BC Society of Transition Houses

Connectivity and Violence against Women in British Columbia:
TFGBV, barriers, impacts, and recommendations

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Acknowledgments

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Background

Connectivity and Violence against Women

In 2016, the UN General Assembly deemed access to the internet a human right (Howell & West, 2016). This essential freedom is a sign of the times as the new digital age evokes rapid changes both on and behind the screen.

At first glance, this human right seems satisfied as 94 % of all British Columbians have access to the internet and is on par with the national average (Statistics Canada, 2019). However, of the 94 % of British Columbians that have the internet, "only 40 % of rural communities and 38% of rural Indigenous communities have access to the recommended broadband internet speeds" (James, 2021); in other words, there are gaps in who can engage in the digital world meaningfully. This reveals the disproportionate digital struggles many British Columbians face which have manifested two important issues: connectivity and safety.

As it becomes clear that technology and connectivity are disproportionate across the nation, it raises a pertinent question: how does meaningful connectivity relate to violence against women? Technology and connectivity are vital for daily services and tasks that ensure safety and livelihood. As such, when connectivity is limited or manipulated, it can foster violence against women (VAW); importantly, it is linked to increased rates of tech-facilitated-gender-based-violence (TFGBV) (CBC Radio, 2021). The lack of connectivity can prevent anti-violence workers from providing essential services to women facing violence. Restricted connectivity can limit women and children's ability to connect and learn, possibly prolonging abuse. The impact of technological manipulation can harm women's mental health. ***Meaningful connectivity is essential for women's safety***. In recognition of the importance of technology and meaningful connectivity for women and anti-violence work, the BC Society of Transition Houses (BCSTH) has created the Technology Safety Project, which provides anti-violence workers across British Columbia with information, resources and training about technology safety and technology-facilitated violence. The BCSTH Technology Safety Project has launched a sub-project to research the links between connectivity, and technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) and existing digital divides.

Tech-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) occurs when digital spaces and devices are intentionally used to harass, abuse and or exploit others based on gender and/or sexuality. Similar to the definition put forward by LEAF, BCSTH defines TFGBV as the "spectrum of activities and behaviours that involve technology as a central aspect of perpetuating violence, abuse, or harassment [...]" against women and girls (Khoo, 2021). This can include restricting or limiting usage or access to technology, domestic violence, criminal harassment (stalking), sexual assault, impersonation and harassment. As Dunn points out, "Like other forms of gender-based violence, TFGBV is rooted in discriminatory beliefs and institutions that reinforce sexist gender norms. It intersects with racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism and other discriminatory systems in many of its manifestations" (Dunn, 2020).

Goals and Methods

This report presents the preliminary findings of BCSTH's work regarding connectivity in British Columbia as it relates to violence against women and girls and anti-violence work.

During the research process, academic papers, news articles, reports, and projects coordinated by community organizations primarily in Canada, the United States, and Australia were reviewed. Conversations with anti-violence workers across the province provided guidance as to what areas were of particular importance for research, and data specific to the experiences of BC anti-violence workers was collected from the BC Anti-Violence Program Technology Safety and Privacy Survey conducted by BCSTH in August of 2021 (BCSTH, 2021).

This report communicates our research findings and highlights key themes regarding the impacts of connectivity on TGV from the perspective of anti-violence organizations in British Columbia. It outlines recommendations to deepen meaningful connectivity, reduce barriers to services, and counter-violence experienced by service users across the province.

"Women and girls" refer to and is inclusive of all self-identified women. While we recognize that gender-based violence has significant impacts on cis-gender women and girls in Canada, we also acknowledge that 2SLGBTQQIA+ and gender non-conforming people are disproportionately impacted by experiences of violence and continue to experience significant barriers to anti-violence supports and services.

Intersectionality and Digital Divides

BCSTH works from an intersectional feminist framework and incorporates a critical lens to systems of power. An intersectional feminist framework recognizes that the experiences of individuals and their ability to access services are informed by various aspects of their identity including, but not limited to, their race, class, gender, location, ability, sexuality, and age. In the context of connectivity and TFGBV, this means consideration of the impact of social location on access to technology, and experiences with technology, violence, and accessing support for TFGBV. Significant variation in social location means that TFGBV and experiences with connectivity will look very different between groups and individuals.

A **digital divide** is defined as a systemic barrier to establishing or maintaining meaningful connectivity for communication, information, and safety. The digital divide occurs because of macro structural inequities that limit genuine engagement through technology/digital means such as insufficient infrastructure, affordability, digital literacy, etc. These divides result from and deepen pre-existing disparities based on various identities including, but not limited to, gender, race, socioeconomic status, rural/urban differences, citizenship, and age. Notable digital divides that have been reviewed in literature include the gender-based digital divide and the rural/urban digital divide.

A Deeper Look into Connectivity

Connectivity in the Digital Age - What is connectivity?

Access can be a deceiving word. *Meaningful connectivity* and access - often used interchangeably - mean different things that distort the digital realities of Canadians. Specifically, 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, building relationships, and access services. With connectivity, safe and equitable inclusion is essential to provide opportunities for participation that are accessible to folks 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. When meaningful connectivity is present, digital inclusion expands to all communities, and the division mends.

> "Comfort comes with connection." – B.C. anti-violence worker on the importance of meaningful connectivity

TFGBV, Connectivity, and Problems of Access

Traditionally, discussions about TFGBV have focused on the misuse of technology, which includes but not limited to criminal harassment, monitoring/surveillance, non-consensual distribution of intimate images, or threats. Traditional understandings of TFGBV tend not to include how insufficient or restricted access to connectivity can impact a person's ability to reach out for help, or how it can contribute to the intensity of violence they experience. By looking at connectivity's role in TFGBV, a deeper understanding of how it impacts women and youth can be reached.

The sub-category of TFGBV specific to barriers to accessing meaningful connectivity can be referred to as "Access-Related TFGBV". Perpetrators of violence can use the prevention of access to connectivity strategically as a method of abuse and violence. The absence of connectivity can complicate or worsen the violence women experience. With exclusion from access to technology and/or connectivity, women may experience isolation from loved ones and support networks reduced ability to access support and/or anti-violence services, or possibly even experience a greater intensity of violence. TFGBV can also include negative implications associated with the absence of connectivity or strategic prevention of connectivity. This might include, for example, restriction of access to devices by the abuser or the abuser withholding Wi-Fi passwords which prevents seeking help.

What is important to note about Access-Related TFGBV is that it involves both individual and systemic dimensions. Access related TFGBV might look like an abusive partner destroying her device, or forcibly restricting her to areas in the house without a strong internet connection, to

preventing her from connecting with others. In this case, an individual's partner restricts access to connectivity as a form of violence. Systems-level barriers to connectivity also assist and aggravate violence. Lack of internet or phone infrastructure or unaffordable connection can isolate women and youth from accessing support services. These systems-level barriers fall under the category of "digital divide" discussed earlier, so access-related TFGBV impacts women differently depending on their social locations. It is informed by, and reflects, broader inequalities in society.

Both cases represent barriers to meaningful connectivity- at the individual level, women face barriers to personal access to meaningful and safe connectivity, whereas, on the systems level, digital divides mean that entire groups face consistent and systemic barriers to accessing the connectivity they need for safety.

Criminal Harassment (Stalking): perpetrator REPEATEDLY communicates with a woman or engages in threatening behavior that makes a woman fear for her safety and/or the safety of a family member.
Monitoring/Surveillance (voyeurism): perpetrator monitoring and/or watching a woman via technology.
Threats: perpetrator makes threats via phone call, video call, email, text message and/or social media platforms.
Non-consensual distribution of images: perpetrator sharing or posting intimate photos or videos of a woman without her consent.

The Ongoing Issue of Connectivity in BC

Technology and connectivity play an increasingly large role in our lives, especially as they become means to provide services such as telehealth, online banking, learning, and social opportunities. Particularly since the pandemic forced many areas of life, including the delivery of key services, to transition to remote delivery or modified delivery methods, connectivity is more than ever an essential component of safety and inclusion. This is particularly relevant to the work transition houses and other anti-violence programs do as a lack of meaningful connectivity could present barriers to accessing or providing services central to women and children's safety and wellbeing. Connectivity in BC is not distributed evenly and faces ongoing and significant challenges.

- 1 in 10 Canadian households has no internet connection, and "Over 1/3 of low-income Canadians have sacrificed essentials like food to make sure they can pay for internet access." (James, 2021)
- Those in rural or remote areas of B.C. pay a disproportionately larger bill for access to technology: for example, "a Chetwynd resident living outside of the town limits will have a landline (approx. $100), a cell that only works in town (approx. $100) ad satellite service for the internet (approx. $200). That is $400 monthly, not including overages" whereas "a hotel in town only pays $1119 per month for the same broadband access." (BC Chambers, 2020)
- "Approximately 3 % of B.C.'s population lives in areas where satellite technology provides the only option for a high-speed Internet connection for the foreseeable future." (Government of British Columbia, 2012)
- From 2011 to 2017, "the BC household internet access spending has increased 59% to $691." For Alberta, Quebec, and Ontario, the rate was 39% (KPMG, 2019)

The BC Connectivity Report conducted by KPMG in 2019 examined how BC's connectivity compares to similar Canadian and American jurisdictions, and found that as of 2019:

- BC had the lowest percentage of internet plans without caps on data- only about 50% of broadband plans did not have a data cap. (KMPG, 2019)
- While median household income is comparatively lower in BC, rural broadband prices "for 1-199 GB data cap plans" are some of the highest. BC also has comparatively high cellular prices, which means that in many cases, a greater proportion of income is spent on cellular and internet plans. In fact, growth of internet access spending outpaced the income growth rate in BC, which raises serious concerns about the affordability of connectivity in the broader context of cost of living. (KPMG, 2019)
- BC's median broadband speed was 15.2Mbps- despite BC leading the Canadian jurisdictions studied, it is important to note that the target broadband connection speeds set by the CRTC are 50Mbps download, and 10Mbps upload (50/10, for short). These speeds are necessary to support "multiple users of cloud-based software applications, telehealth, online learning resources, HD video streaming [...]" etc., and are particularly relevant in contexts where household members are working, learning, and accessing services from home. (KPMG, 2019)

Connectivity remains an active issue for anti-violence organizations

- According to the BCSTH anti-violence survey (BCSTH, 2021), 60 % of respondents stated that tech affordability was a barrier for clients accessing their services; 51 % stressed that access to a device was another concerning barrier. Issues were also identified with other components of meaningful connectivity- low quality and/or reliability of signal, as well as technological literacy, were identified as barriers to services by 55. 49% of respondents, respectively.
- 55.29% reported that in their experience, the service user's lack of technology made service delivery more difficult, and 14.29% reported that the program's lack of technology made delivery more difficult.

> "Not only do newcomer women need affordability and access to the internet and devices, but so do [workers] in anti-violence centers." - B.C. Anti- violence worker

Connectivity's Relationship with TFGBV

According to anti-violence workers, in their experiences, program participants reported that a lack of access to technology and or/concerns that their abuser may be monitoring their use of technology (i.e. unsafe connectivity) negatively impacted their ability to access domestic and/or sexual violence support (78.21%), social connection and support (76.92%), housing (52.56%, and employment (44.87%), among other impacts (BCSTH, 2021).

Anti-violence workers were also asked what issues, in their opinion, may arise from the lack of technology (i.e. meaningful connectivity) for women, children, and youth experiencing violence. 93.98% believe that lack of technology is associated with increased isolation of the participant (e.g. separation from family and peers, digital and technological isolation, etc.). 89.16% believe that it is associated with decreased ability to seek support, and 83.13% that it decreases the likelihood of seeking support or accessing services. Many believe lack if technology may also impact the violence women experience, 56.63% responding that it may be associated with increased intensity of violence other than tech abuse (e.g. physical, emotional, financial, sexual abuse).

Lack of meaningful connectivity can present significant risks for women and children's wellbeing. However, despite persistent issues with connectivity, anti-violence workers provided

significant feedback that supports meaningful connectivity's power as a tool to promote women and children's safety. 84.71% reported that in their experience, technology has played a positive role in their program's service delivery. In fact, 77.17% responded that after the pandemic, their program will continue to use technology to offer support and conduct intake. Anti-violence workers indicated that technology positively impacted the service delivery process in several ways:

- Helped combat feelings of isolation- one worker stated that technology helped by "maintaining some degree of connection in the face of a very isolating pandemic."

- Increased connection with service users, including making possible "connection to clients 7 days a week", and reminder texts as a way to increase appointment attendance.

- Increased options and methods for clients to get in touch.

- Increased connection to services and resources for programs and service users.

- Reduced barriers to accessing services, especially barriers related to disability, resources, expectations of in-person attendance, and COVID-19 related concerns.

- Two of the most prominently identified barriers to accessing services were lack of transportation and childcare, which were reported by 3 in 4 anti-violence workers. Many anti-violence workers reported that technology helped overcome these barriers and increased accessibility- one stated that technology "reduced barriers for rural clients, removed barriers of childcare, time and transportation issues (particularly in winter)", while another wrote that "It has helped us reach clients in very remote communities and helped us offer services during the pandemic."

"There needs to be affordable and consistent devices and internet to make sure women have the support and ability to reach out" - B.C. Anti- violence worker

Connectivity and VAW among Newcomer Women

Studies have shown that violence against newcomer women, especially those a part of visible minorities, is more prevalent than non-newcomer women (Mahapatra & Rai, 2019; Henry et al., 2018; Raj & Silverman, 2002).

The causes and consequences of violence against newcomer women can be attributed to a multitude of challenges. Newcomer women face obstacles such as "being in a new country, isolation from immediate family members and relatives, lack of support systems, language barriers, limited awareness of legal and other systems in the host country, fear of exclusion

> ***Newcomer women*** *is an umbrella term for women who have come to Canada under various legal statutes. This includes immigrant, migrant worker, refugee, international students, and non-status women.*

from their own community, [...] threats of deportation, fear of divorce, [and] economic dependence" (Mahapatra & Rai, 2019). Additionally, they are burdened with the systemic inequality and oppression that comes with being a visible minority in Canada. It is important to note that these barriers are not inherently exclusive to newcomer women, but compounded when compared to non- newcomer women.

Role of connectivity in Violence against Newcomer Women

TFGBV has become a prevalent and overlooked form of violence that affects newcomer women. Studies have shown that perpetrators, who understand how essential connectivity is, manipulate technology to abuse (Mahapatra & Rai, 2019). Newcomer women are more susceptible because perpetrators use women's "immigration status, geographical isolation from families and friends, as well as their ethnic or religious backgrounds" to evoke fear, cut supportive ties, and inflict abuse (Henry et al., 2021). When newcomer women do try to seek support in informal ways, barriers (i.e., "language barriers, cultural bias from support services, lack of financial resources, lack of trust in state institutions, and additional challenges with justice and migration systems") prevent immediate justice (Henry et al., 2021). For example, in a qualitative Australian study, a stakeholder stressed that a photo of them without their hijab would not be considered as image-based sexual abuse due to the legal system and cultural hegemony of Australia - which is strikingly similar to the system and culture in Canada (Henry et

al., 2021). This would prevent newcomer women from addressing the violence by reaching out and accessing support. Another example of these barriers lies with Western perceptions of violence against women. As newcomer women often "experience domestic violence perpetrated by extended family members, including relatives overseas" (Mahapatra & Rai, 2019), it contrasts with Western notions of violence against women often refer to as the abuser as the intimate partner. As a result, newcomer women may feel anti-violence support or legal systems will misunderstand or minimize the abuse.

Beyond the manipulation of connectivity, there comes a problem with its absence or limitation. Newcomer women – like most people, rely on technology and digital spheres for everyday essential tasks. From information to connection, access to the internet and devices is critical every day. However, in addition to common necessities of technology, newcomer women tend to rely on it more in response to the obstacles they face; in other words, access and engagement with technology become vital for seeking support. In fact, studies have shown that technology "[is] used as a way to extend their social life and ensure [newcomer women] had social interaction beyond the abuse of their spouses" in which the support often means addressing the violence they experience (Mahapatra & Rai, 2019). Simply, the most meaningful support came from friends and family within their inner circles which stresses how quintessential technology is for these women. (Mahapatra & Rai, 2019). Violence against newcomer women increases when this technology is inaccessible. The lack of connectivity further increases the digital divide of newcomer women in BC as an additional form of systematic marginalization is present as their connection to personal and anti-violence support is threatened. As a result, newcomer women struggle unfairly with establishing and maintaining meaningful connectivity. Existing digital divides restrict or limit meaningful connectivity to opportunities, support, and engagement.

Secondly, the presence of technology can be a concern when it is manipulated and misused by abusers. When TFGBV occurs, newcomer women often are isolated from the support that they need to escape violence. Experiencing TFGBV, such as having their technology use being minimized or having devices being tracked or monitored combined with limited structural connectivity is now two barriers for women to seek support.

How to support newcomer women facing TFGBV

Newcomer women benefit when the digital divide diminishes, meaningful connectivity is prioritized, and barriers to reach out for support are reduced. This translates into two main focuses: increasing connectivity and decreasing barriers.

Recommendations to increase connectivity and decrease the digital divide for newcomer women:

- **Access to affordable devices and plans**: newcomer women may need a safety device to communicate with and access information. . Additionally, newcomer women may also need affordable internet, wireless cell phones, and data plans to maintain their usage to ensure they can access emergency services when their safety is at risk.
- **Access to affordable devices and plans for anti-violence programs**: As anti-violence programs are essential for women experiencing violence, there needs to be safe agency owned devices that ensure workers can provide the most confidential services possible.
- **Sufficient infrastructure** (broadband, satellite, coverage, etc.) is essential for newcomer women who reside in rural and remote areas. In some communities, not having cell phone towers or having sufficient broadband and download speed can prohibit newcomer women from accessing anti-violence support services.
- **Digital Privacy**: newcomer women need to be informed on digital privacy (e.g., how to install and change passcodes, complete safe searches, deleting or blocking messages or contacts, how to screengrab evidence) to ensure safe and secure tech use. Additionally, it may allow women to reduce the impacts of TFGBV as they can change passwords, block contacts, and collect evidence for court matters.
- **Digital Literacy** (e.g., how to update settings, change language preferences, manage online accounts, differentiate credible information online, etc.) is a necessity as newcomer women deserve the ability to confidently maximize their usage of technology. Additionally, as COVID -19 has pushed many services online, digital knowledge ensures newcomers can seek anti-violence support when needed; whether it's filling out virtual forms to scheduling video counselling sessions, this fluency will aid women.

> “We can’t just give out devices, there needs to be digital literacy, financial security, legal support to make a real change” – B.C. Anti-violence worker

Recommendations to reduce barriers for newcomer women seeking anti-violence support:

- **Address legal systems and laws** that prevent justice and illegitimate newcomer women's abuse. This includes consistent, victim centered and updated cyber laws, creating safe ways to preserve evidence that ensure women are not charged, affordable legal aid, and reducing unnecessary paperwork that systemically overwhelms newcomers.
- **Affordable and accessible language education**: Steps are needed to ensure language courses are welcome to all which can include providing low-cost childcare for mothers enrolling, transportation accommodations or reimbursements, day and evening courses for working mothers, etc.
- **Increase digital literacy**: Provide free courses, sessions, information sheets in anti-violence programs.
- **Translated material and translators in anti-violence programs**: This means meaningful translations that evoke the same tone and message. This should also extend to newcomer women with disabilities such as those hard of hearing in which various sign languages should be accommodated.
- **Information on newcomer women's rights and freedoms in BC**: This can be done by the creation of posters, info sheets, or courses provided by anti-violence programs with the appropriate level of government financial support.
- **Cultural sensitivity training** for frontline workers, law enforcement, and legal advocates who support newcomer women experiencing violence.

Importantly, these recommendations are not for individuals or underfunded anti-violence programs to achieve on their own. Properly funded partnerships with government, legal societies, internet and mobile providers as well as newcomer organizations ***must*** be in place. Newcomer women will begin to feel supported when holistic and collaborative approaches and efforts are made on all fronts to ensure the fulfillment of all - or any - recommendations.

> "A one size solution does not work; instead, we need cultural awareness, research, funding, and education for all our newcomer women." - B.C. Anti-

Rural, Remote, and Indigenous Women: Connectivity and Access

Rurality shapes experiences with violence and connectivity significantly. In conversations regarding rurality and its intersections with violence and connectivity, the term "rural/urban divide" is often used. At its most basic, the rural/urban divide refers to differences in experience between rural and urban communities, often distinguished by inequity and/or urbancentricism. In the context of connectivity, the rural/urban divide refers to systemic barriers to establishing and/or maintaining meaningful connectivity due to rurality or geographic factors (see digital divides definition). Rural/urban divides are especially significant for women and youth in rural, remote, and Indigenous (RRI) communities, especially as they relate to gendered violence.

Defining Rurality

What is considered rural and remote vary significantly between organizations, academics, and community members. In BCSTH's 2020 Technology Facilitated Violence Report, BCSTH has used the following definitions:

Rural: A community with a population size of 29,999 or fewer.
Remote: A community or geographic location with a population of less than 5,000 and/or at least 100 km from a city of >29,000. It can also be a community or geographic location without year-round road access. The project recognizes that geographic isolation can be compounded by lack of access to social networks, internet and cellphone service, and financial resources.

Several papers have pointed out how considering rurality according to a firm rural/urban division risks losing nuanced understanding of differences between rural communities, and that considering rurality as a spectrum or continuum is helpful for recognizing variation (i.e., Farhall (2020) and Owen and Carrington (2015)). BCSTH acknowledges the complexity of defining rurality and the existence of significant variation in experiences from community to community. In order to facilitate analysis, this report will mainly use the BCSTH definitions of rural and remote to distinguish rural from urban. To avoid homogenizing rural experience, survey data will be reported according to the agency's community size indicated by survey respondents. This includes small communities (population up to 5,000), small towns (population between 5,000 and 29,999), medium cities (population between 30,000 and 99,999), and large cities (population of 100,000 and over).

The CRTC currently recommends target broadband speeds of 50 Mbps download, and 10 Mbps upload (50/10) as the standard for Canadians' quality of internet (CRTC 2021). The BC government reports that while 94% of BC households have access to 50/10 Mbps internet speeds, only 40% of BC's rural communities meet these goals, and even fewer rural Indigenous communities, at only 38%. (Ministry of Citizens' Services, 2021). KPMG's report also draws attention to these inequities, and actually estimates lower rates of communities with on-target connectivity than reported by the BC government (KPMG 2019). According to their findings, 33% of rural non-Indigenous, and 35% of rural Indigenous communities have access to 50+

Mbps. While these numbers differ slightly from government data, they serve to reaffirm that the urban/rural digital divide is significant and persistent and demonstrate that Indigenous and Rural experiences with connectivity are disproportionately sub-par in BC.

Indigenous communities face added barriers to connectivity. The First Nations Technology Council published a report in 2019 that examined Indigenous experiences with connectivity in British Columbia. Their report outlines the connections between colonialism and ongoing barriers to connectivity for Indigenous communities today, and identifies "equitable, affordable, and sustainable access to digital and connected technologies" as a process closely interrelated with reconciliation (Jang, Larocque, Patsey, and Patsey, 2019).

RRI contexts and Gender-Based Violence

A recent report by the Centre for Research & Education on Violence against Women and Children at Western University found that in Canadian rural, remote, and Northern communities, gender-based violence occurs in "ways that are both unique and disproportionately high." What's more, both service users and providers' needs are not being met. According to the report:

- Compared to the national average, police-reported violent crimes are 56% higher for rural women, and police-reported intimate partner violence for rural women is 75% higher than the rate of urban women.

- Women and girls in the North face rates of violent crime four times higher than Canada's "overall population" and "three times those in the South." Further, for women and girls in the North, the rate of violent offenses resulting in death is three times those in the South. Actual rates of violence may far exceed these numbers as well, as the report points out- community based-research finds higher levels of violence against Indigenous women when compared to government reports, for example.

- Indigenous women are even more vulnerable to violence. The report identifies that in the ten years from 2007 to 2017, 34% of "all young female homicide victims in Canada" were Indigenous women in the North. This is despite Indigenous women only making up about 4% of Canada's population, as of 2011 census data. (Arriagada, 2016)

- Women and girls in rural communities may face different challenges than those living in cities, including complicated financial and emotional challenges related to land and

livestock ownership, and differences in cultures surrounding gun ownership, for instance. (all statistics from Nonomura and Baker, 2021)

Despite being at higher risk of violence, women in RRI communities also experience lower rates of connectivity, which could further complicate contexts already defined by geographical isolation by limiting the options to seek support.

RRI Communities: Key Themes and Findings

Theme one: Women and Girls in Rural, Remote, and Indigenous (RRI) communities face added barriers to meaningful connectivity due to their rurality.

1a) Women and girls in RRI communities may face added barriers to accessing devices related to geographical isolation's impact on cost and proximity to technology stores.

The Technology Safety survey conducted by BCSTH in August of 2021 (BCSTH, 2021) found that anti-violence workers in small communities identify lack of consistent access to devices as a barrier to accessing services for women and youth at rates 16.19% higher than the rate in large cities. Women and girls in RRI communities face added barriers to accessing devices, firstly due to the physical distance required to access devices, but also due to the costs added by this distance. Many rural communities may be located far away from cities large enough to have stores selling devices- some anti-violence workers described having to drive up to four hours one way to access stores with essential goods. For individuals without ready access to stores selling devices within their own communities, the cost of a device is not the only barrier to accessing devices. Individuals also must account for factors including, but not limited to:

- Transportation to travel to the closest tech store, as well as gas costs. This could be a significant barrier for those without vehicles, especially in areas without extensive public transit,
- Childcare while they make the trip,
- Time off work, which could mean lost wages,
- The safety of making the trip- this is especially a concern in inclement weather, or if there are risks associated with lack of access to connectivity on isolated highways,
- Whether they have the freedom to make the trip (e.g., their activities are being restricted by their abusive partner).

These barriers can significantly impact whether individuals are even able to access devices.

1b) Connectivity is less affordable in RRI areas, making cost a significant barrier for women, girls, and even service providers.

Feedback from the survey, our conversations, and research overwhelmingly stresses high prices as a barrier to meaningful connectivity for women in RRI communities. When compared to the South, Northern "high-speed internet is as much as 3 times more expensive." (Nonomura and Baker, 2021). KPMG found that:

- Plans with high data caps are less accessible to rural communities despite increasing need for large amounts of data. BC also has the "lowest percentage of plans without data caps" when compared to the other Canadian jurisdictions measured and falls below the national average in this area.
- "BC has one of the highest rural broadband prices for 1-199GB data cap plans when compared to the median household income in the province." Cellular prices in BC are also high when compared to other Canadian jurisdictions.
- The proportion of BC's rural population that has access to LTE wireless coverage is 3% lower than the national average, at 93% (All statistics from KPMG, 2019).

Anti-violence workers described how in many cases; individuals would use pay-by-the-minute options because plans were out of their price range. It is often the case that internet quality goes hand in hand with cost, so individuals may be restricted to lower quality internet (which may be insufficient to access services) due to high fees. Hidden costs in contracts, such as cancellation fees, were identified as a complicated added barrier which increased costs for women. Individuals may also face barriers to accessing plans if they do not meet credit score requirements. Due to high prices, even if women and youth could access funds for the one-time cost to access a device, they may not be able to fund a plan month after month.

i) Affordable phone and internet programs face challenges to their effectiveness due to stigma and issues related to inaccessibility.

Inclusive internet schemes that aim to provide lower cost plans or donated devices are a promising response to inequity in connectivity access by telecommunications carriers. While they have supported numerous families, especially during the pandemic's pressures, some anti-violence workers have noted that stigma surrounding accessing affordable service programs may prevent some individuals from accessing these services. Some affordable access initiatives have adopted policies that aim to reduce barriers for families– some internet programs have, for example, designed policies to include no long-term contract or cancellation fees, support for

tech literacy, and programs to connect service users with devices. Certain components of the program may inadvertently decrease their accessibility, however, including that:

- Programs often have time limits, and in many cases families and individuals may require longer term support. Re-application processes may cause stress in families experiencing violence, or act as a barrier to accessing the program.
- In some cases, plans offer internet speeds that fall below the 50/10 targets set by the CRTC, and even these speeds may be restricted to "where available". Target speeds are important for families to be able to participate equally online and access services such as anti-violence supports.
- Low-income requirements may limit eligibility despite others needing access as well.
- In some cases, a school principal may have to refer families to the service. A requirement such as this may dissuade families from reaching out if they believe the experience may be shameful or stigmatizing, and especially if confidentiality is a concern for them. This may be particularly relevant for small communities, where families may be more concerned about privacy.

Similar issues arise with affordable phone programs. They may, for example, provide a phone and discounted plan for a limited period of time (e.g., 6 months), but return to normal fees after the end of the period.

Recommendations:
Affordable internet and phone programs can build on their work by undergoing a review of their accessibility that applies a barriers reduction approach in order to maximize their impact. Simultaneous work could be conducted related to program equity. This could include, for example, exploration of innovative policies such as sliding scale payments.

Help invest in connectivity infrastructure (e.g., cell phone towers, internet wiring, etc.) to expand availability of affordable access plans where they are most needed.

Increase speeds offered in affordable access programs to meet targets in order to help facilitate equitable and meaningful connectivity for all.

1c) RRI communities are more likely to experience barriers to meaningful connectivity related to insufficient connectivity infrastructure (cell phone towers, internet wiring, etc.).

Even if a woman is able to access a device and can afford adequate monthly plans, there is no guarantee that the necessary infrastructure will be in place to actually provide the means to connect. Infrastructure is a significant concern for anti-violence work in RRI communities.

- 42.86%– just under half– of anti-violence workers responded that according to their program's service users, lack of infrastructure for connectivity (e.g., no cell phone reception in the area) is a barrier to accessing services they provide (BCSTH, 2021).
- Infrastructure options may be limited based on where a community is. "Approximately **3 %** of B.C.'s population lives in areas where satellite technology provides the only option for a high-speed Internet connection for the foreseeable future" (Government of British Columbia, 2012). In some areas, there are no cellphone towers, or the existing infrastructure is not sufficient to serve the community fully. Some anti-violence workers reported that communities may not have both phone and internet.
- The First Nations Technology Council's report found that "Indigenous communities lack reliable internet connectivity", and access to connectivity infrastructure is "inequitable and unsustainable" which was especially true for on-reserve demographics when compared to off-reserve. In fact, of FNTC's survey respondents living on-reserve, only half had access to the internet in their homes (Jang et al., 2019).
- RRI communities may have limited or poor access to support for connectivity infrastructure. Some anti-violence workers describe waiting four hours for support to travel to their community when phone lines went down, and 10 hours for internet support.

> "We try to close the gap, but it's next to impossible with challenges that are out of our reach." - BC anti-violence worker, talking about the program's tech literacy initiatives and challenges due to lack of connectivity infrastructure.

i) Anti-violence workers express concerns related to limited options and choice for connectivity providers in RRI areas is related to cost and vulnerability to outages.

For anti-violence workers in RRI communities, limited options and choice for providers may be a concern. In some communities, there is only one option for service providers. Many anti-violence workers believe this impacts the costs they face as anti-violence agencies, as well as

the costs vulnerable individuals pay. In discussions about high service costs, one anti-violence worker voiced that "The [providers] don't care- they know we don't have another choice." This worker believed that another provider company in the area would be helpful in encouraging competitive prices.

Recommendations:
ISPs could consider partnering with RRIs communities to develop alternatives so that communities have increased choices. This could work in conjunction with increased affordable internet and phone plans, as well as related equity and accessibility reviews Organizations such as Pathways to Technology and The First Nations Technology Council are working in this field.

1d) Insufficient quality and reliability of signal continues to present significant barriers to meaningful connectivity in RRI communities.

The quality and reliability of signal was an extremely significant barrier for women accessing services, according to anti-violence workers. Concerns related to quality and reliability of signal as a barrier included:

- Dead Zones in rural areas, especially those that made certain roads or areas dangerous for women (notable examples include parts of Highway 16 known as the Highway of Tears).
- Inconsistent internet and mobile phone quality within RRI communities- quality may be sufficient in town, but immediately on the outskirts of town the quality drops off significantly. Outlying areas may not receive connectivity.
- Low quality or overloaded internet- only one person can stream or use the internet at a time (may impact women accessing services from home or staff providing services from home).
- The quality of signal varies with the weather.
- The quality of the internet varies within the house (one anti-violence worker describes an incident where a woman's abuser restricted her to areas of the house without connection so she could not access supports).
- Internet that frequently drops frequently for staff

The First Nations Technology Council's report found that for the communities they surveyed, average internet quality is reported far more frequently than "good" or "excellent", and "almost all regions" report lag, download speeds, and bandwidth that "at some point or

another that was below the provincial or national standard." In certain regions, such as North Vancouver, half of participants identified poor service connection in areas related to communication and the delivery of services and resources "was a challenge holding them back from accessing opportunities" (Jang et al., 2019)

Recommendations:
Research whether additional "light" or "lightweight" versions of websites can be developed in order to decrease demand on the internet for individuals trying to access these sites (CBC news recently launched "CBC Lite" to make news more accessible to rural and remote Canadians. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/introducing-cbc-lite-1.5943819)

Revise policies relating to connectivity and expansion goals in order to recognize gender-based and intersectional elements of digital divides, as well as how these relate to violence and anti-violence work. Shift work related to connectivity from a conversation that focuses mainly on economic inclusion and opportunities to one where gender equality and safety is also central.

Theme two: Lack of meaningful connectivity negatively impacts both service providers and service users.

2a) Complex isolation due to lack of meaningful connectivity combined with physical or geographic distance may be related to higher rates of violence frequency or intensity experienced by RRI women and girls.

Women in RRI communities face unique and complex forms of isolation. Physical and/or geographic isolation due to rurality may interact with lack of access to connectivity as a result of digital divides.[1] This may mean women and youth experiencing violence face significant isolation, which can both negatively impact their wellbeing and act as a significant barrier to accessing services.

- Lack of access to technology and/or concerns that their abuser may be monitoring their use of technology impacts women's safety and wellbeing, quality of life, income, and

[1] Nonomura and Baker's report (2021) provides an excellent discussion of gender-based violence in rural, remote, and Northern communities for further reading.

opportunities to participate in society. Over three quarters of anti-violence workers (76.92%) responded that program participants had reported that lack of access to technology and/or concerns that their abuser was monitoring their use of technology negatively impacted access to social connection and support. Over 40% reported negative impacts to accessing employment (44.87%) and benefits and/or insurance (i.e., CERB, EI, IA) (42.31%)

- Lack of technology may lead to increased isolation while also reducing women and youth's ability and likelihood of reaching out for support. 93.98% of anti-violence workers responded that in their opinion, lack of technology (mobile devices, computers, internet, Wi-Fi) for women, children, and youth experiencing violence may lead to increased isolation of the participation (e.g., separation from family and peers, digital and technological isolation,). Relatedly, 89.16% believe lack of technology may lead to decreased ability to seek support and 83.13% that it decreases the likelihood that participants will seek support or access services. Understanding the effects of lack of technology, abusers may purposefully break women and youth's devices in order to disconnect them from potential support. Actions such as these may especially isolate women with disabilities who rely on these devices to connect with support services.

- *Isolation may be linked to increased intensity of violence.* 56.63% of anti-violence workers believed that lack of technology may lead to increased intensity of violence other than tech abuse (e.g., physical, emotional, financial, sexual abuse), and 28.92% that it would lead to increased intensity of technology-facilitated violence. Complex isolation faced by RRI women means violence may be more hidden, which can also be a barrier to accessing support

Isolation and increased rates of violence are concerning for women and youth's wellbeing, and could have significant impacts on mental health. Meaningful connectivity is therefore an important component of combatting complex isolation in RRI communities.

2b) Lack of meaningful connectivity negatively impacts professional development opportunities for anti-violence workers in RRI communities.

Feedback from anti-violence workers in RRI communities suggest that online training and webinars have been helpful, as they do not have to travel, pay for childcare, travel, and accommodation costs, or take time off work in order to attend. However, certain anti-violence

organizations have described difficulty accessing these trainings due to limited data/internet plans, high internet costs, or insufficient quality of internet.

Connectivity could potentially have positive impacts on professional development for anti-violence workers by facilitating easier access to training. If their program's level of connectivity is not sufficient for them to connect at the degree necessary to take advantage of such opportunities, though, these positive impacts will not be possible. It is possible that a gap in professional development will grow between anti-violence workers in rural and urban areas, or between workers in rural areas depending on where connectivity is available. In its present state, insufficient connectivity is a barrier to professional development for anti-violence workers and organizations. For anti-violence work in BC to advance evenly across the province, all anti-violence workers must have access to the same level of professional development opportunities, and connectivity is a big part of making these opportunities possible.

Recommendations:
Support meaningful connectivity for anti-violence workers of all abilities and make online training more accessible by providing closed captions on online webinars.

For online training or webinars, accommodate varying levels of connectivity by providing text copies of slides (in the description, caption, etc.) in case audio cuts out for anti-violence workers tuning in from RRI communities. Provide copies of slides before the training session so that participants can attend in listen only mode.

2c) Anti-violence workers in RRI communities may require further support in developing tech/digital literacy and skills to support service users experiencing TFGBV.

Service providers outside of urban centres have reported lower confidence with tech literacy and skills related to TFGBV anti-violence work, which reflects a noteworthy gap that must be addressed. Over one fifth (23.46%) of anti-violence workers surveyed responded that their program's employee training and educational material did not ensure sufficient awareness and comprehension of tech literacy. Anti-violence workers in small communities are less likely to report feeling "very confident" in a variety of skills related to addressing TFGBV when compared to their counterparts in other sized communities. Further support may be required by anti-violence workers outside of population centres in order to build higher degrees of confidence addressing TFGBV. Anti-violence workers in small communities feel comparatively

less confident recognizing tech misuse when addressing TFGBV experienced by women and children. 0% of workers responded that they feel "very confident", while the rate that anti-violence workers reported feeling very confident with this skill ranged from 9.09-26.32% in small towns, and medium and large cities (BCSTH, 2021).

> "Tech is running the world, and a lot of us aren't up to par with it."- BC anti-violence worker

This trend is also reflected in a few other skill areas- 0% of anti-violence workers in small communities also reported feeling "very confident" in finding out what kind of tech misuse is being reported, basic tech strategies and planning, sharing tech safety info with their communities, increasing accountability and minimizing the ability of tech being misused by abusive people, and building collaboration with partners around TFV issues (local law enforcement, telecommunication companies, etc.). In each of these categories, at least a portion of anti-violence workers in other community sizes reported feeling "very confident" in these skills. This is consistently below the average of all community sizes. Anti-violence workers in large cities were almost four times more likely to report feeling "very confident" helping women and youth to document harassing messages, posts or images as a safety step. Lack of tech digital/tech literacy was more likely to be identified as a challenge to starting or continuing to use technology to communicate with women, children, and youth for anti-violence workers outside of urban centres versus in large cities. Some anti-violence workers also described fatigue in service providers and users alike related to the amount of platforms they had to learn to navigate (BCSTH, 2021).

Recommendations:
Develop and provide more comprehensive digital literacy training for RRI anti-violence workers.

Provide spaces for anti-violence workers and organizations in RRI communities to collaborate, interact, and share their experiences in the spirit of mutual support and solidarity; support the implementation of communities of practice for rural membership such as the Safe homes Community of Practice for rural members that BCSTH is organizing. One anti-violence worker voiced that the development of this kind of interaction would be helpful to countering at times urban centric policies and systems.

2d) Insufficient meaningful connectivity for anti-violence workers and service users in RRI communities negatively impacts service delivery.

Insufficient meaningful connectivity has an especially significant impact on service delivery in RRI communities. In BCSTH's survey (BCSTH, 2021), nearly 4 out of 5 (78.21%) of anti-violence workers responded that program participants had reported that a lack of access to technology and/or concerns that their abuser may be monitoring their use of technology (i.e., phone calls, video calls, email) negatively impacted their ability to access domestic and/or sexual violence support. When anti-violence workers were asked if in their experience, the service user's lack of technology made their program's service delivery more difficult, over half responded yes (55.29%). Anti-violence workers in small communities, however, responded yes at a rate 11% higher than the average.

When there is insufficient connectivity, women and youth experiencing violence "fall through the cracks a bit more" (BC anti-violence worker). Connectivity is closely tied to how services are delivered, and in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, whether they could even be delivered at all. Anti-violence workers in large cities were 4.5 times more likely than those in small communities to hold support groups through video conference during the pandemic; whereas those in small towns and small communities were more likely than their counterparts in medium and large cities to report that all groups had been suspended during the pandemic. The proportion of anti-violence workers in small towns and communities that reported that all support groups had been suspended during the pandemic was higher than the average rate for all community sizes. While there may be other factors causing these differences, in the context of feedback from anti-violence organizations that internet in RRI communities is insufficient for video conference, these statistics would support the statement that lack of connectivity during the pandemic impacted the services that individuals were able to access in their communities. Further, lack of tech digital/tech literacy was more likely to be identified as a challenge to starting or continuing to use technology to communicate with women, children, and youth for anti-violence workers outside of urban centres versus in large cities. One anti-violence worker described how a support group she held online lost two thirds of its participants over the course of the program, which she attributed to a few barriers including tech literacy. In this group, participants were in their 30s-40s, which draws attention to tech literacy as a phenomenon that is not strictly generational.

Feedback on how anti-violence workers find online delivery varies from agency to agency. While some have been able to adapt services to online options and have even seen increased participation, others miss in-person connection and find it important to deliver effectively their

service. The issue of preference for service delivery format is a separate and at times, agency specific issue. Either way, it is important that meaningful connectivity be available to service users and providers as if it is absent or inefficient it can negatively impact service delivery. One important consideration for anti-violence workers delivering services remotely is agency consideration for the impact of online delivery formats on staff wellbeing- take, for example, "zoom fatigue" and increased pressures to take online meetings back-to-back without breaks.

Recommendations:
Organizations can promote anti-violence worker's wellbeing and prevent burnout (which could impact service delivery) by developing occupational health and wellbeing policies that reflect new delivery methods and contexts such as those that utilize more technology, including remote service delivery or work from home situations.

Agencies can advocate for funders to pay for internet for anti-violence workers working from home in order to reduce strain on workers and ensure effective service delivery.

i) Lack of meaningful connectivity related to insufficient reliability or quality of signal can create pressure for staff to make a trade-off between privacy and smoother connection during service delivery.

For service users accessing services remotely or with the assistance of technology, insufficient connectivity (as a result of inadequate devices, restrictive phone or internet plans, etc.) may mean the type or amount of programs they can use is limited. In cases such as these, anti-violence workers may face a trade-off between using programs that respect privacy for the service user and having enough bandwidth to provide the service as effectively as possible. Telehealth platforms such as doxy.me, which are used for services like counselling, are considered more secure but may require higher levels of connectivity or may run better on a browser such as Chrome which may be inaccessible on older devices. If the level of connectivity on either the service provider or service user's end is not enough to sustain the connection, the choice may be made to move off of the secure platform to one that requires less connectivity but is less secure. In situations such as these, user privacy may be a privilege only afforded to those who can afford high quality connectivity and live-in areas where it is available. As a result, staff are placed in difficult situations where they must pick which needs to prioritize, and service users may ultimately receive a lower quality or lower security form of support.

ii) Lack of meaningful connectivity makes it challenging for anti-violence workers to address RRI women and girls' intersectional circumstances and needs.

Anti-violence workers outside of large cities were less likely to report that their program's employee training and educational material ensures sufficient awareness and comprehension of service users with different legal status (e.g., immigrant, migrant worker, refugee, etc.), technology safety planning, privacy and confidentiality obligations (e.g., BC's PIPA, records keeping mandates, etc.), and best practices for culturally informed services.

Western's report discusses intersectionality in rural communities' experiences: "The increasing diversity of RRN communities presents a multitude of possible intersectional experiences of GBV. Despite their best efforts, RRN support services may not have the resources to accommodate the complex circumstances of each client. Survivors may have to travel considerable distances to access services with staff resources that can meet their language, cultural, religious, medical, or accessibility needs." (Nonomura and Baker, 2021)

Connectivity adds an extra layer of context to RRI individuals' experiences with violence and accessing anti-violence supports. Many resources and services may be concentrated in larger urban centres, meaning that geographic distance could make these services inaccessible to those who need them. Technology and increasing capacity in remote delivery could mean anti-violence work can counter barriers related to rurality and bring specialized services to those who need them in RRI communities (ex. Specialists call in). In order for this to be possible, however, high quality connectivity is necessary so that services can feasibly be delivered remotely. As a result, delivering high quality connectivity is essential in order to provide the degree of care necessary to diverse populations in RRI communities, and ensure they receive support that actually fits their unique set of needs. This might include, for example, specialized support for individuals engaged in sex work, newcomer demographics living in RRI communities who may require services such as translation or specific legal aid, or individuals with complex health situations. Anti-violence workers may encounter additional difficulties if policies and systems are urban-centric, and assume access to services in RRI areas is equivalent as opposed to urban centres. Improved connectivity therefore is an important part of providing support to individuals in RRI areas who experience added barriers due to race, disability and socio-economic status.

iii) RRI communities are less likely to report that they will continue to use technology for support and intake services after the pandemic, and are less likely to report that technology has played a positive role in their program's service delivery.

Over three quarters of anti-violence workers reported that their program will continue to use technology to offer support and conduct intake after the pandemic (77.17%), with only a small amount answering that they will not 2.17%, it is a maybe still 15.22%, or that they have not offered online support or intake during the pandemic (5.43%) (BCSTH, 2021). When disaggregated, however, the survey results indicate that all of those who responded that they would not continue to use technology represent small towns or communities, which are also the only two community sizes who did not offer online intake or support during the pandemic. Anti-violence workers who work in large cities were more likely to respond that tech use would continue post-pandemic.

84.71% of anti-violence workers responded that technology had played a positive role in their program's service delivery, with only 3.53% responding no and 11.76% that they are not sure. However, anti-violence workers in large cities were the most likely to respond that technology has played a positive role in the program's service deliver: 93.75% of anti-violence in large cities responded yes, versus 88.24% in medium cities, 78.57% in small towns, and 80.95% in small communities.

While it is not clear if insufficient meaningful connectivity is causing these responses, based on the feedback from the survey as a whole it is worth considering that insufficient access to meaningful connectivity and barriers specific to RRI women and youth's access could be contributing to or partially responsible for these trends.

Theme three: Unique contexts specific to RRI communities result in a different significance of meaningful connectivity, as well as distinct challenges, for women in these communities.

3a) Meaningful connectivity is an essential component of addressing barriers to accessing anti-violence services related to transportation and childcare for RRI women, and it has the potential to make services significantly more accessible.

Two of the most significant barriers to accessing services identified by BC anti-violence workers were childcare and transportation (BCSTH, 2021). Especially for women in rural areas, lack of transportation could present an even more significant challenge due to geographic isolation and larger distances between houses, towns, and distance from urban centres. Limited options

for public transportation and taxi services also contribute to the issue. In fact, anti-violence workers in small communities identified transportation as a barrier to services experienced by their service users at a rate about 14% higher than large cities. Childcare options may also be more limited in very small towns, especially if cost or waiting lists restrict access. As a result, these barriers are significant challenges for RRI women.

Feedback from the survey, however, indicates that technology used to deliver services remotely can help to overcome these barriers significantly. Provided service users have high enough quality of connection and a level of privacy they are comfortable with, connectivity can open up the opportunity for them to access services from home. In some cases, this might even be a preferable option if they are more comfortable in their homes. This feedback is an indication of the positive potential of technology to increase accessibility of anti-violence supports. In order for technology to reach its full potential as a tool to counter barriers associated with childcare and transportation, however, women and children need to have access to full and meaningful connectivity. Anti-violence workers overwhelmingly expressed that online services can increase accessibility of services due to the way it can work around childcare and transportation-based barriers.

3b) Online spaces take on particular significance in RRI communities as venues for social connectedness, which may present context-specific challenges to women and girls' safety.

For rural or geographically isolated communities, online spaces play a distinct role. They can provide an important means to connect for social, professional, academic opportunities, and so on. Individuals can take advantage of digital means to interact with friends and family, but also people with similar interests, find a community, potential relationships, acquaintances, information, and broader communities online. Because online spaces may hold a different significance for rural and geographically isolated community members, they may be unsafe or contribute to violence differently. It is important to consider how RRI communities interact with online spaces differently in order to support women and girls in ways that fit RRI contexts.

i) Tech and digital safety are important components of building digital literacy and preventing experiences of violence in RRI youth.

Youth in rural and remote areas may turn to online spaces and social media for social connection and entertainment, especially as generations become increasingly connected to online spaces. For vulnerable youth, forms of violence such as exploitation or the non-consensual sharing of intimate images become concerns. Unsafe or violent technology use

between youth may also be a concern, as in cases of teen digital dating violence. An important part of tech literacy and violence prevention is ensuring that youth have the necessary tools and information to use the internet safely, as well as that they have support figures in place in case violence occurs. For more information about youth and digital dating violence, visit BCSTH's Teen Digital Dating Violence Toolkit. https://bcsth.ca/teendigitaldatingviolence/

ii) Misogynistic online spaces add an additional barrier to meaningful connectivity.

Misogynistic online spaces may make the internet- or at least some spaces within it- unsafe spaces for women. Online spaces can be used to facilitate the development of violently misogynistic online communities and dispel information, as has been seen with movements such as the "involuntary celibate" (incel) movement (Hastings, Jones, and Stolte, 2020). It is important that anti-violence work acknowledge online misogyny, especially for marginalized and vulnerable women and girls, as a potential barrier to women and youth's safe access to connectivity. Further, as youth learn to navigate the internet, it is important that they be provided with education regarding spaces such as these, so they understand how to identify potentially hateful messaging, recognize why it is harmful, and avoid interacting with communities that hold misogynistic ideologies.

Recommendation:
Incorporate information about online misogyny into technology literacy resources for youth to account for unsafe online spaces and support them in safely navigating the

iii) Online dating safety is an important dimension of tech literacy and anti-violence work, and is just as important to address in adult women (especially as technologies continue to evolve).

Like in urban areas, community members in rural or remote communities may choose to participate in online dating. For smaller or isolated communities, this may provide a way to connect with others outside of the community. Some women and girls may experience digital dating violence perpetrated by individuals they have met online, however. It is important that anti-violence workers have robust understandings of online dating safety that are up to date with current technologies and information. Digital dating violence may prevent women and girls from participating in online spaces, or from feeling safe when they do so, which effectively compromises the meaningfulness of their connectivity. Supporting women in understanding

online dating and how to navigate these spaces can help make their experiences with connectivity safer and more meaningful.

Digital Dating Violence means physical, sexual, or psychological/emotional violence that occurs between dating partners by texting, social media, and related online mediums. Digital dating violence falls under the umbrella of TFGBV.

Recommendation:
Develop online dating safety resources for RRI women as components of tech literacy for both service users and providers, in ways easily accessible to tech literacy "beginners" and adult women.

iv) Industry and transient work may impact quality of connectivity while also impacting violence in RRI communities.

Industry and VAW: Areas with higher levels of industry and transient work have been connected to higher levels of violence against women (Nononura and Baker, 2021). An influx of transient workers may mean online spaces such as dating apps become more dangerous for women if transient workers are using them as a means to meet local women. Heightened risk of violence means women and girls' safety and wellbeing is more of a concern. Increased connectivity alone cannot prevent violence as systemic response and reform is needed to address cultures of violence in transient work culture. One worker describes concerns that transient workers may use online dating as a means to groom local women before digital violence becomes physical. However, connectivity plays an important role in keeping women connected, safe, and able to seek help, especially due to the connections between industry and intimate-partner violence.

Industry and connectivity: Anti-violence workers have provided a range of feedback related to the impact of industry on the quality of connectivity available to local communities. One worker described how connectivity and the degree of support services available to the town decreased when industry moved out of the area, whereas another described how the quality of connectivity decreased when industry arrived, in the workers' opinion due to the amount of

people accessing the internet. It is essential that regardless of industry, RRI communities have consistent and high quality of access to connectivity so that service delivery is not impacted.

3c) With climate disasters projected to increase in coming years, meaningful connectivity will play an increasing role in preventing and addressing gender-based violence in BC.

At the time that this report was written, BC had declared a provincial state of emergency as a result of wildfires (Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, 2021), with recent cases such as Fort McMurray and the disaster in Lytton that provide a sobering picture of disasters to come. Because extreme weather such as wildfires are closely linked to climate change, scientists predict that BC will experience increases in extreme forms of weather and related disasters as the climate crisis intensifies (Abbott and Chapman, 2018). This is concerning for several reasons, which in the context of BC anti-violence work include:

1. Transition houses and anti-violence programs face high risk situations that threaten the safety and wellbeing of staff and service users, as well as program infrastructure.
2. Damaged or destroyed infrastructure could impact, interrupt, or halt service delivery and programming.
3. After disasters, levels of gender-based violence (including intimate partner violence, child abuse, sexual violence, and sexual exploitation) tend to increase. Pre-existing violence may also intensify. This is closely related to upheaval post disaster, separation from social support networks, and disruption of support programs and services (Department of Injuries and Violence Prevention, 2005).

Disasters threaten the ability of support services to continue operating at a time where the need for these services may increase. Connectivity is intimately related to these challenges. Emergency management strategies increasingly involve connectivity and technology as central components of planning (Roome, 2016; Abbott and Chapman, 2018). In the turmoil after the fire in Lytton, barriers to connectivity complicated friends and families' attempts to locate one another, and made identifying where community members were extremely difficult.

> "We are receiving calls from people looking for family and loved ones as well, and it's really hard because of power outages and cellphone towers being down […]" - Scott Hildebrand, chief administrative officer with the Thompson-Nicola Regional District, said to CBC that (Schmunk, 2021).

Connectivity plays multiple roles in the context of disasters and anti-violence work, including communication of emergency alerts prior to disasters, as well as maintaining social connectedness and continued delivery of services after a crisis. Unfortunately, the realities of the climate crisis mean that disaster planning and emergency management are issues that will become increasingly relevant to anti-violence work within the province in coming years. As the frequency and intensity of disasters increases in the coming years, connectivity will play an essential role in promoting the safety and wellbeing of women and children in BC. For this to be effective in addressing gender-based violence and the safety of women and children, equitable, sustainable, and resilient access to connectivity must be prioritized.

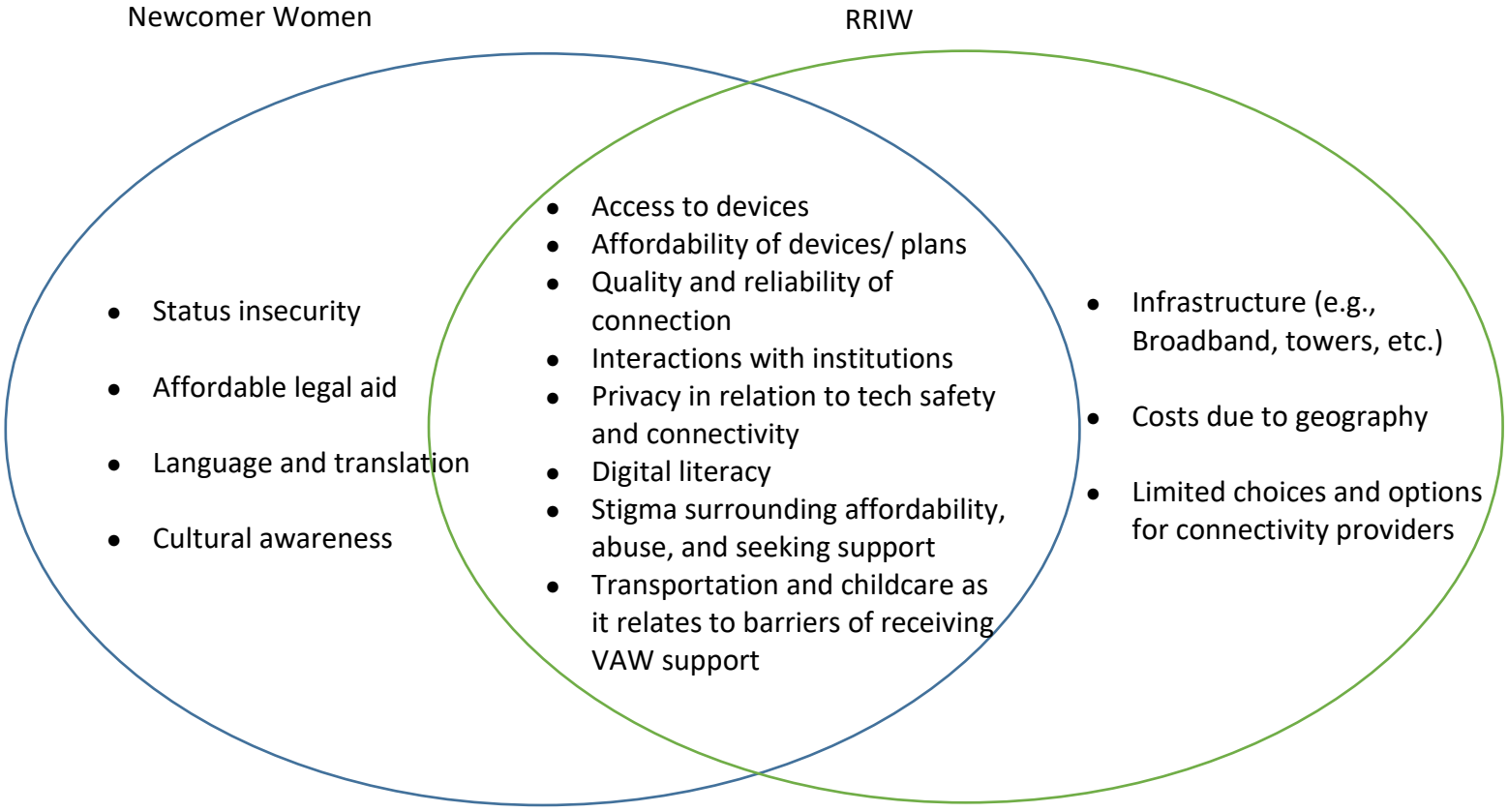
Recommendations:

Policy work moving forward should prioritize connectivity as a safety necessity for anti-violence work and emergency preparedness. This involves actions such as:

- Ensuring that emergency alerts can reach all Canadians, especially those in areas that are increasingly impacted by climate change-aggravated disasters (infrastructure issue).
- Organizing collaborative emergency planning with participation from a variety of sectors including, for instance, the private sector- particularly companies with access to connectivity technology and infrastructure- and anti-violence organizations. As pointed out by the report, this planning should be informed by and reflect Indigenous land knowledge and practices.
- Researching and investing in sustainable and ecologically wise connectivity infrastructure that is resilient to climate change to ensure the maximum possible protection of community members' wellbeing, especially those most vulnerable to post-crisis violence.
- Researching and developing a plan for women who need to call emergency services for experiences of violence but have no phone or internet as a result of the disaster.
- Many of these recommendations align with the recommendations made in Abbott and Chapman's 2018 report.
- Incorporate disaster and emergency planning in anti-violence programs' policies.

Overlap and differences for Newcomer and RRI women

Common trends in barriers for connectivity and safety



Trends in barriers to connectivity

- **Access to devices:** In order to maintain meaningful connectivity, individuals must have steady and consistent access to devices that are of a high enough quality and condition to facilitate their full use. Factors that may impact access include that: abusive partners may restrict women's access to devices or destroy their devices in order to prevent connection; devices may not be up-to-date enough to access certain programs (e.g., Zoom, Google Chrome, etc.); youth may not have access to personal devices depending on parent's beliefs and/or means to access technology; devices may be shared between more than one family member, limiting access and/or privacy; prohibitive costs of devices.

- **Affordability of devices/plans**: The cost associated with connectivity includes a variety of expenses including, for instance, the cost of the device itself, the cost of internet and/or phone plans, any hidden contract fees, and the cost of maintenance. In many cases, even if the cost of the device is manageable as a more or less one-off fee, the cost of plans to actually connect is prohibitive for many. While cost could be a barrier for a variety of individuals, expensive plans are more likely to take up a greater proportion of income for lower-income families and individuals, which means socio-economic status will influence how accessible plans are.

- **Quality and reliability of connection:** Access to phone and internet does not necessarily mean the signal or quality is sufficient to meaningfully connect. Lack of infrastructure or high costs can mean the quality- how strong it is- or the reliability- how consistent it is- is not sufficient for women to access services or reach out for help. This could mean, for example, that the signal is too low for women to be able to smoothly access services, or that it may work one day but not the next.

- **Privacy in relation to tech safety and connectivity:** Access to meaningful connectivity can also be restricted by privacy concerns, especially related to the privacy women and youth have to use their device(s) and how this impacts their ability to reach out. Privacy concerns related to connectivity could include monitoring or surveillance of personal devices by abusers, only having access to shared devices, restricted private use of devices by abusers, or not having a private space to contact or access anti-violence services (e.g., relying on public Wi-Fi hotspots at libraries or outside of restaurants). Having a private space to access services is especially relevant at a time like the COVID-

19 pandemic, where many individuals had to shelter at home in unsafe situations and/or with abusers.

- **Tech literacy:** An important part of connectivity is that individuals actually have the capacity to navigate devices and online spaces that they access. This means having an adequate level of understanding of the devices and programs that are relevant to an individual's needs, from checking emails and operating zoom, to establishing a device's Wi-Fi connection, grasping things like location settings, and understanding tech-based parts of safety planning. Lack of tech literacy may prevent women and youth from researching and contacting anti-violence organizations. It could also prevent them from accessing services with ease and consistency, keeping in touch with support figures and programs, and participating fully and completely in programs in order to receive the support necessary for safety and wellbeing

- **Stigma:** Stigma surrounding, for example, affordable internet and phone plans, or accessing anti-violence supports, could also act as a barrier to women and youth accessing services.

- **Lack of transportation and childcare:** Lack of transportation and childcare is a significant barrier that impacts the ability women and youth have to access anti-violence support services. Meaningful connectivity could potentially help to bridge this gap.

- **Layers from intersectionality:** The above barriers will be shaped and informed by a person's intersectional identity, or the multi-faceted components of their identity including, but not limited to, race, ability, immigration status, age, and sexuality. Intersectionality will add layers to a person's experiences with violence and help-seeking, as well as their connectivity.

"Our clients feel like they are not valued, isolated, marginalized because our shelter doesn't offer WIFI. [It also makes] finding housing and supports much more difficult for our clients."-BC Anti-violence worker

Connectivity and the impacts on violence against women

Increased isolation: Social media, phone, and online means of connection are increasingly interwoven with our lives, and can keep us connected with friends and family both near and far. When individuals have insufficient connectivity, they may not be able to connect with others for support, distraction, solidarity, or to access services. It may also isolate women and children from the broader community, and serve to distance or exclude them. Between isolation from personal support networks and the community at large, lack of connectivity resulting in limited social connectedness may negatively impact the mental health of women and youth. The pandemic demonstrated that this concern can become critical if restrictions such as stay-at-home orders are in place, which could cause women and youth experiencing violence to essentially be cut off from supports almost entirely if they do not have sufficient connectivity.

Lack of connectivity and increased isolation **impact experiences with violence** in a few ways:

- **Increased intensity of violence:** Lack of technology may be linked to increased intensity of violence experienced by women and youth.
- **Decreased help-seeking:** As a result of lack of technology, women and youth may be less able to seek help, and further, may be less likely to do so.
- **Impact on other forms of violence:** Lack of technology may also be associated with increases in the intensity of TFGBV.

> "Not being able to afford cell phones or data makes it harder for women to seek help and stay connected to friends, family and support networks. Women and children feel very isolated when all we offer is a communal land line. It also makes everything harder for women who are trying to start a new life and need to fill out applications/ forms, send emails, look for rental [ads] or employment [ads]." -BC Anti-violence Worker

Recommendations to bridge the digital divide

Key barriers to address in order to promote the development of meaningful connectivity include:

- Affordability
- Access

- Infrastructure
- Tech literacy

*See also recommendations in report sections relevant to newcomer and RRI communities.

Conclusion

As violence against women continues to rise across the nation, understanding the role and impact of technology and connectivity as it relates to gender-based violence becomes essential for potential systemic solutions.

A main concern of this virtual age has been digital divides as they hinder meaningful connectivity for women, in turn making them more vulnerable to various forms of violence - such as TGFBV. Digital divides prevent women from engaging in daily services and interactions that are the core of livelihood, in addition to preventing the flow of informal and formal lines of communication and support. This report showcases that meaningful connectivity does not equate to the mere presence of technology, but rather encompasses the unlimited accessibility and reliability of technological devices and the internet. Across the nation - and British Columbia in specific - digital divides are present as certain communities are systematically excluded from online connection. Importantly, as this research showcases with newcomer and rural, remote, and Indigenous women, digital divides mirror pre-existing disparities as certain identity groups are more prone and vulnerable to limited connectivity.

Without meaningful connectivity, a multitude of consequences ensue that foster abusive scenarios for women. This point is reflected in the BCSTH Anti-Violence Program Technology Safety and Privacy Survey (BCSTH, 2021) as anti-violence workers reveal that limited access to technology has negatively impacted women's ability to reach their services; additionally, the survey displays the correlation of limited connectivity and TFGBV. Specifically, when connectivity is restricted, limited or manipulated, TFGBV can occur; in fact, these actions should be considered forms of TFGBV in themselves. Research and the survey both reveal that TFGBV - an important and often overlooked form of violence against women - can occur ***both*** in the presence or absence of technology. Mainly, TFGBV is based on the manipulation or weaponization of technology in any capacity.

Beyond the impact on women, existing research and the BCSTH survey reveal that the lack of technology greatly impacts ability to provide services for women facing violence. As COVID-19

has pushed a variety of essential services online, the ability for anti-violence workers and programs to be connected has become of utmost importance. If anti-violence workers struggle to provide effective services to women in crises, it further complicates and deepens the impact of violence women experience.

In the final stages of the report, focus shifts to the role and impact of connectivity and VAW for two specific communities: newcomer and RRI women. Both communities face different barriers to connectivity and receiving support as they are burdened with macro structural barriers that override their ability to connect. However, overlap is clear as both groups struggle to overcome barriers that impact their ability to join digital spaces and seek support against violence; these barriers include access to affordable devices and plans, transportation, childcare, and digital literacy. The impact of limited connectivity for both communities are mainly struggles with mental health, increased isolation, and decreased likelihood of reaching out for support. Although recommendations are made to address barriers and incomes in both communities, research and the survey showcase those larger systemic solutions are necessary to address the digital disparities and violence. This mainly includes newfound structures and initiatives that ensure affordable and accessible devices and plans for women and anti-violence programs, infrastructure in remote and rural areas that allow for consistent internet and services, and technological literacy for women and anti- violence workers.

To conclude, it is vital to note that the solution to these systemic problems lie not with individuals or independent anti-violence programs, but rather in the holistic and collaborative approaches and efforts of those involved; this includes technological companies, governments, legal societies, and social programs. The promotion of wellbeing and safety for women and youth in B.C. lies in the participation of all.

Glossary

Anti-violence organizations: Anti-violence organizations provide a continuum of services, which share a common mission: to support women, children and youth who experience domestic and/or sexual violence.

Digital Divides: A digital divide is defined as a systemic barrier to establishing or maintaining meaningful connectivity for communication, information, and safety. The digital divide occurs because of macro structural inequities that limit genuine engagement through technology/digital means such as insufficient infrastructure, affordability, digital literacy, etc. These divides result from and deepen pre-existing disparities based on various identities including, but not limited to, gender, race, socioeconomic status, rural/urban differences, citizenship, and age. Notable digital divides that have been reviewed in literature include the gender-based digital divide and the rural/urban digital divide.

Meaningful Connectivity (connectivity): 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, building relationships, and to access services. With connectivity, safe and equitable inclusion is essential in order to provide opportunities for participation that are accessible to folks 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 wellbeing of society members.

Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV): Tech-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) occurs when digital spaces and devices are intentionally used to harass, abuse and or exploit others based on gender and/or sexuality. Similar to the definition put forward by LEAF, BCSTH defines TFGBV as the "spectrum of activities and behaviours that involve technology as a central aspect of perpetuating violence, abuse, or harassment [...]" against women and girls (Khoo, 2021). This can include restricting or limiting usage or access to technology, domestic violence, criminal harassment (stalking), sexual assault, impersonation and harassment. As Dunn points out, "Like other forms of gender-based violence, TFGBV is rooted in discriminatory beliefs and institutions that reinforce sexist gender norms. It intersects with racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism and other discriminatory systems in many of its manifestations" (Dunn, 2020).

Women: "Women and girls" refers to and is inclusive of all self-identified women. While we recognize that gender-based violence has significant impacts on cis-gender women and girls in Canada, we also acknowledge that 2SLGBTQQIA+ and gender non-conforming people are disproportionately impacted by experiences of violence and continue to experience significant barriers to anti-violence supports and services.

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