



Committee Secretary
Select Committee on Social Media and Online Safety
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Dear Committee Secretary

Submission to the Inquiry into Social Media and Online Safety

Who we are

WESNET is Australia's national peak body for specialist women's domestic and family violence services, with almost 350 eligible members across Australia. WESNET represents a range of organisations and individuals including women's refuges, shelters, safe houses, and information/referral services.

WESNET is also Australia's leading non-Government expert on technology facilitated abuse. Since 2009 WESNET has been working closely with international experts on technology abuse, training over 8,500 frontline workers since 2013. WESNET's world leading Safety Net Project examines the intersection between technology and violence against women.

This inquiry

As for any inquiry of this nature, its direction is shaped by the terms of reference which, in this case, are largely framed around the actions and responsibilities of technology companies and industry. While this is one important aspect of inquiry, it is WESNET's strong view that a more holistic approach is necessary to put more emphasis on the individuals who use technology to stalk, abuse, harass, threaten and intimidate, as well as on cultural settings that support and enable these behaviours.

Technology abuse—which includes using social media and online platforms to stalk, abuse, harass, threaten and intimidate—is an increasingly prevalent form of violence against women, and is too complex and too broadreaching to focus only on one sector of the community.

This submission

Given the time of the year and the short timeframe, WESNET is limited in its ability to consult widely with its membership and to provide the Committee with new and tailored information in this submission. On that basis we are focusing on highlighting to the Committee evidence gathered by WESNET, as well as alerting the Committee to other key sources of information.

Background and forms of online harm

Technology abuse—or ‘technology-facilitated abuse’—is a recognised dimension of domestic and family violence. Technology-facilitated abuse can involve perpetrators’ misuse of devices (such as phones, devices and computers), accounts (such as email) and software or platforms (such as social media) to control, abuse, track and intimidate victim-survivors. It can also involve the use of technology by perpetrators to:

- post or send harassing or abusive messages
- stalk (tracking someone’s activities, movements, communications)
- dox (publish identifying, private information)
- engage in ‘image-based sexual abuse ‘ (IBSA) (producing or distributing intimate images or video without consent)
- make or share clandestine or conspicuous audio or visual recordings of another person
- impersonate or steal another person’s identity
- gain authorised access to a person’s digital accounts or profiles or devices
- change functions, impair authorised functions or, cause an unauthorised function on a digital account, profile or device (Harris & Woodlock, forthcoming).

It is important to note that technology does not cause technology-facilitated abuse, abusers do.

The same kinds of abusive behaviours used in domestic violence and other forms of gender-based violence against women are still being used by abusers, however advances in technology, and particularly mobile phone technology, mean that it is now much easier and cheaper for abusers to misuse technology to perpetrate harms and abuse. Perpetrators now have unprecedented, easy access to simple and user-friendly technology, and the effect is that abuse and monitoring behaviours have become instantaneous, omnipresent, unrelenting and harder to detect.

It is essential that women’s access to technology not be limited by technology abuse or by measures intended to address technology abuse.

Anything that limits someone’s safe access to technology restricts access to essential

services, such as banking, education and social services and can impair social and economic participation. Safe and open access to the internet and online spaces has been framed as a human rights issue, and an indicator of gender equality.

In 2016, the United Nation's Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, noted that the internet and other forms of emerging technologies "have facilitated new types of gender-based violence and gender inequality in access to technologies, which hinder women's and girls' full enjoyment of their human rights and their ability to achieve gender equality (Šimonović, 2016)."

Online anonymity is essential to at-risk social media users

The *Social Media (Anti Trolling) Bill* has, rightly in WESNET's opinion, raised a number of concerns in attempting to dismantle online anonymity. Many people who do not use their real names on social media may have legitimate, non-nefarious reasons, such as people fleeing domestic violence.

In a recent *Conversation* article (Butler, 2021) Dr Belinda Barnet, senior lecturer in media and communications at Swinburne University, warns that targeting anonymous users could have dangerous consequences, particularly with respect to stalking and doxxing, noting that "...anonymity is important to your physical safety. Attacking anonymity on social media won't stop trolling, but it'll put sections of our community in danger."

Our research - experiences and impacts

In 2020, WESNET and Curtin University, with funding assistance from Telstra, undertook the [Second National Survey of Technology Abuse and Domestic Violence in Australia](#), involving 442 domestic violence practitioners. A full copy of the survey report is attached, and linked above.

The survey is a follow-up to a 2015 survey by Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria (now Safe and Equal), Women's Legal Service NSW, and WESNET which was the first and largest national investigation of technology-facilitated abuse in Australia.

Key findings

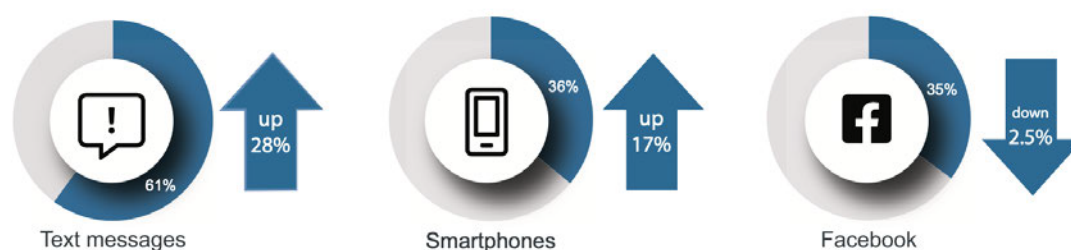
Key findings include:

- Almost all survey respondents stated that they had clients who had experienced technology facilitated stalking and abuse.
- The use of technology by perpetrators to threaten victim- survivors increased from 2015 to 2020 across all modes. It is important to highlight that intimate partner homicide is 11.36 times more probable with any kind of threat made by perpetrators (Spencer & Stith, 2020).

- The type of technology most commonly used by perpetrators was text messaging, with two thirds (60.7%) of practitioners seeing this ‘all the time’. Text messages are used in various ways, from constantly sending messages to victims-survivors, to carefully worded messages that perpetrators would use to cause victim-survivors fear.
- Respondents noted they were seeing GPS tracking apps used ‘all the time’ (16.2%) and ‘often’ (45.6%). This is a 131% and 75% increase respectively from 2015. Participants noted that because GPS tracking apps such as “Find My” are preloaded on iPhones, that women were often obligated to turn them on, or else they were seen by the perpetrator as having something to hide.
- FaceTime and iCloud were both seen as often being used to perpetrate technology-facilitated abuse, noted as commonly used by perpetrators to stalk and place women under surveillance.
- A high proportion of respondents saw government accounts such as myGov being misused by perpetrators to abuse women.
- Almost half (49.9%) of the practitioners said that perpetrators were forcing women to film and record intimate images ‘often’. However, respondents felt it was likely to be underreported and that they suspected it was happening much more often than women were comfortable talking about.
- Women with disabilities, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and Indigenous women were seen to be at particular risk.

Interestingly when asked about social media abuse, respondents in our Second National Survey returned slightly lower levels of observing these platforms being misused compared to 2015. This was in stark contrast to the misuse of other technologies. (See Figure E-1 taken from our survey below.) One explanation for this may be that many social media platforms have reporting mechanisms and other policies in place to remove harmful materials.

Figure E-1: The top three technologies identified by respondents as being used ‘all the time’ by perpetrators.



Source: Woodlock, D, Bentley, K et al (2020) *Second National Survey of Technology and Domestic Violence in Australia*. WESNET.

Impact on women

In both the 2015 and 2020 surveys, participants were asked, “What has been the impact of technology-facilitated abuse on women you have worked with?”. The responses across the two surveys were similar, but with an increased perception in 2020 that women were experiencing high levels of fear and terror as a result of the technology-facilitated abuse, and that they were feeling trapped and hopeless.

Exhaustion, despair and hopelessness were also mentioned by respondents. One of the main consequences of technology-facilitated abuse on victim-survivors was identified as increased isolation, and a fear of using technology to keep in contact with friends, family and services. This can have significant ramifications on women’s safety and wellbeing.

Police and justice responses remain the same

There was little change in practitioners’ perceptions of police responses to technology-facilitated abuse from 2015 to 2020. When asked if they felt police took technology-facilitated abuse seriously, 61.6% said this happened sometimes, but was dependent on the officer.

Practitioners noted that effective police responses entailed them taking the time to collect evidence and seeing different forms of technology-facilitated abuse as patterns of control. Even so, respondents also felt that even when police took the abuse seriously, it was actually difficult for further action to be taken through the courts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, rapid changes in technology are shifting the various ways in which technology-facilitated abuse is perpetrated against women.

While—as evidenced by WESNET surveys—the extent of technology facilitated abuse has increased, responses to perpetrators are not expanding and changing to keep pace. States and territories have criminalised image based sexual abuse and there have been some prosecutions, but the more commonly described text harassment and threats or breaching of privacy through surveillance have been subject to less scrutiny.

- Governments, telecommunication and technology companies, police, and the justice system must take the tactics of perpetrators of technology-facilitated abuse more seriously, noting links to domestic violence, violence against women, and femicide.
- Perpetrators of technology abuse must be held accountable. It is not just the responsibility of platforms to prevent it.
- Collective action must be taken to support women and children subjected to this abuse and ultimately prevent it from happening in the first place through effective technology design, legislation, awareness, training, resource development and primary prevention education.

Other reference material

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WESNET thanks you for the opportunity to participate in this inquiry. If you would like to discuss the contents of the submission further, please contact me using the details below.

Yours sincerely



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WESNET acknowledges and pays respects to the Traditional Owners and Custodians of all the lands on which we live and work.