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Remote control

Technology-facilitated abuse is having a devastating impact on women's lives, according to a new national survey of domestic violence workers. This survey is part of *Recharge: Women's Technology Safety*, a joint project from Women's Legal Service NSW, WESNET and DVRCV, funded by the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN).

inbrief

> ❯ Technology-facilitated abuse is widespread in the context of domestic violence

> ❯ Text messages and posts to Facebook are the most common forms of technology used by perpetrators to abuse and stalk women

> ❯ Perpetrators were also using technology to monitor women, and threatening to distribute private photos or videos

> ❯ Women from culturally diverse backgrounds, and Aboriginal women, face particular challenges in relation to technology-facilitated abuse

In 2013, DVRCV conducted the first Australian study into the use of technology by perpetrators in the context domestic violence. This Victorian-based study included two surveys: one with domestic violence sector workers, and one with women who had experienced domestic violence. The findings showed that the use of technology by perpetrators to stalk and abuse women is a significant emerging issue in Victoria.

Building on the knowledge gained from this research, DVRCV has been working with Women's Legal Services NSW (WLSNSW) and Women's Services Network (WESNET) to investigate technology-facilitated abuse in Australia.[*] Between December 2014 and February 2015, we conducted a survey of domestic violence sector workers in Australia to examine what and how technology is being used, and how frequently workers were seeing technology-facilitated abuse.

Profile of participants

Overall, 546 domestic violence sector workers participated in our survey. The majority (53 per cent) specified that they worked directly in domestic violence organisations, with others working in legal organisations (15 per cent), sexual assault (14 per cent), housing (13 per cent) and health organisations (12 per cent). Other respondents specified workplaces such as child protection and community development.

The majority of our survey participants were from Victoria (45 per cent) and New South Wales (22 per cent), with most working in major cities (49 per cent) and regional centres (32 per cent).

Types of technology used

Almost all survey respondents (98 per cent) stated they had clients who had experienced technology-facilitated stalking and abuse. In workers' experience, the type of technology most commonly used by perpetrators was text messages. This is in line with our previous survey, in which 80 per cent of survivors said they had been abused via text messages (Woodlock, 2013). The findings are also similar to the Safety Net Technology Safety Survey from the US in which workers reported that women were most commonly abused using text messages (NNEDV, 2014).

Workers described how perpetrators were often sending large amounts of text messages a day, creating a sense for women that they could not escape the perpetrator:

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Capturing unique expertise

Our decision to survey domestic violence sector workers reflects our commitment to 'practice-based knowledge'. There is much debate as to whether practice-based evidence is empirical knowledge or anecdotal information. Coy and Garner (2012) assert that these debates challenge traditional orthodoxies of research, which privilege the role of academic 'experts':

> Support workers from specialised organisations are frequently interviewed in studies … because their relationship with service users affords a depth of knowledge and expertise which is often inaccessible to even the most skilled researchers.

We value the experiences of domestic violence sector workers as primary knowledge sources within our research work. Their participation in this survey has provided deep insight into the issue of technology-facilitated abuse.

> One client I worked with received approximately 30 plus messages and missed calls during our 60 minute counselling session. This makes them feel like they have nowhere that is safe.

Facebook was the next most-utilised technology by perpetrators. Workers reported that perpetrators often contacted or harassed women by making comments on their Facebook timelines.

The use of GPS tracking using smartphone apps was considered common, with 34 per cent of survey respondents stated they said they saw this 'often' or 'all the time', and a further 40 per cent stating it was occurring 'sometimes'. The number of workers in our 2013 survey who saw GPS technology being abused by perpetrators was 29 per cent.[1] The increase in our current research could show that workers are now more aware of this type of technology and how it is being used, or may be an indication that perpetrator's use of GPS is increasing in Australia. Respondents described how this form of technology enabled perpetrators to not only track women, but could also cause enormous fear:

> A number of clients have informed me their location had been tracked by a GPS track finder application and they receive threatening and intimidating messages from the perpetrator saying 'they know where they are and to look out'.

Threatening tactics

In order to learn more about the ways that different technologies can be used to abuse, threaten, monitor and humiliate women, we asked workers about the nature and frequency of different perpetrator tactics.

> '*Women feel like they are under constant surveillance, they feel vulnerable and powerless and they feel like nowhere is safe*'

Abuse: According to the survey respondents, perpetrators are most commonly using text, email or instant messages to abuse, call women names and put women down, with 47 per cent of workers stating this was happening 'all the time'. Perpetrators also frequently use phone calls (to mobiles or landline phones) to verbally abuse, call women names and put women down, with 45 per cent of workers stating this was happening 'all the time'.

Threats: When asked about the kinds of threatening tactics used by perpetrators via technology, workers stated that phone calls (to mobiles or landline phones) in which perpetrators made verbal threats to harm was the most common behaviour, with 46 per cent seeing this 'often' in their work. Workers felt that perpetrators used phone calls because this did not leave evidence:

> Perpetrators seem aware of legal ramifications so they threaten less in writing form and more in verbal.

Veiled threats were commonly mentioned by workers as a tactic used by perpetrators, and women often found it difficult to prove that the threats were serious. For example one worker explained:

> Sometimes only the victim understands the threat level in code/type words which is insufficient as proof.

Another worker stated that perpetrators intentionally make threats in obscure ways so that they can avoid being seen to breach protective orders:

> Threats may be indirect or phrased in a way that may avoid 'breaching' an AVO, yet the woman knows it has a threatening intention and may be afraid.

Over one-third (39 per cent) of workers felt that social media was being used 'often' by perpetrators to make threats, noting that these threats were frequently done via friend's or family member's accounts.

Monitoring: Nearly half (45 per cent) of survey respondents reported that their clients 'often' had their text messages and phones checked by the perpetrator without permission. Perpetrators are commonly using text, email or instant messages to check women's whereabouts, with 46 per

98%

of DV sector workers had clients who had experienced technology-facilitated abuse and stalking

Use of GPS to track women has increased since 2013 research

Most frequently-used technologies by perpetrators

texts | facebook | smart phones | other mobiles

cent of workers 'often' seeing clients experiencing this kind of behaviour.

Banking and other online data is another common way in which women are being tracked.

Humiliating and punishing: Over one-third (35 per cent) of respondents stated that clients 'often' mentioned that perpetrators had threatened to distribute or post private photos or videos of them. These threats were used as a way to control women, for example to prevent them from leaving the relationship or with taking out a protective order:

> *It is common for perpetrators to threaten to release videos/photos of women of a sexual nature, to control them/stop them going to the police/ getting an IO.*
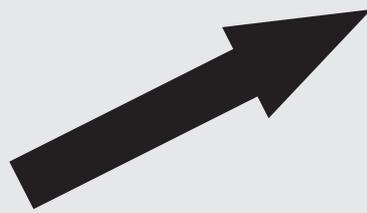
Nearly half (42 per cent) stated that perpetrators 'sometimes' followed through with their threats and distributed intimate photos or videos. Workers provided examples of this type of abuse, which is also known as 'revenge porn'.

Exploiting vulnerabilities

Respondents were asked whether they had noticed particular issues for different groups of women regarding technology abuse and stalking. In general, workers felt that perpetrators would exploit any perceived vulnerabilities that women had—particularly if they were from a small community and the perpetrator could effectively use technology to further isolate them. One respondent wrote:

> *The more vulnerable the cohort is, the more opportunities are available to abuse.*

The group most commonly identified as facing particular challenges in relation to technology-facilitated abuse was women

from non English-speaking countries. Respondents reported that perpetrators exploited the social isolation and language barriers faced by these women, and deliberately isolated women further by restricting their access to technology, which women often relied on to stay in contact with friends and family:

> *Australian men who sponsor their partners, who are women from a CALD background, will often take away their phone and internet access, causing social isolation.*

Workers noted that often perpetrators' families also participated in the abuse of women.
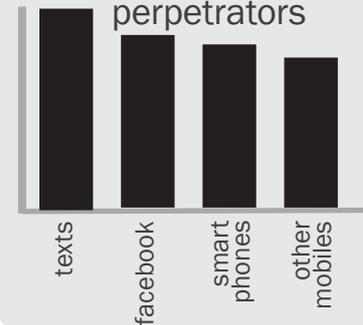
Perpetrators could also effectively use technology in their abuse of women with disabilities. Again, perpetrators exploited women's social isolation, and their reliance on technology for their communication.

Respondents felt that perpetrators were using technology in specific ways to abuse Aboriginal women, particularly due to the importance placed on community and connection within Aboriginal cultures:

> *Indigenous women may need to use technology to keep connected to their mob, culture and community but this can place their whereabouts/ situation known to the perpetrator if they also have the same connections.*

This connection to community also made it easier to publically humiliate Aboriginal women.

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Perpetrators exploited women's social isolation, and their reliance on technology for their communication

'It appears that police either don't know how to deal with this type of abuse or treat it less seriously than other types of domestic violence'

Impact on women

We asked workers how technology-facilitated stalking and abuse impacted women, and workers gave much detail on the ways that women's lives are impacted by this violence.

Forever looking over their shoulder

One of the key themes that emerged was the anxiety created in women's lives and the sense that they had to always be on high alert.

Workers said that technology can easily enable a perpetrator to constantly monitor and harass his partner or ex-partner, and this can result in constant fear. One respondent stated:

Women feel like they are under constant surveillance, they feel vulnerable and powerless and they feel like nowhere is safe. They are often hypervigilant, anxious and depressed as a result.

One of the most noted impacts was the way that technology-facilitated stalking and abuse left women feeling like they could not escape the perpetrator:

Women have often commented that they feel they 'can't escape' or ever get any relief from the monitoring or abuse because smart phones and the internet allow him to be there all the time. Additionally, it appears that police either don't know how to deal with this type of abuse or treat it less seriously than other types of domestic violence.

The use of technology to abuse women also resulted in them being fearful to use their phones, which made it harder for them to receive support from services.

Life-changing

According to survey respondents, the abuse that women experienced via technology such as Facebook left them feeling humiliated and ashamed, as the abuse was public and usually witnessed by friends, family and even their children. A worker explained:

It can be life-changing. The humiliation and shame from having things publicly written on Facebook, for example, can lead to family cutting women off, to them having to move, leave the country, lose all their friends.

Workers also highlighted the sexualised nature of much of the abuse:

Women are humiliated by the abuse, particularly when perpetrators release photos/videos of a sexual nature of women. Some feel absolutely 'stuck', 'trapped', powerless and totally controlled when perpetrators threaten to release photos or videos of a sexual nature to family, friends and work colleges. Especially if they have children.

Conclusion

Our national survey of domestic violence sector workers indicates that there is a significant issue throughout Australia of perpetrators using technology to facilitate their abuse of women. Text messages, Facebook, mobile phones and GPS are being used by perpetrators to control and intimidate women and children in the context of domestic violence. ◘

*More information

This research is part of the *Recharge: Women's Technology Safety* project from Women's Legal Service NSW, WESNET and DVRCV, funded by ACCAN. These research findings, legal guides for all states and territories, as well as how-to-videos, advice and tip sheets will be published in June on our new national website:
www.smartsafe.org.au

References

Coy, M & Garner, M (2012) 'Definitions, discourses and dilemmas: policy and academic engagement with the sexualisation of popular culture', *Gender & Education*, 24(3) pp.285-301

NNEDV (2014) 'A Glimpse from the Field: How Abusers Are Misusing Technology', *Safety Net Technology Safety Survey*

Woodlock, D (2013) *Technology-facilitated Stalking: Findings and recommendations from the SmartSafe project*, Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria, Collingwood

Endnotes

[1] Our first SmartSafe survey in Victoria did not measure the frequency of types of abuse, therefore this number represents an overall figure.

Text messages, Facebook, mobile phones and GPS are being used by perpetrators to control and intimidate women