

April 30, 2021

Submission to the Special Committee on Reforming the Police Act

The [Vancouver Women's Health Collective \(VWHC\)](#) is a non-profit organization helping self-identified womxn foster health, wellness and equity through feminist approaches to advocacy, shared knowledge and low-barrier programs and services. We value shared information and experience over authoritative knowledge, especially when it comes to our own bodies. We support womxn's right to make informed choices about their health and health care.

The VWHC has supported womxn in their efforts to share their ideas and advocate for changes in the healthcare system since its inception in 1971. True to its original philosophy, the VWHC provides no-fee programs and services to ensure access to underserved or under-represented womxn. Our location in the Downtown Eastside provides a drop-in space in a safer and secure site that is accessed by people who self-identify as womxn (cis and trans), gender non-conforming, or non-binary. We welcome individuals with diverse gender identities, expressions and sexual orientations, and strive to provide gender-affirming health and wellness support.

We write in support of submissions from other community organizations, such as the BC Civil Liberties' Association (BC CLA), Pivot Legal Society, and Feminists Deliver. We cannot stress enough the importance of applying a decolonizing and intersectional lens to this review process, recognizing that the sole existence of a police institution is based on centuries-old colonial, patriarchal, hetero-normative oppressive views.

The current policing model disproportionately disadvantages and victimizes people of colour, Indigenous people, people living in straitened circumstances, and womxn. Numerous reports, consultations, calls for justice, already outline recommendations that are relevant to an in-depth overhaul of the BC Police Act by the BC government: the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), [The Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry Calls for Justice](#), [The Truth and Reconciliation: Commission of Canada: Calls to Action](#), and the Downtown Eastside Women's Centre [Red Women Rising report](#).

We are also compelled to submit to the Special Committee on Reforming the Police Act as one of the community organizations that has to 'pick-up the pieces' in the aftermath of (re)traumatizing encounters between community members and the Vancouver Police Department.

A few examples of lack of intersectional principles that directly impact our operations and communities:

- a male officer attending a call after a client disclosed sexual assault; stood for the duration of the interview, in 'military' position, looking down at the woman recounting a

brutal and traumatic violation of her intimacy. This attitude was not conducive to building a trusting and safe environment for disclosure, knowing that only 5% of sexual assaults were reported in 2014¹, that 1 in 5 victims of sexual assault feels blamed² and that only 1 in 10 sexual assaults that have been substantiated by police result in a criminal conviction.

- a mother in possession of an updated court order allowing her to see her child at school was apprehended on school grounds because neither the principal nor the police took the time to look at the updated court order she had in hand.

- a grand-mother carrying food we had donated to her was apprehended nearby and accused of stealing the food she was carrying. The attending officers chose to take her to a police station, 2.5km away, instead of coming to our space and checking with us. She then had to walk all the way back to attend a work meeting with us. She was flustered at being late and triggered another member in the meeting, resulting in a conflict that left the group very distraught. The harm caused has ripple effects on individuals and groups, and can take months to repair even with access to support systems. In our current world, many of the support services are inaccessible or severely reduced. Womxn may feel so much guilt for their outburst in a space they consider to be safe, that they may temporarily stop accessing said space, putting themselves at more risk of isolation, emotional crisis, houselessness, staying or returning to an abusive relationship, relapse, for example.

- calls to ACT teams (car 87) have resulted in police intervention (including handcuffing of women in crisis and attempts to intimidate our staff who advocated against use of symbols of police power) over mental health support.

A parallel example: No later than yesterday, I requested again from a fire prevention inspector (male, young, Asian descent) that a female inspector attend our space. He claimed it was a "challenge" to accommodate such a request, though it has previously been offered as a potential alternative several years ago. I countered that it was as much a challenge for us to accommodate having men in uniform walk through a womxn's space, and even more of a challenge for folx in the space who may be triggered by the presence of men in uniform. He added that their team counted (I quote) "quite a few women: *about half a dozen*" (numbers are currently around 3%). I don't know which was most striking: this young man's inability to fathom the concept of accommodation, or his sense that 3% was a significant representation of non-male colleagues on his team.

The recruitment efforts of police, fire and military institutions are bound to fail for as long as they focus on how Indigenous/women/diversity/(fill in the blanks) persons "don't see themselves in this role". Any white privileged person would refuse to become part of an institution that negates their existence, the basic human rights of

¹ <https://canadianwomen.org/the-facts/sexual-assault-harassment/>

² <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2019001/article/00017-eng.html>



VANCOUVER WOMEN'S HEALTH COLLECTIVE

29 WEST HASTINGS STREET, VANCOUVER, BC

PH: 604-736-5262

VVHC.CENTRE@GMAIL.COM

WOMENSHEALTHCOLLECTIVE.CA

their community members; and exerts oppressive measures on the folx it is supposed to protect – yet, it is expected that any other person would gladly do so to join the police force.

Echoing the statements by like-minded community partners, we urge the Special Committee to centre the experiences of people most affected. The voices of Black and Indigenous women, as well as transgendered, gender nonconforming, and non-binary peoples need to be prioritized and are fundamental in eliminating violence in law enforcement.

We support divesting in the police and moving toward more community-led approaches to safety and wellness in our community.

We urge the BC government to act on its commitment to reconciliation, justice, and redress by implementing recommendations from the above-mentioned reports and boldly transforming an archaic institution rather than tweaking it to continue to serve the privileged few it was founded by.

The Vancouver Women's Health Collective

