

HOW CAN WE MAKE TORONTO'S MULTIUSE TRAILS AND RAVINES BETTER SPACES FOR WOMEN & NEWCOMERS?

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PROJECT TEAM

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ABOUT TCAT

The Centre for Active Transportation (TCAT) at Clean Air Partnership (CAP) has a vision of vibrant cities with clean air, a healthy population, and a transportation system that prioritizes walking and cycling. Our mission is to advance knowledge and evidence to build support for safe and inclusive streets for walking and cycling. We believe that active transportation plays a critical role in creating environmentally and economically sustainable cities.



SUMMARY

- Green spaces like Toronto's multiuse trail and ravine system are essential to communities' health and well-being.
- The results of TCAT's previous research on multiuse trail use revealed that while Torontonians across the board do see these benefits, certain demographic groups – in particular, women and newcomers – face disproportionate and several distinct barriers to accessing and enjoying the trail system as much as they could and would like to.
- To provide decision-makers with guidance on trail improvements and programming that could make the biggest difference for these groups, we organized a series of focus groups and a walk audit with Torontonians holding one or both of these identities.
- This report synthesizes key insights from our conversations with community members and recommends four priority areas for enhancing Toronto's greenspace through this equity-based lens.



INTRODUCTION

Research shows that access to green space plays a vital role in supporting people's physical, mental, social, and emotional well-being (Lai et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2021). In Toronto, multiuse trails – shared pathways designed for non-motorized uses such as walking, running, cycling, and rolling – connect the [city's many parks and ravine system](#), offering nature-based recreation and transportation routes removed from motor vehicle traffic.

Despite the well documented benefits of publicly available green spaces and active transportation infrastructure in Canada (See, e.g.: Daisy & Habib, 2015; Mohamed & Paez, 2021; and Ngo, Frank & Bigazzi, 2018), there is limited research on how Toronto's existing multiuse trail network is used, who these trails benefit, and whether barriers exist that prevent the equitable access to and enjoyment of these spaces for all Torontonians. To address that gap, The Centre for Active Transportation (TCAT) conducted intercept surveys and travel counts (tabulations of all people who move across a given threshold in a set time period) on three major multiuse trails throughout Toronto (TCAT, 2024).

Our demographic analysis of the intercept survey data revealed that, while trail users widely reported receiving substantial benefits from Toronto's multiuse trail system, there were notable disparities in trail use and user experience along the lines of gender, race, immigration status, and age.

In particular, we found that women and newcomers (individuals who arrived in Canada within the last five years) were more likely to identify poor trail maintenance, safety concerns, winter conditions, and a lack of amenities as significant barriers to their trail access and enjoyment. These groups also frequently cited the absence of formal programming, especially in the colder months, as a reason for reduced trail use.

Our findings also revealed differences in trail use behaviour among women and newcomers compared to other demographic groups, suggesting that addressing these barriers could meaningfully improve equitable access to Toronto's green spaces. Our travel counts revealed that women were, in fact, significantly underrepresented on the trails we studied. While we found that newcomers actually represented a greater share of trail users compared to the surrounding neighbourhood demographics, newcomers were more likely to be first-time trail users and to live farther from the trails they were visiting compared to non-newcomers.

While the intercept surveys provided valuable quantitative insights, the study's research design limited the number of questions and time spent with each participant to prioritize speaking with a wide range of people and gathering a variety of perspectives.

In 2025, TCAT conducted a supplemental focus group series, a trail walk audit, and key informant interviews with women and newcomers to gain deeper insight into the barriers these groups face in accessing and benefiting from Toronto's multiuse trail system.

This report outlines the methodology used for the focus groups, walk audit, and interviews, summarizes key findings, and offers recommendations for steps municipal staff, community organizations, researchers, and advocates could take to continue improving trail access for equity-deserving groups.



METHODOLOGY

Between March and June 2025, TCAT conducted three focus group sessions, one walk audit, and two key informant interviews with women and newcomers living in Toronto. Each focus group centered on the trail experiences of a different demographic group – i.e., women (trans-inclusive), newcomers, and newcomer women – while the walk audit guided a group of women along the Humber River Recreational Trail (hereby referred to as the Humber River Trail) to obtain location-specific insights into trail use and user experience. Two key informant interviews with women-identifying trail users involved in [Park People’s Sparking Change program](#) were also conducted to fill in knowledge gaps and triangulate our focus group and walk audit findings.

While the survey results from TCAT’s previous trail study found that women and newcomers face more challenges to trail access and enjoyment compared to other demographic groups, we were unable to contextualize these observed differences with the survey data alone. For example, while we learned that women were less likely than men to use the trail system in the winter months, the data provided no context or reasoning for why this disparity might exist. The combination of focus groups, a walk audit, and interviews allowed us to ask in-depth questions on perceptions of trail safety, programming, infrastructure, maintenance, and amenities, and to better understand the ways in which these groups’ identities shape their lived experiences in Toronto’s parks and trails.

For a more detailed account of TCAT’s methodology, please refer to [Appendix 1](#).



FINDINGS

TRAIL USAGE MOTIVATIONS AND PATTERNS

All participants were familiar with the multiuse trail system and self-reported using the trails a minimum of once per week. The most commonly frequented trails amongst participants were the Kay Gardiner Beltline Trail, the Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail, the Humber River Recreational Trail, and various trails within High Park and the Don Valley. Other less frequently mentioned trails include the Meadoway, King's Mill Park, the Bayview Trail, Scarborough Bluffs, and the Rosedale Ravine Trail.

Consistent with findings from TCAT's previous intercept surveys, **participants across all focus groups perceived the multiuse trail system as incredibly important to their overall physical, mental, and social health.** All groups reported using the trails for general fitness activities such as walking, jogging, and cycling, and expressed receiving numerous mental health benefits, including reduced stress, improved mood, and enhanced overall well-being. It was clear that participants across all focus groups, interviews, and the walk audit **highly valued the availability of calming and restorative blue-green spaces** separated from the hustle and bustle of city life.

Participants also predominately used the trails for recreational purposes, such as exercising, enjoying nature, and spending time with friends and family, rather than for utility purposes (e.g., commuting). Newcomers particularly emphasized the social value of the trail system, describing multiuse trails as important free and easy-to-access third places where they could connect with friends and family.

Although only a few participants said they currently used multiuse trails for commuting, many expressed being eager and willing to use the trails for utility if the trails were better connected to each other and the city's broader transportation network, as well as more conveniently located (e.g., closer to their homes and workplaces).

BARRIERS TO TRAIL ACCESS AND USAGE

The three main barriers to trail use among all focus groups, interviews, and the walk audit were 1) trail awareness and navigation; 2) safety and comfort on the trails; and 3) a need for expanded programming.

1) Trail awareness and navigation

One of the most significant barriers cited by all participants was their **general lack of awareness of the trail system – what trails exist throughout the city, where they connect, and how to use them**. This barrier was especially true for newcomers, who often discovered trails through word-of-mouth recommendations from friends or by accidentally stumbling upon the trails during a walk in their neighbourhoods.

Compared to newcomer men, **newcomer women were more likely to describe having initial fears about using the trail system** and credit friends with taking them onto the trails for the first time to help them build confidence.

These feelings of uncertainty may explain why multiple participants recommended better online advertising for the trail system. Participants identified blogs, community newsletters, public library/community centre bulletins, and trail workshops and webinars as ways that the City of Toronto or related non-profits could increase people's awareness of the trails.

Participants also strongly desired more communication through social media sites they use often, such as Instagram, and offered social media hashtags, social media trail accounts, and partnerships with local influencers as ideas for ways people could be introduced to the safety, benefits, and different uses of the trail system.

When asked, **most participants were unaware that the City of Toronto had trail maps and other digital trail resources on their website.** One key informant – who frequently used the trail system for commuting and utility cycling – shared that, while she had previously accessed the multiuse trail and cycling maps provided by the City, she did not possess the map reading skills to understand them, rendering them useless.

A lack of easily available maps and/or confidence with map reading could explain why on-trail signage was consistently raised in the focus groups, interviews, and walk audit as a necessary improvement to the existing trail system. Participants reported not knowing the location of trail entrances and exits, the type or location of amenities (e.g., washrooms), or which direction to take while walking or cycling, which discouraged them from trying new trails and made navigating even familiar trails challenging.

Participants suggested multiple improvements to reduce navigation barriers on the trail system. These included:

- Better integrating signage with adjacent neighbourhoods to help people find trail entrances, and enhancing on-trail signage with clear information about the location of amenities.
- Using signage to indicate access or egress points on the trails and highlight natural hazards and accessibility features (such as the presence of ramps versus stairs, or the steepness of trail grades).
- Signage indicating trail length and the direction of travel using local landmarks (e.g., a sign with an arrow saying “3km to Brick Works Park”).

Participants also proposed using colour-coded trail routes and trail blazes, practices similar to what many provincial and national parks use to aid navigation.

2) Safety and comfort on the multiuse trail system

Infrastructure and perceptions of safety

Newcomer and non-newcomer women across every participant group expressed feeling constrained in how they used the trails (e.g., avoiding them at night, alone, or at times when the trails are more isolated) because the lack of lighting made them feel unsafe. One key informant, who often navigated the trails alone and was less concerned about trail lighting, highlighted that the lack of signage – and her fear of getting lost exploring the trails by herself – deterred her from exploring more isolated trail areas.

For many women (both newcomers and non-newcomers), the design and maintenance of the trails themselves was also a serious safety concern. Participants – particularly those who used the trails for walking and running rather than cycling – shared that **the lack of separation between different transportation mode users on trails**, and/or high-speed vehicle rights-of-way next to trails, made them feel on edge and resulted in conflicts and near misses. At the Humber River Trail, walk audit participants similarly pointed to the potential for collisions at the main trail entrance where cyclists, pedestrians, and motorized vehicles share the same right-of-way into the park.

These concerns about the safety of trail infrastructure explain why **most participants desired trails that were paved, contained separate lanes for different transportation modes, and possessed clear signage indicating how to safely navigate any shared spaces**. Participants also mentioned safety issues relating to trail erosion, flooding, and cracked or unmaintained pavement, particularly in the winter months when narrow, unplowed paths, icy conditions, and the risk of slipping were key deterrents to winter trail use.

For women-identifying newcomers, the width of trails was an especially important access barrier, as narrow paths made it more difficult to leverage the trails for their preferred uses as social spaces and free third places to spend time with their families. Both newcomer focus groups, regardless of gender, were concerned with trail access for people with disabilities, and emphasized that the grade, width, and maintenance of the trails should be able to accommodate people of all ages and abilities, from seniors to families with young children.

On-trail harassment

In addition to trail infrastructure and maintenance concerns, some participants described feeling unsafe due to frightening interactions with other trail users.

One newcomer man (who identified as Indigenous, Inuit, or Metis) shared that he felt judged while using the trail because of his identity. Multiple women participating in the Humber River Walk audit, and one key informant, recounted disturbing experiences witnessing naked men and being stalked, harassed, or threatened, particularly on more isolated sections of the Humber River Trail and on the Port Union Waterfront Trail.

These encounters significantly discouraged them from returning to the trails, especially at nighttime or during the winter months when the trails are less populated. **Participants consistently noted that more lighting, more people on the trails, and clearer sightlines (e.g., “eyes on the street”), would make them feel more comfortable using the trails alone or in the evenings.**

Emergency services access

Many newcomer women voiced concerns about the limited presence of emergency support. They also raised questions about how emergency services, such as ambulances, would access the trails in case they needed assistance.

This uncertainty about how Toronto’s trail emergency response system operates and how or who they should contact for help created hesitation around using the trail system – especially for mothers, who often visited the trails with their families. One newcomer mother, whose child has a disability, was particularly concerned about whether emergency assistance could be provided on trails in a timely manner if her daughter needed urgent medical assistance.

In response to this uncertainty around emergency services access, both newcomer groups independently proposed stationing trained staff or volunteers on the trails to offer guidance, answer questions, and provide first aid in emergencies. Participants felt that such a presence would be reassuring, making them feel safer and more confident while using the trail system. Some participants also saw this role as overlapping with the traditional duties of a park ranger (i.e., someone who is responsible for both visitor safety and enforcement, and educating visitors about trail history, ecology, and landmarks).

While the majority of women in the Humber River Trail walk audit met this suggestion with enthusiasm, some expressed a different perspective, voicing concern that an authoritative presence would personally make them feel less welcomed and safe on the trails, and might deter other users – particularly those from marginalized backgrounds – from using the trail system freely. Both key informants we interviewed shared these concerns, but for different reasons; they were worried about the practicality of stationing enough staff or volunteers on the trails to have a meaningful impact on their perceptions of safety.

Solutions that were proposed as an alternative to or in conjunction with more trail staff included emergency call boxes, more signage and online information about emergency services access on the trails, webinars on how to use the trails safely, and a designated emergency line that could be called for trail-specific safety concerns.

Trail amenities

Participants also pointed out that **even when trails were well-connected and accessible, the lack of amenities on the trails made them feel uncomfortable – and in some cases, unsafe** – while using them.

Two recurring concerns across the focus groups, walk audit, and key informant interviews were 1) both the absence of and lack of information about the availability of open washrooms, and 2) the absence of weather protection, with the lack of shelter from rain, wind, and sun described as a major barrier to their safe enjoyment of the trail system.

Along the stretch of the Humber River trail we audited, there is one washroom that was closed, and participants would have needed to exit the trail and walk for at least 15 to 20 minutes to reach the next closest publicly available washroom. Participants expressed difficulty finding information about where washrooms on trails are located and when they are open, and a strong desire for washrooms with drinking fountains to be open year-round. One key informant shared that she felt hesitant to continue using a trail near her home because of the absence of washrooms, which on one occasion meant that she was forced to go to the bathroom in deep brush.

Without warming stations or protection from the elements, participants expressed being unable to enjoy the trails during the winter months, and without shaded areas in warmer weather (e.g., gazebos, canopies, or mature trees), participants shared stories of the trails being dangerously hot in the summer.

Participants across all groups further expressed a clear need for more sheltered seating options along the trails, ranging from individual benches to larger communal spaces that could support rest breaks for children and seniors, facilitate communal gatherings, and provide protection from the elements. One key informant, who lives close to several trails, shared that she often avoided using them simply because there was nowhere to sit when she needed a break or wanted to relax and enjoy the surroundings.

Several of the focus groups' newcomer participants shared that having more parks with additional amenities, such as cafés and food vendors, could address several of these barriers within the same facility and help to make the trails more welcoming for a wider range of users.

3) A need to activate trails through expanded programming

Our previous research found that a lack of formalized programming was a particularly significant barrier to accessing green space more frequently for women and newcomers compared to other demographic groups. In the focus group and walk audit discussions, participants noted that being part of a group and having more people around on the trails would help them feel safer in green spaces and therefore more likely to use them.

Among the various types of trail programming discussed, outdoor fitness activities emerged as the most popular across all groups. Participants expressed a strong interest in group-based fitness offerings such as yoga, running clubs, and cycling events.

In addition to physical activity, there was a clear desire for social and community-focused programming, with suggestions including barbecues, book clubs, litter cleanups, drawing or photography groups, group dog walks, pop-up markets, art or sculpture exhibits, lantern festivals, and scavenger hunts.

Participants emphasized the importance of offerings that are inclusive of children, families, and multigenerational users. Women-identifying participants across all focus groups were also more likely to suggest evening or nighttime events, reflecting their interest in programming that fits their schedules and provides a sense of safety in numbers.

There was also notable enthusiasm for educational and wellness-based programming. Participants supported ideas such as guided nature or historical tours, mental health-focused group walks, and wellness sessions designed to support emotional and psychological well-being. Some even proposed combining these offerings with a dedicated safety presence on trails – envisioning "trail ambassadors" or ranger-style figures who could not only enhance safety but also offer guided tours and share knowledge about trail history, ecology, and landmarks.

A recurring theme across all groups was the importance of keeping trail programming casual, approachable, and financially accessible. While free or low-cost events were strongly preferred, there was some debate around event structure. Some participants preferred drop-in formats, citing their flexibility and low barriers to participation, while others favoured registration-based events, which would allow them to plan events into their schedules. Both approaches offer distinct benefits, suggesting that a mix of drop-in and scheduled options may best serve the diverse needs of trail users.

A vertical photograph on the left side of the page shows a dirt trail leading towards a stream in a lush, green forest. The trail is in the foreground, and the stream flows through the middle ground, surrounded by dense trees and foliage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Increase awareness and trail literacy by...

Expanding online and digital trail communication

Develop a comprehensive digital trail awareness strategy targeting women and newcomers. This could include social media campaigns (e.g., Instagram hashtags, influencer partnerships), interactive trail maps, YouTube tutorials, and webinars hosted by community ambassadors.

Improving on-trail signage

Install clearly visible signage at trailheads and intersections with maps, facility locations (especially washrooms and water fountains), emergency contacts, and the distance and direction to different landmarks. Consider including accessibility information such as trail grades, the presence of stairs or ramps, and the location of sheltered rest stops.

Better integrating trails with neighbourhoods

Use street-level signage, community boards, and local gathering spaces (e.g., libraries, community centres) to identify trail access points and promote upcoming park and trail programs, especially in newcomer-dense neighborhoods.

2) Improve safety and comfort on trails by...

Prioritizing visibility and lighting

Install consistent, energy-efficient lighting along major trail corridors to increase nighttime visibility and safety, particularly in areas with poor sightlines and low foot traffic, while also following best-practice guidelines to minimize any negative environmental impacts.

Communicating emergency services information

Install emergency call boxes or post safety information, including emergency numbers, on signage. Consider creating a non-policing Trail Ambassador Program – staff or volunteers trained in basic first aid, trail navigation, and public engagement – to offer visible support without enforcing surveillance. Safety staffing should be carefully designed in collaboration with equity-deserving groups to avoid perceptions of surveillance or policing. Staff should be trained in cultural safety and trauma-informed approaches to make all users feel welcome and respected.

Engaging in winter trail maintenance

Prioritize snow and ice clearance on popular trail segments and communicate up-to-date maintenance schedules via signage and online updates.

3) Prioritize inclusive trail design and infrastructure by...

Undertaking accessibility upgrades

Widen narrow trail sections, smooth pavement, and address grade issues to better accommodate strollers, mobility aids, and group users. Ensure that trails are universally accessible for all ages and abilities.

Separating different transportation modes

Redesign high-traffic trails to include designated lanes for pedestrians, cyclists, and e-micromobility devices to reduce conflicts and enhance user experience.

Expanding seating options and weather protection

Install various seating options at regular intervals, including individual benches, shaded group seating areas, and weather-protected shelters. Prioritize areas near play structures, restrooms, and scenic views.

4) Activate trails through programming by...

Offering fitness and wellness programming

Run inclusive outdoor fitness activities such as group yoga, walking clubs, cycling tours, or strength training tailored to different fitness levels and ages. Include women-only and family-friendly time slots.

Offering cultural and social events

Host accessible, low-barrier events such as multicultural festivals, art shows, trail cleanups, and storytelling walks. Events should accommodate diverse schedules, including evenings and weekends.

Offering mental health and educational services

Consider guided mindfulness walks, mental wellness sessions, and educational tours on trail ecology and Indigenous land history. These could be led by trained Trail Ambassadors to combine safety presence and programming.

Prioritizing flexibility

Offer a mix of drop-in and pre-registration events to meet different user preferences. This could be seasonally adjusted (e.g., drop-in in summer; pre-registration in winter).



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Appendix 1

DETAILED METHODOLOGY

The focus groups and walk audit were designed to gather qualitative insights into the challenges that women and newcomers encounter when accessing and enjoying Toronto's multiuse trail system. Findings from academic research and TCAT's 2024 multiuse trail study reveal that green space and trail access is unevenly distributed along socioeconomic lines (Dong & Miller, 2024; TCAT, 2024), necessitating an intersectional methodological approach. Using an intersectional lens allowed for the exploration of how overlapping aspects of identity influence individuals' experiences and potential barriers to trail use (Crenshaw, 1989).

To ensure participants from diverse backgrounds, TCAT shared a recruitment Google Form through social media and Park People's community networks. The form invited individuals to self-identify across a range of demographic categories, including age, race, gender, newcomer status, household income, and geographic location. Participants for the focus groups and walk audits were then selected to reflect a broad spectrum of these identities. In recognition of their time and contributions, participants received honoraria valued at \$50 for focus group participation and \$75 for the walk audit and key informant interviews.

Prior to participation in the focus groups and walk audit, all individuals were provided with detailed information about the purpose, format, and intended use of the study and were required to submit a signed letter of informed consent. This letter of consent included an explanation of their rights as participants, including the right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and participants were provided with the opportunity to ask questions before signing. All data collected was anonymized for publication, and demographic information is only discussed in aggregate in this report to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality.

Appendix 1

FOCUS GROUP & INTERVIEW METHODS

Three focus group sessions were conducted in March 2025. All sessions took place over Microsoft Teams and ran for 1.5 hours. The first focus group consisted of women (inclusive of trans women) who were not newcomers to Canada (n=7); the second focus group consisted of newcomers to Canada of all genders (n=6); and the third focus group consisted of people who self-identified as being both a woman and a newcomer (n=7). All participants were familiar with the multiuse trail system and self-reported using the trails a minimum of once per week.

The purpose of these focus groups was to create space for deeper exploration of questions, themes, and ideas that emerged during the initial survey phase but could not be fully addressed at that time. To guide these conversations, a facilitation guide was created incorporating questions aligned with those from TCAT's 2024 multiuse trail study ([see Appendix 2](#)) to allow for meaningful comparison across findings.

The focus groups were semi-structured; although not every question was asked in every group, discussions consistently addressed four core themes: trail safety, programming, infrastructure and maintenance, and amenities. Additional questions were introduced as needed to follow the flow of conversation, and participants were encouraged to engage with one another and build upon previously shared insights. Data from the focus groups was analyzed by transcribing the sessions and coding responses based on the four pre-established thematic categories.

In June 2025, two women-identifying key informants from Park People's Sparking Change network were also interviewed to triangulate our focus group findings. The facilitation guide used for these interviews was identical to the focus group guide, with minor amendments made to gain more clarification on certain topics.

Appendix 1

WALK AUDIT METHODS

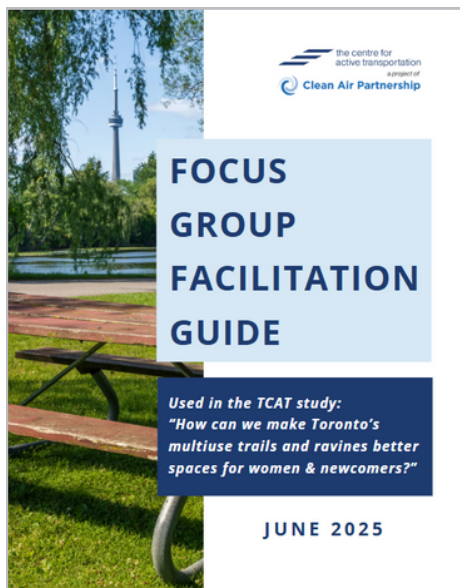
A walk audit of the Humber River Recreational Trail was conducted in March 2025 with a group of women (inclusive of trans women) who were not newcomers to Canada (n=6). The two-hour audit took place on a segment of the trail located just west of Islington and Finch. Participants included individuals from the surrounding community who were already familiar with the trail, as well as women visiting the trail for the first time.

The walk audit aimed to gather location-specific insights into trail use and user experience, with a particular focus on women. The walk audit location was chosen based on findings from our previous report, which highlighted a notable underrepresentation of women on the Humber River Recreational Trail compared to the demographics of the surrounding neighbourhood (TCAT, 2024). To support this aim, we developed a walk audit guide designed to prompt participants to reflect on trail features such as infrastructure, maintenance, safety, comfort, appearance, and amenities, and to consider how these features might influence trail accessibility through the lens of their identities and lived experiences as women ([see Appendix 2](#)).

Study leads guided the group along the trail, pausing at pre-scouted locations to complete walk audit questions and facilitate discussion. Informal conversations took place throughout the walk, and observational notes were recorded. This approach encouraged participants to reflect collectively and engage in dialogue with one another, creating an informal focus group-style experience.

Appendix 2

FOCUS GROUP & WALK AUDIT RESOURCES



FOCUS GROUP FACILITATION GUIDE

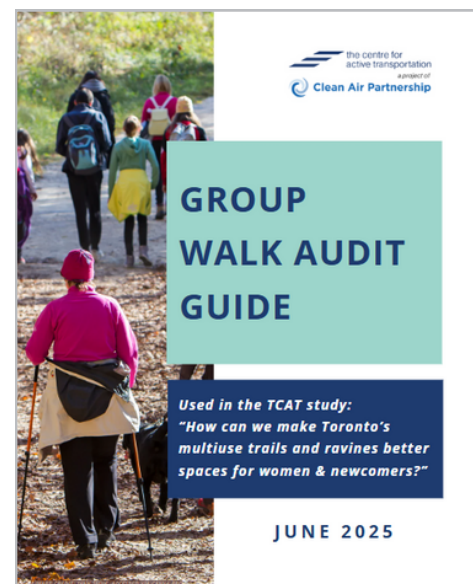
This resource is the semi-structured interview guide we used to facilitate three focus group discussions with women and newcomers on their experiences on Toronto's multiuse trail system.

URL: <https://tcat.ca/resources/toronto-multiuse-trail-study-focus-group-facilitation-guide/>

MULTIUSE TRAIL WALK AUDIT GUIDE

This resource is a copy of the walk audit template we used to better understand the needs of women-identifying trail users.

URL: <https://tcat.ca/resources/toronto-multiuse-trail-study-walk-audit-guide/>





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