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SAFETY TOGETHER

Addressing gender-based violence
and the family policing system

 West Coast LEAF

 **West Coast LEAF**

www.westcoastleaf.org

 Women and Gender
Equality Canada Femmes et Égalité
des genres Canada

 THE LAW
FOUNDATION
OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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ABOUT WEST COAST LEAF

In collaboration with community, we use legal strategies to work towards an equal and just society for all women and people who face gender discrimination.

ABOUT THE FAMILY WELL-BEING COALITION

West Coast LEAF hosts the province-wide Family Well-being Coalition (FBWC), a space for systemic advocacy that challenges the current family policing landscape in BC and centers family well-being.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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THIS ZINE provides an overview of West Coast LEAF's longer Safety Together report, featuring art created by parents and youth. It shares key takeaways and insights.

READ THE FULL REPORT
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KEY TERMS



GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV)

"Violence that is inflicted upon a person or persons due to their gender identity, gender expression, or perceived gender." It impacts women and all people impacted by gender-based discrimination, including Two-Spirit, non-binary and queer people, and trans people of all genders. It can include sexual violence, assault, rape, stalking, etc.

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a predominant form of GBV. IPV is the "abuse of power by one partner in a dating, common-law, married, or otherwise intimate relationship. This abuse can be physical, sexual, emotional, financial, social, cultural, or a combination of some or all of these."

FAMILY POLICING

Often known as child welfare or child protection, the family policing system narrowly focuses on assessing whether to remove a child from their home. Thus, the system focuses on scrutinizing parents or caregivers and families as "risks" to their children.

The family policing system maintains power and control over the lives of families and children—most often Indigenous families and children—through surveillance, regulation, and punishment.

Implement multi-system advocacy supports and transformative alternatives to existing legal systems

Governments, legislators, funders and agencies can:

- Implement multi-system navigation and advocacy supports.
- Implement systemic changes to address discrimination, gaps, and contradictions.
- Enable meaningful access to Indigenous, transformative and restorative justice options.

Support well-being and connection to minimize harms of separation

Friends, neighbours, educators, collectives, community leaders, organizations, service providers and advocates can:

- Support the well-being of parents, children, and families – even during separation.

Governments, legislators, funders and agencies can:

- Ensure resources are available for families to maintain their relationships.
- Implement advocacy supports if access is being denied or negatively impacted.



To see the full detailed list of recommendations, see the full report: westcoastleaf.org/safetytogether

A SHARED HISTORY AND THE OVERLAPPING

HARMS



“So we actually have systems, especially the criminal law system, ... just heaping harm on top of harm. My brothers did not become more gentle people following periods of incarceration, they were more harmed every time they came out. And their potential to cause harm to others was so much greater.”

-COMMUNITY EXPERT

The systems that create gender-based violence and the family policing system operate from shared histories and shared goals of control and domination.

Colonial systems and experiences come together to create an endless cycle of harm.

In the following sections we share how the experience of GBV and how the family policing system responds creates more harm for survivors and their children.



Move towards supporting over reporting

Friends, neighbours, educators, collectives, community leaders, organizations, advocates and service providers can:

- Uphold a commitment and practice to support and not report
- Build helpers' capacities to support

Service providers, advocates, governments, legislators, funders, and agencies can:

- Advocate to end mandatory reporting

Minimize family policing harms and maximize support

Friends, neighbours, educators, collectives, community leaders, organizations, service providers and advocates can:

- Take an advocate stance during investigations.

Governments, legislators, funders, and agencies can:

- Strengthen rights-based and accountability approaches



STATE WELFARE SYSTEMS AS VIOLENCE

CALLS TO ACTION

Services for families are not neutral services for helping, and can bring more violence to people's lives. This can be understood as administrative violence.

Administrative violence "draws attention to the ways in which systems that organize our lives in seemingly ordinary ways [...] produce and distribute life chances based on violent forms of categorization."

Often these categorizations are presented as normal and neutral, and mask how they uphold colonial, racist, ableist etc. frameworks.

The state presents these ways of organizing life as neutral and ordinary, helping them entrench harm into daily life.

Support community-rooted care and honour self-determination

Friends, neighbours, educators, collectives, community leaders, and organizations can:

- Support transformative learning for all
- Build collective responsibility
- Build skills and knowledge to support survivors of GBV's self-determination

Resource community-based services

Funders, governments, legislators, and agencies can:

- Resource upstream, holistic supports for family well-being
- Increase access to inclusive community-based anti-violence services for those who have experienced harm and those who have harmed

Service providers and advocates can:

- Prioritize self-determination



I thought immediately about the obstacles of young parents/families having to weave in and out of all services within the MFCD/ Family court systems. Too many hoops to jump through can be confusing and bring out more stress.

When finding a way out to get trust back and reconnect within the family it takes months or years depending on the case. It is never easy to get through the tangle of the web of the unknown and what the system will put on your path to disrupt your life or stability.



For some frustrations and disparity of feeling hopeless and sometimes feel stuck inside the web of systems with no exit. Support needs to find the missing link within the web of deceptions/lies/mistrust and jump over these hurdles by binding to the web and see there is a WAY OUT!

Although the dreamcatcher has healing legends beliefs; I figured I would convert this to how the stakeholders make complications for broken families."

-SANDRA P., RESEARCH ADVISOR



MANDATORY REPORTING

“There was violence in my family of origin; this would have warranted intervention. But ... as a child, the knowledge that seeking institutional help would have resulted in separation from my siblings, kept me in that situation.”

-COMMUNITY EXPERT

Mandatory reporting is the universal legal “duty to report” suspected child abuse/neglect to the Ministry of Children and Family (MCFD). Mandatory and permissive reporting laws often lead to misreporting.

This results in over-reporting, due to vague and subjective definitions like neglect, reporter fear, implicit bias, and a “when in doubt, report” culture.

Many survivors do not disclose GBV for fear of triggering the mandatory reporting laws in BC.



I grew up.
I learned the history.
I learned the politics.
I learned that my story isn't an accident—
it's the outcome of policy, of colonial design,
of intentional underfunding, of a nation that thinks Indigenous girls are resilient enough to survive anything
so it never has to protect us.
Well, here I am.
Not quiet.
Not grateful.
Not decorated for your reports.
I'm a grown Indigenous woman who remembers everything you hoped I'd forget.
And now I'm telling the truth you were mandated to report.

Let's talk politics, then:
Your system is built on the same bones
as residential schools—
remove the child,
erase the culture,
claim it's for their own good.
Different buildings,
same intentions.
Modern language,
same violence.
And when I spoke up,
when I said “I'm not safe,”
the system labeled me
“attention-seeking.”
“Defiant.”
“Difficult.”
Translated, that means:
a girl they didn't believe,
in a system afraid of being
But here's the part you didn't plan for:



MANDATED REPORTERS LOOKED AWAY BY TAMIM.

You call it child welfare.
I call it a colonial institution
with a nicer logo.

You say the system
protects kids.
I say it protects itself—
especially from accountability.

An Indigenous girl like me
was never seen as a child to save.

I was a statistic to manage,
a file to move,
a problem to relocate
when things got uncomfortable.

Fifty-six moves.
Not because I was unsafe—
but because you couldn't stand
to look at what your own
system created.

Gender-based violence?
Mandated reporting?

You wrote those laws yourselves,
and still you ignored me.

Still you shrugged,
still you filed it under
"unsubstantiated,"
still you told me
to behave.

Tell me—

how many times did a worker
read my file

and see the words

"suspected," "concerning,"
"possible risk,"

and decide their paperwork

mattered more than my safety?

You trained staff to identify harm

but not to act on it

when it came from a foster home

you approved.

You taught them the signs

of abuse against girls,

but not the courage

to confront the people signing their
paycheques.

You called it oversight.

I call it complicity.



FAMILY POLICING INVESTIGATIONS AND INTERVENTIONS

"Some folks we work with... they just got out of an abusive situation with their child's father, and now they have to deal with family policing. And do you know what they say? They'd rather have been in a physically abusive relationship than have to deal with the family policing system. Because in that [intimate partner violence] situation, they can yell, scream, maybe hit back, maybe set boundaries... but they can't do any of that [in relation to the family policing system]."

-COMMUNITY EXPERT

Family policing investigations occur after a family is reported to the government.

Families are subject to multi-stage investigation processes where they experience surveillance and monitoring of their behaviors, relationships, and home life.

If an investigation confirms perceived child safety concerns, there are a range of possible protection responses, ranging from negotiating a voluntary agreement with the parents to removing the child from the parents' legal custody through the court.

Many survivors of GBV experience trauma, stress and shame during these investigations.

INTERSECTING

LEGAL SYSTEMS

If a survivor is deemed unable to keep their child safe, they are pulled into the legal systems.

Survivors shared that they often navigate multiple legal systems at once. This can be child protection proceedings, family law, criminal and even immigration for survivors whose immigration status becomes precarious if they leave the person who is harming them.

They are often navigating systems alone, with little to no access to resources.



GOVERNMENT CUSTODY OF CHILDREN AND SEPARATION FROM FAMILY

Children and youth who are removed do not see an end to gender-based violence in their lives.

Instead, these young people are at risk of experiencing gender-based violence from the system and after exiting the system.

Survivors who have had their children removed are too often discarded by the system and can also see an increased risk of violence.

Government custody is when a child(ren) is removed from the care of their family by the family policing system and placed with someone else.

