



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Advancing Trauma- and Violence-Informed Responses to Gender-Based and Family Violence: An Exploration of Sustainability

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Knowledge Hub:

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Introduction and Background

The success of programs designed to address gender-based and family violence (GBFV) depends on their ability to maintain their core benefits and functions beyond the expiration of initial funding or external support. This report explores pathways of sustained improvements in the health outcomes of victim-survivors of GBFV associated with two cycles of a Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) investment: the 2015–2022 *Supporting the victims of domestic violence and child abuse through community programs* cycle and the 2022–2026 *Preventing and addressing family violence: The health perspective* cycle. The Knowledge Hub (KH) at the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children at Western University was funded in both cycles to facilitate two consecutive Communities of Practice (CoPs) consisting of representatives from all other funded projects to bolster the combined impact of this work.

Despite the attention to sustainability in project application and reporting by PHAC and other funding bodies, sustainability remains a point of stress and challenge for projects and funders alike. Attracting sustainable funding is a recognized challenge within Canada’s government and the GBFV sector, with inadequate amounts of funding and with the dominant structure of short-term, project- or program-based funding. Research finds that, across North America, only around 40–60% of effective public health programs are sustained beyond short-term, project-based funding cycles (Vitale et al., 2018; Scheirer, 2005; Stirman et al., 2012). Lack of sustainability can result in (Bodkin & Hakimi, 2020):

- (1) Recurrence or continuation of the issue the program was established to address
- (2) Loss of human, fiscal, and technical capital and costs associated with funding being withdrawn before activities and outcomes have been fully realized
- (3) Loss of community trust and support, especially in communities with a history of program termination due to lack of funding

Loss of trust and other challenges related to short-term funding are often intensified for organizations serving equity-deserving populations (Deutsch et al., 2023; Shelton et al., 2023).

Based on PHAC-funded project representatives’ perspectives and the extant literature, we explore sustainability and make recommendations for PHAC and other funders.

Key Findings

We describe and explore four key domains of sustainability for GBFV and related programs, which all require a foundation of stable funding sources.



Foundation: Stable Sources of Funding

Sustained funding that supports ongoing programming *and* data-driven adaptation such that programs can evolve in response to changing contexts feeds into and is typically *required* to support all sustainability domains. Project representatives articulated the ideal of having effective public health programs become standard practice within communities or sectors through long-term, stable funding.

Domain 1: Sustained Outcomes for Program Clients

The ultimate objective of the PHAC-funded projects is *long-term positive change in health outcomes for victims and long-term prevention of GBFV*. Projects worked to achieve these outcomes via multiple routes, including increasing victim access to healing and health-promoting activities, promoting trauma- and violence-informed health and public health services, and developing and implementing effective GBFV prevention and response.

Domain 2: Sustained Implementation of Program (Components)

To sustain positive outcomes for victims and prevent GBFV, effective programs and services must remain available to victims, families, and communities, especially beyond an initial funding period. We estimate that 60% of the 2015–2022 PHAC-funded projects continued after PHAC funding ended. Smaller organizations, often serving populations facing structural and intersecting forms of violence, tended to have fewer funding opportunities and be at greatest risk of termination. It is too early to assess the sustainability of programs and program components for the 2022–2026 PHAC-funded projects; however, two months before the end of the PHAC investment, only a handful of these projects have confirmed funding to continue.

Project representatives noted that it often takes a minimum of 10 years to develop, implement, and effectively evaluate a program, and identify what is needed to support implementation in different contexts. Supporting this developmental work through successive short-term projects and grants is time-consuming and challenging, exacerbated by the fact that funding calls often seek to support “new” projects rather than those already proven effective and seeking to continue or expand.

Domain 3: Sustained Knowledge and Skills for Program Staff and Professionals

This domain refers to the maintenance of knowledge and skills for those working to implement and support a program, as well as other professionals in the field. Writing up results in the academic literature, sharing learnings through program guides and workbooks, creating and maintaining a presence online are all examples of ways that knowledge gained from initiatives can be maintained and shared. Results from this research highlighted the importance of knowledge creation and mobilization for sustaining the knowledge and skills needed to address GBFV. This work was seen as important both for sharing information and ensuring work would not be lost even if funding ended. Although projects in both funding cycles were highly successful at creating and sustaining (often publicly available) knowledge via web presence, learning modules, scholarly publications, and other resources, there remain concerns with keeping that knowledge up to date as contexts and issues related to GBFV continue to evolve.

Domain 4: Sustained Relationships, Collaboration, and Capacity for Organizations

This domain refers to the development of new or enhanced collaborations and partnerships across settings and sectors. Project representatives highlighted the importance of several types of relationships as both sustainability outcomes and processes. Most notable was the role of partnerships between academic and community stakeholders for implementing and sustaining programs. Program champions within organizations and communities were also viewed as helpful for supporting relationships with service user communities and for building and maintaining support for projects. Inadequate and short-term, project-based funding were noted as major barriers to projects’ ability to develop and sustain relationships with partners and service user populations, particularly from equity-deserving communities.

Building organizational readiness and support as part of implementing novel approaches to addressing GBFV is another relational component of sustainability that stems directly from enhanced collaborations and partnerships.

Recommendations for PHAC and other Funders

We make the following recommendations for PHAC and other funders to foster *systemic change* towards sustainable funding of effective public health initiatives:

- **Recommendation 1:** Continue to articulate and differentiate between funding for innovation testing and funding for adaptation and implementation.
- **Recommendation 2:** Create and/or make visible pathways to stable funding for effective public health initiatives; for example, create and publicize multi-year funding “routes” that would allow a larger group of projects to receive innovation and testing funding, and then support a subset through to broader implementation and adaptation.
- **Recommendation 3:** Support a coordinated response to GBFV across federal and provincial governmental bodies, including clear pathways from successful federally-funded projects to provincial funding.
- **Recommendation 4:** Use the power of government to introduce private funders to publicly funded programs, potentially through specially created sustainability units whose role is to leverage a range of funding types (e.g., philanthropic, impact investments, social enterprise) to ensure stable funding of successful approaches.

We make the following recommendations for PHAC to increase sustainability within the currently limited funding system:

- **Recommendation 5:** Continue to support a Community of Practice of funded projects and ensure sustainability is on the agenda.
- **Recommendation 6:** Continue to support centralized and publicly accessible knowledge mobilization to sustain and preserve the knowledge generated through investments.
- **Recommendation 7:** Require *agency leaders/Directors* who are responsible for agency-level decisions about programming and/or whose role it is to seek out and secure sustainable funding to attend a CoP meeting once per year to discuss sustainability.
- **Recommendation 8:** Continue to share information about policy developments and potential upcoming funding opportunities as openly as possible.
- **Recommendation 9:** Consider potential sustainability as part of funding decisions, including whether the intervention or innovation is potentially scalable at a cost that can be reasonably envisioned.
- **Recommendation 10:** Require annual reporting on sustainability (to encourage programs to consider sustainability early) and provide feedback.