Advancing Knowledge Translation to Improve Inter-Agency Collaboration & Response to Domestic, Sexual, and Gender-Based Abuse

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Domestic, sexual, and gender-based abuse (DSGBA) is a complex societal issue with implications for individuals, families, and communities. Recognising the negative implications of agencies developing isolated knowledge bases for service users and society, this Action Research study adopts an integrated knowledge translation approach to investigate the knowledge production and transfer processes among multi-agency practitioners and academics engaged in the DSGBA field. The study introduces a virtual community of practice (vCoP) as a knowledge management system to evaluate its effectiveness in facilitating knowledge translation. Employing a mixed-methods approach, this study aims to contribute a framework for implementing multi-agency vCoP.

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence encompasses physical, sexual, and psychological forms, impacting individuals irrespective of age, gender, culture, or socio-economic background, rendering it a critical public health issue (Greville et al., 2023). The World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that globally, one in three women experiences physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, highlighting the pervasive nature of gender-based violence (WHO, 2018). Recent studies by Women's Aid reveal ongoing issues, with one in five young women and one in eleven young men experiencing intimate partner abuse in Ireland (Womens Aid, 2021). Evaluating the economic cost of domestic, sexual, and gender-based abuse (DSGBA), Forde and Duvvury (2021) estimated a woman's journey to safety in Ireland at €113,475, equating to an annual economic cost of €2.7 billion. Ireland has responded to DSGBA through legislative measures, including the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017 and the Domestic Violence Act 2018, in addition to ratifying the Istanbul Convention in 2019 and implementing its third national DSGBA strategy called Zero Tolerance (DoJ, 2022). Despite legal advancements, a victim's journey to safety in Ireland remains non-linear (Safe Ireland, 2023). The fragmented DSGBA landscape and the lack of cohesive knowledge translation may also highlight a potential research-to-practice gap (DoJ, 2022).

Effective knowledge management is central to navigating the complex multi-agency DSGBA landscape. According to Venkatraman and Venkatraman (2018), knowledge management involves generating, capturing, storing, and disseminating knowledge for competitive advantage. Knowledge management systems, often leveraging information technology, are crucial in supporting knowledge-sharing and transfer activities (Nezafati et al., 2023). This knowledge management focus requires a knowledge translation (KT) approach, an iterative process concerned with putting research knowledge into practice to bridge the research-to-practice gap (Leggat et al., 2021). WHO (2023) defines KT as "the synthesis, exchange, and application of knowledge by relevant stakeholders to accelerate the benefits of global and local innovation in strengthening health systems and improving people's health". The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) identified two categories of knowledge translation, integrated knowledge translation (iKT) and end-of-funding knowledge translation (CIHR, 2019). iKT focuses on knowledge production by involving knowledge consumers in identifying research gaps, data collection, analysis, dissemination, implementation, and reflection (Leggat et al., 2021). In contrast, end-of-funding KT addresses knowledge transfer problems (Bowen and Graham, 2013).

Communities of Practice (CoP) and virtual Communities of Practice (vCoP) have emerged as effective mechanisms for knowledge management and inter-agency collaboration (Habash, 2019). vCoP evolved from traditional CoP, leveraging collaborative technologies for member engagement (Sims, 2018). Rooted in situational learning theory, CoP emphasise that learning occurs in social groups through collaborative participation and relationships (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015`) define a CoP as a group of people who share an interest in a domain of human endeavour and engage in collective learning that creates bonds between them. CoP and vCoP are distinct from other learning environments in three elements: domain, community, and practice (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). vCoP foster learning anytime and anywhere as they transcend geographical boundaries (Greville et al., 2023), and their global reach introduces diverse perspectives (Michaelides, Tickle and Morton, 2010). Cost-effective and resourceful, vCoP share rich media resources and may prevent professional isolation (Ford et al., 2015). However, challenges arise in maintaining personal connections and engagement, necessitating a balanced and structured approach to their setup and management (Valenti and Sutton, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature highlights vCoP as a tool for evidence-based practice (EBP) (O'Brien and Richey, 2010) and evidence-informed practice (EIP) (Rolls et al., 2016). EBP values research and practical experience, although it prioritises scientific evidence in decision-making (O'Brien and Richey, 2010). Evidence supports vCoP effectiveness for EBP within clinical settings as a cost-effective solution to improve the quality of care (Sahay et al., 2022), standardise best practices (Chu et al., 2021), or implement research-based interventions (O'Brien and Richey, 2010). However, EBP implementation faces challenges due to cultural, resource, professional, organisational, or geographical factors (Linkewich et al., 2022). Valaitis et al. (2011) suggest that vCoP can be a valued resource for occupations with limited professionals. Noting that vCoP should be designed around practical issues to enhance collaboration, Graaf and Ratliff (2018) argue that EIP is more applicable to community-based human service professionals. EIP is an iterative process incorporating evidence, expertise, resources, and preferences (Kumah et al., 2019). While vCoP can support EIP, knowledge brokers are crucial for successful implementation (Hajisoteriou, Karousiou and Angelides, 2018). Knowledge brokers are nominated individuals who aim to bridge the gap between research and practice by facilitating connections between knowledge consumers and producers. Their responsibilities include promoting knowledge sharing, building links between research findings and practical applications, and summarising relevant research (Hennessy et al., 2013).

O'Brien and Richey (2010) highlight vCoP as an effective mechanism for resource development, facilitating the generation of educational materials and best practice guidelines. These resources are designed for dissemination within the professional community, aiding knowledge transfer, decision-making, and practice standardisation. An illustration of the application of vCoP for resource development can be found in the Elements of Success in Family Planning Programme vCoP, hosted on the WHO

Gateway (Richey and Salem, 2008). This vCoP demonstrates a structured approach through collaborative efforts, resulting in tailored resources for family planning programme managers. According to O'Brien and Richey (2010), the model's success lies in task allocation, defined timelines, and focused discussion forums.

VCoP also serve as an effective platform for professional development, enabling collaborative learning (Hajisoteriou, Karousiou and Angelides, 2018). O'Brien and Richey (2010) also emphasise the global role of vCoP in professional development, demonstrated by the Global Alliance for Nursing and Midwifery (GANM) on the WHO Gateway. GANM used their vCoP to disseminate an educational module on cervical cancer detection, targeting regions with limited resources. Hajisoteriou, Karousiou and Angelides (2018) advocate for collaborative projects and reflective practices within vCoP to support professional development. Nguyen et al. (2019) note that vCoP serve as a platform to support innovation, as observed with HOBE+, a community dedicated to innovating primary care in Spain. HOBE+ (1627 members) yielded 48 submissions with 133 ideas, 23 of which were approved for implementation. Success is attributed to a structured framework, active facilitators, clear objectives, and two working groups focused on idea management and innovation (Abos Mendizabal, Nuño Solinís and Zaballa González, 2013).

Critical success factors for achieving an effective vCoP were identified from the literature. One key factor is knowledge-sharing behaviour (KSB), which involves the willingness, attitude, and actions towards sharing knowledge (Tan and Ramayah, 2018). However, fostering a willingness to share knowledge remains a consistent challenge in vCoP (Hernández-Soto, Gutiérrez-Ortega and Rubia-Avi, 2021). Various motivational factors influencing knowledge-sharing intention were identified, and these are categorised into individual cognition, interpersonal interaction, and organisational effort (Cheung, Lee and Lee, 2013). Hernández-Soto, Gutiérrez-Ortega and Rubia-Avi (2021) extend this classification, highlighting personal factors, particularly pro-community and altruistic behaviour, as precursors to knowledge sharing. The complexity of knowledge-sharing dynamics in vCoP highlights the importance of considering individual motivations and community dynamics for sustained engagement and collaboration (Haas et al., 2020).

Trust is critical in shaping community engagement within vCoP, influencing knowledge-sharing behaviour and member participation (Hennekam et al., 2020). Social cognitive theory (SCT) outlines a three-stage trust development process: economy-based, information-based, and identification-based, that impacts personal factors and behaviour. Hsu et al. (2007) explain that this sequential trust process is situationally dependent and not progressively smooth, emphasising the substantial impact of identification-based trust on KSB, which is attributed to emotional investment. Sharratt and Usoro (2003) categorise trust into integrity, benevolence, and competence and support its impact on KSB but acknowledge that integrity trust holds greater significance for knowledge-sharing intention. The absence of face-to-face contact in vCoP challenges trust development (Lev-On and Adler, 2013), impacting social presence and sense of belonging (Ikioda et al., 2013). However, the findings from these studies may be influenced by characteristics such as age, attitude, and profession, as some professions may use technology more for day-to-day tasks than others.

Ford et al. (2015) highlight the importance of knowledge brokers in fostering community engagement in vCoP, and Haas et al. (2020) stress the critical role of facilitators in providing administrative support, encouraging community engagement, and ensuring value to members. Facilitators prove valuable in bridging gaps in multidisciplinary or geographically dispersed vCoP by facilitating effective communication (Greville et al., 2023). Lin (2017) adds that facilitators, leading by example, significantly influence community engagement, underscoring the need for a balanced approach between facilitator-led initiatives and organic community activities.

Evaluation is vital for assessing the value and performance of vCoP and understanding online user behaviour. Evans and Mathur (2005) found that online surveys aid demographic exploration or member feedback collection within vCoP. They offer low cost, convenience, reach, and quick execution. However, limitations arise from potentially low response rates attributed to the inundation of emails and perceived time efficiency. Cook-Craig and Sabah (2009) used online surveys on the Israeli Social Worker Gateway vCoP, achieving a 33.67% response rate. However, the study lacked in-depth trend analysis or correlations among variables. Semi-structured interviews offer qualitative insights into participants' perceptions or experiences in a vCoP. Lev-On and Adler (2013) used them to gauge members' perceptions in the same

Israeli community. However, challenges in quantifying engagement levels emerged, impacting the study's depth. Website analytics are crucial for understanding community engagement within vCoP (Cook-Craig and Sabah, 2009). Metrics include the number of logins, forum interactions, and downloads to provide insights on vCoP performance and user behaviour. Cook-Craig and Sabah (2009) evaluated website analytics, revealing insights into lurker participation. However, the analysis lacked granularity, such as explaining user surges and addressing these aspects, which would have provided more significant insights.

The literature underscores the integration of EBP and EIP within vCoP. However, a gap exists in assessing the adoption of EBP versus EIP among vCoP member segments, hindering understanding of their differential uses. Moreover, the practical application of knowledge acquired within vCoP lacks evaluation, impeding assessment of its real-world impact. vCoP primarily focus on discussion forums, neglecting diverse content formats such as webinars. Furthermore, a standardised approach to data mining and limited information on data cleansing and exploratory data analysis impede thorough analysis, yielding generic findings. The literature also lacks evaluations of multi-agency vCoP for knowledge translation in the non-profit sector. Furthermore, the use of Action Research (AR) in evaluating multi-agency vCoP for knowledge translation is underexplored. These gaps call for comprehensive assessments in vCoP studies, warranting an AR study to evaluate a multi-agency vCoP for knowledge translation in the DSGBA field. This study is being conducted in collaboration with Haven Horizons, an Irish non-profit group that advocates for inter-agency collaboration to bridge the research-to-practice gap and support the intervention and prevention of DSGBA.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study employs an AR methodology, a collaborative research approach that involves the researcher at every stage of the process. Central to AR is the cyclic process of action and reflection, distinct from traditional research methodologies, as it promotes the acquisition of tacit knowledge through critical reflection (Masters, 1995). The study adopts a five-stage cyclical AR process adapted from Susman and Evered (1978), as shown in Figure 1.

The first phase of the AR process, diagnosing, focuses on identifying the problem, which then serves as the research focus. For this study, the literature review served as a mechanism for determining the barriers and motivations of using a vCoP to facilitate knowledge translation among professionals in the DSGBA field. The findings formed the basis for developing a conceptual framework (see Figure 2), which informed the research objectives, questions, and subsequent action-planning and action-taking stages.
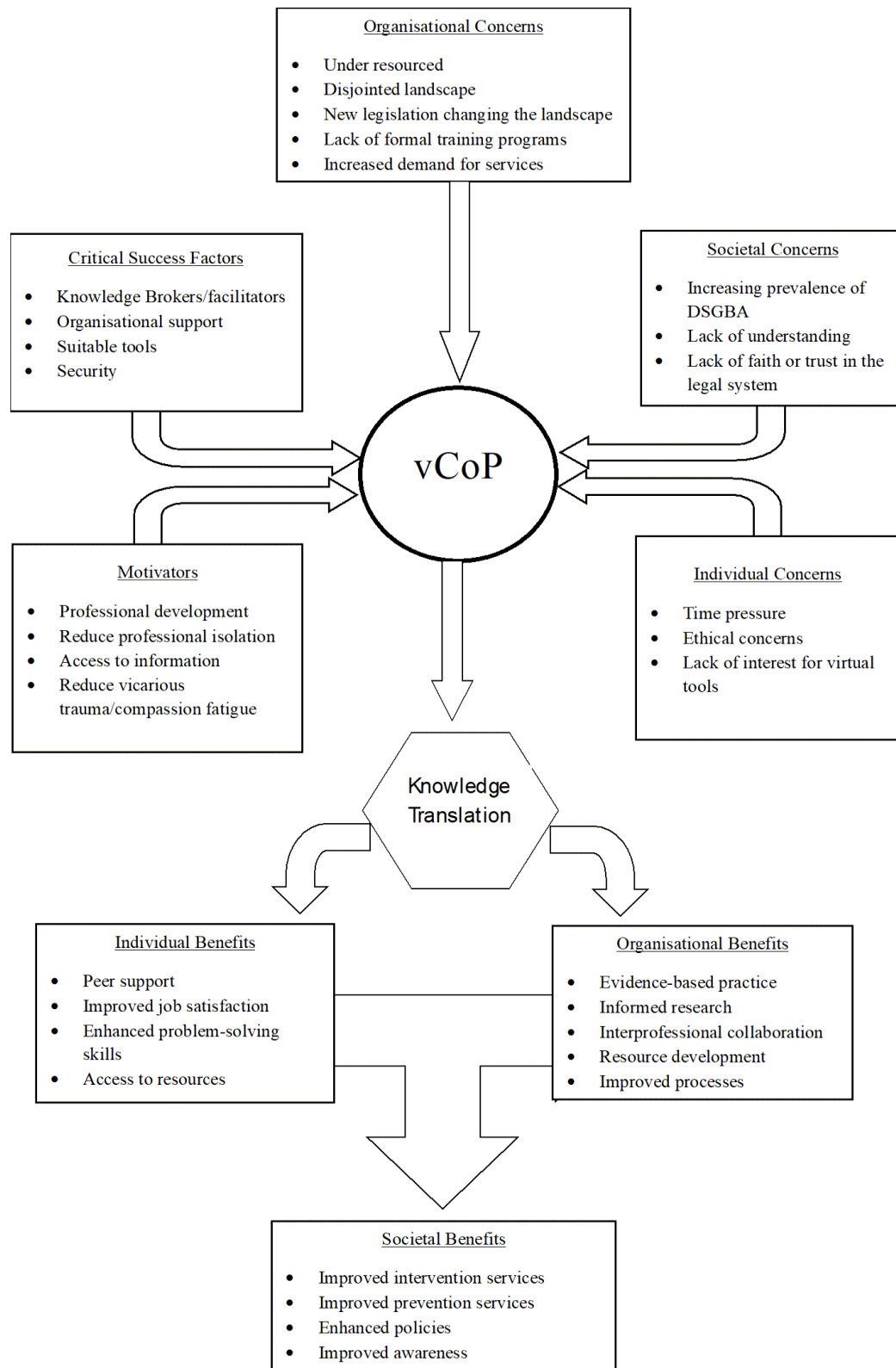
The next stage of the AR process, action planning, involves identifying, developing, and scheduling interventions to address the problems identified in the diagnosing phase. Knowledge brokers and Haven Horizons are involved in the planning phase, outlining a quarterly roadmap of activities to support community engagement. The action-taking phase focuses on implementing the planned interventions and monitoring progress. This includes conducting focus groups with knowledge brokers, launching the DSGBA vCoP, developing a database of relevant contacts, and issuing marketing campaigns to attract members. Applying an iKT approach, the DSGBA vCoP membership will comprise multi-agency practitioners and academics to support bridging the gap between research and practice, aligning with EBP and EIP. Discussion forums and webinars will be initiated to foster engagement, and resources will be designed to support knowledge sharing. Furthermore, natural language processing (NLP) techniques such as aspect-based sentiment analysis (ABSA) and topic modelling will be implemented to extract insights from vCoP discussions. Topic modelling uses statistical methods to determine the frequency of words within the text to identify topic patterns (Murshed et al., 2023). Topic analysis aims to identify hidden topics to improve knowledge production and transfer issues, while ABSA serves as a tool to gain deeper insight into emotions towards entities or topics (Nazir et al., 2020). ABSA is a robust tool for analysing discussion forum content and evaluating the application of knowledge acquired within the vCoP. The observed patterns will help understand the vCoP efficacy in bridging the research-to-practice gap and using EBP or EIP. Data extracted from the topic analysis and ABSA will support the evaluation phase of the AR cycle.

FIGURE 1
FIVE-STAGE ACTION RESEARCH MODEL
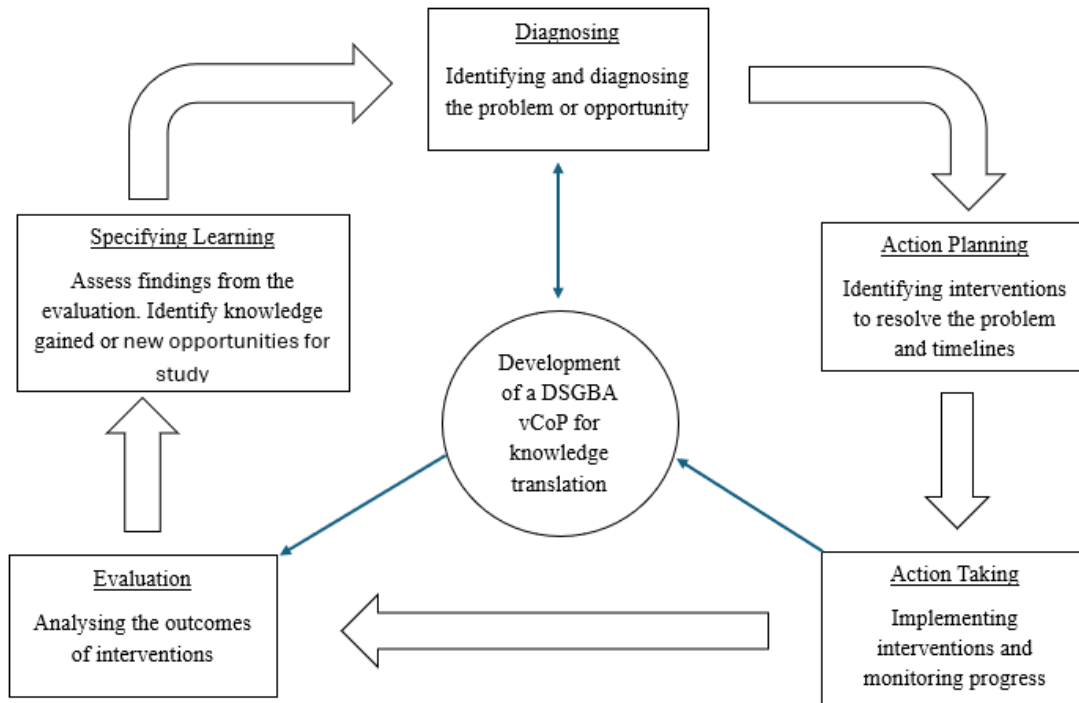
Evaluation of interventions is important to determine their effectiveness. Quarterly online surveys will be conducted to gather member feedback and monitor trends, supplemented by user statistics. The specifying learning phase assesses the findings from the evaluation phase to identify knowledge and contribute to theory development. Corcoran and Duane (2017) recommend using a reflective diary to document methods, interventions, observations, and experiences throughout the research process to maintain research rigour. Reflective journaling is used in this study to ensure research rigour and embrace the reflective practice. In summary, this study uses an AR methodology to enhance understanding and practice in the DSGBA field while contributing to scholarly dissemination and accredited academic programme development through diagnosing, action planning, action taking, evaluation, and specifying learning phases.

FIGURE 2
CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Organisational Concerns

- Under resourced
- Disjointed landscape
- New legislation changing the landscape
- Lack of formal training programs
- Increased demand for services

Critical Success Factors

- Knowledge Brokers/facilitators
- Organisational support
- Suitable tools
- Security

Societal Concerns

- Increasing prevalence of DSGBA
- Lack of understanding
- Lack of faith or trust in the legal system

vCoP

Motivators

- Professional development
- Reduce professional isolation
- Access to information
- Reduce vicarious trauma/compassion fatigue

Individual Concerns

- Time pressure
- Ethical concerns
- Lack of interest for virtual tools

Knowledge Translation

Individual Benefits

- Peer support
- Improved job satisfaction
- Enhanced problem-solving skills
- Access to resources

Organisational Benefits

- Evidence-based practice
- Informed research
- Interprofessional collaboration
- Resource development
- Improved processes

Societal Benefits

- Improved intervention services
- Improved prevention services
- Enhanced policies
- Improved awareness

IMPLEMENTATION AND INITIAL FINDINGS

In preparation for the launch of the DSGBA vCoP, project documentation was developed to streamline project organisation, task coordination, and communication with Haven Horizons as part of the action-taking phase. This included creating a platform requirements document outlining essential features, integration requirements, and the aims and objectives of the DSGBA vCoP. Additionally, comprehensive documentation was generated to establish thematic areas, inquiry protocols, and content frameworks for conducting focus groups, interviews, and online surveys to gather feedback from community members and knowledge brokers. Creating a contact database was necessary to facilitate user engagement within the DSGBA vCoP. This involved identifying suitable organisations and job roles and manually extracting contact details from websites and digital documents. The resulting database included 320 direct contacts spanning diverse professions, such as solicitors, academics, and support services. A ten-week marketing plan was devised to assist Haven Horizons in post-launch promotional activities for DSGBA vCoP membership acquisition. This plan included social media postings, general newsletter content, and personalised email invitations.

Several platforms were evaluated to identify one which aligned with project requirements and budget. Heartbeat emerged as the preferred choice due to its functionality, user-friendly interface, and cost-effectiveness. Heartbeat is a platform for online communities with an easy-to-use interface that lets people build and run their communities (Olayiwola, 2023). An FAQ document on Heartbeat features was developed to support Haven Horizons onboarding. Knowledge brokers from various professional backgrounds were recruited in collaboration with Haven Horizons to ensure representation across domains. An email campaign was launched to 38 individuals in September 2023, resulting in 26 acceptances by December 2023. Focus groups were then organised with vCoP knowledge brokers to discuss the motivators and barriers to knowledge sharing and inter-agency collaboration in the DSGBA field. Three focus groups were organised across March and April 2024 with 19 participants, detailed in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3
FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT OVERVIEW

Role	Total Numbers	Years of Experience					
		0-4	5-10	11-15	16-20	21-30	31-40
Academic	3		2			1	
Practitioner	10	4	1	1	1	2	1
Lived Experience	6	3	1	1	1		
	19	7	4	2	2	3	1

The researcher facilitated the focus group sessions, and recordings were transcribed for NVivo thematic analysis. Findings revealed key insights regarding inter-agency collaboration. Participants identified staff turnover as a significant challenge, leading to disruptions in collaboration efforts, causing continuity issues and requiring time for new members to integrate into DSGBA networks. The absence of clear policies and procedures hindered collaboration efforts, with reliance on individual initiative rather than institutional support. Workload pressures also constrained participants' ability to engage in collaborative initiatives. Despite these challenges, participants recognised the value of inter-agency collaboration in facilitating knowledge-sharing and learning from diverse practices. The absence of standardised services across regions underscored the importance of sharing best practices and developing a common language within the vCoP. Strategies such as local networks and resource development were identified as effective for supporting collaboration and addressing service gaps. Furthermore, academic participants viewed the vCoP as a platform for extracting information for academic pursuits. In contrast, practitioners and individuals with lived experiences emphasised the importance of peer learning, knowledge exchange, and the development of a common language across the agencies. The virtual nature of the vCoP was perceived as advantageous,

offering accessibility and opportunities for relationship-building across diverse stakeholders. However, sustained engagement was viewed as contingent upon participants perceiving tangible benefits, whether in the form of resources, knowledge acquisition, or networking opportunities. DSGBA vCoP members are expected to experience enhanced collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and networking opportunities, ultimately improving service delivery and professional development.

SUMMARY

Gender-based violence remains a pressing global issue, persistently prevalent in Ireland. The Irish Zero Tolerance strategy underscores the necessity of an inter-agency approach to combat DSGBA. Effective knowledge management is important in this complex environment to facilitate seamless knowledge sharing among stakeholders. A literature review suggests that a vCoP holds the potential for knowledge translation among DSGBA professionals and agencies. By providing a platform for practitioners and academics to connect and collaborate without geographical, political, or financial barriers, the vCoP fosters interaction, discussion, mutual learning, and the application of research in real-world settings. This aids in bridging the gap between research and practice, fostering a collaborative environment conducive to interprofessional cooperation in combating DSGBA. However, building trust through online communities remains a significant challenge. In addition, the literature identifies research gaps, particularly in understanding knowledge translation dynamics within non-profit vCoP. An Action Research approach is used to establish a multi-agency DSGBA vCoP as a knowledge management system to address these gaps. Complemented by sentiment analysis techniques, this methodology aims to provide insights into knowledge translation processes within the vCoP. The outcomes may include the development of a framework for managing vCoP in multi-agency settings and contributions to understanding knowledge translation dynamics using NLP techniques.

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