



Fall 2009 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.

METRAC staff & board

Staff: Keli Bellaire, Program Assistant | Michelle Davis, Safety Director | Zahra Dhanani, Legal Director | Mergitu Ebba, Justice Program Coordinator | Andrea Gunraj, Outreach Director | Paola Jani, Girl Guide Project Coordinator | Raksha Jeyaratnam, Event Assistant | Wendy Komiotis, Executive Director | Kirsti McHenry, OWJN Coordinator | Katharine Neufeld, Legal Information Coordinator | Jannette Saberon, Administrative Assistant | Jae Thuo, Legal Outreach Coordinator | Onyii Udegbe, OHRC Coordinator | Helen Yohannes, ReAct Coordinator

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Message from the Executive Director

Wendy Komiotis (Executive Director)

Welcome to this edition of METRAC's newsletter. We have certainly been busy ramping up our violence prevention projects, trainings, and initiatives. With support of the Law Foundation of Ontario, we have continued to engage in supporting criminalized women and working women experiencing violence, including women in prison, migrant farm workers, temporary workers, and sex workers. We've launched information materials and trainings tailored to these communities of women and are working to get that information directly to them and their service providers.

While we've traditionally focused on the Toronto inner city and Greater Toronto Area, and Ontario, we have been journeying across Canada to find out what diverse girls want and need to be safer in their neighborhoods. In partnership with Girl Guides of Canada-Guides du Canada and with funding from Status of Women Canada, Girls for Safer Communities project was launched to engage girls in Safety Audits and help them share their safety needs and solutions. Our other work with children and youth successfully continues as well.



Annual General Meeting (September)

In October, our violence prevention video game RePlay/ReJouer was presented with another award.

Technology is changing our world on a daily basis, and it has been a complex reality. At times, the interconnectedness, entertainment, and information and resource flow inherent to new technologies have brought us together and supported us. Many digital tools are coming into their own faster than the speed of

light, often exceeding the hype. But new technologies have also made the divisions all the more stark - old power imbalances between people with access and privilege and people on the margins of society are as present as they were before Google and YouTube and X-Box and tweets.

At METRAC, we're excited about the possibilities new technologies open up to challenge gender-based violence, particularly with respect to access to justice, community safety, and outreach and education. We're exploring how various online tools, interactive websites, blogging, digital media, and games can be leveraged to build strengths of diverse communities to prevent and end violence. But we're cognizant of how technologies interact with and impact people differently, depending on who they are, their experiences, and where they live. It makes no sense to rely on the internet to support and connect women living in rural and remote regions if they don't have access to the internet. If a young person can't afford dinner, let alone a cell phone, a text message campaign to prevent violence will be of little benefit to her or him. If a technology is designed only with English-language readers or people of certain abilities in mind, pinning our hopes on it to build the capacity of communities means that many communities will end

up falling through the cracks.

Technology is only as good as it's used, and technology to prevent violence is like anything else - if diverse communities aren't at the centre and aren't leading the way, its ultimate potential will be limited. At METRAC, we've only begun to grapple with the challenges and opportunities new technologies present, and as we've said many times before, there is simply no quick fix to ending violence and oppression against diverse women and girls. But we're more than willing to do the hard work to use the new media tools and use them right, building our own capacity and resources to challenge violence and oppression in innovative new ways. And we're excited by the new partnerships and alliances with organizations and communities that will inevitably come out of it.

To close, I would like to welcome new members to our Board of Directors, who were voted in at our recent Annual General Meeting, as well as our new staff members and placement students. I would also like to bid a very fond farewell to Narina Nagra, METRAC's past Safety Director of over four years - thank you for your amazing contributions and dedication. Finally, I would like to extend thanks to our wonderful supporters, donors, funders, partners, and volunteers.

What is "new media"?

Wikipedia, itself an important and heavily accessed example of new media, defines it as a term "meant to encompass the emergence of digital, computerized, or networked information and communication technologies in the later part of the 20th century." It states that new media tends to be digital and amongst other things, is "manipulatable", "networkable", "dense", "compressible", and "interactive". New media includes the internet and the forms of media now accessible online, as well as digital games (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_media). Kelly Makimaa (2005) of the Web Analytics Association provides various examples, including blogs and microblogs (e.g. Blogger, WordPress, Twitter), RSS Feeds, Google Books, podcasts, vidcasts, online video and photosharing (e.g. YouTube, Blimp TV, Flickr), social networks (e.g. MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn), search

engines, affiliate programs, viral marketing, virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life), online games and games with multiplayer capacity, online communities, and wikis (www.webanalyticsassociation.org/en/art/?179). Many have discussed how new forms of media, by virtue of their characteristics, can and have been used to support social movements and help people organize for social change.

New media, by virtue of its characteristics, can and have been used to support social movements

A key feature of new media is that the threshold for using it is lower than traditional forms of media. For instance, watching television may be easier for most

people, but getting a clip on television is much more difficult. Without connections, resources, money, and interest of advertisers, getting a video clip on air would be a challenge. However, through new media tools such as YouTube and Facebook, millions of people can upload their own videos with lesser resources. Similarly, newspapers limit who can get printed in them, but blogs are much more accessible than print media, often written by people who may never experience getting printed on paper.

Another important feature of new forms of media is

Legal Information Training

METRAC's Legal Information Training is designed to support those who work with women who have experienced or are experiencing intimate partner violence and workplace violence and/or harassment.

The fee for each workshop and accompanying materials is \$50 (negotiable for organizations with limited resources). For more information or to register, contact 416-392-3138 or visit metrac.org.

higher interactivity. Instead of traditional mediums where limited platforms were available for a select set of people to communicate to a large mass, new media has multiplied those platforms and allowed many people to connect with many others at a faster, easier pace. Many popular console video games, for example, include opportunities for players to compete and interact, and the sociability of gaming continues to increase. On the other hand, the shape new media takes has also led to highly customized, individualized interactions and experiences, and it has increased users' expectations of customization. For instance, most console games allow a great deal of personal choice - players select from a wide range of options to make their gaming experience unique to their own identities, preferences, needs, and wants.

New media statistics: the English-language Wikipedia is home to over 3 million entries; more than 70 million videos have been posted to YouTube; about 25 million tweets occur daily; Second Life users have spent more than 1 billion hours in the virtual world; nearly a million new blog posts appear each day; Facebook has more than 200 million active users.

Character, compassion, content: cyberstyle

Padma Tata (METRAC Volunteer) and Andrea Gunraj (Outreach Director)

Character. Compassion. Content. In his blog, motivational speaker, trainer, and coach Jef Menguin references Aristotle's claim that these are three key elements of communication (jefmenguin.wordpress.com/2007/03/12/three-elements-of-effective-communication). In other words, effective communication requires believability, emotions, and facts.

Let's go back - what is "communication"? A definition I found fitting for this article is, "the imparting or interchange of thoughts, opinions, or information by speech, writing, or signs ... towards a mutually accepted goal or direction." We hope that METRAC's premier staff and volunteer blog, Megaphone Diaries, is emblematic of all of the above.

Why did we start a blog? The internet connects us all and the popularity of blogs as a communication tool is

ever-increasing amongst an enormous worldwide audience. We hope that this initiative will provide further reach for METRAC's work to prevent and end violence against diverse women, youth, and children. Megaphone Diaries aims to build transparency and community involvement in the organization to increase awareness and action on gender-based violence issues. In this day and age, authentic involvement and the willingness of the community to participate is a key element of building credibility, not only for the organization but most importantly, for the cause.

How can Megaphone Diaries grow and flourish? According to Dave Taylor, entrepreneur, writer, and speaker on all-things-internet, successful blogs are those that engage their audience, "address them directly", and create "a venue for the public to respond" (www.intuitive.com/blog/what_makes_a_successful_blog.html). The blogging team of

METRAC staff and volunteers are working to build upon these elements and make them strong; by sharing personal experiences, news, facts, and different perspectives on important topics related to violence and oppression, we hope to do this in an organic way to engage diverse readers and communities in a holistic way.

Visit Megaphone Diaries and participate in the dialogue at metrac.wordpress.com.

16 Days to THRIVE

16 Days to THRIVE: Challenging Violence Against Racialized Women and our Communities will happen from November 25 to December 10. It celebrates the global campaign, 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence. Visit www.metrac.org/programs/safe/thrive.htm to for a list of events and to find out how you can participate in the 16 Days to THRIVE t-shirt design contest.

“Here comes everybody”: Web 2.0

In Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations, Clay Shirky discusses “Web 2.0”, a blanket term to describe new web applications such as Twitter, Flickr, Facebook, and Blogger that are user-centered and facilitate interactivity, information-sharing, and collaboration. He notes that Web 2.0 has transformed communication from the familiar one-on-one and one-to-many to “many-to-many”. Intrigued by the potential this presents for social change, we interviewed **Monica Hamburg** and **Peter Deitz**. Monica is a writer and social media evangelist who investigates how online technology connects people and helps them do business. She was a contributor to *One Degree*, an online digital marketing magazine, and is the author of *YourDoseofLunacy.com*. Peter is Founder and Executive Director of Social Actions, a global network of organizations and online platforms making the internet more philanthropic, creative, and participatory - it helps ensure that browsing the web is full of meaningful opportunities to take action on causes people care about.

“Web 2.0 makes connecting and distributing information infinitely easier,” Monica says. The new tools can “encourage people to pass on items they are passionate about which can lead to others promoting your event and cause seamlessly.” Peter notes that Web 2.0 has caused organizations to begin breaking with the tradition of viewing their programs at the center of creating positive impact. “Organizations are now putting people at the center of their impact, whether they are donors, beneficiaries, volunteers, or casual supporters.” With respect to gender-based violence, Monica notes that Web 2.0 can give voice to those who

experience violence and allow others to understand they are not alone. “But it’s not magic,” she warns. Effort needs to be put into using Web 2.0 effectively, as was the case for old forms of organizing and mobilizing. In his book, Shirky addresses the fact that for every widely-accessed blog or wiki and for every highly engaged user, hundreds and perhaps thousands are not. We shouldn’t get trapped in the excitement - successful information sharing, collective action, and “many-to-many” communication takes real work.

Nonetheless, great potential lies in Web 2.0 tools to engage people in challenging violence against women and girls, because they boost sharing of stories. “Who is affected?” Monica asks. “What is happening? I think this is particularly effective when it comes to a misunderstood issue.” Peter also notes that Web 2.0 provides mechanisms to deepen the engagement of people who already care about the issues. “I would encourage the advocates for awareness and action on gender-based violence in Canada to use Web 2.0 to link up the people who already are concerned and affected.” In addition to story sharing, he also refers to “network-weaving” to help create many points of engagement for different people. “It’s probably more effective to find out who already cares about this cause rather than initially trying to recruit allies,” Monica confirms. She suggests that searching the web for who is already speaking to the issue of violence against women and girls should be the first step. Finally, Monica offers wise advice in a context where many of us are struggling to keep up with and understand new technologies. “Remember, social media isn’t about the tools. It’s how you use those tools.”

Video games & transformative play



Actor Mark Hamill presenting Adobe MAX award for RePlay/ReJouer in Los Angeles, California (October)

Susana Ruiz is an artist, game designer, and co-founder of Take Action Games, a design studio that seeks to address social and political issues through innovative video game design. The Take Action Games team partnered with METRAC to develop our award-winning video game on healthy relationships, *RePlay: Finding Zoe/ReJouer: Où est Zoé?* **Andrew Laird** is a high school student in New York City involved with Global Kids, an organization that helps youth to connect with other youth and issues that impact their lives around the world. Through Global Kids, he co-created *Hurricane Katrina: Tempest in Crescent City*, an online game that won an award at the 2009 Games for Change conference.

Games provide a unique reflective experience and an opportunity to think critically

Susana explains that games, by their trans-disciplinary nature, can address social issues from a variety of perspectives. As a result of the sense of agency they offer to players, “games can often foster a great sense of empathy. They can shed light on a situation that is sobering and unjust, while doing so in an experiential way that encourages the belief that there is indeed something you can do to affect change.” Andrew believes “video games are special because they let you be something that you are not.” They can let you view the world and global issues from different perspectives, and particularly amongst youth communities, “they can

make a difference because a lot of kids play games and have fun playing them.”

With respect to violence against women and girls, Susana notes that games provide a unique reflective experience, as well as an opportunity to think critically about how actions - and non-actions - contribute to systems of dominance such as sexism and the perpetuation of unequal power. An example of unequal power in our world is the “digital divide” - the fact that those with less social power and access to resources have less access to digital resources as well. The divide is certainly a concern for those of us who seek to harness digital games to promote social change. “Schools as well as after-school programs can indeed serve as equalizers,” Susana notes, “but new thinking should occur that allows for technology to be more fluid and mobile.” She notes that efforts to reduce the digital divide are really about expanding opportunities for social participation as a whole, and that access to the opportunity to “play” is so important. “It often motivates different ways of learning and problem-solving, encourages experimentation, lowers the emotional stakes of failing, and awards collaboration.” It’s a little-acknowledged reality that play is essential to individual and collective well-being, and that access to play is by no means universal.

Andrew offers simple yet valuable advice to those who try to use digital games in transformative ways amongst youth. “Make it fun for the youth to play, and also for everyone else, so that it takes them away from some of the bad games and it helps them learn something in a good way.” He notes that the worst approach is to “make a game that is boring” - it inevitably creates missed opportunities, particularly with respect to young players, who are bombarded by advertising for games that have nothing to do with social change. Susana believes that it is important to engage with those who are part of potential player communities in “vibrant, open-minded, and rigorous discussions and brainstorming” during the early phases of game design. “This way, the community or activist group enjoys the process while working towards precisely defining their goals so that they can then approach a game designer or developer.”

Introductions & updates: Safety Program

Michelle Davis (Safety Director) and Navneet Marwaha (Placement Student)

Michelle Davis: I am very happy to be the new Safety Program Director and look forward to meeting you at the various events and initiatives in which METRAC is involved. METRAC's vision makes it rather unique among other organizations that address violence against women and so I am honoured to not only have the opportunity to be a part of such a great organization but I am also humbled to work with such an esteemed group of women. I anticipate that I will learn much from the managers, staff, students and volunteers who work tirelessly for the right of women, youth, and children to live lives free of violence.

I bring to METRAC a background in feminist education and research and I have worked both overseas and locally with a number of organizations on projects that speak to women's lived realities. Most recently, I spent four years with Legal Aid Ontario delivering training for frontline staff and family, immigration, and criminal lawyers across Ontario on domestic violence and how the issue affects women. As we know, access to justice is critical for women survivors of violence. I have also taught at the post-secondary level, including the Women's Studies program at the University of Toronto. I enjoyed interacting with students and helping to further the anti-oppression analysis and research skills of young feminist activists and scholars.

As some of us prepare to celebrate Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa or other holidays in December, I wish for you many blessings in 2010 and a spirit of peace and happiness.

*A neighbourhood is not safe
unless those who live in and use
the space actually feel safe*

Navneet Marwaha: Being a placement student at METRAC in the Community Safety Program for the past three months, I have been learning the "ins and outs" of community safety. I have learned that a neighbourhood is not safe unless those who live in and use the space actually feel safe. The Safety Program has



Girls for Safer Communities project focus group (September)

provided me with tools to assist diverse community members as they identify their safety concerns, both those that are physical and those that are social.

In addition to beginning the Girls for Safer Communities project in partnership with Girl Guides of Canada-Guides du Canada, we held a city-wide Safety Audit training for community members and service providers in Toronto in September - one participant has already put the training to use and conducted an audit in her neighbourhood. In November, we assisted Toronto Community Housing residents in the Rexdale neighbourhood to use METRAC's audit to assess their safety needs. Our hope is that the Safety Audit Report Card produced from the audit will provide next steps to help them enhance their safety. We are currently working in conjunction with the City of Toronto on the Mayor's Tower Renewal Project (MTR). The project seeks to make the city greener and more liveable - it focuses on an array of environmental, social, economic, and cultural issues. We will conduct adult and youth audit trainings and walkabouts for the four key neighbourhoods: Rexdale, St. Jamestown, Scarborough Village, and the "Peanut" area in Scarborough. METRAC will also develop tailored Safety Audit tools for youth, and our trainings for youth will give them the skills to lead audits and train other youth.

We will facilitate follow-up training sessions for community members after they do an audit and receive a neighbourhood Safety Audit Report Card - this will strengthen their ability to act and effectively advocate for safety improvements. The first follow-up training will be in Spring 2010, so please stay tuned!

The will to pave the way: Justice Program

Zahra Dhanani (Legal Director)



No Holds Barred event to launch legal information for criminalized women (August)

The phrase “violence against women” may seem self-explanatory, but it does not do justice to the complexity of the issue. Violence against women can take infinitely different forms and it is as diverse as the women and girls who experience it. Each manifestation of gender-based violence requires its own unique strategy and solution.

METRAC’s Community Justice Program has spent the last twenty-five years “unpacking” multiple forms of violence and constructing legal information responses to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and isolated women in Ontario using multi-faceted, unique, and culturally appropriate approaches that recognize women’s assets and strengths. Increasing access to justice is a critical part of responding to violence against women. Women’s knowledge of their legal rights is essential to ensure they have full access to justice.

METRAC has had consistent success delivering legal information to diverse communities in accessible formats. We have developed expertise in using an equity lens to remove barriers to legal information for women. The Justice Program delivers exceptional legal information trainings and produces innovative, relevant legal educational materials for women experiencing violence and their supporters. The program has distinguished itself by providing access to legal information for vulnerable women, including Aboriginal women and racialized women; women living with disabilities; rural women; young women and older women; Deaf and hard of hearing women;

women involved with the law; working women; and immigrant and refugee women.

The Justice Program offers a unique perspective as we examine how legislation and legal practices impact diverse women and children, especially those experiencing violence, in multiple ways. We provide information to women fleeing violent and abusive situations who may be scared for their lives. We offer easy-to-understand information to victims of violence, service providers, and the general public on issues that affect abused women. We develop and present accessible workshops, train-the-trainer sessions, and written materials on a variety of legal topics.

From our multilingual pamphlets in clear language to train-the-trainer materials to the Ontario Women’s Justice Network (OWJN) website, METRAC’s Justice Program has generated a wealth of easy-to-understand legal information. These resources have built the knowledge and skills of numerous communities in desperate need of accessible legal information. As we look to the future, our hope is to better disseminate this information to the greatest number of diverse women across Ontario. It is vital to reach the most isolated women across the province and we plan to use as many methods of communicating the information as needed.

It is vital to reach isolated women across the province and we plan to use as many methods of communication as needed to do it

As we move forward, the question we will continue answer is, “How do we disseminate all of the information METRAC has created and acquired to the greatest number of women with the greatest impact?” Our expectation is to reach hundreds of thousands of Ontario women, with greatest attention paid to communities who are underserved, under-reached, marginalized, and most commonly the target of societal oppressions. As they say “where there is a will, there is a way.” Without a doubt, we have the will.

New & tried & true: Outreach Program

Andrea Gunraj (Outreach Director)



Launch of family law resources for Filipina domestic workers and caregivers at Earls Bale Park (August)

New media technologies have opened new doors to prevent violence against diverse women, youth, and children in innovative ways. The challenge lies in how to use the technologies effectively - as many of us have noticed, an overwhelming amount of information and messages bombard us daily, and despite their popularity, the vast majority of websites, blogs, and other Web 2.0 media sit inactive, unaccessed, and underused. The cumulative effect of this sheer overload means that important messages and attempts at engagement for social change too often get filtered out of our “collective psyche”. How do you rise above the new media clamour? Ground what you do in the communities you seek to engage and aim for excellence in that context. As mentioned before, our online video game to promote healthy relationships amongst youth 8 to 14 years old, *RePlay: Finding Zoe/ReJouer: Où est Zoé?*, recently won the Adobe MAX 2009 award for “Social Responsibility”. Despite limited, non-profit resources for game production and promotion, *RePlay/ReJouer* has done well because its design is based in the needs and preferences of 250 diverse Ontario youth. We will continue to seek partnerships and funding support to use video games to prevent violence and promote social change, always taking the lead from communities themselves.

It’s always important to set realistic goals and timelines. While the use of new media is building at exponential speeds, individual examples of new media often grow slowly and take a lot of work. In the beginning of October, METRAC launched our new staff and volunteer blog, *Megaphone Diaries*. It started with less than 20 to 30 views per week and has grown to about

200 views per week. With consistent postings from our blog team and reader engagement on a variety of topics, our hope is that *Megaphone Diaries* will become a lively site of discussion, thinking, and sharing on issues of gender-based violence from an anti-oppressive perspective.

While we’re excited about new media initiatives in the Outreach and Education Program, we are keenly aware of the reality that it can’t be considered “the answer” to any social issue. It’s important to continue using tried and true methods of challenging violence. *Respect in Action (ReAct)*, our peer youth violence prevention program, continues to be heavily accessed by schools and community services across the city and beyond. New media may be great for engaging some communities, but so is *ReAct*’s peer-to-peer, youth-friendly approach to support diverse youth in preventing and ending gender-based violence and oppression they so often experience. To keep connected to *ReAct* online, you may join our Facebook group - METRAC also has a Facebook group where we post about upcoming events and initiatives.

Ground what you do in communities and aim for excellence in that context

Stay tuned for next year when, with funding support of Laidlaw Foundation, the Youth Alliance Project (YAP) will be reconvened to support young women experiencing gender-based violence and sexual assault. YAP was originally formed in 2007 as a youth-driven collective to strengthen the capacities of youth to advocate for improvements to gender-based violence prevention strategies. The group engaged in a number of successful strategies to support the safety of diverse young women in our city and to put their needs onto the city’s community safety agenda. This new funding will allow YAP to come back together and open space for young people to share their needs and concerns, ultimately working with partners and the Toronto Police Service to improve police policies and practices with respect to gender-based violence against youth.

Thank you to METRAC's supporters

Our Funders and Donors:



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We extend our thanks to METRAC's team of dedicated staff, board, volunteers, and placement students. Your hard work is appreciated and makes a difference.

Thank you to departing Safety Director, Narina Nagra, as well as departing placement students and ReAct Peer Facilitators.

METRAC would 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 2009 - 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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