



High Risk Cases of Violence Against Women in Relationships: Collaborative Safety Planning

Many safety planning documents focus on steps a woman can take to work toward her own safety. These would include lists of resources the woman can access, items to take with her when she leaves and devices such as alarms that she can install in a new home. These types of safety plans provide valuable information for women experiencing violence in their relationship. At the same time, they tend to focus solely on steps she can take to ensure the safety of her children and herself.

The following document is designed as an aid for workers and presents a range of options; it is not an exhaustive list. Because of the complexity of each woman's individual situation, it is not possible to cover every circumstance that will need to be addressed in developing a safety plan. An understanding of the most common risk factors for lethality in domestic violence cases is essential to the work of identifying and planning for safety. It is also critical to understand the importance of working with and the role of other community agencies including police, Children and Family Services, Crown Counsel, and First Nations resources to name a few.

For a list of domestic violence risk assessment and safety resources, see the end of this article. These resources are not intended to instruct workers how to conduct a formal risk assessment or to use specific tools. Rather, they are intended to introduce those risk factors common to domestic violence cases and to explain how an understanding of them can be used in effective safety planning.

Effective safety plans must take into account all the dimensions of a woman's circumstances

It is a reality that women often do not call police until they have been assaulted many times. It is also a reality that an actual or pending separation and a history of domestic violence are the two most common risk factors present in a domestic homicide. It is critical that workers know and identify all the risk factors present in a given case in order to ensure that appropriate safety planning is undertaken and implemented.

Two significant factors to consider and address in any safety plan are a woman's belief that her partner is likely to commit further violence against her after they are separated, and his access to her. Also consider:

- Abuser risk factors
e.g. A prior history of domestic violence including stalking, threats, forced sex, assaults; a history of drug or alcohol abuse; depression; unemployment
- Outside/system risk factors
e.g. Poverty, geographical isolation, pressures from family/community
- Woman's individual situation
e.g. She is recent immigrant with language barrier, without independent financial means, with young children
- Woman's support network
e.g. She does or does not have friends, family members etc. who assist and support her decisions
- Level of system response
e.g. Threats from child welfare, police response inconsistent, possible judgmental response from systems
- Past experience and knowledge of system
e.g. Prior negative involvement with the Court system

Interventions must focus on both the victim and the perpetrator

For example, where there are threats of suicide by the perpetrator, mental health professionals should be brought in as part of the safety planning process. Where substance abuse is an issue, conditions should be put into release orders that address this concern and provide for monitoring the offender. When there are children involved, safety plans should always include safety of the children. Safety plans should not simply focus on steps the survivor can take, but must include steps the system will take to ensure monitoring of the offender, accountability, and access to necessary resources.

Clients should be encouraged to listen to their instincts and validated for the skills they have already developed to keep themselves and their children safe.

Once you have consulted with the woman, the first step in developing an effective safety plan is to gather information from as many sources as possible, e.g. Court Registry if there is an order, police, police victim services and other system responders who have been involved with the woman.

In the highest risk cases it is recommended that service providers who have contact with the survivor or offender meet to share current risk and safety information about the family. The highest risk case teams most often consist of police, corrections, community-based victim services, police victim services, child protection, mental health, income assistance and transition houses. Others who make a referral to a highest risk case discussion and hold information relevant to the risk and safety planning should be invited to participate in order to share that information. For provincial policy on highest risk domestic violence cases see the *BC VAWIR Policy 2010*.

Safety plan documents are helpful resources but should not be used as checklists to be reviewed with a survivor.

Risks associated with the use of checklists include:

- Survivors may decide the worker is not helpful because their situation is not “cookie cutter”
- Survivors may decide the worker is not aware of the context of their lives and therefore not credible
- Conversely, survivors may decide the worker knows better than they do and ignore their own intuition
- May result in oversimplification of the complexity of the survivor’s life

There are various *conditions* and challenges that contribute to a woman’s vulnerability. Examples of these discussed in scientific and professional literature include:

- Society’s ignorance of the dynamics of violence
- A lack of support, services and resources (both formal and informal) for the victim and her children
- The victim’s inability to disclose the abuse
- The victim’s inability or reluctance to leave the relationship due to a myriad of concerns
- The criminal justice system’s inability or unwillingness to take measures to

keep the victim safe.

- The shortage of effective intervention for perpetrators

Some Challenges Facing a Victim When Leaving an Abusive Relationship:

- Acting in spite of the fact that leaving places victim in further danger
- Surviving escalations in violence that often follow separation
- Dealing with the shock and disbelief of others
- Ignoring people who say it is the victim's fault
- Overcoming religious or cultural challenges.
- Giving up denial
- Acknowledging the extent, severity, and danger of abuse
- Coping with the impact of the abuse on the victim (self-confidence)
- Ignoring cries, pleas, and promises of abuser
- Coping with threats of suicide and homicide by abuser
- Acting in spite of threats
- Protecting self and children

Challenges victims face providing for themselves and dependents:

- Loss of money/home
- Raising children alone in poverty
- Accepting welfare/family benefits
- Facing the potential loss of their children to abusive partners in custody battles
- Resisting pleas of children who miss the abusive parent
- Becoming isolated from friends and family
- Heightened complexity of relationship with abuser

Safety plans should be developed as soon as possible and in consultation with the woman. First, she should always be asked if she already has a safety plan, and the details of it. Secondly, workers will want to have a dialogue with the woman that focuses on the identification of known risk factors and what her needs are in her situation.

Gathering Information

Consult with the woman regarding the following list of risk indicators. This list is a compilation of risk factors from several current risk assessment tools (see endnotes):

1. Relationship History

- Current status of the relationship
- Are there children in the relationship?

2. Victim Vulnerability Factors

- Perception of future violence
- Inconsistent attitudes or behaviours
- Extreme fear of perpetrator
- Relative social powerlessness
 - Inadequate support or resources
 - Unsafe living situation
 - Health problems

3. Partner History

- Violence history
 - Violent acts
 - Violent threats or thoughts
- Previous domestic violence history
- Obsession, jealousy, control, or coercion
- Escalation of violence
- General criminality
- Violation of court orders
- Alcohol/drugs/employment instability/mental illness
- Violent attitudes
- Intimate relationship problems
- Relative social powerlessness
 - Inadequate support or resources
 - Unsafe living situation
 - Health problems
 - Employment problems

4. Weapons/Firearms

- Weapons/firearms (used or threatened)
- Access to weapons/firearms

The actions the woman is taking now can be the building blocks for the plan you will develop together:

What does your client do already to keep herself and her children safe?

- Has she notified neighbours, family, friends?
- Has she considered safety in the home?
 - For the children?
 - At work?
 - In her car?

Once you know what the woman is instinctively doing now to keep her children and herself safe, build on these strengths when addressing her worst fears.

What are the client's greatest fears? The evidence tells us that while women may minimize the violence (as a survival mechanism) they do not exaggerate risk (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009).

Status of Relationship	Actions
<p>Is there a current or pending separation?</p> <p>If separated, does the woman have a new partner in her life?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The period after leaving an abusive relationship is the most dangerous time. Danger also escalates when papers are served and just before court dates. ➤ If so, safety planning should take into account the new partner, as s/he may also be at risk.
Current Violence	Actions
<p>Has he threatened to kill her?</p>	<p>Threats should always be taken seriously</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Has she diarized the threats? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Can you offer her suggestions of how to do that and where to keep her notes safely hidden? ➤ Has she reported to police? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If she hasn't reported to police is there a way you can support her in that? ○ If she has, has she been documenting the reports? ○ Has she included these threats in the

	<p>information she's given to police?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What kinds of supports does she have here or in other communities? ➤ Has she considered leaving the community? (Remember that leaving is the most dangerous time and she will need a plan and supports in place) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ In highest risk cases some women have chosen to change their identity and relocate. When appropriate, inform the woman about the services offered by the BC MPSSG Protective Measures Unit. http://www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/victimservices/victim-safety/index.htm#notification ➤ If she has not separated and is considering doing so, does she understand the risks association with separation?
Has he threatened to harm or kidnap the children?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Has she considered communicating with the school/daycare/teachers regarding the situation and notification of any orders that may be in place? ➤ Has she secured the children's passports and birth certificates in a safe place or away from the home? ➤ Is she aware of the children's legal status if she is a newcomer to Canada? ➤ If the fear of abduction is imminent, has she connected with MCFD, police, schools and daycare?
Has he threatened to report her to Immigration or MCFD?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Does she understand her immigration status? ➤ Does she understand her reporting obligations under the Child, Family and Community Services Act? ➤ Does she understand her legal rights?

Obsession, Jealousy, Control or Coercion	
Is he stalking her?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Is she keeping track of the times and places she has seen him? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Has she reported to police? ○ If she hasn't reported to police is there a way you can support her in that? ➤ Does he leave messages? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Has she kept any written notes, emails, voicemails, or texts that have come from him?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Does he bother her at work or in public in front of others? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Has she spoken to her employer or co-workers? ○ If so, is there a plan in place to protect them? ➤ Does she have regular routines that would make her vulnerable? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Could she vary her route to and from work? ○ Could she change her places of shopping, etc?
Relative Social Powerlessness	
<p>Have you considered how the social factors in your client's life impact her safety?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ If she lives in poverty, how does this exacerbate her risk? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Are there measures you can help her take to mediate the additional risks created by her circumstances? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Is there extra funding she can access for food? Food bank or other food programs? ▪ Are other service providers aware of the extra risks? ➤ Are there risks presented by his or her extended family or community? ➤ If she is from the LGBTQ community have you explored the risks associated with her partner being same sex? e.g Has her partner attempted to access the same services? ➤ If she is Aboriginal and lives on reserve can you explore her options and additional risks? ➤ Have you considered her extra vulnerabilities caused by a disability? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Is she aware of resources in her community? <p>If you are not an expert on safety measures other women in such circumstances have taken, is there a colleague in the community who could help?</p>

The *apparent* risks a woman faces may be just the tip of the iceberg, while significant portions of the dangers she faces remain hidden. There are diverse social factors of a battered woman's life that impact her choices and decisions, especially regarding her experiences of battering. These social factors include: external condition, pressure, norms and practices that exacerbate the dangers to a battered woman.

Assessing Social Risks of Battered Women, Jaaber, R.A. and Das

Perception of Future Violence	
Does she understand his behaviour as abuse/violence?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Are there ways you can describe the behavior to help her understand it as abuse/violence? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ e.g. Show her the Power & Control Wheel? ○ Share with her other women's experiences? ○ If safe to do so, share materials, books, videos?
Does she believe that she is at risk?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ If she predicts future violence, what does she think he is capable of? ➤ Does she think he will respect court orders or police intervention? ➤ If she understands her risk, work with her to address each aspect of her individual circumstances in your safety planning ➤ The literature tells us that a woman's level of fear can be a predictor of risk of future violence or homicide
Previous Domestic Violence History	
One of the most common research findings is that people with a history of violence are much more likely to engage in future violence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ If there has been violence has it been escalating in severity? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The woman may want to use a calendar to look back and track incidences of violence. This will help her to know if it is getting more severe. ○ Does she recognize when he is escalating towards violence? eg: Drinking more, finding things to complain about, sitting morosely in front of the tv, complaining about the kids <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Diarizing can help recognize these patterns and help her build confidence in knowing when a violent episode is going to occur ○ When she recognizes these signs what can she do to avoid further violence? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Go to transition house, friend or family member's house ▪ Send kids to friend or family's house, take them away from the situation? If she has done this, can you help her plan for their continuing protection? <p>If he has ever threatened or assaulted friends, family members or co-workers, her risk increases.</p>

	Ensure your safety plan includes all the other people who might be at risk
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Court Orders	
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This may include criminal and civil orders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ If there is a court order in place that restricts his contact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Does she have a copy and carry it with her at all times? ➤ If she doesn't have a copy can you obtain one for her from Court Registry, Police Victim Services, or the Provincial Protection Order Registry? ➤ If there is more than one order, (e.g. PTA with no contact conditions and a Family Court access order) help her to understand which order is most binding
Has he violated court orders in the past?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Violation of court orders is an indicator of risk

Alcohol and Drugs, Employment Instability, Mental Health Issues	
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Does he use drugs or alcohol?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ If he uses drugs or alcohol, what does she do to keep safe when he is using? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How can you help her build on this?
Has he threatened to commit suicide?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Has he attempted suicide before? ➤ Does he have mental health issues? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Would it be useful to connect her with a mental health worker to discuss risk? ➤ Has she diarized the threats? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Can you offer her suggestions of how to do that and where to keep her notes safely hidden? ➤ Has she included these threats in the information she's given to police? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If not, and she agrees, can you help her report?

Access to Weapons, Firearms	
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Does he have access to a firearm or other weapon?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Does he own a firearm? ➤ Does she know if his firearms are registered? ➤ If he has access to firearms, does your client think he will use them? ➤ Has she reported this possibility to police? ➤ If she thinks he'll borrow a firearm, is she afraid she may get someone in trouble for reporting it if it is unregistered?
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Weapons, Firearms Used, Threatened	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ If he has used a weapon to threaten her in any way, has she reported this to police? ➤ If there is a court order, have police confiscated weapons? ➤ Can you help her decide on next steps regarding police reporting of weapons?

Other resources that may need to be involved:

Depending on your client’s situation, it may be helpful to involve some or all of the following:

- Multicultural worker
- Aboriginal victim services or outreach worker
- Transition house
- Schools
- Physician
- Mental health
- MCFD (Ministry of Children and Family Development)
- CWWA (Children Who Witness Abuse Program)
- Police, Crown counsel

Safety planning is a complex and dynamic process. As circumstances change, the plan will need to be revisited and revised. Each woman is an expert in her own process. She has kept herself and/or her family safe in the past and is the one who best knows the intricacies of the situation. The worker is there to provide information, options and support her choices.

Risk Assessment Resources:

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