

# **Forum 2014**

Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence: French Language  
Services and Priority Issues Ten Years after Forum 2004

## **Summary of the Report on the Forum**

November 25, 26 and 27, 2014

Ottawa, Ontario

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May 2015**

This report was made possible thanks to a financial contribution by the government of Ontario.

We thank them for this support.



The opinions expressed in this document are those of Action ontarienne contre la violence faite aux femmes and do not necessarily reflect the perspective of the government of Ontario.

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## Acknowledgements

The success of the Forum held in November 2014 was due to the commitment of persons dedicated to the cause of ending violence against women and to French language services (FLS) in Ontario.

As the event's organizer, Action ontarienne contre la violence faite aux femmes (AOcVF) wishes to thank all who contributed to the success of the gathering and this report that presents an analysis of its recommendations.

First, our thanks to all the participants. Your comments and recommendations regarding the future of French language services in the area of violence against women (VAW) are of inestimable importance to the vitality of our network and AOcVF's actions in the years ahead.

As president, and on behalf of AOcVF, I also wish to thank François Boileau, French Language Services Commissioner, whose address stimulated debate and commitment to the continued development of quality FLS across Ontario.

I want to underline the contribution of several partners who brought different and complementary perspectives to our discussions, in particular: COPA, FESFO, MOFIF and Le Phénix.

In addition, heartfelt thanks to go to all the presenters for their great commitment and professionalism in stimulating our reflection and discussions. You enhanced the knowledge and enriched the feminist analysis that was generated at this event.

Heartfelt thanks to our much appreciated facilitator, Chantal Cholette, for all your work. Your facilitation and support during the preparations guided us through the process to its successful conclusion.

Special thanks to the workshop facilitators, especially the frontline workers from our network, who, as part of our training Institute's trainer succession planning program, generously agreed to facilitate all the workshop discussions. I wish also to thank the minute-takers and timekeepers for their indispensable role in ensuring that the workshops ran smoothly.

To the staff of AOcVF and its executive director: your efforts to carry out this major event, in a context of a transition in senior management, merit our particular acknowledgement. For this and for all your efforts, I am deeply grateful.

To the Advisory Committee of the Forum: because of your involvement, expertise and advice we were able to carry out this collective project without losing sight of regional differences and of the needs of francophone women survivors of violence.

To AOcVF's member agencies and the government of Ontario: without your financial assistance, the event would not have happened. Thank you for your continuing confidence in our movement.

Also, special thanks to Ghislaine Sirois and Marie-Luce Garceau, who authored and presented *État des lieux*, helping us to reflect on the future by emphasizing continuity with the gains of the past.

Without question, the event will serve as a compass and springboard as we move forward. Together, we will advance even further.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Julie Bécharde". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Julie Bécharde

President, Action ontarienne contre la violence faite aux femmes

## Introduction

On November 25, 26 and 27, 2014, Action ontarienne contre la violence faite aux femmes (AOcVF) organized the Forum on the development of French Language Services (FLS) in the areas of domestic violence and sexual assault. This edition of the Forum followed the one held in 2004, which gave rise to many observations about the provision of FLS in the area of violence against women (VAW) and a number of recommendations on how to improve these services.

In 2014, roughly 100 people engaged in discussion about the progress of the last 10 years in services for francophone women who experience violence and shared ideas on how to continue to improve our response to women's needs by enhancing access to quality services in French throughout the province.

The discussions were productive and enriching, due especially to the participants' diversity, which allowed for a range of viewpoints to be expressed. Attending were women who work directly in the VAW movement in Ontario, such as agency directors, frontline workers, survivors and volunteers, and others who are less directly involved in the area of VAW but whose analysis and vision are valuable, among them, feminist activists, representatives of groups that provide related services to women and girls, and delegates from several provincial ministries.

The discussions gave rise to a number of conclusions about the state of French language services, issues and needs related to violence against women, and a number of recommendations. A summary of these conclusions and recommendations is presented here.

## Forum 2014 Goals and Program

The goals of the Forum were to:

- Foster coordinated action and engage in succession planning by taking stock of the state of French language violence against women services, issues related to domestic violence and sexual assault, and hearing from partners on the issues, priorities and challenges in their sectors
- Inform ministries about the needs of the VAW sector and the recommendations of the Franco-Ontarian community
- Determine the elements of a future action plan to continue the development of French language services for women who are dealing with violence

In connection with these three goals, numerous presentations and discussions addressed various topics linked to French language services and violence against women. It was important to begin with a review of the history of French language VAW services to give all participants a common understanding of the context in which the Forum was being held. We heard presentations on landmark events since 1976 and on the 2004 Forum, followed by an overview of the work of the past 10 years based on the report entitled *Éliminer la violence faite aux femmes en Ontario français : une tâche ardue — État des lieux sur les agressions à caractère sexuel et la violence conjugale : services en français et enjeux prioritaires dix ans après les États généraux de 2004*.<sup>1</sup>

We also wanted to highlight the work of frontline workers and to discuss the role of the feminist approach and analysis in French languages services in Ontario. To this end, there was a presentation of the findings of a study on the knowledge and learning of VAW workers and a panel on feminism.

As in 2004, four partner organizations of AOcVF also presented their work of the past 10 years in the area of violence against women and girls and the issues they are dealing with. In attendance were the Centre ontarien de prévention des agressions (COPA), which develops and administers assault prevention programs specifically addressed to youth, the Fédération de la jeunesse franco-ontarienne (FESFO), which organizes mobilizing and awareness raising activities with Franco-Ontarian high school

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<sup>1</sup> The paper entitled *Éliminer la violence faite aux femmes en Ontario français : une tâche ardue — État des lieux sur les agressions à caractère sexuel et la violence conjugale : services en français et enjeux prioritaires dix ans après les États généraux de 2004* was the basis of some of the presentations. It can be downloaded from AOcVF's website at [www.aocvf.ca](http://www.aocvf.ca)

students, Le Phénix, which works with people living with a disability and provides public education on the issues and challenges facing this group, and the Mouvement ontarien des femmes immigrantes francophones (MOFIF), which implements projects to improve living conditions for immigrant women.

Even though they do not work directly in the field of violence against women, it was important to hear from these partners because they represent specific communities that are affected by violence and are grappling with issues particular to them. Hearing the perspective of these groups—youth, women with disabilities, immigrant women—made it possible to establish a comprehensive and inclusive portrait of violence against francophone women and girls in Ontario.

Two series of thematic workshops followed, designed to allow participants to further their knowledge about specific topics related to VAW, discuss the evolving profile of service users and emerging issues and lastly, to formulate recommendations linked to these topics. Each participant chose two workshops out of the eight on offer:

- Intersectionality of oppressions: situations of older women and francophone immigrant women
- Prostitution and trafficking
- Realities of Aboriginal women
- Survivors' experience: the experience of women in Timmins
- Intergenerational cycle of violence
- Mother-child communication
- Social media and cyberviolence
- Access to justice in French: an illusion for women?

Participants then took part in a work session, chosen out of three available options: French language VAW services, sexual assault and domestic violence. During these workshops, participants were able to share experiences and make recommendations grouped into four main areas: calls for government action, coordinated action, intervention and awareness raising. A summary of all the recommendations formulated in the workshops follows.

The Forum concluded with a call to action: participants were encouraged to share the actions they planned to end violence against women or to improve French language services.

# Summary of Observations Emerging from Forum 2014

The three days of discussion culminated in conclusions about the state of French language services in the area of domestic violence and sexual assault in Ontario and, more generally, about efforts to end violence against women as such.

## 1. Calls for Government Action

One of the first calls for government action expressed at the Forum was a call for the establishment of a national plan to counter violence against women. The aim is to have a consistent and coordinated plan at the national level that would be complemented by regional plans in every province and territory. The elimination of domestic violence, sexual assault and other forms of VAW will only be achieved when all levels of government work together.

Other calls for government action focused on the consolidation of FLS and the need for legal reforms.

### 1.1 Consolidate French language services addressed to women

The presentation of the history of French language violence against women services highlighted the progress that has been made. Many centres, women's shelters (WS), sexual assault centres (SAC) and other related services in the field of violence against women are now providing quality French language services in the province. While much has been accomplished, it was nevertheless noted that the development of a full range of FLS must continue.

#### 1.1.1 Reaffirmation of the "by and for" principle and the need for autonomous French language services

A number of discussions held during the 2014 Forum led to the conclusion that the "by and for" principle as it applies to francophone women remains relevant and necessary today. The principle is based on the premise that francophone women in Ontario have specific needs and thus are in the best position to meet them by providing appropriate

services in their own language, in particular, in the area of violence against women. This is one of 13 guiding principles of the AOcVF network that were formulated during preparations of the 1997-2001 strategic plan for the development of French language services in the area of violence. The principle is based on the 1986 *French Language Services Act* and the right of Francophones in 25 designated regions to receive services from Ontario government ministries and agencies in French.

The "by and for" principle, aimed at ensuring the continuity and vitality of francophone communities in the province, means that services provided to francophone women should be entirely in French and autonomous. Participants reaffirmed that these are the only truly effective models for meeting the specific needs of francophone women, and they challenged the effectiveness of so-called bilingual services.

In the past, at the 2004 Forum, for example, the francophone network had already concluded that bilingual services often were not able to provide quality French language services. At that time we asked the government to cease investing in this type of service and instead support autonomous French language services. In 2014, the concrete example of certain bilingual family court support workers who are not able to adequately provide support and assistance to francophone women once again underlines the need to create autonomous FLS, to request that bilingual services cease to be created, and to evaluate the quality of FLS being provided in existing bilingual services.

#### 1.1.2 Need for a comprehensive network of quality French language services in Ontario

In addition to autonomous FLS, participants insisted on the fact that the *French Language Services Act* stipulates that in the 25 designated regions a francophone woman must have access to the same programs and services as those available to an anglophone woman. A francophone woman should therefore have access to a comprehensive system of French language services.

To achieve this, participants stressed the need, in many designated regions in Ontario, for autonomous French language services that are specialized in VAW. We must create new francophone women's shelters (WS), especially in southern and southwestern Ontario, and new sexual assault centres (SAC), especially in northern Ontario, with satellite offices, for example.

In addition to new WS and SAC, participants mentioned the need for second-stage housing resources so that women do not need to stay so long in a women's shelter. The

problem of long stays in WS is apparent in many regions where survivors face a lack of subsidized and safe or affordable housing. Women must stay in the women's shelter for several months before they can find housing, preventing these WS from accepting new women. Second-stage housing for francophone women would solve the bed shortage problem in WS and help women achieve greater autonomy.

Francophone women's shelters and sexual assault centres share a feminist approach and analysis. When applied, these concepts are effective strategies for addressing violence against women because they enable women to regain control over their lives and challenge social structures rooted in the inequalities between women and men. Frontline workers expressed the desire that new VAW services align themselves with this perspective and adopt a feminist approach and analysis.

Participants also emphasized that, parallel to the development of new FLS, existing francophone centres should be consolidated with a view to providing additional services and programs. For instance, there should be more frontline workers, especially to work with children in WS, more positions dedicated to public education, and additional transitional support workers and family court support workers. There is a particularly strong need for additional workers in northern areas where the territory is vast and workers must travel often and cover long distances. Programs must be maintained or reinforced, particularly those addressed to children who are exposed to domestic violence; others must be created in response to new issues such as intergenerational domestic violence.

Participants stated that salaries in specialized VAW services are neither equitable nor competitive when compared to those provided by other agencies that do similar work, such as health agencies. Salaries in WS and SAC can vary among themselves or from one region to another. Women working in the same field experience wage disparity and in some cases, precarious employment. For many years feminists have denounced the fact that individuals whose work is to assist vulnerable women and engage in the anti-poverty struggle are themselves the victims of precarious employment. Inadequate wage provisions have negative consequences both on workers and the centres that are faced with high staff turnover rates and recruitment problems, undermining the quality of services and the availability of ongoing programs.

The term "comprehensive network" implies that the need for FLS applies not only to specialized VAW resources, but also to all the other services or institutions a woman deals with in her quest to escape violence and regain control over her life. A VAW survivor should be able to meet with a Francophone when she goes to the hospital, the police, social services and to court. The lack of francophone lawyers experienced in the

field of VAW was much discussed during the Forum. To address this problem, participants proposed that positions for francophone family court support workers be opened in the regions, and that the programs of AOcVF's legal services centre be expanded to be able to provide representation in court and legal counsel for women victims of violence. They also proposed the creation of an incentive program to encourage francophone lawyers to take on more VAW cases.

## 1.2 Initiate reforms to improve access to justice

Many workshops raised the need for provincial government reform to improve access to the justice system for women victims of violence, in particular, access to justice in French. It is important to keep in mind that the violence men commit against their spouses does not end when the couple separates, and that they find other means to control. One of these is manipulation in the Family Court process. In the course of the Forum, women recommended various legal changes to diminish violent men's capacity to manipulate the system.

First, women need to have legal representation so that their interests in terms of family law are protected to the maximum. Currently, numerous women experiencing violence have no means to pay a lawyer, yet are ineligible for Legal Aid Ontario (LAO). One solution proposed by participants would be to make violence against women an eligibility criterion for LAO, which would provide survivors with automatic access to legal aid. There is already a precedent in Ontario for listing VAW as a criterion for receiving assistance: domestic violence survivors are given priority consideration for subsidized housing. Another proposal is to continue raising the maximum income limit for eligibility for legal aid in Ontario. As we have already mentioned, the government could also provide more funding to AOcVF's legal services centre.

In addition, Family Court procedures and forms could be revised to make the process shorter and less complicated, thereby facilitating access to women with no legal representation. Further, violence should be a criterion in cases of separation. Measures should be implemented so that child custody decisions in violence cases take this issue into account in serving the best interests of the child.

Improvements could be made with respect to women's and children's safety. At court, for instance, they could have access to separate rooms to avoid contact with the abuser. In addition, court orders such as support and restraining orders must be effectively enforced.

Another possible improvement to the justice system discussed during the Forum would be to link the files of a woman victim of violence, related to criminal and family law, to avoid inconsistency and lessen the risk of further violence by having only a part of the information. Better communication between the courts would, for example, prevent judges from issuing contradictory orders or prevent the situation of a father charged with domestic violence from being granted joint custody of his children.

With respect to sexual assault, participants affirmed that women's access to the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board (CICB) could be facilitated by relaxing eligibility criteria and that sexual assault survivors should have legal representation in court.

All reforms to the justice system must be accompanied by better training and awareness raising on the issue of VAW for staff at every level of the system. With regard to domestic violence, the concept of parental alienation and how violent men use it to manipulate the system merits particular attention. Concerning sexual assault, the aim of training should be to break down the myths and encourage justice system personnel to accord more credibility to survivors.

## 2. Coordinated Action

During the 2014 Forum, participants emphasized the importance of coordinated action to improve the network of FLS and reinforce the initiatives to eliminate violence against women, including sexual assault, domestic violence and other forms of violence against women. The Forum's emphasis on collaboration gave rise to the concept of "by, for, and with" francophone women. Participants affirmed the need to coordinate with different agencies and women to effectively counter violence against women. In this respect, AOcVF, as a provincial body, has an important role in continuing to foster consultation and coordinated action among its members, especially by reinforcing partnerships between WS and SAC.

### 2.1 Coordinated action to address new challenges

Because our world is constantly evolving, new forms of violence against women are emerging all the time. The development of new technologies and the resulting cyberviolence are good examples of new challenges confronting those active in the area of violence against women. In these situations, coordinated action is needed to properly address the challenge and come up with effective responses. In the case of

cyberviolence, partnership with FESFO would be useful to gain an understanding of the scope of the phenomenon, create public education tools, determine how to effectively assist victims, and as needed, propose recommendations for eliminating the problem.

Participants also mentioned that the profile of the women they are working with has changed. For example, in some regions, more vulnerable and poor women, elderly women and immigrant women are accessing services, which represents additional challenges. There appears to be a need to develop more expertise in the francophone network, for instance, through collaboration with MOFIF, regarding issues such as forced marriage, so-called “honour” crimes, and older immigrant women.

## 2.2 Coordinated action to develop common positions

Among feminists, there are some subjects of hot debate such as prostitution, pornography, sexting, and the hypersexualization of girls. Coordination in these areas would facilitate the development of a comprehensive strategy for responding to women's needs.

With regard to prostitution, AOcVF and its members consider that prostitution is sexual exploitation and therefore a form of violence against women. They have adopted an abolitionist position. Even though the official position on prostitution is clear in the francophone network, participants are of the opinion that it is still important to have consultations and discussions so that frontline workers can be informed and understand the issues and the position, and thus be more equipped to defend it.

## 2.3 Coordinated action to account for different forms of oppression

For a number of years now, intersectional analysis aimed at taking into account the different forms of oppression to which women are subjected has become more widely adopted, and services have adapted. To foster an understanding of the challenges and respond to the specific needs of particular groups of women, it is necessary to partner with specialist groups. With regard to Aboriginal women, for instance, women raised the possibility of establishing partnerships with community centres and health services on reserves. A stronger collaboration with MOFIF would enable groups to better meet the needs of immigrant women. Le Phénix could also continue to educate VAW workers about the needs of women with a disability.

## 2.4 Coordinated action to support survivors in speaking out

In 2010, the Timmins Family Violence Interagency Action Committee women in Timmins set up a survivor sub-committee called the Women's Advisory Sub-Committee (WASC). This sub-committee was created to ensure that the voices of women in the community, particularly those of survivors, were heard. The WASC is committed to fostering an understanding of the obstacles facing women who experience violence. Its annual reports include numerous recommendations, some of which were endorsed at the Forum. This model was much appreciated by participants, who hope that similar committees will be formed in other regions and that the Timmins subcommittee will continue to receive funding and support.

## 2.5 Coordinated action to support calls for government action

On the topic of VAW, different organizations can share the same position on a particular issue and come together to make their voices heard by political decision makers and effect change. In recent years, for example, AOcVF has been a member of the Women's Coalition for the Abolition of Prostitution and the Coalition for Gun Control. During the Forum, women formulated several calls for legal reform and women's increased access to justice in French. Participants noted that allying with other groups, such as the Association des juristes d'expression française de l'Ontario (AJEFO) and survivor groups such as WASC can be useful when it comes to formulating demands and establishing greater influence.

# 3. Intervention and Training

As we have already noted, our environment is changing and new matters are emerging in the area of violence against women. Among these are cyberviolence, the growing numbers of immigrant women using VAW services, and the attempts to decriminalize prostitution. Each new issue raises new challenges. Participants at the Forum stated that frontline workers need training and adapted intervention tools to provide an appropriate response to these challenges.

### 3.1 Conduct French language research in the area of violence against women and disseminate information

In-depth research on certain issues to gain an understanding of their extent is sometimes necessary to develop quality training and tools to meet needs. Various research topics were proposed during the Forum, for example:

- Research to establish an overview of the situation and needs of francophone women who are victims of violence in Ontario
- Research on the issues facing women in prostitution
- Research to identify best practices in sexual assault intervention
- Research specific to violence against women living with a disability

Participants also emphasized the need for existing studies on VAW related and feminist issues to be more widely circulated and a general need for more French language resources.

### 3.2 Train frontline workers on various matters related to violence against women

Frontline workers need training to inform them about specific realities so they can adapt their intervention practices. In Ontario's francophone network, training can be provided by AOcVF's violence against women training Institute. The Institute offers several online self-training modules, onsite training sessions and webinars. Participants stated an interest in receiving training on many different topics:

- Issues faced by immigrant women, namely, so-called "honour" crimes, forced marriage, VAW in the context of armed conflict, obstacles related to immigration, and the situation of older immigrant women
- Myths and facts, needs of women living with disabilities, discrimination against disabled women
- Issues facing women in prostitution
- Forms of oppression and marginalization experienced by Aboriginal women and adapted intervention methods
- Intergenerational violence and how to break the cycle
- Intervention with children who are exposed to domestic violence and mother-child communication
- Use of social media and communication strategies

- Impact of new information and communication technologies on women and new forms of VAW

### 3.3 Create new intervention tools

In addition to training, it is also often necessary to create tools to help frontline workers in their interventions with the women who use their services. During the Forum, the need for tools adapted to several specific realities was mentioned, particularly with regard to cyberviolence, women in prostitution, and children exposed to domestic violence.

## 4. Prevention and Awareness Raising

As in 2004, prevention of violence against women was central to the discussions. Participants reaffirmed that public education about what women experience and education of the various professionals with whom women come into contact are essential to the elimination of violence against women. Many women noted that dedicated awareness raising positions needed to be created in different services, especially in sexual assault centres, to build on the existing work in this area. In addition, we must continue to create VAW prevention and educational tools, for instance, concerning cyberviolence, the dangers of sexting, prostitution, and pornography. Participants also spoke of the importance of educating anglophone groups about the need for FLS.

### 4.1 Raise public awareness about violence against women

We know that the younger a person is exposed to information about an issue, the easier and more effective is the transmission of values that will positively shape the young person's attitudes and behaviour. In the area of violence against women, educating children and teens about respect, equality between the sexes and consent is fundamental to their ability to develop healthy relationships and avoid violent situations. Coordinated action between women's shelters, sexual assault centres and FESFO would maximize available resources and tools.

In Ontario, it is also necessary to continue educating francophone adults in order to dispel the myths surrounding domestic violence and sexual assault, help them gain an understanding of the reality of different forms of violence and assist them in supporting

survivors. In the course of prevention and awareness raising work, we must represent women in all their diversity and mention the specific forms of violence and oppression to which some women are subjected. This means talking about and demystifying subjects that are still taboo, such as the sexuality of women living with disabilities or older women, and the violence to which they are subjected.

Raising public awareness about violence against women is also an important means of opening up the francophone feminist network to new women, thereby enriching it with new voices and fostering the next generation of service providers and activists. In this regard, it was observed that we must reach out, not only to young women, but also to immigrant women, women living with disabilities and Aboriginal women to ensure that their specific realities are reflected. Their role will be important regardless of their involvement in the network—as activists, volunteers, frontline workers, managers or board members.

#### 4.2 Train professionals who work with survivors about the reality of violence against women

A survivor of violence will encounter various professionals as she accesses the various services she requires. All of these professionals should receive compulsory training on the reality of VAW (domestic violence and sexual assault) in order to make objective decisions rather than ones based on commonly held myths, and deal with survivors in a respectful manner so they are not revictimized. The professionals most commonly referred to during the Forum:

- Hospital staff: physicians and nurses
- Justice system: police, crown attorneys, lawyers, judges
- School personnel: teaching and administrative staff
- Children's aid societies
- Community-based services, such as substance abuse rehabilitation services

#### 4.3 Raise the awareness of anglophone groups about the need for French language services

In 2014, a number of organizations still do not understand the rights of Francophones to receive services in French, nor are they convinced of the importance of providing French language services. One of the consequences of this is that anglophone groups do not refer francophone women to existing French language services. Another

consequence, as we have already noted, is the funding of bilingual positions instead of francophone positions in certain programs, for instance family court support workers. We must continue the awareness raising work with regard to the need for autonomous FLS, conceived "by and for" Francophones.

Many participants also mentioned that in their regions, especially in northern and southern Ontario, there is a lack of awareness in the communities about existing FLS. It was also noted that promotional activities add to the workload of francophone organizations and that they do not receive adequate funding to support this work.

# Summary of Recommendations from Forum 2014

## 1. Recommendations for the federal government

- Formulate and implement a national plan to counter violence against women
- Work with other levels of government to eliminate violence against women

## 2. Recommendations for the provincial government

- Implement, in partnership with expert groups, a provincial plan for the development of French language services in the area of violence against women. The plan should reflect:
  - A commitment on the part of government with respect to the need to provide Francophones with autonomous French language services, cease investing in bilingual services to serve the francophone population, and conduct regular evaluations of the quality of FLS provided in existing bilingual centres
  - Effective enforcement, backed by sufficient funding, of women's right to access quality French language services during all phases of the process toward a life without violence
  - The creation of new French language services for women dealing with violence: women's shelters, especially in southern and southwestern Ontario, second-stage houses in regions with existing women's shelters to complete the range of services, and sexual assault centres, including satellite offices, in northern Ontario in particular
  - Recognition of the importance of the work of sexual assault centres, women's shelters and feminist programs for women in the form of increased, recurrent and, above all, adequate funding to meet women's needs. Services must also be given sufficient resources to provide staff with salaries and benefits equivalent to those provided by other health services
- Improve access to justice in French for women victims of violence by undertaking reforms, relaxing LAO and CICB criteria and providing VAW training to personnel

- Ensure stable and ongoing funding to AOcVF so that it can continue to facilitate coordinated action, train frontline workers, develop French language tools and conduct research
- Ensure the funding of survivors' committees or groups in all their diversity throughout Ontario

### 3. Recommendations for AOcVF

- Defend the calls for government action expressed by members
- Continue fostering coordinated action among members, in particular, between sexual assault centres and women's shelters
- Pursue alliances to address specific challenges, meet women's diverse needs and defend common demands
- Encourage more sharing of available resources and conduct research on topics related to violence against women, including specific issues and concerns
- Continue to provide training for frontline workers on matters specific to VAW, especially through the training Institute
- Continue developing French language VAW intervention and awareness raising tools

### 4. Recommendations for AOcVF members and frontline workers

- Foster in every region the creation of survivors' groups so that their voices can be heard
- Continue taking part in coordinated VAW initiatives
- Continue to provide support and FLS to francophone women victims of violence based on feminist analysis and an intersectional approach
- Intensify VAW awareness raising actions with the public and professionals in different sectors
- Intensify the promotion of FLS in francophone communities across Ontario

## Conclusion

Forum 2014 was an occasion for us to reflect on the evolution of French language services in Ontario over the past 10 years and on current issues linked to violence against women. It was also an opportunity for us to identify the key elements of an action plan for AOcVF and the francophone VAW network in Ontario.

This plan will guide the next few years of development of French language services and the actions to be taken in order to continue to work toward eliminating domestic violence, sexual assault and other forms of violence. It will incorporate methods to deal with emerging issues related to domestic violence, sexual violence and other forms of VAW and will take into account the different realities, oppressions and needs of francophone women in Ontario. The plan will count on the active collaboration of different levels of government, VAW groups and survivors because only through coordinated and consistent action will we succeed in eliminating violence against women.