They may have trouble distinguishing between main points and details in a story, or writing a story with a beginning, middle and end that flow smoothly.

## What can you do?

Use cues to signal important details. Use a highlighter (or support the student to use one) and highlight all the plus signs on a math sheet in purple, and all the multiplication signs in yellow. Use voice inflections when giving important instructions and get quiet, or loud, to bring attention to key messages. Demystify the reading comprehension process by reading a brief story out loud, then ask the women to "think out loud", by relating details of the story to the memories that they attach to them so they can remember them.

5. **Physical symptoms**—experience with violence often brings with it difficulty with eating, sleeping, physical health (including chronic pain) and mental health. Women will often share that they can't sleep or eat, or that they eat or sleep too much. Shari was the first woman to join our classroom, and she had a damaged esophagus from years of being choked by her abuser. She could eat only pureed food. In response to her need, we made sure there was always food she could eat in the classroom. She didn't always eat it, but knowing that someone was thinking of her and accepting her physical limitation without judgement, was a very positive experience. Women who have experienced blows to the head may have suffered brain injuries, resulting in memory loss, headaches, and a sense of disorientation.

## What can you do?

Provide what comfort you can for physical symptoms, such as cushions for chairs when their backs are painful, blankets or shawls to put over their shoulders when they are cold, a lounge chair to relax in if they have been up all night. The women in the Bridges class loved the smell of lavender and found it very soothing, so we had a simple set-up of lavender oil and reeds to diffuse the scent.

chapter 6

# MOVING FORWARD

## ALL OR NOTHING THINKING AND GOAL SETTING

One of the most common effects of trauma and violence is referred to as ”all or nothing” or “black and white” thinking. For women who have experienced violence there are no shades of grey. Things either are good or bad, dangerous or safe, perfect or completely flawed. All or nothing thinking is especially problematic when considering goal setting. Women who have experienced violence may see themselves as being stupid for not having done well in school. They may believe that setbacks are synonymous with failure. These misperceptions go beyond low self esteem, they are rigid ways of seeing the world that have served to keep the women safe, to protect them from the terror of uncertainty. Therefore, the women always believe they are failing at the goals they set for themselves or they don’t set goals for themselves because they don’t believe they can meet the goals.

Helping women develop a more flexible lens through which to view the world is not the task of an educator alone. However, in an education system where an A is considered good, and all other grades are considered “bad”, an educator can help women recognize that improvement is good and that struggling is a normal and expected experience within school. Women often also need assistance in setting realistic and appropriate educational goals for themselves. We found two common issues that required goal-setting assistance:

1. Women who set very ambitious goals for themselves that they are often unable (for a variety of reasons) to achieve. These women needed help altering their view of success to fit their abilities without feeling that they are failures for not being able to reach their goals.

2. Women who set the bar very low out of fear of failure. These women required assistance with appropriate challenges and motivations in order to recognize their academic potential.

Dealing with these issues requires sensitivity. Bridges relied on trauma research and epistemology to ground our understanding of the lasting impact of violence on learning.

> **Even when programs are designed to help people return to school, internalized oppression may act as an invisible barrier to success.**
>
> **(Horseman 2006, Wagner, & Magnusson, 2005).**

chapter 7

# RESOURCES

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Appendix

# OUTLINE FOR THE GROUP COUNSELLING MANUAL

## BRIDGES: ENDING WOMEN ABUSE GROUP

### Group Themes:

**Week 1:** Starting School
Getting to know you

**Week 2:** What is Woman Abuse?
Power and Control

**Week 3:** Goal Setting
Fears and Challenges so far

**Week 4:** The Effects of Abuse on Women
Learning and Surviving

**Week 5:** Safety Concerns
Safety Planning

**Week 6:** Myths of Woman Abuse
Why Men Abuse

**Week 7:** How Learning is Effected by Abuse

**Week 8:** Setbacks in Learning and in Life

**Week 9:** Survival Skills

**Week 10:** Dreams and New Goal setting
Fears and Challenges

**Week 11:** Other Resources we have

**Week 12:** Closure

### Guiding Principles:

To encourage women to continue in their education in order to promote self worth. To increase the safety and well being of women who have been in relationships, or are currently in relationships, where woman abuse exists. To hold the woman abuse perpetrator, not the victim, responsible for the abusive behaviour and for stopping it.

# WEEK ONE:
# Starting School and Getting to Know You

**Objectives:** To establish a safe, comfortable, women-centred environment for women to discuss the personal abuse to which they have been subjected; To discuss openly and honestly the challenges and expectations of starting school; To create a forum where women are viewed as experts of their own personal experiences and therefore have resources to share with the group and all members; and to define woman abuse from a woman's own experience.

**Resources:** name tags, folders, group members rights and responsibilities hand out, confidentiality form, reporting responsibilities information handout, flip chart and marker.

**Agenda:**

1. Welcome and Introduction
   - (a) Begin by honouring all the women for attending the group today. Light candle in centre of group and read the poem for grounding.
   - (b) Introduction by the facilitator of herself to the group.
   - (c) Review briefly the rights and responsibilities handout, confidentiality, and reporting responsibilities.
   - (d) Explain to each woman that she is provided with a folder containing these items which can be kept in their cubby at school if they don't feel it is safe to take these documents home.
   - (e) Give a brief description of the group and explain that it is open and ongoing, and speak about attendance and issues of concern for women who are absent without letting anyone know.

2. Introduction of group members:
   - (a) Have group members pair up with someone they don't know. Ask the women to gather information from the other member and let them know that they will be introducing the new member to the group.

3. Activity:
   - Using the flip chart to record the answers given by the women ask the following questions:
   - How do you feel right now in the group?
   - What are your hopes and worries from the group?
   - Do you have any fears or concerns about the group?

- What do you need to feel safe and comfortable in the group?
- How do you feel about being at school today?
- What are your hopes and worries about attending school again?
- Do you have any fears or concerns about attending school?
- What do you need to feel more comfortable at school?
- Notice the themes and repeated responses. Point these out to the women in the group and explain that this is normal. Create a community that is experiencing similar emotions and thoughts to lower the feelings of isolation.

4. Closure:

(a) Go around — ask each woman how they feel after finishing the first group

(b) Go around — ask each woman how she might take care of herself over the next week until the group meets again

(c) Read grounding poem

(d) Ask the women to consider volunteering to set up coffee and refreshments for the next group (materials all provided). Have information for women on resources in the community. Set up coffee and tea for women before group begins

## WEEK TWO:

# What is Woman Abuse? Learning about power and control.

**Objectives:** To establish a safe, comfortable, woman-centred environment for women to discuss the personal abuse to which they have been subjected. To create a forum where women are viewed as experts of their own experiences and therefore have resources to share with other women and to define woman abuse from a women's own personal experience.

**Resources:** name tags, Power and Control Wheels

**Agenda:**

(1) Welcome- be sure to introduce self to the group again, recognize new members, have each woman say her name to the group and ask new members to state their name and something that they think is interesting about themselves.
(2) Briefly review the rights and responsibilities of each member
(3) Read grounding passage to prepare woman for the beginning of group.

**Activity:**

(1) Discuss the origin of the power and control wheel, the importance of women defining abuse for themselves rather than having it defined by their partners or the legal system.
(2) Discuss the intentionality, the repeated use of tactics (not isolated events), no hierarchy of tactics
(3) Invite the group to discuss tactics of abuse that they have experienced or have witnessed from friends and family and note the responses on the large power and control wheel. Try to encourage women to claim/name the abuse for themselves in order to help make it real. Make sure that examples are as inclusive as possible i.e. AIDS under sexual abuse, "outing" under threats, "being nice" under emotional abuse.
(4) Encourage women to discuss how they are feeling after the previous exercise, acknowledge courage and strength in having completed activity. Prepare the women for the possibility of remembering examples once they return home and encourage them to use self care tactics.
(5) Discuss how the violence and abuse against them impacts their education and learning.
(6) Hand out completed power and control wheels.

**Closure:**

(1) Go around — ask each woman how they feel after finishing the group
(2) Ask how she might take care of herself in the next week until the group meets again
(3) Remind members about individual counselling available.
(4) Read poem to close.

# WEEK THREE:
# Goal Setting, Fears, and Challenges So Far

**Objectives:** To begin to identify the difference between goals and desires; To identify goals which will lead to personal success; To set one goal for the next month; To set one desire for the next month;

**Resources:** Magic Wand, construction paper, markers, masking tape.

**Agenda:**

(1) Welcome: Notice any new members and ask them to state their name for the group and state something that they think is interesting about themselves. Ask all members to go around and state their name.

(2) Check-in: We all find ourselves in situations that are difficult and challenging, when we are challenged we all react differently. Think of a time when you were challenged and how you reacted. Briefly complete the following sentence " when I am challenged I ….."

**Activity:**

(1) Explain to the group the difference between desires and goals. Speak of goals which are able to fulfill success and goals which seem to have many obstacles between success and failure.

(2) Provide each woman the opportunity to use the magic wand to grant herself a "desired" wish.

(3) Ask each woman to think of a goal that is obtainable, ask her to draw her goal on the construction paper or write it on the construction paper.

(4) On the reverse side of the construction paper ask each woman to write the steps needed to fulfill the goal "how will you obtain this goal?"

(5) Ask each woman to share their goal and steps with the group if they would like to.

(6) Invite the women to tape their goals on the classroom wall of "inspiration"

(7) Open discussion about what are some of the challenges that each woman is facing to date in the classroom and from going back to school. Ensure that all members note that there is no need for solutions to these challenges and it is not suitable for members to "give advice about what the other member should do."

**Closure:**

(1) Ask each woman how they are feeling at the completion of the group.

(2) Ask how they plan on caring for themselves in the next week until the group meets again.

(3) Read poem to close group.

## WEEK FOUR:

# The Effects of Abuse on Women, Learning, and Surviving

**Objectives:** To identified the impacts of abuse on women; To recognize woman abuse as an atrocity; To explore the internalization of the messages of the oppressor; To de-pathologize the impact of abuse;

**Resources:** Power and Control Wheel (large for group), The Effects of Abuse on Us (facilitator's copy)

**Agenda:**

(1) Welcome: Review confidentiality, notice any new members and have them state their name and something that they find interesting about themselves. Ask everyone to go around and state their name for the members of the group.

(2) Opening: Complete grounding breathing technique with all the women in the group and identify this as something that will help when they feel anxious, fearful, overwhelmed.

**Activity:**

(1) Using the large power and control wheel, reflect on tactics of abuse. Ask the women to
speak of ways which they are or have been impacted by abuse. Consider feelings created
by long term exposure to abuse, de emphasizing the idea of dysfunctionality and acknowledging trauma.

**Examples: hated self, gained weight, lost weight, loss of self esteem, isolation, fearful, distrusting, felt deserving of abuse, hurt relationship with children, economic dependence of partner, see other women as a threat, shame, humiliation, guilt, self doubt, going "crazy", physical injury, disability, venereal disease.**

(2) Internalizing the messages: Read "The Effects of Abuse on Us: internalizing the messages" to the group.

(3) Discuss the material.

(4) Discuss the ways in which women internalize the messages from the abusers, the system that supports the abuser, and the culture that both subtly and blatantly dehumanizes women.

**Closer:** How are you going to take care of yourself this week?

# WEEK FIVE:
# Safety Concerns and Safety Planning

**Objectives:** To give women an opportunity to share safety information with one another; To identify risk factors that increase the potential of being abused; To establish safety plans for women and their children. To discuss other resources in the community that can assist abused women.

**Resources:** Safety plan information for facilitator only, flip chart and marker

**Agenda:**

(1) Welcome: inform the group that this might be a difficult session for many and encourage them to care for themselves as needed.
(2) Ask the women when was a time that they felt "brave"?

**Activity:**

(1) Read the risk assessment from LAWC to the group and ask the women to respond silently in their head.
(2) Read "Creating a Safety Plan" from LAWC.
(3) On the flip chart, record the discussion of what safety measures have been pursued. Ask women what resources they have utilized in the community that directly relate to woman abuse issues and flip chart the responses.

**Closure:** Grounding technique to help women with the following week and the night following the group as emotions might be high.

# WEEK SIX:
# Myths of Women Abuse, Why Men Abuse.

**Objectives:** To dispel the myths surrounding violence against women; To define why men abuse; To explore the acceptance of violence against women in society

**Resources:** "Common Misconceptions About Women Abuse" LAWC resource

**Agenda:**

(1) Welcome: invite group and women to discuss any safety issues or concerns that they have had over the previous week related to women abuse issues

**Activity:**

(1) Ask the women to respond to the following: why have you been told men abuse and what have abusers told you is the reason for their abuse?

(2) Discussion to dispel myths with the common misconceptions. Use handout as a guide.

**Closure:** Discuss the fact that abuse is a learned behaviour and therefore it can be unlearned; Read poem, breathing techniques.

# WEEK SEVEN:
# How Learning is Effected by Abuse

**Objectives:** To help women to understand that some of the difficulties that they are experiencing or may have experienced, are a result of the prolonged effects of abuse.

**Resources:** "Too Scared to Learn" Jenny Horsman book (passage); Flip chart or blackboard with picture of a woman (head, neck, body)

**Agenda:**

(1) Welcome- notice any new members and ask them to introduce themselves to the group by stating their name and something interesting about themselves.

(2) Ask if there are any questions that came up from last week's discussion. Ask the group to contribute to answering these questions if there are any. (Note: this promotes women as experts of experience).

**Activity:**

(1) Engage the women in a discussion about how many of them may have registered for adult learning before, the constraints of traditional learning. Ask the women to explain any difficulties that they have had with learning and school in the past.

(2) On the outlined picture of the woman, mark the Effects of Abuse on Learning in the appropriate place (ie on the head write confusion, memory problems, recall problems; on the body mark dissociation * noted as a strength, stomach problems, anxiety, etc.)

**Closure:** Invite the women to stand, to breathe deeply and feel the breath entering their lungs, and stomach. Hold that breath and push it out with exhale. Repeat. Ask the women to state "I am strong and capable just by being here". Thank the women for their honesty.

# WEEK EIGHT:
# Setbacks in Learning and in Life

**Objective:** To acknowledge that life has been challenging and difficult, to embrace these "setbacks" as strength building. To teach the women how to find strength in their responses and actions. Teach the women stress management and coping techniques.

**Resources:** Trauma fact sheet

**Agenda:**

(1) Welcome: let the women know that today's discussion will be difficult for some of them and that we are going to learn about trauma and coping methods. That you encourage the women to take care of themselves and give examples of what that looks like.

(2) Ask the women to pick a colour which describes how they are feeling today.

**Activity:**

(1) Read the trauma information sheet to the women.

(2) Read the information to the women about how trauma is shown to others and themselves (describe them all as strengths to survive).

(3) Describe grounding techniques and their purpose.

(4) Teach one grounding technique (breathing focused).

**Closure:** Ask the women again to describe how they are feeling through a colour.

# WEEK NINE:
# Survival Skills

**Objective:** To encourage the women to see strength in their behaviours; To encourage women to identify other areas of support in their lives; To develop and strengthen self esteem and self worth.

**Resources:** Construction paper cut in to thick strips, markers, tape

**Agenda:**

(1) Welcome: look for new members and identify them to the group
(2) Go round: ask the women to think about another word for strong (ie brave, not scared, big, little).

**Activity:**

(1) Explain to the women that by them being present today, by coming through the door they have shown strength, survival skills, and should begin to honor their bravery.
(2) We have talked about what the abuse has taken from us, ways in which it has affected us, but we haven't talked about how we are strong from our circumstance.
(3) Pass around the construction paper strips and ask each woman to take three strips.
(4) Begin a discussion to identify strengths that the women have shown (while in abusive situations, leaving, coming to school, caring for children, living in a new town, learning a
new language).
(5) Ask the women to reflect on what we have just discussed, ask them to write three strengths that they possess on each of the strips.
(6) Pass the tape around after showing the women how to begin to connect the strips as a chain, looping each strip through the next, connect all the pieces together.
(7) Talk about how much stronger we are together, how we have created a chain of strength while talking today. Ask the women to identify and begin to identify other agencies and support for the women.

**Closure:**

(1) Read poem about bravery and strength
(2) Praise the areas of strength that have been identified today in discussion.

# WEEK TEN:
# Dreams and New Goal Setting Fears and Challenges

**Objectives:** To revisit the discussion on goal setting and to check in with women as to the progress of the goals, their emotions in failed goals and successful goals. To set another goal, to state another dream.

**Resources:** Magic Wand, Goals that were on the wall in the classroom as identified in session three by women in the group (don't take down but recognize for reference), construction paper, markers, tape

**Agenda:**

(1) Welcome: identify any new members and welcome them.
(2) Go around: ask the women how they are feeling today in the group.
(3) Explain to the women that we have two more sessions following today's group and that we need to begin to prepare for the ending of group.
(4) Ask if there are any questions.

**Activity:**

(1) Pull out the wand from session three.
(2) Ask the women to identify a dream that they have, for those that were in session three remind them that a dream can have no limits, for new members evoke a discussion on dreams and goals and the difference between the two.
(3) Pass the wand around and ask each woman if she would feel comfortable to state her dream.
(4) Make reference to the goals identified in session three, ask the women to speak about what has been difficult in reaching those goals, have there been any challenges? Ask all the women to think about goals which have been difficult to obtain and speak about those difficulties.
(5) Pass around the construction paper and markers.
(6) Ask the women to identify one new goal to add to our wall.
(7) On the back of the paper ask the women to state three ways that they will act to make this goal successful (action plan).
(8) Ask the women to either state their goal and plan to the group and then to tape it to the wall, or if they do not wish to share out loud, to tape it to our wall of growth.

**Closure:** Read poem about change, complete grounding exercise which honours change and goals. Thank the women for sharing.

# WEEK ELEVEN:
# Other Resources we Have. Thinking About Closing the Group.

**Objective:** To encourage the women to build upon their resources, to identify other sources of support in the community and what their mandates are. To have the women begin to think about the last session of group.

**Resources:** List of agencies in the community that offer supports and provide brochures on these agencies, flip chart, marker

**Agenda:**

(1) Welcome identify any new members
(2) Ask the women how the week has been for them since we last met, has anything come up that they would like to share with the group (keep the discussion centred around what has occurred in the classroom)
(3) Remind the women that our last group is next session and that as part of today's group we will be thinking about how to end next week.

**Activity:**

(1) Tell the women that today we are going to be talking about agencies in the area that might be a resource for our needs.
(2) Ask the group to mention any agencies that they have worked with in the past or are currently working with, remind the group of confidentiality and that they should be mindful of sharing specifics such as workers names or why they are at the agency. They don't need to share details specific to their case if they choose not too.
(3) Write the name of the agency down and speak about what the agency does.
(4) Notice if there are agencies that are missing and mention them.
(5) Pass out a sheet with the numbers of contacts for the agencies we discussed to all the women. Remind them to keep this in a safe place where they will not be harmed if someone else finds it.
(6) Closing the group, mention to the women that next week will be the final group that another group will begin (following the same outline) in a week following the ending of this group (it might be helpful here to have a calendar).
(7) Ask the women to think about what they would like to do for their last group. Brainstorming session and planning. Use flip cart. Ask for volunteers to help with the ideas suggested.
(8) Let the women know that the group will begin next week with talking about emotions and ending the group, and that the second half will be their generated ideas.

**Closure:** Ask the women to state how they are feeling now that the group is coming to an end?

# WEEK TWELVE:
# Closure

**Objectives:** To explore what it means to the women that the group is ending; To acknowledge the connections made in the group; To celebrate the success of the members;

**Resources:** Blank cards enough for each woman, pens

**Agenda:**

(1) Welcome all the members of the group, if there are snacks, have a table in the back where they can be placed.
(2) Ask the group members how they feel today.

**Activity:**

(1) Ask the group members if they were speaking to other abused women what would be the most important thing that you would want to tell them about abuse?
(2) Ask the women how they feel about the group ending.
(3) Pass around the blank note cards and pens.
(4) Ask the women to write their name on the card in the upper left hand corner
(5) Explain to the women that this is our opportunity to say goodbye to each other and to give a gift of thoughtfulness.
(6) Explain to the women that on each card they can write a goodbye message, a message of hope, or a message of thoughtfulness to the woman whose card it is. At the end of the activity, there will bea card from all of the members with words of strength.
(7) Ask everyone to pass their card to the person beside them and begin writing. The facilitator might have to time one to two minutes per card and say pass cards when time is up to keep to schedule!
(8) As per the discussion the last session had, enjoy the remaining time as the group wishes.