



# TECHNOLOGY FOR WOMEN'S JUSTICE

Exploring the intersections between violence against women, access to justice and technology.



Technology-based intimate partner violence (IPV) encompasses acts of abuse that are committed in part or fully by the use of technology to exert power or control over a current or former spouse or dating partner. While the cause and consequences of this form of violence remain largely the same as other forms of violence against women, the use of technology can create new mechanisms to exert controlling behavior. Technology-based IPV is used to control, isolate, and make it difficult for women to leave abusive relationships. Similar to other forms of abuse, technology-based IPV is a violation of women's rights, impacts their health negatively, can damage their reputation, and often results in economic loss. It is often intertwined with other forms of abuse, including emotional, sexual, and physical violence. Types of technology-based abuse perpetrated against women include harassment, stalking, impersonation, and forced isolation. Further research is needed in the area to ensure preventative and responsive strategies are effective in increasing the safety and wellbeing of women experiencing technology-based IPV.

## Technology-based IPV

Technology has increased accessibility and effectiveness in the way people communicate, access resources, and participate in public life. The advancements in technology have become a significant way in which partners communicate and have contributed to the complexities of intimate partner violence by creating new ways for perpetrators to abuse their victims. A common narrative of technology-based violence is one in which the perpetrator is a stranger online. However, research suggests that it is more common that technology-based violence is perpetrated by someone known to the victim.<sup>i</sup> Despite the scarcity of research into technology-based IPV<sup>ii</sup>, there is broad acknowledgment that it is used by perpetrators to assert power and control over victims to isolate and increase their dependence on the abuser. Perpetrators utilize technology as a tool to harass, stalk, impersonate, and isolate victims of IPV.

The omnipresence of technology has provided new ways for abusers to monitor partners. Threats made through text messages or social media can be veiled in a way in which may not be viewed or identified as threats by others. Furthermore, technology has enabled abusers to overcome the physical distance barrier that may prevent other forms of abuse and thus, has made it easier for abusers to find and continue to contact victims after separation.<sup>iii</sup>

### Types of technology-based IPV

#### **Harassment**

Technology can be used to continuously contact, threaten, or intimidate a partner or ex-partner. It has enabled abusers to overcome geographical boundaries and still



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Harassment may include bombarding a victim with calls or text messages<sup>iv</sup>, sending threatening text messages, or filling up their voicemail to ensure no one else can leave a message. It may also include going through a partner's messages or emails without their knowledge or threatening to harm a partner if they do not respond to messages. Social media can also be used as a platform for harassment and threats directed towards a partner or ex-partner, sometimes with others engaging in the harassment as well.<sup>v</sup> Furthermore, threats made through text messages and social media can be positioned in a manner in which the messages may not be viewed or identified as harassment by others.

The distribution of private images is also used to harass or control a current or former partner.<sup>vi</sup> The distribution of private photos after a separation can be used as a means to embarrass or humiliate an ex-partner. In some cases, it has been reported that the threat of distributing intimate or private images is used to prevent women from pursuing charges related to the abuse.<sup>vii</sup>

Ongoing harassment through technology after the relationship has ended is very common. One study found that 52% of women

had received unwanted texts from an ex-partner after a relationship breakdown. In these cases, 44% were concerned about the behavior, and 21% had a feeling of fear.<sup>viii</sup>

### *Stalking*

The increasing ability to access an individual's local through global positioning system (GPS) is used as a way to monitor a survivor's current or historical activities or location.<sup>ix</sup> Spyware software, designed to monitor a child's activity online, can be used to track a survivor online, including emails, websites visited, and stored passwords.<sup>x</sup> Wireless video cameras can be set up without a survivor's consent, and some spyware software can provide remote camera access and recording.<sup>xi</sup> The pervasive nature of technology alone is often used as an intimidation tactic by perpetrators to suggest to a victim that they are being monitored or listened to at all times. A perpetrator may provide the victim with a phone or device that they have ownership of or manage, which they regularly check.<sup>xii</sup> Technology-based stalking often exists alongside other forms of abuse. For example, one study found that 81% of women who experienced online stalking by a current or former partner also experienced physical violence by the same partner.<sup>xiii</sup>

Studies have also expressed that online stalking often forces victims to make significant and costly changes to their daily lives, such as quitting their job, moving, changing phone numbers, or purchasing security systems.<sup>xiv</sup>

### *Impersonation*

The abuser can use technology to assume the survivor's identity through their email or phone to impersonate them and send false messages to others. The ability to be anonymous online enables abusers to contact the survivor secretly. Technology can also be used to take out credit cards, loans, and

make online purchases in victims' names.<sup>xv</sup> The intent of impersonation is often to harm the survivor's relationships with friends and family.<sup>xvi</sup>



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### *Isolation*

Similar to other forms of abuse, technology can be used to increase a victim's dependence on an abuser, isolate them from family and friends, and prevent them from seeking help. As the internet and phone are increasingly used for activities such as paying bills or applying for jobs, an abuser can exert control and block a survivor's access to a variety of supports and resources.<sup>xvii</sup> An abuser's control of technology can also directly impact a woman's ability to seek help and ensure safety<sup>xviii</sup>, such as contacting the police.

### *Responding to technology-based IPV*

The rapid advancement in technology makes it challenging to keep up with the ways in which it enables violence against women. A common response to technology-based IPV

can be encouraging victims to limit their time online to minimize the impact of the abuse. This response can promote victim-blaming and can isolate women from meaningful connections, information, and supports. Another typical response, particularly directed at young people, is education related to the risks of sharing intimate photos or text messages with dating partners. Some argue this perspective deflects the focus away from the abusive behavior or ignores the gendered and controlling behaviors at the root of the issue.<sup>xix</sup>

Further research into technology-based IPV is critical to ensure preventative and responsive interventions are effective. Future research should also explore the relationship and overlap between technology-based abuse and other forms of IPV to ensure responses are effective.

Services responding to intimate partner violence may benefit from training exploring how technology can be incorporated into safety planning as both a potential risk and support mechanism for survivors. Lastly, re-considering security mechanisms built into existing technologies that were designed with strangers in mind rather than intimate partners such as website security questions can increase online safety for survivors.

## Final thoughts

Greater research into technology-based IPV is needed to ensure that preventative and responsive strategies are effective. Service providers should incorporate screening for technology-based violence in their intake processes and consider it when safety planning with survivors. More emphasis should be placed on exploring how technology can be used to increase women's safety and connections when they are experiencing IPV. Further, technology should be designed with IPV in mind, and ideally, co-designed with survivors or specialists with knowledge and expertise in the area of IPV.

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<sup>i</sup> Association for Progressive Communications (2015). From impunity to justice: Domestic legal remedies for cases of technology-related violence against women. Retrieved from: <https://www.genderit.org/resources/impunity-justice-domestic-legal-remedies-cases-technology-related-violence-against-women#page=20>

<sup>ii</sup> Duerksen, K.N and Woodin, E.M. (2019). Technological intimate partner violence: Exploring technology-related perpetration factors and overlap with in-person intimate partner violence, *Computers in Human Behavior*, 98, 223-231

<sup>iii</sup> Dimon, J.P, Fiesler, C and Bruckman, A.S. (2011). Domestic violence and information communication technologies, *Interacting with Computers*, 23, 413-421

<sup>iv</sup> Henry, N. and Powell, A. (2015). Beyond the 'sext': Technology facilitated sexual violence and harassment against adult women, *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 48(1), 104–118

<sup>v</sup> Woodlock, D. (2017). The Abuse of Technology in Domestic Violence and Stalking, *Violence Against Women*, 23(5) 584–602

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Henry, N. and Powell, A. (2015).

<sup>viii</sup> Short, E and McMurray, I. (2009). Mobile phone harassment: An exploration of students' perceptions of intrusive texting behaviour, *An Interdisciplinary Journal on Humans in ICT Environments*, 5(02), 163-180

<sup>ix</sup> Southworth, C., Finn, J., Dawson, S., Fraser, C., and Tucker, S. (2007). Intimate Partner Violence, Technology, and Stalking, *Violence Against Women*, 13(08), 842-856

<sup>x</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xi</sup> Dimon, J.P, Fiesler, C and Bruckman, A.S. (2011).

<sup>xii</sup> Douglas, H., Harris, B.A., and Dragiewicz, M. (2019). Technology-facilitated domestic and family violence: Women's experiences, *British Journal of Criminology*, 59, 551-570

<sup>xiii</sup> Southworth, C., Finn, J., Dawson, S., Fraser, C., and Tucker, S. (2007).

<sup>xiv</sup> Nobles, M.R., Reynolds, B.W., Fox, K.A and Fisher, B.S (2014) Protection Against Pursuit: A Conceptual and Empirical Comparison of Cyberstalking and Stalking Victimization Among a National Sample, *Justice Quarterly*, 31(6), 986-1014

<sup>xv</sup> Docherty, L., Zawitkowski, S., Wilson, B., and Currie, E. (2019) "Hidden in the everyday: Financial abuse as a form of intimate partner violence in the Toronto area. Retrieved from: <http://www.womanact.ca/financialabuse.html>

<sup>xvi</sup> Woodlock, D. (2017).

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xviii</sup> Douglas, H., Harris, B.A., and Dragiewicz, M. (2019).

<sup>xix</sup> Ibid.

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