



to the soul:

faith & spiritual communities
addressing violence against women

Fall 2008 Bi-annual Newsletter



**Metropolitan Action Committee on
Violence Against Women and Children**

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About METRAC

Since 1984, the Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC) has pursued its mandate to build the capacity of individuals, communities, and institutions to prevent and respond effectively to the issue of violence towards diverse women and children. Our mission has been undertaken through public education and training, safety initiatives, partnerships, research, and policy in three program areas: Community Outreach and Education, Community Safety, and Community Justice.

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Message From the Executive Director

Wendy Komiotis (Executive Director)

Welcome to METRAC's fall 2008 newsletter, which highlights the role of faith and spiritual communities in addressing violence against women and girls. In these pages, you'll read interviews we have conducted with diverse faith community members and leaders, as well as updates on the exciting work METRAC has been doing during the summer and early fall season.

METRAC is a secular not-for-profit organization, but we recognize the value in working with the vastly diverse communities in our city, province, country, and world. This diversity includes faith and spirituality as these are often integral aspects of women's culture and support networks. Some women experiencing violence may seek help from their faith communities as a first resort before contacting women support services, while some may not know about or choose to use such services. Indeed, after the murders of a number of Ontario women who sought help from their faith leaders, *The Annual Reports of the Chief Coroner: Case Reviews of Domestic Violence Deaths, 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005* made recommendations for an improved



Helen Yohannes' spoken word performance at the Annual General Meeting (September)

response from faith communities to women who approach them for information and support in dealing with volatile family issues.

Violence against women and girls is a pervasive social problem that happens in most communities. All communities, including faith and spiritual communities, have a role to play in ending gender-based violence and

in providing support to women and girls experiencing violence. This is important when we consider that women, including those marginalized by their race, income, gender, sexuality, abilities, language, and immigration status, may turn to faith and spirituality to seek purpose and hope and to reduce their isolation and build community.

Recently, METRAC has been looking for ways to engage and partner with communities of faith and spirituality in order to share resources and address issues of safety and gender-based violence against women. In this issue, you'll read about METRAC's support of the Collective Dreams project, a group of young Muslim women in Toronto who are speaking to violence against young Muslim women and the interplay of very prevalent discrimination and stereotypes facing Muslim communities in our society, particularly in this "post-911" context. We highlight findings from focus groups and surveys we conducted with Christian women, which are currently informing the creation of materials for women and leaders in diverse Christian communities. There is more work to be done and many more untouched communities to engage in our mission to end and prevent violence towards women and girls. METRAC is committed to sharing resources and supporting women of diverse

faith and spiritualities. So too must communities of faith and spirituality take up the challenge to dig deeply to the roots of violence that happens against women and girls amongst their membership. Mutually engaging partnerships must be built if they are going to be as beneficial as they can be for the multitude of women in this city and beyond who consider themselves to be a part of a spiritual or faith-based community.

Aside from the main topic of this newsletter, I would like to thank and acknowledge the hard work of METRAC's staff, Board, and volunteers in the past months. Our wonderful team of women, young women, and young men has been working tirelessly; their passion and care for communities has been especially apparent over the summer and fall. Finally, I would like to welcome you all to attend our special event in support of METRAC's Justice Program on Wednesday October 29 at the Arcadian Court (401 Bay Street at Queen). **METRAC's Night Court Comedy Hour** will be an evening of improv comedy, including great food, fun auctions, roasting, and of course, insatiable laughter. "Summons" (in other words, tickets) are available for \$60 and can be ordered by contacting METRAC directly or by filling out and sending in the form inserted into this newsletter. We'd love to meet you and laugh with you there!

Faith Communities' Role in Ending Violence

Violence against women and girls cuts across all communities in our city, province, and country. While violence manifests itself differently in different settings, no one group can be accused of perpetuating it more than others. Gender-based violence happens in communities connected by faith, spirituality, and religion as well - it's an issue that all women, including those of diverse faiths and spiritual beliefs, must deal with too often.

Faith and beliefs are sometimes used as a justification for violence. There are men who would find such reasons to explain why controlling, abusive behaviours towards women and children in their lives are acceptable - or even necessary. Some who have expressed religious, spiritual, and faith justifications for mistreatment and devaluation of women and children have been in influential positions and may have caused

much harm within their communities. But women, youth, and men from many faith communities have also been standing up against this kind of thinking. They have spoken to the reality that violence is unacceptable, that justifications for abuse are often due to problematic interpretations of spiritual traditions and texts and used to create or maintain power imbalances.

The role that faith and spirituality can play in peoples' lives should not be underestimated. Our beliefs can link us powerfully, even across lines of neighbourhood, immigration status, race, language, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and age, cumulating to the creation of connected and dynamic communities. For many people of faith and spirituality, strong bonds of trust are created between them - for example, look at the many active temples, churches, mosques, synagogues, and

other religious groups that meet in Toronto. Several of them deliver community services, programs, and supports to thousands of women, youth, and children who have been traditionally under-served by mainstream social service organizations. As a result of their incredible reach, there many ways that faith groups and spiritual communities can make a difference and are making a difference for women and children experiencing violence. Research on violence show that women and girls most often seek help from people they know and trust - their peers - when facing violence. It's no stretch, then, to imagine that women and girls in

faith and spiritual communities will access people they trust in those communities, people who can help them on both practical and spiritual levels. Relevant, culturally-appropriate resources must be made available to communities of faith, both leaders and members alike, to ensure they have the information to support women and girls. Violence prevention and women's service providers must work in partnership with these communities, building mutual trust and making inroads where none may exist. Faith leaders must also work with the violence against women sector to increase their knowledge of the issues.

Update: Take Action Project

Take Action, a research and public policy project to address women's experiences of poverty and violence, is underway. A number of consultations with women's service providers have held and an initial report has been submitted to provincial decision-makers. The project is being administered in partnership between METRAC and WACT and is funded by the United Way of Greater Toronto.

The Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres released a report on community safety and sexual violence in 2005. Recommendations for faith and spiritual communities included developing theologically-based materials emphasizing women's right to safety and perpetrators' responsibilities for ending violence; creating policies to address violence in collaboration with the women's sector; educating leaders and constituents on dynamics of sexual violence; and making a commitment to support women's equality and their right to live free from all forms of violence.

The Collective Voices of Collective Dreams

We interviewed a founding member of Collective Dreams, a group of young Muslim women METRAC has been providing some support to as they work with their communities.

Q: What is Collective Dreams? How did it begin?

A: Collective Dreams is a collective of young Muslim women who came together to address a host of issues within and affecting our diverse communities. These concerns include, but are not limited to racism, Islamophobia, gender-based violence, homophobia, political engagement, and arts and culture. The collective began initially as a response to the death of Aqsa Parvez. Founding members felt that there was little space for the voices of young Muslim women to be heard. You had on the one hand, stereotyping images of Muslims in the media, and on the other hand, Muslim community leaders who did not reflect the full range of diversity and perspectives within Muslim communities. Since the founding of Collective Dreams, the focus has expanded to a broader vision of community building.

Q: How do you incorporate faith and spirituality into your work and approach?

A: Within Collective Dreams, there is a wide spectrum of faith practices represented (as well as non-practicing or questioning members). We remain open to all self-identified Muslim women and aim to create a space that is judgment-free when it comes to individual faith practices and/or sect. This means that the group does not subscribe to one all-encompassing approach to faith and spirituality, but instead provides a mutually supportive environment.

*There was little space
for the voices of young Muslim
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Q: What are some things the group has done so far?

A: One of Collective Dreams' biggest successes has been a retreat that drew nearly 30 young Muslim women for a day filled with strategic planning, writing

and arts workshops, and bonding. We hope to follow up with a winter retreat. Collective Dreams has also hosted a recent iftar for group members, hosted monthly meetings, and participated in events such as a youth conference on Islamophobia. Individual members have also been supported in projects such as HalaalArt, a multi-media arts program for young Muslim women.

Q: What are some things you're hoping to do in the future to address violence against girls and women in your communities?

A: We believe that empowerment is a core feature of combating violence within communities, this means looking at the intersecting issues of poverty, discrimination, racism, gender violence, and

Twin Project Findings



Youth from ReAct, SWB, and MYSA in Kenya

We've been working on our Twin Project, funded by Family Law Education for Women (FLEW) and the Ontario government, to address family law information needs of Philipina domestic workers and women in Christian communities. Research was conducted with both communities - with respect to Philipina domestic workers, one of our findings is that faith is important to the women we interviewed. One participant said, "The church is important to us. It can be any church we go to." As a result, we sought to recognize and reflect that reality in the legal resources developed for this community.

With respect to Christian women, METRAC recognizes the need for accessible information on violence issues for all faith community leaders, women, and members. For women in less mainstream Christian

Update: ReAct in Kenya

In July, a representative from our ReAct program visited with the Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA) in Nairobi, Kenya to share models to support leadership of young women. Representatives from MYSA also visited with us and other youth initiatives in Toronto. This learning and leadership exchange was facilitated by Schools Without Borders, under their Emerge '08 youth program.

homophobia. Strengthening communities as a whole lays the groundwork for reducing violence. We hope to continue education (which means self-education as well) and community building efforts.

communities, including ethno-specific congregations and churches that fall under unaffiliated denominations, their isolation and need for support could be greater. Both mainstream and non-mainstream Christian communities involve women and girls who face oppression due to their identities, and these communities may serve as their few points of support.

Our surveys revealed important things. Like women from many communities, Christian women expressed that fear is a top reason why they wouldn't report an abusive spouse - fear of retribution, embarrassment, being disbelieved, deportation, and/or losing their children. They indicated gaps in their knowledge of legal rights. For example, in response to the question, "Do you think a woman without legal status has any rights under the *Family Law Act*?", 43% of Christian women said no, didn't answer the question, or said they weren't sure. Similarly, 16 of the 37 surveyed didn't know or were unsure about how to get child support. But the women also identified how important information about family law and violence is - 49% believed that their church leaders or pastors would be able to help or provide direction for family law issues. And there is no lack of interest, as 70% of those surveyed indicated that information about family law issues should be available in churches, and many said that it should be available "everywhere".

Many Voices, Common Goals

Paola Jani (Girl EmPower Project Coordinator) & Andrea Gunraj (Outreach Director)

The International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) works for global freedom of religion and belief. It has been in existence for more than a century and encourages interfaith dialogue and tolerance. IARF has over 90 member groups in approximately 25 countries from a range of faith traditions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Shintoism, and Sikhism. It holds consultative status with the United Nations and is involved in human rights education in light of faith, spirituality, and religion. IARF incorporates gender issues in its work as well. Thomas Mathew, IARF's President explained to us, the organization's perspective on gender issues and the need for equal educational opportunities. Thomas recognizes the role that technology can play in enhancing women's rights. In the region of India in particular, IARF is working on women's rights through awareness, capacity-building initiatives, education, dialogue, and greater access to education for girls and women.

Closer to home, Jewish Women International of Canada (JWIC) works with Jewish communities to deal with gendered violence. Executive Director Penny Krowitz explains how important it is to address pressures that women and families may feel to present as "perfect", because for Jewish communities, as is the case for many communities, "family is the centre of our universe." Pressures will vary since Jewish cultural and religious practices are very diverse, but the pressures can serve as a real barrier to women disclosing violence. Penny notes that, depending on a particular group's religious practices, conveying that the Torah speaks of how "a man shouldn't raise his hand to a woman" can be quite powerful. She also refers to innovative, culturally appropriate programs JWIC delivers, including a partnership with Jewish Family and Child of Greater Toronto to run a Kosher women's shelter; collaboration with Jewish groups, day schools, and Rabbis to raise awareness of violence against Jewish women; and coordination of a speakers' bureau for Jewish women to share stories of surviving violence with other women and the broader community.

Mohammed Baobaid is coordinator and founder of the Muslim Family Safety Project, an initiative of Changing

Ways in London, Ontario. As Baobaid explains, they employ a "different kind of model" to address domestic violence from a culturally competent perspective, one that is mindful of religion's role in Muslim families and communities. Starting six years ago with participatory action research on Muslim women's access to woman abuse services, the project has brought mainstream agencies and Muslim community leaders together to build relationships, trust, dialogue, and a sense of "being part of the solution". Baobaid notes that one of the key stereotypes and misconceptions the Muslim Family Safety Project has been tackling is an assumption that Islam endorses violence against women. They have been working to demonstrate how a culturally competent, "faith-mindful" approach can empower and prevent violence in traditionally underserved communities.

The Sisters in Spirit Campaign was launched by the Native Women's Association of Canada to raise awareness of violence against Aboriginal women in Canada. Jennifer Lord, Community Development Coordinator, speaks about how cultural and spiritual perspectives are infused in the campaign's many initiatives. For example, Aboriginal Elders provide support, guidance, and balance to the work, whether it be a workshop on violence, meetings with community members and legal representatives to address the legal system's approach to the issues, or the annual nationwide vigil for missing and murdered women. "It's more than Elders doing opening and closing prayers," Jennifer says; they assist the campaign's important work, recognizing deep traumas that Aboriginal families and communities experience in dealing with ongoing violence and discrimination against Aboriginal women. Jennifer also spoke about the cultural-spiritual significance of the campaign's Grandmother Moon logo, designed by the late Richard Baker. Grandmother Moon provides "direction, strength, knowledge and wisdom in taking our sacred place in our families, communities, and beyond." At the 2008 vigil in Ottawa, the logo was released into the air on biodegradable balloons, representing the spirits of missing and murdered women, and signifying a release of mourning and the readiness for change.

Safety Program: Looking Back & Ahead

Rita Nketiah (Safety Program Assistant)

METRAC's Community Safety Program challenges us all to re-conceptualize our understanding of "community" and "safety", and mostly, what it means for those two concepts to be in perfect union. What does it mean for a community to feel safe? What does it mean to live a communal existence? And how can METRAC as an organization work towards a better framework of public and personal safety for communities across Toronto?

The Safety Program challenges us to re-conceptualize our understanding of "community" and "safety"

Over the years, METRAC's Safety Program has been dedicated to the promotion of public and personal safety for women, children, and everyone. And, as we push on towards the end of the year and into the New Year, we take with us a reaffirmed commitment to tackling some of these big questions. Indeed, METRAC's Safety Program continues to be a leader in the eradication of public violence against women, children, and other marginalized groups through its world-class Safety Audit Process. With each event, however, we learn more about the diverse challenges facing Toronto's diverse communities, lessons that encourage us to constantly re-think our strategies for community safety and community organizing. We accept this challenge wholeheartedly.

This year, the Safety Program's commitments include a survey to assess the safety concerns of Toronto's diverse queer and trans communities, funded by the Lesbian and Gay Community Appeal Foundation, in partnership with the 519 Church St. Community Centre's Anti-Violence Program. The survey, entitled "Safety Needs of LGBTTIQQ2S (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, intersex, queer, questioning, two-spirited) Women and Trans Communities", has been posted online and made available on paper. Some of the themes highlighted in this extensive survey include a section on the socio-economic and racial identities of respondents, questions designed to distinguish the realities of



Image from RAP trainings addressing hate crimes and violence against diverse women (May)

commuters and local residents and younger and older residents, and an invitation to discuss particular incidents of violence that community members face in the city. The final section invites respondents to offer suggestions on improving the safety of this diverse community in Toronto. Future plans for survey results include an in-depth report about METRAC's findings. Indeed, METRAC and the 519 Church St. Community Centre imagine that this project will be the next step towards a safer Toronto for LGBTTIQQ2S communities. The survey closes on October 31, 2008.

Other highlights of METRAC's Safety work include two successful Safety Audit Training Workshops that were held in March and April; providing communities with thorough, resourceful, and revolutionary "Report Cards" that outline practical recommendations for improving neighbourhood and community safety in the city; two upcoming safety audit trainings to be held at the North York Civic Centre and the Albion Library in the fall; continual commitment to THRIVE: The Multicultural Women's Coalition Against Violence and Oppression, including a re-conceptualization of THRIVE's mission and scope; and an ongoing partnership with the City of Toronto to provide anti-violence education and training to communities across the city.

To access the LGBTTIQQ2S safety survey, please visit www.surveymonkey.com/metrac_safety_survey or contact Narina Nagra, Safety Director, by phoning 416-392-3137 or emailing safety@metrac.org

Justice Program: RAP Trainings & More

Zahra Dhanani (Legal Director)



*METRAC's Legal Director with advisory committee members at the *Swimming with Sharks* guidebook launch at the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto (September)*

The Community Justice Program has just completed our Respect for All People (RAP) project to address and prevent hate crimes, which was funded by the Ministry of the Attorney General. Violence against women, particularly domestic violence, is rarely included in the hate crimes discourse in Canada and internationally. This violence comes from a historical, legal, political, and sociological context that promotes hate and inequality of women, especially women who are further marginalized, such as racialized women, queer women, and women with disabilities. There is more need than ever to advocate against hatred of women and its results. The first step is naming it for what it is - a hate crime.

RAP was a direct response to a 2007 report about Aboriginal women using women's services in the Kawartha Lakes/Halliburton region, which provided a painful reminder that even people serving women survivors of violence need to look at our bias and behaviors, especially when dealing with Aboriginal and racialized survivors. We developed a full-day, holistic training program that focused on hate experienced by marginalized women; the legal, social, and political context of hate in Canada; privilege and oppression; and legislative frameworks such as the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *Ontario Human Rights Code*.

RAP surpassed all of our expectations - we trained over 300 service providers in 11 different regions across the province. 95% of the participants said they

would recommend the training to friends or colleagues and 99% felt that it would assist them in their work. Participant feedback also shows that, while trainings were a success, there is a province-wide need for expanded training on RAP material and related topics to support agencies, individuals, and communities in responding to discrimination and hate crimes. The Justice Program will continue this work and we are looking at ways to support this ongoing need.

Through funding from the Law Foundation of Ontario and in partnership with our Provincial Advisory Committees, the Justice Program has been conducting research and creating written materials for women experiencing workplace violence, criminalized women, and Aboriginal women experiencing violence. We re-launched *Swimming with Sharks: Starting the Healing Journey from Assault - an Aboriginal Woman's Perspective*, a guidebook that has been out of print for more than three years, originally created by the Native Women's Resource Centre. Directed by our Aboriginal Advisory Committee representing 11 Aboriginal organizations across Ontario and a team of Aboriginal artists, we revised and re-launched the guide with a new legal advocacy section explaining basic steps to get help. On September 19, we celebrated the new *Swimming with Sharks* with over 40 Aboriginal women attendees. Since our first print this summer, the handbook has been in high demand and is being well used by Aboriginal women and their service providers.

At METRAC's Night Court Comedy Hour fundraiser on October 29, we will also launch the new and improved Ontario Women's Justice Network website, www.owjn.org. We've brought together over 40 legal volunteers to create new site content that is increasingly relevant to diverse women and girls in Ontario.

Update: RePlay Award

RePlay: Finding Zoe, our online video game on healthy relationships, won the Adobe-TechSoup *Show Your Impact* design contest ("Other" category), one of nearly 400 entries from North America. This is the second award that the game has been honoured with.

Outreach & Education Program Update

Andrea Gunraj (Outreach Director)



*Girl EmPower Project Launch,
with Minister Deborah Matthews (June)*

It has been a busy summer and fall for the Outreach Program. Our work to increase public awareness about violence against diverse women, youth, and children and METRAC's programs and services has been steady - interest in the issue and organization is only growing stronger as time goes on.

The United Way of Greater Toronto released a report entitled *Toronto's Youth Serving System: Fragmented Paths to Youth Development* in June. It examined the youth serving sector and found that there is a great deal of fragmentation, gaps, and duplication of services due to a number of systemic problems and the temperamental funding allotted to youth needs. The Outreach Program participated in the research process for this report in 2007 by providing our understanding of youth needs and gaps in the youth sector, particularly with respect to girls, young women, and gender-based violence.

Respect in Action (ReAct), our peer youth violence prevention program, continued to deliver a number of workshops and trainings with youth, youth workers, and educators over the summer and fall. We have been dedicating more time to enhancing the program's curriculum and building on our evaluation processes to ensure our work is as effective as possible. We recently learned that the Canadian Women's Foundation approved funding for "Youth Speak Out", a partnership project between the Social Services Network in Markham and ReAct. Through this

project, ReAct's peer-to-peer, popular educative program model and process will be reproduced to involve and serve South Asian youth in the Markham area. In addition, our Youth Alliance Project, also funded by the Canadian Women's Foundation, is in the midst of training a group of young women and men on issues of gender-based violence and civic engagement. Through this training process, entitled *Don't Make Me Repeat Myself!*, the youth participants will gain skills to help them advocate for young women's safety needs on a municipal level. In the coming months, they will use their new skills to engage community members in educational forums on the issue of violence against young women.

*Interest in the
issue and organization
is only growing stronger*

The Girl EmPower Project is also well under way. In partnership with the Girl Guides of Canada, Girl EmPower will help girls involved in Ontario Girl Guide programming learn about building healthy, equal relationships through a kit of activities that cumulate to a earning a Girl EmPower badge. A province-wide Advisory Committee of educators, adult and youth Girl Guide volunteers, and representatives in the anti-violence sector has already been established to lead the project's activities. Soon, focus groups and interviews with Girl Guide girls and adult mentors will be held across Ontario to determine what they already know about healthy relationships and what they'd like to learn on the subject - these will form the basis of the badge kit and related trainings to be developed in 2009.

Finally, the process of translating our *RePlay: Finding Zoe* online video game into French was successfully completed in June, in partnership with Centre ontarien de prévention des agressions (COPA). The game is now available at www.metrac.org in English and French, and accompanying resources for youth, educators, and parents will also be available in French by the end of the year.

Thank you to METRAC's Supporters

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We extend our thanks to METRAC's dedicated staff, board, volunteers, and placement students. Thank you to departing staff members Chantal Bombardier, Lena Palacias, and Iris Samson, as well as departing ReAct Peer Facilitators, volunteers, and placement students for their hard work. METRAC would also like to thank our community partners, including organizations and individuals dedicated to ending violence against women, youth, and children. Finally, we extend sincere thanks to individual and anonymous donors who have contributed to METRAC since spring 2008 - we could not survive without your support.

Yes! I would like to support METRAC's work to end violence against women, youth, and children. Enclosed is my gift of:

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