



# FEMINIST BRAIN DRAIN

Labour Issues and Worker Wellness  
in the VAW Shelter Sector



**WOMEN'S  
SHELTERS  
CANADA**

Shelters and  
Transition Houses  
United to End Violence  
Against Women

# CONTENTS

- EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ..... 1**
  - SUMMARY OF RESULTS.....1**
  - KEY FINDINGS..... 2**
  - RECOMMENDATIONS ..... 4**
- INTRODUCTION ..... 5**
- METHODOLOGY ..... 5**
  - MIXED METHODS ..... 6**
    - Survey .....6
    - Focus Groups .....6
  - LIMITATIONS..... 7**
- RESULTS..... 8**
  - STUDY PARTICIPANTS ..... 8**
    - Survey .....8
    - Focus Groups .....8
  - THEMES DRAWN FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS AND SURVEY ..... 9**
    - Key Themes.....10
    - Appreciation and Connection.....11
    - Communication and Management..... 15
    - Compensation, Benefits, and Professional Development..... 19
    - Self-Care..... 24
    - Workload, Work-Life Balance, and Flexibility ..... 28
  - VICARIOUS RESILIENCE..... 32**
  - RECRUITMENT..... 34**
    - Competition.....35
    - Salary & Benefits .....36
    - Training & Qualifications .....36

<b>SYSTEMIC ISSUES .....</b>	<b>38</b>
Funding and Recognition of Work .....	38
Cost of Living and the Housing Crisis.....	39
Complexity of and Access to Systems and Resources.....	40
<b>THE PANDEMIC EXACERBATED LABOUR ISSUES.....</b>	<b>41</b>
Hope During Difficult Times.....	43
<b>FEMINIST LEADERSHIP.....</b>	<b>44</b>
Intersectional Approach .....	44
Shared Leadership and Decision-Making .....	45
Collaboration and Relationships .....	46
Advocacy and Systems Change .....	47
<b>BEYOND THE FEMINIST BRAIN DRAIN SYMPOSIUM.....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>WORKS CITED .....</b>	<b>51</b>

## Women's Shelters Canada

Women's Shelters Canada (WSC) is based in Ottawa, Ontario. Bringing together 16 provincial and territorial shelter organizations, we represent a strong, unified voice on the issue of violence against women on the national stage. Through collaboration, knowledge exchange, and adoption of innovative practices, we advance the coordination and implementation of high-quality services for women and children accessing VAW shelters and transition houses.

Women's Shelters Canada acknowledges that the location of our office and the work that we do in Ottawa is on the traditional, unceded territories of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg people.

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## Acknowledgements

WSC would like to thank the advisory committee for their invaluable expertise, input, time, and direction at all stages of the study design, implementation, and dissemination of results. Thank you to Miranda Pilipchuk (Alberta Council of Women's Shelters, Alberta), Micki Materi (Archway Society for Domestic Peace, British Columbia), Jodi McDavid (Cape Breton Transition House Association – Willow House, Nova Scotia), Kimberly Fontaine (Ikwe Widdjiitwin Inc., Manitoba), Sandrine Iceta (Maison Flora Tristan, Quebec), Jyoti Singh (Nellie's, Ontario), Lauren Hancock (Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses, Ontario), and Becky Wells (Wellspring Family Resource & Crisis Centre, Alberta).

Thank you to all the workers who took the survey and participated in the focus groups.

This project would not have been possible without the support of the WSC team:

Kaitlin Geiger-Bardswich, Director of Communications, Development, and Grants, for editing the report.

Jed Nabwangu, Communications Coordinator, for social media, website support, and video production related to the study.

Michele Briand for translating the report and infographics.

LJ Robinson and The Public for art direction, infographic design, and report layout and design.

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## How to cite this document

Hoogendam, R. and Maki, K. (2023). "Feminist Brain Drain: Labour Issues and Worker Wellness in the VAW Shelter Sector." Ottawa, ON: Women's Shelters Canada.

Women's Shelters Canada would like to gratefully acknowledge Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE) for providing funding for this study. The opinions expressed in this document do not necessarily represent the official policy of WAGE.



Women and Gender  
Equality Canada

Femmes et Égalité  
des genres Canada

Canada

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

VAW shelters and transition houses (THs) are able offer vital services to those attempting to live free of violence because of talented, passionate, and dedicated staff members. While the backbone of shelters/THs are its people, organizations are struggling to recruit and retain staff, and staff are facing issues of burnout, exhaustion, vicarious trauma, and overall lack of wellness in their workplaces.

The provincial and territorial shelter/TH associations identified the sector-wide labour crisis as an area in need of more research. Women's Shelters Canada, together with a project advisory committee of VAW shelter/TH leaders, developed a pan-Canadian study of labour issues impacting the sector. The study included a survey, focus groups, and a national symposium.

In partnership with the Victimology Research Centre (VRC) at Algonquin College, we collaborated on the design of a national online survey. The survey had a wide scope to reach diverse staff working in victim-serving organizations, including shelters/THs workers (management, frontline, and administrative staff). It was launched by the VRC in Winter 2021 and closed on May 31, 2022. The survey was completed by 314 shelter workers from nearly all areas of the country.

Additionally, five national focus groups and one interview were held with shelter/TH management, frontline staff, former staff, and the provincial and territorial associations over Summer 2022. Overall, we connected with 45 individuals.

The report provides information on: the scope of the labour crisis; elements that contribute to staff retention or turnover; recruitment; systemic issues contributing to labour issues; pandemic-specific challenges; feminist leadership; the study symposium; and recommendations.

## SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Labour issues are not new to the sector. These have been heavily influenced by government funding which has not increased with inflation or rising workloads. Given funding constraints, wages are not keeping pace with inflation, which is contributing to staff turnover. While people are passionate about this work, because of low wages and high workloads, individuals are leaving the sector for other related fields which can pay higher salaries, often in the public sector.

The data shows that staff of VAW shelters/THs at all levels are experiencing high levels of exhaustion and burnout. Staff are working long hours, including being on-call and working overtime. As the rates and severity of violence have increased and cases have become more complex during the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>1</sup> staff feel like they are working harder than ever. Given this situation, organizations are struggling to retain and recruit staff.

Despite the challenges, workers remain passionate and committed to the work of ending gender-based violence. Through this work, staff

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<sup>1</sup> Women's Shelters Canada (2022). Shelters Voices 2022. <https://endvaw.ca/shelter-voices-2022>

are growing and learning. By witnessing the resilience of those coming into shelters, staff build their own resiliency and hope, and become better in their roles as helpers.

Organizations are finding innovative ways to retain staff, and maintain high quality services for those rebuilding their lives after leaving violence. While they are working from a place of scarcity, they are trying to build strong internal environments that make staff feel connected, heard, and appreciated. When staff feel supported, they are more likely to remain with an organization.

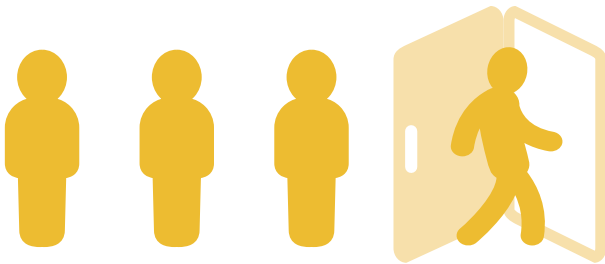
VAW shelters/THs are putting substantial efforts into keeping staff in this work. Without a stable funding environment that provides more competitive salaries, organizations will continue to see high level of turnover.

## KEY FINDINGS

The key findings of this report are:

### 1 Many staff are leaving or thinking of leaving their current positions or even the sector altogether.

- More than **one-quarter (28%)** of survey respondents indicated that they thought about quitting their job.



- **Average salaries** in the VAW shelter/TH sector remain **below those of the general economy**, particularly for non-management staff.

66%

OF NON-MANAGERS OR SUPERVISORS REPORTED EARNING LESS THAN \$50K

- Nearly one-third of survey respondents reported that they **worked an additional job** to supplement their income.



32%

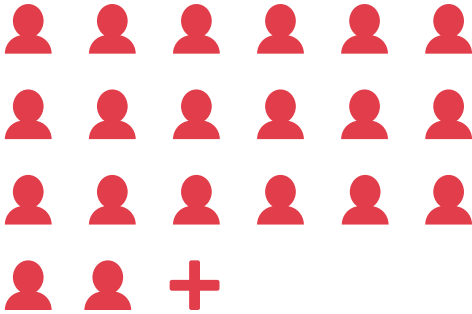
### 2 Staff are struggling with their mental health, and the pandemic contributed to decreased overall mental wellbeing.

- Among survey respondents, **79% had experiences of trauma** in their personal and/or professional life.
- When asked about their pandemic experience, 47% of survey respondents reported **declines in their mental health.**

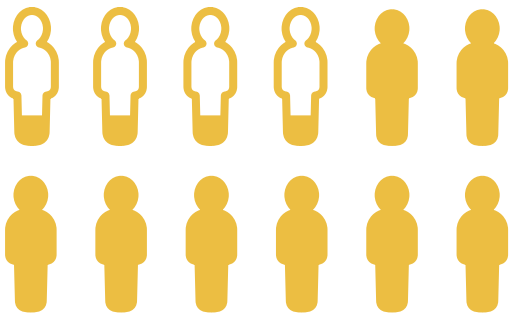


**3 High workloads and increasingly complex cases are contributing to burnout and retention issues.**

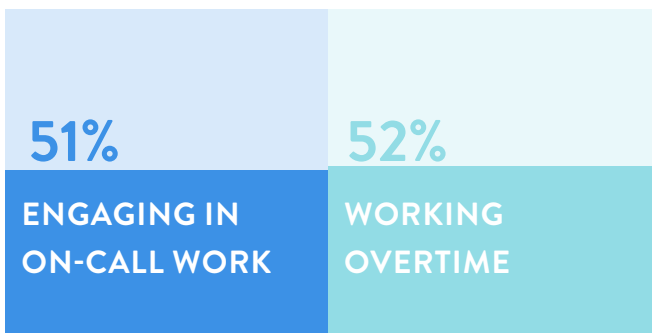
- Staff have high caseloads, with one-fifth of survey respondents indicating that their **caseload was 20 or more clients.**



- Nearly one third (31%) of respondents often **felt overwhelmed by their caseload.**



- As staff turnover increases, existing staff are taking on more work which is contributing to **overwork and burnout.**



**4 Through the study several key factors were identified that, if present, support the development of a healthy work environment:**

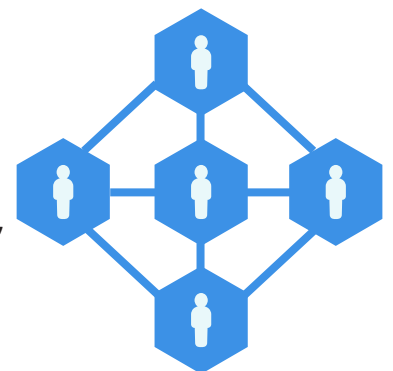
- **Appreciation and connection**
- **Strong communication and management**
- **Adequate compensation, benefits, and professional development**
- **Self- and collective care**
- **Work-life balance, support for heavy workloads, and flexibility**

**5 Staff largely feel supported in their workplaces and connected to their colleagues.**

- Among survey respondents, more than three-quarters (77%) were **satisfied with their relationships with their colleagues**, and over 70% (71%) were **satisfied with their relationships with their supervisors.**



- Organizations are attempting to **foster healthy community and communication** among staff through regular debriefing sessions, case management team meetings, and more informal social activities.



By engaging in this work, survey respondents reported that they saw their vicarious resilience<sup>2</sup> increase. Overall, they were better able to support survivors without taking on the negative effects of the trauma people

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<sup>2</sup> Vicarious resilience is the positive impact of repeat exposure to witnessing positive coping skills, problem-solving, and courage, which in turn builds the helper's personal capacity to respond to adversity. These impacts include increased capacity for resourcefulness, attentiveness to clients, and self-efficacy (Killian, 2017).

share, while also growing and learning through their experiences with client resilience and resistance.

Organizations may be struggling, but at the Symposium participants shared many ideas for moving forward collectively. There was a strong sense of connection and hope, and the potential for taking forward a set of actions to support the work (and workers) of the sector.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

VAW shelters/THs are a vital resource in combatting violence in our communities. To maintain a high quality of service for those fleeing violence, the labour crisis must be addressed. Women's Shelters Canada recommends:

### 1 Stable Funding

Organizations need to be provided with stable government funding, which increases over time with inflation and living costs. This includes an adequate number of staff positions, including administrative and management staff, and the capacity to double staff for night and weekend shifts.

### 2 Decent Work

All employees in the sector should have access to a living wage, paid sick days, a pension or retirement savings, and be recognized as essential workers (like other emergency frontline services). Working in this sector should not contribute to precarity.

### 3 Workplace Injury

Like many other first responders, there needs to be more recognition of the psychological harm that can come from doing VAW work. With this recognition, workers would have greater access to Workers' Compensation Board benefits for psychological injuries.

### 4 Human Resources (HR) Supports

Organizations indicated that they need funding for HR supports. As shelters/THs are small, many do not have dedicated HR supports. A funded provincial resource, consultant, or working group that could provide information and training would be valuable.



# INTRODUCTION

The violence against women (VAW) shelter/transition house (TH) sector is facing a labour crisis. Women's Shelters Canada's (WSC) 2019 *More Than a Bed* study (Maki, 2019) showed that labour issues were having an impact on shelter/TH operations. While this has been a long-standing issue, with the addition of the pandemic, a critical point has been reached where organizations are expressing concern about the future stability of the sector.

In response to concerns raised by shelters/THs across the country, the Feminist Brain Drain (FBD) study was undertaken to understand the depth of and issues contributing to the human resource (HR) and labour crisis, including issues of organizational trauma and grief, shelter staff retention, staff wellness and burnout, and vicarious trauma. While this study looks at the challenges being experienced, this research was also action-oriented, seeking promising practices and potential solutions for organizations and developing an action plan to collectively address workforce challenges for the sector.

This report provides background information on labour issues in the shelter/TH sector, as well as how those align with issues in the broader non-profit sector. It also provides an overview of labour challenges that shelters/THs are encountering, ways of operating that are supporting retention and worker wellness, and promising practices that organizations have implemented to address these issues.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A literature review was completed for this study. It can be accessed here: <http://endvaw.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/FBD-Lit-Review.pdf>.

The report is laid out as follows: introduction, methodology, results, conclusion, and recommendations for action. The results section pulls together findings from a national survey and focus groups conducted in 2022. This section includes themes affecting worker wellness and retention; specific recruitment challenges; systemic issues affecting labour; added challenges related to the pandemic; and the influence of feminist leadership. Promising practices and proposed solutions are shared throughout the report.

# METHODOLOGY

This study used feminist participatory action-based research methods, which is a methodology that actively seeks to engage research participants in the various stages of the research process. It centres the voices of those who work in the shelter/TH sector, both management (including executive directors and managers) and frontline staff. To ensure that employee experiences and expertise were fully captured and understood, an advisory committee was formed that was comprised of shelter/TH leaders from across the country. The advisory committee was instrumental in reviewing the stages of the study and offering input throughout the research process.

Data collection and research activities were completed through the summer and fall of 2022. While many of the pandemic restrictions had been lifted by this point, we continued to pursue most of our research activities through online platforms. While this ensured that we could access a wide range of research participants, it did require the

research team to think differently about the engagement of the research participants and the logistics of activities.

## MIXED METHODS

This study used a mixed method approach, which seeks to draw on the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods. For this research, in partnership with the Victimology Research Centre (VRC) at Algonquin College, we collected and analyzed data from a national survey. We also independently hosted a series of focus groups. The survey enabled us to better understand the scope of labour challenges and the individual positive and negative effects of this work, while providing enhanced demographics on the workers employed in VAW shelters/THs. The focus groups, while similarly asking about the extent of labour challenges, also focused on compiling organizational promising practices and looking at systemic issues and solutions.

### Survey

In partnership with the VRC at Algonquin College, we collaborated on the design of a national online survey about the impacts of COVID-19, worker wellness, and vicarious resilience in service providers who work with survivors and victims of crime in Canada.

The survey was launched by the VRC in Winter 2021 and closed on May 31, 2022. The survey, *Victim Services and Vicarious Resilience*, was designed to gather data on the experience of victim service providers, including VAW shelter/TH workers.<sup>4</sup> The goal of the survey was to

<sup>4</sup> VRC Study and survey details: <https://www.algonquincollege.com/arie/category/victimology-research-centre>

learn more about the individuals engaged in work with victims and survivors of crime in Canada. This included collecting information about well-being, perspectives on the work and one's organization, self-care, vicarious resilience, and harm experienced in doing this work.

The survey was available online in French and English through the VRC. It was designed for individual staff members of shelters/THs, including management, frontline staff, and administrative staff. This was promoted through the VRC, as well as through WSC's network of members and shelter/TH contacts with assistance from the provincial and territorial (P/T) shelter/TH associations and the project advisory committee. WSC did specific outreach to shelters to bolster our response numbers.

The survey included 51 questions and took 20-30 minutes to complete. A small number of questions were open-ended, giving space for respondents to clarify or elaborate on any of their answers. The majority of questions were not open-ended, including several scales. Overall, we had **314 respondents that identified as working or volunteering at a domestic violence shelter or program**, which was 34% of all survey respondents.<sup>5</sup>

### Focus Groups

In July and August 2022, WSC conducted **five focus groups and one interview with 45 participants**. Two focus groups were with management of shelters/THs, two were with frontline staff, and one was with

<sup>5</sup> The VRC survey was completed by 915 respondents across different victim-serving organizations. The 314 respondents were those who indicated that their organization was a domestic violence shelter.

the representatives of the P/T shelter/TH associations. One interview was hosted with a former staff member, as there were challenges recruiting those that have left their positions or the sector. All focus groups were offered online through Zoom except for the focus group with P/T associations, which occurred in person.

WSC garnered participants through an open invitation sent to shelters/THs and promoted with assistance from the P/T shelter/TH associations and the project advisory committee. As there was more interest in participating than could be accommodated, it was necessary to select for geographic representation. This included looking at P/T representation, as well as whether individuals served urban, rural, remote, or northern communities. The focus groups lasted 1.5 hours and individuals were offered an honorarium for their time.

We undertook several strategies for maintaining participant confidentiality so that they felt they could speak freely and openly.<sup>6</sup> The informed consent process provided participants with details on how their identity would be protected, how quotations may be used, and the intent to share the findings publicly. Participants were also reminded to not discuss individual stories that had been shared with them in these sessions after they left. All of this provided participants with the ability to make informed decisions about what to

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<sup>6</sup> Confidentiality strategies included: participants were not required on Zoom to use their full name, participants were not required to provide the shelter/TH name where they worked in the registration; consent forms were filled out digitally through Simple Survey and kept separate from all other data collection documents; audio recordings were stored through password protected programs including Teams and NVivo; and all written documentation was kept in password protected programs (Teams) and only accessible to the research team.

share. This report, and other research outputs, contain no identifying information about our respondents. The focus groups were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically in NVivo.

Among the five Zoom focus groups/interview, there was representation from Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, and Quebec. There were 13 frontline staff, 16 management, and 1 former worker among the participants. The communities served included 15 from urban shelters, 13 from rural, and 2 from remote or northern. In addition, 7 participants were from shelters funded by Indigenous Services Canada (ISC).

## LIMITATIONS

We wanted to ensure that the voices of frontline staff and management were present in this research, but we were also mindful of their busy schedules and not wanting to overburden workers with research requests. While we were able to engage a good mix of frontline and management participants in the focus groups, we struggled to attract labour representatives within shelters and former shelter staff members. We did eventually recruit enough participants from each of these target groups, but we were unable to schedule a time that worked for participants. We did speak with one former worker from a VAW shelter/TH organization who agreed to shift the focus group format to an interview.

# RESULTS

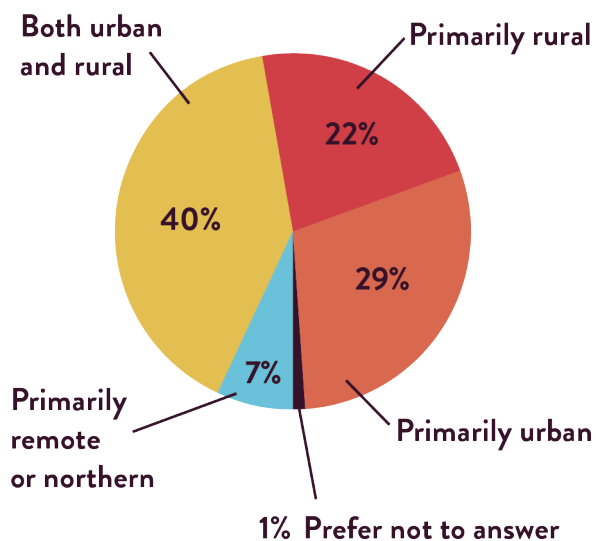
## STUDY PARTICIPANTS

### Survey

There were 314 respondents to the Vicarious Resilience and Services for Victims and Survivors of Crime survey from VAW shelters/THs.<sup>7</sup>

### REGIONAL DEMOGRAPHICS

We had participation in the survey from across the country, with only Nunavut having no responses. We also had respondents from across rural and urban communities, as well as a small number from northern or remote communities (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Type of Community the Organization Serves (n=314)

<sup>7</sup> Respondents could choose various occupations listed in the survey. As such, we cannot say with absolute certainty that these were strictly VAW shelter workers, as they could also work in other victim serving agencies such as sexual assault centres, child protection agencies, counselling or family services, or victim services.

Nearly 60% of respondents indicated that they worked in organizations with 16-50 employees. While we expected that more organizations would be smaller, this may include casual and relief staff, not only full-time employees. CanadaHelps (2022) found that 90% of charities have 10 or fewer employees, while WSC (Maki, 2019) similarly found that shelters/THs have an average of 10 full-time employees.

### THE VAW SHELTER/TH WORKFORCE

The vast majority of respondents identified as women (97%, n=313) and heterosexual (79%, n=312). 2SLGBTQI+ workers remain a small minority in the sector, particularly those identifying non-binary, two spirit, or transgender.

**Almost one-third (30%, n=313) of respondents were between the ages of 25-34. A vast majority (85%, n=314) had completed post-secondary education.**

Among survey respondents, 42% (n=311) had worked in the field for more than 10 years, whereas 30% had worked in the field for three years or less. The majority (68%, n=314) of respondents who participated in the survey were frontline workers, 12% were executive directors, and 13% were program managers or directors.

### Focus Groups

There were 30 participants in the five online focus groups. There were two focus groups with frontline staff (n=13), two with

management (n=16), and one interview with a former worker from the sector.

Among the focus group participants, there were:

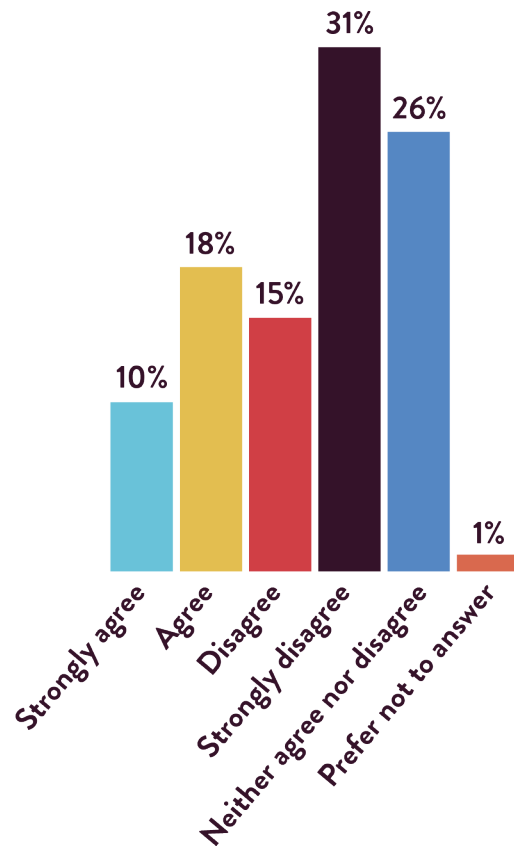
- **15 urban organizations, 13 rural, 1 remote, and 1 northern**
- **7 participants from ISC-funded shelters**
- **5 French-speaking**
- **Cultural identity: 8 Black/African, 2 Asian, 14 White, 3 Indigenous, 1 Latina, 2 N/A**
- **Age: 2 were 24 and under, 12 were 25-39, 9 were 40-55, 7 were 55+**

Beyond these focus groups, we also conducted one with sector leaders of 15 provincial/territorial shelter associations or representatives (e.g. from the territories) that are WSC members.

## THEMES DRAWN FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS AND SURVEY

Organizations are struggling with issues of employee stress and exhaustion, which in turn are contributing to high turnover of both frontline staff and management. Turnover is not always bad, as it can result in new ideas and energy coming to an organization. Unfortunately for VAW shelters/THs, they have described an environment where staff are only staying for a short period and they are unable to fill positions quickly and easily.

Survey respondents were asked to respond to the statement (*Figure 2*), “I frequently think of quitting my job.” While more than half did



**Figure 2:** Thinking About Quitting (n=301)

not agree with the statement, 28% agreed or strongly agreed. In addition, **over one-quarter (28%, n=299) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I am planning to search for a new job in the next 12 months.”** If more than one-quarter of staff left their positions or organizations, this would cause huge instability among the sector.

## KEY THEMES

To combat issues of turnover, five key themes were identified that can facilitate the building of a workplace that contributes to well-being and retention. The next section discusses each of these themes that were identified through the survey and focus group data.

- 1 **Appreciation and connection**
- 2 **Communication and management**
- 3 **Compensation, benefits, and professional development**
- 4 **Self-care**
- 5 **Workload, work-life balance, and flexibility**

When these elements are present or considered in an organization, there is often a healthier work environment created, which reduces staff stress and increases retention. Without these areas being addressed, more negative workplaces can emerge, which makes employees more inclined to express frustration and a desire to leave.

The start of each section includes some **promising practices**<sup>8</sup> and strategies that we heard throughout the study. Many of the ideas collected from organizations are small, but they are having a positive impact on the well-being of staff and organizations. Small practices are often easier to implement for organizations that want to try new ideas.

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<sup>8</sup> Promising practices were gathered through the focus groups and qualitative survey responses. These represent individual responses compiled through the research, rather than widespread coded themes. These will not necessarily be appropriate in all settings.



Promising Practices to Address  
**FEMINIST BRAIN DRAIN**

**Appreciation  
and Connection**

Promising Practices to make staff feel appreciated and to build connections within organizations

**1 Staff Social Events**

- **Staff retreats**, going to events together (e.g. soccer games), or getting out into nature
- **Group meals** – sharing snacks in-person or via Zoom (during pandemic restrictions)
- **Staff parties**
- **Team building** through events or activities (e.g. photo scavenger hunt)

**2 Staff Meetings & Debriefing**

- **Zoom all-staff meetings**, especially when people couldn't be together in-person due to restrictions or multiple work sites. These helped to break through silos and the disconnect that built up across departments or different types of roles (e.g. outreach, frontline, administration).
- **Debriefing sessions:**
  - Daily morning check-in to touch base about both work and personal issues that may be affecting staff
  - Case management meetings (e.g. daily, weekly)
  - Cross-over at the end of night or weekend shifts so that staff can check in with those who had been working alone
  - Regular staff/management check-ins
  - For Indigenous organizations, Elders could be available to support staff
  - Friday afternoon informal debriefing often with social time (e.g. playing cards, having coffee) so that staff did not take difficult work home with them or into their weekend

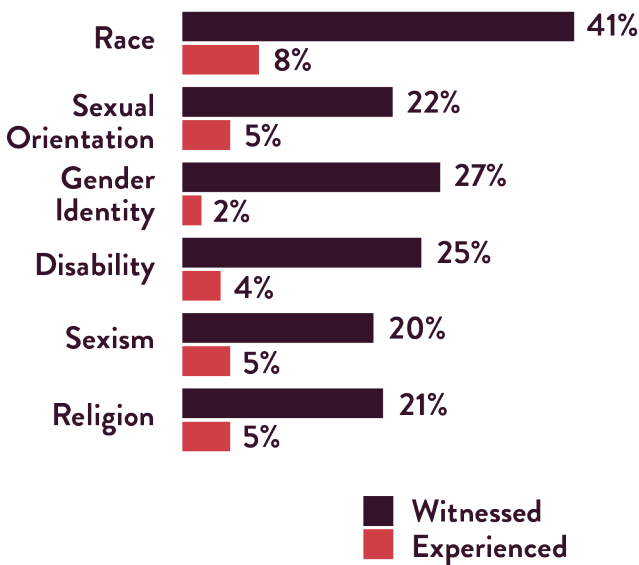
**3 Staff Appreciation**

- **Star of the month:** Each month, a staff member is chosen to highlight their work. The organization that shared this idea had a staff committee select a staff person each month based on their overall work, or a particular action or piece of work they undertook. In a small presentation, this individual was featured and their photo was posted.
- **Nominate their colleagues** for their outstanding work. The nominees were then entered into a draw for a gift card.

Both management and frontline staff of VAW shelters/THs noted the importance of feeling supported, seen, and appreciated in the workplace and of connecting with their colleagues. Building an environment where employees feel appreciated and connections are fostered requires thoughtful integration, but such initiatives do not need to be formalized and often are informal.

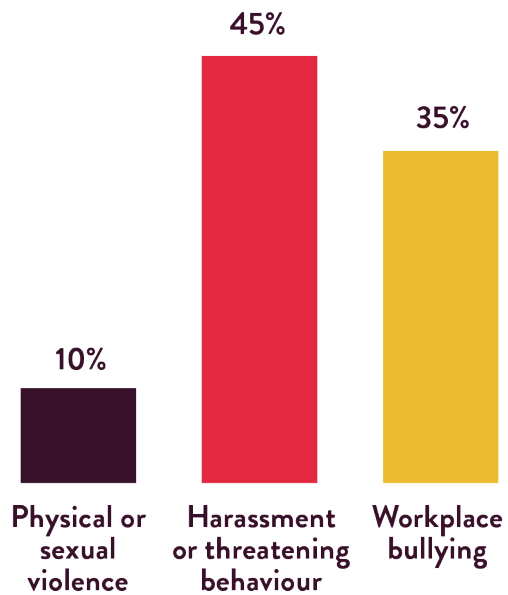
**LATERAL VIOLENCE**

A lack of appreciation or engagement with colleagues was often described as a “toxic” work environment. This included issues of lateral violence such as bullying and microaggressions. **Among survey respondents, nearly half (49%) had witnessed or experienced microaggressions based on race, and 29% based on gender identity and disability** (Figure 3). This can have an impact on the retention and well-being of workers, as well as potentially contributing to a lack of diversity in organizations.



**Figure 3:** Witnessed or Experienced Microaggressions by Clients or Coworkers (n=300)

As shown in the *Respect at Work* report (Berlingieri et al., 2022), those in public serving roles are more likely to experience workplace harassment and violence, with this most reported by those in health care and social assistance fields (76%). Among our own survey respondents, as shown in *Figure 4*, we can also see high levels of violence and harassment, as well as **more than one-third reporting workplace bullying** (35%, n=301).



**Figure 4:** Experience of Harassment and Violence in the Workplace



## INTERNAL APPRECIATION

While a toxic work environment can have a significant impact on staff wellness and organizational stability, these are not the only circumstances that contributed to staff feeling underappreciated. Among survey and focus group respondents, some indicated that they felt underappreciated by management, other staff, and clients. Many expressed feeling unseen, as one survey respondent shared:

“ We are busier at my workplace than ever. Oftentimes, the work goes unnoticed and unappreciated by the clients and management. I am overworked and underappreciated.

As VAW shelter/TH work pays less than comparable work, particularly in government positions (Baines et al., 2014), feeling appreciated becomes that much more vital as a strategy to maintain existing staff members. As one survey respondent noted:

“ The support I get from my colleagues and manager is amazing. I used to get paid \$50/hr in nursing and don't even care about the wage now because the agency is such a healthy workplace.

Respondents of both the survey and focus groups discussed the importance of an environment where staff felt supported by both management and other colleagues. This meant feeling comfortable speaking with them judgement-free, getting regular performance feedback, and feeling listened to and respected.

Management also talked about the importance of appreciation, with some feeling like

their work and effort did not always get acknowledged by staff. While management faced many of the same issues of stress and workload as their staff, they did not always feel like staff saw this or appreciated the work that they were doing. Management, like other staff members, wanted their efforts acknowledged as expressed by this focus group respondent:

“ I have been able to keep my organization safe from outbreaks, my staff safe and accommodated, but only I see that. Sometimes I work 70 hours a week, and I cannot say that I'm tired because I'm going to demotivate everyone.

## DEBRIEFING AND SOCIAL CONNECTION

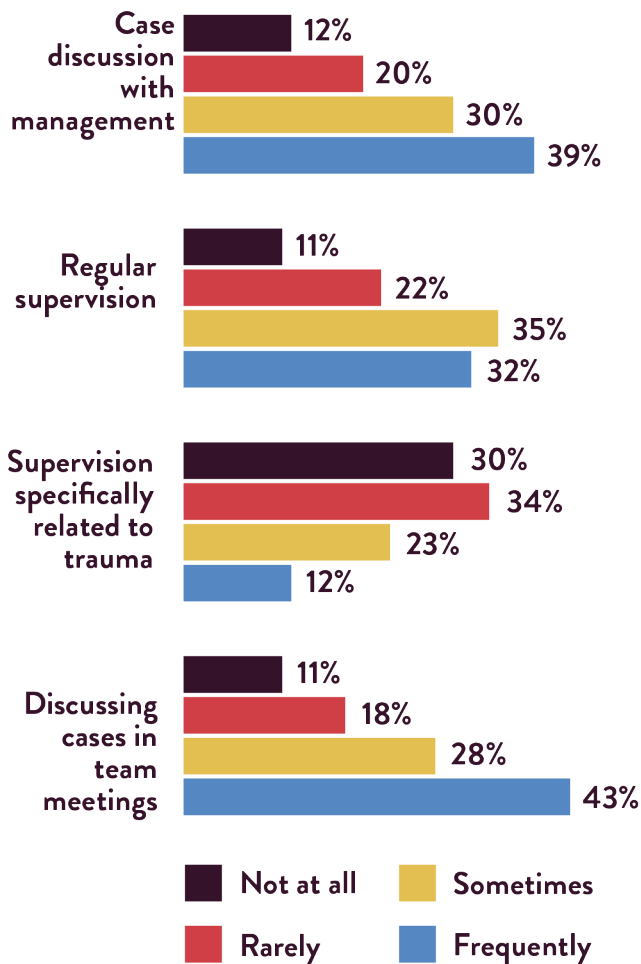
Strong social connections within organizations contribute to fostering social belonging among staff, which can prevent turnover. The focus groups showed that people wanted both formal and informal opportunities to connect and share with their colleagues. Many mentioned the importance of having colleagues or management to debrief with, especially after working through difficult cases. For one focus group participant, this included case management meetings:

“ We discuss the clients. It gives us a chance to talk and do the wraparound services. It gives us a chance to debrief and discuss if we're struggling or if we need to ask for help. We can do it as a team, rather than someone struggling by themselves.

This space to debrief was important not only for sharing resources and supporting clients, but also for checking in on staff members

and helping them leave their work at the office. Debriefing was seen as valuable both in a one-on-one setting with a colleague or manager and as a team. The key elements of these sessions were to ensure that they were judgement-free and that people felt listened to.

As shown in *Figure 5*, many who responded to the survey are engaging in workplace practices like debriefing, individual and team case management, and supervisor support. These are practices that are important for supporting individuals and teams as they work through challenging cases, and for building a cohesive team.



**Figure 5:** Organizational Support and Debriefing

Several managers in the focus groups discussed debriefing practices, including:

“*At the beginning of COVID we started, and we’re continuing now, to have big all-staff Zoom meetings where people can connect and share ideas, and just see each other’s faces. It has been helpful to get support from each other and across our organization.*”

“*We have ‘Talk Tuesday.’ Every Tuesday, we meet the whole staff and we talk about anything that might have happened in the last week that was upsetting to them. We sort of process difficult situations that they have had to deal with in the last week.*”

Beyond work-related activities, many focus group participants highlighted the importance of social events and activities among staff. These built stronger relationships and were an opportunity to reflect on the work, or just have fun and recharge. Through these activities, trust was increased among staff, relationships were built, and people felt more supported. Taking time away from the constant urgency or “crisis,” as some described it, was essential to creating a supportive and enjoyable work environment.

Overall, while some stories of problematic workplaces were shared, *Figure 6* shows that staff reported feeling satisfied with the relationships that they have in the workplace. For example, over 70% (n=299) of survey respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with their relationship with their colleagues (77%, n=301) and their direct supervisor (71%, n=299).

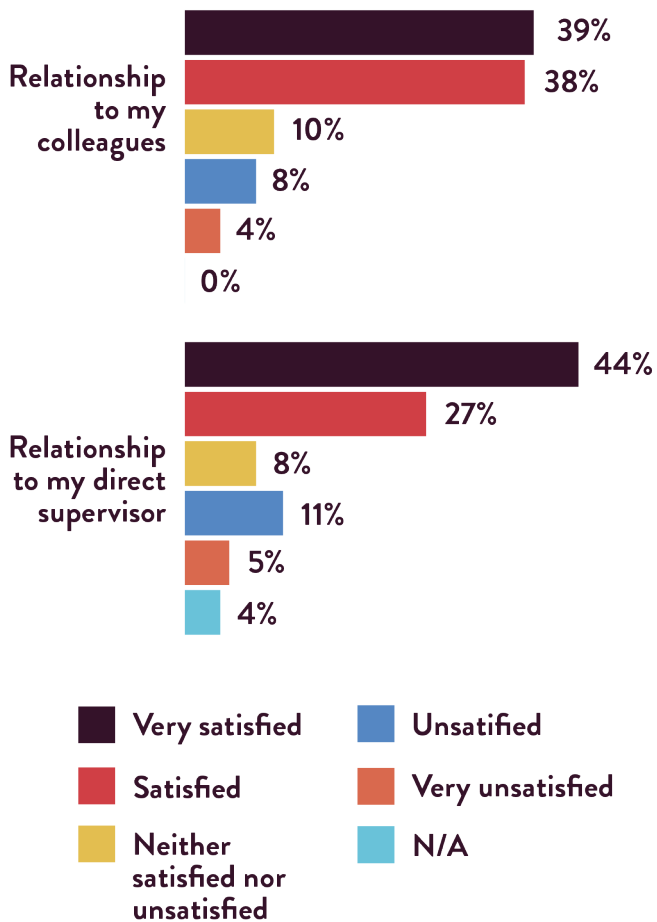


Figure 6: Satisfaction with Relationships

## OUTSIDE APPRECIATION

In addition, management and frontline staff expressed a lack of appreciation and respect from funders, other community organizations, and institutions that they needed to interact with regularly (e.g. police, child welfare). The lack of understanding of the work done in the sector contributes to chronic underfunding and organizations becoming a catch-all for areas where they have not traditionally had expertise (e.g. mental health and addictions supports, homelessness). The lack of recognition of the expertise of shelters/THs makes staff feel like they lack credibility and their work is not taken seriously, as shown in the following quote from a survey respondent:

“Lack of funding and government support results in high stress, and the feeling that our organization is being undermined and is unimportant.”

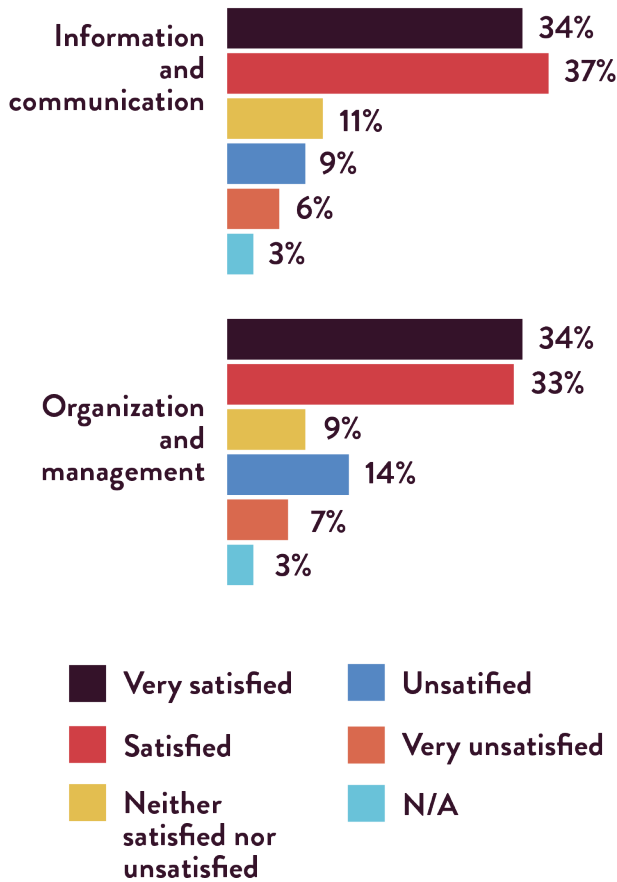
While feeling appreciated, connected, and supported in the workplace may not overcome the low salaries and high workload in VAW shelters/THs, this was valuable in creating a healthy work environment and workplace wellness. Importantly, when these were lacking, people discussed how challenging it could be to come to work and that there was greater turnover. Appreciation and connection is critical for retention, but goes beyond individual organizations, extending to relationships with other organizations, partners, and the wider community.

## Communication and Management<sup>9</sup>

Good management that provided clear and regular communication was key to creating healthy, functional, and welcoming workplaces. Among survey respondents, **71% (n=300) were satisfied or very satisfied with the information and communication from management,<sup>10</sup> and 67% (n=301) were satisfied or very satisfied with the organization and management in their workplace (Figure 7).** These are positive findings, given the important role that management can play in building morale and maintaining staff.

<sup>9</sup> Promising practices relating to communication and management are contained in the section on feminist leadership (beginning on page 44).

<sup>10</sup> We have chosen to use the term management to refer to leadership within VAW shelters/THs. We wanted to ensure that non-management staff were not excluded from being considered leaders based on their position.



**Figure 7:** Satisfaction with Communication and Management

### TRUST AND INCLUSION

A management quality that was valued by both focus group and survey respondents was leadership that listened to and actively solicited feedback from all staff. Staff wanted an opportunity to feel like they were involved in decision-making and could influence change in an organization. This frontline focus group participant spoke highly of their management:

“ You definitely see that non-hierarchical relationship between management and frontline workers at my organization. Our management is very supportive. They always listen to our experiences. Most of our management had frontline work experience prior to entering management,

*so they really understand our work and always support how we do it.*

This was integral to staff feeling important and valued.

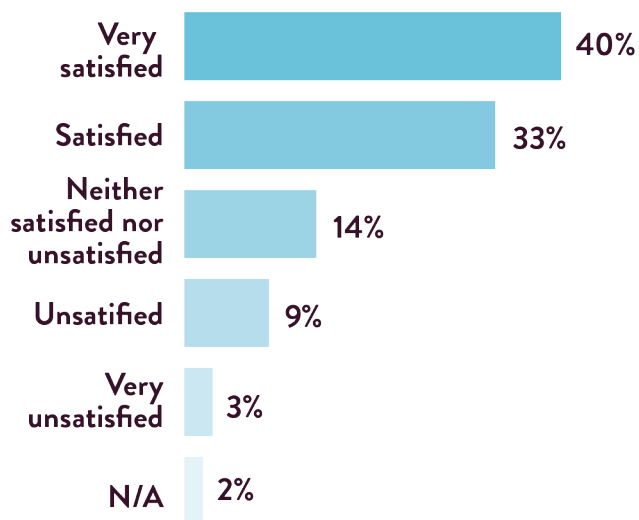
While management noted that there were times when this was not possible, they also tried to provide opportunities for staff to be more involved through staff meetings or to participate on behalf of the organization at community events. As one survey respondent expressed:

“ *Despite the heavy workload, the director is available to hear the problems of her employees. She’s a great listener and very flexible.*

Respondents also wanted to feel trusted, which was demonstrated by managers who encouraged autonomy and independence in their staff. By comparison, there were many concerns raised about micromanagement, which meant more work for both staff and managers. While staff did not want heavy management, they also indicated that management that was too hands-off or not present enough created workplace tensions and frustrations. This can be a difficult balance for management to achieve, particularly during the pandemic as some aspects of operations became virtual and more physically disconnected. This quote by a survey respondent highlights this challenge:

“ *When support is needed from management, they are unavailable, but when we work independently, we get reprimanded and are micromanaged.*

While there were concerns raised about the opportunities for staff to work independently, have their voice heard, and contribute to the organization, **73% were satisfied or very satisfied with their ability to participate in decision-making processes** as per Figure 8 below.



**Figure 8:** Participation in Decision-Making (n=300)

Regular communication and organizational reviews were also indicators of strong management. Having regular conversations put staff members at ease and reduced confusion. Many organizations did this by hosting team meetings regularly, weekly or even daily. Clarity on roles and responsibilities, and having regular performance reviews for all staff members also reduced misunderstandings:

**“** *If the management is clear and supportive, then that trickles down to frontline management and workers. When workers are treated well and taken care of, they in turn do a better job with the clients.*

—Survey Respondent

**“** *We are really striving to be an employer of choice. Our approach is to be goal-oriented with our staff. Once our staff tell us what their goals are, we want to develop them, because we want to retain them.*

—Focus Group Participant

## CONFLICT AND TURNOVER

Throughout the study (focus groups and survey), staff generally found their management supportive, but like any workplace, some respondents spoke of problematic managers. These toxic leaders influenced the entire organization, contributing to a negative workplace culture. These included unfair or unethical behaviours like nepotism, differential treatment among staff, and gossip. It was felt that these behaviours went against feminist and anti-oppressive values held by these organizations. Where such behaviours were noted, it was also indicated that there was high turnover. A survey respondent shared their experience of a toxic workplace:

**“** *It greatly affects my well-being. It is a stressful work environment because of negative and toxic coworkers. Direct management are micromanagers, punitive with harsh criticisms, and there is a lack of support and validation. These are the largest factors of my stress at work; not the work itself and not the clients.*

While 40% of survey respondents were not considering leaving their job, among those who were, conflict with management or coworkers was the reason that 14% were considering doing so.

High turnover is also happening among leadership. **From September 1, 2021, to August 31, 2022, 126 executive directors or managers left their organizations, with 54 vacancies at the time of that survey** (n=243) (WSC, 2022). With this turnover and the number of vacancies, organizations are left understaffed, with the workload needing to be absorbed by remaining staff members. With greater workloads, managers have less time to provide support and feedback to individual staff members, which are key elements of a healthy workplace.

Like frontline staff, management is struggling. While management and communication issues can be individual weaknesses, it is also important to recognize that managers are working in difficult situations and within broken systems. This executive director, who had been at the shelter for decades, highlights these difficulties in a survey response:

“ I am on call 24/7, 365 days a year. I am on call plus doing my regular work of managing the shelter, programs’ staff, and budget. The demands on the ED are unreasonable, but because I manage the organization and the budget, I realize there is no other option. Although I believe strongly that my pay and benefits are good, I do not believe my employer understands the impact that on-call work and supporting a crisis response workplace has on me as the sole manager.





Promising Practices to Address  
**FEMINIST BRAIN DRAIN**  
Compensation, Benefits,  
and Professional Development

Promising Practices to address concerns related to wages, benefits, and training

## 1 Benefits

- **Mental health benefits** – access to counselling or therapy. It was often acknowledged that these were too low compared to the cost of mental health resources. Many organizations have implemented an Employee Assistance Plan (EAP)<sup>11</sup> as a supplement.
- **On-site counselling for staff.** A professional who can focus on burnout, trauma, stress, and compassion fatigue (e.g. therapist or traumatologist).
- **Benefits are available** for part-time, contract, and relief or casual staff, not only full-time staff
- **Personal, vacation, and sick days** are available for all staff. Staff feel like these can be freely used.
- **Mental health or wellness days**
- Provision of a **yearly training budget for staff**

## 2 Compensation

- **Shift premiums for evenings or weekends**, which are more difficult to staff.
- **Shift premiums for staff who need to work in the shelter/TH**, compared to those who work from home.
- Provisions of **dedicated funds for retirement purposes** (e.g. shelter pension fund or contribution to an RRSP).
- **Salary increases** and small bonuses at the end of the year.

## 3 Employee Swaps

- Proposed idea not yet implemented: **Staff trade positions** (or shadow other positions) to encourage skill development and cross-training. It was suggested that this could happen across organizations, not only within individual shelters/THs. This could bring new ideas and innovations to teams and organizations.

<sup>11</sup> For more information about what EAP is, see <https://www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/resources/what-is-an-employee-assistance-program>

Any discussion of labour challenges requires consideration of compensation in the sector. It has been well-documented that salaries in the VAW/TH shelter sector, and the non-profit sector as a whole, are not competitive (Jensen, 2022b). According to Statistics Canada data, “The average annual salary for those working in community non-profits is \$38,716, compared to \$57,137 in the economy overall” (Jensen, 2022a, p. 3). Both focus group and survey respondents indicated that shelter/TH work does not pay enough, especially given the high workload and complexity of the work. As inflation and cost of living increase, salaries are not keeping pace, and many expressed concerns about their finances.

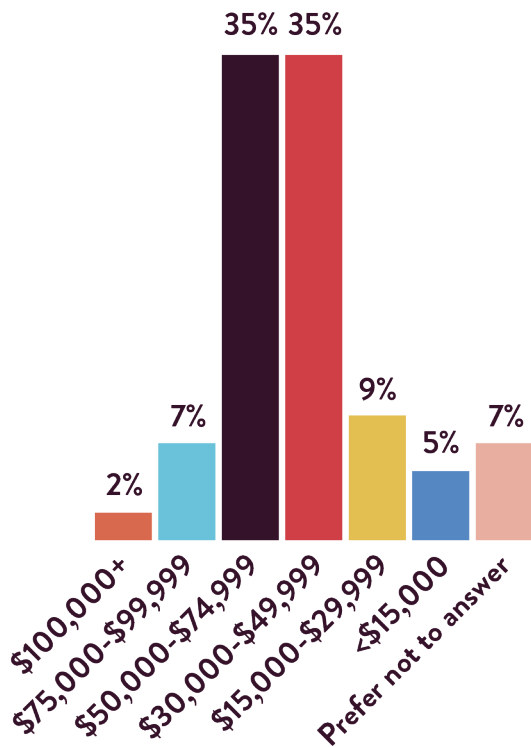


Figure 9: Annual Salary (n=308)

As shown in Figure 9, **70% are earning between \$30,000 and \$75,000 annually.** For those who indicated that they were not a manager or supervisor, no one made over

\$75,000, and those making under \$30,000 rose from 14% to 20% (Figure 10).

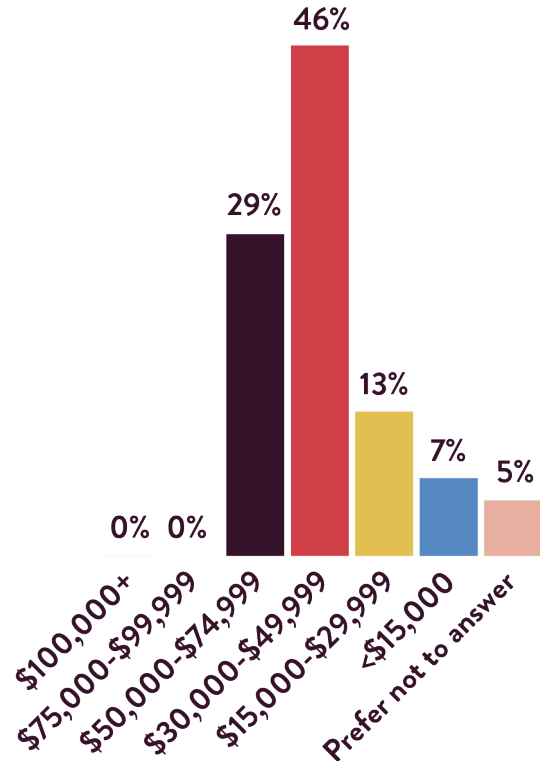


Figure 10: Salary of Non-Management (n=208)

Compared to similar work in other sectors, the wages are lower, which is contributing to people leaving. Focus group and survey respondents have seen staff move into government positions (e.g. child welfare, social services), health care, and for-profit work like the resource industry. While individuals are passionate about anti-violence work, they are struggling with compensation. As expressed by one manager in a focus group:

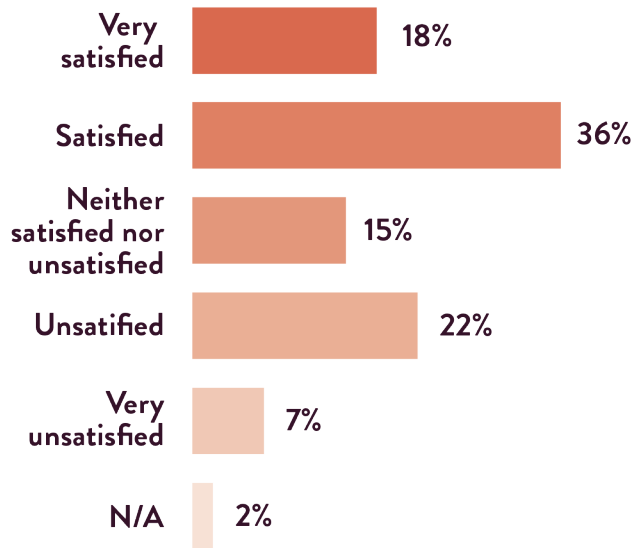
“ There’s definitely still a lot of reliance on women having a passion for this work and feeling committed that way, because they’re certainly not rewarded otherwise.”

Much of the work of the sector is essential care work, which is often seen as an extension



of women’s unpaid work in the home, and therefore even among paid work it is devalued, invisible, underpaid, and underfunded (Canadian Women’s Foundation et al., 2020; Charlesworth et al., 2015; Kosny & MacEachen, 2010; Ontario Nonprofit Network, 2018).

Among survey respondents, 54% indicated that they were satisfied or very satisfied with compensation, but **29% were unsatisfied or very unsatisfied** (Figure 11). This was a surprising finding, as we heard from those in the focus groups and the survey that low pay was a concern. Among the qualitative responses in the survey, we had more than 65 comments that had negative references to terms related to pay.<sup>12</sup>

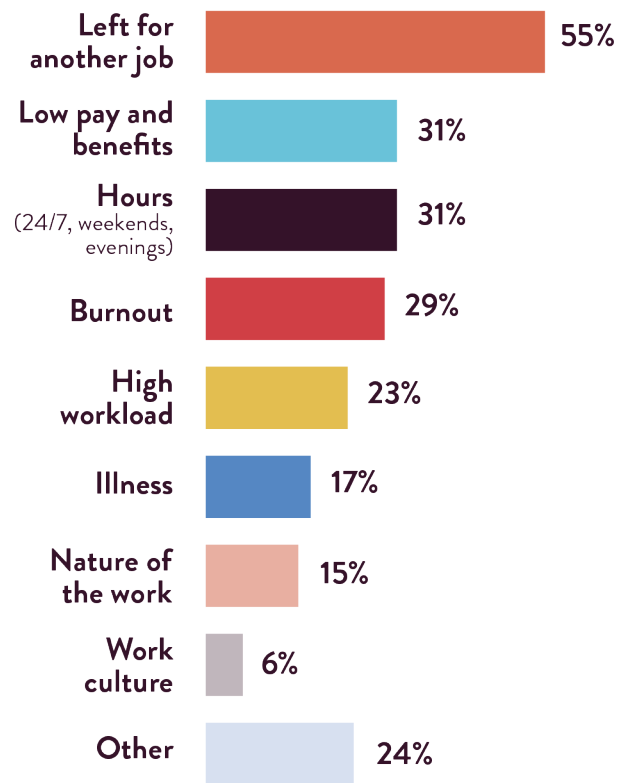


**Figure 11:** Satisfaction with Compensation (n=301)

While we cannot fully explain the discrepancy between the qualitative and quantitative questions, we believe that open-ended

questions may have provided respondents more space to fully nuance their answers. We also know that those from VAW shelters/THs can be hesitant to answer questions in a way that may make the sector look bad as that can be used against organizations to further exacerbate issues with funders. With space to provide rationale, respondents seemed more open to sharing.

**Among organizations that have had staff leave, we also saw that 31% indicated this was due to low pay and benefits** (Figure 12) (WSC, 2022).



**Figure 12:** Reason for Leaving Position (n=243)

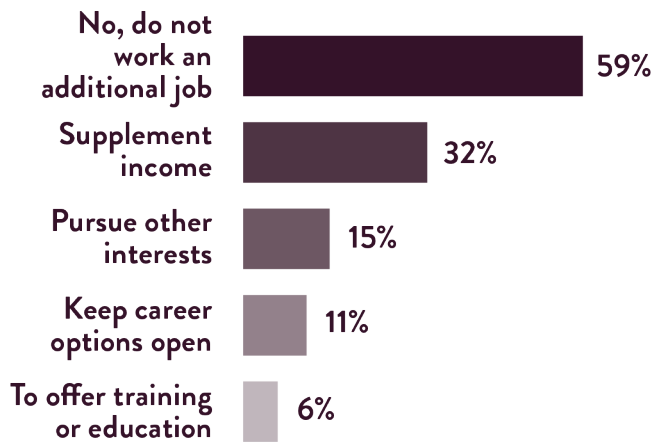
Source: *Shelter Voices 2022*

<sup>12</sup> Through Nvivo, a word frequency was conducted using the following stemmed words: pay, inflation, compensation, wages, expenses, finances, paid, underpaid, and fund.

Among survey respondents, **32%** indicated that they **work an additional job to supplement income**. As one survey respondent explained:

“ I will have to get a second job on top of my full-time career just to make ends meet financially, even in a dual-income household. It is a constant stress I cannot escape.

Two frontline staff in the focus groups also indicated that they work additional jobs to cope.



**Figure 13:** Reasons for Working an Additional Job (n=314)<sup>13</sup>

Many pointed to compensation issues being rooted in funding models that do not allow for salary increases that provide adequate wages for staff and keep pace with inflation. Staff were aware of these challenges, as many organizations are small and often staff support fundraising efforts. This can be seen through the following survey respondent’s comments:

“ They do the best they can given the non-profit sector. I know that they are spread

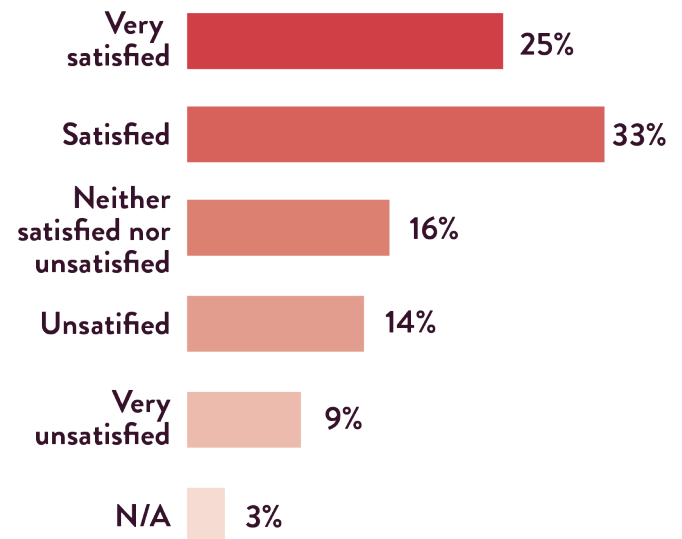
<sup>13</sup> Respondents could choose all answers that applied, so totals in Figure 13 do not add up to 100%.

*thin, but so is my bank account. I am the main earner in my household and live paycheck-to-paycheck.*

**EXTENDED BENEFITS**

While organizations are constrained in the amount of money they have to offer staff members, they have sought other ways to support them, particularly through additional benefits.

VAW shelters/THs provide a range of benefits, including health and wellness programs, and a variety of leave options for staff such as vacation, mental health, sick, and self-care days. One survey respondent even noted that their organization provides staff with their birthday off. Among survey respondents, **58%** indicated that they were **satisfied or very satisfied with their extended benefits**, while only 23% were unsatisfied or very unsatisfied (Figure 14).



**Figure 14:** Satisfaction with Extended Benefits (n=301)

Survey responses indicated that many found their benefits to be very good. Despite this, some thought that extended benefits deductions were too high and resulted in lower take-home pay. Others indicated that benefits for counselling, therapy, and mental health supports were too low, leaving them to pay out of pocket for these supports. Part-time and casual staff often did not have access to extended benefits, vacation leave, or sick time.

There was limited discussion about access to pensions or RRSPs, as we did not ask any specific questions about them. Despite this, there were some concerns raised about the potential to save for retirement, or of organizations to support their employees with secure retirement. Without the ability to save, staff may also be staying in their roles beyond retirement age. As one survey respondent said:

“*There is no way to save for retirement in this role, which has impacted the organization because employees have tended to stay longer than they were fully able to do the job to ensure they get a pay cheque.*”

#### ADVANCEMENT & TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

In the focus groups, participants mentioned that there were limited opportunities to advance in organizations, with **only 46% being satisfied or very satisfied with their ability to move up** (Figure 15).

As many shelters are smaller organizations with an average of 10 full-time staff, they can be management light, so there are few advancement opportunities. Additionally, training and professional development opportunities are limited. While there

were organizations that made active efforts to provide training, this had been interrupted by the pandemic. As one survey respondent explained:

“*The inability for our team to get together for staff meetings in person or trainings had a detrimental impact on our organization.*”

Another expressed the importance of training for staff:

“*As a manager, I strive to put supports in place for my team that did not exist when I started my career because I know how important it is to provide adequate training, not only for the job, but also for self-care and debriefing.*”

Unfortunately, budgets for training, like wages, are constrained.

While organizations are finding creative ways to address the challenges of compensation, benefits, and training, these are significantly constrained by the funding environment in which shelters/THs operate.

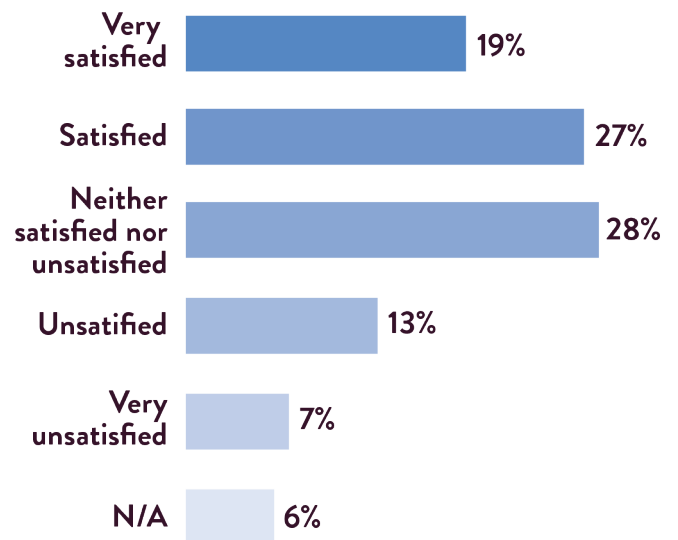


Figure 15: Satisfaction with Potential for Advancement (n=301)

Promising Practices to Address  
**FEMINIST BRAIN DRAIN**

**Self Care  
and Collective Care**

Promising Practices to develop an environment of self- and collective care

**1 Staff-led wellness committees**

- **Wellness committees**, a few of which were led by staff. These committees often sought feedback from across the organization to determine what activities or projects they should undertake. These served both to think about staff and organizational wellness, as well as develop skills and engagement of staff members.

**2 Activities**

- **Wellness workshops** or support programs for staff
- The **opening up of client programming to all staff** (e.g. yoga, arts programming)
- **Wellness Mondays**: on Monday mornings, staff were invited to take time to focus on their wellness. They were not accountable to anyone and did not have to say what they had done with this time. The organization did not serve clients during this period. This was meant to be a space for reflection, and for staff to identify what they needed to reset.

**3 Organizational supports**

- **Gift certificates or gifts** for staff (e.g. plants, bookstore gift certificates)
- **Wellness spending account** available for staff (\$200-\$500). This can be used as staff desire (e.g. to purchase massages, fitness classes, or running shoes).
- **On-staff wellness coordinator**, clinical supervision or counselling – for clients and staff

Throughout this study, we approached self-care with caution as it is often an individual solution to a series of systemic failures, putting the responsibility to address the strain and stress that individuals feel back onto them (Wyatt & Ampadu, 2022). Instead, we were intentional in examining collective care and the ways that organizations are encouraging this within the workplace, while also recognizing that self-care is an important aspect of collective care.

Survey and focus group respondents were candid about their struggles with mental health. Many survey respondents had experiences of trauma in their past, with nearly 80% having experiences of trauma in their personal and/or professional life (Figure 16). Hearing trauma stories and seeing trauma daily, alongside individuals' own experiences, can make self- and collective care that much more important for keeping people healthy and engaged in this work.

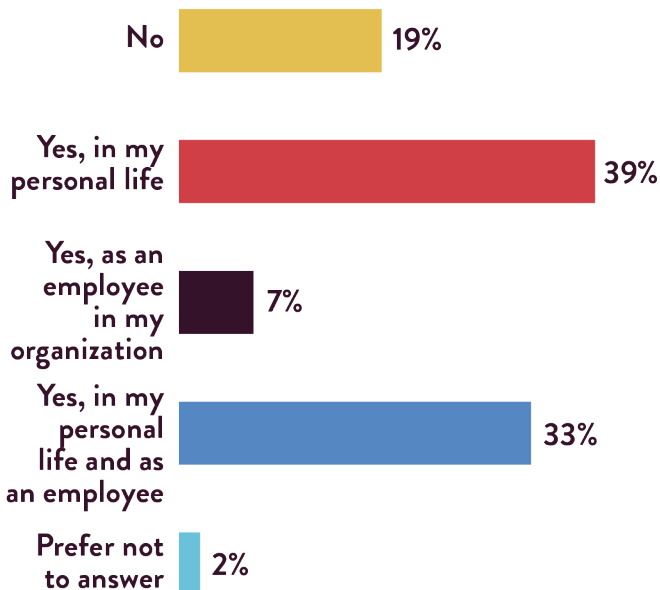


Figure 16: Experience of Trauma (n=301)

Among survey respondents, many indicated that they were struggling with the effects of work trauma or personal trauma.<sup>14</sup> The *Vicarious Resilience Scale Survey* asked if respondents had experienced a range of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms in the past month.<sup>15</sup> As shown in Figure 17, there were **high rates of avoidance behaviour<sup>16</sup> (52%, n=238) and feeling numb or detached (55%, n=237).<sup>17</sup> Clearly, anti-violence workers are experiencing adverse mental health, which needs to be taken seriously at a collective and systemic level. In the focus groups, we heard from many people who have limited access to mental health supports either because of cost or lack of available supports (e.g. long waitlists, not available locally). To keep people healthy and in**

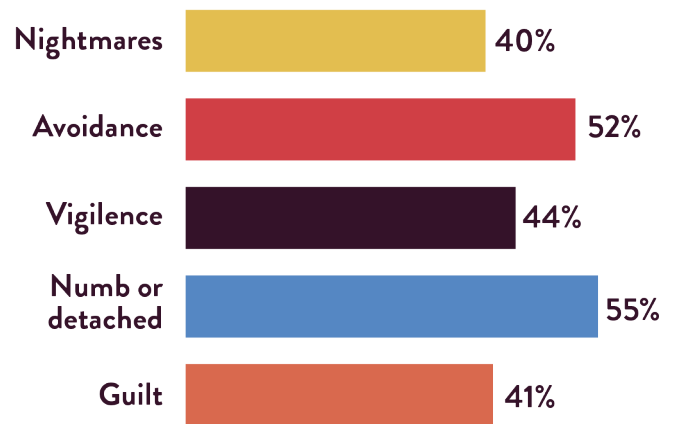


Figure 17: PTSD Symptoms

14 The question asked: Sometimes things happen to people that are unusually or especially frightening, horrible, or traumatic. For example, a serious accident or fire, physical or sexual assault or abuse, an earthquake or flood, a war, seeing someone be killed or seriously injured, or having a loved one die through homicide or suicide. Have you ever experienced this kind of event?

15 Primary Care PTSD Screen for DSM-5 (PC-PTSD-5; 2015).

16 The question asked to evaluate avoidance behaviour was: In the past month, have you tried hard not to think about the event(s) or went out of your way to avoid situations that reminded you of the event(s)? The event(s) is referring to traumatic events.

17 Nightmares (n=238); Vigilance (n=238); Guilt (n=237).

this work, trauma-informed practices for staff, not only clients, were found to be beneficial.

Many challenges were raised in terms of engaging in more self-care activities. Among them was an inability to fit in self-care, especially if working shifts, doing overtime, or working more than one job. The hours of work and the high workload also made practicing self-care difficult. For some, even leaving their desk to eat lunch was not possible, with many feeling too emotionally and physically tired at the end of the day to engage in exercise or spend time with others. Comments such as this were common:

*“ I do not create space for self-care. When I get home from work, my husband and I will usually turn on the TV as a way to unwind, or in my case, to numb or not think about what happened during my day.*

Self-care is made more challenging as many organizations noted that they had staff taking stress leaves, which put added pressure on the remaining staff. Others mentioned the difficulty of mentally leaving work at the office, both because the work was never-ending and difficult cases were hard to set aside, which made relaxing, recovering, and sleeping even more difficult.

Many respondents talked about the importance of self-care, but the hours of work and the high workload could make practicing this difficult:

*“ I have worked 30 years in the helping field, and it has definitely impacted my stress level over the years. I also spent many years dismissing my feelings because when I*

*joined the field there was an expectation to ‘suck it up’ in order to support our clients.*

This was a sentiment that was also expressed in a management focus group. It was specifically hoped that there were now improved supports and that staff would not need to just “suck it up.”

While not everyone could find time or space for self-care in their lives, there were many examples provided of ways that people were practicing self-care. Among the most common ways that people reset and recovered from their work were:

- Getting out into nature
- Exercise and movement
- Engaging with their community (family, friends, etc.) or animals
- Taking time for themselves
- Accessing therapy or counselling
- Talking to co-workers and reflecting on the work
- Sleeping
- Eating

A key point that was raised in respondents' reflections about self-care was trying to make it a practice, engaging in their chosen activities regularly, and especially taking time to eat and sleep regularly. Further, self-care was not something that only happened at the end of the workday, but during work as well. It was important to pause during the day, take short walks or breaks, or periodically stretch. This was not only the responsibility of staff members, but was important to have built into the work environment.



When asked about time spent on coping strategies, survey respondents reported that they take time with family and friends (67%, n=275) and spend time watching movies/TV (64%, n=276). By comparison, respondents indicated that they rarely or never engaged in actions like participating in advocacy (68%, n=277) or political action (72%, n=276) as coping strategies.

Some self-care practices noted by survey respondents included:

“*The most helpful way for me to deal with trauma work is to sing it out. After every shift, I spend the whole 8-minute drive home singing as loud as I can.*”

“*After a center meeting with a client, I go for a walk. I share with my work colleagues.*”

## COLLECTIVE CARE

“*Caring for myself in this work is wrapped up in how we care for each other as a team and as a larger community. I feel very fortunate to be part of a team that supports and cares for each other in very overt, meaningful ways.*”

—Survey Respondent

This quote is a great example of how self-care is deeply intertwined with collective care, especially in organizations that are working towards social justice and a world free from gender-based violence.

In an area where the work is never-ending, a culture of collective care and space to practice self-care can be vital. The following quotes are some of the ideas shared about how to create collective care culture in the workplace:

“*My boss promotes self-care throughout the day and flexible work hours to accommodate work-related stressors and maintain overall well-being.*”

—Survey Respondent

“*Lately, we’ve (staff) been struggling a lot more. We just need a little more self-care. So, if you need to do something during the day, you go and do that. So, that’s nice to have that flex time and not be so rigid.*”

—Focus Group Participant

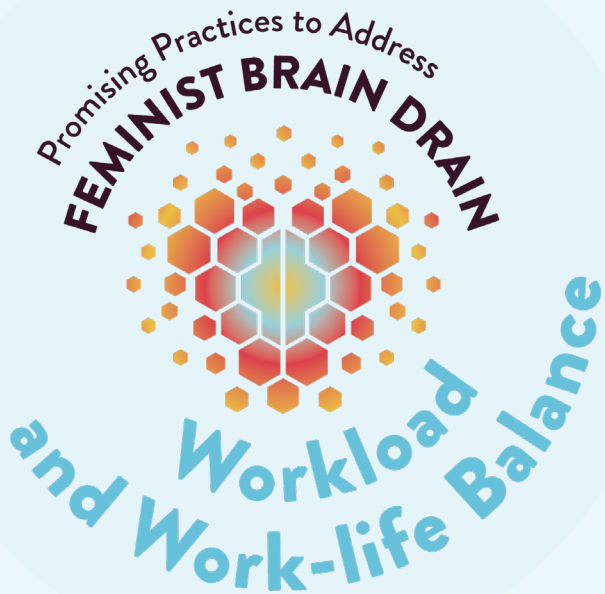
“*My workplace offers an extensive benefits package, perks such as paid birthday off and a self-care wellness fund. I have monthly scheduled supervision time with my supervisor, and we have an open-door policy. I am able to make arrangements with my supervisor to step out of the office to attend medical appointments as needed. We receive monthly internal staff training opportunities.*”

—Survey Respondent

“*They’re (the organization) bringing in a counsellor who specializes in frontline workers’ trauma and burnout, compassion fatigue, and all that. So that’s exciting!*”

—Focus Group Participant

While a lot of self-care has become commodified and individualized, engaging in activities that allow staff to reset at the end of the day or week is important to continue doing this work. Organizations and leadership that supported a culture of self- and collective care were often described as healthier workplaces, and staff felt like they could remain engaged in this work.



Promising Practices to Address  
**FEMINIST BRAIN DRAIN**  
and Workload  
and Work-life Balance

Promising Practices to support staff with their workloads and to increase staff work-life balance

## 1 Four-day work week

The concern raised is that this is incompatible with frontline work, but here are two examples:

- A **condensed 40-hour week**, which meant a longer weekend, but also longer daily hours.
- A **32–35-hour work week**.

## 2 Shifts

Workers want a **stable schedule**. These are some ways to accommodate this:

- Ending shift rotations so that people would always have the same schedule. This included:
  - Creating a three-day, one-afternoon shift schedule, giving more time off and consistency
  - Three days on, three days off on 12-hour shifts. This is similar to nursing schedules.
  - Accommodating people's preferred shifts as much as possible (days, evenings, weekends)
- Importance of **double staffing** so that people had support and safety, particularly for evening and weekend shifts

## 3 Flexibility

Several organizations tried to bring **more flexibility to the work**. Examples included:

- **Every other Friday**, staff work from home and this is often a **short day**
- **Hybrid work**, which was appreciated by staff when they were mildly sick, but did not want to lose a day of pay
- **Accommodate work-life balance** and provide flexibility in work. Frontline staff indicated that they could move hours around or make up time to do personal things like go to appointments or family events.
- If staff needed to work additional hours or on a weekend, they could take those days or hours as **personal time** during the week
- Allowing **staff to make their own schedule**, as long as they were able to continue supporting their clients
- **Taking timeouts or breaks**. This was especially important after working through a difficult circumstance or case. These might be very short, but were a needed and appreciated reset.



Given the nature of 24/7 crisis support, working in VAW shelters/THs has always required long hours and a high workload. However, study participants discussed the many ways that this has increased in recent years, especially during the pandemic.

As many shelters/THs (particularly emergency shelters) continue to operate 24/7, staff are often required to be on-call and to work shifts. Among those surveyed, 51% were required to be on-call. While the survey did not explicitly ask about engagement in shift work, in both the survey and the focus groups participants discussed this as a challenge, especially without consistent schedules. When asked about the **reason for leaving a position**, as shown in *Figure 15* (page 23), **31% cited the hours, 29% burnout**, and **23% the workload**. These issues contribute to difficulties in attracting and retaining staff, as people were not interested in working shifts and being on-call.



Figure 18

In addition to the hours of work, one survey respondent noted that “getting my job done in the allotted time is impossible,” while another stated that “my role is overloaded with expectations, and it is impossible to do everything well.” As shown in *Figure 18*, 52% of survey respondents are working overtime. The high workload that many are experiencing across the sector is contributing to elevated levels of stress, burnout, and turnover. While we often hear about issues of vicarious trauma and acknowledge that hearing stories of violence is difficult, study participants pointed to the administrative burdens of the work as well as systemic failures in contributing to exhaustion and burnout, not necessarily their experiences with service users. As one management focus group participant expressed:

“Staff are often required to go well and above their duties. Due to staff shortages, they are often required to wear multiple hats and to be able to transition easily from cook to child support worker to crisis intervention worker.”

*Figure 19* shows the level of satisfaction with the demands of the job (n=300) and with work and vacation times (n=301). Based on the frequency with which we heard in the focus groups and qualitative survey answers about workload, it is surprising that the level of dissatisfaction with workload and hours was not higher.

Shelter/TH staff and management have seen the workload increase as cases have become more complex since the beginning of the pandemic (WSC, 2020; 2022). This includes

clients arriving at shelters with more severe injuries and increased mental health and addictions concerns. While these are not unfamiliar to organizations, the frequency requires more staff time to support each case, as well as more community connections for referrals.

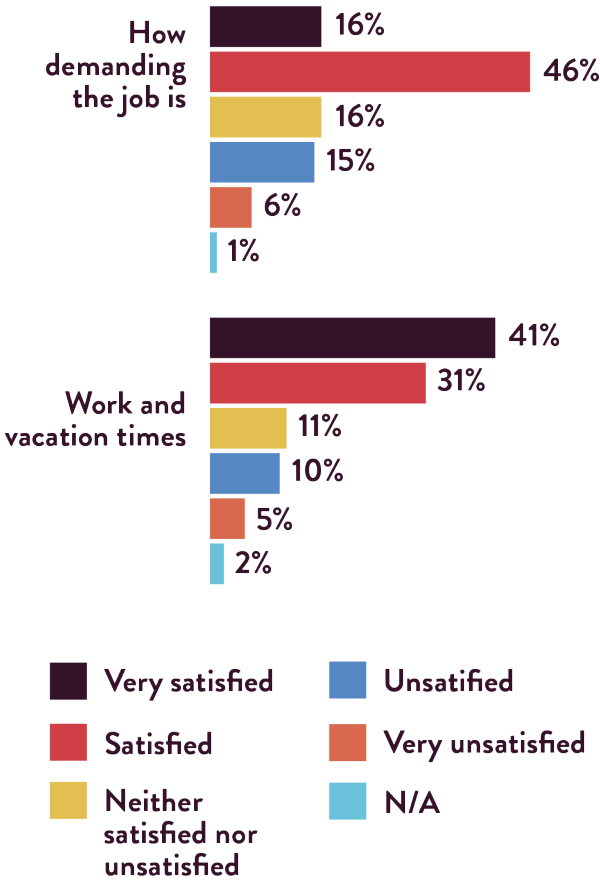


Figure 19: Satisfaction with Workload and Hours

As shown in Figure 20, 43% of respondents indicated that their caseload was between 10-20, while **20% indicated that their caseload was 20 or more clients**. While we were unable to find an average or recommended caseload numbers for shelter/TH workers, “The Child Welfare League of

America recommends caseloads of between 12 and 15 children per worker. The Council on Accreditation recommends that caseloads not exceed 18 per worker” (Whitaker et al., 2004, p. 15). With more complex cases, staff need to spend more time to maintain their current case levels, which makes the high caseload numbers a concern for both quality of client care and well-being of staff members.

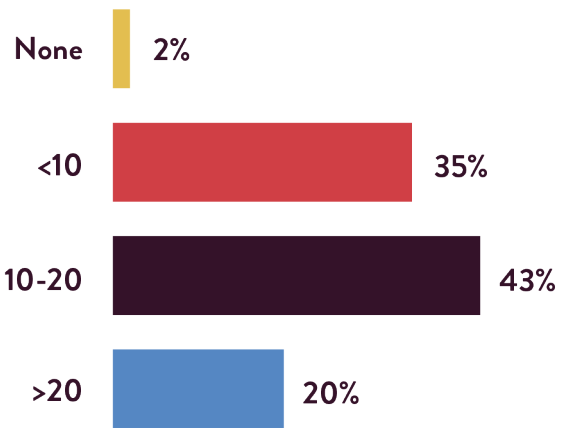


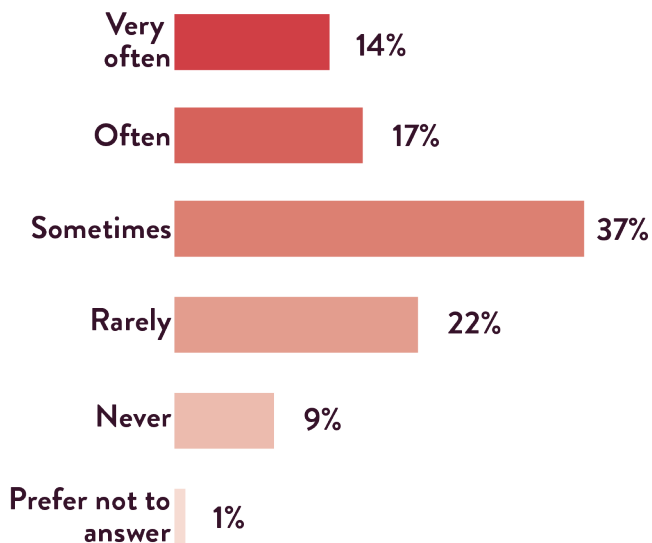
Figure 20: Number of Clients (n=310)

With high workloads comes a sense of constantly being overwhelmed and feeling like there is always more to do. While leadership indicated that they are attempting to take on more to support their staff, they similarly are experiencing high rates of burnout, exhaustion, and turnover. In the focus group, management participants acknowledged how hard they were working, but also that they were lacking time and space to address their own wellness. One participant even joked, “Leadership wellness??? Haha.” Based on the recent *Shelter Voices* data, **since 2020, 23% (n=242) of shelters/THs surveyed saw their executive director leave** (WSC, 2022).

For all shelter/TH staff, the work has increased. As this survey respondent explained:

“During the pandemic, workloads and stress have skyrocketed and they don’t seem to be coming back down. Everyone is overworked and trying to keep up with everyone in need.”

Figure 21 shows that almost **one-third** (31%) of respondents often or very often feel overwhelmed because their caseload seems endless.



**Figure 21:** Feel Overwhelmed by Caseload (n=298)

Among casual or non-permanent staff (7% n=23), many of the comments were in line with those above. One casual staff member noted that between their jobs, they could work 75 or more hours in a week, even working 12-hour shifts nearly back-to-back. Without consistent hours, this group of staff can experience high levels of precarity and are at high risk for exploitation (CWF et al., 2020). Casual staff often do not have health benefits or access to vacation and sick leave. A small number of casual staff noted in

their survey responses that they wanted more shifts or more hours. Some were also interested in transitioning into full-time staff positions, which may also be a potential outlet for accessing more employees when organizations are experiencing staffing shortages.

### THE NEED FOR FLEXIBILITY

While addressing issues of workload is challenging, study participants shared ways that their organizations attempted to create flexibility in the work and ease staff stress. This included providing time for staff members to go to personal appointments during the workday, physical and emotional space for staff to take breaks, and/or an environment where staff felt that they could take vacation or sick time. Flexibility also included hybrid work, which focus group frontline workers noted helped complete administrative tasks, and having space from providing direct crisis support.

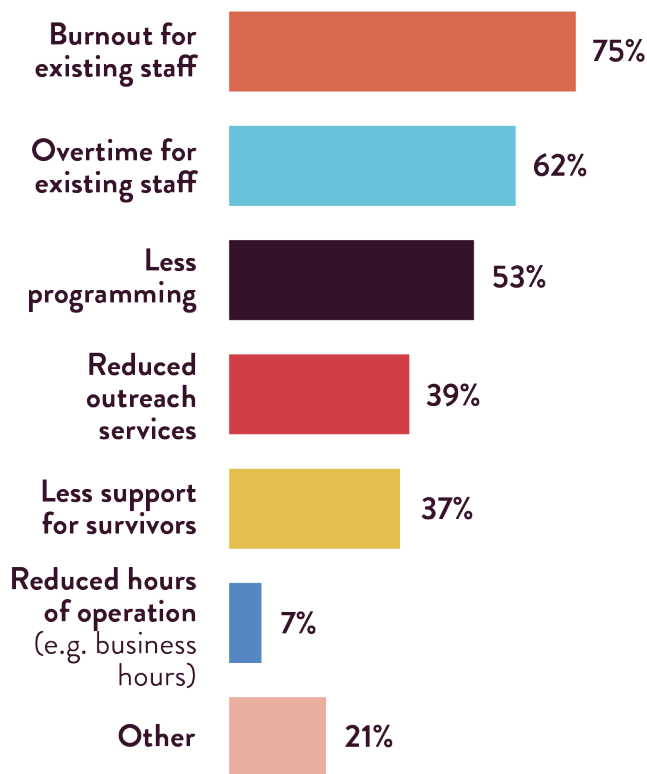
This survey respondent shared how their organization supported a work-life balance:

“My organization/direct supervisor heavily stresses work-life balance, which aids in my overall well-being. Self-care is always a priority, and it makes for a comfortable work environment. My organization is also quite flexible with taking time off/taking off days for mental health. And although I am not on the on-call list, those at my organization who are receive an additional week of lieu/vacation!”

There is a lot of work to do, and organizations never want to turn away those in need of services, but management also acknowledged that there are limits to how much staff could

give. If VAW shelters are at capacity, including reduced staffing, and they cannot take on new clients, they often use a referral system with other shelter organizations to ensure that they can find a safe place to stay.

Figure 22 shows that, with understaffing, organizations are seeing **high burnout (75%) and overtime (62%)**, as well as potential reductions to services and supports (WSC, 2022). However, **95% (n=226) of shelters surveyed in Shelter Voices noted that they were able to maintain 24/7 operations**, although 23% (n=238) did need to reduce their capacity (e.g. intake of new residents).



**Figure 22:** Consequences of Turnover and Staffing Shortages (n=243)

In the management focus groups, we heard that if staff were struggling they would not be able to provide the best quality of service. Doing slightly less and providing time and

space for staff to recharge can lead to better support of service users and keep staff in this work. Several managers in the focus groups noted how important this was for staff:

*“We all know that you cannot pour from an empty cup, so, if people have had a particularly difficult day or time before coming in, it’s just good to know that stuff.”*

*“The key thing for me as leadership is trying to prioritize the staff as much as we were the women, because we couldn’t serve the women at all if we weren’t taking care of our staff.”*

*“The one thing that I think is a big barrier is most people who work in organizations, such as us, are very caring people, and they tend to always want to take on more. I see that as a barrier to staff well-being. They are always ready to take in another client, look after another person. I feel it’s my responsibility, as their manager and supervisor, to remind them of their boundaries.”*

Without addressing feelings of overwhelm, exhaustion, and burnout, staff will leave. Implementing greater flexibility within the workplace can contribute to better staff health and overall retention.

## VICARIOUS RESILIENCE

A key part of the survey was to look at the positive effect that this work had upon individuals, including attitudes, experience, and how their view of the world had changed since being engaged in anti-violence work. While there is often a focus on the negative

impacts of this work, like vicarious trauma, burnout, and compassion fatigue, the survey also wanted to understand the positive effects. Vicarious resilience is the positive impact of repeat exposure to witnessing positive coping skills, problem-solving, and courage, which in turn builds the helper’s personal capacity to respond to adversity. These impacts include increased capacity for resourcefulness, attentiveness to clients, and self-efficacy (Killian, 2017).

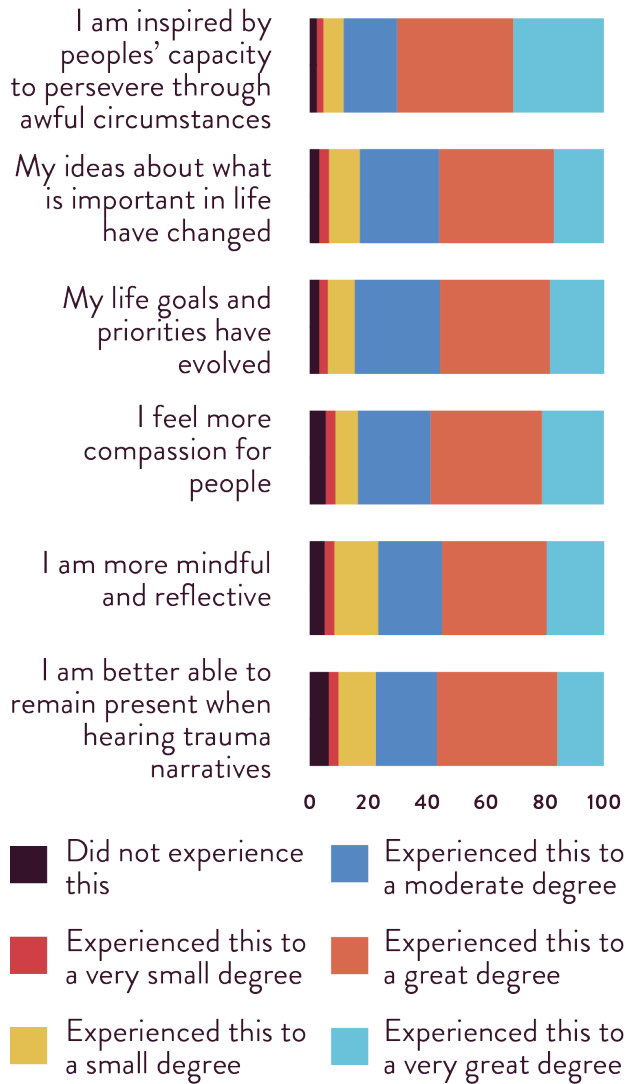


Figure 23: Vicarious Resilience

Using the Vicarious Resilience scale, participants were given 27 statements and asked to indicate the degree to which they experienced this. Figure 23 shows their responses to a small number of the overall statements.

Across the 27 statements, a small number of variables scored lower, but for most of the variables, respondents indicated that they were experiencing these types of changes. This points to shelter/TH work having a positive impact on people’s lives through seeing the strength, resilience, and hope of clients. In the survey, respondents were asked about the ways that this work has affected and changed them, and what it has taught them. While there were negative experiences of this work, many spoke of hope, resilience, understanding, and compassion, as shown through the following quotes:

“ I am a survivor of domestic violence. I have found healing in shared experiences and being in a safe space for people who are leaving domestic violence.

“ It [the work] makes me stressed. However, it is very fulfilling knowing that I am making a difference. I am more knowledgeable and admire how resilient people can be. I’ve learned every situation is different and no solution is one size fits all.

“ Working in the VAW sector has opened my eyes to a lot of systemic issues and barriers we have in society, and how they are reinforced to maintain oppression.

With so much focus on the potential negative impact of client trauma, its important to also see the opportunity for the growth and wellness of staff.

Promising Practices to Address  
**FEMINIST BRAIN DRAIN**  
 Recruitment

Promising Practices to support recruitment

- 3** Staff support for recruitment
- **Referrals**
  - **Staff competitions** where employees could receive gift certificates (or other incentives) if candidates made it far enough into the hiring process

**5** Be clear about the position

- During, or even before the first interview, be very **clear about salary, hours, and benefits**
- **Transparency** in job advertisements regarding **salary and benefits**
- **Be upfront about all of the available benefits.** These are not always transparent, but may be an incentive to join an organization.

**1** Affordable rentals

- One organization found that **housing costs were a major factor** in recruitment issues. They engaged their Board of Directors in searching for solutions. Ideas included asking board members to rent properties they owned to employees, rather than renting these on a short-term basis to tourists.

**2** Promoting positions

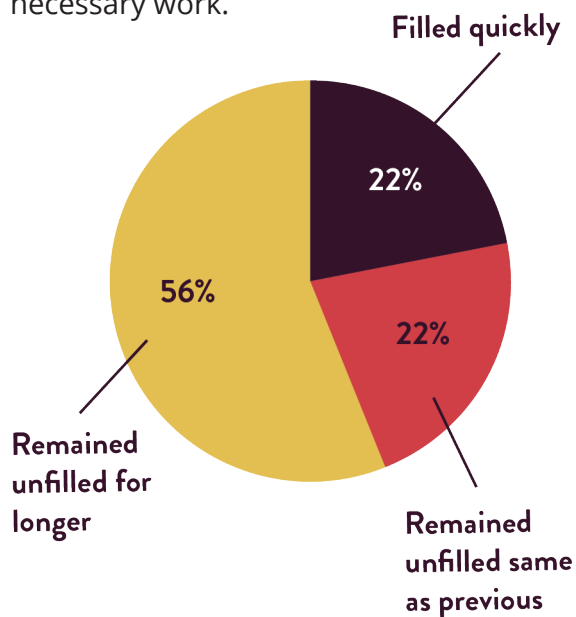
- Utilizing an **external hiring firm**
- Returning to **more traditional methods:** newspaper, word-of-mouth, posting flyers in community spaces
- **Engaging partner agencies**
- Using **online job boards** (e.g. Indeed) and social media (e.g. Facebook ads, LinkedIn)

**4** Accessing candidates

- Organizations were more **flexible with qualifications**, either no longer requiring particular degrees (e.g. social work) or were accepting experience in lieu of education or certifications
- **Targeting non-traditional groups** for hiring (e.g. older individuals, newcomers)
- **Hiring former clients**
- **Using funding programs** to support hiring (e.g. Employment Ontario, Federal jobs programs)
- **Hiring practicum students.** One organization specifically said they limited themselves to two at a time, so they could provide lot of support, which had improved their ability to retain these students when they graduated.
- **Splitting positions** to attract candidates. This was specifically done for a nurse position, as the manager found that nurses wanted greater flexibility. Splitting the position provided that accommodation.



A significant staffing issue impacting organizations is the ability to recruit new employees. VAW shelters/THs feel like they are in a continual cycle of hiring, with some organizations always having at least one job posting open. A respondent to the *Shelter Voices 2022* survey indicated that “we have had 1-2 vacancies unfilled consistently for almost a year. We have had at least 1 vacancy since December 2021” (WSC, 2022). This is a process that is costly, time-consuming, and can take away from the ability to complete other necessary work.



**Figure 24:** Time to Fill Vacancies (n=241)

Source: *Shelter Voices 2022*

From September 1, 2021, to August 31, 2022, shelters/THs (n=243) saw 1300 frontline staff and 126 managers or executive directors leave their organization, and **at the time of the survey there were 455 frontline vacancies and 54 management vacancies** (WSC, 2022).

As shown in *Figure 24*, 56% of organizations took longer to fill staff vacancies than the previous year. With these gaps in staffing, organizations are struggling to deliver services

and maintain staff health and well-being.

During the pandemic, staff recruitment became more challenging, and also extends to board members and volunteers as well (WSC, 2022).

Organizations are seeking innovative ways to recruit new staff, but three common challenges were raised: competition for candidates; salary and benefits; and training and qualifications.

### Competition

VAW shelters/THs are struggling to compete with other types of organizations for candidates. Through the study, participants noted that shelters/THs were trying to compete with school boards, health care organizations, municipal agencies, and social services for potential employees. The draw to these institutions is that they often provide higher pay and more consistent hours. Shift work, weekends, and long hours were all reasons given for being unable to attract candidates.

As shown in *Figure 15* (page 23), **31% of those giving a reason for leaving noted both benefits and pay and the hours worked**. An additional 23% cited leaving because of the high workload and 15% because of the nature of the work. With so many jobs available currently, focus group participants indicated that candidates could be more selective and choose work that met their demands. The management focus group participants identified this issue:

“ We know that there are a lot of jobs that exist and there’s tough competition.

“ If we compare with other organizations, our workload is much heavier and we cannot offer the same conditions as our competitors.

## Salary & Benefits

Managers are seeing higher salary expectations than they have seen in the past, but given funding constraints, are struggling to meet these expectations. As one manager shared:

“Lately, recruiting new employees is a whole other level of salary expectation. We definitely see people wanting and choosing not-for-profit work, and saying they prefer it and like it, but the salary component is a barrier.

Some organizations have tried to be very clear about what can be expected from the position through the job posting or in a first interview, which can limit interviewing those who will not take the position or will leave shortly after hiring. Such strategies included posting the pay range on all job descriptions and laying out the salary and schedules in advance of or in the first interview. Unfortunately, shelter wages can be obtained in many other positions, which makes such positions less desirable, particularly given the level of stress and high workload in this field. As one focus group participant stated:

“You can work almost anywhere and get wages that will match these, or maybe even be a bit better.

While people want to be engaged in non-profit work, the passion for the work is not enough to pay the bills. As this frontline focus group participant stated:

“The work we’re doing is really tough. We’re always hearing our clients’ traumatic stories and work with their trauma, but the pay is not really supplementing our work and

*the burnout. I think sometimes, it’s not worth the pay. The mental struggles you’re going through make you think, is it really worth sacrificing my mental health for this amount of pay?*

## Staff will sacrifice their own well-being to serve those who come to their organizations.

This includes living in precarity as this work does not pay enough, not taking vacation or sick time, or working long hours and overtime. While this work is never ending, if it is accepted that self-sacrifice is a part of the job, there will be continual loss of employees due to burnout and exhaustion, and it will remain difficult to recruit new employees.

## Training & Qualifications

Affecting the ability to recruit staff are challenges in attracting those with the needed qualifications and training. As organizations have had fewer applicants, they are not getting the breadth of skill sets that are needed in this work. VAW shelters/THs are doing more internal staff training, but this is an added expense. While organizations feel as though candidates are lacking qualifications, among survey respondents only 8% (n=290) reported that they did not feel well-prepared for their current job.

As the shelter/TH sector has become more professionalized over time, organizations have come to expect staff to begin roles trained and with credentials like social work degrees. As salaries have failed to keep pace with other areas that also require such training, candidates have more options and incentives to choose work outside of the shelter sector.



Returning to the grassroots values of the women’s movement that promoted the development of women’s shelters (Goodhand, 2017), several organizations have been considering lived experience more in the hiring process, and how staff can be more reflective of the community served. This practice, unfortunately, has been eroded by the pressure from funders to professionalize (Boucher, 2021; Bumiller, 2008; Markowitz & Tice, 2002; Nichols, 2014; Perlmutter, 1994).

One manager in the focus group spoke about their hiring practices:

“The other thing we’ve been really talking about and thinking about is what we value as an organization in terms of the qualifications and contributions of our team. I think our sector took a bit of a swing to the mainstream for a while. We’ve been focusing a lot on outputs and just getting stuff done, and not really valuing diversity of our staff and what they can bring to the work. We say that we want to reflect the community that we serve in who we hire, but for that to be successful, we need to create working conditions that reflect the needs of our workers.

Managers also spoke about bringing placement students into their organizations. While this was not an option for communities without local CEGEPs, colleges, and universities, those in larger centres commonly brought in students. The difficulty of having students work in the organization was that they would stay for their placement or a short time after, and then they would move on to other work. Shelters/ THs often referred to themselves as “training

centres.” For instance, **17%** (n=314) of survey respondents **indicated that they choose this work to prepare them for another field**, and **11%** (n=308) **work another job to keep their career options open**.

To counter this, one manager talked about their strategy for retaining students:

“When hosting practicum students, we take only two at a time. Then we can really work on developing them because we want to keep them and maybe move them to being an employee. Within the year, we’ve actually hired three of our practicum students.

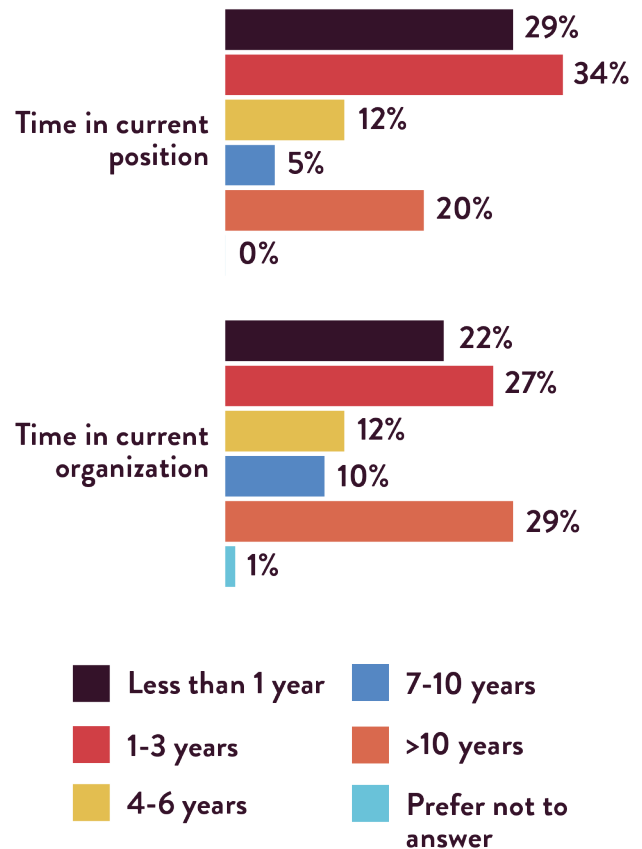


Figure 25: Time Spent in Position or Organization

Among survey respondents, 42% indicated that they had worked in the field for ten or more years, but **29%** (n=313) **had been in their position for less than a year** and **22%** (n=308) **had been at their current organization for under a year** (see *Figure 25*). While people may be staying in the field,<sup>18</sup> they are not necessarily staying with one organization. Such turnover can bring new ideas and energy, but it also means that there is a regular loss of organizational knowledge and skills.

For organizations unable to recruit the staff they need, they are seeing consequences that can contribute to organizational instability. Staff are struggling with added work and issues of burnout, while clients are facing the potential of reduced services (see *Figure 22*, page 32). One survey respondent noted several challenges emerging from recruitment issues:

**“** *We are losing staff almost monthly. Our managers told us yesterday that they spend at least 50% of their time on hiring/recruitment, whereas their jobs have a whole range of other aspects that are getting neglected, and we feel it. In addition, the lack of continuity for clients is huge. It’s hard to establish rapport with clients when they’re always seeing a new face.*

## SYSTEMIC ISSUES

We asked all participants in our focus groups about the systemic challenges that were contributing to the labour crisis in the VAW

<sup>18</sup> The survey does not define the boundaries of a “field.” While those who completed the survey indicated that they currently worked in a domestic violence shelter, we do not know the area of the field where they were previously employed.

shelter/TH sector. While we heard about many systemic issues, the most frequently reported were funding and the recognition of the work; cost of living and the housing crisis; and the complexity of systems and issues accessing resources.

### Funding and Recognition of Work

Funding naturally came up as a challenge for organizations. VAW shelters/THs are chronically and systemically underfunded, which is contributing to low staff salaries and high workloads. This is only growing more challenging with increasing inflation, which has not been reflected in funding levels. Staff are continually doing more work with less funding, especially as the severity and rates of violence have increased. The underfunding of the sector in part stems from an overall lack of understanding of domestic violence and shelter/TH work. As one frontline focus group participant explained:

**“** *[W]e are such a female-dominated field and the expertise of helping professions is not recognized...the biggest issue with pay is our expertise not being recognized. We are seen as easily replaceable and hence we are not worth paying higher.*

As funding issues are contributing to depressed wages in the sector, staff are struggling with their own precarity. Many staff are working additional jobs to make ends meet. It is difficult for them to focus on their clients when they are navigating their own challenges. Organizations are trying to combat these issues, for example by starting staff at higher salaries, but they are also concerned about what this will do for their

budgets. They will also need to advocate to their funders about the realities on the ground.

Not only are funding amounts impacting staff wellness, but the expectations of government funders are also affecting staff stress. A lot of costs are not accounted for within current funding models, in particular administration and evaluation of programming, and the costs to cover an adequate number of well-paid staff to do the work. For these and many other organizational activities and supports, staff need to fundraise the shortfall. There was an influx of response and recovery funding from the federal government during the pandemic, which was greatly needed and welcomed during the crisis and recovery period. This funding is not sustainable though, which leaves organizations under pressure to fundraise and seek out alternative funding sources while still recovering from the pandemic and facing a challenging fundraising environment. Feminist groups have called for funding that is sustained, covers operational costs, and builds the capacity of organizations (Dale et al., 2021; CWF et al., 2020).

**The funding situation is preventing organizations not only from having healthy and thriving staff, but also from engaging in prevention and advocacy work.** One manager in a focus group raised the concern that if are too busy to engage in advocacy, then it will happen without our knowledge and expertise at the table:

“ [O]ur work is precarious because we lack financing. We lack staff and we are in survival mode. And the analysis of the manifestation of violence and the decisions

*made by decision-makers, sometimes we're not there. Often we don't have enough time to bring this analysis, to respond at times to the policies because we're working so hard.*

So much of the labour crisis is rooted in issues related to funding. While organizations can strive to build a healthy and supportive work environment, they are struggling at all levels with a broken funding system and problematic funding relationships. Without recognition and valuing of the expertise of the sector, organizations will continue to struggle to attract and keep labour.

### **Cost of Living and the Housing Crisis**

Rising inflation and increasing costs of living are having a huge impact on the VAW shelter/ TH sector's labour force, the potential to offer decent work, and the ability to compete with other sectors (Jensen, 2022b). Organizations are finding it difficult to attract and retain staff at current salary levels, and staff are struggling to afford housing, food, gas, and other necessities. While this was cited as a concern from all areas of the country that we heard from, those in and around large cities spoke specifically of the impact of the housing crisis on the ability to attract and retain staff members.

Often discussed in this sector is the impact of the housing crisis on those fleeing violence, but this is similarly impacting those doing this work. This was a sentiment echoed throughout the focus groups and the survey:

“ *It is housing, and the cost of housing, and that's for our staff and for women trying to leave first stage and/or second stage. There is a huge crisis in our community,*

*and even more through the pandemic as we are now becoming a place where people who could work from home are moving [to their community], and housing costs have increased. So, we've lost out to staff moving because they couldn't find housing.*

—Focus Group Participant

“*The compensation/salary is not enough to keep up with the increase in the cost of living. I consistently struggle financially and worry about finances.*

—Survey Respondent

The shelter/TH sector needs to be able to offer a living wage to staff, but funding issues, wage freezes, and growing inflation are contributing to staff poverty and precarity. As one survey respondent said:

“*Rising prices, and no ability to grow any savings, is making it untenable to work for such low pay.*

### **Complexity of and Access to Systems and Resources**

Throughout the study, we heard about the growing needs of clients and the increasing complexity of cases. This is not a new concern; however, the pandemic has contributed to the severity and rates of violence that staff have been witnessing. Staff have also noted that they have seen more clients struggling with mental health and substance use concerns. This is made more complicated by the difficulty of navigating systems for clients. There is a lack of community resources for support or referral, and VAW shelters/THs become a catchall for anyone needing support. This is particularly true for rural, northern, and

remote organizations, where there are simply not enough services. As this manager of a rural shelter in a focus group stated:

“*There is definitely the idea that the shelter is open 24/7. There's nowhere else for this person. This is where they'll go. It doesn't matter if the mandate is correct. You become that catchall when you're rural.*

Adding to the complexity is the challenge of navigating broken government systems, which is also not a new issue (Maki, 2019; Wathen et al., 2012). As cases have become more complex, more navigation and supports are needed. This includes mental health and addictions, immigration, social services, child welfare, childcare, health, justice, family law, and housing. Shelters and their staff are responsible for relationship-building with these systems and pulling these together for clients. While staff may be experts in domestic violence, they also need to be networkers, addictions and mental health experts, and system navigators for a wide range of government resources. This is leading to frustration and stress for workers, as this frontline focus group participant shared:

“*As cases become more complex and more systems need to be involved, we are expected to do all the collaborative work to build those relationships, and pull all the different government resources and supports together. It makes the work more complex. It does add a real challenge to frontline staff who might be absolute experts on anti-violence, but now they're also learning how to navigate addictions systems and government resources that they may not have navigated before.*

With the increasing complexity and the time it takes to navigate the systems, both staff and clients feel less hopeful about the outcomes. As one survey respondent remarked:

“*It feels like larger systemic forces, like governments and funders, make it impossible to succeed in our work.*”

Staff are working as hard as they can, but are encountering broken systems and, as this survey respondent noted, “working in societal systems that are problematic contributes to overall fatigue.” Evidently, burnout is also the result of working in systems that are not sufficiently supporting survivors.

## THE PANDEMIC EXACERBATED LABOUR ISSUES

Labour issues are far from new. In fact, one P/T shelter association leader discussed efforts since the 1990s to address labour issues. A 2005 Standing Committee on the Status of Women report found labour issues among organizations funded by Status of Women (now Women and Gender Equality) Canada:

“It [the Committee] was saddened to hear about the human toll that the current funding environment imposed, both in terms of a reduced ability to serve the population, and in terms of the burn-out of staff.

Witnesses told the Committee that they need stable funding in order to

- prevent turn-over of staff and subsequent loss of capacity; and
- provide staff with competitive levels of compensation which recognize the

valuable contribution of the voluntary sector (p. 10).”

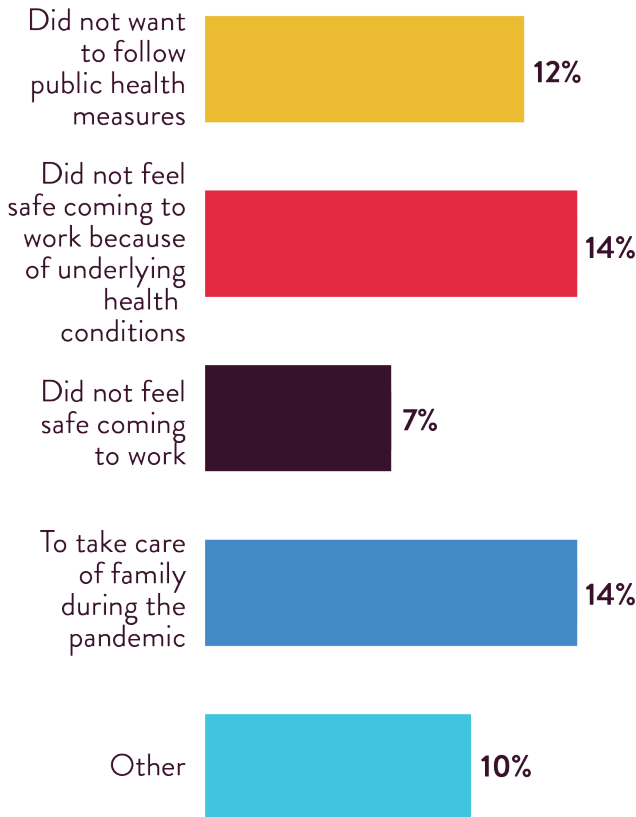
The pandemic added to and accelerated these challenges.

COVID-19 forced organizations to adapt, creating new policies, procedures, and ways of operating. Unlike many industries, shelters/THs stayed open throughout the many lockdowns (WSC, 2020). While some workers increased their time working from home, many were still required to deliver in-person supports. Survey respondents reported only 40% (n=299) were working more from home during COVID-19. For those who did move their work to home, many of them felt more isolated and disconnected from their team. Some staff did appreciate hybrid models of working, with several organizations intending to maintain some work-from-home opportunities.

As organizations continued to operate in person, they needed to implement and enforce COVID-19 safety protocols. This included enforcing mask-wearing, quarantining, and social distancing, as well as adding cleaning protocols to their duties. Additionally, these protocols created their own social divisions between staff members. Some staff felt as though they were lifted too early, while others no longer felt they were necessary (or in some cases never felt they were necessary). Many survey respondents spoke of the social divisions that they had seen in society at large, particularly related to pandemic restrictions and vaccinations, being mirrored within the shelter/TH among staff and clients, which was contributing to more fractured workplaces.



There were also many study participants who were proud of the efforts they took and success they had in keeping staff and clients safe. Despite challenges related to protocols, COVID-19-related concerns were not a major reason for leaving the organization as shown in *Figure 26*, especially compared to rates of leaving due to pay, hours of work, and workload (*Figure 12*).



**Figure 26:** Leaving Related to the Pandemic (n=243)

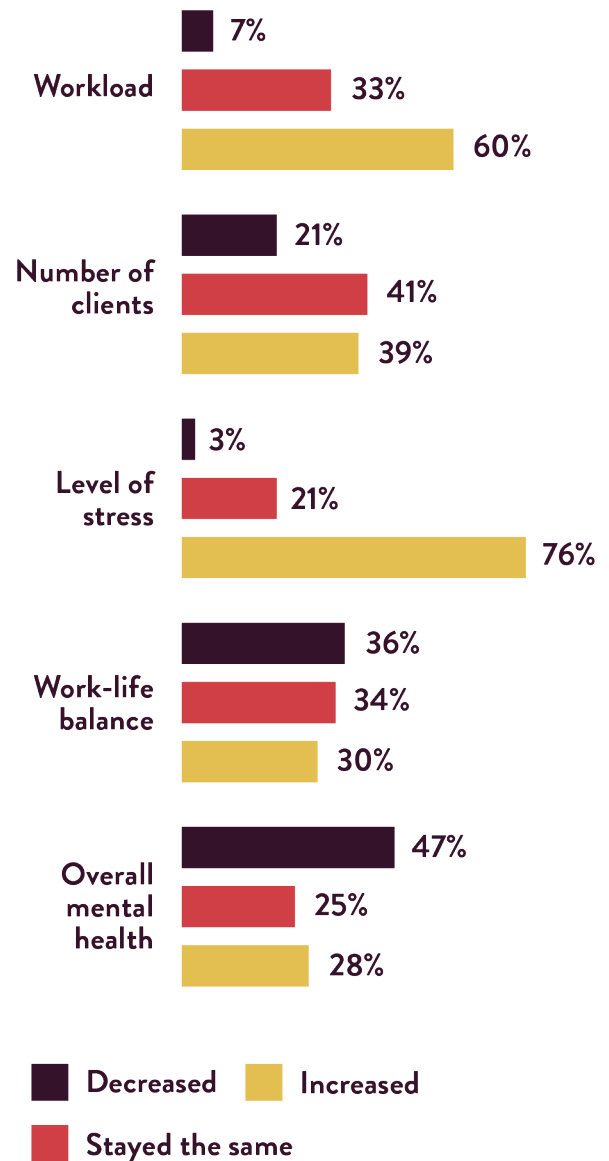
Source: *Shelter Voices 2022*

While staff may not have left the organization due to COVID-19, **stress increased** (76%, n=298), and **overall mental well-being** (47%, n=299) and **work-life balance** (36%, n=299) **decreased** (*Figure 27*). Factors contributing to these changes included increased workload (60%, n=297) and clients (39%, n=297) over this

period. These findings are reflective of those found in both *Shelter Voices 2020* and *2022*.

As one survey respondent stated:

“The pandemic was a collective trauma that we all experienced together. There were tremendous levels of burnout and compassion fatigue in this field due to the pandemic, which continues to be difficult to navigate for all service providers.



**Figure 27:** Effects of COVID-19

Another expressed exhaustion and defeat:

*“ Without fully realizing it, I have been traumatized by the many impacts of COVID-19. I actually have trouble naming the impacts as traumatizing because I feel like I’ve coped and managed without most people really grasping how mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausted I am. I feel like I have failed as a mom, a woman, and an employee. Trying to navigate it all, and feeling like I don’t or haven’t held enough space for what my kids are going through and how this impacts them. I feel defeated, lost, and invisible.*

This feeling was representative of the exhaustion we heard from many workers throughout the study. Without change, some did not know how they would be able to continue in this field.

Management responses in both the survey and focus groups showed that they not only needed to perform their regular duties, but many had also filled in when staff were unavailable (e.g. sick or working from home) while navigating and implementing continually changing public health requirements.

This survey respondent summed up the toll that the pandemic has had on staff and management:

*“ The pandemic has taken its toll on frontline staff, who worked the front lines during the entire pandemic, and leadership is also experiencing a fair bit of burnout. It has been a very long two years and holding that kind of stress these two years has exhausted staff and management.*

Management often noted the value of the Response and Recovery Funding from the federal government, which flowed through WSC and allowed for salary top-ups and shelter space renovations to meet public health requirements. There were concerns about the end of this funding, especially as costs are rising, there are ongoing COVID-19-related needs, and underfunding was a sector concern pre-pandemic.

### **Hope During Difficult Times**

While the pandemic has been a challenging time, we also heard about the positives that have occurred. Importantly, staff and management have been resilient, adaptable, and committed to their work and their clients. As this survey respondent said:

*“ I am amazed by how the staff I work with have navigated doing anti-violence work during the pandemic. They have faced their own fears and continued to move forward in supporting persons fleeing violence.*

Staff also expressed pride in the adaptations that their organizations made, like virtual client support and maintenance of services with public health requirements. Some new opportunities that arose included more virtual training opportunities for staff and access to placement students in rural communities as school moved online.

Survey respondents and focus group participants are hopeful about returning to more in-person programming, but rebuilding teams will take time. A manager in a focus group discussed this challenge:



“If I look at the course of the last number of years, we do a lot of staff development as a team and because we couldn't do that, I felt like that has caused a trauma of its own. It has really damaged our team relationships. So, it is about trying to get back on track with getting staff together as a team and feeling in sync with each other moving forward.

Similarly, this frontline worker was looking forward to coming back together as a team:

“We're trying to bring our team closer together. Trying to get us back to a cohesive unit. Outreach was at home during COVID. So, it's just bringing us all back together.

While some challenges may be lessening, client numbers are not decreasing, severe violence continues to be high, and COVID-19 funding is not likely to be renewed. Organizations are learning how to operate in this new environment.

## FEMINIST LEADERSHIP

Among the many concerns involved in the labour crisis facing the VAW shelter/TH sector is the potential loss of feminist leadership that has made this sector distinct. Such leadership has been described as inclusive, political, justice-oriented, collaborative, participatory, horizontal, bottom-up, and empowering (Batliwala, 2011). We asked those in the management and P/T shelter association focus groups to discuss what feminist leadership meant to them and how they integrated these principles and values into their work. They highlighted the importance

of leading with an intersectional approach; shared leadership and decision-making; collaboration and relationships; and advocacy and systems change.

A focus group participant shared this excellent definition of feminist leadership:

“Feminist leadership creates space for collaborative and creative models and workspaces. Being feminist leaders, we practice self-reflection, accountability, and knowing how we show up. We must be aware of trauma that we, and others, bring into the workplace and guard against oppression. This can be done by sharing power and ensuring collaborative decision-making. We also must be aware that people's social identities can overlap, creating compounding experiences of discrimination.

## Intersectional Approach

Intersectionality is a framework for understanding how different social identities and oppressions overlap, contributing to unique and more complex forms of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991). By taking an intersectional approach, feminist organizations, among them shelters/THs, seek to recognize this complexity and provide space for the voices of those from a range of differing identities. For many organizations, this includes the adoption of active anti-racism and anti-oppression frameworks.

An intersectional approach was important to the organizations we spoke to in the focus groups, as it was a way to reflect and work with the communities they were serving. Participants noted the importance of having

a connection with and understanding local Indigenous communities, as well as historical and ongoing colonialism and oppression. Leadership is working to implement actions that respond to the Calls to Action for truth and reconciliation and the Calls for Justice on Missing and Murder Indigenous Women and Girls. Organizations are also connecting with and supporting local immigrant and 2SLGBTQ+ communities. According to this organizational leader:

“*[There is a] need to have a deep understanding of the systemic barriers for women historically. This includes for racialized and Indigenous women and for vulnerable gender identities and people with different sexual orientations. We also need to understand the impact of poverty and the social determinants of health. An understanding of the context that we’re all living in is part of being grounded. It’s setting the stage for feminist leadership.*”

To implement intersectional approaches into practice, organizational leaders are engaged in learning, listening, identifying gaps, and trying to understand what people need. This includes a process of self-reflection and awareness of their own privilege, having difficult conversations, and reflecting on and acknowledging how their organization may have caused oppression or harm in the past.

Ways organizations were attempting to embody an intersectional approach included:

- Changing the qualifications for positions so that the organization was reflective of and responsive to the communities they serve.
- Providing space for staff to learn about issues related to violence, the impact of patriarchy, and other systems of oppression. This can help staff better understand the issues and build compassion for their clients, while also imparting feminist values, knowledge, and ways of working.

The development of frameworks, like an intersectional approach, was designed to prioritize those who come for support, but in the discussion of feminist leadership, many talked about the ways that this also applies to staff. There needs to be a recognition and accommodation of difference. This is exemplified by this management focus group participant:

“*Leadership is meeting people where they are as a worker, for what they may know or not know already, but also as a person because we all have different identities and experience the world in different ways.*”

### **Shared Leadership and Decision-Making**

For many, the concept of leadership conjures the image of an individual, but a key element of feminist leadership is an attempt to share power and decision-making. This was also referred to as collaborative, non-hierarchical or participatory leadership. In these circumstances, staff felt trusted to carry out their work, voice concerns, and contribute ideas, while knowing they would receive support if issues arose.

Focus group participants talked about creating an environment where staff felt empowered to find solutions. While all staff may not have a role in overarching organizational decisions,

providing autonomy to staff within their own roles or programs empowered individuals and also freed up more time for management to do their own work. As this manager stated in speaking about her relationship with staff:

“Give them autonomy with regards to their responsibilities and don't supervise everything. They have great ideas! They can deal with their own files.

Approaching this work from a collective rather than top-down model provided the opportunity to bring more people into the conversation and decision-making, new ideas were brought forward, and there was potential for innovation. As staff became more comfortable in this type of environment, they were more willing to take risks and make mistakes. One manager shared that they had spoken to staff about engaging in cross-training, possibly even in outside organizations. The hope was that this would build skills, give staff agency, and bring new and fresh ideas back to the organization.

While an earlier concern raised was about the lack of potential to advance, with a shared leadership model staff are gaining leadership skills, even if they do not move into new roles. This can contribute to staff retention, as well as overall happier staff, especially compared to those who are experiencing micromanagement from leadership. As this manager in a focus group stated:

“When I am informed of certain things, instead of finding the solution, I empower the staff so they can find a solution. For me, it's important to give room for people to be able to find their own solutions. I think that's part of the leadership journey.

This sharing of power and passing along of leadership skills may also contribute to future feminist leaders in the VAW shelter/TH sector.

A management focus group participant shared that staff were encouraged to take over chairing internal staff meetings. While a small act, it showed staff that their leaders trusted them to take on leadership roles. They also sent staff members to community meetings and trainings, which allowed their voice to be heard, grew their skills, and contributed to better understanding of the work and the sector.

### Collaboration and Relationships

Building a cohesive and collaborative team was important as individuals shared their experiences of feminist leadership. This was not only important within a workplace, but also when working in coalitions. This required leadership that embodied elements such as kindness, the ability to listen, trust in themselves and others, provision of support and guidance, and being responsive to feedback and suggestions. Simple acts of kindness and appreciation helped create healthy workplaces. As one leader stated:

“To me it's asking, what do you need? I say that to the women when they come to the door, and it's the same with the staff or any other person you see who's struggling.

Additionally, a space with open, safe, and non-confrontational communication was a source of greater workplace cohesion. This did not mean ignoring conflict or not engaging in difficult conversations, but rather disagreeing respectfully, which led to people being more open to sharing in the future.

One of the P/T association leads spoke about how they work with other agencies in their region to coordinate projects. Not only was this responsive to the community, but it also meant that organizations worked collaboratively, taking the pressure off any one individual organization:

*“So, it’s not just in our organizations, it’s using the allies. You’re taking turns in the leadership, especially in the tough stuff, and you’re strategizing who’s in the best place to take that leadership.”*

The sector leaders are well aware of how project funding models have created a competitive environment that has siloed organizations and compromised the collaborative and movement work that created the sector in the first place. Many actively resist this. It was this collaboration that could be transformative, whereas working in silos or in competition was problematic. As one leader said:

*“When you’re warring against each other, patriarchy, and government wins.”*

### **Advocacy and Systems Change**

A key element of feminist leadership is having a strong voice and engaging in systems change. This includes having a deep understanding of the experiences of women fleeing violence, including the root causes such as inequality, patriarchy, colonialism, and power and control. This also includes knowledge of the historical context of the anti-violence sector. Leaders discussed the importance of sharing this knowledge with all staff, which created an environment of compassion for those

experiencing violence and staff dedicated to ending VAW.

In addition to sharing this with staff, leaders also talked about their commitment to working toward ending VAW and social injustice. Given their position in their organizations and in the sector, they felt a responsibility to use their voice as advocates. This meant engaging with government officials, being part of decision-making tables, and continually fighting to ensure that VAW and gender inequality were not ignored. This role as an advocate was also described as a part of collective care. As one P/T shelter association lead put it:

*“Some of the collective care can be being a good advocate for your mission and your mandate, the women we serve, the women who work with us, and the people who work with us. When I go to a meeting with government and say our piece, that’s collective care in the sense that folks think, ‘Hey, someone’s amplifying my voice. Someone’s amplifying the concerns I’m raising.’ So, collective care can be advocacy.”*

Leaders from across the shelter/TH sector are concerned that with high turnover among leaders and frontline staff, we will see a loss of feminist leadership. This style of leadership is important as it is inclusive, supportive, and collaborative, while also focusing on social change and advocacy. Given the systemic issues that contribute to situations of violence, as well as the challenges experienced after fleeing violence, having this strong voice is the only way to see long-term systemic change.

To address the loss of feminist leadership, the BC Society of Transition Houses is developing feminist leadership training for managers in the anti-violence sector across the province. The training will be tailored to emerging and current managers and executive directors. In this training, participants will explore how feminist leadership works in everyday, practical terms, and how feminist values and principles, rooted in collaboration and respect, can form the foundation for policy development, staff support, and meeting the needs of those receiving support. Participants will get a chance to share and hear from peers about their practices, resulting in a thriving collaborative community of practice.

# BEYOND THE FEMINIST BRAIN DRAIN SYMPOSIUM

In November 2022, we brought together more than 40 representatives from across the country to discuss the labour crisis. Over two days, people connected through their shared challenges and broke the isolation that many had felt over the last three years. Through facilitated sessions, participants shared the innovative ways that they are tackling labour issues in their organizations. The event developed collective energy to advocate for change, which meant that participants left with a sense of hope.

Participants shared not only what they were doing in their own spaces to foster wellness and retention, but also what needs to happen to move toward a thriving sector. Many of the ideas shared are reflected in the promising practices put forward throughout this report. The discussions had at this event also helped to form the recommendations put forward on the next page.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout this study, we have heard about the innovative ways that organizations are navigating the labour crisis that is facing the sector. While organizations are resilient and adaptive, they are struggling with organizational issues like collective trauma and grief, burnout, recruitment and retention, and staff wellness. They are also contending with broken systems that make this work more difficult, including a funding system that undervalues and underfunds VAW shelters/THs. These challenges have only increased through the pandemic, **contributing to a sector that is surviving but not thriving.**

## 1 Stable Funding for the Sector

As called for in the Roadmap for the National Action Plan (Dale et al., 2021), there is a need for “funding a diverse and sustainable women’s movement, and allocating sustainable and escalating funds for prevention, education, and attitude change. Our working groups have reiterated here that funding should reflect the reality that anti-violence frontline services provide ‘wrap-around’ support that often goes beyond addressing violence” (p. 124). This need for stable funding was also recently recommended by the Mass Casualty Commission’s final report. With stable funding, staff can feel secure in their positions, and there will be adequate funding for staffing.

## 2 Decent Work

All employees in the sector should have access to a living wage, paid sick days, a pension or retirement savings, and be recognized as essential workers (like other emergency frontline services). Working in this sector should not contribute to precarity.

## 3 Acknowledgement of Workplace Injury

Like many other first responders, there needs to be more recognition of the psychological harm that can come from doing VAW work. With this recognition, workers would have greater access to Workers’ Compensation Board benefits for psychological injuries.

## 4 Human Resources (HR) Supports

Organizations indicated that they need funding for HR supports. As many shelters/THs are small, they do not have dedicated HR supports. A funded provincial resource, consultant, or working group that could provide information and training would be valuable.

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