

Lawyer-Assisted Family Dispute Resolution: Evaluating outcomes from a partnership model

Evaluating the legally-assisted family dispute resolution service offered by Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) in partnership with community legal centres.

Dr. Genevieve Heard and Melody Petersen-Tan

AIFS Conference 2026



Relationships Australia Victoria acknowledges First Nations peoples as the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands and waterways of Australia. We support their right to self-determination and culturally safe services.



We are committed to providing safe, inclusive and accessible services for all people.

We recognise the lifelong impacts of childhood trauma.

We recognise those who had children taken away from them.

The context

3



Family dispute resolution (FDR) is compulsory for separating parents to attempt before they can file in court.



Some clients are unable to participate in standard FDR due to unequal bargaining power, family violence, or other vulnerabilities.



Lawyer-Assisted FDR (LAFDR) can address barriers to participation in non-adversarial dispute resolution.

Lawyers in FDR

4

Role of lawyer

- 'Full mediation advocate' NOT 'review counsel' or 'consulting counsel' (Kaas & McCormack 2024)
- 'Supportive professional participant' NOT 'advisor observer' or 'spokesperson' (Rundle 2009)

Benefits

- Equalises power imbalances, empowers vulnerable clients
- Facilitates a shared understanding of the law, improving chances of agreement
- May reduce emotional burden for clients

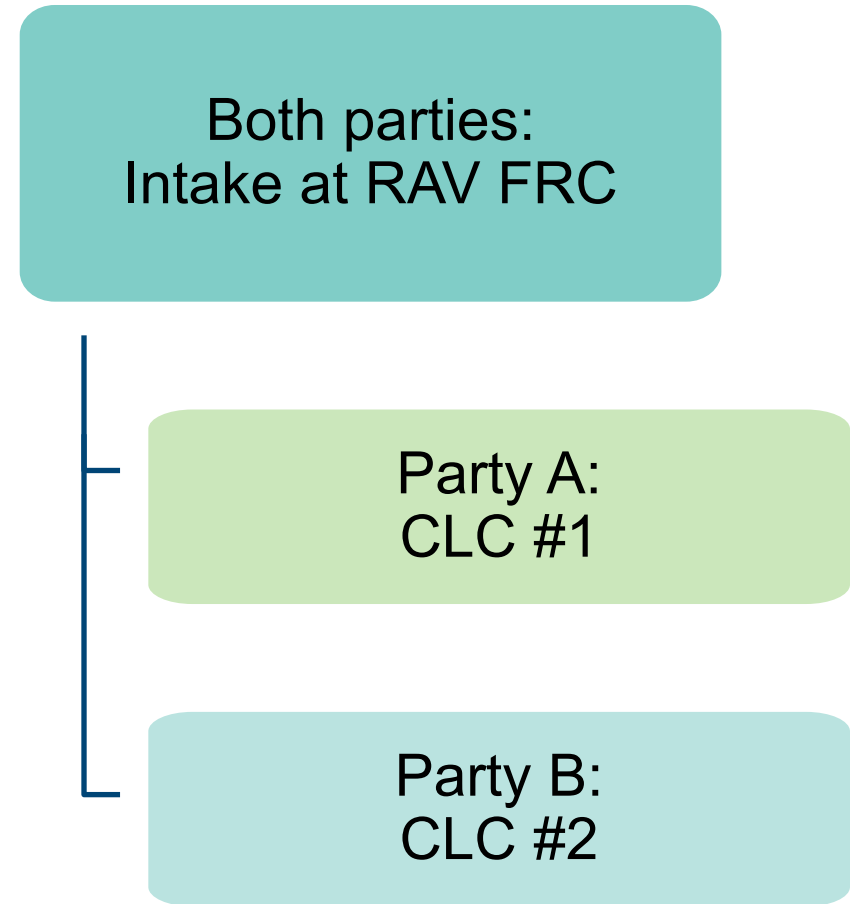
Criticisms

- Further from facilitative ideals?
- More resource-intensive
- Risk of adversarial tactics

The partnership model

5

- Intake process through Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) Family Relationship Centre (FRC).
- FDR practitioners (FDRPs) determine suitability for LAFDR.
- Each party is referred to a different community legal centre (CLC) for free advice and legal support during LAFDR.
- CLCs provide legal representatives.



Relationships Australia Victoria FRCs and CLC partners

6

RAV FRC	CLC partner 1	CLC partner 2	CLC partner 3*
Sunshine	Monash Law Clinics	Community+ (Brimbank CLC)	Moonee Valley CLC
Berwick	Peninsula CLC	South-East Monash Legal Service	Monash Law Clinics
Greensborough	Whittlesea Community Legal Service	Monash Law Clinics or West Heidelberg Community Legal Service (alternating)	
Melbourne	Monash Law Clinics	Deakin Law Clinic	

*Where there is a conflict of interest or issues with capacity or catchment area.

Criteria for referral to LAFDR

Vulnerability

- Clients whose capacity to participate in standard FDR is affected by family violence, unequal power and/or social/emotional wellbeing.

Need for legal advice

- Unrealistic expectations or would benefit from a stronger understanding of legal processes/ family law matters.

Likelihood of ending up in family law courts

- One or both parties likely to pursue court proceedings.
- One party fearful of being 'taken to court' by the other.

LAFDR sessions

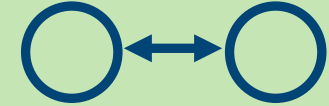
8



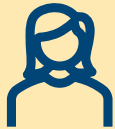
3-hour sessions
(4 hours if interpreters are required).



Sessions conducted using **videoconference** since 2020.



Most sessions in **shuttle format** using break-out 'rooms'.



Lawyers and students **assist and advocate** for clients.
However, process is **client-led**.



Lawyers' role is to **support, provide feedback** on proposals, and **reality-check**.



FDRPs' role is to **encourage** negotiation, **maintain** child and future **focus, explore options** for compromise.

Research questions



What are the **effective features of the LAFDR model** when provided in **partnership** with CLCs?

What benefits do clients receive from participation?



What **value does lawyer assistance add** to the FDR process for clients?
Which cases benefit most from this feature?



What is the **client experience** of the LAFDR process?
How can this experience be enhanced?

Mixed-methods design with concurrent quantitative and qualitative data collection

Client survey (2023–24)

- Brief online questionnaire
- Included client satisfaction items plus items about lawyers' role
- Designed in consultation with practitioners



Interviews (2023)

- With LAFDR clients from Sunshine FRC, to gain insights into their experience of the LAFDR process
- With FDRPs and partner lawyers (at least one from each CLC) for their deep knowledge of the LAFDR process, clientele and dynamics



Data collected

11



Client survey, n=54

- 28 males, 26 females, with 1-3 children each
- 40 with experience of abuse, most often verbal/emotional



Client interviews, n=14

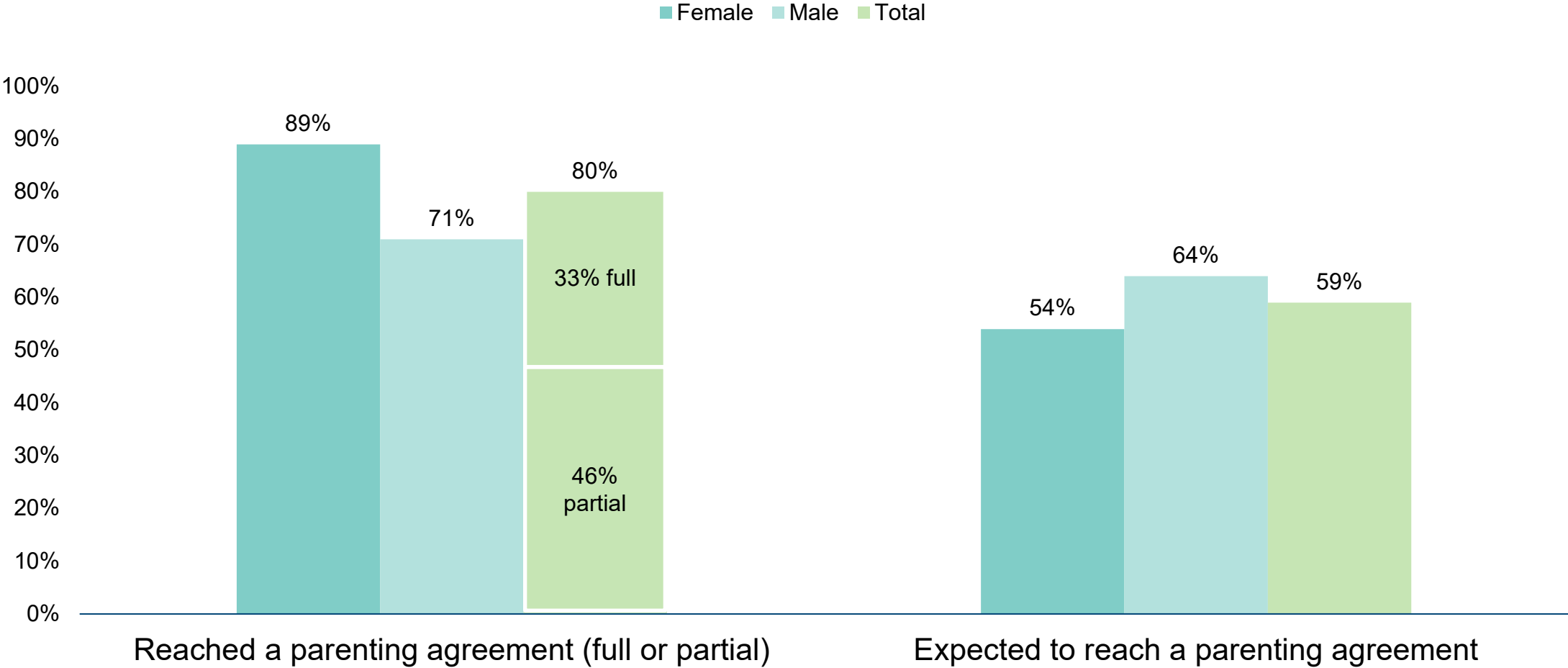
- 7 males, 7 females (purposive sampling)



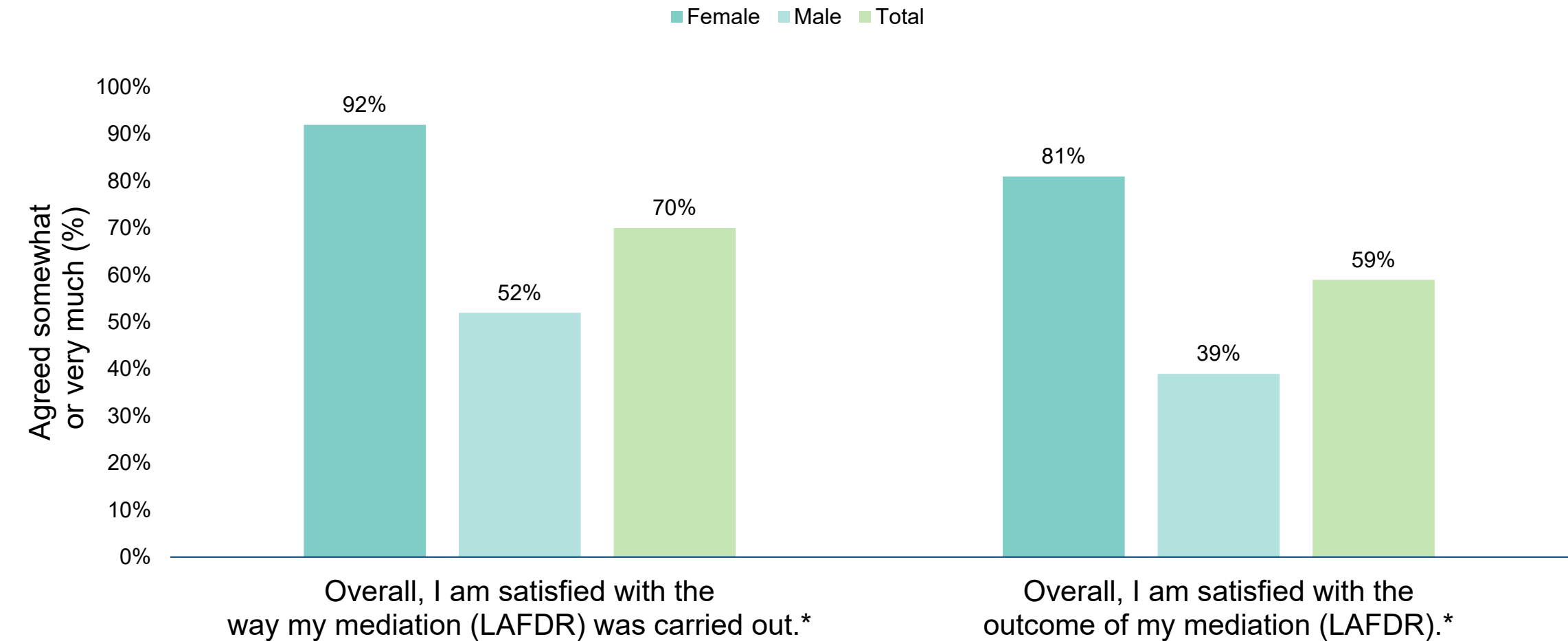
Practitioner interviews, n=5

- 2 FDRPs
- 3 lawyers

Client survey data (n=54)

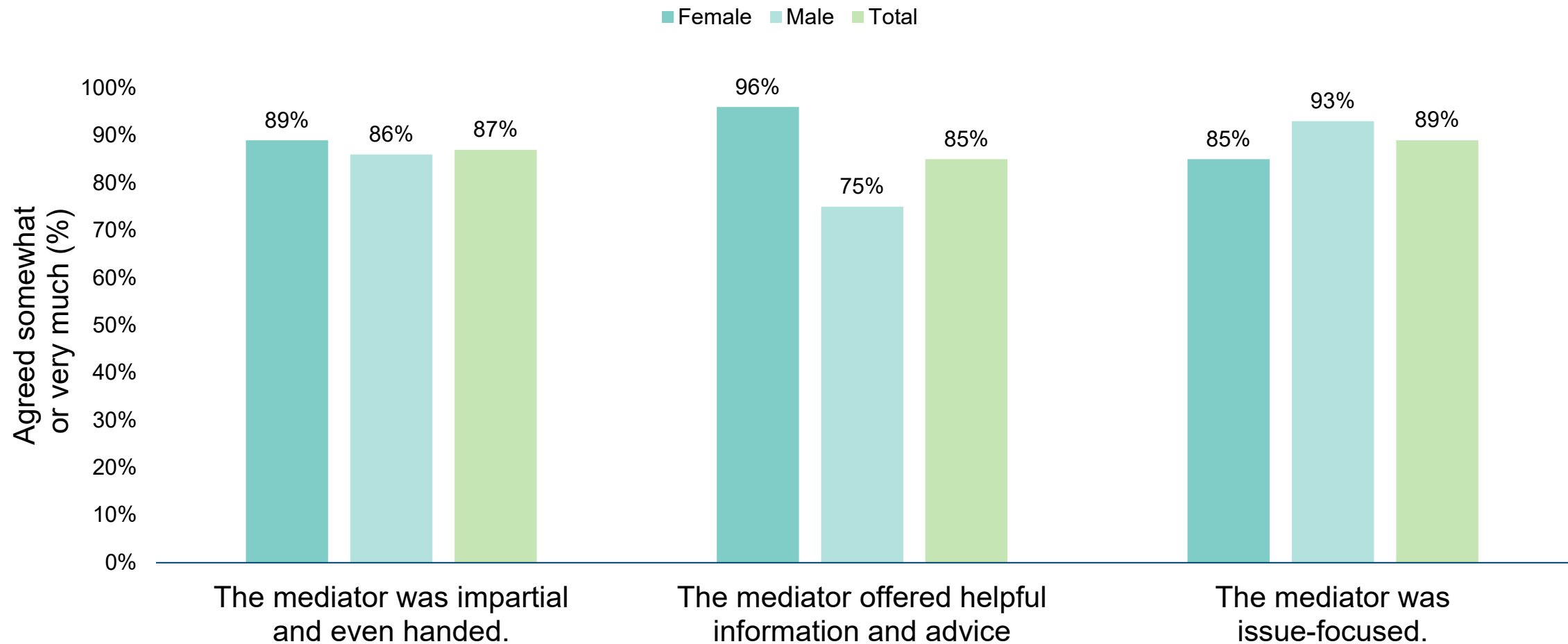


Client survey data continued (n=54)

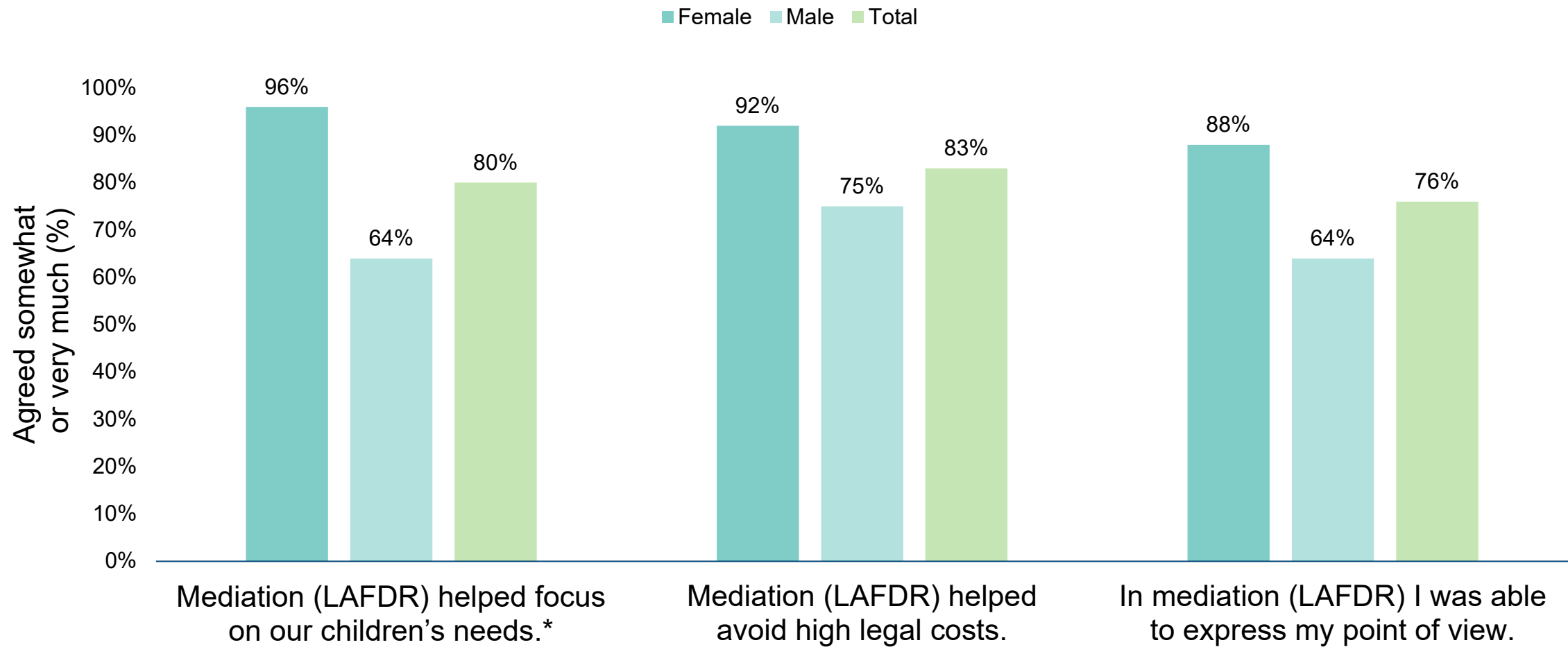


*Chi-square tests suggest gender difference is significant.

Client survey data continued (n=54)

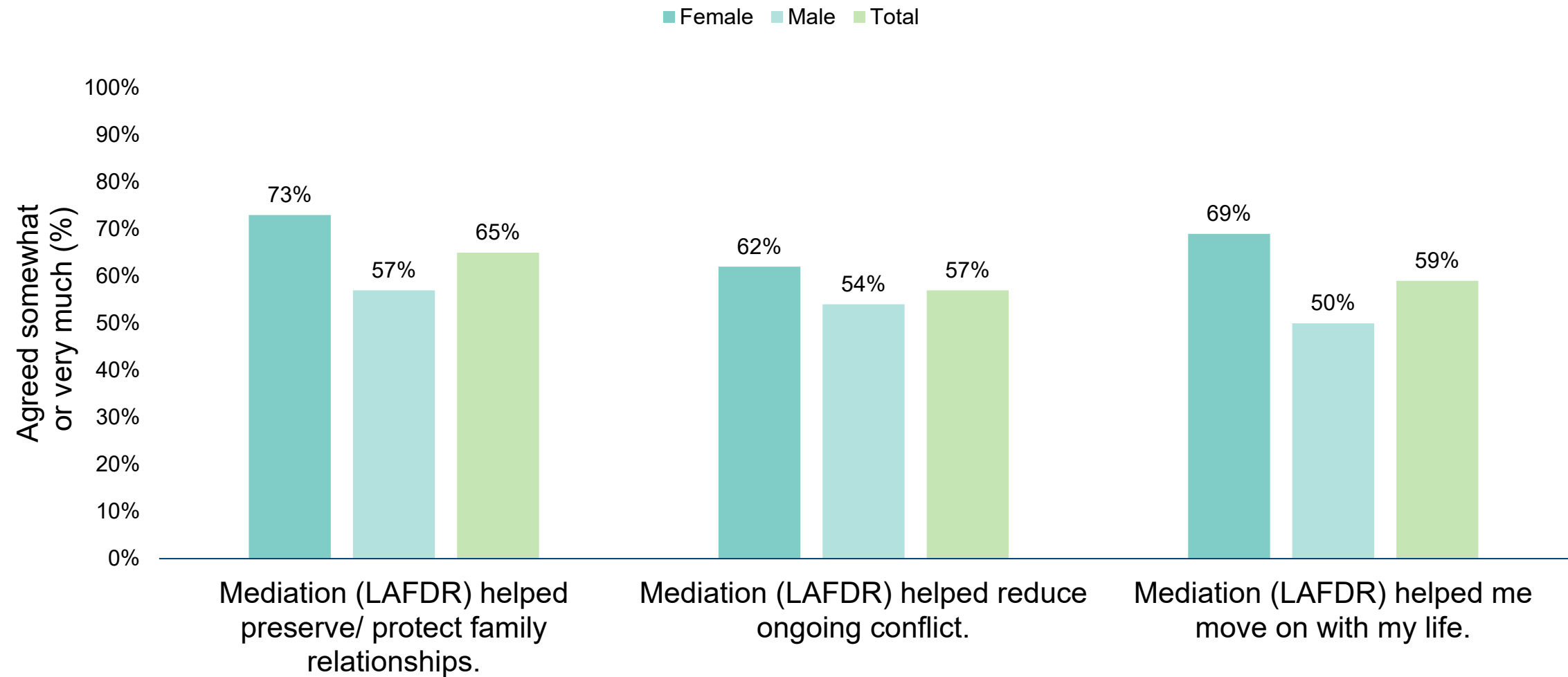


Client survey data continued (n=54)

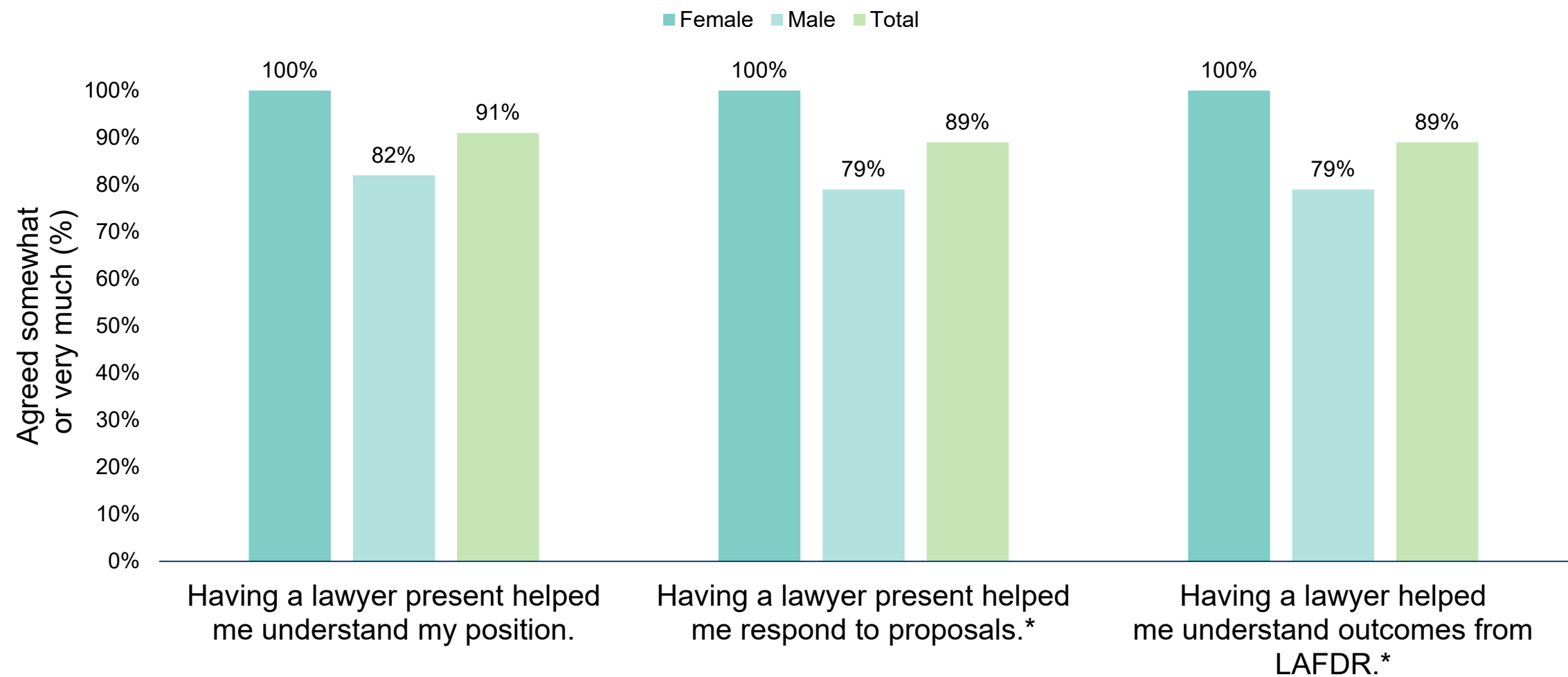


*Chi-square tests suggest gender difference is significant.

Client survey data continued (n=54)

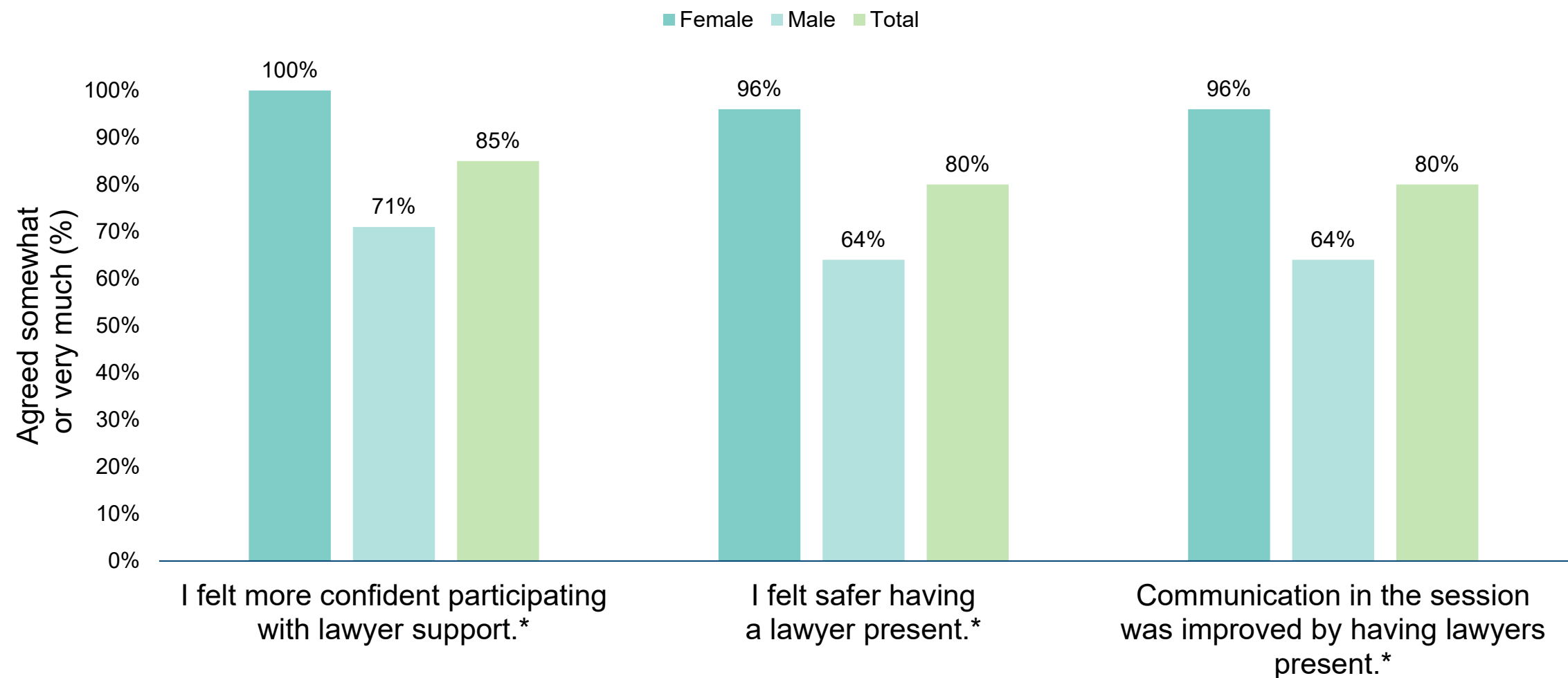


Client survey data continued (n=54)



*Chi-square tests suggest gender difference is significant.

Client survey data continued (n=54)



*Chi-square tests suggest gender difference is significant.

Client interviews (n=14): Benefits of LAFDR

19

- Legal information, guidance, perspective, reality-checking
- Feeling supported, reassured and empowered by lawyer presence
- Child-focused and cost-effective process



They [the lawyers] were
just fantastic about keeping me
focused on the task at hand...
but supporting me at the same time.'

– Client, female



With the lawyer there I was good...
because **I didn't have to fight for myself.**
I was not alone. It was a team.'

– Client, male



I definitely see people benefit from LAFDR when they have unrealistic expectations of what litigation would provide for them ...

... a lot of clients may have a perceived idea of what their entitlements are or should be, but haven't had that step to get legal advice in respect to court considerations and outcomes but also what processes look like and costs, and so **those clients get a little bit of a reality check** on where they stand.'

Final words from interviewees

21

**[LAFDR] will save families
thousands of dollars,
stress, time in court,
and all the rest of it.
... when we did go to court...
I didn't know this was available.'**

– Client, female

I'm very grateful that it was suggested.
To have the lawyer-assisted...
I didn't know that was available.

Especially in my position, and with
previous experiences with my ex,
them being able to recognise that this
is something that could be useful...
I really appreciate that, because I
wouldn't have known about it.'

– Client, female

Our new study

22



Data from **multiple RAV centres**



Property matters as well as parenting



Pathways to LAFDR



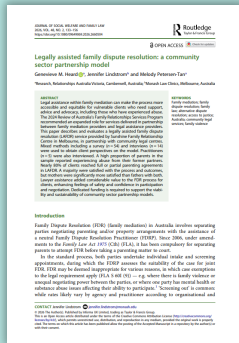
Factors which **assisted**, or were **barriers** to, reaching **agreement**



Lawyer-Assisted Family Dispute Resolution: Evaluating outcomes from a partnership model

Leading research by

Relationships™
AUSTRALIA • VIC

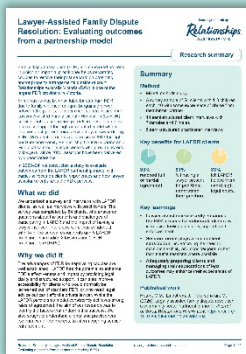


Read our journal article

Visit doi.org/10.1080/09649069.2026.2660504 or scan the QR code.



G. Heard, J. Lindstrom & M. Petersen-Tan (2026), 'Legally assisted family dispute resolution: a community sector partnership model,' *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, 48(2), 133-156.



Download our research summary

Visit rav.org.au/lafdr-research-summary-2026 or scan the QR code.



You can also pick up a printed copy at our Relationships Australia stand.

Contact us

Email research@rav.org.au

Learn more about research, evaluation and impact at RAV

Visit rav.org.au/research/impact or scan the QR code.

