



Transcript from the Forum/Panel Discussion on the Strategic Pillar – Creating a Safe London for Women & Girls

Monday, March 22nd, 2021

Indigenous Opening – Elder Tracey Whiteye

Settler Land Acknowledgement – Dani Bartlett

Moderator – Dani Bartlett

Panelists – Jessie Rodger (Anova), Megan Walker (London Abused Women’s Centre), Rosanna Wilcox (City of London) & Elizabeth Pelozza (City of London Councilor)

Panel questions –

1. **Why was it important for you to take on this work of creating a safe London for women and girls?**
 2. **What does a safe London look like to you in one year, 5 years & ten years?**
 3. **What advice would you give other municipalities or gender-based violence against women agencies who feel that this issue is too big to tackle and how could they get this work started in their community?**
-

Dani – I would like to introduce the panel for today. We have Jessie Rodger from Anova, Megan Walker from London Abused Women’s Centre, City Councilor Elizabeth Pelozza and Rosanna Wilcox from the City. Thank you so much for joining us today. I am excited to talk about some of the amazing work that we’re doing with the launch of the 2019-2023 City of London’s Strategic Plan and specifically the Pillar – Creating a Safe London for Women & Girls.

Why was it important for you to take on this work of creating a safe London for women & girls?

Jessie – For those of you who don’t know me, I am the Executive Director of Anova, the province’s largest women’s shelter. We also run the sexual assault centre for London-Middlesex. Our mandate of creating a world where women can live free from violence is at the centre of everything we do. And I feel like Megan and I should talk about this at the same time because it was very much a conversation between the two of us. I think

it was the early part of 2019 when we were talking about the strategic plan that London's City Council was putting together and how we might be able to include and have voices of women and girls be a part of that. It was Megan who uttered the suggestion first what would it be like if we brought this to Council about the idea of having a pillar in the strategic plan that had specific goals and a focus around making the city safer for women and girls. And a part of the piece that really spurred this on was what we know to be true about what it is to live as a woman in this city. And for us at Anova, at that point, our shelter had been full for 4 years straight. When women get in it is because it just happens to be the right moment that they call and there just happens to be a bed free. It came from our crisis line accepting over 11,000 calls in one year. And the stat that became important to us that we had to say no over 2,500 times when women were asking for a safe place to go because they were fleeing from violence. So, it really highlighted that we had some work to do in our community and what better way for us to do that collaboratively and recognizing that everybody has a part in that.

Megan – I am the Executive Director of the London Abused Women's Centre where we provide immediate access to women and girls over the age of 12 who are experiencing violence by their partner or trafficker or sex purchaser. And I first want to acknowledge the news today with respect to Colton Boushie a young man who was killed while he was on land in Saskatchewan and was shot by the landowner. There have been several concerns raised about this issue and how it came about including the investigation by the RCMP. The RCMP watchdog today found that there was profound discrimination and racism against Colton Boushie and his family. They spoke today very strongly, and it was nice to hear that his mother said that she had never given up on fighting for her son because she knew that he was not a criminal, and that this was a result of systemic racism. So, I want to say that because Tracey did an amazing job with the opening and I was really moved by what she said I wanted to acknowledge a situation in our country that is most recent. You can't ever be happy in resolution in a situation because you've lost your son. But at least had a resolution where his mother can perhaps have some peace.

And as forgetting involved in creating a safe London for women and girls, it's been a pleasure to work in collaboration with all the Coordinating Committee partners, and Rosanna and the City of London towards something that inevitably will make a huge difference in the lives of women and girls. Mayor Ed Holder has said that this is not only the first initiative of this kind in Canada but also in the world. And I did seek out consultation around that with some of my global partners and they said well it certainly isn't happening in our community and we wish it were. So, we will be circulating information about that to our global partners, and it's a pleasure to be here and I am honoured to be part of this initiative.

Dani – Mayor Holder was unable to attend and was going to send greetings and then got unwell and was not able to share a video. But I'm sure we will hear from him on this

subject later. But Elizabeth I am so glad that you were able to join us because I do believe that if it wasn't for you sharing your story and standing up in Council and fighting the way you did that this wouldn't have happened. For first our heartfelt thank you for being vulnerable and sharing what you did to help us to have this happen. But also, to continue fighting not only for your ward but for all the women and girls in our community. So, thank you and welcome.

Elizabeth – Thank you for having me today. It's nice to be here around friends I have met and friends I have yet to meet in person. I am a first term City Councilor I take care of the south end of London being the White Oaks area predominantly. When Council sits down at beginning of term, we set out our strategic priorities, and what's going to be important for this Council. And buried in the document of another pillar was creating a safe London for women and girls. Having lived experience myself with abuse and having buried a friend who died at the hands of her former partner, I felt it was important that it was a stand-alone pillar. London is a hub for human trafficking especially along the 401 for transit, which traverses my ward. I stood at council and made a case of why we need to focus on this and recognizing that this Council is made of 15 members only 4 of which are women. It was important to me to have strong voices and policies that back our advocacy as we make policies throughout this 4-year term. I was grateful to my colleagues for believing in that vision and pulling it out. Creating a safe London for women and girls is that London will enhance the potential for women and girls to live safe lives. And then we break it out into our expected result is to decrease male violence against women and girls who are who are subject and in front of it. I am glad that we can all gather today as Covid has not made these issues any better. The pull and strain on our system has only gotten worse, the waitlist longer, and much work still needs to be done, and these conversations need to keep happening. So, I am grateful for what we are about to go through this afternoon together recognizing that time is short but it's time well spent so thank you for having me.

Dani – And then Rosanna Wilcox from the City. I can't imagine having a panel without having you on there. Megan, Jessie & I could not do this work without you. You always have our backs, you keep us organized, you go way above and beyond the call of your job to help us and keep us organized. I can't thank you enough and I am so happy that you're here. Why was it important for you to take on this work?

Rosanna – Thank you Dani and thank you for your kind words. I think I have expressed to some of you on the Coordinating Committee that it's an absolute pleasure working with all of you. I am humbled to be able to do the work with you. You teach me so much and I am extremely grateful. My role at the City is as Director of Service Innovation and Performance so I do a lot of work in strategic planning but I'm also the lead for creating a safe London for women and girls across the organization. I work across teams to make sure we are advancing the work and Council's plan around this strategy. I think creating a safe London for women and girls is one of the most important aspects of the work that I do. I am committed and I want to build a city where

all women and girls have the potential to live safe lives. I also do a lot of work – some of you might know - with Safe Cities London. We have a community table, and through that work we know that women, girls, trans & non-binary individuals & survivors are not safe in public spaces. And if they're not safe in public spaces it significantly impacts their access to social activities, freedom of movement, education, leadership opportunities, & psychological wellbeing. So, I am really committed to addressing the systemic oppression that exists and want to be part of building a better community. And I want to say that this work is very personal to me. I am a mom of 2 young girls, and I want them to grow up in a community that is different.

Dani – It's funny that you say that because I am a mom of two teenage boys, and I want them to be different. So, the next question to you is what does a safe London look like to you in one year, 5 years & 10 years? And it's funny when we first started to look at that question, it wasn't Covid-related but for sure Covid has changed the way that we have to answer those questions.

What does a safe London look like to you in one year, 5 years & ten years?

Jessie – For me, the place where you always go to, as a social worker, you kind of want to work yourself out of a job. You want one day not to have to do this work. That the spaces that you have don't need to be there and people can live freely. But I think before we get to that place, I hope we hear from more women. I hope the phone keeps ringing. I hope that women keep coming to our door because that means that we're talking about this more. My hope is that we will hear from them and be able to provide more services and supports. Because I know that we are missing so many. For me that's a good indicator. Sometimes people think that an increase in a demand for service means that the problem is getting exacerbated. But I think that the issue about violence against women and girls is really hidden right now. There are lots of women who are, especially with Covid, trapped at home and are not able to get to the phone or are not able to get out. So, my hope is that we will hear from them and we can provide more services and supports. So that's a big piece for me. When I think about even further down the road the way the way that I will measure success is by listening to women and hearing what they say. If they tell me that they're feeling safe, then that will be a hugely important part and part of the conversation at the table around doing this collaborative work. And it's important that the voices of survivors are listened to. So that's going to be something that I will listen for.

Megan - So I am optimistic because when I look at how this began, we've already seen some significant outcomes. We now have a foundational piece that we work with that recognizes the importance of public awareness & education, robust funding, the importance of bylaws, policies & legislation in the work that we are going to be doing. And I have a great example of where that has already taken place. The City released their Community Safety and Wellbeing document and what we noticed was creating a safe London for women and girls was absent in that document. So, we were able to raise that and now as one of the five areas that London has heard is creating a safe

London for women and girls. So, I feel optimistic that that has happened already. In one year, I hope that we will see the outcome of some of the departments of the city who have utilized those three pillars in their work so that we can start to track to see the importance of this work. One year from now I hope to see some positive outcomes towards resolving the horrendous challenge of women finding housing, at least longer-term solutions that can be implemented. And one year from now I hope that we will be able to show the women who risked so much to come forward to speak their truth that they were heard because this is so important and leads to other women coming forward. I don't think it's our responsibility to empower women. I think it's our responsibility to provide women with the tools they need to empower themselves. And I see that as a main part of this process. In five years from now I would like to see an evaluation of how far we've come and where we have to go. I think that's really important and that must include the voices of women of lived experience. And in 10 years from now I would like to see everything the City does, and all their initiatives reviewed through a trauma-informed and feminist lens. I'd like to see the strategic plan continue to address the significant needs of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. I would like to see Anova and all shelters in this city need never to turn a woman away because they are fully funded and able to give all women immediate access to the services that they provide. And what I really hope in 10 years is that we can see some concrete evidence that we are being successful in creating a safe London for women and girls. And that doesn't just mean women and girls who are at work or walking down street but because we know that the most dangerous place for women and girls is their own home, we hope that there be a significant difference in the lives of women and their children in their own homes.

Elizabeth – I look at things through cycles. I look at this through election cycles. Our funding for a lot of these programs rely on provincial, fed, municipal contributions to address some of these systemic issues that have been lagging and not addressed – transit, housing, neighbourhood design. I am looking at the voices around the table and hope that we will increase diversity around the horseshoe and in other positions. You need someone to stand up. It's not a space that I am comfortable with sharing personal stories but if I am at Council and it takes me being vulnerable and crying on the evening news to help colleagues see that this really is an important issue and to help others in the community see - hey she's successful – that we all have lived experience. And it is staggering when women start revealing their experience and you're hard pressed to find someone who hasn't had some kind of trauma or been in uncomfortable situations. It's just about creating a safe place for those conversations. And those conversations need to happen for people to realize just how broad and deep these issues are in our community. On Council, moving forward, we apply gendered lens to our decisions. When we first implemented the pillar of creating a safe London for women and girls. I did push back in the beginning because they weren't using the lens in the report. Everyone needs to be onboard, and I am grateful for what Ms. Wilcox brings to the table

and those like her on our others on the senior leadership team. And we know that if something is not being done, there's at least one voice at the table that will call out people. Because that's what we need. We need our organizations, our citizens calling on elected officials because these problems need to be addressed. Because municipally, I can't fix housing alone. I can't fix a lot of these problems alone. But together we can make huge impacts and hopefully in 10 years when we evaluate how far we've come the results will be astonishing. That is my hope.

Rosanna – This is a huge question! I think on the 1-year horizon I think it's continued grabbing on to collaboration. The way we work right now is so especially important including how we work with non-traditional actors in this space. On the horizon in terms of work and how we work to enhance our gender equity lens, that it's grounded in an intersectional approach and considers the three-pillar framework that Megan mentioned earlier – legislation, public awareness & funded services. I think that there's some really great work underway this year. Again, the work on the gender equity lens. We have work that will be done to complete a safety audit of the downtown. That this will require the use of an intersectional & gendered lens, which I think is a first for this type of RFP work. So, we're excited to see where this leads. There's also some great pilot work being done with Safe Cities London. If you aren't familiar that is a collaborative and city-wide project that brings together researchers, community leaders, organizations, and individuals with lived experience. This report goes to Council for consideration tomorrow evening. But some of the early work that's been identified as priority in the first year is working on bystander intervention training whether that's on transit or in bars. And what's been highlighted, in recognizing the times we're in with Covid, is lack of safety online. This wasn't something that was considered in the early scoping study but now has become so important. And I also think that increased use, so with the example that I gave about the safety audit around the GBA+ or Gender Based Analysis, so there's lots of tools out there. We're looking to see how we can strengthen our practice and finding every opportunity to use it. Another piece of work being done through Safe Cities is amplifying the best safety programs. So those are just some examples. On the 5-year horizon it's about how we continue to engage with non-traditional actors in this space and again with the work of the Strategic Pillar and Safe Cities are good examples of this. Sometimes it takes engaging people who are not typically leaders in this space to think differently about how we impact and create change in our community. In 5 years, I am seeing the consistent application of an intersectional gender lens and the three-pillared framework in all areas of our practice. Also ensuring that women of lived experience are included in the development of all bylaws and policies that affect them. I think that seeing further opportunities of finding those where we integrate – to the example of being built into the Community & Wellbeing Plan – there are many other ways to do that. So how is that centred at the beginning of plans, policy and program development at the beginning as opposed to later in process. And on the 10-year horizon I see a community where women are empowered, they have financial freedom and full use of public spaces. And as a municipality we have so many levers that we can activate to create that type of a

community – childcare and early years, housing, economic development, creating safe spaces with regards to municipal planning and gender mainstreaming and how we ensure that safety of women and girls is considered in all we do. But again, it takes the collaborative pull of the community approach to do that. I also think and am hopeful that in that timeframe we create a community where everyone feels like they belong. We know that there's a connection between belonging and safety. So, when you think about public spaces and how recognizing that, and the systemic racism and oppressions that exist, and how the intersections of identify compound and intersect. When we think about that and how to develop tools to create safety and where everyone feels that they belong.

Dani – I think back to what it meant to me this week and last week. I was a delegate to the UN and have watched presentations from around the globe and was thinking that we should have done a presentation. One thing that we haven't talked enough as well is the need to keep women and girls safe psychologically. And we for sure we didn't do a great job of that at the last election. Keeping women who ran for municipal council safe. It didn't feel safe for a lot of the women who ran. This time we have a pillar that says we must and what is that going to look like. I am starting to formulate a plan and I know some amazing women that will all stand behind me to make sure that that doesn't happen and how that looks differently. So hopefully you're not alone around that horseshoe next time, and it's not so horrible to run and that you're not attacked the way it happened last time.

What advice would you give other municipalities or gender-based violence against women agencies who feel that this issue is too big to tackle and how could they get this work started in their community?

Jessie – I would say if you think this is too big to tackle, and you work at a violence against women organization, then you need to check yourself. This is the work. This is what we do. This is some of the macro work that is critically important for changing our community and dismantling systems of oppressions. We talk about that a lot. And this is wonderful tool to actually do that because all the things that these other wonderful women have been talking about today, stuff is happening. So, if there are other gender-based violence/violence against organizations that are thinking that this is too much to take on, this is the work! This is what we do. I will say that it seemed very big at the beginning. And it is very big. But once you start to talk to people who are doing the work, finding allies who really believed in doing this work was critical. And Elizabeth's leadership and her voice around the horseshoe was critical in getting it done. So, seeking out allies for this work is really important. How Elizabeth spoke at Council was really moving. But people shouldn't have to share those personal details of their life if they don't want to or to get work happening. It takes a huge amount of strength and courage to do those pieces and it can be really moving. But it's important to recognize that keeping women and girls safe is not something you do because you have a sister or a mother or you're attached to a woman. You should do it because it's the right thing

to do and because it's critical to making sure that our community is a safer and happier one. We know that when you take care of women and girls you take care of everybody. So that is an important piece to remember, and I would say that the benefits far outweigh the preconceived costs or heavy lifting that goes with it. And if people are getting hung on those things then I would encourage others to sit with that and think about why they are hesitating to do this fundamental work for equality.

Megan – To pick up on what Jessie was saying when we keep women safe, we keep communities safe. There is a direct relationship, and we know that 1 in 3 women is abused. So, if you look at this panel there are 4 women, one of whom has identified herself as having been abused. And others of us who may not have publicly identified but know what it means to live with these kinds of experiences. Every two and half days in this country a woman is murdered. So, I think we need to start saying that women, and women's lives, matter. And instead of saying it, this is a really solid way of showing what it means. Some of the strategies that we've outlined in this plan is ensuring that women become leaders in their communities and assume leadership positions. And it's clear about training on men's violence against women and whether it be in an intimate relationship, harassment, sexualized violence, or sex trafficking. All those things, if we can accomplish the goal, will benefit the lives of everyone living in our society. And it's vitally important to recognize that we are talking about women and gender equality. And I always say women and gender equality because otherwise the voices of women are lost and what we fought for so long as women is lost. So, one of the things that I am grateful for, maybe the only thing I am grateful to government for, is to continue to name the new department WAGE, which is women and gender equality. And like the City strategy, the federal and provincial strategies also look to accomplish some of these same goals. It reminds me a little bit when we ask why we should do things for women and that's so hard. Well imagine how hard it is for a woman to live in a relationship where every single day she is either being verbally, emotionally, or physically abused. That's the hard work! That's a very hard part. So, for us to do whatever we can to end that atrocity against all women is one of the most important things that we can do. But I also want to say that when we have opportunities to ensure that women can exercise their rights to safe living spaces, their rights to be treated without violence and with respect, their rights to exist in a society with a name and an address. Those are not just special things that you do for women. That's actually our right. So, if any community says this is a lot of work, I would say indeed it is a lot of work. And it's the work that should have been started years ago by municipalities and it's never too late to join.

Elizabeth – I would say that if you feel that the task before you is too monumental or too much to tackle then you need to give up your seat at the table and let someone else have a seat who is willing to take this on. We don't need pleasantries we need action. Some days I am feistier than others, but I am never apologetic about claiming that space. Half your population is female roughly, there are children in the community. If we don't do anything it's going to stay the same. If it's that big of a problem, then fund it

more. Fund all those problems that tie into women leaving relationships, fund more counselling, fund more housing, more public transit. Pay a decent wage – not minimum wage - but a living wage that people can afford for be where they want to be. When we did Safe Cities work some people from the LGBTQ+ community reached out and they were very excited for it. They acknowledged that they face many barriers too. But if we focus on creating safety for women and girls, inherently everyone in the community will benefit from it and we will have more time to dive into other issues in the community as well. I would like to recognize that we're halfway through this Council term, and I would like to see the next Council continue this work. That it's not just a one and done. It really does need to stay in the strategic plan in a pillar and priority of its own. As we've seen with Covid, the numbers have just gone up. And Covid recovery for women who have been disproportionately impacted in workplaces and services industries isn't going to be a one-year fix. We're looking longer out for that. We need government electives to be aware of that and be willing to work towards more long-term change. It's a long road and it's been there for a really long time, and no one has addressed it properly. And the time is now.

Rosanna – I don't know that I have much to add to what has been said. When I look at colleagues in other municipalities who are on the staff side of how you do this work, we are here to serve the community. Bottom line, that's what we're here to do. So, you just find a way to prioritize the work and make it happen. I think it can feel overwhelming when you look at what needs to be changed. But approaching it with an open mind and heart and be willing to look at your policy and practice. There's always the opportunity to pilot things. You can start with something and test it out and see what works and it can snowball from there. I think being open to collaborating and working in a different way than your typical practice is important. Like the work that we've been doing with the Coordinating Committee, we are working alongside and are committed to that type of collaboration that is real and authentic I think is really important because that is how we effect change. I don't have much more to add to the incredible thoughts that have been shared. I would echo those as well.

Dani – A big part of the work that we have done was started with women of lived experience and their voices. We took it as a priority for the work we have done today to collect women's voices and we will continue to do that and share women's stories in a meaningful way. We haven't decided exactly what we will do and what that will look like but in August the city is hosting the provincial municipal conference and so we will make surer that women's voices will be heard around these issues. We will share what we come up with and would welcome your thoughts on how to do this in the most meaningful way.

Avril – I know there are two or three women of lived experience on the call who have provided input about what a safe London means to them. Louise has asked for a moment to share and I invite her to share as well as you're comfortable.

Louise – Thank you so much for giving me that opportunity and for everyone who has joined us. Domestic violence is a huge passion of mine and I will always be an advocate. I have made it my mission to do what I can to help with the issue. I do a lot of public speaking through our Speaker’s Bureau at My Sister’s Place on the subject. And, I have recently finished peer and facilitator training and hear stories every day, about really horrible things that nobody should have to go through. So hopefully with us raising our voices and standing up together as women we will put an end to all of this. Thank you very much.

Avril - I think Nancy if also on the call. You shared some thoughts, and I am wondering if you’d like to share anything now or let your words be reflected in another way?

Nancy – Yes, I will let my thoughts be reflected in another way. But the one suggestion I made was to have more police out at night if it’s possible. I know it’s going to cost money but safety for women should be a priority as far as I am concerned. This is a really important issue.

Avril – We are working with your response and others and we really appreciate you sharing your thoughts.

Dani - I would just like to thank all the speakers for coming and sharing their time. Thank you to the City for being the first municipality to take this on. And to Elizabeth and Rosanna - we couldn’t do this work without you! Jessie I am so proud to be part of the project and to work with you. Megan you I are always online at the same time to tell them that they’ve dropped the ball. Jessie, you work to keep shelters safe. I am very proud of the work that we’re doing. If anyone has ideas about how to keep the city safe let us know. Thanks for coming and until next time.