Insights Into Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence

A SURVEY OF WOMEN'S SHELTER AND TRANSITION HOUSE WORKERS ACROSS CANADA

Women's Shelters Canada

Women's Shelters Canada (WSC) is based in Ottawa, Ontario. Bringing together 16 provincial and territorial shelter organizations, we represent a strong, unified voice on the issue of violence against women on the national stage. Through collaboration, knowledge exchange, and adoption of innovative practices, we advance the coordination and implementation of high-quality services for women and children accessing VAW shelters and transition houses.

Tech Safety Canada

Tech Safety Canada is a project of Women's Shelters Canada. It equips shelter and transition house workers with the knowledge and resources they need to support women, children, and gender-diverse people with their experiences of technology-facilitated gender-based violence.

Women's Shelters Canada acknowledges that the location of our office and the work that we do in Ottawa is on the traditional, unceded territories of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg people.

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Women and Gender Equality Canada | Femmes et Égalité des genres Canada

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Glossary

Anti-Violence Worker/Frontline Staff/Service Provider

Staff who provide support services and programs to women's shelters and transition houses. Anti-violence worker, frontline staff, and service provider are used interchangeably.

Assistive Technology

Assistive technology is "an umbrella term covering the systems and services related to the delivery of assistive products and services"; they "maintain and improve an individual's functioning and independence, thereby promoting their wellbeing." Examples include wheelchairs, communication aids, spectacles, and prostheses (World Health Organization, 2023). Assistive technology might also include, for example, technologies such as a screen reader or a teletypewriter (TTY) machine.

Internet of Things

A network of interrelated devices that are connected and share data. This can include cars, thermostats, and smartwatches.

Shelters by Type

Emergency shelter or transition house: provides short-term shelter to women and children in crisis, usually with private bedrooms and communal living spaces. Length of stay can be days, weeks, or months, depending on the shelter (Akbarnejad et al., 2023).

Second stage shelter or transitional housing: provides longer-term accommodation to women who may no longer be fleeing immediate abuse but require continued support and safety. Longer-term accommodation may be months or years, depending on the shelter, often in apartment-style spaces (Akbarnejad et al., 2023).

Third stage house: provides longer-term, supportive housing for women who have left violent relationships and no longer need crisis service support. This more independent form of housing has lengths of tenancy from two to four years (Akbarnejad et al., 2023).

Safe homes: are community-based networks of private homes that shelter women and their children, typically for very short stays. They also provide outreach services in small rural communities that are often far from larger towns (Akbarnejad et al., 2023).

Indigenous shelter: The survey allowed respondents to self-identify as working in an Indigenous shelter. This could mean that the organization primarily serves Indigenous women, is located on a First Nation reserve, and/or has a primarily Indigenous governance or leadership team.

Survivor/Service User

To be as inclusive as possible, this report uses the term survivor to refer to people experiencing, or who have experienced, technology-facilitated gender-based violence. Survivor also refers to those accessing support services and programs from women's shelters and transition houses. Survivor and service user are used interchangeably.

Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) is part of a continuum of violence that can take place both online and in-person. It refers to any violent or abusive act, such as domestic violence, harassment, stalking, sexual assault, impersonation, extortion, and the non-consensual filming and sharing of intimate images, carried out via technological devices, digital spaces, and apps.

Woman/Women/She/Her

This report may use woman, women, or she/her pronouns when referring to survivors of gender-based violence. We use the definition, generated by the BC Society of Transition Houses:

> **"The term 'women' refers to and is inclusive of all self-identified women. [WSC] recognizes that while gender-based violence has significant impacts on cis-gender women and girls in Canada, 2SLGBTQQIA+ and gender-diverse people are disproportionately impacted by experiences of violence"** (Akbarnejad et al., 2023, p. 6).

Acronyms

BCSTH – British Columbia Society of Women's Shelters

DAWN Canada – Disabled Women's Network of Canada

GBV – Gender-based violence

IoT – Internet of things

LEAF – Women's Legal Education and Action Fund

NCDII – Nonconsensual Disclosure of Intimate Images

NNEDV – National Network to End Domestic Violence (USA)

TFGBV – Technology-facilitated gender-based violence

TH – Transition house

TTY – Teletypewriter machine

UNODC – United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

VAW – Violence against women

WAGE – Women and Gender Equality Canada

WSC – Women's Shelters Canada

WHO – World Health Organization

Language

The language in this report is imperfect, and the conversation about terminology is ongoing and nuanced. We will continue to make updates to language and terminology in line with best practice for compassionate and accurate communication. For the purposes of this report, 'women', 'survivor', and 'service user' are used; however, this language will presumably change as work moves forward and more inclusive terms are identified.

Principles of Tech Safety Work[1]

Women's Shelters Canada (WSC) **is careful to centre the survivor in its tech safety work. To do this, we follow NNEDV's Safety Net Projects' core principles of tech safety work, which together inform our survivor-centred and trauma-informed approach:**

Technology isn't the problem. Abuse is.

Technology is one tool among many that can be misused by abusers to exert power and control. At the same time, technology is also used by survivors to enhance and maintain safety, decrease isolation, and empower themselves. Technology provides new tools for old behaviours – ultimately, the goals, to cause harm and maintain power, stay the same. While technology can allow abuse to happen, it is these intentionally abusive behaviours that are the problem, not technology itself.

Survivors have a right to technology.

Getting rid of survivors' technology is not the answer to tech-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). Keeping in mind that technology is not the problem in and of itself, those working to address TFGBV must recognize that limiting tech won't stop abuse. In fact, restricting women's access to technology could cut off crucial lifelines and harm reduction tools, like emergency services, or the use of a phone to stay connected to their communities. With an understanding of the pivotal role technology plays in our lives and societies, work surrounding tech safety should focus on promoting safer use of tech that respects women's agency and dignity.

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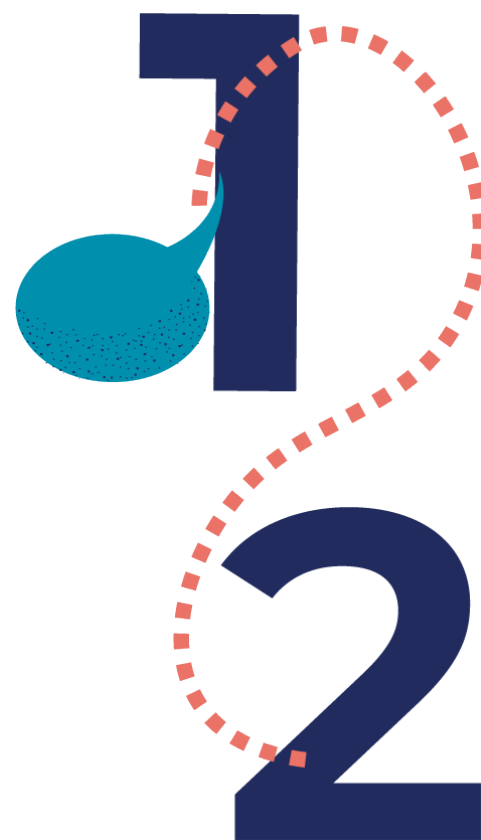
[1]   Adapted from NNEDV's presentation at their Safety Net's Tech Safety Summit 2023 Welcome

Abusers should be held accountable.

Accountability for TFGBV rests with the abuser. It is important that workers do not advise women to get rid of their technology as this can reinforce victim blaming narratives (e.g. it's her fault for sending those pictures) and draw on shame and judgement that may (re)traumatize survivors. When an abuser decides to misuse their phone to send threatening text messages or phone calls, it is illegal. Women are not to blame for their abuser's misuse of technology.

Looking at TFGBV through an intersectional lens

The same power dynamics found within societies replicate themselves in digital spaces, or can be expressed using technology as a tool to reproduce violence and power imbalances. This means that the ways survivors experience violence is intimately related to their identity, and so it is important to consider how varied experiences with violence are. WSC recognizes the need to consider gender-based violence (GBV), and in this context, TFGBV, through an intersectional lens. This lens must actively consider, among other components of identity, race and experiences with systemic racism, age, geographic location, sexual orientation, class and economic marginalization, citizenship status, and experiences with colonization.

Executive Summary

For many women, girls, and gender-diverse people, technology plays a significant role in their daily life. It allows them to participate in economic markets, engage in learning and education, join communities and conversations, and maintain meaningful relationships with friends and family. Technology can also be a way for people experiencing violence to access critical resources and support. However, many survivors are excluded from technological spaces or are not able to use technology safely.
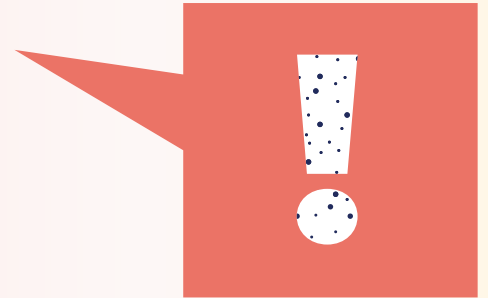
Survivors experiencing violence, and anti-violence workers, are increasingly seeing perpetrators misuse technology as part of their abuse. Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) is part of a continuum of violence that can take place both online and in-person. It refers to any violent or abusive act, such as domestic violence, harassment, stalking, sexual assault, impersonation, extortion, and the non-consensual filming and sharing of intimate images, carried out via technological devices, digital spaces, and apps.

TFGBV is common across Canada and takes a significant toll on survivors. Part of what makes TFGBV challenging to navigate, however, is that it is often dismissed as a less significant or hurtful form of violence. This means that the violence survivors experience may not be recognized or taken seriously, which can impact whether they receive the support they need.

In 2022, WSC undertook a national study of TFGBV among frontline shelter/transition house (TH) workers, as a part of the Tech Safety Canada project. This study was designed to better understand the rates of reporting of TFGBV within shelters/THs, the current knowledge of workers, as well as training and resource needs of frontline staff. While similar studies have been undertaken in Australia, the US, or regionally in BC, this type of research had not previously been undertaken at the federal level in Canada.
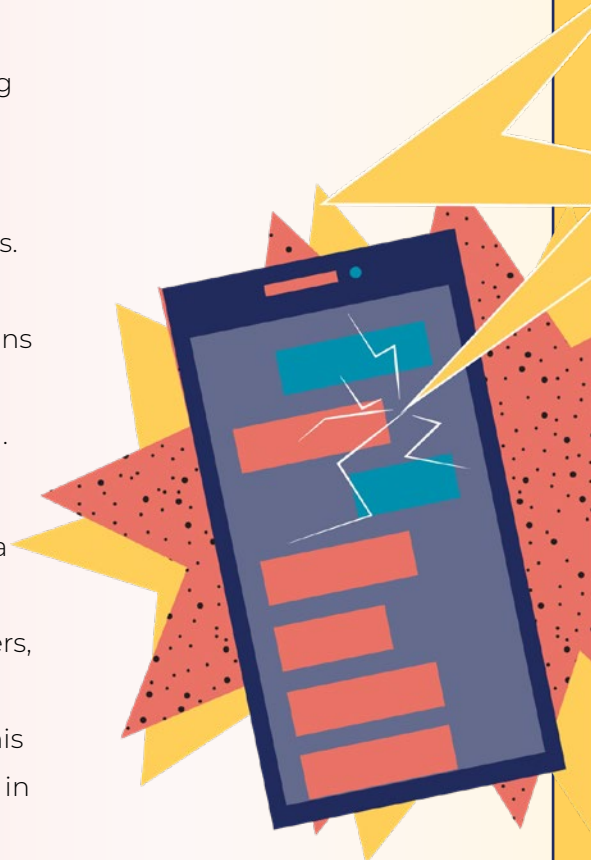
In late 2022, we distributed the Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence Needs Assessment Survey online to women's shelters/THs across the country. We received survey responses from 204 frontline staff. WSC also facilitated a semi-structured focus group in Iqaluit, Nunavut, in March 2023, to gather survey feedback with nine frontline workers. The goals of the survey and the focus group were to better understand what TFGBV looks like for survivors accessing women's shelters/THs across Canada, and to gain insights into the use of technology with organizations.

The report provides information on: prevalence and common types of TFGBV reported to anti-violence workers by survivors; the technology and devices that are weaponized against survivors; the impact of and differences in how TFGBV is experienced by different groups of survivors; how organizations and support workers are using technology in the delivery of their programs; gaps in services and knowledge; recommendations for future work, training, and advocacy; and recommendations for future actions to address the increasing rates of TFGBV.
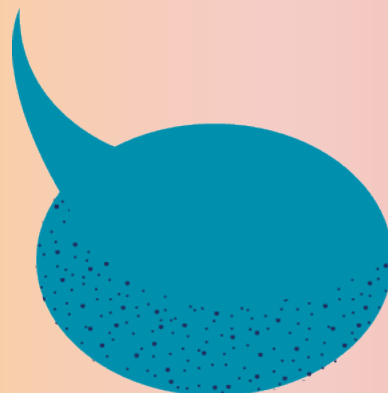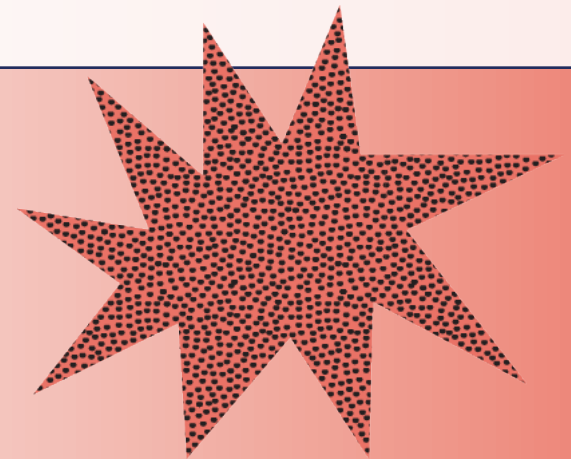
Summary of Results

TFGBV is a significant barrier to women, girls, and gender-diverse peoples' tech use, and impacts their safety, wellbeing, and ability to flee violence.

TFGBV is prevalent and a serious issue in Canada.

- **95%** of anti-violence workers reported that they have supported service users who have disclosed experiencing some form of TFGBV. The types of abuse most commonly facilitated by technology include harassment, closely followed by threats and location tracking.

TFGBV profoundly impacts survivors' lives and takes a toll on their sense of safety, mental health, and relationships. TFGBV affects access to services, safety, and connection. This includes social connection and support, housing, employment, and domestic and/or sexual violence support.

- **76%** of respondents indicated that TFGBV has a significant impact on survivors' ability to access social connection and support.

Some groups are impacted disproportionately by TFGBV.

- **Five groups** report the highest incidence of TFGBV: Immigrants, refugees, and non-status service users; young service users; service users in rural, remote, and isolated areas; Indigenous service users; and older and elderly service users.

It is a misconception that TFGBV is harmless or less serious than other forms of violence. TFGBV is harmful and often occurs alongside other forms of violence.

- Among survey respondents **96%** indicated that emotional abuse commonly co-occurs with TFGBV.

Shelters/THs are using technology with clients, and many have tech policies, yet overall shelter staff lack confidence in supporting clients with technology and TFGBV.

- Only **12%** of survey respondents felt very confident in helping survivors navigate being monitored or surveilled online.

While TFGBV is a common occurrence among survivors, it is still a relatively new area for many working in shelters/THs. Organizations are attempting to create policies and educate their staff but are constrained by a lack of funding and staff time. This study shows that there is an interest in having training and resources for frontline staff that will allow them to be more responsive to survivors experiencing TFGBV.

Recommendations

Technology's use, and misuse, warrants careful consideration and thoughtful and timely action from a range of actors, including government bodies, public safety agencies, corporations, and civil society. A collective and coordinated response is required to effectively address TFGBV and promote safety for vulnerable populations. Some of the core recommendations to emerge from the survey include:

- Advocacy by anti-violence organizations on behalf of and with survivors on a number of levels, including with government, corporations, and the police and justice system.

- Corporations should re-evaluate policies and promote and implement corporate policies and practices that are trauma-informed, accessible, and survivor-centred.

- Governments should put forward legislation about TFGBV, e.g. facilitate meaningful consultation to incorporate TFGBV in examples within existing criminal and civil laws, with frontline workers and survivors. They can also provide sustained funding that will support those in the sector to address TFGBV.

- Police and justice systems need to increase training and reassess their policies to better support survivors experiencing TFGBV. Specifically, this should include training on the significance of TFGBV and its impact on survivors, and appropriate and proportionate responses to this crime.

- Additional training and resources need to be developed and provided for frontline workers. These need to fit the needs of staff, including training that is varied in format and delivery, opportunities for specialized training to support survivors with particular needs and experiences, and training that uses a trauma-informed, survivor-centred, and non-shaming lens.
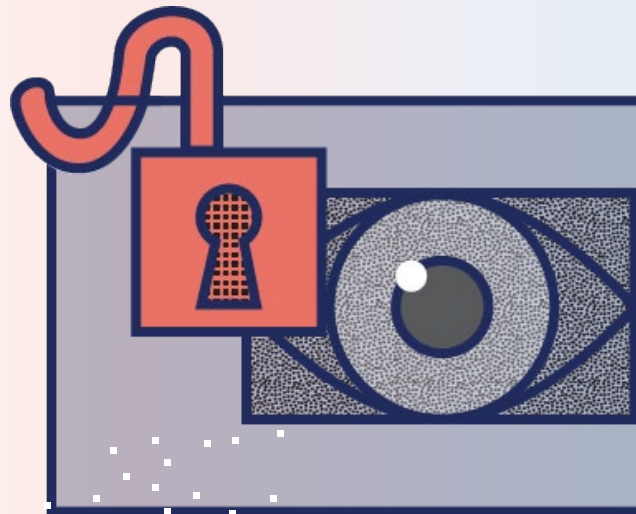
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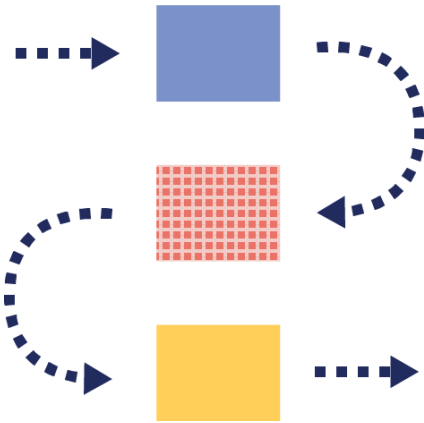
Many have welcomed the growth in technology in our lives. We are more connected than we have ever been before. We have greater ability to participate in economic markets, engage in learning, and join communities. Yet while technology presents amazing opportunities, it has also been weaponized against many, including women, girls, and gender-diverse people. TFGBV is a growing concern across Canada and globally.

There is growing research and advocacy within and beyond Canada to understand and address TFGBV. This includes the work of many community organizations, including YWCA Canada, the BC Society of Transition Houses (BCSTH), and the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF Canada). Further, this includes the work/activities of academics, such as Jane Bailey and the eQuality Project, Suzie Dunn, Moira Aikenhead, and Alexa Dodge, as well as many other individuals, institutions, and private sector organizations.

TFGBV is part of a continuum of violence that can take place both online and in-person. It encompasses a wide range of behaviours. Most of these behaviours fall within two key categories: harassment (including stalking, spying, and threats), and image-based abuse (including voyeurism, non-consensual distribution of intimate images ['revenge porn'], and other behaviours related to the exploitation of images). TFGBV comprises any behaviour in which a perpetrator (mis)uses digital technologies to cause harm to another person.

In 2021, BCSTH surveyed British Columbia anti-violence workers to learn more about TFGBV in the BC context. The survey found that TFGBV was extremely common. A majority of anti-violence workers (89%) reported that they had supported survivors experiencing TFGBV (George & Wong, 2022). These results are mirrored by the results of anti-violence organizations' findings internationally. Similarly, in 2020, a WESNET Australian survey found a majority of respondents (99%) had clients who had experienced technology-facilitated stalking and abuse (Woodlock et al., 2020).

Unfortunately, the TFGBV many survivors experience is not recognized or addressed, which can impact whether survivors receive the support they need. TFGBV has unique elements that make it difficult to address, including the way it facilitates easy access to survivors by abusers. Before devices, such as smartphones, and platforms, such as text and social media, were widely accessible, survivors could create physical space between themselves and their abusers, which made it more feasible to build a sense of distance and safety. While technology presents many advantages and opportunities, it can also be misused by abusers to stalk, harass, and threaten survivors. For example, survivors might receive a constant stream of violent messages, be stalked via social media by their abuser, or have their devices monitored. As reported by Western University's Learning Network, "[w]hile the dynamics of violence largely remain the same, technology extends the reach and creates new forms of abusive behaviour. Technology-related violence erodes a survivors' sense of safety: it threatens the geographic and spatial boundaries of a 'safe distance' or a 'safe place' (The Learning Network, 2013, p. 1). The nature of this violence may feel inescapable or impossible to address, making any attempts to flee feel pointless.

Currently, some provinces are working towards civil legislation to respond to TFGBV. For example, due to the government of BC reporting that "incidents of sharing intimate images without consent are underreported due to stigma, embarrassment and a prevailing presumption that there's no meaningful avenue for redress" (BC Gov News, 2023a), BC will soon enact civil legislation to combat nonconsensual disclosure of intimate images (NCDII) with more governments to follow (BC Gov News, 2023b).

Though there is some work being done, there is still a gap in knowledge of the prevalence of TFGBV in Canada. In 2022, as part of the Tech Safety Canada project, which aimed to identify these gaps, WSC launched a study on TFGBV to better understand how this impacts those coming into shelters/THs, how shelters workers are navigating this new and growing form of violence, and what gaps in knowledge or resources there are in shelters.

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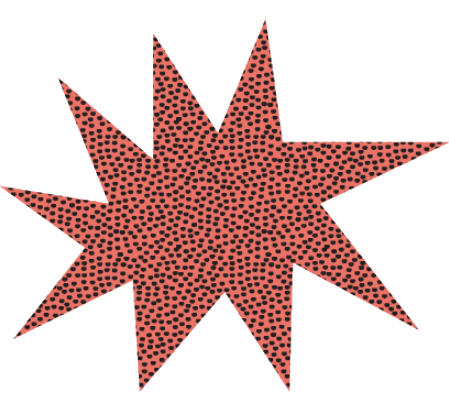
Methodology

To expand upon the work on TFGBV that had been done in Canada, WSC, as part of the Tech Safety Canada project, launched a study in 2022 to better understand the experiences of survivors and frontline workers with TFGBV. While BCSTH and WSC have both been engaging in TFGBV research and training throughout the country, we know that this is a new and evolving form of violence. This study was designed to fill gaps in knowledge, including better understanding the TFGBV training and resource needs of frontline workers.

Data collection was undertaken from the end of 2022 through Spring 2023. This study used a mixed methods approach. Mixed methods combine the strengths of quantitative research with those of qualitative. We designed an online survey that was shared with VAW shelters/THs across the country, and ran one in-person focus group in Nunavut.
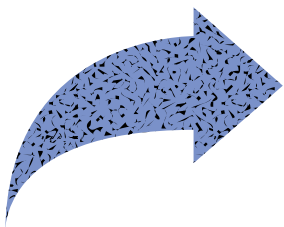
Survey

The Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence Needs Assessment survey was distributed to shelters/THs across the country. The survey was designed to better understand the prevalence, form, and severity of TFGBV experienced by survivors accessing shelters/THs, identify ways in which shelters/THs are using technology to connect with and support survivors, and to determine the kind of resources needed to help shelters/THs more effectively support survivors experiencing TFGBV.

The survey was offered in French and English and was distributed online via Qualtrics. It launched in December 2022 and remained open until March 2023. The survey was open to all VAW second stage, safe home, transition, and mixed shelters that serve women fleeing violence. An anonymous link to the survey was sent to 518 shelters through WSC's network. The survey was designed to be completed by frontline workers who support survivors. The survey was promoted with assistance from our 16 provincial and territorial associations, as well as through our own shelter/TH list and newsletter. We conducted targeted outreach to shelters to bolster response numbers throughout the survey period.

Many of this survey's questions were adapted from research conducted by partner organizations working in the field of tech safety. WSC drew on

needs assessment surveys developed by BCSTH, the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV), and the Women's Services Network's (WESNET) 2020 Second National Survey on Technology Abuse and Domestic Violence in Australia.

The survey questions were divided into four sections: 1) Shelter/TH information; 2) Service users' experiences of TFGBV; 3) Using technology to communicate with service users; and 4) Training and resource development.

The survey included 42 questions and took about 20–30 minutes to complete. The bulk of the questions resulted in quantitative data; however, many questions offered text boxes so respondents could elaborate on answers or provide further feedback. In line with WSC's goals of trauma-informed practice, as well as the practical realities of frontline work, none of the questions, except for the consent message, required a response.

The survey received responses from 204 shelter/TH workers from across Canada.

Focus Group

In March 2023, we had the opportunity to deliver TFGBV training in Nunavut to frontline shelter/THs workers. Given the barriers to engaging in an online survey that can be experienced by rural, northern, and isolated communities, such as poor connectivity, we took this time to host a focus group on the issues we raise in the survey. This semi-structured focus group was attended by nine individuals from four shelters/THs. The session was guided by three questions: 1) How is tech being used, particularly in Nunavut? 2) What are concerns about how tech is being used? 3) What areas would you like to know more about and what resources would be helpful?

We used a semi-structured format for the focus group, as this allowed us to come prepared with questions, but also to provide space for the conversation to flow naturally. With the consent of the frontline workers involved, WSC recorded feedback from attendees. While this is a very small sample, based on the responses we received, the focus group confirmed much of what we had heard through the survey, and also raised some unique issues for remote and northern communities.
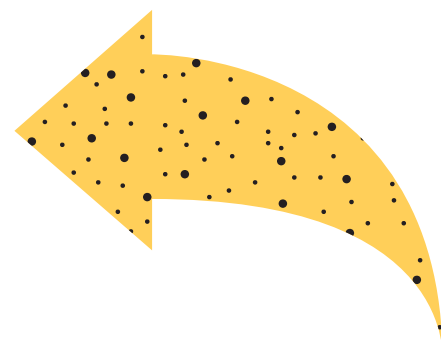
Confidentiality

Those who completed the survey or engaged in the focus group consented to participate and were given the opportunity to withdraw their consent at any time. Study data is only accessible to the research team and is stored on password protected computers and programs. All quotes from the survey and focus groups used in this report have been anonymized to maintain the confidentiality of our participants.

Limitations

The decision to use an anonymous rather than an individualized link to distribute the survey was made with the intention of facilitating the sharing of access to the survey within shelters/THs. This meant it could more easily reach frontline workers, not only administrators, which could increase participation of staff working directly with survivors. This unfortunately made follow-up on the completion of in-progress surveys impossible. As a result, there were a number of surveys that were not completed. Using an anonymous link also made the tracking of organizations' responses more complicated. The survey was relatively lengthy, which likely impacted survey completion rates. Together, these factors may have resulted in a lower response rate and gaps in response on a regional basis. Providing an option to complete the survey via telephone, as has been done in previous surveys, may have improved response rates.

Our outreach also encountered some limitations, similar to that encountered in previous survey work completed by WSC. These limitations include turnover in the sector, especially as it relates to changes in contact information for frontline organizations, and connectivity issues based on region or rurality. While we attempt to maintain up-to-date contacts, and offer alternative means to complete surveys, these will continue to impact response rates.

A final limitation was the overall understanding of technology, TFGBV, and the barriers of GBV. It is well documented that nonprofit organizations do not have the funding and capacity to access and learn about the most up-to-date technology (Imagine Canada, n.d.), which can contribute to knowledge gaps around TFGBV. Further, technology is constantly changing, contributing to gaps in service providers' digital literacy, and their understanding of this kind of violence. This may have in turn reduced the likelihood of survey completion, as respondents were not comfortable with the subject matter.

All quotes from the survey and focus groups used in this report have been anonymized to maintain the confidentiality of our participants.

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Survey Demographics

The survey was completed by 204 participants. Of the 204 respondents, the majority (89%) work for an organization that operates an emergency shelter/TH, 35% work for an organization that operates a second stage shelter, while only 6% work at a safe home, and 4% work for an organization that operates a third stage house. Among these organizations, 76% (n=203) indicated that their shelter/TH location is confidential. A small number of respondents (8%) indicated that their shelter/TH was Indigenous-focused, -serving, or -operated.

The survey response was highest in Ontario (29%), Alberta (18%), BC (16%), and Quebec (14%). Response rates were comparatively low among Atlantic provinces and the territories, which can be explained by factors such as low connectivity, smaller populations and thus fewer shelters, and sector-specific factors such as staff turnover (Alberta Council of Women's Shelters, 2023; Hoogendam & Maki, 2024; Maki, 2019; WSC, 2022).
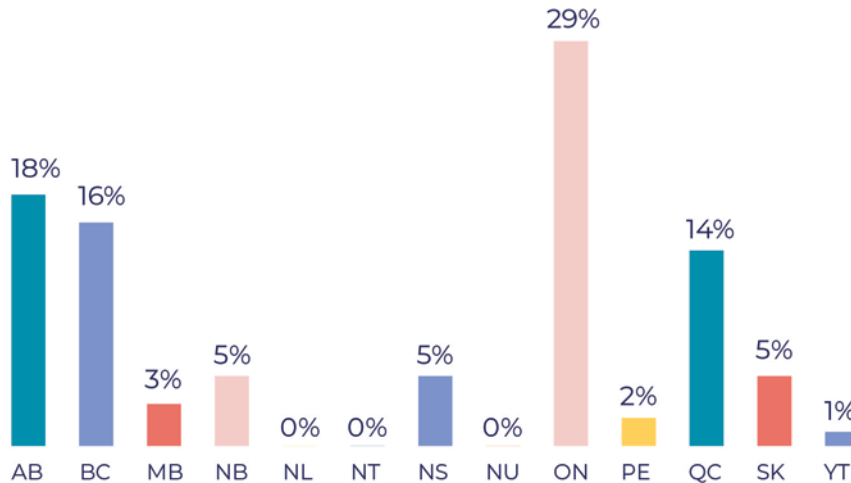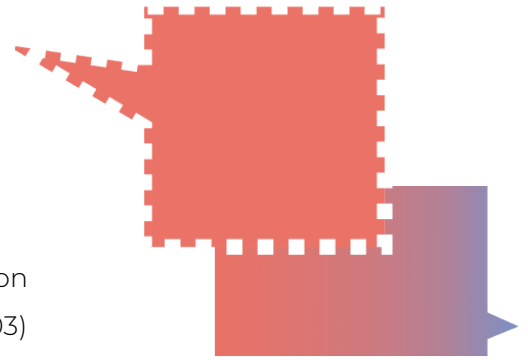
Figure 1: Province/Territory of Respondents (n=204)

We heard from respondents across communities large and small. Among respondents, 23% work with a shelter/TH located in a metropolitan centre, 11% work in a large community, 28% work in a medium-size community, and 38% in a small community. A small percentage of respondents indicated that they work rurally, or that their shelter/TH was located in a northern, or remote community.

This mix of community sizes was important, as we know that connectivity can be much lower outside of major urban areas. To really understand issues related to TFGBV and the knowledge of frontline staff, we needed to hear from respondents with varying levels of digital access and literacy.

Prevalence and Forms of Violence

We found high levels of TFGBV being observed by anti-violence workers. The levels of violence are comparable with those found by BCSTH and WESNET, with 95% of anti-violence workers reporting that they have supported survivors who have disclosed experiencing some form of TFGBV. These are high rates that not only reflect the prevalence, but also point to a need for training, resources, and investment to address this form of violence.

The most commonly reported forms of TFGBV include harassment, threats, and location tracking, as shown in figure 2. These forms of violence contribute to an environment of control and fear for one's safety, as well as inhibiting women from using technology. Women who are experiencing TFGBV may be less inclined to reach out for help if they are being tracked through devices, such as computers and phones. While technology has become a necessity in many people's lives, it has also become weaponized against women, trapping them in violent situations.
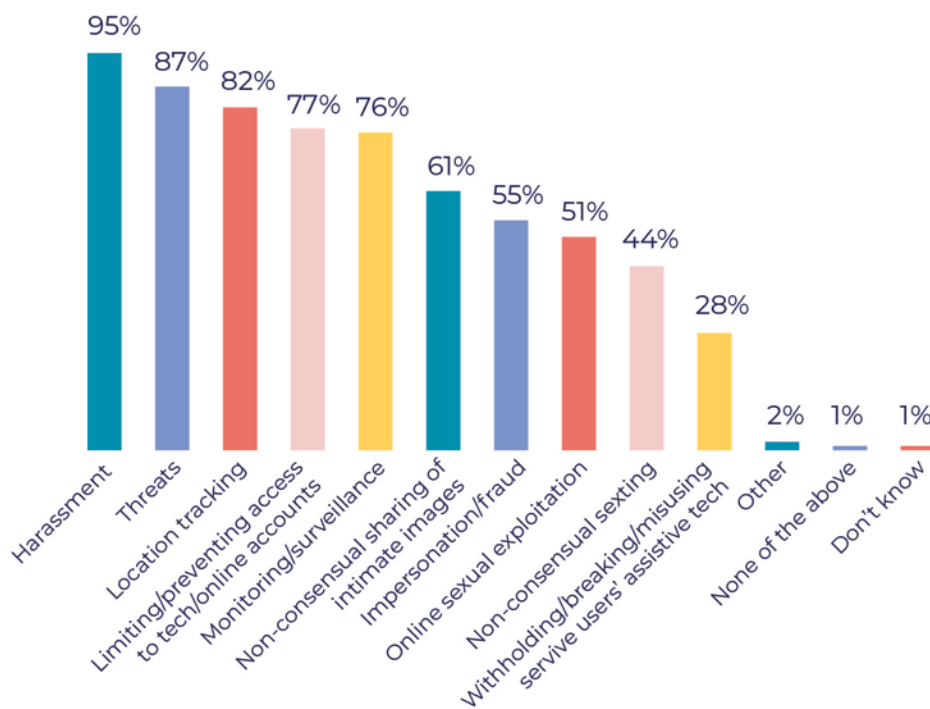
Figure 2: Forms of TFGBV Reported by Frontline Workers (n=204)

Harassments and Threats

Survey respondents indicated that harassment via technology (95%) was the most commonly observed form of violence, closely followed by threats[2] made via technology (87%). Survivors' experiences of harassment and threats are often not considered a form of violence, or a crime, and are therefore dismissed. These forms of violence can serve to isolate survivors and reduce their ability to seek help and can also be precursors to more extreme forms of violence, including femicide.

Location Tracking and Monitoring or Surveillance

Monitoring, stalking, and surveillance feature heavily in the types of violence reported.

Location tracking using technology was reported by 82% of frontline workers, and 76% of workers supported survivors who reported experiencing monitoring and surveillance via technology. This finding is unsurprising, given that recent reports have identified that the use of stalkerware globally is a persistent problem, with nearly 30,000 people affected in 2022 (Kaspersky, 2022). During our tech safety training, we heard from frontline workers that high-tech stalkerware is less common than lower-tech methods of surveillance and tracking, such as the use of shared accounts (e.g. cloud storage or email). While the use of stalkerware, such as mobile spyware is a relatively less common tool of TFGBV compared to other methods, it is noteworthy and concerning as it becomes more readily available to those seeking control over their partners, children, and family members. The reliance on devices, apps, and accounts for our daily communications and tasks means that telling survivors to stop using technology would not be reasonable or practicable; however, these same technologies make survivors more accessible and vulnerable to abusers.
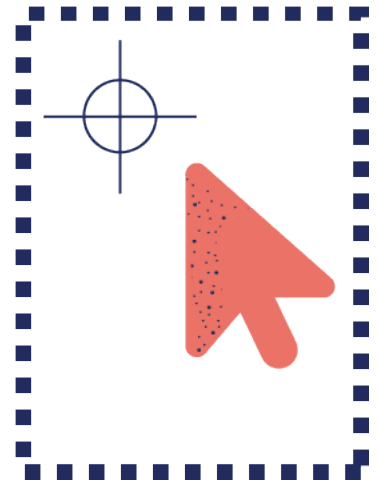
Access to Technology

Preventing access to tech is a significant method of abuse that 77% of frontline workers encounter. Anti-violence workers reported that they have supported survivors who have experienced abusers limiting or preventing their access to technology or online accounts, including through the destruction of technology. This can also include **withholding, breaking, or**

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[2]   While some of these threats are explicit, abusers may also make covert threats via technology. A covert threat is a specific threatening tactic used by abusers, in which a very context-specific comment is made in a way that appears innocuous by a third party. WESNET has documented this phenomenon in their work (Woodlock et al., 2020).

misusing the survivor's assistive technology (e.g. hearing aids, screen reader, Teletypewriter (TTY) machine). These kinds of abusive strategies have also been documented by BCSTH, which found that this form of violence is particularly high among frontline workers in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities (George & Wong, 2022).

Having access to tech is an essential tool for many survivors, which allows them to check in with family and friends, and contact emergency and anti-violence services. Recognizing that tech can provide a means for survivors to reach out for support, abusers will control and limit access to technology in order to isolate. This might include breaking devices, controlling access to internet and Wi-Fi passwords, or restricting time with devices or accounts. Relatedly, it is also important to consider whether survivors have privacy when they use a device. They may technically have access to a device or the internet but be unable to seek support if they do not have the privacy to safely search for or contact resources and services.

Specific populations experience this form of violence in unique ways. For example, survivors living with disabilities may experience forms of violence that weaponize or target their assistive technology. More than one-quarter (28%) of survey respondents had supported a survivor who reported that an abuser had withheld, broken, or misused their assistive technology (e.g. hearing aids, screen reader, TTY machine). This can leave these individuals isolated and very dependent upon their abuser.

Impersonation or Fraud

The UN Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC) (2021) found that technology plays a significant role in human trafficking operations

More than half (51%) of anti-violence workers supported survivors who had experienced forms of TFGBV related to impersonation or fraud, including online services or benefits abuse (e.g. the perpetrator pretends to be the victim to access benefits or sign up for a service). With increasing access to online banking, shopping, and communicating, there are more ways for abusers to infiltrate accounts and perpetrate fraud. Many have limited security on personal devices, including saving passwords for easy access, using the same passwords for multiple accounts, and not locking devices. For those experiencing TFGBV, these time-saving tactics can make them vulnerable to abusive tactics, such as posting humiliating content on social media accounts, draining bank accounts, opening credit cards, or making purchases.

Some survey respondents indicated that they had observed catfishing

scams.[3] The RCMP reported that this has become a dangerous and devastating trend that has defrauded millions from those affected (Northcott, 2022). Survivors who have experienced romance scams often experience feelings of shame and embarrassment, despite accountability needing to fall on perpetrators.

Non-consensual Sharing of Intimate Images and Sexting

Over half of survey respondents reported NCDII online or via technology (61%), as well as non-consensual sexting (i.e. receiving unwanted and sexually explicit content) (55%). This means that anti-violence workers regularly support survivors who have reported experiencing NCDII. While a significant number, it likely understates the scope of the issue, particularly as victims of this crime often feel shame and embarrassment, and therefore do not report. The Government of Canada reports that there is limited data concerning NCDII, and that anecdotal evidence contributes significantly to understanding the topic (CCSO Cybercrime Working Group, 2013). Despite this we know that Canadian rates of NCDII are on the rise (Moreau, 2021). In fact, "In 2020, Statistics Canada reported an 80% increase in incidents reported to police of non-consensual sharing of intimate images across the country compared to the previous five years" (BC Gov News, 2023a). This kind of abuse can be used as a form of exploitation, and leads to shame, embarrassment, and damage to reputation.

Online Sexual Exploitation

Almost half (44%) of respondents have supported a survivor who reported experiencing online sexual exploitation, such as a perpetrator building an online relationship with a woman over time to gain her trust for purposes of sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, soliciting of images/videos, or trafficking. Though not all cases are related to human trafficking, it's important to consider this finding in the context of global human trafficking statistics, particularly considering that human trafficking is often intimately related to tech misuse. The UN Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC) (2021) found that technology plays a significant role in human trafficking operations. Latonero (2012) identified that increasingly mobile devices and networks are being used to facilitate human trafficking.

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[3]   "Catfishing is when someone sets up a fake online identity and uses it to trick and control others. Often, they do it to scam people out of money, blackmail them or harm them in some other way." (eSafety Commissioner, 2023)

While trafficking is one area of concern related to online sexual exploitation, this form of abuse is also used as a tactic to control and humiliate a partner, family member, friend, or child. Online sexual exploitation can include sharing intimate images or videos, online grooming, tricking victims into sex acts, or forcing victims to record sex acts. This material can be used to threaten survivors into staying in a relationship out of fear. This type of manipulation often deeply affects emotional wellbeing and can contribute to survivors feeling more tethered to their abuser.

Other Forms of TFGBV

Another example of violence noted in the survey was the use of children's technology to track a partner or former partner. We heard from many workers that abusers often misuse smart technology to track children's locations in order to stalk their mother. Not only does this violate women's privacy and security, but also brings children into this pattern of abuse.

A small number of respondents indicated that they did not know the types of TFGBV that survivors had experienced. As this is an emerging and evolving area of violence, this could indicate a gap in knowledge in the identification of TFGBV or the types of TFGBV (either by survivors or service providers).

TFGBV has become prevalent among those accessing shelters/THs. Unfortunately, technologies that should bring greater independence and safety to women, are increasingly being used by abusers to control and harm them. Workers need the resources, supports, and knowledge to effectively support women experiencing TFGBV.

Technology and Devices

As technology has become more integrated into our daily life, the potential for misuse has also grown. Given how integral computers, smartphones, social media, assistive tech, and many other programs and devices have become in our lives, it is difficult to simply stop using these when harms arise. This is the difficult tension that many women face when experiencing TFGBV. Anti-violence workers identified many kinds of technology that have been misused against the survivors they work with.

Devices

The devices that were identified to be the most misused against survivors were smartphones (98%) and laptops (72%). Other notable forms of tech being misused include GPS-enabled location tracking devices (e.g. Tile, AirTag, TrackR, GPS device for vehicles) (53%), hidden cameras (38%), and desktop computers (34%).
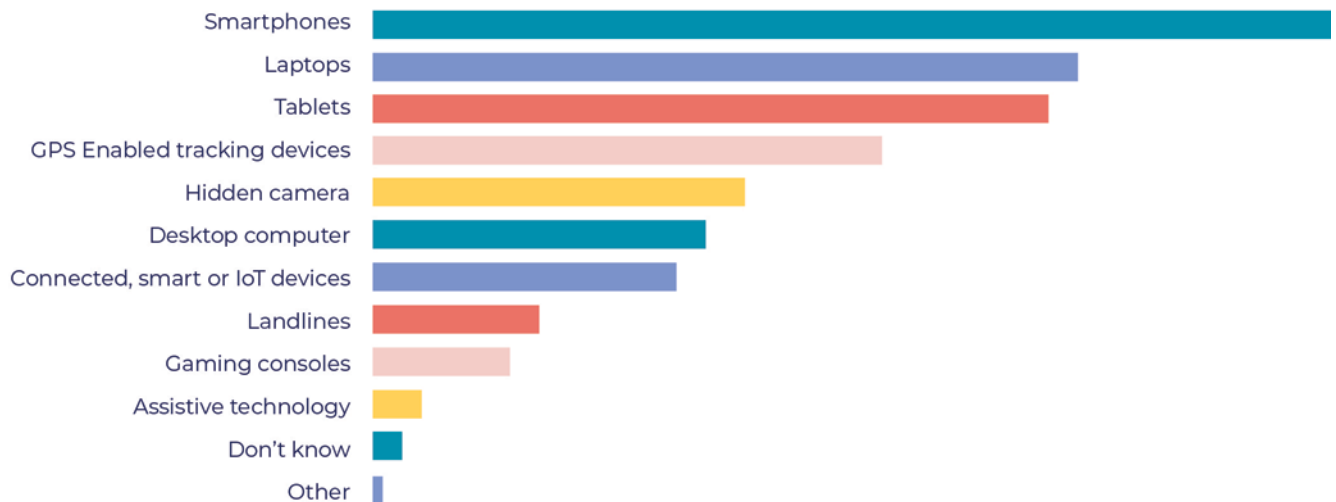
Figure 3: Common Forms of Technology Misused Against Survivors (n=204)

More than 30% of anti-violence workers reported that Connected, Smart, or Internet of Things (IoT)[4] devices were being used against the survivors they work with. These devices and systems can provide yet another highly invasive way that technology can be misused to monitor, harass, threaten, or harm. At the same time, they are also potential tools people can use to strategically increase their safety. This includes everyday devices connected to the internet, such as thermostats, cars, appliances, smartwatches, lights, clocks, security systems, and smart home technology. Another everyday item that was reported to be used against survivors is gaming consoles (14%).

For survivors with disabilities who use assistive devices, the misuse of these devices by an abuser can reduce independence, increase isolation, and cause great harm. Among survey respondents 5% indicated that they have seen assistive technology, such as hearing aids, screen readers, and TTY machines, be misused against survivors. Although this number may appear small, it is notable as women living with disabilities experience a

[4] Read more: You can learn more about IoT devices in WSC's Tech Safety and Privacy toolkit.

disproportionate level of GBV, and there are many barriers women with disabilities face in reporting violence and accessing support. When women with disabilities have their assistive technology taken away, destroyed, or used against them, this can prevent them from engaging in daily tasks. While this can increase isolation for victims of this type of abuse, it can also pose serious health and safety risks (Safety Net Project, 2019).

When abusers access everyday devices to harass, humiliate, threaten, and terrorize survivors, they can become isolated, and deeply fearful of everything around them. In addition to the fear of the person who is perpetrating abuse, TFGBV also creates fear of things. Not only is home not safe, but the house itself can be used as a device to trap, control, and abuse a survivor.

Digital Spaces and Apps

Digital spaces have proliferated, and our reliance on these systems has increased further through the pandemic. These have become such an integral part of our lives, that we forget they could be used to perpetrate harm. Programs used against survivors included messaging, social media, dating apps, and even gig economy apps, such as ride sharing and food delivery apps.
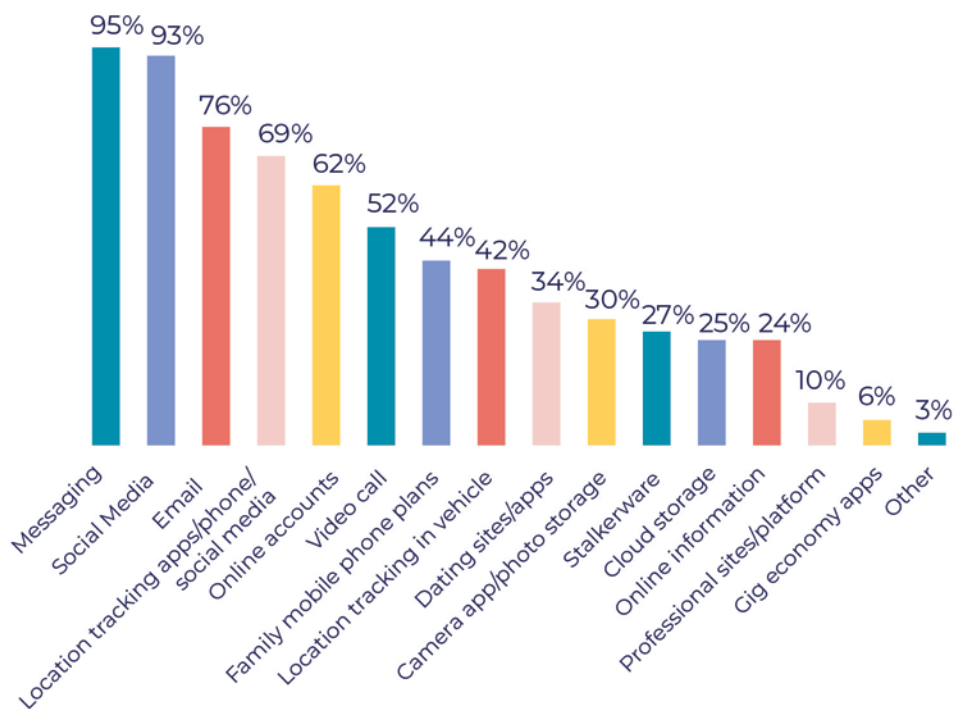
Figure 4: Programs Misused Against Survivors (n=204)

Frontline staff cited messaging programs (e.g. text, iMessage, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Signal, etc.) as the technological tools most commonly used to abuse or violate survivors (95%), followed by social media (e.g. Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Instagram, BeReal, Spotify, Discord) (93%), and email (76%). These are basic programs that many people use regularly, particularly texting apps and email. When these are compromised or unavailable, survivors are less able to stay connected to others and access safety.

The use of platforms that utilize location tracking was also commonly cited as a form of TFGBV. Location tracking through an app, phone, or through social media (e.g. Find My Friends, Find My Phone, location check-ins on social media, fitness apps such as Strava) was reported by 69% of anti-violence workers, followed by location tracking in a vehicle (e.g. On Star or putting a physical GPS tracker in a vehicle) (42%). The use of stalkerware apps was reported by 27% of survey respondents. Stalkerware takes a device that is designed to make the world more accessible and turns it into a weapon that can be used to stalk and terrorize survivors. Half (52%) of the anti-violence workers reported that video call programs (e.g. FaceTime, Skype, Zoom) were misused against survivors. These programs can also be used to track survivors by requiring them to show their location, or by using video to identify where they are located.

Online platforms (62%), such as banking and utilities accounts, are also frequently exploited by abusers. This can include logging into bank accounts and withdrawing funds, or not paying or canceling utility bills so that there is no heat or hot water. Similarly, 44% of respondents reported working with survivors whose shared family mobile phone plans were misused by an abuser. This can include suspending or canceling a phone service, monitoring phone usage through phone bills, or not paying monthly bills to create bad credit under the survivor's name.

Other programs that abusers interfere with include cloud storage, professional sites and platforms (e.g. LinkedIn, Slack, Microsoft Teams), and dating sites or apps. While TFGBV is often dismissed, the misuse of these digital spaces and apps can disrupt all areas of survivor's lives, including finances, employment, dating, and social interactions, with potentially long-term consequences.

Impact of TFGBV

"There is the additional aspect of power and control that abusers will maintain over the client. They assume they can maintain power, surveillance, and control over their interactions." — Survey respondent

TFGBV has profound impacts on survivors' wellbeing, ability to seek support, and capacity to flee violence. Anti-violence workers shared the many ways that TFGBV has negatively impacted survivors' ability to access services. Access to services is affected by actions such as an abuser monitoring calls or emails, impersonating survivors, or spreading information online that damages reputation.
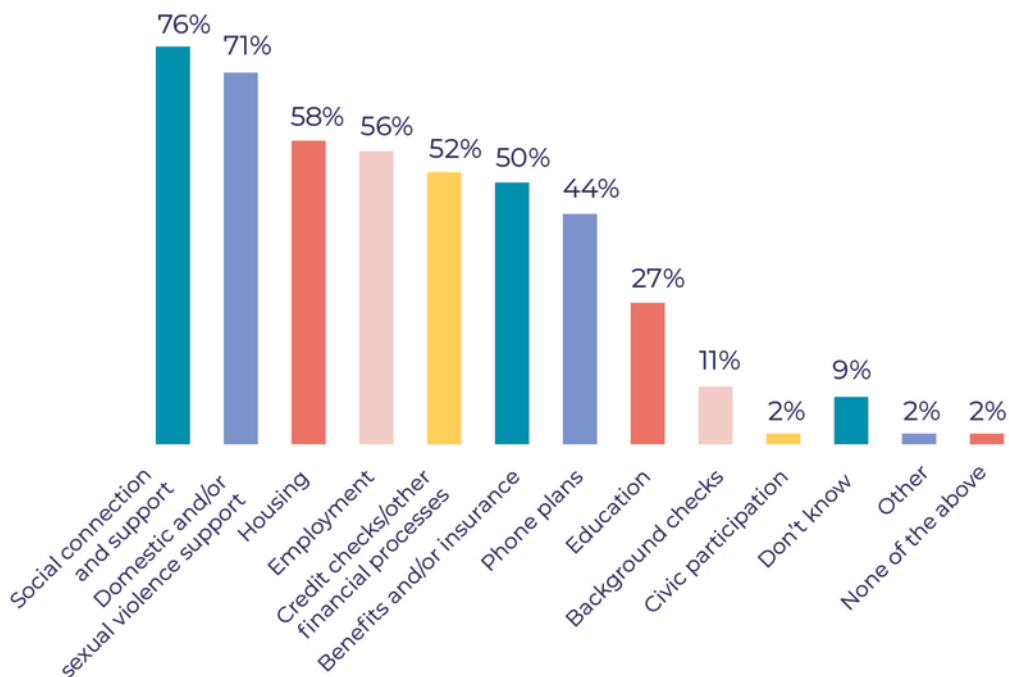
Figure 5: Service Access Impacted by TFGBV (n=204)

Respondents indicated that TFGBV has a significant impact on survivors' ability to access social connection and support (76%). This has concerning implications not only for survivors' ability to engage with their communities and receive important support from loved ones, but also for their ability to escape violence. Relatedly, 71% reported impacts on access to domestic and/or sexual violence support services. Both of these have the potential to significantly isolate a survivor and restrict their ability to access help and flee violence.

TFGBV impacts survivors' access to essential opportunities and lifelines to establish or maintain their livelihoods, including housing (e.g. rental

applications) (58%), employment (56%), and education (27%). This is particularly concerning in the context of survivor's attempts to escape violence, as TFGBV poses barriers to finding housing, accessing sources of income, and seeking opportunities for new or different career options. TFGBV also affects the logistics and financial dimensions of survivors' lives. Respondents reported that TFGBV impacted survivors' credit checks and other financial processes (52%), while 50% reported impacts on benefits and insurance (e.g. pandemic support, employment insurance, income assistance). Survivors' ability to access phone plans (44%) was also impacted. Other affected services include drivers' licenses, utilities, family court proceedings, and online resources, such as email or social media.

TFGBV can significantly destabilize women's lives, not only at the time when the abuse is occurring, but in the form of long-term economic or reputational harm. There is often a focus on stopping the violence, and addressing the trauma, but TFGBV can prevent women from recovering both by barring them from accessing needed supports, services, and resources, and also by negatively affecting credit, reputation, and opportunities in the long-term.

Co-Occurring Violence

It is a misconception that TFGBV is harmless or less serious than other forms of violence. TFGBV is harmful in and of itself; as demonstrated above, and it can prevent survivors from accessing a wide range of essential services and takes a toll on social connection and support. TFGBV can also be an indicator that other forms of violence may be taking place; the survey's results demonstrate that TFGBV often occurs alongside other forms of violence.

Our survey adapted a question posed by WESNET Australia to frontline workers, asking about abuse commonly seen co-occurring with TFGBV. We heard that 96% of respondents saw emotional abuse commonly co-occurring with TFGBV, and 88% observed threats and extortion. Respondents also identified that stalking commonly co-occurs (87%) with TFGBV. Stalking is a notable form of co-occurring violence because of its invasion of privacy, and because of the links between stalking and life-threatening violence. In its reporting on the same question, WESNET stressed that "stalking is associated with a significant risk of lethal or near lethal harm" and has been connected to risk of homicide by an intimate partner (Woodlock et al., 2020). Similarly, Canadian research has

TFGBV can significantly destabilize women's lives, not only at the time when the abuse is occurring, but in the form of long-term economic or reputational harm.

shown that stalking can be a precursor to violent assaults and femicide (Burczycka & Conroy, 2018).

Survey respondents identified high levels (78%) of financial abuse co-occurring with TFGBV. The high rates of co-occurrence with the above forms of violence are unsurprising given that technology can facilitate these types of abuse. Technology can facilitate access to accounts that can be used to perpetrate stalking, financial abuse, and many forms of harassment, threats, and exploitation.
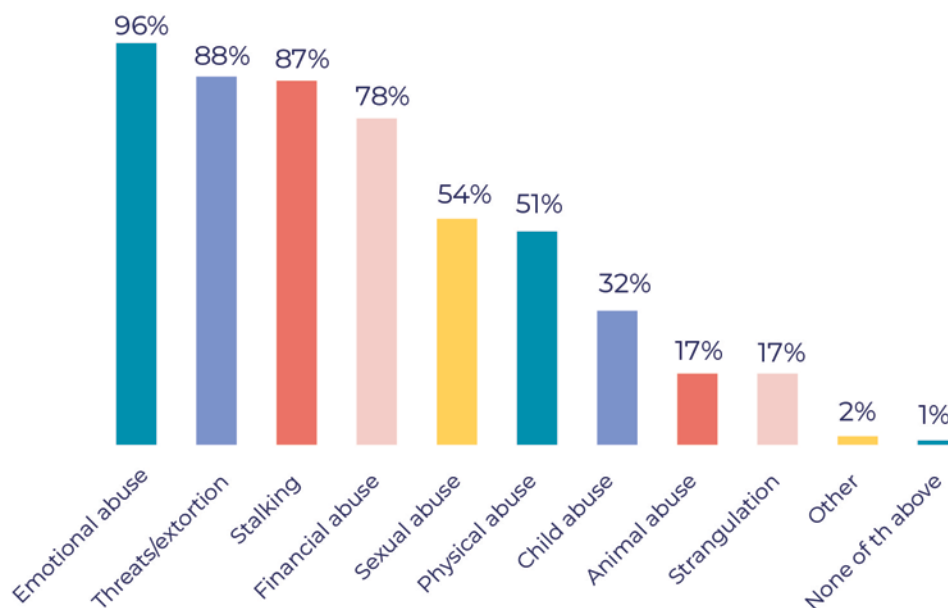
Figure 6: Abuse Co-Occurring with TFGBV (n=204)

More than half of anti-violence workers identified sexual abuse (54%) and physical abuse (51%) co-occurring with TFGBV. In addition, one in three workers (32%) saw TFGBV commonly co-occurring with child abuse. This raises particular concerns for survivors, especially regarding the intensity and the breadth of violence they face, as well as violence directed towards their family members and dependents. A specific form of physical abuse identified as co-occurring with TFGBV was strangulation (17%). This is particularly concerning as strangulation is used as a measure for serious violence and attempts on lives. "Strangulation is, in fact, one of the most accurate predictors for the subsequent homicide of victims of domestic violence" (Strack & Gwinn, 2011, p. 4).[5] Similarly, Glass et al (2008) found that "the odds of becoming an attempted homicide increased by about

[5]   Strangulation as a risk factor for serious violence and homicide has received increasing attention from a range of outlets, from media to academic institutions. To read more, consider: Glass et. al, 2008; Fowles, 2022; WESNET, 2020; Douglas, 2019.

seven-fold for women who had been strangled by their partner" (Glass et al., 2008, p. 332). In a context of rising femicide rates, such results are very concerning (Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability, 2021).

Animal abuse (17%) was also identified as a co-occurring form of violence. This is a significant finding because firstly, as WESNET identifies, the abuse of animals can be a method to control or terrorize women (Woodlock et al., 2020), and secondly, family pets or livestock may be a factor that influences women to stay in unsafe situations. They may fear the abuser harming pets or livestock if they leave, which can cause significant distress, and in farming cases can be considered a form of financial abuse (Nomomura & Baker, 2021).

With these findings in mind, it is important to recognize that technology is a new tool for old behaviours; it is a method or avenue through which violence can take place. TFGBV does not happen in isolation from other forms of violence but is often part of a much larger picture of coercive control and abuse. This is in part why it is so important to increase knowledge of TFGBV, as it is not only a violent act in its own right, but also can be a predictor of more extreme physical violence and even homicide.

TFGBV and Mental Health

TFGBV takes a significant toll on survivors' mental health (Bates, 2017; Woodlock et al., 2020). LEAF reports on a number of TFGBV's impacts, including negative impacts on the survivors' relationships and social life, personal and collective dignity, and trust. Further, LEAF has identified ties between TFGBV and negative mental health outcomes including anxiety, depression, and suicide (Khoo, 2021).

"Unlike a single act of sexual assault, which, though horrific, ultimately ends, the violation of having one's sexual images distributed online can last forever. This can make it impossible for women to recover from the violation" (Biros-Bolton, 2021, p. 21). This, of course, in no way minimizes the impacts of assault. What should be taken from this information is the extensive harm that can be caused by TFGBV. LEAF draws on Amanda Todd's case, where a **"15-year-old … died by suicide at her BC home in 2012 following a man's sexual exploitation of her in an online video chat room and the misogyny and harassment that ensued from peers at her school" (Biros-Bolton, 2021, p. 22).** Another example to consider is that of Rehtaeh Parsons, who died by suicide at 17, following images of her sexual assault being shared, as well as harassment and bullying by peers and a lack of response from official bodies (Chiu, 2018; Khoo, 2021). While this is often thought to be a crime committed by younger people or connected to online relationships, it is used in all relationships, and can be used to extort, humiliate, and control an intimate partner.

Intersectionality

Intersecting Inequalities and TFGBV

Survivors experience TFGBV in different ways based on their unique contexts and circumstances. For instance, a survivor with a disability having their assistive device broken, preventing them from reaching out for help. Another example is the way newcomer groups' precarious citizenship status can impact their ability to report violence. Frontline workers shared the ways that the different groups of women they serve experience TFGBV.
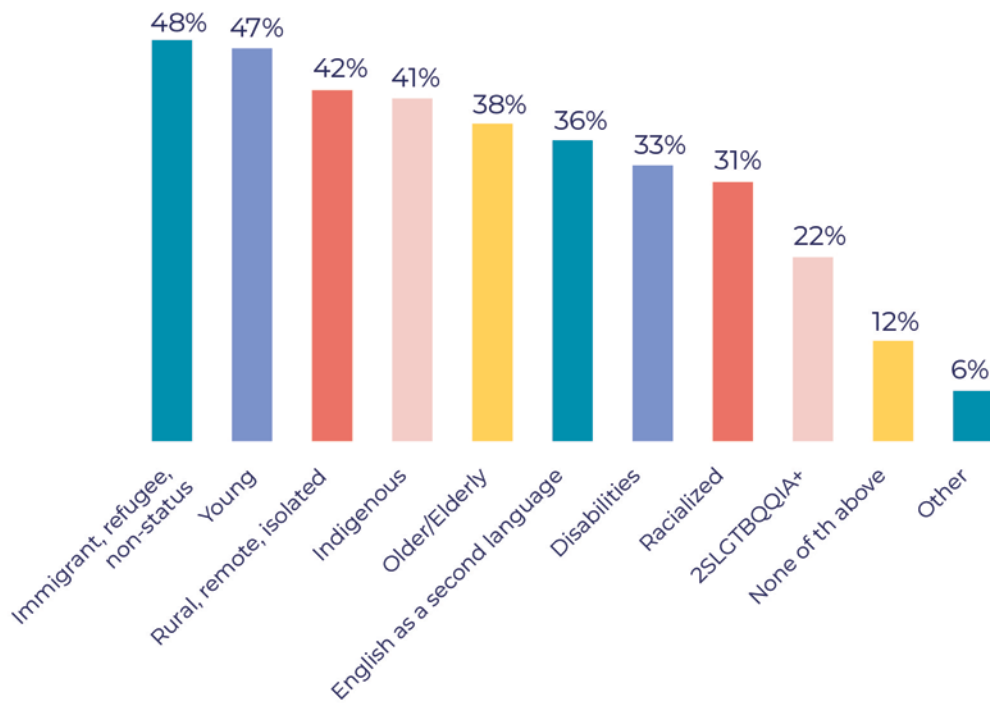
Figure 7: Service Users Reported to Experience More Extreme Forms of TFGBV (n=201)

While some workers didn't observe TFGBV as having distinct impacts on different populations, many felt that violence was more intense or particular based on the survivors' intersecting identities.

> **"I have not noticed a difference in how TFGBV affects each of the above-mentioned groups individually. I think that it affects them all equally in our organization."**

> **"Harassment and threats via cellphones are the reality of virtually every woman we meet now. Geolocation from their cell phone is an important security issue for us."**

"I suppose due to intersectionality, these users are more marginalized and therefore the abuse with technology is worse...It is particularly upsetting when someone in a rural community has no way to communicate and cannot safety plan nor walk to any help. I think for some people on this list, technology is more of a lifeline than a 'nice to have,'. So, being abused in this way is particularly harmful and worrisome."

The groups shown in figure 7 face high rates of violence, and new risks and concerns compared to those with fewer barriers or who are less marginalized. Further, there are increased barriers when some groups seek help, due to discrimination, as well as the absence of appropriate and trauma-informed care. Respondents also identified concerns related to isolation and difficulty escaping violence, and stigma and judgement.

"These [populations] experience a lot of discrimination when they ask for help. They feel compelled to tell their story, to justify themselves and they sometimes feel judged."

"The individuals that are at the most risk are individuals who are not well versed in technology, processes and how to access resources."

"For the clients we work with it creates a whole new level of safety risks and concerns. The use of technology often further isolates and traps our clients from being able to break free of the violence."

"Immigrant women do not know their rights well. Abusers take advantage of them."

"The younger people are very connected to their phones/tablets. If they block their perpetrator from texting, then they get emailed. Perpetrators have changed their profile to get access to the victim. They have also changed the victim's profile and made statements that will affect her support system. The perpetrator can also get access to the victim's support people and harass them. Phone accounts are often shared so that can be a way the perpetrator can manipulate the victim by threatening to cut off their ability to use the phone."

"Many of my clients have children and live in remote or isolated conditions. Sometimes technology is the mom's only connection to the outside world, if she is able to get access to it. Stay-at-home moms experiencing abuse can be isolated and their technology might be their one link outside the home."

"Survivors don't often see this as a form of abuse. For some turning it off [devices] further isolates them as they already feel this living in a northern community."

The following table provides details of the key issues that frontline staff shared.

Figure 8: Key Issues Experienced by Target Populations

Population	Percentage of respondents[6]	Key issues
Immigrant, refugee, or non-status survivors	**48%**	• May not know their rights well • Potentially fewer local connections • Status and documentation can be used to threaten and harass • Potentially limited English/French language
Young survivors	**47%**	• Heavy reliance on tech devices and tools, and may gauge online risk differently • Typically have greater tech literacy than frontline workers • May be at higher risk of some types of violence, e.g. NCDII
Survivors in rural, remote, or isolated communities	**42%**	• Isolation • Limited local resources and supports (e.g. anti-violence organizations, transportation, limited internet) • Technology an essential resource for connection
Indigenous survivors	**41%**	• Isolation • Limited local resources and supports (e.g. anti-violence organizations, transportation, limited internet) • Cultural significance of connection • Systemic racism may make survivors disinclined to disclose violence and seek support (e.g. negative interactions with criminal justice/legal systems)
Older or elderly survivors	**38%**	• Gaps in tech literacy • Potential to be isolated or have fewer connections
Survivors with English as an additional language	**36%**	• Similar to immigrant, refugee, or non-status survivors • May not know their rights well • Potentially fewer local connections • Difficulty accessing anti-violence supports due to language barriers • If abusers have stronger language skills (English/French), this can be used against the survivor
Survivors with disabilities	**33%**	• Isolation • Reliance on assistive technology • Possible gaps in tech literacy
Racialized survivors	**31%**	• Lack of culturally appropriate/representative resources and supports • Systemic racism may make survivors disinclined to disclose violence and seek support (e.g. negative interactions with criminal justice/legal systems)
2SLGBTQQIA+ survivors	**22%**	• Programming, supports, and resources that are designed for 2SLGBTQQIA+ individuals experiencing violence are limited • Similar to racialized survivors, systemic discrimination may make survivors disinclined to disclose violence and seek support

[6] Percentage of respondents that noted this population experiences greater effects of TFGBV (n=201).

While TFGBV can affect any women, the effects can be compounded for those who are Indigenous, racialized, 2SLGBTQQIA+, live with a disability, or have other intersecting identities. TFGBV interacts with other systems of oppression arising with intersecting identities, potentially intensifying its effects. This is an area that has not been studied extensively, and thus it was important for us to better understand the experience of under-represented groups experiencing this specific type of violence. More data is needed.

Barriers to Addressing TFGBV

Survivors face a number of barriers in addressing TFGBV. These include barriers that occur at more micro levels, such as their interactions with service-providing organizations. They also contend with systemic and institutional failures to meaningfully address barriers and improve accessibility. The following section provides details of the barriers to addressing TFGBV according to frontline staff.

Financial Barriers

The most commonly reported barrier to addressing TFGBV in the survey was financial barriers (78%), including lack of income, and lack of financial independence. Within the sector, it is well documented that financial barriers significantly impact survivors' ability to address GBV, safety plan, and leave violent situations. In the context of TFGBV, this might include costs such as phone plans, buying new devices or replacing technology broken by abusers, and repairing or replacing expensive and necessary assistive technology. For survivors living in rural or remote communities this might also include costs incurred to replace technology or access support, including transportation, childcare, or hotels for overnight stays in urban centres (Kaya et al., 2021). We also know that technology is a means for committing financial abuse, including draining bank accounts, or opening new accounts or credit cards in a survivor's name.

Low Rates of Tech Literacy

A major concern shared by frontline anti-violence workers is the lack of tech literacy. There is a gap in understanding among survivors, frontline workers, and other community supports, such as police and legal actors regarding options available to address TFGBV. This includes the legal measures that women can take to address TFGBV, and the procedures needed to secure devices, accounts, and women's spaces. Low rates of tech literacy remain a persistent issue in service provision. In 2021, BCSTH

surveyed frontline workers and identified that low rates of tech literacy impact efforts to address TFGBV (Kaya et al., 2021). Similarly, our survey found that nearly three-quarters (73%) of survey respondents identified that service user's lack of digital literacy makes it difficult for them to safely seek help, and 65% of shelter/TH staff have limited digital literacy and/or training on TFGBV.

Tech literacy gaps include lack of email or text basics, lower rates of understanding how cloud-based accounts work, or low levels of comfort in navigating cell phones. As many anti-violence organizations have limited resources to invest in tech and associated training, tech literacy is often dependent upon individuals' outside knowledge and skills. Survivors are made to feel as though there are no repercussions for TFGBV, and often tech suppliers do little by way of support when problems are reported. This is all made more difficult by the evolving nature of technology, and the new, malicious ways it is being weaponized against survivors. As one survey respondent points out, "the digital world is always changing, and it is hard to keep up." To address these concerns, trauma-informed education is essential. This can create an environment where survivors feel believed and supported, and are more likely to disclose their experiences.

> **"I think that we are as unprepared as our clients about tech safety. If there is an issue that comes up, we try our best to help them navigate, but we really do not have any training on best practices."** – Survey respondent.

Lack of Response to TFGBV and a Way Out

Seven in ten (69%) survey respondents reported that lack of response from the police and the justice system is a barrier for survivors attempting to address TFGBV. This raises a couple of key points of concern; firstly, it indicates that survivors who have sought justice have not been supported, and secondly, it carries significant implications for how levels of trust in police and the justice system have likely been affected by lack of response in the past. By extension, it is likely that actual rates of TFGBV far exceed reported rates of violence. It is also important to consider that women's experiences with the police and justice systems vary significantly, and some groups have had extremely negative interactions with these systems, particularly Indigenous and racialized women. Indigenous women, notably, are not only 'under protected' by the RCMP but have also been targets of violence from RCMP officers (Human Rights Watch, 2013; McDougall et al., 2022).

When survivors do disclose experiences of TFGBV, they may not be believed, or this form of violence may not be recognized as abuse. TFGBV, like emotional abuse and coercive control, often do not leave visible marks. This makes such forms of violence difficult for police to understand, identify, and ultimately intervene in. This speaks to a lack of tech literacy, as well as knowledge of GBV within the justice system. Such reactions contribute to a lack of confidence in support services.

If survivors do not feel confident in reporting, TFGBV becomes an even more serious concern for survivors' wellbeing and sense of hope, and their ability to escape violence. This was a concern for 56% of survey respondents. As one respondent stated, many survivors "feel that it is not worth seeking help because technology makes it possible for the abuser to find them and continue to abuse them." In addition, frontline staff indicated that access to opportunities for reporting or seeking help may be restricted by the abuser, especially if the abuser has control of devices or access to passwords. Abusers also frequently use manipulative tactics through many forms of violence, including TFGBV, to prevent survivors from accessing support.

Poor Connectivity

If survivors do not feel confident in reporting, TFGBV becomes an even more serious concern for survivors' wellbeing and sense of hope, and their ability to escape violence.

Poor connectivity was also identified (68%) as a barrier to addressing TFGBV. It is unsurprising that connectivity was reported as a barrier at such a high rate, given the digital divide that exists across Canada. Despite reports from the federal government that progress with the expansion of connectivity has been made (Government of Canada, 2023), there are still significant disparities in internet access, especially for rural and remote communities. While 91% of Canada has access to Broadband at 50/10 Mbps[7], this number drops to 62% for rural communities (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, 2023). There are also significant gaps in rural versus urban access to high-speed internet (Nomomura & Baker, 2021). Connectivity is shaped by a range of factors including affordability, available infrastructure, digital literacy, and the privacy to use devices; marginalized groups often have different experiences with, and levels of connectivity.

[7]   Internet speed that has been identified as a baseline target.

Meaningful Connectivity

BCSTH uses the term "meaningful connectivity" to guide its tech safety and connectivity work.

Meaningful connectivity refers to digital inclusion through access to devices and services, such as phone and internet coverage, as well as the quality of those services and devices, their reliability, and affordability. It encompasses equal opportunities to participate online and connect with others for safety, learning, recreation, relationship building, and accessing services. With connectivity, safe and equitable inclusion is essential to provide opportunities for participation that are accessible across the spectrum and intersections of gender, sexuality, age, location, class, race, citizenship status, ability, etc. In this sense, meaningful connectivity promotes the quality of life, safety, and well-being of society members (Kaya et al., 2021, p. 1).

Issues Related to Limiting Tech Access

Restricting or limiting access to technology is a means to abuse survivors. When survivors are restricted in accessing technology, this also limits their access to support and outside resources. This can further contribute to isolation (e.g., from family and peers, digital isolation) and the potential for intensification of violence.

Less able to seek support

Less likely to seek and access services
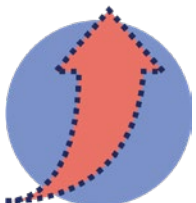
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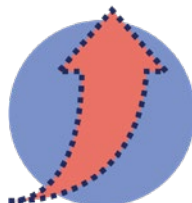
More intense violence in forms other than tech-facilitated violence

It was noted that heightened risk for controlling behaviour around the time when a survivor leaves an abusive relationship is a concern. This can mean greater restrictions on the use of devices, or even an increased likelihood of devices being destroyed. It has been well-documented that this can be one of the most dangerous times for women facing abuse, with increased risk for extreme physical violence or femicide (Battered Women's Support Services, 2020; Caicedo-Roa et al., 2023; Campbell et al., 2003; Hancock, 2022).

Several respondents identified the mental health impacts of restricting or removing access to tech as a form of abuse. This included the role that isolation plays in increasing social anxiety and depression, decreasing mental wellbeing, and removing social ties and support. Together, these points reaffirm the importance of connection, social ties, and community, especially in empowering survivors to access support. Access to tech is an important tool to maintain these ties and enable support-seeking. It was also noted that for some survivors, technology and social media are used in a self-soothing manner or for self-care. When abusers restrict access to technology, this impacts women's wellbeing. Restricting access to tech can also be a manipulation tactic by abusers that aims to change the survivor's behaviour.

"As a result of the increased isolation, some survivors are less able to recognize the abuse occurring. They cannot see that what is happening isn't okay when the only person they are connected with is their abuser." – Survey respondent

Limiting access to tech affects survivors' ability to respond to TFGBV, and their ability to engage with support services and organizations. While this may be perceived as a 'lesser' form of abuse than physical violence, the experience of TFGBV removes agency, creates isolation, and increases the safety risks to survivors.

Tech Use and Knowledge by Shelters and Frontline Workers

Anti-violence organizations are using technology in their work with survivors. Since the onset of the pandemic, organizations have increased their virtual engagement with survivors (WSC, 2022, 2023). Many shelters/THs opted to continue online services to meet the needs of users who were unable to access services in person. This includes a rise in the use of

virtual counselling sessions, group programming, texting services, and even chat bots available through websites. While tech use has increased, there continue to be gaps in knowledge for many organizations across the country.

Technology's Role in Service Delivery

Despite concerns, issues, and considerations particular to technology when it is used to deliver GBV services, it is a vitally important resource in service delivery. In fact, 80% (n=201) of frontline workers responded that in their experience, technology has played a positive role in their programming.
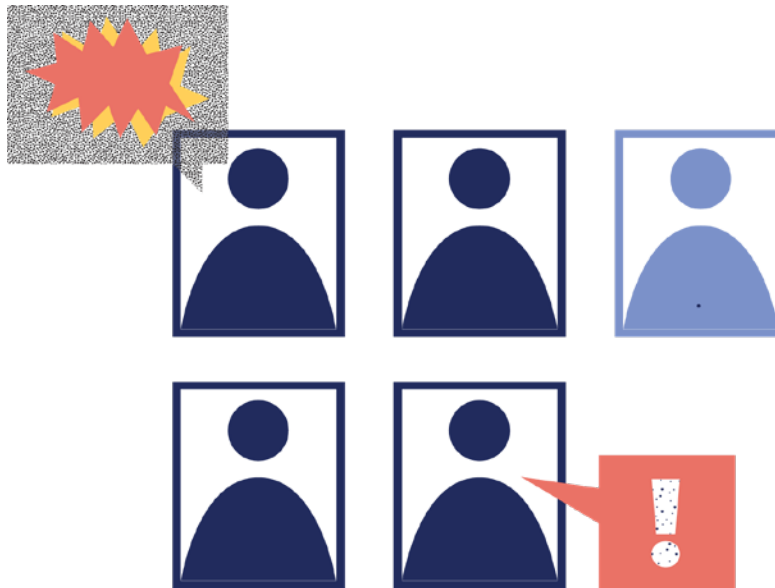
Technology was identified as a necessary tool for facilitating connection to services for survivors, particularly for those who are geographically distanced from shelters/THs or are unable to access these spaces due to disability.

> **"It has helped break down barriers for women who may not have been able to access our resources otherwise."** – Survey respondent

Text, calling, and video chatting were all identified as ways to better meet the needs of survivors. These tools are a means to connect with those who are not yet ready to leave violent situations, or to maintain contact with those who have ended their residency in shelter. Respondents noted that technology has reduced barriers that have existed for those with disabilities, through assistive tech; although these are not always well understood by much of the public, including shelter/TH workers. Further,

for those needing translation supports, there are an increasing number of technological resources to support real-time translation in many languages.

"We have succeeded in reaching women who would not have used our services otherwise. Some women started to get in touch with us through text messages or instant messaging. They mentioned to us that they would never have felt comfortable calling us." – Survey respondent

Other areas of technology that frontline workers have found valuable include the greater ability to collect and preserve evidence of abuse. This includes saving, downloading, or printing text and email chains, photos, videos, and evidence of malicious software use. For those engaging in either criminal justice proceedings or family court, such artifacts provide evidence of this difficult-to-recognize crime.
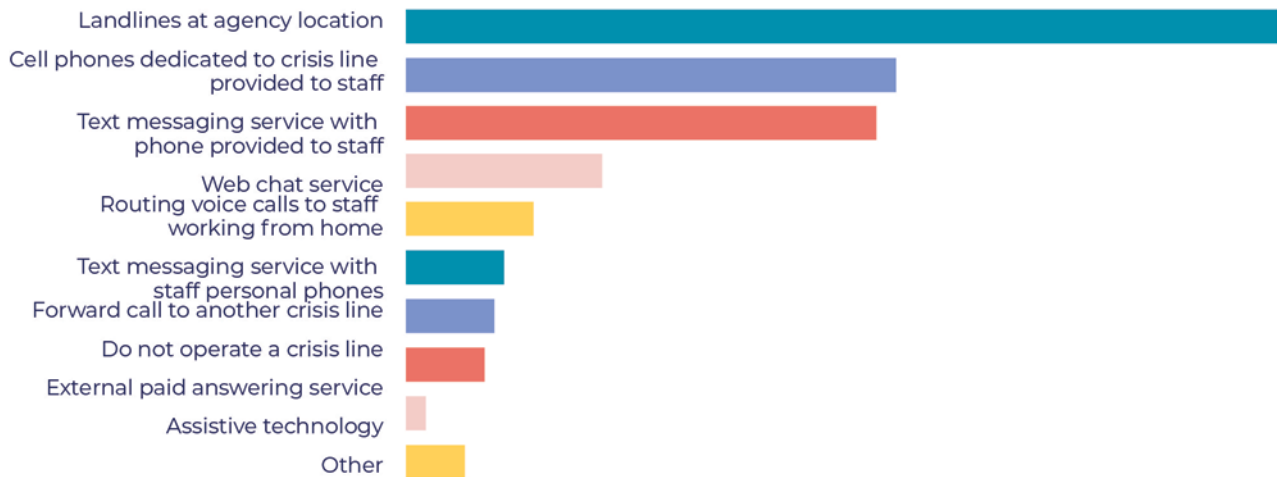
Figure 9: Technology Used for Crisis Lines (n=204)

Anti-violence organizations are using a variety of technologies to operate crisis lines. The most common types of technology being used, include landlines at an agency location (89%), cell phones dedicated to the crisis line provided to staff (50%), and text messaging services with phones provided to staff (48%). Over time, organizations have expanded access to their crisis line, which is important for providing safe and accessible services to those experiencing violence. This has been done by offering chat services and video calls.

Beyond crisis lines, shelters/THs have also diversified the ways a survivor can access support. While in the past survivors typically accessed support in-person, either in shelter or through outreach workers, there are now

new avenues, such as virtual intake, outreach via video calls, online groups or programming, and individual counselling through video calls.
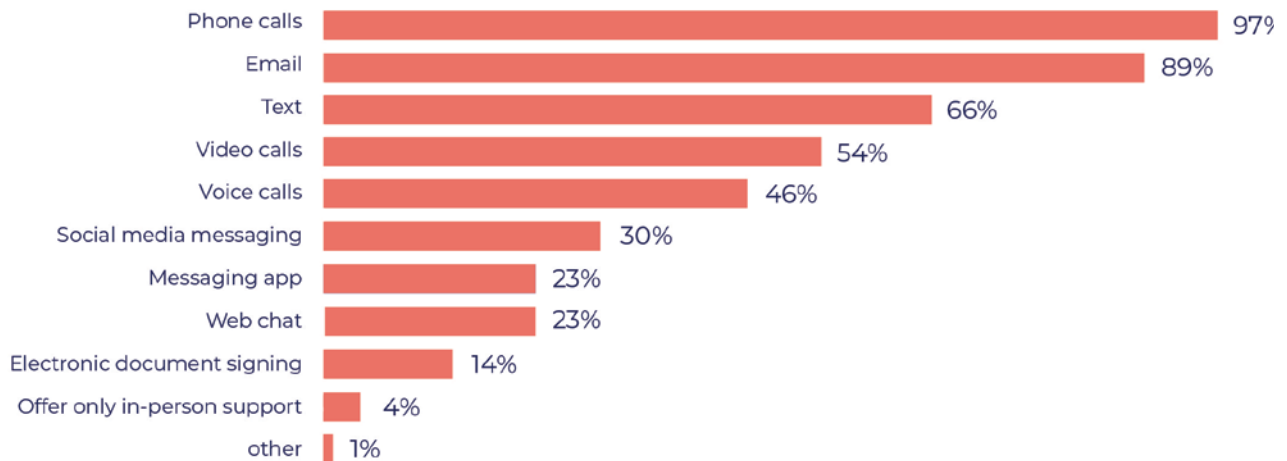
Figure 10: Technology Used to Support Service Users (n=204)

The most common forms of technology used to provide services include phone (97%), email (89%), and text (66%). Given the many barriers that survivors face in accessing in-person resources, it is important to provide different ways for them to connect. Virtual services, supports, and programming mean that women who are not ready to leave a relationship, or are unable to leave, still have access to resources. Further, for women who cannot easily access a location, this provides more options for accessing support. This can include women who live in rural, remote, northern, or isolated areas, or women with disabilities who cannot easily reach a shelter.

Tech Devices Used by Staff

Devices are a regular part of how shelters/THs and their staff deliver services and programming. During the pandemic, many organizations shifted to online, or partial online delivery of services. In some cases, staff needed to use personal devices for work. Much of service delivery has returned to in-person delivery, although many organizations have maintained hybrid offerings (WSC, 2023). As shown in figure 11, most respondents are using devices provided by their organization to carry out their work, although there is also a large number that are using personal devices. This can be problematic for many reasons, in particular the need for staff to separate their personal and professional lives in order to create work-life balance (Hoogendam & Maki, 2024; WSC, 2022). This also can raise privacy issues, as there may not be consistent security protocols being

Beyond crisis lines, shelters/THs have also diversified the ways a survivor can access support.

used on personal devices. Work devices may come with more security protocols and support, including user authentication, regular resetting of passwords, and restrictions on accessing websites or apps.

Figure 11: Type of Device Used by Frontline Staff (n=204)

Legend:
- Organization-provided devices
- Combination of personal/work devices
- Personal devices

Explanation of Privacy Risks to Survivors

Using technology, such as email, text, web chat, or video calls to provide services, often involves different or additional privacy risks than in-person services. This may include risks such as the collection of data through platforms, or messages being intercepted or monitored. Most frontline staff explain to survivors the privacy risks of using technology to provide services (66%); one-third of workers (34%) were either not sure if they were doing this or were aware they were not providing this information (figure 12). Without this critical information, survivors may not take precautions, such as securing devices, changing passwords, or setting up new accounts. This is an important element of safety planning that could be missed if shelter/TH staff do not have the digital literacy needed to share this information.

Legend:
- Yes
- No
- Not sure
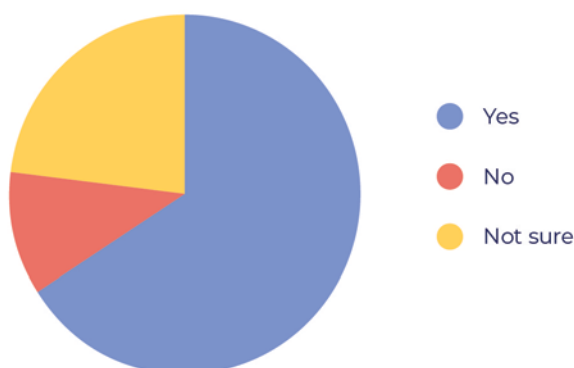
Figure 12: Frontline Staff Explaining Risks of Tech-based Service Delivery (n=204)

Organization Policies

To ensure the safety of program participants, organizations have created policies around tech and device use for those staying in shelter. Examples of guidelines and restrictions include policies, such as turning location services off, limiting online gaming, no video calls in common areas, or silencing phones during sessions. Most respondents (70%) indicated that they have specific guidelines and restrictions for how participants use technology and mobile devices in their programs. It is of concern that nearly one-third (28%) do not have such policies in place. These policies bring increased safety not only to the individual using their own device, but to all residents and staff living or working in these spaces.[8]
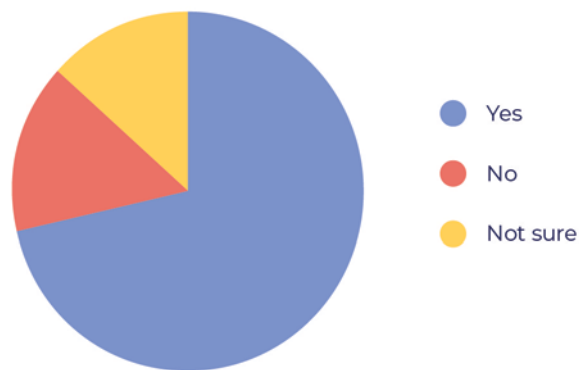
Figure 13: Organizational Policies on Participant Use of Tech/Devices (n=197)

The most common restrictions and guidelines appear to be restrictions on phone and video calls, especially in common spaces, guidelines on taking photos in shelters (particularly as this relates to confidentiality concerns) and disabling location services on devices. These guidelines, and how structured or official they are, vary considerably across organizations. For some organizations, they are recommendations or encouraged practices, whereas for others they are mandated requirements. Some survey respondents do not currently have guidelines in place but noted the importance of these and their intention to adopt such policies.

While policies are an important step toward creating greater safety for both staff and survivors, this can be challenging to implement in practice. Guidelines may be inconsistently applied depending on which staff member is working with the client. For instance, one respondent noted: "We are inconsistent with this. Some staff consistently verbally review guidelines, and we are working on getting our intake documents

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[8]   Examples of technology-related guidelines and restrictions employed by shelters and transition houses are provide as Appendix A

updated with specific guidelines around use of technology in the shelter." This lack of consistency may be related to low tech literacy and a lack of understanding of TFGBV among frontline staff. Further, difficulties in upholding policies may be related to enforcement challenges in shelter. Similar to what was seen with pandemic protocols, if clients neglect policy or do not know how to adopt guidelines (e.g. turning off location services), it is not always easy or possible to enforce the policies, particularly as staff cannot monitor clients at all times. Enforcing these rules can also be difficult for staff, as these restrictions on women's freedom can mirror the ways that women may experience control in their relationships. While these rules are meant to bring greater security, they can also create a tension between maintaining safety and ensuring survivors remain connected to the outside world and retain some agency.

"No video calls in common areas, limited gaming online, some sites are restricted. I'm not really sure if that is helpful or in line with anti-oppressive practices."

– Survey respondent

While such tech safety policies are becoming increasingly necessary, they need to maintain a balance between ensuring safety and confidentiality, understanding staff capacity, and supporting survivor empowerment and independence.

Creative Solutions from the Field

Frontline organizations have demonstrated significant creativity and resilience while working with limited resources and in difficult conditions, facing high rates of TFGBV. Strategies for addressing TFGBV include collaborating with other organizations to provide education and access staff training, as well as working with individuals who have specialized knowledge in this area.

"We try to train all our staff on basic tech safety planning, but for clients experiencing more difficult issues, they can be referred to our IT Manager for a comprehensive Tech Safety Plan including review of all accounts for unauthorized access, etc."

– Survey respondent

Organizations have developed tech safety policies and procedures, including updating intake protocol, and implementing tech security

processes for staff and client devices once they are in use within the shelter/TH. This also includes incorporating tech safety into clients' safety plans.

Many organizations also provide access to devices through donation programs. One shelter/TH provides service users with both devices and pay-and-talk plans. This is a way to increase safety and connection.

Often shelters/THs are not seen to be innovative, but responses from frontline staff show that there is exceptional creativity happening to mitigate TFGBV and provide greater tech access to clients. While there are many that feel like this is an area that warrants greater attention, we can also see that organizations are coming up with innovative solutions despite the many constraints they face.

Challenges in using tech to communicate with survivors

> **"There's not enough staff to provide access to an online chat service."**
> **– Survey respondent**

> **"We would eventually like to be able to have a texting line so that women and children can communicate with the workers." – Survey respondent**

While organizations are expanding their technological capabilities, there are still many barriers to using tech to communicate with survivors. These include access to physical devices, affordability of devices and plans, and privacy to use devices to access support. Organizations not only face these challenges, but few funders are interested in investing in tech and tech supports for shelters/THs. This includes not just the devices, but funding for creating safe tech policies, building cyber security that protects the privacy of survivors, and training for staff.

Concerns for privacy and confidentiality for survivors (83%) was the most commonly reported barrier to communicating with survivors. This issue has always been a top concern for VAW shelters/THs and is more relevant than ever given the role of technology in our lives. Privacy concerns were followed by gaps in survivors' tech literacy (68%), and survivors' lack of phone plans (67%). These are critical concerns as they limit the ability of women to seek help, or to mitigate TFGBV, such as through deactivating tracking software or securing social media. While the primary concerns centred around survivors, organization and staff capacity were also flagged. Given difficulty retaining staff (Hoogendam & Maki, 2024; Women's Shelters Canada, 2022), and insufficient funding for operational areas, such as tech, it is challenging to build internal capacity among shelters/THs.

Connectivity and lack of tech significantly impact the service delivery process. Based on survey responses, there are several issues that hinder the delivery of services to survivors.
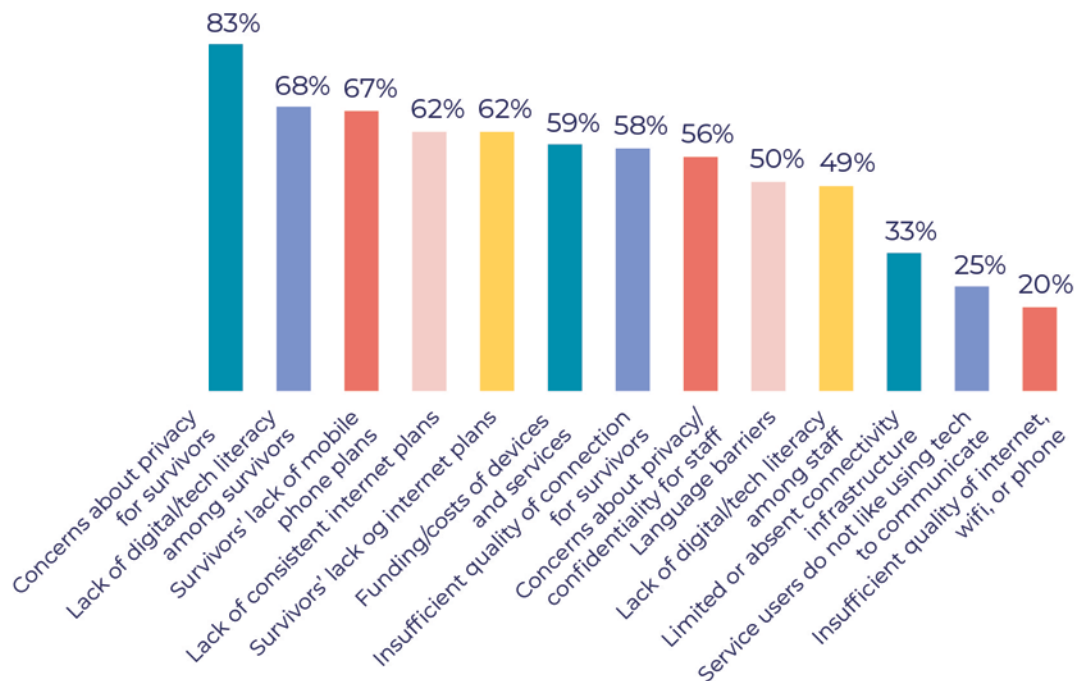
Figure 14: Top Challenges in Using Tech to Communicate with Survivors (n=202)

Bars (left to right):
- 83% — Concerns about privacy for survivors
- 68% — Lack of digital/tech literacy among survivors
- 67% — Survivors' lack of mobile phone plans
- 62% — Lack of consistent internet plans
- 62% — Survivors' lack og internet plans
- 59% — Funding/costs of devices and services
- 58% — Insufficient quality of connection for survivors
- 56% — Concerns about privacy/confidentiality for staff
- 50% — Language barriers
- 49% — Lack of digital/tech literacy among staff
- 33% — Limited or absent connectivity infrastructure
- 25% — Service users do not like using tech to communicate
- 20% — Insufficient quality of internet, wifi, or phone

Infrastructure and Telecommunications

"Internet and cell service is very sketchy throughout our region. It is not reliable for calling for help, or a regular Zoom. Texting is limited also." – Survey respondent

Many regions of Canada have limited infrastructure and telecommunications, including many northern and isolated regions. While we often imagine this only affecting the northern-most areas of the country, this can be seen in many rural areas, including those relatively near to urban centres. This leaves those experiencing violence even more reliant on limited technology, or on costly options. Providing internet options to everyone across the country by 2026 is a Canadian Government goal (CBC News, 2020), but with the size of the country and many communities being geographically isolated, this seems far from being achieved. Options such as Starlink, which is satellite internet, provide greater options for places that have been traditionally underserved, yet this is still unaffordable to many. As one survey respondent noted,

"[l]ack of technology infrastructure affects both the service user and provider. This leaves limited options for financially sustainable plans [and] a lack of service in a service users' home or area. This means that there are areas that pose higher risk, as they have no means for communication when it comes to needing emergency response or crisis support."

In addition to the lack of infrastructure to provide tech to people across the country, there are also many areas that have limited access to highspeed internet, particularly rural, remote, and northern communities. With inconsistent connection, survivors are more isolated, and have less ability to access supports. Many survivors have poor cell coverage, which results in dropped calls and being unable to reconnect. This not only can affect seeking help from shelters/THs, but also accessing emergency crisis support. Frontline staff also mentioned areas such as Highway 16 in BC (known as the Highway of Tears), which has limited connectivity. This highway has been known to be a particularly dangerous route for Indigenous women, with many murders and disappearances occurring there (Carrier Sekani Family Services, n.d.). Sadly, similar isolated, unconnected areas exist throughout the country, and present dangers for women.

In addition to lacking access to a high-quality connection, communities that are further from urban areas may lack access to devices. While much can be ordered online, more remote areas do have limited options, and costs are often higher. Without access to devices and connectivity, it is difficult for survivors to know the resources available to them, and to reach out for support. As this respondent indicated: "We do not have cellular coverage in some areas, or we have spotty cell coverage. We may drop calls and not be able to reconnect with the user, or they are no longer safe to connect with workers or the agency when we have connectivity."

Affordability

"Poverty and access are issues, with some service users unable to have access to the means to communicate." – Survey respondent

Technology is expensive. Devices, internet access, and phone lines require upfront and ongoing investment. This is even more acute for those needing to access assistive devices. While purchasing a device is costly, phone and internet plans require continuous financial commitment, and often require access to a credit card and/or bank account. These costs

can make accessing these necessary resources impossible. For those experiencing TFGBV, many are also facing financial abuse, which means that this technology is even more challenging to obtain. These costs are only exacerbated when devices are destroyed by abusers. This frontline staff member highlights this problem: "There are many women who don't have the financial resources to buy a mobile phone. Sometimes women will keep a device that their abuser gave them to avoid buying another one. Thus, their attacker can have access to several elements, such as their call record or their location."

Staff Connection and Service Delivery

"A lot of our participants do not have access to the internet and phone on a regular basis. This makes it difficult to inform participants about upcoming programming sessions if they are not popping into the centre on a regular basis." – Survey respondent

Shelter/TH staff provide support, safety, comfort, and community to survivors, yet there are many barriers to providing these services to survivors. As survivors' access to technology can be precarious, and often women must share devices with their abuser, there is not always a reliable or safe way for staff to connect. Without regular access to a phone or internet, it can be very difficult to help a survivor navigate services and supports. While some navigation can be done on behalf of service users, there are many community and government agencies that require clients to connect directly. The lack of connectivity interrupts not only service navigation, but shelter/TH programming, including online counseling, group programs, and safety planning.

Without regular access to a phone or internet, it can be very difficult to help a survivor navigate services and supports. While some navigation can be done on behalf of service users, there are many community and government agencies that require clients to connect directly.

While staff are creative in the ways they attempt to support their clients, this is not a sustainable or efficient way to provide programming to those who are in potentially very dangerous circumstances. As one respondent noted: "When getting in touch with a client, sometimes we use a middle person like a friend or safe person to relay a message due to not having a safe number to call and no other means of communication (no internet or devices). It prolongs the service plans."

So much of the work done in shelters/THs has been facilitated by the addition of technology; unfortunately, when this is limited or restricted for survivors or for staff, service delivery is negatively impacted. Frontline staff noted that the quality and speed of intervention is affected by TFGBV and connectivity issues. Particularly with the rise in the use of digital interventions through

the pandemic, such as online meetings with clients, there was a sense of frustration when these tools did not work smoothly, or calls were dropped. A common staff concern is that clients will be frustrated with the level of services they are receiving and will stop reaching out.

These concerns were less pertinent for those residing in shelter – although there were some potential safety issues – but for non-residential clients or those transitioning back into the community, follow-up and outreach could be challenging. For those transitioning into greater independence, many experience fears and apprehensions about this move, making it a critical time for staff to provide virtual services. Without reliable connectivity this can be an issue, and frontline staff fear for the safety and progress of survivors.

Staff recognize the importance of technology in all our lives. They know what this means for staying connected to communities, breaking isolation, and accessing needed resources and opportunities. Online spaces not only provide logistical support, they also offer emotional support, and contribute to survivors' overall wellbeing. When these spaces are inaccessible, either because of violence, or limited connectivity due to infrastructure and geography, survivors suffer in many ways.

Tech Literacy and Tech Support

> **"The fact that the technology is changing rapidly is a challenge for the intervention team, because it is not directly our field of competence."**
> **– Survey respondent**

Survivors and frontline staff alike face tech literacy barriers, and there is a lack of resources to support them through the challenges they encounter. For shelters/THs there has been limited investment by funders into tech, including devices, systems, security, or into the development and delivery of policies and training to support these services. Many organizations do not have in-house tech support, and therefore need external support, or have to rely on staff knowledge, which will vary by individual and organization. Given these challenges, it is difficult for shelter/TH staff to stay up to date on tech.

Throughout the pandemic organizations had to invest more heavily in tech in order to continue offering supports to those experiencing violence. While this had many positive outcomes, it was done during a time when supply chains were disrupted, and tech support was not consistently accessible. This created lags in service delivery, causing stress for staff and

survivors. Beyond the disruptions that were experienced related to the pandemic, many also mentioned that tech supports were limited in rural, remote, and northern regions.

Not only was the establishment of these systems complex, but staff were not always prepared to shift to new ways of operating. It was noted that staff did not necessarily feel comfortable engaging with clients via text, for example, as they didn't know who they were speaking with. While text provides another avenue for seeking help, staff concerns are valid considering how abusers misuse tech; these intricacies need to be navigated, and appropriate policies and training implemented. This connects to broader concerns about the need to ensure privacy and confidentiality of all survivors accessing shelters/THs which was raised by frontline staff. Respondents noted issues such as challenges communicating privacy practices to survivors and responding to data privacy breaches, and a lack of resources to set up firewalls or virtual private networks.

There is a lack of funding for organizations to implement best practices, access devices, employ those with expert knowledge, and train staff on tech safety, and technology more generally. This means that when survivors come into a shelter, staff may be checking devices and providing information, but depending on their knowledge, these processes may be lacking.

There is a lack of funding for organizations to implement best practices, access devices, employ those with expert knowledge, and train staff on tech safety, and technology more generally. This means that when survivors come into a shelter, staff may be checking devices and providing information, but depending on their knowledge, these processes may be lacking. Based on responses, we know that this work is happening inconsistently in shelters/THs across the country, as there is limited focused investment for upgrading the tech, as well as the skills and knowledge of workers. This is compounded by a labour shortage and unsustainable workloads. As this worker mentioned: "Staff turnover in our organization does not allow capacity building in this area. Webinars and resource people would help empower us in the proper use of technology to better manage risk."

Maintaining confidentiality and privacy is another concern. This includes maintaining the confidential address of the shelter/TH, as well as the privacy of service users. Staff become responsible for identifying if devices are being monitored, which can be a complex process, and failure to identify tracking apps can result in disclosure of shelter and client locations. This is in part why technology policies are so critical for shelters/THs (Appendix A). Unfortunately, the extensive ways that abusers use tech to track and terrorize, and the lack of tech literacy among service users and staff, continue to make the work of maintaining confidentiality difficult.

Clearly communicating privacy policies to clients, and their children, is critical to ensuring the safety of those residing in shelter, and often needs to be reiterated over time.

Despite the challenges that may exist in using tech to work with and communicate with survivors, these tools have expanded how frontline staff can support survivors. Shelters/THs have become more accessible because of the ways that technology has been employed.

Knowledge Gaps and the Need for Training

> **"This is a real problem among service users and staff - training is vital. We all have great intentions to support, but just don't have the knowledge around the technology. I am really looking forward to receiving more resources and training to better support service users." – Survey respondent**

Confidence Rates in Tech Safety Skills

Survey responses show that there is a lack of overall confidence in the ability to help survivors navigate a range of tech safety issues. Frontline staff indicated that they felt more confident in communicating with survivors about not exposing program staff's personal information, keeping information private when relocating (e.g. avoiding location tracking), and changing basic privacy settings in common apps and devices (figure 15). By comparison, they reported that **they lack confidence with safety considerations related to working in the gig economy, understanding legal remedies for TFGBV, dealing with being monitored or surveilled online, securing mobile devices and existing online accounts, and finding accurate, up-to-date information about how to ensure privacy and safety on specific devices or platforms.**

It is positive that staff are confident with some of the basic areas of tech safety, but as TFGBV becomes increasingly sophisticated, and abusers find more creative ways to weaponize technology, investing in enhancing knowledge and capacity in areas such as legal remedies, online surveillance, and securing accounts and data becomes more critical. Importantly, staff need to not only learn information, but they need to feel confident in their ability to share it with survivors. This means ongoing training is necessary to stay up to date with new tech and trends and build confidence around TFGBV.
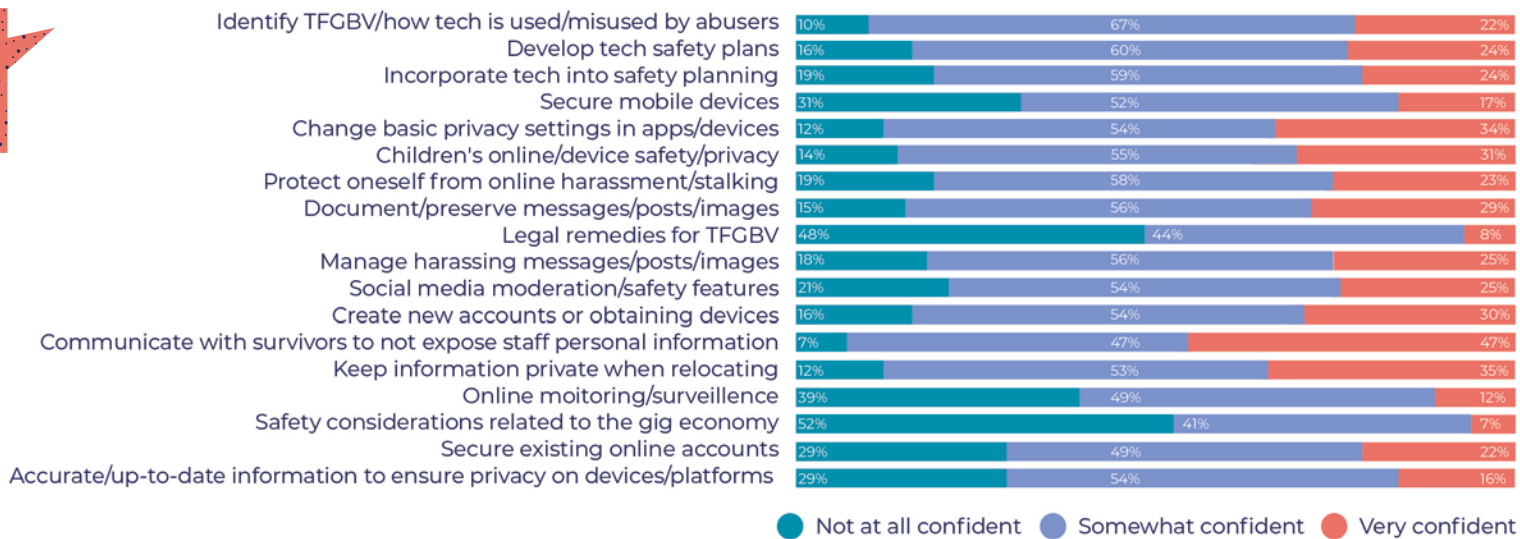
	Not at all confident	Somewhat confident	Very confident
Identify TFGBV/how tech is used/misused by abusers	10%	67%	22%
Develop tech safety plans	16%	60%	24%
Incorporate tech into safety planning	19%	59%	24%
Secure mobile devices	31%	52%	17%
Change basic privacy settings in apps/devices	12%	54%	34%
Children's online/device safety/privacy	14%	55%	31%
Protect oneself from online harassment/stalking	19%	58%	23%
Document/preserve messages/posts/images	15%	56%	29%
Legal remedies for TFGBV	48%	44%	8%
Manage harassing messages/posts/images	18%	56%	25%
Social media moderation/safety features	21%	54%	25%
Create new accounts or obtaining devices	16%	54%	30%
Communicate with survivors to not expose staff personal information	7%	47%	47%
Keep information private when relocating	12%	53%	35%
Online moitoring/surveillence	39%	49%	12%
Safety considerations related to the gig economy	52%	41%	7%
Secure existing online accounts	29%	49%	22%
Accurate/up-to-date information to ensure privacy on devices/platforms	29%	54%	16%

● Not at all confident   ● Somewhat confident   ● Very confident

Figure 15: Frontline Staff Confidence in Support Survivors with Tech Safety Issues

TFGBV Training and Resource Needs

The survey identified a clear need, and interest, in more training related to TFGBV. While an interest was expressed in all areas of TFGBV training that were listed, the top desired training areas were phone tech safety, including phone monitoring and security, legal remedies for TFGBV, and best practices for organizations using technology to support survivors.

Online training was thought to be the best way to deliver information to frontline workers, followed by online resources (e.g. how-to guides, info sheets, videos). Webinars or recordings available online, handouts that can be shared with colleagues and partner organizations, and posters or info sheets that can be made available to survivors in a shelter/TH were also thought to be useful means for disseminating information. Currently, many resources are available through the Tech Safety Canada website, but these could be further expanded to support staff to meet the needs of survivors.[9] It was suggested by a respondent that **online training that included a certificate of completion would be beneficial**, particularly as this would allow them to demonstrate their knowledge through a credential.

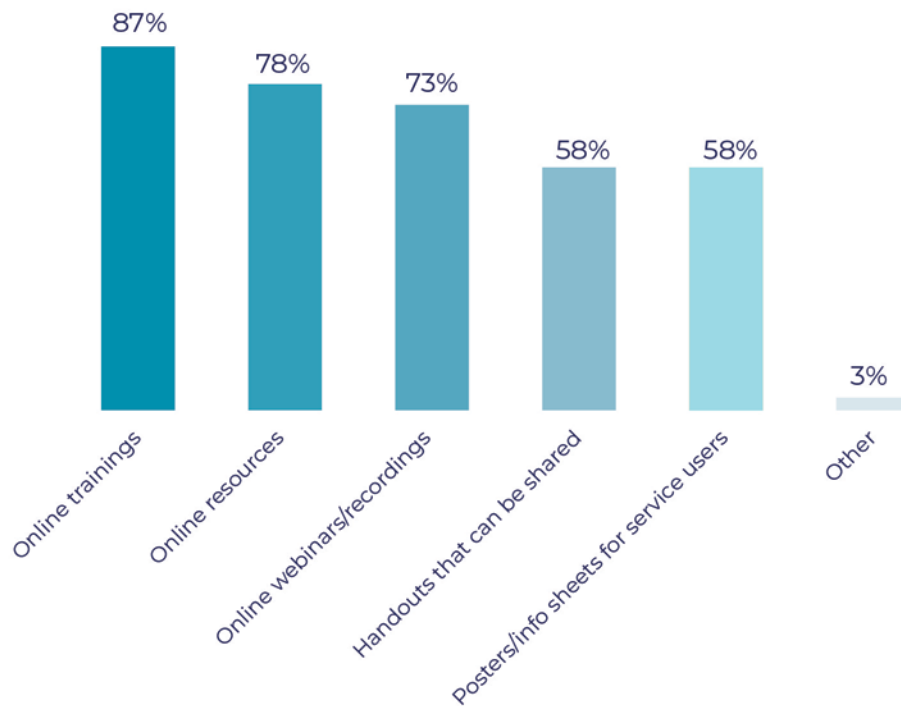[9]   Tech Safety Canada - https://techsafety.ca

Figure 16: Ways Frontline Staff Would Like to Learn About Tech Safety (n=202)

Respondents noted that offering resources in a variety of formats would be helpful and would contribute to meaningful education. Notably, there were many requests for in-person training. Because there is high demand for training both online and in person, it is important that trainers communicate and liaise with the organizations to determine whether online or in-person training would be suitable. For instance, organizations operating in rural, remote, or northern communities might require in-person training due to poor connectivity, and small organizations may not have the technology required to support online training. On the other hand, organizations may not have the funding to pay for in-person training, and in that case online training may be the best option. Having the flexibility to work with frontline organizations to determine the type of training that will most effectively and meaningfully contribute to supporting survivors is an essential component of an effective response to TFGBV as each community has varying needs and predominant issues of TFGBV.

While the survey revealed a need for TFGBV training generally, workers also expressed that it would be helpful to have access to training and resources designed to support staff in working with specific populations. This may

include people with context- and experience-specific needs. The survivors whom frontline staff would like additional training and resources to serve include newcomers (e.g. people with refugee status, asylum seekers) and older or elderly survivors (figure 16). This was closely followed by the need for more supports related to young survivors, survivors with English as an additional language, and survivors in rural, remote, and isolated communities.
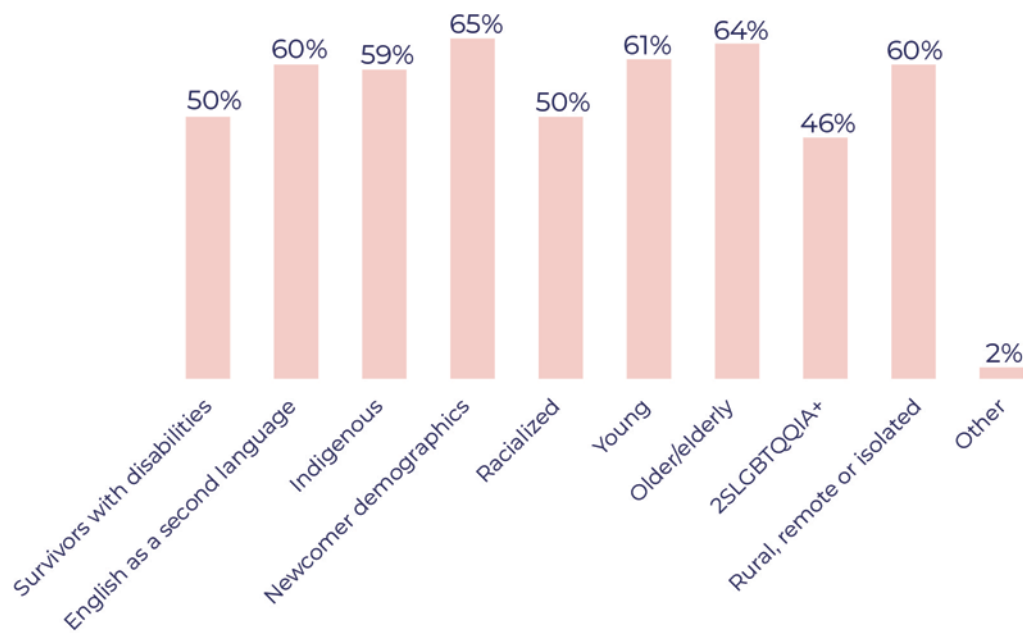

Figure 17: Training/Resources for Target Service Users Wanted by Frontline Staff

Frontline staff not only identified a number of areas that would be beneficial for their learning, but they also shared knowledge gaps identified by survivors. Some of the key areas where survivors could use additional support include information on anti-trafficking, how to secure phones and check for tracking or spyware, navigating legal systems, and safety planning. Survivors also noted they could greatly benefit from access to cell phones, data/calling plans, and access to the internet.

"A lot of survivors do not know all the possible ways someone could be tracking them. I worked with a user at one point who did not realize the gaming system could be used in this way. I think a list like "do you think you are being monitored? Let's do a safety scan!" could be helpful. It could explain where to look for cameras, apps that can be on your phone, where a car could have a tattler on it, how family sharing on phones is, and so on. I think that people do not understand the vastness of ways to be monitored." – Survey respondent

Handouts that individuals can take away was recommended as one potential way to provide education to survivors. This also relies on staff being able to provide step-by-step walk-throughs on different tech issues. As one respondent stated:

> **Based on this survey, our organization needs more training and products to keep our clients safe."**

Areas of Priority for Telecommunications Companies

Training and greater education are needed for staff and survivors, but for this to be effective, telecommunications companies must work towards addressing TFGBV. Telecom companies are producing and overseeing the technology that impacts our everyday lives, yet they are not always accountable for the negative impacts of this tech. It was important to capture this tension through the survey, as this is an aspect of TFGBV that is beyond the scope of the ways shelters/THs can support survivors experiencing this form of violence. The most requested area of action was for tech companies to take TFGBV much more seriously (92%) - otherwise this form of abuse will continue unchecked. We have seen increasing numbers of tech companies acknowledge the potential harm. For example, smartphone device producers are creating safety guides and implementing emergency resets that disconnect location information and accounts. Yet, these interventions are limited, and inconsistent across the sector of companies creating devices, operating social media, providing phones and phone plans, and developing more sophisticated technology (e.g. AI, smart houses, tracking tools).

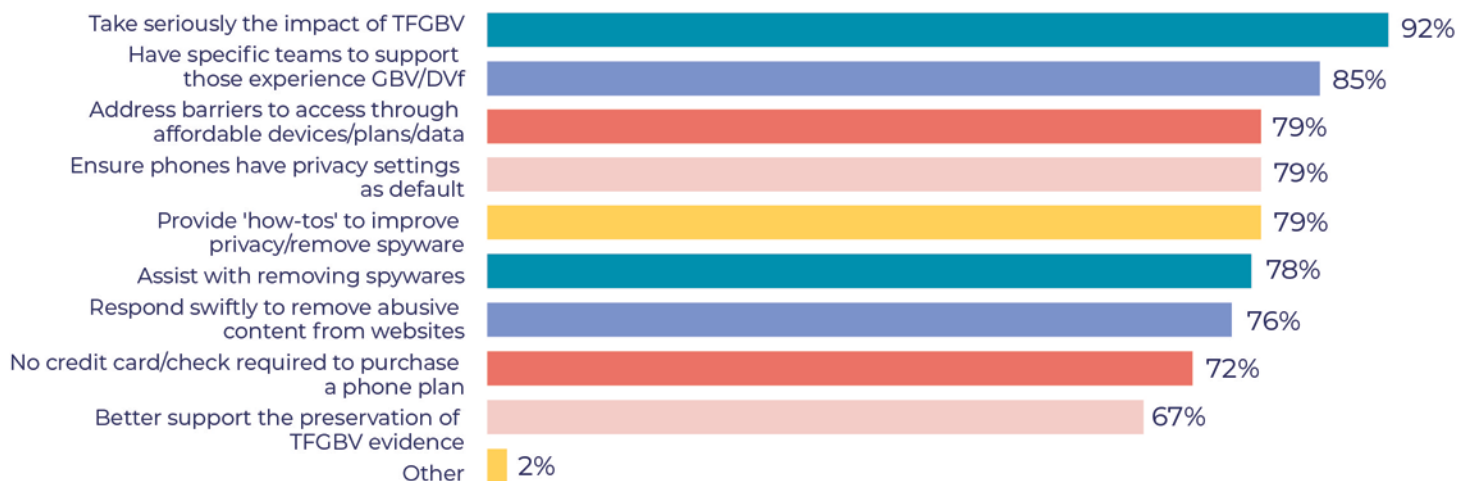| Area of Action	Percentage
Take seriously the impact of TFGBV	92%
Have specific teams to support those experience GBV/DVf	85%
Address barriers to access through affordable devices/plans/data	79%
Ensure phones have privacy settings as default	79%
Provide 'how-tos' to improve privacy/remove spyware	79%
Assist with removing spywares	78%
Respond swiftly to remove abusive content from websites	76%
No credit card/check required to purchase a phone plan	72%
Better support the preservation of TFGBV evidence	67%
Other	2%

Figure 18: Areas of Action Needed by Telecommunication Companies (n=204)

There are several priorities and actions that are needed by telecommunications companies to address TFGBV, in particular developing policies and practices informed by the realities of violence. Survivors need access to trauma-informed, survivor-centred practices when engaging with support services. These policies and practices need to recognize that there is low tech literacy in the general public, and resources must be accessible and easy to use. This means tech companies need to have better training on GBV, and to understand the risks and opportunities embedded in the tech tools that they provide. For individuals contacting call centres, for example, companies should have clear policies acknowledging how tech and violence interact, and agents should understand such policies and the realities of TFGBV. With an increased level of understanding of TFGBV's severity and prevalence, this may contribute to such actions as abusive content being more expediently removed from sites or social media, and support preserving vital evidence for survivors.

Companies can also increase tech safety by helping to reduce barriers to accessible tech and connectivity. This can include providing affordable devices, phone, and data plans, and not requiring a credit card or credit check to purchase a phone plan. Currently, to gain access to technology requires costly upfront expenses, which can prevent many, including survivors, from accessing needed resources that can increase safety and connection. Survey respondents stressed the need for sustained access to devices and phone donation programs, which are often facilitated through tech companies. One frontline staff proposed the idea of targeted phone, data, or internet plans for survivors.

Overall, it was felt that tech companies need to be held to account for the products that they are producing, and that greater regulations are needed. This includes providers being responsible for content that appears on their websites, and holding customers accountable for content that is uploaded. This is especially applicable for social media companies.

Currently, to gain access to technology requires costly upfront expenses, which can prevent many, including survivors, from accessing needed resources that can increase safety and connection.

Nunavut Focus Group

> **"It's heartbreaking; a constant battle; we see these women completely stripped of everything." - Focus group participant**

The Tech Safety Canada team had the opportunity to train frontline workers in Nunavut, Iqaluit in March 2023. This provided the chance to hold a focus group about connectivity and TFGBV with these workers. While we were unable to host similar focus groups in other regions, we felt that this was an important addition to this survey. Nunavut, like other northern and remote communities, faces many issues with connectivity. We also had very few survey responses from Nunavut, so the focus group was a way to bring these voices and experiences to this study.

Prior to hosting this focus group, we were unsure how similar the experiences of the Nunavut workers would be to those who had responded to the survey. Upon analyzing the data, we realized that while there were unique experiences with connectivity issues and being in northern and remote communities, many of the themes that emerged were aligned with what we heard through the survey. The feedback has been divided into two sections: the first section outlines elements that were consistent with the survey findings, and the second highlights findings unique to these communities.

Similarities to Survey Responses

> **"Technology makes it easy to keep harassing people and makes it hard to really escape." – Focus group participant**

As in other areas of the country, tech is being used in shelters/THs by workers, and by their residents. The kinds of technology being used include texting, email, printing, and phone calls, as well as external safety measures like security cameras. It is a primary means for people to be in touch with shelters/THs. Unfortunately, TFGBV is also very prevalent in Nunavut. This includes issues of harassment and tracking. While much of the harassment, and even tracking, is taking place via social media, it was noted that this spills into the real world, with survivors also experiencing stalking in their community. Tech is being used to control women and is seen as an easy way to perpetrate abuse, as it is often invisible and misunderstood. Another form of TFGBV that was cited by respondents

Frontline workers reported that it can be difficult to know what to do about TFGBV. They are interested in more training but acknowledge that funding is a constraint.

in Nunavut was perpetrators destroying survivors' devices. One frontline worker explained that many women think "Why should I buy a new phone when he's just going to break it?"

There is often no legal action taken when TFGBV is reported in Nunavut. Similar to our survey findings, and sadly, as with other forms of violence, perpetrators are often not held to account. When TFGBV is reported, many do not feel that they are listened to or that justice is achieved. Survivors who attempt to have content removed online find that there is limited support and recourse for TFGBV. This contributes to survivors being disinclined to seek support from police, justice systems, and even tech companies, which leads to distrust of these systems. As this focus group participant noted, "Technology makes it easy to keep harassing people and makes it hard to really escape".

Frontline workers reported that it can be difficult to know what to do about TFGBV. They are interested in more training but acknowledge that funding is a constraint. They noted that they would be interested in sessions of a similar nature to the Tech Safety Canada focus group, as this not only offers valuable training, but also facilitates building community and collaboration among shelters. They indicated that training must be tailored to varied levels of tech literacy in order to be effective.

Shelters have different policies surrounding tech, but most have a policy that prohibits photos of common spaces, or that show the outside of the shelter. Despite efforts to keep locations confidential, this remains a challenge in small communities. As survey respondents mentioned, communicating tech policies to clients can be difficult, particularly the importance of location confidentiality. Another support worker estimated that even in Iqaluit, by far the biggest community represented at training, at least half of the town must know where the shelter is.

What is Unique to These Communities?

There were several themes that emerged from the focus group that were distinct from the survey responses. Several of the distinctions are linked to issues of connectivity in the North. While these were discussed earlier, unlike many of the provinces, connectivity is problematic in all areas of the territory.

It was shared that there were some days when phones and internet would be down for hours at a time in Nunavut. Even within shelters/THs there is no unlimited data, or they have very limited connectivity, and therefore are unable to provide Wi-Fi to clients. Similarly, affordability is even more problematic in Nunavut because of high shipping costs, limited retailers, and few options for phone or internet plans. This was not only important to note as a challenge for service users and shelters/THs but was an important reminder for those providing resources to these communities that information should be provided on paper or USBs. In addition, as these communities have a high percentage of people who are most comfortable working in Inuktitut, translating materials was also necessary, both for shelters and for those outside the territory sharing resources. As one focus group participant said, "Additional training and resources would be beneficial, and it would be advisable to explore Inuktitut translation services for trainings."

Summary

The study results highlight several keys themes. These include a high prevalence of TFGBV occurring among those seeking help in shelter, an overall lack of tech literacy among survivors and frontline staff, a desire among staff to have more resources and training on tech safety, and many gaps in addressing tech safety among tech companies. Because technology and TFGBV are constantly evolving, it is essential to not only provide continuously updated resources to keep pace with changes in technology, it is also essential to develop core competency in tech literacy so that frontline workers build confidence in problem solving when faced with TFGBV.

A notable consideration identified in this study is the impact that shame and stigma have on the likelihood a survivor will seek out and receive support for certain forms of TFGBV. This is particularly significant with cases of NCDII, for instance, and stresses the importance of developing specialized resources and training for the anti-violence sector that apply a trauma-informed lens informed by considerations of the differentiated impacts of violence. Further, TFGBV resources that support population-specific concerns, for example for newcomer, Indigenous, or young survivors, are also needed in order to address a broad range of needs.

Mobilization from across sectors is key to addressing TFGBV and supporting survivors. This survey identified areas for action for civil society, government, police and legal systems, and corporations. Guiding these actions should be the expertise held by frontline staff, who intimately understand the experiences of survivors and the ways in which TFGBV shows up in GBV and anti-violence work.
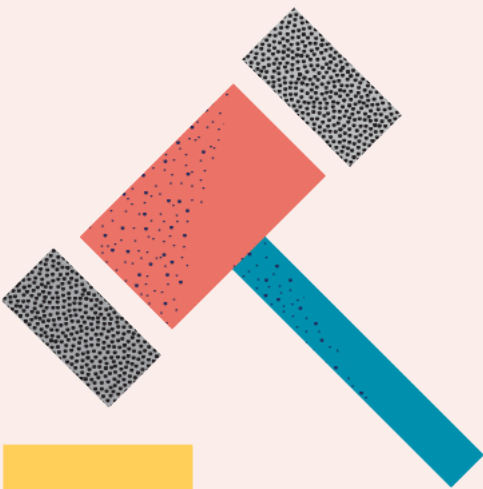
Conclusions and Recommendations

TFGBV is a growing concern, and this report has helped to build a picture of what TFGBV looks like in Canada. The main findings are that TFGBV is pervasive, intense, and concerning and that further attention to this issue is required, including advocacy, training, and resources.
Unfortunately, abusers are tech savvy, and constantly finding new ways to weaponize technology to terrorize their partners, families, and community. Despite this being a growing threat, it is not well understood by many, especially those with the ability to make changes in survivors' lives, including legal systems, government bodies, police, and tech companies.

Frontline workers are creative and resilient problem solvers working against high rates of violence with limited resources. Because of their wealth of experience and understanding of the violence survivors are facing, frontline workers and organizations should be some of our main teachers when seeking to understand what is happening in our communities. Despite this, many workers still need much more training to best support survivors. Tech literacy remains low among workers in the anti-violence sector, as well as among survivors. With greater knowledge, survivors, alongside workers, will have more opportunity to address TFGBV and work toward living violence free. To achieve this, core funding is needed to address the gaps identified by the voices shared in this report. We hope that through the trainings we offer, the connections we have garnered, and the data we gather through surveys such as this, Tech Safety Canada, as a project of Women's Shelters Canada and part of the larger VAW shelter/TH sector, contributes to a changing landscape on TFGBV.

Recommendations

Technology's use, and misuse, warrants careful consideration and thoughtful (but timely) action from a range of actors, including government bodies, public safety agencies, and corporations. A collective and, as much as possible, coordinated response is required to effectively address TFGBV and promote safety for vulnerable populations.

The lack of corporate policies is contributing to keeping women tied to their abusers, as rigid practices are not being informed by the realities of coercive control and trauma. Corporate policies and government legislation must be updated to better support survivors of violence.

Relatedly, many legal areas must be updated; this includes both the reshaping of existing legal mechanisms and the implementation of new ones, and the development of an up-to-date and accurate body of resources to help survivors navigate civil and criminal legal systems and privacy legislation. It is also essential that those working in support services or front facing roles with survivors, such as frontline anti-violence workers, law enforcement, legal professionals, those working in healthcare, and beyond, are educated on TFGBV, its impacts, and what can be done to support survivors. Training delivered by TFGBV experts on how to respond effectively to the issue is of the utmost importance, especially with the aim of supporting frontline workers to confidently support survivors, and to manage the stress associated with supporting people experiencing TFGBV.

Based on our survey feedback, WSC calls for the following recommendations to be enacted as a response to TFGBV.

Recommendations for Companies

Telecommunications Companies

- Address barriers to affordability.

- Make it possible for survivors to interact with support staff through whatever method makes them feel safe to access support.

- Provide shelters/THs with donated phones. These are a lifeline for survivors, and they increase survivors' safety and the ability of staff to deliver programming.

- Address issues of accessibility.

- Address digital divides.

Recommendations can be achieved through the following actions:

- Fees for changing phone plans need to be eliminated. In addition, reassessing the cost of phone, data, and Wi-Fi plans and allowing survivors to break free of abuser's shared family plans.

- Develop trauma-informed and survivor-centred teams of staff tasked with supporting survivors, as well as accompanying equity policies.

- Continue to fund phone donation programs.

- Remove the need for a credit check or the requirement of a credit card to open a new account for survivors.
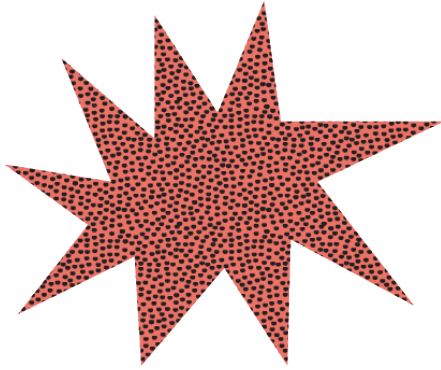
- Develop plans to support vulnerable survivors in rural, remote, or isolated areas, where connectivity may be prohibitively expensive or there may be gaps in service. This may include infrastructure development.

**Rideshare Companies (e.g. Uber and Lyft)**

- Adopt or scale up policies and projects that support survivors.

- Continue to add and review safety options and mechanisms, such as enabling sharing location with a trusted contact. Provide clear reporting mechanisms for users and follow-up processes for these companies, to ensure that survivors receive timely support and resolution of issues.

Recommendations can be achieved through the following actions:

- Review of internal policies, as well as monitoring and evaluation of response to violence and reports of violence, for both riders and drivers.

Recommendations for Government

- Develop legislation and responses to TFGBV through collaboration with advocates and survivors.

- Consult with frontline workers and advocates. Such consultations should be reflected in decision-making. Such consultations would be compensated. This would ensure that the valuable expertise of frontline workers in the sector informs work being done.

- Provide sustained funding to GBV organizations currently working on TFGBV issues. It takes a toll on smaller nonprofit organizations to continuously reapply for funding, especially for core programming and resource development. Further, it is disheartening to see non-anti-violence organizations with limited experience or knowledge of the complexities of domestic and sexual violence receive funding, while experienced organizations struggle to meet needs and keep their doors open. Such funding needs to not only sustain programming to support survivors, but funding to sustain workers and support their wellness.

- In its work with telecom and tech corporations, apply a lens informed by GBV. This includes the oversight and provisions of mandatory low-cost phone, internet, and mobile plan options for survivors of
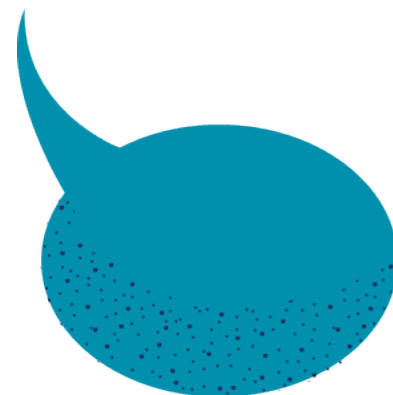
domestic violence, reduction or cancellation of service and change fees, and the ability for survivors to remove themselves from their abusers' family or shared plans at no cost.

Recommendations can be achieved through the following actions:

- Consult with frontline organizations and advocates working in GBV fields about how to address TFGBV, and act on consultations.

- Provide funding to support TFGBV work of GBV non-profits.

- Provide financial support to civil society to advocating with telecom companies.

- Align government advocacy with recommendations made by the anti-violence sector.

Recommendations for Police and Justice System Actors

Frontline workers' and survivors' experiences with police and justice staff are highly varied. Additional training for these actors should address and consider:

- The impact of TFGBV on survivors.

- The prevalence and significance of TFGBV, as well as how to work with and support survivors.

- Trauma-informed and survivor-centred practices and approaches, as well as non-shaming lenses that can be used to perform this work.

As this report has identified, some women may not feel comfortable working with police or justice. Options through GBV organizations or civil remedies should:

- Be developed to support those who do not wish to pursue action through the police or justice systems.

Police and justice systems should

- Continue to evaluate and respond to the ways in which their systems shape the experiences of marginalized communities, such as women and gender minorities, Indigenous peoples, racialized communities, and so on, in their response to TFGBV.

- Assess how accessible their services are. For instance, legal action may be prohibitively expensive for survivors. In court settings, this may include fees to submit applications. This is not to mention the costs of appropriate and needs–informed counselling for survivors.

Responses should consider what survivors want and respect their choices. This includes things such as fast take-down services in cases of NCDII, for instance, as well as not placing the burden on the victim to work with tech companies to remove their photos. It would also include offering a range of free and timely supports and responses, legal and beyond.

Recommendations can be achieved through the following actions:

Provide further training for police and justice staff.

- Address equity and justice issues within these systems.

- Improve accessibility of supports.

- Ensure that policies and practices are survivor-centred.

Recommendations for Frontline Workers and Organizations Working on TFGBV

One of the recurring themes of this report is the shame or stigma survivors feel about experiencing TFGBV. Shame and stigma are particularly concerning not only as they impact survivors' experiences with service delivery, but also in the ways that they can retraumatize survivors. Work to support survivors of this kind of violence should include:

- Active adoption of non-shaming policies and language.

- The prioritization of victim-centred, trauma-informed practices.

- Support for survivors' wellness in a holistic and sex-positive lens. Survivors are community members with an equal right to tech, connection, relationships, and community. This includes a right to engagement and sexuality.

- Make relational health a priority. Support strong relationships with survivors and prioritize their healing so that trust and safety can be rebuilt and maintained moving forward.

Frontline workers have, throughout this report, stressed the need for further training in a number of areas. As they stated, because technology is constantly evolving and staff turnover is a feature of the sector, training should:

- Be recurring. It is important that survivors and frontline workers alike have access to up-to-date information that keeps pace with technology's changes.

- Be offered for different levels of tech literacy, to best match varying levels of comfort and knowledge related to tech.

- Address core areas of concern identified in this report.

- Include working with frontline organizations to build staff awareness of privacy risks and communication of risk to survivors.

- Address tech safety in the context of anti-violence work.

- Take shape in many formats. This would be most effective from an educational standpoint. Options should exist for in-person or online training depending on what would support staff needs. Training should be expanded to rural and remote areas. Training may need to be tailored to fit unique communities' needs.

- Be provided through the lens of our tech safety principles, and updated when new information becomes relevant.

- Incorporate specialized resources to support groups of women with specific experiences (e.g. Immigrant, refugee, and non-status women).

Recommendations can be achieved through the following actions:

- Work to address shame and stigma surrounding TFGBV by providing:

  - Training for frontline workers and organizations, and other community stakeholders, to reframe TFGBV and support survivor-centred practice.

  - Collaborate with experts, including sexual education and sexual health communicators/educators.

  - Advocacy on behalf of survivors, including tools to support advocacy and self-advocacy.

- Support frontline workers who work with survivors experiencing TFGBV.

This report recognizes that staff and organizations are very often under-resourced when working with high rates of violence. As much as possible, support for the staff's wellbeing should be prioritized. Recommendations for staff wellness include:

- Organizations build supports and wellbeing policies for staff.

- Trainers provide positive and supportive messaging during training to build confidence.

The co-occurrence of TFGBV with other forms of violence raises many concerns about safety and the potential for physical violence or femicide. Forms of violence like coercive control, which often involves TFGBV, are often a precursor to femicide (Regroupement, 2022). Therefore, there is a need to monitor this link further, and better understand TFGBV in the broader context of GBV and rising rates of violence.

Recommendations can be made actionable through:

- Monitor trends and rates in femicide.

- Maintaining records of feedback and findings related to this area.

- Seek opportunities for further advocacy.

- Government and policy collaboration with the sector to take action to address femicide.

- Continue to build awareness about TFGBV and its impact on survivors, as well as what resources are available in the community.
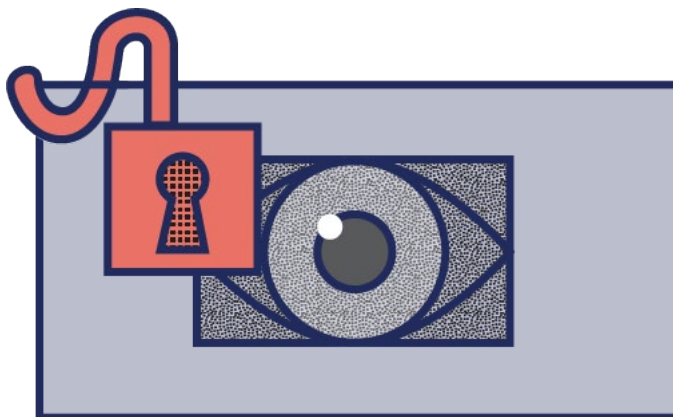
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Appendix A

Example list of policies for participant tech and device use in shelter/TH

Policy category	Example policies
Video calls	• No video calls in common areas • no video calls outside of their rooms (where other clients can be seen), only against a plain wall background • video devices prohibited
Location settings	• Location services must be off before coming in the shelter/TH • residents receive explanations upon arrival on the confidentiality/security and the premises
Pictures	• no taking pictures/recordings inside the shelter/TH • no pictures taken without approval in the shelter/TH, and no posting of phots that may identity location of the shelter/TH • no photos of children in the shelter/TH • no photos of staff members
Social media	• no posts that include the location of clients
Phone use	• no speaker phone in communal areas • phones on silent • no hands-free calling in common areas • cellphone boxes for meetings and workshops • no use of devices during meals or activities • phones can be checked for suspicious programs • phone needs to be turned off until it can be looked at by IT • clients don't have access to their laptops and cellphones • no phone in the worker's office during an intervention • it is recommended to not lend devices to others in shelter and keep personal devices in a locker or in bedroom if not in use (due to possible loss or theft) • agency is not responsible for lost, stolen, or broken devices
Security settings	• change all passwords • encourage creation of new email address or to change password
Cloud	• disconnect from cloud software • participants do not take the phone with them if it is under the abuser's name or the abuser has access accounts
Children's devices	• do not connect children's devices to Wi-Fi • children's devices should be restricted using parental locks, monitoring for messages from the abuser, and blocking the abuser as to ensure safety

Policy category	Example policies
Wi-Fi	• Wi-Fi given after raising awareness of the importance of confidentiality and internet security • separate internet connection for clients and staff • web filtering in place on Resident Wi-Fi for potentially dangerous content • Wi-Fi Curfew 11pm • program participants provide their own internet
Internet use	• some websites are restricted and inaccessible on devices
Other	• do not use the ATM machine in the shelter area • everything about the shelter must be kept confidential • use ride sharing services, like Uber, are restricted • phones may be put into pouches that block location tracking • residents cannot watch violent or upsetting shows near others