

Moving On: Digital Empowerment and Literacy Skills for Survivors

Needs Assessment Report



MediaSmarts

MediaSmarts is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization for digital media literacy. Our vision is that people across Canada have the critical thinking skills to engage with media as active and informed digital citizens. MediaSmarts has been developing digital media literacy programs and resources for Canadian homes, schools, and communities since 1996. MediaSmarts also conducts and disseminates original research that contributes to the development of our programs and resources and informs public policy on issues related to digital media literacy.

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Land Acknowledgement

MediaSmarts acknowledges that it is based on the traditional unceded and occupied lands of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg. With gratitude, we acknowledge the territory to reaffirm our commitment and responsibility to building positive relationships with Inuit, First Nations, and Métis peoples from coast to coast to coast.

We strive to ground our research processes in care and reciprocity, and this includes being in a constant state of learning – especially when it comes to understanding the digital well-being and experiences of Indigenous peoples and communities across Canada. We commit to creating and maintaining respectful processes and relationships that recognize and seek to address power imbalances across the digital media literacy landscape.

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Introduction

Moving On: Digital Empowerment and Literacy Skills for Survivors (MODELSS) is an intervention research project designed and developed by [MediaSmarts](#) - Canada's non-profit centre for digital media literacy.¹ This project aims to adapt, deliver, and evaluate digital media literacy resources for practitioners in the violence against women (VAW) sector and survivors of family violence – specifically those who have experienced or are experiencing technology-facilitated violence and abuse (TFVA).

In this report, we detail the methodology and results of the needs assessment we conducted in February and March 2023 to understand the current needs and concerns of survivors and VAW practitioners regarding addressing and preventing TFVA in Canada.

Through a [trauma- and violence-informed approach](#), this project *understands TFVA as a public health issue* requiring collaborative and sustainable interventions at individual, interpersonal, community, and systems levels. Our project also recognizes that environmental factors (such as access to resources) and intersecting forms of oppression, marginalization, and exclusion [greatly influence all aspects of well-being](#) and shape health outcomes for survivors. With this in mind and drawing on MediaSmarts' previous research and capacity to design and evaluate [digital media literacy programs](#), this project aims to adapt and mobilize a [culturally safe](#), evidence-based health intervention for survivors of violence.

Although definitions of TFVA remain inconsistent as research develops in this field, [TFVA](#) may be defined generally as a **form of abuse or controlling behaviour involving the use of technology to coerce, stalk, surveil or harass another person**. TFVA [consists of a range of actions](#), including sending abusive text messages or emails, cyberstalking, the non-consensual sharing of intimate images ('revenge porn'), publishing private and personal information ('doxing'), impersonation, threats, intimidation, and blocking communication. Scholars and advocates argue for an additional

VAW stands for violence against women

TFVA stands for technology-facilitated violence and abuse

TFVA may be defined generally as a form of abuse or controlling behaviour involving the use of technology to coerce, stalk, surveil or harass another person.

¹ Funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada through the Preventing and Addressing Family Violence: The Health Perspective Program.

understanding of TFVA – that it is inextricably linked to intimate partner violence, gender-based violence, domestic and family violence, and to larger societal and structural patterns of violence against women.² To acknowledge these links is to recognize that it is gender inequality that drives TFVA, not technology itself.³ Some scholars have stated, however, that it is equally important to recognize the unique and driving role that technology plays in enabling new forms of abuse.⁴

TFVA has been [compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic](#), with control and intimidation tactics increasingly moving to digital devices and platforms. Additionally, during the pandemic, access to technology has emerged as a [social determinant of health](#) that has unequally impacted women and girls. Harms resulting from TFVA may be [physical, psychological, emotional, or financial](#). TFVA can also [increase the need](#) for health care, judicial and social services, impede the exercise of free expression and other human rights, and disturb the sense of peace and security required for women and children to participate in economic and democratic life. The impacts of TFVA vary depending on social circumstances, including [age, race, class, ability, and location](#). In the recently published [Emerald International Handbook of Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse](#), Professor Jane Bailey (University of Ottawa’s Centre for Law, Technology and Society) emphasizes that a failure to take into account the impacts of intersecting forms of oppression on women experiencing violence is likely to result in policy and services that fail to meet the needs of women from the most marginalized communities, such as immigrant and refugee women, as well as racialized and Indigenous women, and women living in remote and rural areas. For example, Indigenous women are [three to four times](#) more likely than non-Indigenous women to be victims of violence.

Following a needs assessment, which is the subject of this report, MediaSmarts’ research and education teams will design the MODELSS program for survivors of TFVA and the practitioners who

2 Douglas, H., Harris, B. A., & Dragiewicz, M. (2019). Technology-facilitated Domestic and Family Violence: Women’s Experiences. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 59(3); Duerksen, K. N., & Woodin, E. M. (2019). Technological intimate partner violence: Exploring technology-related perpetration factors and overlap with in-person intimate partner violence. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 98.

3 Afrouz, R. (2021). The Nature, Patterns and Consequences of Technology-Facilitated Domestic Abuse: A Scoping Review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*.

4 Henry, N., Flynn, A., & Powell, A. (2020). Technology-Facilitated Domestic and Sexual Violence: A Review. *Violence Against Women*, 26.

support them through direct services and programs in communities across Canada. MODELSS is a digital literacy education program that will build resilience to increase control over and improve the health and well-being of participants by developing their confidence and skills to engage as active, informed, and empowered digital citizens. MODELSS includes two phases of program content:

1. **Digital triage content:** important online safety, security, and well-being information to assist survivors in crisis and their families.
2. **Prevention and resilience content:** a series of workshops to educate and empower survivors to confidently participate in online communities (for example, through safe and secure job searching, online banking and shopping, and using social media).

[Research in the field](#) considers digital media literacy a social justice issue through which economic, social, cultural, and civic gaps are reduced and opportunities are strengthened - particularly for women and girls. Using a [trauma- and violence-informed approach](#), we will tailor the MODELSS program to meet the wide-ranging needs of survivors of TFVA and VAW practitioners. Furthermore, we will give specific attention to the cultural and safety needs of Indigenous women who are [underserved regarding digital access and training](#) and [disproportionately affected by violence](#), and the practitioners who support them in the community.

Our project goals are:

1. Addressing and reducing the impact and preventing further instances of TFVA;
2. Building resilience among survivors and practitioners to improve health outcomes; and
3. Improving access to digital media literacy education and resources for both survivors of TFVA and the practitioners who support them in the community.

We will achieve these project goals through the following four project objectives:

Adaptation: In collaboration with a network of VAW service delivery partners across Canada, our project advisory committee, literacy and accessibility consultants, evaluation consultants, Indigenous facilitators, graphic designers, and translators, we will adapt MediaSmarts' [DigitalSmarts](#) program to reach a new population (survivors of TFVA) in a new setting (emergency shelters and transitional homes) and context (preventing TFVA). The MODELSS program will be designed for in-person or online participation.

Implementation: Practitioners who support survivors of violence in emergency shelters and transitional homes will become facilitators of the MODELSS program via train-the-trainer sessions. Practitioners will deliver the *digital triage* and the *prevention and resilience content* within their communities.

Evaluation: As part of the intervention research plan that we have designed to guide the development of the MODELSS program, drawing on [empowerment](#) and [utilization-focused](#) evaluation, and in collaboration with service delivery partners, project advisors, and evaluation consultants, we will conduct an iterative evaluation of the program throughout the implementation period.

Knowledge Mobilization: We will share and exchange evidence-based practices regarding practical and effective approaches for designing and delivering digital media literacy interventions to address and prevent TFVA and to support the health of survivors with: the Community of Practice and Knowledge Hub established by the Public Health Agency of Canada, the MODELSS project advisory committee, our service delivery partners, and MediaSmarts' network of academic, research, community organization, and education partners.

In this report, we share details of the design, process, and results of seven focus groups conducted across Canada with practitioners in the violence against women (VAW) sector and survivors of family violence, specifically TFVA. This focus group-based needs assessment is the foundation upon which we will continue adapting and developing program content for this four-year project.

A trauma- and violence-informed approach is one that “realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; and responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization.”

Trauma-and Violence-Informed Intervention Research

We apply a trauma-and violence-informed lens to all phases of the MODELSS program (adaptation, development, implementation, and evaluation) to promote the safety, respect, and empowerment of survivors and practitioners. Current research overwhelmingly states that responses to TFVA must be trauma- and violence-informed to support survivors of TFVA and avoid further harm.⁵

According to an often cited [manual](#) from the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): a trauma- and violence-informed approach is one that “realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; and responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization.” The [manual](#) gives six guiding principles to achieve this approach: safety; trust; peer support; collaboration; enablement; and [intersectionality](#). Furthermore, trauma- and violence-informed approaches often require community and expert consultation and awareness of intersecting and community-level traumas.

⁵ Voith, L. A., Hamler, T., Francis, M. W., Lee, H., & Korsch-Williams, A. (2020). Using a Trauma-Informed, Socially Just Research Framework with Marginalized Populations: Practices and Barriers to Implementation.

In applying a trauma-and violence-informed framework, our project aims to understand the effects of historical, intergenerational, and ongoing trauma and structural and interpersonal violence survivors have experienced due to systemic and political violence (such as colonization). Rather than expecting survivors to engage in individualizing solutions, our project aims to ensure they can participate in collective efforts to prevent TFVA that recognize their diverse needs.

In our design of the needs assessment focus groups, we followed a trauma-informed approach to introduce additional safeguards focused on sensitivity and awareness of already existing ethical and methodological best practices in qualitative research. For example, confidentiality, meaningful consent, and participant safety were upheld and communicated to participants in clear and accessible consent documents and focus group discussion guides were designed with sensitivity to the vulnerability that participants might feel in discussing TFVA. For instance, we started discussions in the focus groups with questions that participants might consider to be of higher intensity to avoid leaving those questions to the end when participants might be getting tired.

We also worked closely with our service delivery partners to ensure participants had access to support (such as counselling services) throughout their participation. Following the work of the [Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children](#), we approach this study with the understanding that “continued efforts to bring... trauma-informed responses to survivors of family violence [are] integral to advancing prevention and intervention across the life course, as well as improving services and health for survivors of violence.”

Methods: Needs Assessment

The [research team](#) at MediaSmarts designs projects that create safe spaces for people to share their experiences, concerns, strategies, and solutions related to the internet and digital technology, positioning research participants as experts to be actively involved in designing interventions and resources that impact them. Findings from our research serve as the foundation for our advocacy and knowledge mobilization work and the educational resources we create and share with communities across the country. The key findings from the needs assessment we conducted form the foundation for our intended goal to adapt and deliver digital media literacy resources that address the key concerns and needs of survivors of TFVA and VAW practitioners across Canada.

For this project, we designed and facilitated focus groups with seventeen VAW practitioners and twenty-four survivors of TFVA across Canada, guided by the following research questions:

- What are the specific needs and concerns of survivors of family violence (which includes intimate partner violence) and frontline practitioners in the VAW sector across Canada when it comes to addressing and preventing TFVA?
- What kind of digital media literacy resources and supports are needed to address and prevent TFVA?

The design of the focus groups was a collaborative co-design process with our service delivery partners, who reviewed and provided feedback on all focus group materials to ensure they

centralized participant experiences in a safe and meaningful way. We also consulted with TFVA and VAW researchers and practitioners in our project advisory committee on how best to ensure that we created safe and empowering spaces for our participants during the focus groups. Both decisions were made to ensure that we moved into the focus groups and met participants with an expert and trauma-informed approach.

The recruitment process was also designed to prioritize safety, transparency, and empowerment for participants. We limited our recruitment strategy to our service delivery partners, who distributed letters of information and recruitment posters within their organizations, so participants only shared identifying information with the trusted supports they were already engaging with at each site. Furthermore, our letters of information and consent scripts ensured participants knew what would be discussed, how, and why. Participants were given a chance to review this information before the scheduled session and reviewed it again during the focus group before giving their oral consent.

We worked with our network of service delivery partners from across the country and conducted focus groups with organizations in four locations for practitioners (Calgary, Guelph, Montreal, and Vancouver) and three locations for survivors (Calgary, Guelph, and Vancouver). Focus groups were divided according to each area, for a total of four practitioner focus groups (all conducted online via Zoom) and three survivor focus groups (two conducted online via Zoom and one in-person). The partners we worked with serve a diverse group of survivors, including those from Indigenous, racialized, immigrant, and rural communities. However, we recognize the need for

further research in additional geographic locations, including with survivors in northern and eastern parts of the country. With participant permission, the focus groups were audio-recorded and made available to members of the MediaSmarts research team for analysis. To protect the safety and privacy of participants, we do not include any identifying information in either our analysis or reporting.

Each focus group lasted two hours and began with introductions by facilitators, including a review of the purpose of the focus groups and the goals of the MODELSS project to further clarify the context and details of participation. After a brief review of the consent form, we obtained oral consent from all participants using a pseudonym of their choice.

For practitioner sessions, we encouraged participants, to the best of their ability and experience, to reflect on the needs and concerns of the various priority groups they serve. For example, how might the key challenges and issues differ for Indigenous women, racialized women, religious minorities, or 2SLGBTQ+ survivors? This request aimed to capture the disproportionate impacts of TFVA across [intersectional identities](#) that we highlighted in the introduction of this report.

We then reviewed the procedure of the focus groups to further remind and clarify for participants exactly what they should expect from the session. We assured participants that all insights, reflections, and emotions were welcome, and they could let the facilitators know if they needed to take a break, stop, or leave the discussion at any time. Breaks were also implemented throughout the sessions, during which participants were informed of the next topic of discussion and reminded that their participation

was voluntary, maintaining a feeling of safety, transparency and control. We have included a list of discussion topics from the focus group sessions below.

Practitioners

Key Challenges and Issues
Access, Devices, Activities
Skills and Competencies
Needs

Survivors

Online Safety, Security, Privacy
Access, Devices, Activities
Skills and Competencies
Needs

Practitioner Focus Groups

The first topic of discussion in each practitioner session was the *key challenges and issues* they have encountered in their work, exploring their challenges as practitioners and the challenges faced by the survivors they support. Our discussion prompts for practitioners included the following questions:

- What are the key challenges/issues you're seeing in your work regarding technology-facilitated family violence and abuse? What opportunities and challenges do you think come with going online for survivors?
- Keeping in mind the needs and concerns of various priority groups, what do you think is needed to help survivors feel safe online? What do VAW service providers need to support this?
- How would you explain online well-being? Can you think of some ways that technology could positively influence the well-being of survivors? What do VAW service providers need to support survivor's online well-being?

Within the discussion topic *access, devices, and activities*, we asked practitioners about their internet access, including how they and the survivors they support most regularly access the internet, the devices they use most frequently, and their thoughts about survivors' experiences with engaging in online activities. Similarly, in the following discussion section, we asked how practitioners perceive their online skills and competencies and those of the survivors they support. Practitioners were also encouraged to share their thoughts on what they would need to gain more confidence in their ability to use the internet and digital devices and what would help them support survivors seeking to do the same thing. Finally, we asked about the resources practitioners use or find helpful and what they would like to see developed in the MODELSS program.

Discussion prompts for this final topic included the following questions:

- What resources do you currently have access to when it comes to supporting survivors of technology-facilitated family violence? What is working best? What is not working and why?
- How do you feel about online learning or learning conducted over the internet?
- How do you feel about tutorials and workshops (both online and in-person)?
- What types of skills and knowledge would you like to see covered in a facilitator guide for conducting digital media literacy workshops with survivors?

During closing discussions, we asked practitioners to share any final thoughts related to TFVA and digital media literacy. Facilitators reminded participants of the next steps in the research process, including how they will be informed of MODELSS program content once its developed, and sessions concluded with the provision of existing digital media literacy supports from [MediaSmarts](#) and other organizations doing work in the TFVA field (including the [BC Society of Transition Houses](#) and [Women's Shelter Canada](#)).

Survivors Focus Groups

The discussion guide and prompts in survivor focus groups were almost identical to the practitioner focus groups, although, following a trauma-and violence-informed approach, they began with the topic of *online safety, security, and privacy*. We asked participants questions about safety and well-being online, including:

- What are your major fears or worries about going online or using the internet? What opportunities and challenges do you think come with going online?
- Are you concerned about your privacy online? In what instances?
- How would you explain online safety? What would make you feel safe online?
- How would you explain online well-being? Can you think of some ways that technology could positively influence your well-being?

We then asked how survivors regularly *access* the internet, the *devices* they use most frequently, the devices their children or dependents can access or share with them, and the *online activities* they most frequently engage in. To understand a broader spectrum of their experiences online, we also asked how important going online is to them, what they like and don't like about it, and whether there are things they want to do online or on devices that they find challenging.

The following discussion topic focused on survivors' *online skills and competencies*. Our discussion prompts included the following:

- Do you feel there are specific skill sets that you need to use devices and the internet to its fullest capacity? What are they?
- Do you feel confident that you have those skills or some of the skills?
- When do you feel most confident online?
- When do you feel least confident online?
- What would help increase or build your confidence in your ability to use digital devices/ the internet?

Within these questions, we prompted survivors to think about skills like accessing government and community services; emailing, texting, messaging, and other forms of online communication; using social media; online banking and shopping; using online employment services; information seeking; and assisting children/dependents with school-related online activities.

Finally, the last topic of discussion prompted survivors to reflect on the *resources* they currently have access to when going online, whom they turn to for support, and which resources work and don't work for them. To assist us in developing the MODELSS program, we also asked for their opinions about online learning compared to in-person learning and paper-based versus digital resources.

As in the focus groups with practitioners, the closing discussion with survivors involved facilitators thanking the participants for sharing their time and experiences, informing them of the next steps in the research process, and sharing existing digital media literacy supports.

Collaborative Analysis

Following the focus groups, the research team met with the MODELSS project advisory committee to discuss the findings from the focus groups and begin forming the key themes for analyzing the needs assessment. We asked the advisory committee members to share their thoughts, experiences, and insights on the key findings we began to surface from the focus groups. The committee (which includes academics, researchers, educators, social service providers, and practitioners working in TFVA or VAW sectors) offered meaningful, expert, and diverse insights that helped ground our analysis.⁶

The MediaSmarts research and education teams then met to engage in a collaborative analysis process. We shared reflections on the key findings from the focus groups and the insights from the advisory committee and discussed how they would inform the creation of the MODELSS digital media literacy program.

We want to thank everyone who took the time to participate in this research project. Your experiences, concerns, and suggestions are summarized in the following sections of this report and will help us adapt and mobilize digital media literacy resources that reflect the current needs of VAW practitioners and survivors of TFVA.

⁶ See the second page of this report for a list of members of the project advisory committee.

Key Findings: What We Heard

In this section, we centre the concerns we heard from practitioners and survivors who participated in the focus groups we conducted. The key findings are organized into three key themes for each group:

Practitioners

Key Challenges and Issues
Access, Devices, Activities
Skills and Competencies
Needs

Survivors

Online Safety, Security, Privacy
Access, Devices, Activities
Skills and Competencies
Needs

Although additional topics of *skills and competencies* and *resources* were present within the focus group discussion guides, we have included findings related to these topics within the other analytical themes to reflect how participants engaged in the discussions during focus groups. We have highlighted the critical needs identified by both practitioners and survivors at the end of each key findings section below and include select quotes from participants.

Practitioners Focus Groups

Key Challenges and Issues

As explained [above](#), we began each focus group with practitioners by asking them about the key challenges and issues they see regarding survivors of TFVA in their day-to-day work. Almost all practitioners mentioned the challenge of digital media literacy competence among survivors. These challenges ranged from survivors being unfamiliar with the basics of different digital devices, online platforms, and online services to a more specific lack of understanding or feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, and confusion around how to protect themselves online.

“But when it comes to checking their emails, when it comes to checking their locations, a lot of [survivors] don’t even know that option even exists.”

“Some of them are scared to have even on their laptop, to have someone locate them through their laptop. So, it’s not just their phone. I remember [a survivor] came, and she turned off her laptop completely.”

“If people have been violated, for example, videotaped, any nude photos, any sexual activity that’s videotaped, all of that. The big worry [is that] it goes somewhere. You don’t know where it goes, and you don’t know if it be cancelled. What do you do? So it’s sort of out in the universe and it’s very scary.”

“So... most of them are not too familiar with their smartphones and the recent technology.”

Practitioners often described this digital literacy challenge alongside several other factors, such as language barriers, generational differences, situations where the perpetrator controls the survivor's digital life, and a lack of education or digital media literacy supports.

First, almost all practitioners highlighted language barriers (and the predominance of English-only online support) among survivors as a significant challenge. Language barriers make it difficult for survivors to learn how to use their devices and protect themselves online.

"...there are so many ESL people who cannot access information even though they're good with computers."

"I think for newcomers, there's mostly the language barrier... So, if they receive their letters, whether it via email or the post, they're so confused. They don't know what's there and what's not. So, I think with that, they start getting a bit nervous, and that's probably where they start feeling unsafe, too."

"Some [online resources] are not user-friendly, and of course, if they have language barriers, that will be an issue as well in terms of just understanding what's required of them as well."

"I think they are hesitant to apply to anything online because of the language barrier. English is not their first language."

Next, practitioners highlighted that perpetrators often have a higher level of digital media literacy and tend to control the survivor's devices and online accounts, making it difficult for the survivor to increase their digital media literacy and protect themselves online. Almost all practitioners expressed particular concerns about location tracking.

"Even with us doing our due diligence [including] turning off tracking on the phone, on certain apps, we did have an instance where the perpetrator was still able to track the victim via phone."

"Also, immigrant women, like if I mention a specific type of abuse, for instance, one that controls almost everything financially, usually they're just given a smartphone for them and nothing else. I mean, they don't know how to properly use or how much they can use with just a smartphone, too."

"I think the other challenge is that sometimes folks don't understand technology very well, and so their abuser will set up passwords and different pieces. And so, then when they need to get back into their account or if they try to do any kind of safety plan... the abuser can either change the password and link it to their stuff."

“A lot of women have their accounts under their spouse, so not having freedom over their cell phones, their computer. Even email is oftentimes we share emails with our spouses for business transactions and so that can become easily violated and a point of control.”

“...location is a big thing to figure out whether she’s gone to the police station or planned with [name of shelter].”

Almost all practitioners stated that they also struggle with digital literacy and understanding what advice to give to survivors about online safety. Some of the concerns raised include difficulty keeping up with the rapid development of technology, feeling like they are not ‘tech-savvy’ enough, feeling overwhelmed with the number of things they need to be aware of as everything increasingly moves online, and feeling unsure of the best and most sustainable solutions for survivors.

“These are things I am not familiar [with], and I, myself, am not really a tech-savvy person... Even when I did all these things, I still feel like it’s not safe. I don’t know.”

“I wish I had more training on what else I could do...but I try to teach them what I know.”

Alongside these concerns about technology, some practitioners also noted what they experience as insufficient legal responses to TFVA. Specifically, they shared that most of the time, the suggestions given by law enforcement to address or prevent technology-facilitated abuse or harassment are often simplistic or unhelpful.

“It was a bit frustrating because when we talked to the police department, all they can advise is change your address. Change your IP address. Change this. Change that. But the abusers are really good with technology, they still keep finding out and that was very frustrating.”

In response to this frustration, practitioners pointed to the value of alternative, non-legal responses to TFVA (some of which they are a part of). These non-legal responses can include: finding helpful online resources (such as [Steps to Justice](#)), working with other agencies (such as [Calgary Immigrant Women’s Association, CIWA](#)), and survivors depending on and supporting each other.

“I don’t know what to advise except refer them to another website.”

“Some of the residents are close, so they use each other, and a lot ask questions.”

“We mostly rely on our own connections and our own resources within each community to help support the clients as much as we can and with other agencies and immigrant agencies to help with those as well.”

As noted above, practitioners expressed concerns with the rate at which everything from work to services and social connection is increasingly moving online. One concern is that it complicates what can be done about TFVA, as survivors are required to be online more than ever.

“One of the main things they can do is get rid of the phone, but that’s not that easy to do.”

“One thing that comes to mind is the balance of wanting to have an online presence but also wanting to protect yourself from potential violence.”

“I would say the biggest challenge is the education piece on safety with technology, especially with technology changing very fast. Every day there was something new, so it’s hard to keep track for someone who doesn’t have any barriers to start with. So, take into consideration people who have barriers, survivors have barriers whether it’s language, education, having technology to start with.”

Additionally, being online is challenging for survivors because the trauma that survivors are living with can sometimes make it difficult for them to feel safe and secure online when they are required to for various tasks, appointments, and parenting responsibilities.

“I feel like even those that are comfortable using technology they are very hesitant to do anything because of the trauma, too. I had a client that has lots of work experience and just uploading a resume on Indeed, she was really hesitant... and it was just because of safety reasons... Like when [survivors] see the computer, they are just very uncertain. They don’t even want to do anything on the computer. And like I said, it all has to do with the trauma, what they are experiencing at the moment, too.”

Finally, almost all practitioners noted a challenge with survivors supporting their children, who are sometimes required to be online for things like school and social activities. Participants explained that perpetrators could use children’s digital presence to track or harass survivors. Additionally, they noted that sometimes survivors do not realize this is happening:

“...we have had incidents where the child would call or message the perpetrator. So, it is a learning piece for the moms as well to learn about how the kids are using the devices and keep them safe while using them.”

“Especially a teenager—what can you do—they want to be part of that world, want to have interaction. And sometimes they say the wrong thing and the abuser finds out information. Yeah, it’s the hard one with the children.”

Access, Devices, and Activities

Following the opening conversation about the challenges of being online and using digital technology, we wanted to learn more about how survivors access and use the internet and various digital devices. All practitioners stated that the primary device used by survivors is a smartphone. Some also have access to laptops and tablets, whether it is their own or one that belongs to the home/shelter or sometimes even the public library. Children typically share devices with their parents, but in some instances, they have their own.

Survivors access the internet via both private and public channels. Private and password-protected Wi-Fi is available in transition homes and emergency shelters. Survivors also sometimes access public Wi-Fi in libraries, coffee shops, and other public locations. One practitioner noted that because many survivors live on a fixed and low income, they typically have limited or no data plans on their personal phones – so they rely primarily on public access to the internet.

Practitioners indicated that survivors use their devices for several activities, including:

- accessing government services;
- general information seeking;
- navigating public transportation;
- managing finances;
- emailing;
- grocery shopping;
- assisting their children with schoolwork; and
- attending virtual appointments.

Needs

At the end of each focus group with practitioners, we asked more specifically about what they and survivors need to feel and be safe online. Practitioners are eager to provide survivors with solutions to the harms they are experiencing, including, and perhaps especially, when they are in crisis as well as tools and resources to increase survivors' long-term capacity and autonomy to engage online.

“So, we’ve got to make sure they’re aware; they have the tools needed. They know what steps to take themselves as well so that they’re safe and protected for their future, too.”

“I’m thinking if they had the knowledge of how to keep themselves safe online, I think it would increase their confidence.”

Practitioners also expressed a need for a more formal process of helping survivors with TFVA, as they typically assist survivors on a case-by-case basis.

“I don’t feel confident that I’ve checked all the boxes. I just know the things that I know about from my own personal experience. I would just feel more confident if there was something that was more comprehensive and more detailed.”

According to practitioners who are looking for more support and guidance in this area, digital media literacy workshops and educational tools for survivors ought to be:

- offered both in-person and online, as both options have their benefits;
- more visual than text-heavy;
- multilingual, with simple, accessible language;
- hands-on, walking survivors through each process and never assuming knowledge; and
- regularly updated to keep up with rapidly developing technology.

Survivors Focus Groups

Online Safety, Security, Privacy

As explained [above](#), we began each focus group with survivors asking questions about their online safety and well-being. These opening discussions revealed survivors' many concerns and anxieties about going online and using digital technology after experiencing violence and abuse (in many forms, not necessarily only TFVA). First, survivors shared that they mostly struggle with technology while navigating an immediate crisis. Some explained that they stopped using social media or only used technology in a very limited way while in crisis. However, several survivors stated that they became more comfortable with technology and online platforms as time passed.

"...now I actually feel more comfortable, but I was very scared [when in crisis], so stopped all of social media."

Most survivors also expressed concerns about maintaining privacy online, concluding there seems to be no such thing as online privacy. Survivors feel like they must be extra vigilant (above and beyond 'average' technology users) in protecting their privacy, and they often do not know if what they are doing is enough. There is a severe lack of confidence in this specific area of digital media literacy.

"It's just trying to prepare and protect. But online, you just never know."

"...life is not private anymore."

There were concerns about increased privacy risks for particular platforms and online activities. For example, survivors worried about perpetrators being able to find them on Facebook through mutual friends or by searching their names on Google. One participant shared how her husband is a computer engineer and how this imbalance in digital knowledge and skills allowed him to easily track her location. Survivors said they do not know how, when, or where perpetrators will get to them, and this leaves them feeling like the only solution is to reduce their online presence or simply "get rid of it all."

"I do check my privacy things on a regular, but it's that fear and worry that I'm actually trying not to have because that adds to the perpetuation of it, like he may be following me or not."

"They can just write your name in Google and know where you are working and what you are doing."

Survivors also expressed feeling isolated by the steps they are forced to take to achieve privacy and safety online. For example, having to hide their location, avoid answering calls and giving out phone numbers and emails, using fake names online including for professional or employment-related activities, and their inability to engage in social media fully or 'authentically' are all actions that survivors felt were isolating.

“I wish we could use technology in the way that we’re supposed to be able to, without having to hide in private.”

“When I listen to these suggestions, I feel that that isolates me so much. I like to be connected to a lot of things going on... So, I’m putting my email address out there all the time, and my phone number and I feel very vulnerable doing that and I get scams not just on my phone but on my email, all the time like...So, it is really tricky to know how to protect myself with all this complication and I wish we had better strategies like soon.”

“I’m a medical professional, and I have to apply for so many jobs, but they use the LinkedIn profile, and I cannot use my full name... because then my husband will know and then when I start working somewhere, I will add it to my LinkedIn, and then he will know.”

Alongside these privacy concerns, survivors said they also felt a general lack of trust and safety online. Specific examples included worrying about online scammers and their financial safety. The third survivor focus group included primarily older adults, who raised online scams and fraud as their primary concern. These survivors expressed feeling vulnerable to and targeted by various scams.

“... I’m very aware of how women this age are targeted.”

“[What] I fear mostly is them taking my information, your stolen identity. And I’m also very afraid of scams. In my family, we have a computer, but we don’t put anything online.”

Overall, survivors who felt a general lack of safety online also lacked confidence in their digital media literacy level and did not feel ‘technologically savvy.’

“...I have a lot of issues with being online, and I don’t feel secure in it. And because I’m not very technologically savvy, often I don’t know what to do. So I have a lot of stress around using my computer, but because I’m alone at home all the time, I need my technology to do a lot of things.”

“But I don’t know how to protect myself on my cellphone. And so often, if I want to get information about a program or sign up for something that I want to participate in, you have to put your name and your email, address and your phone number, and I don’t know how to protect myself on it.”

Added to this, survivors expressed a lack of confidence in the legal system – either as a source of support for protecting their online privacy and safety or as a means through which to report violations or abuse. In fact, some survivors explained that they felt the legal system is designed to protect perpetrators (especially men):

“...we don’t get that protection from law enforcement. Or I never did. It’s always like even when you call them, they won’t.”

“But the man seems, even in the legal process, they get protected. They are protected. They get to say whatever they want about the women.”

Next, survivors also expressed concerns about their children’s online lives. One major worry was that perpetrators could use their children’s digital engagement to access them and their children.

“...my abuser has never been a part of his child’s life, so I’m trying to imagine how it is on his end. Is he like, “Oh, now I want to reach out.” I’m very aware of that.”

These concerns are layered on top of worries about a lack of online safety for children, screen time (especially at a young age), and a desire to understand how to better guide their children’s engagement with technology.

“I’m really thinking about how to guide my child’s online presence.”

“So it’s more that, just like making sure that [participant’s child] is very aware of every button and conscious about what she’s doing... Maybe that’s one way I’m trying to get her to view it so that she’s more careful because I don’t know. I don’t know where the knives will come from...”

Despite their concerns, several survivors also mentioned the value of social connection that technology brings. Specifically, they were very aware of how being online can help them build and maintain community support— especially with other survivors.

“I can’t even say how much Facebook and YouTube and the World Wide Web in general has helped my life.”

“I have grandchildren. I would like to be able to go online and play games with them, even though we’re not in the same location. It would [be] nice to be able to do that.”

While women are very much aware of the risks of being online (especially related to surveillance and privacy), many strongly desire to remain in certain online spaces. For some, it was about engaging in activism or advocacy related to their experiences with interpersonal or state violence; for others, it was about staying connected with family and friends. A couple of participants also highlighted the economic benefits of being online (e.g., selling items on Kijiji, promoting personal businesses, or looking for employment).

Access, Devices, Activities

While we heard about internet access, device ownership, and online activities from practitioners, we also wanted to hear directly from survivors about how they get online and what they do once connected. First, it was confirmed that smartphones are the most popular digital device among survivors, but many also use tablets, laptops, and computers (some that they own and others that they borrow either from the house/emergency shelter or the public library). Many survivors expressed frustration that many websites and online resources are not mobile-friendly and how this negatively impacts their ability to navigate the service landscape. Older adults mentioned that their children or grandchildren occasionally help them with their devices – emphasizing the importance of family connections when seeking relevant supports and services and staying safe online.

In terms of accessing the internet, survivors echoed what we heard from practitioners – that they access the internet through a combination of private and public channels. What differed in this conversation was the level of concern expressed about accessing public or shared Wi-Fi networks. For example, one survivor wondered if she accessed the shared Wi-Fi at the house if it meant the woman in the room next to her could see what she was searching and viewing online. These conversations confirmed the need for digital media literacy resources on this topic.

Regarding what they do when online, survivors mentioned a few platforms that they regularly engage with, such as:

- Facebook to build community and keep up with friends and family;
- YouTube to engage in calming and educational activities (for example, meditation and yoga);
- Google to seek information;
- LinkedIn for job-searching;
- Instacart and Amazon for online shopping (helpful when they do not feel comfortable going out);
- Snapchat; and
- TikTok.

In one focus group, there was a conversation about the importance of online shopping apps that allow women to access the things they need without leaving the house. This was an essential resource not only during the height of the pandemic but also for survivors who were not yet ready to be in public after fleeing their homes and arriving at the emergency shelter or transitional house.

“...there was a time, like when I first found out what my ex was doing, I was like freaking out and didn't want to see him and was really worried... I was doing online grocery shopping, and that worked well.”

These conversations about access and activities highlighted the value and importance of being online for survivors, especially during moments of crisis. Alongside concerns about privacy and safety risks, survivors also recognized and appreciated how being online afforded them opportunities to access services, goods, and support from a protected and comfortable physical environment. As such, digital media literacy support is critical for developing and increasing survivors' confidence and capacity to engage online, which they saw as essential to their empowerment.

Needs

At the end of each focus group with survivors, we asked more specific questions about how they would prefer to receive digital media literacy support. Similar to what we heard from practitioners, survivors also emphasized the need for resources that address tech safety in moments of crisis and support in creating a long-term safety plan. Resources should help survivors in crisis develop a sense of knowledge, safety, and autonomy in engaging with their devices and using online services and platforms, especially those needed for work and other everyday tasks (such as LinkedIn, online grocery shopping websites, and password management).

Survivors also want resources grounded in empowerment that help build their confidence online and recognize their strength and resilience:

*“...the most important thing for me that I would like for practitioners and research companies to understand is, it's we're in these crisis states, and we just need that support and guidance, but not to underestimate that if anything, single moms dealing with violence are probably the most savvy and the ones with the most capacity to understand and take on and bear...
Like no, we're not meek and whatever.”*

Such resources must be sensitive to the digital media literacy level of survivors. For example, some survivors were quite technologically savvy and familiar with various social media platforms, while others were still learning the basics about their devices and what it means to 'be online':

“For me, I need someone to facilitate because I'm so not sure of what I'm doing sometimes on my phone, and I'm scared I'm going to hit the wrong button and end up who knows where.”

Other suggestions for digital media literacy resource development included:

- ensuring that the delivery of resources is flexible and multi-modal (available online and in-person), accessible (available in many languages), and free;
- providing food and other supports to those who attend workshops;
- developing a digital media literacy app that has all the necessary resources in one place; and
- creating resources that acknowledge the full spectrum of digital media literacy skills, knowledge, competence, and confidence.

Finally, a couple of survivors expressed interest in a digital storytelling workshop to support women who want to share their personal experiences online in ways that keep them safe. Resources are needed to enable and support safe digital storytelling and allow survivors to share their stories, have control of their stories, and build peer support online while also making survivors aware of the risks regarding potential online harms and privacy breaches.

Overall, we note a strong desire from survivors to actively engage in digital media literacy and received confirmation throughout these focus groups of the need for the MODELSS program.

Discussion and Analysis

In this section, we summarize some key points of analysis developed from discussions between MediaSmarts' research team, education team, and the MODELSS project advisory committee on what we heard from practitioners and survivors in the focus groups.

The Need for More Digital Media Literacy

One observation that is immediately clear and encompasses several themes of analysis from the focus groups is the wide range of digital media literacy needs among survivors and practitioners. We heard from both groups that they are not only interested in resources for what we refer to as *digital triage content* (aimed at supporting survivors and their families in moments of crisis) but also need resources for *digital empowerment* (aimed at supporting long-term online engagement). Several practitioners commented on the need for basic training on using devices and navigating online resources and more advanced training to support survivors wanting to be more active and engaged online. Survivors spoke about wanting to learn specific skills like how to shop online and, more broadly, wished to participate safely and authentically on online platforms and find safe spaces to engage in digital storytelling. We also heard from several participants concerned about scams and how to avoid them.

These discussions illuminate the interconnectedness of survivors' online lives, as all our lives are, which leads to the conclusion that resources aimed at survivors need to address concerns beyond those linked directly to TFVA. While *digital triage* resources are necessary, we aim to design the MODELSS program to empower survivors in the various facets of their digital lives, contributing significantly to their continued sense of safety and well-being online. The [DigitalSmarts](#) program, which forms the basis for adapting the MODELSS program, already includes some resources that offer foundational starting points for digital media literacy. We sent all participants the link to this resource after each focus group (we asked service delivery partners to share the resource directly with survivors).

Intersectional Considerations

During the focus groups, participants noted how digital media literacy levels are impacted by age, immigration status, language, and other intersections of experience (including the trauma and violence survivors have faced). Almost all participants mentioned language barriers and differences in internet and device use across cultures. We heard very clearly across all the focus groups about the essential need for services and supports offered in languages other than English and the challenges for survivors when essential online supports and resources are often only available in English. We also heard about the impact of age, especially on how older adults

expressed feeling vulnerable to scams and fraud and how this affects their sense of safety while navigating the internet and using devices.

Impacts of Trauma and Violence

A complex axis of impact we observed relates to the trauma and violence that survivors have faced. Some practitioners commented that they want to reassure survivors of their safety but are unsure how, mainly because they did not know how to determine how much of survivors' worries about their online safety reflected realistic possibilities of what they might experience online and how much of these fears primarily reflected the trauma they've experienced. This concern was echoed by VAW practitioners and researchers in our project advisory committee, who noted that practitioners must walk a difficult and careful line in reassuring survivors of their safety while avoiding dismissing their genuine fears resulting from their personal experiences of harm and violence.

Furthermore, because technology continues to develop rapidly, and practitioners are not experts in digital technology, new technological possibilities appear every day, which come with new dangers for survivors of TFVA. Practitioners expressed that digital training would help them determine how best to reassure survivors. As such, it is vitally important that both practitioners and survivors are provided with digital media literacy support. We heard and observed that the work of keeping survivors safe online (especially when a survivor first enters a shelter or transitional home)

often falls on frontline workers until survivors are ready to be online in more independent and autonomous ways. Practitioners felt that keeping up with best practices in online safety and privacy to support survivors is a 'full-time job in itself.'

Victim-Blaming and the Need for Non-Legal Solutions

Next, we heard from participants that responses to addressing that do not rely on the legal system TFVA are essential, as negative experiences with law enforcement leave survivors feeling unsupported and unsafe. Survivors reported that support from law enforcement in general, and in relation to TFVA specifically, is insufficient and that they do not feel supported by any legal channels. Instead, survivors must navigate resources either on their own or with the assistance of frontline practitioners in the VAW sector. In fact, one participant stated that they limit what they say online about their experiences of violence and abuse for fear that they may face legal action from their abuser. Another participant expressed a similar tactic of censorship and disengagement, expressing fear of repercussions in an ongoing family dispute resolution. Participants feel the justice system remains steeped in patriarchal attitudes that work against them rather than for them.

These observations align with what we found in our literature review for this project. Despite the existence of legal channels for addressing TFVA, researchers contend that current legal

responses around the globe are inadequate and problematic.⁷ Not only does existing legislation face significant challenges in its enforcement due to the boundless nature of online spaces, but the inconsistency of laws and lack of understanding of the many forms of TFVA leads to a failure in supporting survivors of TFVA.⁸ In existing research, survivors report experiencing victim-blaming attitudes from law enforcement, such as being instructed to stop using digital devices and platforms.

In our focus groups, practitioners expressed frustration with these victim-blaming attitudes, which they saw as a non-solution because being online is necessary in our current world as processes and resources increasingly shift to online spaces. We also mentioned previously how getting rid of smartphones is often put forward as a solution, but practitioners and survivors know this is not practical. One practitioner said, *“That’s like running away from the issue. We want to actually do something about it and help the situation.”* Being offline could further isolate and harm survivors while drastically limiting their capacity to benefit from the digital economy and society.

What we heard from both practitioners and survivors and what is clear from existing research, is that we should instead be creating resources

and spaces that empower survivors to engage in technology in ways that promote healing and solidarity.⁹ For practitioners and survivors, this seemed to be possible only in non-legal responses, further highlighting the need to support frontline VAW practitioners.

Safety vs. Silencing

Both practitioners and survivors want to call specific attention to how, in many ways, safety is conflated with silencing survivors and results in withdrawal and disengagement. Despite expressing the value and benefits of being online, survivors expressed frustration with non-solutions or workarounds they must take to be online, like creating fake accounts and constantly changing their online identities, in contrast to genuine safety and privacy. In many instances, they were frustrated with the tension that they couldn’t reap the benefits of being online without taking what they felt were risks above and beyond what other users take to be online, which left them feeling isolated and silenced. Participants hope the MODELSS program will be a step towards addressing this, empowering survivors to be online in ways that keep them safe and well.

7 Bond, E., & Tyrrell, K. (2021). Understanding Revenge Pornography: A National Survey of Police Officers and Staff in England and Wales. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 36(5-6)

8 Barker, K., & Jurasz, O. (2021). Text-Based (Sexual) Abuse and Online Violence Against Women: Toward Law Reform? In J. Bailey, A. Flynn, & N. Henry (Eds.), *The Emerald International Handbook of Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse*. Emerald Publishing Limited.

9 Marganski, A. J., & Melander, L. A. (2021). Technology-Facilitated Violence Against Women and Girls in Public and Private Spheres: Moving from Enemy to Ally. In J. Bailey, A. Flynn, & N. Henry (Eds.), *The Emerald International Handbook of Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse*. Emerald Publishing Limited.

Collective Resilience

Finally, we note the theme or critical importance of building *collective* resilience for survivors. At MediaSmarts, we understand collective resilience as the ability of a community or group of people to collectively respond to or recover from changing and sometimes stressful or adverse environments. In the online context, this can be expressed as a person's ability to participate in safe and inclusive online communities, draw strength and support from the people around them, foster trust, and engage in meaningful dialogue.

Some survivors commented on the value of finding community online, and others expressed a desire to be online to empower others. They commented on the value of hearing from other survivors (through digital storytelling) and how that helped them to know that they could “get to the other side.” Survivors want to be able to tell their own stories in their own words and in their own ways online, but at the same time, they recognize the risks of doing so – especially regarding their privacy and well-being. They acknowledged that engaging in digital storytelling could open them up to online hate or additional harassment, and they expressed a need for resources to mitigate these risks – or at least make survivors aware of what these risks are.

Next Steps

This focus group-based needs assessment created the necessary space for survivors and practitioners to share their specific digital media literacy needs and concerns. These insights, grounded in the experiences of survivors and practitioners, will ensure that the MODELSS program will be adapted and delivered to address their needs in a meaningful and impactful way. Engaging with practitioners and survivors from across Canada enabled us to reflect on a diverse range of experiences from which [MediaSmarts](#) will create resources that will build survivors' collective online resilience and allow them to engage as active, informed, and empowered digital citizens.

With the completion of this needs assessment, the project will move into the adaptation phase, where the research and education teams at MediaSmarts will work together on creating the MODELSS program (adapted from [DigitalSmarts](#)). We will also continue collaborating with local, provincial/territorial, and national organizations in the family violence and VAW sector across Canada, academics, evaluation experts, Indigenous facilitators, graphic designers, translators, and literacy consultants to support this work.

After the adaptation phase, we will proceed with our iterative evaluation of the MODELSS program throughout the project's implementation period. MODELSS will be updated and improved based on qualitative and quantitative evaluation results. Pre- and post-evaluation surveys (for survivors and practitioners) will accompany each workshop to evaluate the efficacy and effectiveness of the newly adapted materials. We will also conduct follow-up interviews with interested practitioners and survivors [to determine if the MODELSS program has a lasting impact](#) and to hear more directly from survivors and practitioners about their experiences participating in the program.

We will produce evaluation reports based on the evaluation surveys and interviews every three months that the program is in operation, and we will consult with service delivery partners to [revise and update](#) the MODELSS workshop content and develop any new supporting resources, if needed, based on the feedback gathered through this iterative program evaluation.

Finally, we will share and exchange evidence-based practices regarding practical and effective approaches for designing and delivering digital media literacy interventions to address and prevent TFVA and to support the health of survivors with the [Community of Practice and Knowledge Hub](#), the MODELSS advisory committee, MODELSS service delivery partners, and our network of academic, community-based, and education partners.