



# TECH FOR WOMEN'S JUSTICE

At the intersections of intimate partner violence, technology and access to legal information and help

## About this report

This report examines the intersections between intimate partner violence, legal help and technology. This report draws on data that was gathered through interviews and surveys with survivors of intimate partner violence. It explores the experience of survivors in using technology to access or receive legal information and support.

This report is a part of the WomanACT Tech for Women's Justice project funded by The Law Foundation of Ontario. The Tech for Women's Justice project brings together key stakeholders, including survivors of intimate partner violence, to conduct research and explore strategies to improve survivors' experiences and access.



## About WomanACT

Woman Abuse Council of Toronto (WomanACT) envisions a world where women are safe and have access to equal opportunities.

WomanACT has been providing planning and coordination in Toronto since 1991. Today, WomanACT is a charitable organization working collaboratively to end violence against women through research, policy, education and community mobilization.

The research conducted by WomanACT aims to better understand the systemic barriers faced by survivors and helps inform solutions that are rooted in evidence and experience. We strive for our research to be survivor-centered and trauma-informed. WomanACT works with key stakeholders – survivors, feminist organizations, community agencies, scholars and policy makers – to shape policies, programs and practices that promote women's economic security and safety.

## Acknowledgements

The project and research team wish to thank the survivors who shared their experiences and gave generously of their time, especially during a pandemic when women were faced with greater risks and demands on their time.

The research was led by WomanACT with support from community researchers and a project advisory team.

We wish to thank The Law Foundation of Ontario for funding this important research. While financially supported by The Law Foundation of Ontario, WomanACT is solely responsible for all content.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>4</b>	<b>Introduction</b>
5	Background
5	Methodology
7	Demographics and Background of Research Participants
<b>9</b>	<b>Access to technology</b>
<b>11</b>	<b>Use of technology</b>
<b>14</b>	<b>Technology-facilitated abuse</b>
<b>18</b>	<b>Seeking legal information and help</b>
<b>21</b>	<b>Trauma-informed legal information and practice</b>
<b>24</b>	<b>Experience of using technology to seek legal information and help</b>
25	Benefits
27	Challenges
<b>30</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>
<b>32</b>	<b>Opportunities</b>

# INTRO- DUCTION

While the research base about technology as a means to perpetuate intimate partner violence has grown, there is limited information available about how technology can support women experiencing violence. With the increasing prevalence of technology and the significant role that cell phones and the internet have in people's everyday lives, there is a need to understand how survivors are using and could use technology to increase their access to supports and safety.

In this research, WomanACT set out to start to explore how survivors use technology to access legal information and support. WomanACT undertook online surveys and interviews with survivors of intimate partner violence to better understand their access to and use of technology, and their experience of using technology to find legal information and help. The research also sought ideas that survivors had for how technology could increase their access to legal information and help.

This report explores what WomanACT heard from survivors and provides insight into technology-facilitated violence and the wider and complex barriers faced by women in accessing justice.

## Background

Technology has had a major impact on the way people communicate, access information, and participate in public life. Technology has expanded the ways in which people can interact and access information. There is increasing discourse on the relationship between technology and intimate partner violence. Technology can be used to perpetuate intimate partner violence and to exert power or control over a partner or ex-partner. This can include sending harassing text messages, distributing or threatening the distribution of private images or using global positioning systems to track a partner's or ex-partner's location and activities. However, technology can also increase a survivor's ability to seek help and ensure safety. This can include accessing emergency services, employment, education and financial resources. Furthermore, survivors can use technology to stay connected with family, friends, survivor networks and their communities. Studies have found that having access to technology, such as a cell phone, can increase how safe a woman feels.

The rapid incorporation of technology in the social service and justice sectors has changed how organizations deliver legal services, information and support. This is more relevant given the digital transformation across services and workplaces during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many services and supports available for survivors of intimate partner violence are being delivered virtually, including legal services such as appointments with lawyers and court proceedings. While there is a growing discourse around how technology can make the justice system more effective and fair, there is very little exploration at the junction of technology, justice and intimate partner violence.

Many believe technology has the potential to address the differences and inequities across legal needs and access to legal services. In the context of intimate partner violence, there is a need to better understand the intersections between these three complex areas – intimate partner violence, technology and access to legal information and help – especially through an intersectional, equitable, trauma-informed and solution-focused lens.

## Methodology

The community-based research undertaken for this report was part of a larger project, Tech for Women's Justice, aimed at better understanding the experience of women survivors using technology to access legal information and support. The research adopted a definition of women that includes trans women, cis women, non-binary and gender-diverse people.

The objective of the community-based research was to provide space for survivors to share their experiences of using technology to access legal information and support, and contribute ideas and insights into further research and opportunities for technology. The research questions that guided the community-based research were:

1. What are survivors' experiences of accessing and using technology?
2. What types of legal information and help do survivors seek using technology?
3. What are the experiences of survivors in using technology to access legal information and help?
4. What ideas or solutions do survivors have for how technology can increase their access to legal information and help?

The research set out to gather qualitative and quantitative data through an online survey and through in-depth interviews with survivors. The scope of the community-based research included trans women, cis women and non-binary people who had experienced abuse from a partner or ex-partner in the last 5 years and who were living in Ontario at the time of the abuse. The scope of the research was chosen to help ensure discussions on policy, programs and technology were relevant.

Due to the complexity of the area of research and the unique and individual experiences of intimate partner violence, this report is by no means a complete illustration of the experiences, challenges and solutions.

## Surveys

A total of **82 surveys** were completed by survivors. The survey was available online between October 2020 and January 2021. Information on the research and access to the survey was disseminated across community agencies working with survivors of intimate partner violence in Ontario. The survey asked questions about the access to and use of technology by the survivor during and after their experiences of abuse. The survey also asked questions about their experience of accessing legal information and help.

## Interviews

A total of **20 interviews** were conducted with survivors. The interviews were conducted in November and December 2020. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and asked survivors questions about their experiences of using technology to access legal information and help. The interviews also explored survivors' ideas and solutions for how technology could better support survivors' access to justice and safety.

## Research considerations

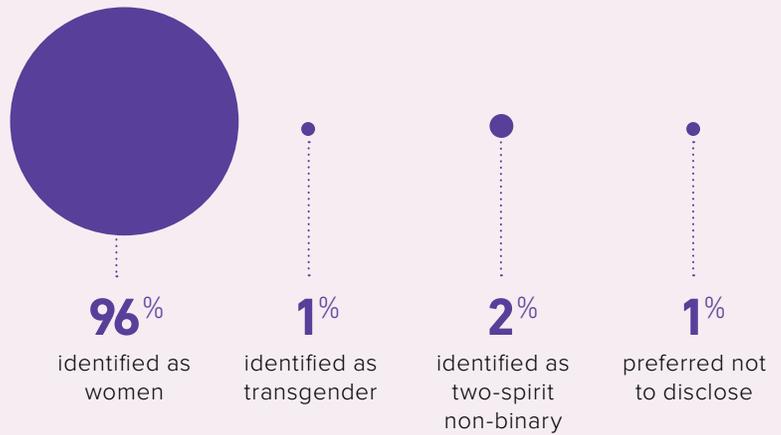
The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on the project, especially the research design. The project had to continually adjust research methods based on the health and safety of the research participants and researchers. The research was conducted remotely through video conferencing and telephone calls, with considerations made around digital literacy, digital access and security. As a result, the project tried to remain flexible and adapted the research policies and methods accordingly.

The team was also aware that research participants were socially isolating, and that some may be isolating with their partners or ex-partners. The team also took into account the additional health risks and economic pressures faced by participants.

# Demographics and background of research participants

A total of 102 survivors participated in the community-based research. Among these participants:

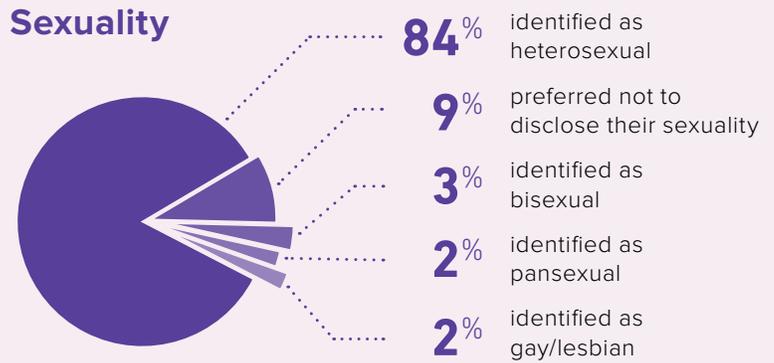
## Gender



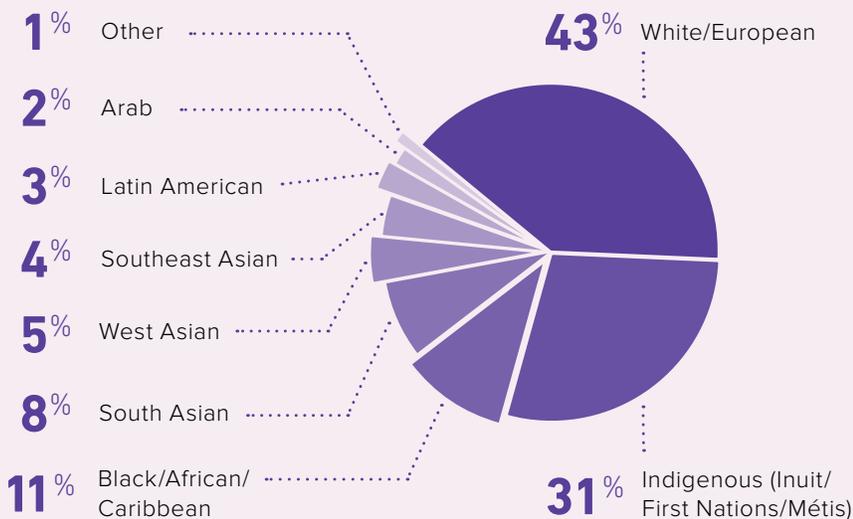
## Age range

**19** to **64**

## Sexuality



## Racial and ethnic identity



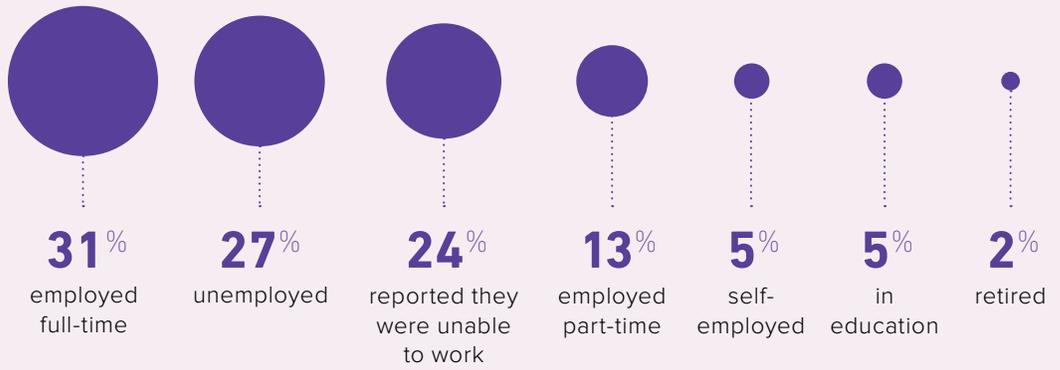
## Immigrant and refugee women

**24%**  
identified as an immigrant or refugee

## Disability

**55%**  
identified as living with a disability

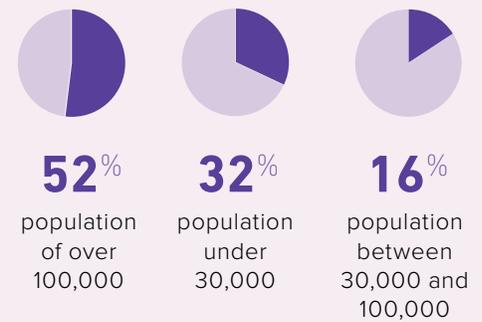
## Employment at the time of abuse



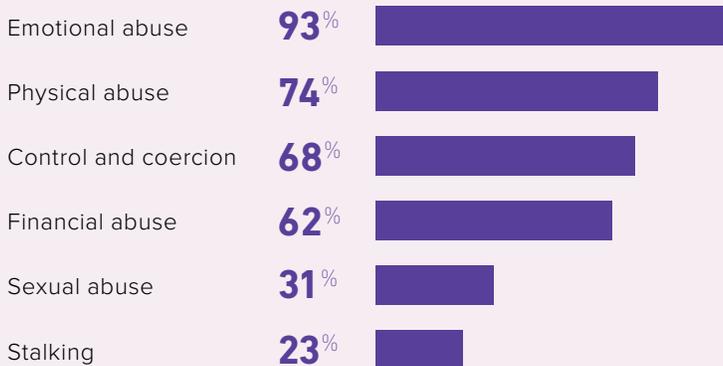
## Individual income at the time of abuse



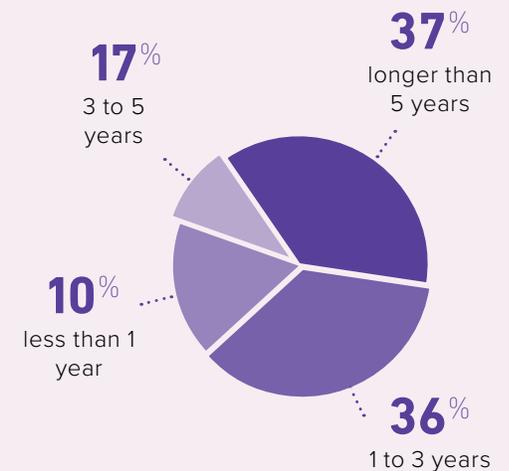
## Size of participants' community



## Experience of abuse



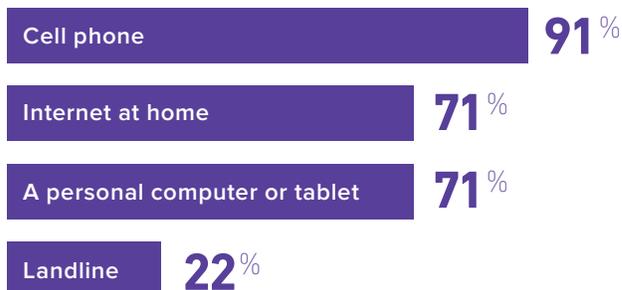
## Length of abuse experienced



# ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY

Survivors were asked about their access to technology during their abusive relationship. The majority of survey participants reported that they had access to a cell phone and that they had access to internet in their home at the time of the abuse.

## Survivors access to technology during the abusive relationship (based on 82 survey respondents)



Survivors were also asked about the barriers to accessing technology. They shared that the greatest barrier to accessing technology was the cost, including the cost of internet in their home and the cost of data on their cell phones. Many survivors stated that they often did not have data on their phone and that it was common experience to run out of data within the first few days of a new billing cycle. Another barrier noted by survivors was the cost of replacing technological devices, such as cell phones and tablets. Survivors shared that devices were often destroyed by their partners or ex-partners.

A common experience among survivors was a lack of access to technology due to the intimate partner violence they were experiencing, including technology-facilitated violence. Survivors reported that their partner or ex-partner restricted their technology access, destroyed their devices and disconnected the home internet.

When asked if they had ever accessed technology outside the home, such as the use of a computer at a local library or a friend's home,

38%

reported that they had.

When asked if they had ever accessed technology outside the home, such as the use of a computer at a local library or a friend's home, 38% reported that they had. When asked where they had accessed this technology, the majority reported that it was at their workplace. Many respondents spoke about using a computer at work to search for information or send emails that they did not want their partner to see. Some highlighted the importance of being able to use a computer at work for everyday activities, such as paying bills or scrolling through social media, due to the disruption or monitoring that they often experienced from their partner at home. Concerns were raised about survivors no longer having this potentially safe outlet when working from home as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. A few participants shared that they had accessed a computer at a library, while others shared that they would often use the computer or a cell phone of a friend for safety reasons. However, many survivors spoke about the challenges to accessing technology outside of the home, including privacy, inconvenience and a fear of pity or judgement.

# USE OF TECHNOLOGY



Survivors were asked about their use of technology during their abusive relationship. Of the 82 survey participants, the majority (57%) spent approximately 1 to 3 hours a day on their personal devices. Among these devices, cell phones were used and relied on more than other devices like computers or tablets. Participants reported that they were more likely to use cell phones for phone calls, text messages, and social media, and more likely to use computers or tablets for seeking information online and carrying out daily activities such as paying bills. However, when asked about their preference for seeking information online, 78% of the 82 survey participants reported that a cell phone would be their first preference for seeking information or help.

**78%**

of the 82 survey participants reported that a cell phone would be their first preference for seeking information or help.

Another common theme across the research was the use of technology for supporting survivors' health and well-being. Participants spoke about using technology for reading, music and entertainment. Participants shared that this would help to keep their minds occupied and distracted and to keep them calm during stressful times. Others reported the importance of the use of technology for educational purposes, especially the use of a computer.

“There is something about playing games on my phone that helped me escape from the world I was living in for a few minutes.”

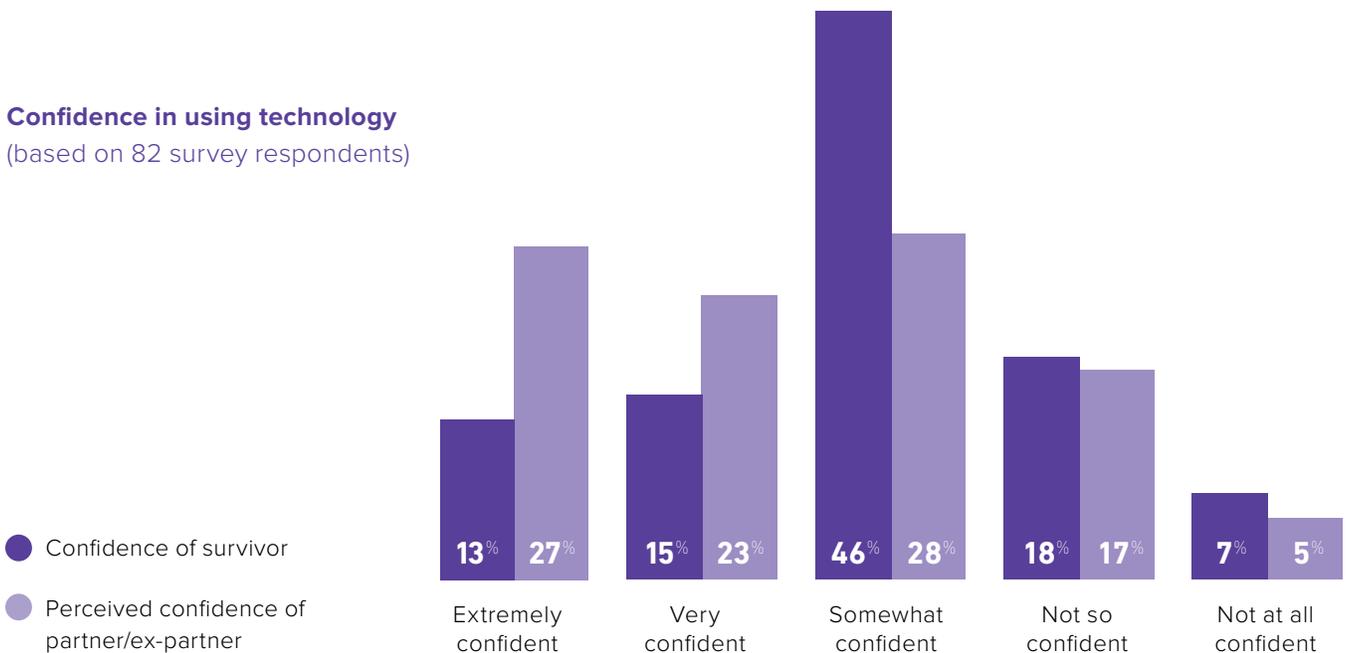
Survivors were also asked about the barriers to using technology. The greatest barrier reported was a lack of safety. Survivors shared that their use of technology was often closely monitored by their partners. This experience is explored in greater depth further in the report.

Another barrier discussed by survivors to using technology was a lack of confidence and skills. Some survivors reported that they were uncomfortable using technology, especially when accessing new devices or new websites. A lack of skills related to technology was discussed as a barrier because it required survivors to learn the skills before using the technology for the intended purpose.

“I know that technology is supposed to make things faster and easier but this is not the case for someone like me who is unfamiliar with technology.”

Survivors were asked to rate their confidence in using technology during the abusive relationship as well as to rate their partner or ex-partner’s confidence in using technology during the abusive relationship. Survey participants most commonly reported that they were somewhat confident in using technology (46%). More survivors rated themselves as very or extremely confident in their use of technology (28%) than those who felt not at all confident (7%). Survivors perceived their partners or ex-partners as having greater confidence in technology than themselves. Half of survivors reported that their partner or ex-partner was very or extremely confident in their use of technology, while only 5% rated their partner as not at all confident.

**Confidence in using technology**  
(based on 82 survey respondents)



Another common barrier to using technology was the associated costs. Survivors reported that at times they did not use technology to avoid running out of data and having to pay for additional data or incur overage charges.

---

**“It is a comfort to know that calling 911 is free and usually I had minutes to call friends but I worried about running out of data in case I really needed it later on in the month.”**

---

The issue of privacy and security online was also voiced by survivors as a barrier to using technology. Survivors were asked about how confident they were in ensuring their safety, privacy and security online. Responses varied considerably – about one-third of respondents reported they were not so or not at all confident (31%), about one-third reported being somewhat confident (38%), and the final third reported being very or extremely confident (31%).

Survivors spoke about the rapidly changing laws and practices related to online privacy and security. There was a sense of feeling overwhelmed by all of the instructions they would receive or hear about in regards to how to protect their personal information and security online.



---

**“Any information you get about managing your personal information online is always pages and pages long. Who reads all of that and could understand it?”**

---

**“Technology is always changing. You can’t keep up with everything you are supposed to do to protect your information online.”**

---

**“People would tell me how to stay safe online but there were lots of things to remember and I would often get home and forget what they had told me to do.”**

---

A general lack of trust and uncertainty in technology in protecting personal information was a common theme among participants.

# TECHNOLOGY- FACILITATED INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

The most predominant barrier to accessing and using technology across the survey and interviews was violence. For some survivors, violence remained a barrier even after separation. Technology was a difficult issue for survivors. On the one hand, survivors wanted and needed technology for safety and maintaining connections and viewed it as a necessity. On the other hand, survivors saw technology as a way for the abuser to maintain control and create violence. In addition to technology-facilitated violence, survivors described how aspects of technology, such as their cell phone or social media, had provoked violence and have remained triggers of trauma.

Of the 102 survivors engaged, 93% indicated that they had experienced technology-facilitated violence. Many different examples of technology-facilitated violence were shared. Survivors reported that their partners and ex-partners would stop them from having access to technology, including destroying their devices.

93%

indicated that they had experienced technology-facilitated violence.

---

**“I wasn’t able to have a personal computer or laptop.”**

---

**“Sometimes he would take the laptop or tablet when he left the house. He said he needed it. I knew it was so I couldn’t use it.”**

---

**“He would threaten to cancel our phone and internet plans all the time.”**

---

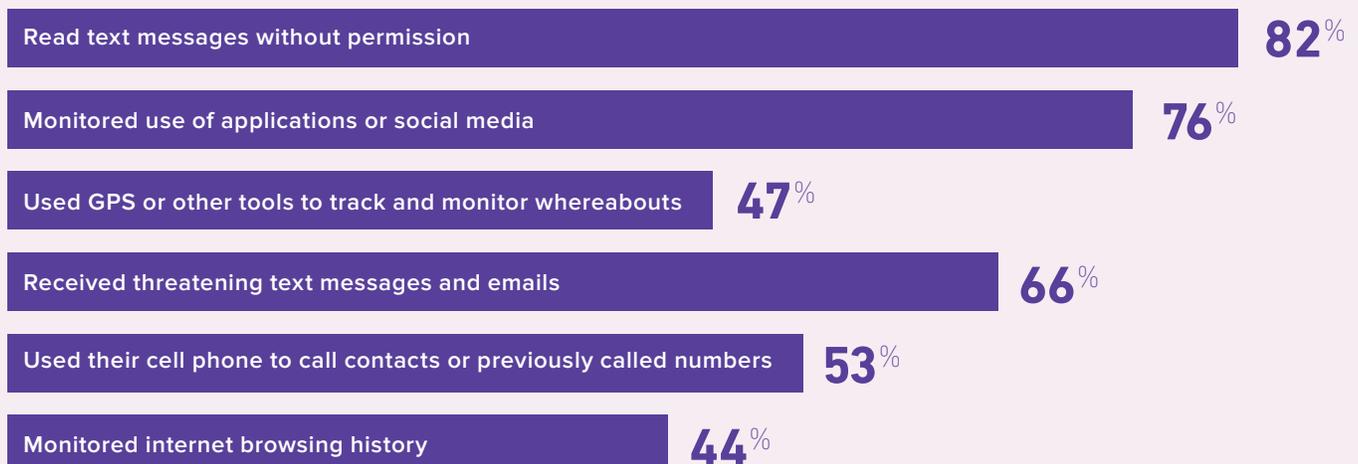
**“He was always taking away my phone, hiding it, sometimes smashing it.”**

---

Survivors reported that their partners regularly checked their text messages, social media accounts, emails, photos and browsing history. They recounted situations in which their partner or ex-partner had impersonated them through text messages or emails, often with the intention of creating conflict with family and further isolating them. One survivor, for example, described that their partner would take their phone and impersonate them through text messages to friends. The partner would ask questions with the objective to understand what the survivor was sharing with their friends about the relationship.

### Survivors experience of technology-facilitated intimate partner violence

(based on 82 survey respondents)



One survivor shared that they were forced to use their partner's account or information when setting up applications or new devices.

---

**“He insisted on having the same Apple ID so he was aware of everything I was doing.”**

---

During interviews, survivors shared that the monitoring of their phone and internet use was a key barrier to seeking support through technology. Many survivors spoke about not being able to look for information online or contact services while still in the abusive relationship because their partner monitored their online activity and call history.

---

**“I was nervous. I could only look for information when he was out at the time. I had to erase everything because he always checked my phone.”**

---

**“It wasn't until after we broke up that I felt I could look up anything on my phone.”**

---

**“I had to delete messages as soon as I sent them, phone numbers after I called them, had to delete my search history.”**

---

As a result of the nature of the intimate relationship, survivors reported that partners or ex-partners could often access their devices or email accounts because they knew or could successfully guess the answers to their security questions. Other participants shared that their partner could see and would review the calls they had made or received by reviewing their telephone bills.

---

**“It didn't matter if I deleted my calls made. He would see the numbers I had called on our bills and would google them or even call them.”**

---

Survivors shared that they found it useful to receive notifications informing them if someone had logged into one of their accounts. This allowed them to know if their partner was accessing an account or device, even after they had separated.

In addition to the technology-facilitated violence, survivors spoke at length about the role technology had in creating conflict in their relationship. Across the interviews, there were many remarks about how technology had led to arguments in the relationship and that as a result, survivors avoided or feared technology.

---

**“I used to be scared when I heard a text message come through. Even if it was just from a friend, it would end up in an argument.”**

---

---

**“Arguments about text messages, phone calls or what I was doing on my phone always ended up in an explosion. I hated my phone because of that.”**

---

**“Any connection with people, whether male or female, was a personal threat to him and a loss of control. Because technology is all about connection, it was like a complete threat to his control.”**

---

**“The first thing he would do was go for my phone when he was angry and going to hurt me. It was a sign that things were going to get bad.”**

---

In some cases, survivors shared that this negative association with their cell phone had continued even after the separation. A few participants shared that as a result of the connection between technology and violence, different aspects of technology, such as an unknown phone number, social media or the sound of a text message, have remained a trauma trigger for them.

---

**“Sometimes I would get phone calls from random numbers that I didn’t know but he would assume I was hiding something. [The phone] has become a symbol of stress for me because of that.”**

---

**“I changed the tone of my messages on my phone after my relationship. The sound of a text message from that time still makes me wince.”**

---

Survivors highlighted the challenge between needing technology but also needing safety. Many survivors shared that their phone helped them feel more safe.

---

**“I feel safe with my phone. It is very important when I walk alone daytime or nighttime.”**

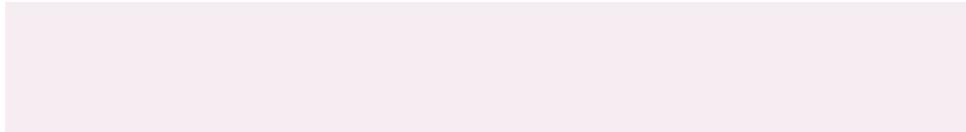
---

**“Although my phone caused issues, it was still important that I had it [...] like knowing I could contact someone quickly in an emergency.”**

---

Some participants noted that they were encouraged by workers or legal professionals to remain off social media to prevent technology-based violence such as stalking or harassment. However, the right to remain on social media safely was recognized by survivors, along with the importance of social media in remaining connected, accessing entertainment and succeeding at work.

# SEEKING LEGAL INFORMATION AND HELP



Survivors were asked about the process of seeking legal information and help online. When asked about when they first reached out for legal information or help, there was a wide range of responses. The average time to reach out for legal information and help was four years into the abusive relationship. Some survivors reached out for legal information or help within weeks of the abuse happening and other respondents did not reach out for legal information or help until the relationship had ended.

## The ways that survivors sought legal information and help (based on 82 survey respondents)



When asked about how they sought legal information and help, survivors reported using a variety of methods. Among survey participants, 71% had used the internet to search, 66% had reached out directly to a community agency, 63% had called a lawyer, and 62% asked family or friends. One respondent reported that they went directly to a courthouse because they were not sure where to access support. Another reported that they went to the police station to ask about legal support and their rights. Many respondents shared that they initially did an internet search but did not proceed with legal help until advised or supported to do so by a support worker.

Survivors were also asked about the type of legal information they were seeking. 95% of survivors had looked for legal information and help online. Of the information they were seeking, legal rights and legal agencies or supports were the most looked up online, by 84% and 81% of survivors respectively.

95%

of survivors had looked for legal information and help online.

### The type of legal information and help survivors were seeking

(based on 82 survey respondents)



Of the 82 survey respondents, the most common type of legal information that survivors were seeking (56%) was information related to their housing options and rights. In the interviews, survivors spoke about looking for information about how to find out if their name was on a lease or mortgage, information on the division of property in a separation and income support to assist with paying for rent. Legal

information about shared finances and assets was also searched for by survivors. For example, many reported that they looked up information on their rights to joint assets and accounts. A few survivors shared that information on the division of income, assets and property was difficult to find and comprehend. This became increasingly difficult when economic abuse was a factor.

---

**“I wanted to understand what I was entitled to if I left but I also wanted to know how to find out what credit cards and debts my name was attached to. It felt so hard to leave because of the financial part of everything.”**

---

Other legal matters that survey participants were seeking information on included criminal charges (52%) such as information on the types of abuse a perpetrator could be arrested for and how to get a protection order. In relation to family law matters, information on divorce (37%) and child custody (27%) were the most commonly searched topics. Another 7% of survey respondents reported that they were seeking information related to family law and immigration.

Some survivors spoke about looking for information on their rights and protection if their partner accused them of abuse. Survivors recounted their partners threatening to call the police on them for assault, threatening to take their children into their full custody and threatening to report them to immigration authorities. Another common theme for legal information and help was information related to stalking and protection from stalking.

When starting the search for legal information, survivors expressed being unsure of what to look for initially. Some participants shared that they felt confused and uncertain about what they were experiencing and if the abuse would be considered domestic violence because it was mainly emotional abuse.

A specific challenge raised by survivors in seeking out information was the amount of time it would take.

A lack of understanding about where to look or what to search were also key factors.

---

**“I didn’t know what to look for or where to start. Now that I have more knowledge of the system and know the language around domestic violence and the justice system, I know what to look for now.”**

---

**“I didn’t know what I needed until I spoke to someone. I could then look for things I needed.”**

---

Survivors shared that there was a lack of information on their rights in relation to immigration. Information on rights related to domestic violence without an immigration status or while undergoing immigration processes was seen as difficult to navigate.

---

**“As a newcomer to Canada, I got a lot of information about my rights to work but I didn’t get a lot of information on my safety. I had to go searching for that and it was hard to find.”**

---

**“Even the information I found about domestic violence and my immigration rights weren’t clear.”**

---

Survivors reported that they went between immigration forums, government websites, and blogs and articles written by lawyers.

# TRAUMA- INFORMED LEGAL INFORMATION AND PRACTICE

A consistent theme across interviews was the lack of trauma-informed legal information and practices. Most of the participants discussed the importance of engaging with legal professionals, especially lawyers, who were knowledgeable on intimate partner violence.

While some survivors spoke of very positive experiences with legal representation, many shared that they found legal representation lacked knowledge around intimate partner violence and trauma. In particular, many survivors reported that legal representation often did not recognize or acknowledge the issues of power and control in

relation to the abuse they were experiencing. The need for legal professionals to understand the complexities of intimate partner violence and the implications of culture and community were discussed by survivors.

---

**“I wanted a lawyer that had a good understanding of domestic abuse and I never did find one. Not to be sympathetic but to understand the dynamics.”**

---

---

**“They need to understand the reasons why women may stay, including cultural dynamics and expectations. Just knowing the law isn’t enough. They need to be fighting the system, not just your case.”**

---

Experiencing shame and judgement from legal professionals was another common experienced voiced by participants.

---

**“I felt like I wasn’t taken seriously because I was over 60 and in an abusive relationship. I think they were surprised that someone my age was in this situation.”**

---

**“My lawyer told me I was too smart to have let this happen to me.”**

---

**“The lawyer seemed confused that I would be in this situation given my education.”**

---

Some survivors shared that they felt they were asked to make choices between their safety, their economic security and justice.

---

**“In the past I had a lawyer who was focused on the easy route. I then got a lawyer who wanted me to be safe but also wanted me to get the justice I deserved, including access to the money I was entitled to.”**

---

**“I was told it would be easier to just focus on the custody piece and not go after the property or any criminal charges.”**

---

Survivors spoke about the role of legal professionals in ensuring their safety. A few survivors shared experiences in which they were put at risk because of the lawyer’s communication with other parties. For example, one survivor shared that they provided direction to the lawyer about how and when to send communication to their ex-partner to prevent violence from escalating. Despite asking the communication to be delivered at a time when the survivor was out of the city, it was delivered during the work day and the abuser showed up at the survivor’s work to confront them about the communication they had received.

The role of lawyers in allowing abuse to continue through ongoing litigation and contact was also questioned by survivors. For example, survivors shared experiences of abuse continuing through ongoing court proceedings as a way for the ex-partner to maintain contact, influence and control.

Some survivors shared experiences of lawyers who were trauma-informed. In these cases, the survivors shared similar traits that they were seeking in lawyers including empathy, patience, awareness of the risks

and the ability of lawyers to advocate for their needs, wants and rights.

When a legal service or support was free, survivors felt they could not be critical of the service. They also feared that a complaint may lead to them receiving a poor service or that they might face judgement.

---

**“I felt like I had to be grateful that I was receiving help for free and shouldn’t ask for more or for a better service.”**

---

Participants noted that they found recommendations and online reviews of legal services useful. A few participants shared the importance of accessing legal clinics and services that were dedicated to serving women survivors of violence. Others shared the benefits of having a support worker with them during their legal meetings or court. These workers were seen as being familiar with legal information and processes and could help manage survivors’ expectations as well as provide support and advocacy.

---

**“I always had [my worker] with me if I could. They knew what questions to ask and they would push back at times when I probably would have just said yes.”**

---

In addition to practice, survivors shared the lack of trauma-informed policy and information. Survivors shared that the process of sharing legal information and obtaining advice did not take trauma into account, especially the importance of timing and reducing the number of times a survivor has to share their story.

Many survivors felt rushed and overwhelmed by legal information and having to share their story many times to professionals before reaching the correct individual.

---

**“I had three hours but I had different things I needed to understand and know before I got help. I needed help with issues related to family law, immigration law and criminal law. They suggested I just focus on one thing.”**

---

**“It is hard to process things during or after abuse. This is why we can’t have a time limit of accessing services, like legal aid or housing, you may not be ready to process things for months or even years.”**

---

Participants highlighted the need for websites to have safety mechanisms in place, including a quick exit button. There was also a need for websites to be trauma-informed, including websites that use accessible language, positive images of survivors, and that acknowledge that intimate partner violence is not the fault of the survivor. Survivors suggested that websites should be designed in partnership with survivors to ensure they are trauma-informed and user-friendly.

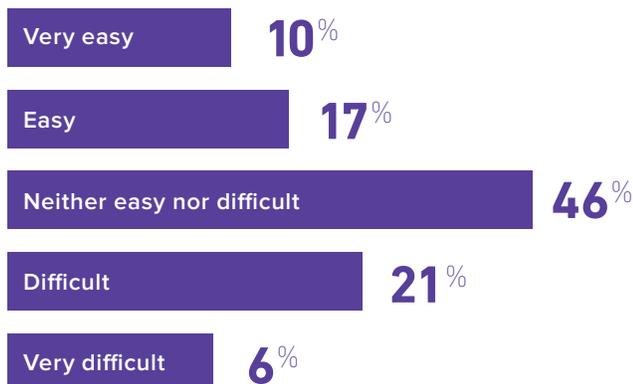
---

**“We need survivors like me and others sitting down with the people who are creating these websites so that people who are accessing the information, it is relevant for them.”**

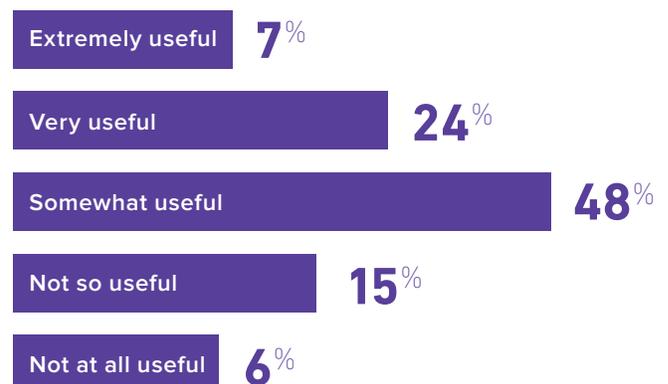
# EXPERIENCE OF SEEKING LEGAL INFORMATION AND HELP ONLINE

Survivors were asked about their experience of seeking legal information and help online. They discussed the benefits and challenges of using technology and the opportunities they see for technology improving their access to legal information and support.

## The experience of survivors in seeking legal information online (based on 82 survey respondents)



## The usefulness of the legal information found online (based on 82 survey respondents)



## The benefits

During interviews, survivors shared the ability of technology to increase their access to information and knowledge. A common theme across interviews was the role of information in increasing the survivors' feelings of control and power. The process of reading about their rights and protections online helped a few survivors to build their confidence. One participant reported that they had been encouraged by a worker to become familiar with the law and the justice system through websites.

---

**“After years of him manipulating and gaslighting me with information, having the facts and knowledge of the law gave me back some power”.**

---

**“I didn’t want to be the one involved who knew the least. I used technology to arm myself with legal information.”**

---

A few survivors also shared that access to information online had supported them to make more informed decisions related to legal options and processes.

---

**“I liked the chance to read information about my legal rights online. It helped me really know my options. It could be overwhelming but I could read it and try to understand it at my pace.”**

---

---

**“I liked to be able to read information before speaking to my lawyer or going to court. It prepared me and also helped me know what questions to ask”**

---

While many survivors shared the benefits of having access to information and knowledge, a few reported that they had at times received resistance and backlash from others for having information and knowledge.

---

**“I felt like I knew the terminology because I had read my rights online and knew words related to Canadian law. Not sure others liked that I knew the terminology though.”**

---

**“Being assertive and knowing things in the system made it hard for me. It was better for me to be submissive in my relationship and in the legal system. I felt safer that way.”**

---

A number of participants spoke about the experience of accessing information and help through online forums or social media groups that were designed for survivors. The online groups discussed were often designed to allow survivors to share their experiences of interacting with the justice system. For example, one participant accessed an online group for survivors who had or were experiencing parental alienation. Another participant accessed an online

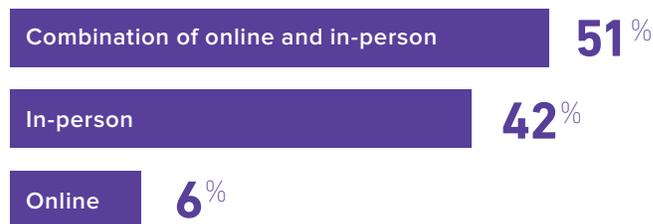
group for survivors who had or were accessing family court as a survivor of domestic violence. Accessing online support groups and forums related to self-representation was another common experience among survivors. Many survivors reported that they valued online support groups and forums that were moderated by survivors or community organizations and designed for survivors.

Two survivors shared that they had a membership to an online legal service. The online service allowed them to speak to a lawyer by phone or online for advice on family law. The services were paid through a monthly subscription. Both survivors reported that they liked the service because they found it inexpensive, accessible, responsive and trustworthy.

The importance of websites and information tailored to the needs and experiences of survivors was discussed in interviews. For example, survivors shared that they liked websites that had information on specific areas of law and domestic violence, and websites that included information on the different forms of domestic violence. A few survivors shared that they valued websites that provided a series of questions to help direct the survivor to information or support that was relevant to their circumstance.

A couple of survivors described the ability to read online reviews of websites and legal services, which they reported as beneficial. For instance, one participant reported that they had found information on the credibility of different websites. In another example, participants spoke about the value of being able to read reviews of lawyers online.

### Preference of interaction with legal information and help (based on 82 survey respondents)



Survivors discussed the different ways they had engaged with legal information and services through technology. There was a wide variety of responses. When asked about how they prefer interacting with legal information and help, 51% reported they would prefer a combination of online and in-person, 43% reported they would prefer dealing with someone in-person and 6% would prefer finding information, help or advice through a website or application.

In the interviews, a few survivors shared that they had used video conferencing functions to speak to their lawyer or other professionals they were engaging with. The use of video conferencing as a means to communicating with legal professionals had increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some survivors reported that they did not like the idea of using video conferencing if their ex-partner would be on the screen as it would mean they would have to see their face. Another survivor did not like the idea of being on a video conference in their home as they felt it would feel like they were bringing back the experience into their home.

While many survivors are comfortable with using new technology-driven means for communication, the majority of survivors spoke about the importance of having a variety of accessible options available to them.

## The usefulness of the legal information found online (based on 82 survey respondents)

Question: How comfortable would you be with the following?

### Speaking to a legal professional through a video call



### Uploading legal documents online



### Speaking to a legal professional through online chat



### Reading legal documents online



### Using video conference for legal proceedings e.g. court, mediation



● Very comfortable    ● Comfortable    ● Uncomfortable    ● Very uncomfortable    ● Unsure

## The challenges

While survivors discussed the increased access to information and knowledge through technology, they also shared that the amount of information available online was often overwhelming.

**“Just starting to look online for information on my rights and the legal provisions available to me was overwhelming and time consuming.”**

**“There was so much information and I didn’t know what legal information applied to me. I would give up after awhile.”**

**“There is just so much information out there. I don’t know how you can go looking for information and not be overwhelmed.”**

Across interviews, survivors shared that they found it difficult to know where to start looking online and how to find legal information and help that was relevant to them. Because the majority of legal information and services are based on jurisdiction, survivors reported that they had difficulty finding information that was appropriate.

Another common challenge for survivors when using technology to seek legal information and help was their health and circumstances at the time. Some survivors described themselves as feeling stressed, sad, scared, confused, and/or embarrassed at the time they were looking for information online.

---

**“I was scared and my mind was all over the place. I also had lost all of my confidence and trust in anything. I just kept reading it again and again.”**

---

**“I am not great with computers and it made me frustrated and I was already feeling overwhelmed because of the abuse I was experiencing. It hurt to read about it too. It felt more clear and like I could do something about it when I first spoke to a person.”**

---

**“It was hard to look up information and understand my rights because of my state of mind.”**

---

In interviews, survivors shared that they had difficulty finding information or help that was responsive to their individual experience or circumstances. For example, survivors reported that they found it challenging to find information related to division of assets and property based on their marital status, child custody when they were undergoing immigration processes or information related to historical intimate partner violence.

The language used on websites, especially legal terminology, was not always seen as accessible to survivors, as was a lack of legal information online that is available in different languages.

A common theme across interviews was the lack of information available on the experience of the justice system. For example, many participants described wanting to find information online about what types of questions a lawyer or judge may ask them or what might happen when they attend court. One participant described wanting to know how to address a judge and another described wanting to know what they should wear to court.

---

**“I wanted to know what would happen at court. I wanted to know what questions people would ask me, how to speak to the judge. All I had seen was from movies and shows.”**

---

Survivors also spoke at length about their fears of accessing legal services and the justice system, including fears related to a lack of trust, stigma related to being involved in the justice system, and possible repercussions. Many survivors shared that they wanted information on what would likely happen to them if they accessed legal support as they recognized the experience was often different than what the law suggests.

---

**“I didn’t just want to know what a restraining order was. I wanted to know if it would actually work”**

---

**“The legal information online paints a pretty good picture of what I was entitled to but that isn’t the reality.”**

---

A disconnect between information on the legal system and survivors’ experience with it was noted by participants. A few survivors spoke about finding information on legal rights, supports and services on websites and then finding the authentic experiences of survivors in accessing these legal rights, navigating these services and receiving these supports on other websites. Survivors shared that speaking to an individual who could provide them with an understanding of the system helped them make decisions that would be best for their health and for their ongoing safety.

Survivors also expressed that online legal information suggests there are many options when in reality, they found that when they spoke to someone or accessed a service, their options were limited. For example, survivors shared that information available online would suggest they were eligible for free legal support but when they accessed services they were ineligible because of their circumstances, including the length of time that had passed since the relationship had ended, the type of abuse they experienced, the type of legal support they were seeking and their income.

---

**“You constantly have doors shut on you because of small reasons that make you unqualified for legal support.”**

---

Another challenge discussed by survivors was a lack of understanding related to credible websites. Survivors shared that they were not confident about what websites and information they should trust. Throughout the interviews, many survivors reported that they were inclined to look for governmental websites and websites specifically designed for legal advice for survivors. Some shared that they were often overwhelmed by the amount of advertising for lawyers and legal services online. A few survivors reported that they trusted websites that had been suggested to them by a worker or community agency.

# KEY FINDINGS

## **The use of technology in the workplace is an important point of safe access for survivors in accessing information and services online.**

During the abusive relationship, survivors were more likely to use the internet at work to seek information than at a library or friend's home. In many cases, survivors were more likely to use the internet at work than at home because their online activities were monitored at home.

## **Technology-facilitated intimate partner violence is common and a key barrier to survivors' access to and use of technology, including seeking legal information and help.**

Technology is often used to wield control over a partner and restrict their access to information, support and connections. Technology-facilitated intimate partner violence encompasses a wide

range of behaviours, including sending harassing text messages, destroying devices or monitoring a partner's online activity. Technology can sometimes become a trauma trigger for survivors, even after the abuse has ended.

## **While technology is often used as the first means of seeking information, survivors do not always proceed to access help without the support of a professional.**

For many survivors, searching the internet for information or services was the first information and help-seeking behaviour identified. However, it is common for survivors to not proceed to access legal help or support until supported to do so by a professional. While some survivors may experience an increase in control by accessing legal information online, the feeling of being overwhelmed by the amount and nature of information available online is common.

## **A lack of trauma-informed legal information and practice has a significant impact on a survivor's experience of interacting with legal information and support.**

The legal professionals and services that survivors interact with do not always have knowledge of intimate partner violence, especially the relationship between violence and misogyny, power and control. The lack of trauma-informed legal websites and services results in survivors disengaging, feeling judged and not having their safety, health and justice needs met.

## **Survivors can experience an increase in confidence and control by accessing legal information online.**

Online information, resources and applications can help survivors access information and services quickly. Increasing survivors' knowledge of the justice system and their rights can help increase their confidence and feeling of control. Furthermore, it can help survivors process information at their own pace as well as help them to make more informed decisions. With a high proportion of survivors self-representing, access to legal information and knowledge online is critical.

## **There is a lack of information available online on the experience of engaging with the legal system as a survivor.**

The information online is not always a true reflection of the access to and experience of the justice system. Survivors are regularly seeking information on the experience of the justice system, including realities, tips for interacting, and expectations. The use of online forums that have been designed by survivors and for survivors are valuable for understanding the lived experiences of survivors.

## **Survivors want a range of technological options for interacting with legal information and the justice system.**

Survivors recognize the value of technology in increasing their access to legal help, in meeting their legal needs as well as improving their safety. However, survivors feel as though technological solutions have not accounted for their unique needs and experiences. Survivors want a range of accessible options for engaging with legal professionals, including live text messaging, secure document storage and the ability to submit legal documents online.

# OPPOR- TUNITIES

## **Co-design technology with and for survivors of intimate partner violence**

Survivors have the lived experience of technology-facilitated violence, how it is used and its impacts. Survivors expressed an interest in understanding who are developing legal websites and applications and their motivations. Survivors have ideas of information and tools that could improve their experience of the legal system and increase their safety. Survivors shared that they would use technology more if there were mechanisms in place to protect them from technology-facilitated violence.

## **Provide the option of live online chat services and texting**

Survivors spoke about the value in accessing legal information and support through live text messaging and online chat. Survivors shared that accessing services and supports through these means were

more accessible and felt more conversational than emails or online forms. Survivors reported that an increase in online chat functions or texting with legal services could prevent them from requiring time off work and would increase access for those who cannot access an office due to location or travel expenses.

## **Using technology to gather and store evidence and documentation**

Survivors expressed the need for safe storage of evidence and documents while also faced with challenges of privacy and security. For example, survivors need safe places to store personal documents that are at risk of being destroyed by a partner or ex-partner. The need for safe storage of evidence, identification and legal documents was discussed. Some survivors were aware of applications that served some of these purposes but had not used them or had difficulty in accessing them.

## **Ensure trauma-informed legal websites and services**

Survivors wanted greater innovation to support their access to trauma-informed websites and lawyers. The recommendations included safe texting with trauma-informed lawyers, websites that provided access to trauma-informed lawyers and online reviews of lawyers. Survivors also shared the importance of lawyers being aware of potential risks to survivors, including the impact of communication with perpetrators and the role of ongoing court proceeding as a way to perpetuate abuse. Survivors suggested training for legal professionals by anti-violence organizations and survivors on intimate partner violence and trauma.

## **Greater online forums and resources created by survivors and for survivors**

Survivors expressed a need for greater access to online groups, forums, message boards and websites to help survivors connect with other survivors. Survivors explained the value in sharing their experience and learning from other's experiences, especially about the barriers to accessing justice and how to overcome them. Sharing their stories and being a part of a wider group was also healing for some. Important aspects of these online forums included anonymity, moderated spaces and places for different areas of law.

## **Use technology to increase efficiency and reduce legal costs**

Survivors shared the high costs of resolving certain legal issues that required the help of a lawyer. Survivors who had self-represented reported that online tools and information designed for self-representation are extremely valuable. Many survivors reported that while they didn't need a lawyer for everything, they would have liked access to a legal professional online who could provide ad-hoc advice, review documents or who could be obtained for certain tasks.

## **Develop online safety planning and mechanisms**

Survivors saw value in online tools that could support them with safety and exit planning. Survivors recommended online platforms that could provide safety planning tools, help facilitate communication with professionals, store personal documents and help share safety plans with family and friends. Survivors also wanted to see online safety planning platforms that could then connect them to services, such as counselling support, or help them access security devices such as personal safety alarms.