

# Supporting Survivors with Disabilities

Accessibility, Assistive Tech, and Inclusion Project

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## 2023 Needs Assessment Findings

In 2023, BCSTH surveyed BC anti-violence workers to learn more about their experiences providing support to people with disabilities who had experienced gender-based (GBV) and technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV).

**27 anti-violence workers** completed the survey at BCSTH's Annual Training Forum.

Participation from:



All regions of BC



Small communities



Rural, remote, and  
Indigenous communities

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## Key Terms

**Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence:** When someone uses technology to harm or control a survivor. [1]

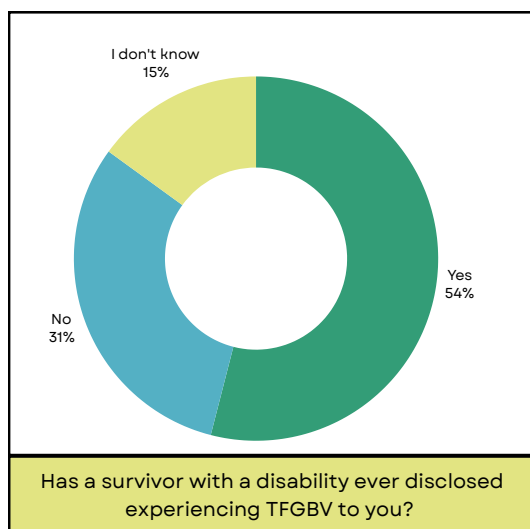
**Assistive Technology:** Systems and services that maintain and improve someone's functioning, independence, and wellbeing. E.g., wheelchairs, communication aids, screen readers, teletypewriter (TTY) machines. [2]

**Disability:** "Any impairment, including a physical, mental, intellectual, cognitive, learning, communication or sensory impairment – or a functional limitation – whether permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, or evident or not, that, in interaction with a barrier, hinders a person's full and equal participation in society. (handicap)" [3] E.g., traumatic brain injuries (TBI), fetal alcohol syndrome (FASD), visual impairment.

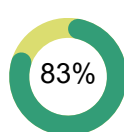
# 5 Findings from the survey

## 1 Survivors with disabilities experience high rates of TFGBV.

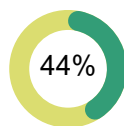
27% of Canadians over 15 have a disability, with the disability rate among women reaching 30% [4]. Despite women with disabilities representing a quarter to a third of the population, **54%** of anti-violence workers shared that they had supported a survivor with a disability who disclosed experiencing TFGBV. This rate is likely higher, as many frontline workers reported lower confidence identifying TFGBV when it impacted survivors with disabilities.



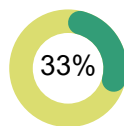
### Anti-violence workers report seeing:



Abusers withhold internet or account access to prevent a survivor from connecting with others/support services



Abusers break a survivor's assistive technology



Abusers alter devices so certain features can't be used

## 2 1 in 2 anti-violence workers have had to turn away a survivor.

This resulted from a lack of resources or capacity to support their accessibility needs. Anti-violence workers shared that challenges to supporting survivors with disabilities might include:



Limitations to physical space



Limited organisational capacity



Limited resources, services, and community support

“Lack of suitable programming in community”

“We only have 1 floor available and limited technology, resources.”

“Either we do not have the capacity to support severe mental health/disabilities or accessibility for physical disabilities.”

“Limited resources, not close to Dr. or Hospital”

**“In 5 years I have had few clients I can think of that this relates to, makes me think this population is very isolated and probably under serviced.”**

### 3

## Anti-violence workers face systemic barriers to supporting survivors with disabilities.

Barriers include a range of factors, from overly complicated processes to receive support for survivors, the prohibitive costs of replacing technology & assistive technology, and stigma surrounding gender-based violence, disability, and substance use.

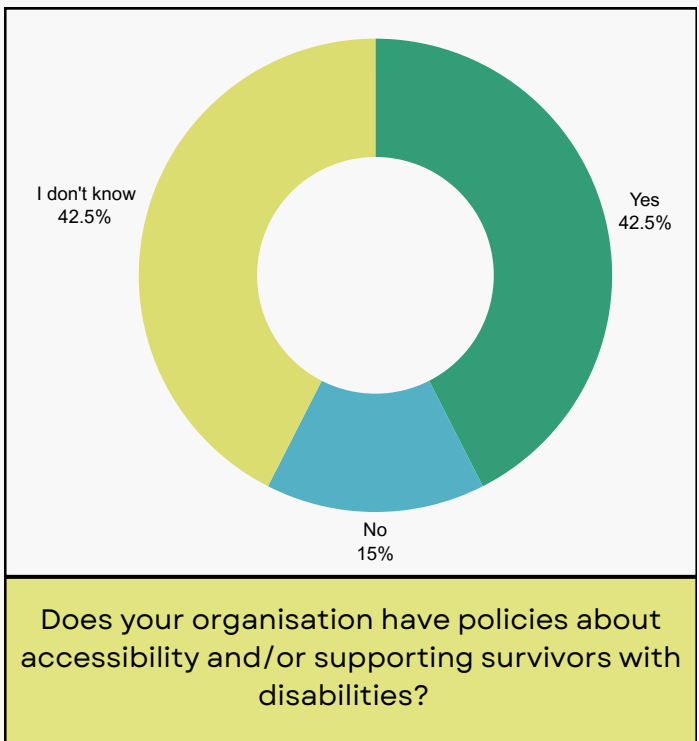
“Some [survivors] have challenges accessing funding for new/up to date technology that uses current and relevant operating systems and assistive tech i.e., touch chat, text-to-speech tech.”

“1) Stigma & judgement at health level has been a barrier for women with disabilities and substance use to access services 2) Training for folks outside our industry (ie healthcare)”

“[We need] Less red tape to help get powered wheelchairs.”

### 4

## Organization’s policies about accessibility are varied, and often do not include technology.



**54%** of anti-violence workers reported that they **had not worked with a survivor who used assistive technology.**

Organizations’ policies about accessibility and/or supporting survivors with disabilities are varied. Some include tech use and accommodations for assistive tech during intake, however others focus primarily on physical or spatial accessibility and do not include technology

Anti-violence workers stress that developing accessibility policies is an area that frontline organizations are eager to learn more about.

# 5

## Accessible, thorough, and specialized training is necessary to support anti-violence staff in their work.

Anti-violence workers report low confidence when supporting survivors with disabilities, and most anti-violence workers are new to using assistive technology. BCSTH has previously found that tech literacy is a challenge for anti-violence staff and organizations supporting survivors of GBV, particularly because the fast rate of change in technology and devices makes it difficult to keep up with tech savvy perpetrators [5].

*“I have not learned about “assistive technology” but I’m excited to learn about it.”*

*-BC anti-violence Worker*

Additional training is needed in tech safety foundations, as well as specialized training for assistive technology and accessibility in the context of technology. Trainings should be comprehensive and accessible, especially considering lower rates of confidence in the area and low levels of experience with assistive technology.

Anti-violence workers identified top areas of need:

Supporting survivors with disabilities

How to include assistive tech in safety planning

Using tech to support survivors with disabilities

## Key Takeaways

The findings in this report confirmed what anti-violence workers and area experts have reported about the experiences of survivors with disabilities. The findings in this report are consistent with other reports produced in Canada, including Women’s Shelters Canada’s national level needs assessment, Supporting Survivors with Disabilities (2024) [6].

Together, these reports overwhelmingly stress that anti-violence workers require additional training and resources to meaningfully support the needs of survivors of gender-based violence who have disabilities. Anti-violence workers are eager to learn more about assistive technology and steps that can be taken to increase anti-violence programs’ accessibility to reach a population that in many cases is not being reached by support services. With increased resources and support including training and funding, shelters and transition houses can build confidence and capacity to provide accessible anti-violence support.

# Recommendations & Needs

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1

**Sustained funding** for ongoing training for anti-violence workers and organizations.

Feedback from training attendees suggests that attending the same training or iterations of the same training is helpful and necessary for memory, maintaining current practices, and continuing to build knowledge and understanding of TGFBV & supporting survivors.

- Funding in budgets for those fleeing violence who need accessible tech items, repairs or replacements, or who have specific needs for accessibility/their disability

2

The development of creative and relationship-focused **training models**. Trainings should:

- Be responsive to the needs of participants, organizations, and the sector
- Take into consideration lower rates of comfort with technology and limited experience with assistive technology.
- Address TFGBV that supports survivors with disabilities
- Focus on the development of core competencies in a) tech literacy and b) accessibility and inclusion
- Adopt anti-ableism as a framework for service provision & training
- Facilitate the development of relationships between trainers and participants, which could help build comfort in exploring tech safety topics that participants find intimidating or challenging.

3

**Advocacy** for both survivors and anti-violence workers providing support. Areas for advocacy include:

- Funding for replacing devices (including smart phones) and equipment when survivors have left
- Information and awareness about resources and programs that can provide support and services to survivors, including funding programs and initiatives
- Cross-sectoral collaboration (e.g., healthcare, technology support, anti-violence sector) within communities in order to better connect survivors to appropriate resources
- Appropriate training and continuous support for frontline-workers in support roles
- Support for organizations to pursue and act on accessibility audits

**“[We are] often helping participants to navigate government websites for filling out forms getting child tax benefits/or affordable childcare which is not easily navigated by women in trauma/ADHD/FASD.”**

# Works Cited

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**[1]** *Tech Safety Canada*. Tech Safety Canada. (2023). Retrieved from <https://techsafety.ca>

**[2]** *Assistive Technology*. World Health Organization. (2024). Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/assistive-technology>

**[3]** *Accessible Canada Act*. Government of Canada. (2019). Retrieved from <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/A-0.6/page-1.html#h-1153434>

**[4]** *A Demographic, Employment, and Income Profile of Persons with Disabilities Aged 15 Years and Over in Canada, 2022*. Statistics Canada. (2024). Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-654-x/89-654-x2024001-eng.htm>

**[5]** *Connectivity and Violence Against Women in British Columbia: TFGBV, Barriers, Impacts, and Recommendations*. BC Society of Transition Houses (2021). Retrieved from [https://bcsth.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/1.-BCSTH-Connectivity-and-Violence-against-Women-in-BC-Report-2021\\_Final.pdf](https://bcsth.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/1.-BCSTH-Connectivity-and-Violence-against-Women-in-BC-Report-2021_Final.pdf)

**[6]** *Supporting Survivors with Disabilities*. Women's Shelters Canada (2024). Retrieved from <https://techsafety.ca/files/8.02-Supporting-Survivors-who-use-Assistive-Tech-Survey-Report.pdf>



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