

## How Canada's Mobile Phone Providers Can Help Address Gender-Based Violence

Women's Shelters Canada's [Tech Safety Canada](#) project aims to advance systemic change on the issue of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) by equipping anti-violence workers with the knowledge and resources they need to support women, children, and gender-diverse people with their experiences of TFGBV. As part of this project, WSC works with corporations to address policies and practices that create barriers for survivors of gender-based violence and can directly impact their privacy and safety.

This report addresses two key policy and practice issues that survivors and frontline workers have identified in the telecommunications sector: the cost of changing a phone number and the difficulty of leaving a shared family plan. Specifically, this report shares the results of WSC's investigation into how Bell, Rogers, and TELUS currently address these areas, and recommends solutions that will better support survivors of TFGBV. These results and recommendations were shared with the companies before publication; their responses are included in Appendix A.

### The Problem

Shelter and transition house workers and the survivors they support have consistently raised two key areas where the policies of telecommunications companies create barriers to safe mobile phone use for survivors who are experiencing TFGBV. These key areas are:

- The cost of changing a phone number
- Getting out of a shared family plan or abuser-owned account

#### The cost of changing a phone number

Many survivors of domestic violence resort to changing their mobile phone number to escape further abuse from their current or former partner. In [WSC's national survey on TFGBV](#), harassment via technology was the most commonly observed form of TFGBV, with 95% of responding shelter workers saying that they had supported survivors experiencing this form of violence (WSC, 2024). This was closely followed by threats made via technology, which was reported by 87% of respondents (WSC, 2024). In addition, smartphones were identified as the device most misused by abusers to abuse their ex, with 98% of respondents identifying this as an issue (WSC, 2024). For many survivors, the only way to avoid harassment and threats is to get a new phone number that their abuser does not know. Unfortunately, the cost of getting a new number can be a major barrier for survivors of violence. In our survey, 78% of responding shelter workers said that they see financial abuse co-occurring with TFGBV (WSC, 2024). Survivors whose credit score, access to money, and ability to work have been impacted by their abuser will find it very challenging to set up a new account and get a new phone number.

#### Getting out of a shared family plan or abuser-owned account

In our national survey on TFGBV, 44% of shelter workers said they have seen family mobile phone plans misused against survivors. For example, abusers may use the bills from a shared

account to monitor the survivor's phone usage and activities. When survivors are financially reliant on their abusers, it is common that the abuser is the account or device owner, allowing them to pause/stop/cancel services, preventing the survivor from having access to account or plan information, and making it hard for a survivor to leave the phone plan.

### **What We Did / Methodology**

To better understand telecommunications companies' policies and the barriers faced by survivors and shelter and transition house staff supporting them, five Women's Shelters Canada staff in British Columbia and Ontario connected with customer service agents from Bell, Rogers, and TELUS via phone call and live chat for a total of 2 phone calls and 2 live web chats per issue. Team members introduced themselves as staff of Women's Shelters Canada who were calling on behalf of a domestic violence survivor who needed support changing their phone number or leaving a shared plan owned by the abuser.

### **What We Found / Findings**

Overall, our contact with customer service agents at all three companies revealed issues around access, inconsistency, cost, requiring survivors to involve the abuser in separating from a shared plan, and requiring credit checks to set up new accounts. Survivors often have limited time to gather information while they are apart from their abuser, and being on hold for long periods or receiving confusing and inconsistent information could make it challenging for them to move forward. In cases where the account owner of a shared plan is the abuser, the requirement to get their permission before separating from the account or changing their phone number raises significant safety concerns. Only one company, TELUS, was able to offer some kind of workaround, by suggesting that their agent contact the account owner on the survivor's behalf. While this is not a full solution, it is a step further than Bell or Rogers suggested. Finally, for survivors who have experienced financial and economic abuse, the cost of setting up a new account and the requirement from some companies to undergo a credit check could be major barriers. While most companies said a waiver of the cost was possible, it was generally at the discretion of individual agents, raising concerns around ease of access and equity. More details about each company are available below and recommendations follow in the subsequent section.

#### **Bell**

Several concerning issues were identified in conversations with Bell agents:

- **Access:** Some WSC staff had trouble accessing Bell's web chat function. In one instance, they were told that no agents were available. Another staff member was disconnected twice in the middle of a conversation. If a survivor had limited time to gather information (e.g. at a library or before their abuser returns home), this would present barriers. If they get disconnected repeatedly, it would also require them to explain their situation to multiple agents, which could be re-traumatizing.

- **Inconsistent Responses:** Different agents provided different information to our staff. For example, some staff were told a new number could be requested over the phone or in person at a store, while another staff person was told it had to be done over the phone. Similarly, one person was told there was no way to waive the \$50 fee to set up an account, while another person was told it could be waived. This inconsistency points to a lack of clear policy and could create unnecessary stress and confusion for survivors. It could also lead to some survivors facing hurdles that others don't, which raises equity concerns.
- **Cost:** One staff person was told there is a \$50 fee to set up a new account. We received different answers about whether this fee could be waived. This cost could be prohibitive to someone who has experienced financial abuse and is in the process of separating.
- **Account Owner Authorization:** We were told that a survivor would need the account owner to approve them leaving the shared plan. If the account owner is the abuser, this raises significant safety concerns as it would require the survivor to be in contact with her abuser, alert him to the fact that she has a new number, and potentially create a new way for him to exert control (i.e. by refusing permission to separate the accounts). Alerting the abuser that the survivor wants to change their number and/or leave the shared account could lead to an escalation of violence by making the abuser feel he is losing control over the survivor.
- **Documentation:** We were told that setting up a new account would require a credit check. This could present a significant barrier for someone whose credit may have been affected by financial abuse and creates delays and extra hurdles for survivors who may need to act quickly.

## **Rogers**

Several concerning issues were identified in conversations with Rogers' agents:

- **Access:** The hold times on Rogers' customer service phone lines were the longest of the three companies approached. If a survivor had limited time to gather information (e.g. while running an errand or before their abuser returns home), this would present barriers.
- **Inconsistent Responses:** Different agents provided different information to our staff. Some staff were told that there was no fee to change a phone number, others were told that to set up a new account, the fee is \$50, while others were told \$60. This inconsistency points to a lack of clear understanding of the difference between the cost of changing a phone number with a customer service agent and the cost of activating a new account. This could create unnecessary stress and confusion for survivors. It could also lead to some survivors facing hurdles that others don't, which raises equity concerns.
- **Cost:** We were told there is a \$50-60 fee to set up a new account. We received different answers about whether this fee could be waived. This cost could be prohibitive to someone who has experienced financial abuse and is in the process of separating.

- Lack of Knowledge of Corporate Policies: Only one agent articulated that a phone number could be changed for free if the survivor had access to the online account and could do this themselves online, even though this policy is stated on the Rogers website.
- Account Owner Authorization: We were told that a survivor would need the account owner to approve them leaving the shared plan. If the account owner is the abuser, this raises significant safety concerns as it would require the survivor to be in contact with her abuser, alert him to the fact that she has a new number, and potentially create a new way for him to exert control (i.e. by refusing permission to separate the accounts). Alerting the abuser that the survivor wants to change their number and/or leave the shared account could lead to an escalation of violence by making the abuser feel he is losing control over the survivor.
- Documentation: We were told that setting up a new account would require a credit check. This could present a significant barrier for someone whose credit may have been affected by financial abuse and creates delays and extra hurdles for survivors who may need to act quickly.

## TELUS

Of the three companies, TELUS was found to be the easiest to access. There were no significant wait times on the phone or over chat, and the agents were quite empathetic. From a policy perspective, TELUS was also the only company that offered to contact the abuser/account owner on the survivor's behalf to obtain permission to separate their numbers, rather than requiring the survivor to contact them. While this doesn't address safety issues around alerting the abuser that the survivor is trying to get their own account or the possibility that the abuser will use this as an opportunity to exert control by refusing to give permission, it is a more trauma-informed approach. Finally, we were informed that while a credit check would be required if she was setting up a new account over the phone, it would not be required if she went into a store and could show ID. This could still present barriers for survivors in smaller communities who don't have easy access to a TELUS store, but at least creates an option for survivors whose credit score has been impacted by the abuse.

While the aspects mentioned above were positive, several concerning issues were still identified:

- Inconsistent responses: Different agents provided different information to our staff about the cost of setting up a new account. In one case, we were told \$50, whereas another agent said it was \$60.
- Cost: We were told there is a \$50-60 cost to set up a new account. This cost could be prohibitive to someone who has experienced financial abuse and is in the process of separating. We were told this could be waived at the agent's discretion. While it is positive that there is an option to waive it, leaving it to the agent's discretion means that some survivors may receive a waiver while others won't. This creates equity concerns.

The discretionary policy also forces a survivor to argue her case, which could be re-traumatizing.

- **Account Owner Authorization:** We were told that a survivor would need the account owner to approve them leaving the shared plan. While it was positive that TELUS agents offered to contact the account owner on the survivor's behalf, requiring his permission would still alert him to the fact that she has a new number, and potentially create a new way for him to exert control (i.e. by refusing permission to separate the accounts). Alerting the abuser that the survivor wants to change their number and/or leave the shared account could lead to an escalation of violence by making the abuser feel he is losing control over the survivor.

### **Recommendations / Calls to Action**

Women's Shelters Canada/Tech Safety Canada recommends the following actions to improve policies and experiences for survivors of domestic violence and TFGBV who are trying to change their phone number or get out of a shared plan/account:

- Ensure employees have consistent and clear understandings of company policies and that implementation of these policies does not vary based on agent discretion or knowledge.
- Offer fee waivers in cases of domestic violence, without requiring documentation of the abuse in the form of a police report.
- Offer a faster way for survivors of domestic violence to access support so that they do not need to wait on hold for so long.
- Make it easier for customers to leave shared plans, for example by allowing any plan member to remove themselves from a shared plan without authorization from an account owner.
- Offer alternatives to credit checks, such as other forms of ID verification or pre-payment.
- Create and/or maintain a phone donation program to women's shelters and transition houses with data and minutes so that survivors can immediately have access to a safe device.
- Work together (Bell, Rogers, TELUS) to address and resolve corporate policies and practices that contribute to gender-based violence.
- Develop on-demand virtual training in collaboration with GBV experts about TFGBV and how to respond to survivors in a trauma-informed manner. Have employees complete this training during onboarding and renew it alongside other repeated trainings.

## Appendix A: Company Responses

### Bell

We thank Women's Shelters Canada for bringing these matters to our attention. Bell is committed to improving the customer experience and ensuring we provide appropriate interactions with anyone who contacts us for assistance.

We are reviewing our processes to help our agents identify calls from customers in vulnerable situations, and provide them with consistent and appropriate information so that they can safely get access to the services they need. We are also reviewing the other concerns that WSC raised including account owner authorization.

Bell has a number of services available to support customers and help protect their privacy for safety reasons such as call blocking, call privacy services, and a number of prepaid phone options that do not require a credit check, bank account or credit card to purchase or top up. However, we understand that more needs to be done for these vulnerable customers who need help in a quick and caring manner.

The safety of vulnerable women is a priority for our Bell team, and we support a number of shelters across Canada through our Bell Let's Talk mental health initiative. More information and a list of the shelters that have received grants is available [here](#).

### Rogers

Thank you to Women's Shelters Canada for continuing to draw attention to the important issues of both reducing barriers facing survivors of abuse and minimizing their exposure to technology-facilitated gender-based violence. We are always open to feedback about how our processes can better respond to the needs of our customers while protecting the privacy and security of their account. Rogers is taking steps to implement a number of the recommended actions outlined in the report, including waiving fees for victims of domestic violence and making it easier for them to remove themselves from a shared plan. We are also updating our training and resources for frontline service agents. We are committed to providing a safe experience for customers and look forward to continuing to engage with Women's Shelters Canada as we explore opportunities to enhance our policies and procedures.

## TELUS

At TELUS, we believe that we have a responsibility to leverage our technology and compassion to help respect and protect human rights. Whether setting up new service providers or support systems, one of the clear challenges for women experiencing violence is the ability to build financial and physical independence. For more than two decades, TELUS has been committed to helping deliver accessible services and programs by offering a path to independence to help women and vulnerable communities to make safe choices for themselves and their families, including:

- TELUS' [Connecting for Good](#) programs including Mobility for Good and Internet for Good, provides low cost or free services and devices to low-income families and seniors, youth aging out of foster care and government assisted refugees. Additionally, TELUS launched the [Mobility for Good for Indigenous Women at Risk of or surviving violence program](#), developed in partnership with Indigenous-led organizations, which provides free smartphones and fully subsidized talk, text and data plans to Indigenous women, girls or gender diverse people, serving as a critical lifeline to Indigenous-led services, wellness resources, and their support networks. To date, TELUS has partnered with 38 Indigenous-led organizations across the country to distribute free devices and sim cards, helping support thousands of individuals in need.
- Through the [TELUS Health for Good](#) program, TELUS offers [free access to TELUS Health MyCare counseling services](#), supporting women experiencing marginalization or economic instability. Partnering with three incredible charities: Dress for Success Vancouver, Mamas for Mamas and YWCA Metro Vancouver, **TELUS has provided over 1,700 free counselling sessions** to women in B.C., Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario, helping directly address the increasing rates of mental health challenges faced by women and remove barriers to accessing care.
- TELUS is also the first multi-year corporate sponsor of the Moose Hide Campaign, an Indigenous-led movement that is about helping to end gender-based violence in all communities. Working to amplify the movement's message with team members, partners and customers, to date, we have distributed pins to 12,300 customers and 8,900 team members and participated in Campaign Day events in Victoria and Edmonton.
- Lastly, TELUS' [Community Boards](#) across Canada have provided \$1.1 million dollars in funding to support local charities with gender-violence ending programs including A New Day - Youth & Adult Services in Ottawa, Candace House Inc in Winnipeg, Fearisnotlove Society in Calgary.

While there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the challenges highlighted in the report, we are committed to offering support and assistance to customers in need. We encourage any customers facing these incredibly sensitive and challenging circumstances to reach out to a TELUS team member directly so that we can offer a tailored solution to their unique situation.