



# Family Violence & Family Law Brief

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How communities of practice  
support and promote change

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ALLIANCE OF CANADIAN  
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CREVAWC is based at the Faculty of Education, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada, on the unceded territories of the Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak and Chonnonton Nations.

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# Family Violence Family Law Communities of Practice<sup>1</sup>

*Supporting the Health of Survivors of Family Violence in Family Law Proceedings* (referred to as Family Violence Family Law, FVFL) project aims to (1) create a collaborative space for family law practitioners to share resources, such as training and guidance on trauma-informed practices, and (2) enhance collaboration and coordination of legal and extra-legal services that provide support to survivors of family violence who are engaged in the family law system. As part of this project, the Alliance of Canadian Research Centres on Gender-Based Violence have established five regional Communities of Practice (CoPs) nationwide. Practitioners and service providers from diverse backgrounds, including family violence experts, survivors, family lawyers, researchers, mental health, and social service professionals, participate in the CoPs. The five CoPs are situated in the following:

- British Columbia (FREDA Centre for Research on Violence against Women and Children),
- Winnipeg and surrounding area (Research and Education for Solutions to Violence and Abuse - RESOLVE),
- Southwestern Ontario (Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children - CREVAWC),
- Quebec (Recherches Appliquées et Interdisciplinaires sur les Violences intimes, familiales et structurelles - RAIV),
- New Brunswick (Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research - MMFC).

Each CoP meets regionally four times a year and nationally twice a year to enhance collaboration, identify and support strategies for improved communication, raise awareness across sectors, and to discuss and advance areas of change.

This Research Brief describes and evaluates the work of these communities of practice (CoPs).

## What is a community of practice, and why is it important?

A community of practice (CoP) includes organized groups of individuals who interact on a regular basis to share their knowledge and expertise in order to achieve a common goal and objective (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). CoPs generally involve: community or mutual engagement (referring to a sense of community and belonging among members); domain or joint enterprise (referring to common ground for participation and learning); and practice or shared repertoire (referring to shared knowledge and resources to provide support for shifting the field) (McKellar, 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> Alliance of Canadian Research Centres on Gender-Based Violence- Family Violence Family Law: <https://www.fvfl-vfdf.ca/home.html>

In recent decades, the use of CoPs has become more common in various sectors such as education, business and health care. The increase in the use of CoPs is, in part, driven by the complexity of the problems in all fields of service provision. Tackling these problems in isolation is problematic and challenging (McKellar, 2019). CoPs create a collaborative environment, where diverse expertise and experience is shared. Such sharing enables collective learning and knowledge translation, as well as creative problem-solving (Amin and Robert, 2008). CoPs provide space for newcomers to the field to engage with more experienced members and learn from their wealth of knowledge (Ranmuthugala, Plumb, et al., 2011). Further, members are afforded opportunities to utilize tacit knowledge and translate it into evidence-based practice to address systemic and organizational barriers collectively.

CoPs can be organized with members from within one organization (called *intra-organizational* CoPs). In this project, membership comes from multiple organizations, which is referred to as an *extra-organizational* CoP. Accordingly, the current evaluation draws from research on extra-organizational frameworks to guide evaluation (McKellar, 2019).

## Evaluation: How the impacts of the community of practice are measured

Over the past few decades, the field of evaluation has expanded from evaluating the functioning of social programs to answering research questions regarding doing the *right thing and doing it well* (McKellar, 2019).

Evaluation of CoPs generally emphasizes the importance of understanding the process of the engagement and development of the CoP models (formative) and/or seeks to measure the outcomes (summative). Results highlight what is working and how the CoP can be more effective. This information allows organizations to be more deliberate in setting strategies to support and build relationships with stakeholders and leverage the advantages of collective learning and action (Wegner et al., 2002; Carman, 2013). For this project, McKellar's (2019) framework for extra-organizational evaluation was used to measure the impact of the FVFL CoP and identify possible new activities and future directions for the CoPs. Research questions were as follows:

- What are the main issues of interest to members in participating in the CoP?
- What are the overarching impacts of Family Violence Family Law (FVFL) CoP?
- Has the FVFL CoP had regional impacts in the field of family law and family violence?
- Is there anything the FVFL CoP should change or do differently?

McKellar (2019) proposes a multi-dimensional evaluation framework that focuses on the effect of CoPs. This framework has two key dimensions “**type of values**, which includes the different ways of looking at the outputs, emergent states, mechanisms, and/or outcomes related to a CoP; and **level of analysis**, that is, who or what is being influenced or is experiencing effects from the

value created” (McKellar, 2019, p.58). The *level of analysis* includes the *individual*, the *collective*, the *organization*, external stakeholders, and the field. The type of values includes motivation and participation, relational, knowledge and cognitive, tangible, intangible, learning, applied, realized/ outcomes and reframing.

In this project, three levels of analysis were chosen from the McKellar framework, including the *individual*, the *collective* and the *field*. The research questions were designed to collect feedback from individual members of the CoPs across the nation to examine members’ motivations for participating in the CoP. Creating a sense of community and a shared space to address gaps between knowledge and practice was another criterion to explore. Finally, it was important to illuminate if/how the CoPs meetings are shifting or changing the field of practice.

The evaluation framework suggests analyzing data further to identify values or outcomes (McKellar, 2019). Categorizing the emerging themes in suggested *types of values* (such as motivation and participation, relational value) allows a more comprehensive view of the generated values/outcomes by CoP meetings and other activities. These categories of values overlap and interact with one another and do not happen in isolation. In the section below, the suggested values were mapped with data and applied in the interpretation of the results of the evaluation in this project (McKellar, 2019).

## Methods

Participants in this research were 20 (twenty) CoP members from across all five CoPs. Research associates from each Alliance Centre approached their CoP membership to explain the purpose of the evaluation and request volunteer participants. Those who volunteered were invited to take part in a semi-structured interview, virtually, or by telephone. Interviews took approximately 30 to 45 minutes and were recorded.

To ensure that CoP members were able to speak freely about both the strengths and limitations of their experience, interviews were conducted by Alliance research associates from a different region. For example, a member of the British Columbia CoP would be by a research associate in Ontario.

Once the interview was completed, it was de-identified and transcribed. The content of the interviews was analyzed using NVivo, and the emerging themes and insights were mapped with the evaluation framework.

# Evaluation Results

## Individual value: Motivation and Participation

Within McKellar's framework (2019), individual values are conceptualized as the level of motivation, engagement and interest of CoP members in participating in a CoP. Motivation is an important target for evaluation since the CoP's development depends on its members' engagement. Different individual and collective factors (such as perceived personal pay-offs, developing new skills, or expanding on social networks) could motivate members to strengthen their relationship with the CoP (McKellar, 2019). One of the critical aspects of participation for members of CoPs is creating a sense of community. Members feel they belong to a community of like-minded people and matter to one another and to the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This feeling is directly linked to motivation to participate and share knowledge (Nistor et al. 2014).

The feeling of community was reflected in the results of the evaluation of the FLV CoPs. Many participants expressed interest in building a community of like-minded people with whom they could share resources and knowledge. Further, sharing lived experiences affirmed the commonality of issues and barriers encountered by survivors in the legal system and highlighted the need for creating better support for survivors of intimate partner violence.

*We definitely have a real feeling of community where everybody feels free to say what they really think (CoP member).*

*It is very inclusive. It is very... like it brings richness. Like when you sit there, you listen to people talking to you, [you] listen to discussions to the topic that they are discussing or to the speakers. You see that true community, a real community coming together toward the change and that's what is needed (CoP member).*

The CoP members felt the meetings and their interactions with other participants created a sense of community for them, enabling them to work together collaboratively on systematic issues and barriers.

*People meeting each other; they didn't even know each other existed or what those programs were like. So, it's building up the community, and the next stage is doing that deeper work. Like I said, picking topics or areas and working on them together as true cooperation.*

The CoP meetings also created an opportunity for people to break away from isolation and gave them a chance to meet and relate to one another.

*[Participation in the CoP] sort of takes care of that feeling of isolation and just being by yourself right? yeah, I think that's kind of one of the strengths of the CoP.*

The CoP meetings included members from diverse backgrounds who were brought together to share their knowledge and lived experiences of the struggles and challenges survivors of intimate partner violence face when they try to navigate the family legal system.

*Being able to share that lived experience, whether it be mine or other victims that I work with...just really pointing out the flaws because we have to provide better support and resources. And we need to talk about the lack of services that are outside of urban centers for victims and survivors.*

Overall, the narratives of interviewees confirmed that the FVFL CoP members successfully created a sense of community across the sites. The sense of comfort and acceptance among members was an essential factor for the members to be motivated to continue with their engagement with CoPs.

### *Relational value*

Relational value refers to the structural and relational aspects of CoPs as indicated by the quality and number of connections between members in the group. Relational value can enhance or diminish other types of values (McKellear, 2019). For instance, building connections could facilitate the willingness of members to share their knowledge. The relational values in FVFL CoPs were created using two factors; (1) raising awareness; and (2) enhancing a sense of empowerment among the members.

### *Raising Awareness*

Participating in the CoP and hearing from other members validated the commonality of issues and difficulties embedded in the field. It also illuminated the uniqueness of the experiences among the service providers and the survivors, given their diverse backgrounds.

*For me to hear other community workers sharing and echoing each other. So, they have a stronger voice for raising awareness of things that I hadn't thought of. They may have experienced it, and I hadn't.*

And the survivors:

*It was very rich in my experience to interact, [and] to hear different perspectives -- to hear lawyers, to hear even from the global population, if you want to say for example, women, Indigenous [and] black communities, immigrants and refugees,*

*how their experiences are and do lawyers know what's happening there?*

Working together and sharing the space also served to raise awareness of the level of engagement of different members and reduced negative stereotypes that had been held by CoP members.

*I think you kind of are left with this impression that lawyers just kind of float above everything, and like they don't care; it's great to see actually that there are many lawyers who are deeply invested in trying to address these issues and they're quite passionate about it.*

The connection and network among people also allowed members to become aware of the support that is present in the CoP and how it could be utilized.

*The CoP has allowed us to have a greater awareness of the barriers but also the supports.*

### *Empowerment*

Feeling empowered was another relational value that emerged through the interviews with CoP members. Particularly, the presence of perceived experts in the field and their openness to share their knowledge and experiences with the members was experienced as beneficial. Constructive discussion on *what works and what doesn't work* in the legal system created a learning opportunity for survivors and service providers. When working with their lawyers, the survivors were more able to use knowledge gained at the CoP to voice their concerns, advocate for their rights and felt more confident in their interactions with the family legal system.

*I think that having access to all the knowledge helps. To say, hey, she knows what she's talking about, and she doesn't talk about IPV just as a victim.*

Survivors sharing the complexity of their circumstances with their lawyers and the court was noted to be an important step toward improving the family legal system.

*They can bring that education into the courtroom before the judge; they are educating that judge. They are influencing that judge in that decision-making.*

*If the people who work in the legal field know that general public service worker survivors will start speaking up. They have to watch what they're doing and pay attention and get off their high horse a little bit and start looking at the real world from that lens as opposed to this higher up on top of the bench type of lens.*



Navigating the legal system can also be difficult and intimidating for advocates and service providers with no related backgrounds. Hence participation in the CoP meetings and constructive discussions about the legal system also enabled services providers and advocates to guide their clients more competently.

*It has raised awareness in many areas for many service providers that didn't know anything about legal information in general. So, the clients would come in, and they say: Well, I'm sorry, you know we don't know that. You could try this person or that person, whereas now they can speak with a little bit more credibility and a little bit more confidence.*

Feeling confident they had the necessary information to provide guidance and support also empowered service providers to expand their network and reach out to more people needing help.

*I feel very empowered, and I am a person of service. That's why I work for the government and always have been; I am a public servant by day and night. And so, for me, I get a lot of satisfaction from making a difference. So, knowing that people are struggling and even if I can help one person. And if it's that brief or that webinar or whatever it is getting that information to them, anything that they can use to help their situation, that's very satisfying too.*

### *Knowledge and Tangible Value*

Other important outcomes often created by CoPs are knowledge and tangible values. Knowledge value refers to tacit knowledge *know-how*; and explicit knowledge, *know-what* related to information and skills embedded in the field of practice (Ryle, 2009). Participation in CoPs often provided an opportunity for members to exchange knowledge and increase their expertise. Members of FVFL CoPs shared and exchanged their knowledge and expertise on multiple levels. For instance, the diversity of the members' backgrounds provided a unique opportunity for members to learn from service providers who work with marginalized populations such as immigrants.

*For example, we also have a lawyer advocating for immigrants and refugees, and she shares her experiences as a visible minority lawyer and how she has been treated among different lawyers. Also, the knowledge that she brings-- because she works with survivors of violence, and as a lawyer, as a visible minority-- her work is more important because she is within. And she always highlights the importance of taking into consideration different perspectives.*

Furthermore, the CoP created opportunities for members to learn practical skills and tools to enhance their service delivery.

*Training is theory but taking that information and putting it into practice ... I've got all kinds of training. I've taken, you know, half a dozen courses and trauma informed, but they've never connected the dots on how actually to do it.*

McKellar (2019) describes three types of knowledge--codified knowledge (written); emergent knowledge (new or ongoing work); and tacit knowledge (implicit wisdom). The presence of researchers from the community often results in identifying the knowledge to practice gap and facilitates the creation of tangible values/outcomes such as documents, tools and training. The five CoPs all generated codified knowledge in the form of webinars, briefs, and legal bulletins. Further, the ongoing discussions among members during and after the CoP meetings contributed to developing emergent knowledge. And lastly, the sharing of their experiences, and diversity of their backgrounds contributed to the development of shared tacit knowledge and tangible tools. All the participants indicated how the CoP meetings, webinars, and briefs improved their knowledge of the field and have been a significant motivational factor for their continued interest in the CoP meetings.

*The webinars are amazing. I mean having, you know, experts talk about the different pieces and being able to put all this together from a perspective of how can I use it!*

CoP members also reported that they tailored these tools to their unique needs and incorporated them into their practice. Many members shared and delivered these tools to others in the field of practice and beyond, thus expanding the reach and accessibility of these tools to others.

*We've shared this information with others. We've modified, cut, or made modifications, and put it into presentations of our own to speak to Indigenous women and 2-spirited people. We've done lots of outreach work as a result of it.*

*There's a lot of learning and webinars and it's been great, and I'll tell you how it's been such a useful tool, the community of practice itself because when I get these e-mails, I send them not only locally here, I send them to our domestic violence crown. So, the crown attorney who is responsible for sexual assault and domestic violence, I've been sharing those with him, and I also share it with women at the centre so that they can share it. So, this new information and these webinars and these newsletters and the briefs and everything are all being kind of shared right across the country.*

## *Realized Value*

CoPs often aim at improving the community and the field of practice by facilitating external outcomes such as changing policy, practice, and contributing to the broader body of science and scholarship. These outcomes are referred to as *realized value* in this evaluation framework. These outcomes could represent short-term (1 to 5 years) or long-term goals (5 to 20 years) of the CoPs and could be achieved depending on the stage of CoPs development (McKellar, 2019). FVFL CoP members reported strong interest in changing the experience of family violence survivors in the family court system by (1) developing a comprehensive view of challenges embedded in the system; and (2) finding collective resolutions to proceed toward building a better life for survivors.

*I think we will see, hopefully on a provincial and national level, real, tangible change eventually out of this other than just the benefit to the individuals that are participating. I hope that there's, going to be like a broader consensus on what can actually change for everybody, irrespective of whether they're part of the actual CoP, like part of the community of practice or not, just the general population.*

*I think it's a perfect place to start looking at change because you've got people with lived experience and you've got people who are also working in the field for many years, right on different sides, whether it be through shelters, whether it be through the legal side, whether it be through, you know, employment and education side. So, you've got every component, if you will, that is involved with rebuilding a domestic violence survivor victim's life.*

## **Discussion**

This research brief presents evaluation results based on interviews of FVFL CoP members. The five national CoPs were organized with the aim of facilitating the sharing of resources and information and to enhance collaboration and coordination of legal and extra-legal services that provide support to survivors of family violence who are engaged in the family law system.

To evaluate the success of the CoPs in meeting these aims, we made use of McKellar's (2019) framework for understanding value at multiple levels of analysis: individual, collective and field. The *individual level* was represented by the members of CoPs who were invited to take part in one-on-one interviews to give feedback and comment on their experience. The results were also analyzed on the *collective level* by looking at the value of the CoPs as a whole or a unit. One goal of the FVFL project is to address gaps in knowledge related to family violence within the family law system and impact on the broader *field of practice*; therefore, the ways in which this was achieved within the CoP is another level of analysis.

The evaluation concluded that the CoPs have created value for members at multiple levels. At the individual level, CoPs successfully created a sense of community and new connections among the members. Members pointed out the benefits of having diverse voices around the table, strengthening connections between survivors with lived experiences and service providers. Creating a safe and welcoming environment enabled the participants to share their concerns and voice their struggles. Overall all the members who participated in the interviews were interested in continuing their involvement in CoPs moving forward.

CoPs held relational value for their members. Members felt that participation in these groups raised their awareness both of the commonalities of issues, but also of the uniqueness of experiences among the service providers and the survivors. Having this knowledge was perceived as empowering for all members, as they felt more confident navigating various parts of the system.

The work of the CoPs resulted in tangible increases in knowledge and in exchange of tools and resources. The tangible outcomes, such as webinars and briefs, were significantly beneficial to CoP members not only in their own practice but members facilitated the dissemination of created knowledge to others in their field of practice.

Finally, the work of the CoPs was evaluated relative to their ultimate aim --the extent to which members' collaborations are changing the field. Members spoke of the value of the collective voice of CoPs regionally and nationally in promoting change. The sense from CoP member interviews is that this work is underway. After having the opportunity to connect and share, CoP members are now ready to take on bigger challenges and address the more entrenched issues experienced by family violence survivors in the family law system.

## Limitations, challenges, and future steps

To ensure CoP members were able to share their views freely, out-of-province research associate conducted their interviews. It is possible however, that bias may have been introduced because of CoP members who volunteered to participate potentially having more positive views of the CoP compared to those that did not volunteer.

It is both challenging and essential to create a culture in which all CoP members feel safe to express their views: survivors must feel valued and respected and legal professionals must openly accept criticism of agency-level and broader systemic problems.

The FVFL CoP will continue to expand and diversify demographically and geographically within Canada. Evaluation of the CoP will be ongoing, and lessons derived will be used to benefit both the membership and to ensure the CoP's knowledge mobilization efforts will continue in the future.

To learn more about the Supporting the Health and Well-Being of Survivors of Family Violence in Family Law Proceedings project, go to: [www.fvfl-vfdf.ca](http://www.fvfl-vfdf.ca) or our partnered research centres:

### The Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women & Children



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Dr. Peter Jaffe

Dr. Katreena Scott

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Dr. Kendra Nixon

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