

# WESNET

## 2018 National Listening Tour Report

Supporting survivors of technology-facilitated abuse from **Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and/or culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) communities.**

Results of a listening tour of **90 frontline domestic and family violence workers** from 21 urban and regional agencies across Australia, conducted by the Women's Services Network (WESNET) in 2018.



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# Acknowledgements

## Acknowledgement of Country

WESNET acknowledges the traditional owners of this land on which we live and work, and their continuing connection to land, water and community. We pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island elders past, present and future; and we value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture and knowledge.

This report may be cited as: WESNET The Women's Services Network, 2018, *Supporting survivors of technology-facilitated abuse from Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander, and/or culturally and linguistically diverse communities: National Listening Tour*, Report. WESNET The Women's Services Network, Canberra.

If minor revisions are made to this report they will be found in the online version at [www.techsafety.org.au](http://www.techsafety.org.au)

The Women's Services Network (WESNET) acknowledges Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people as the custodians of this land.

This report is dedicated to all survivors of violence.

The report is made possible through advice and feedback from experts in the women and domestic violence sectors. The WESNET team would like to thank Maya Avdibegovic, Manjula O'Connor, Maria Dimopoulos, Rayleen Ferguson, and Dianne Gipey for their support and advice in the development stage of the project.

Also, deepest gratitude to the twenty-one frontline agencies and their staff who participated in the listening tour and shared their experience and knowledge.

This work was completed by the Safety Net team members Heidi Guldbæk, Kaofeng Lee, with assistance from Natalie Morris, Willa Whitewolf and Karen Bentley.

This project was funded by the Department of Social Services of the Australian Government as part of the Safer Technology for Women project funded under the Women's Safety Package.



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# Key Findings

Common themes emerge during the listening sessions for both the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) sessions.<sup>1</sup> While the type of technology-facilitated abuse and overall experience of the abuse may be different for each woman, the following issues are consistently raised by frontline workers as factors that make women more vulnerable or make it more difficult for them to address the abuse.

## Factors that increase risk of, and vulnerability to, technology-facilitated abuse

- Low technology literacy
- Not recognising technology control and coercion as a form of abuse
- Isolation can be technological as well as social and geographical
- Technology permits close-knit communities to be closer (positive and/or negative implications)
- Lack of money or poverty
- Limited English proficiency or literacy levels

## Survivor education and resource needs

- Resources need to be accessible, basic, and simple
- Resources need to be diverse
- Education is needed for children

## Frontline worker education and resource needs

- More WESNET technology safety training
- Trained specialist located in their agency or someone they could refer survivors to
- Strategies on how to discuss technology safety with survivors
- More awareness of existing resources

## Systemic advocacy needs

- Technology safety education is needed in other community sectors in contact with survivors



<sup>1</sup> In WESNET Safety Net Australia's broader work on examining the intersection of technology and violence against women, we find these risk factors consistent across all survivors of domestic violence, regardless of background.

## Frontline worker perceptions of technology-facilitated abuse in Aboriginal and/ or Torres Strait Islander communities

- The level of digital inclusion of the abuser influences how technology-facilitated abuse is perpetrated and experienced by the survivor
- Victim-survivors with low levels of digital inclusion are more at risk of abuse and face barriers addressing the abuse
- The number of people involved in the violence can expand
- Sharing devices (in the context of domestic and/or family violence) can make survivors more vulnerable to abuse
- Living in a rural or remote area can be an additional barrier
- Language and literacy barriers compound abuse, isolation, and access to safety strategies

## Frontline worker perceptions of technology-facilitated abuse in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities

- Technology can permit higher levels of control by abusive partner
- Survivors often don't recognise technology-facilitated coercion and control as abuse
- Survivors who have low technology knowledge and skills are quite vulnerable
- The impact of abuse is greater when survivors are geographically, socially, and technologically isolated
- Technology-facilitated abuse is often basic: harassment, destroying technology, forbidding access
- Technology can permit greater involvement in the abuse by the family – in Australia and overseas – both as abusers or as victims
- The lack of English proficiency is a major barrier to addressing technology-facilitated abuse
- Identifying and addressing technology-facilitated abuse isn't often a priority for workers or survivors



# Introduction

## WESNET

The Women's Services Network (WESNET) is the leading National grassroots peak body for women and children survivors of domestic and/or family violence. Representing more than three-hundred and fifty frontline women's agencies and their many thousands of clients escaping or experiencing domestic and/or family violence, WESNET is firmly connected to the voice of the sector.

## WESNET Safety Net

WESNET Safety Net Australia provides training, consultation, and educational resources and materials to frontline workers on technology safety issues to support domestic and/or family violence survivors experiencing technology-facilitated abuse. WESNET is committed to reaching and supporting women from marginalised communities and geographically isolated locations.

## Violence and technology-facilitated abuse in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and/or Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) communities

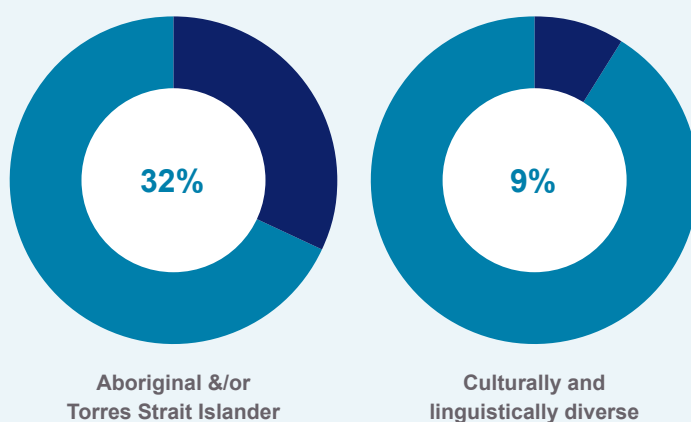
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women experience violence at higher rates than non-Indigenous women (SCRGSP 2016).<sup>2</sup> Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women also experience certain forms of technology-facilitated abuse at higher rates with one-in-two Indigenous people reporting victimisation by image-based abuse compared to one-in-five Australians overall (Henry, Powell & Flynn 2017).<sup>3</sup>

No specific studies have been undertaken on the prevalence of technology-facilitated abuse among Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and/or CaLD survivors of domestic and/or family violence.

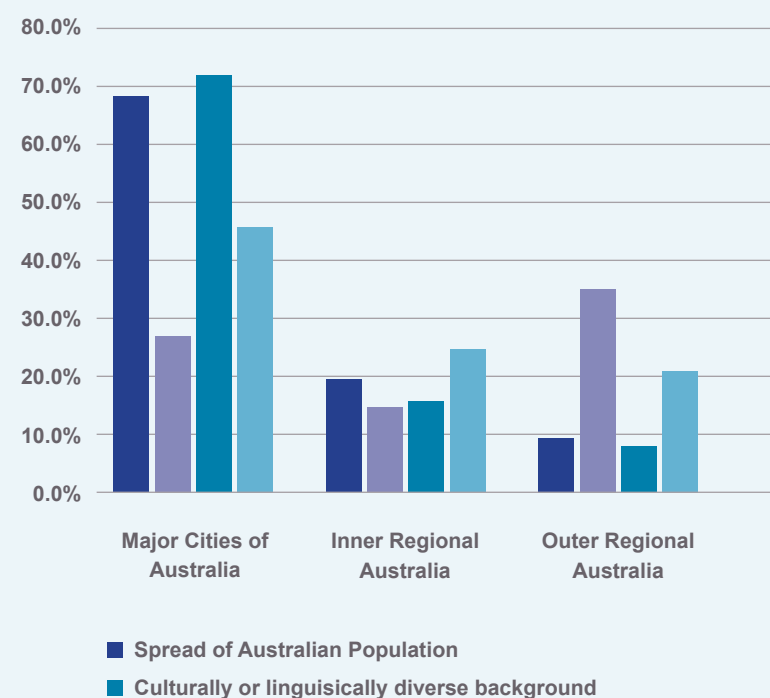
Women from CaLD communities are also at greater risk to violence due to the wide range of factors increasing their vulnerability (Ames Australia 2017).<sup>4</sup>

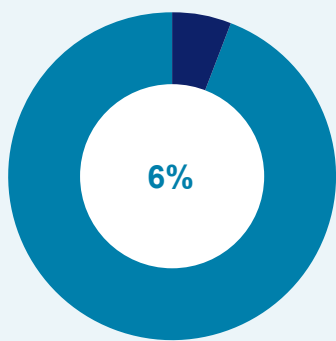
2 SCRGSP (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision) 2016, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2016*, Productivity Commission, Canberra, p. 4.98, Table 4A.12.13.  
 3 Henry, N, Powell, A & Flynn, A 2017, *Not Just 'Revenge Pornography': Australians' Experiences of Image-Based Abuse*, Summary Report, RMIT University, Melbourne, p. 7.  
 4 Ames Australia 2017, *Violence against women in CALD communities: Understandings and actions to prevent violence against women in CALD Communities*, Ames Australia, Melbourne, pp. 8-10.

Smartphones given to women via WESNET Safe Connections agencies between Feb 2015 and March 2019



Smartphones given to women via WESNET Safe Connections agencies between Feb 2015 and March 2019





Women with disability

## Safe Connections

The Safe Connections program<sup>5</sup> is a partnership between Telstra and WESNET Safety Net Australia. The project delivers technology safety training and educational resources to frontline Safe Connections agencies and their workers, and provides smartphones with pre-paid credit to survivors of domestic and/or family violence, sexual assault, and other forms of violence against women.

The Safe Connections project has given nearly half of all smartphones to women identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and/or CaLD. The project has also been successful supporting survivors and advocates in regional and remote areas of Australia.

These diagrams illustrate the smartphones given to women between Feb 2015 and March 2019 based on their self-identification as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and/or CaLD, and/or women with disabilities (WWD); and on the remoteness categorisation of their geographic location.

## Technology-facilitated abuse

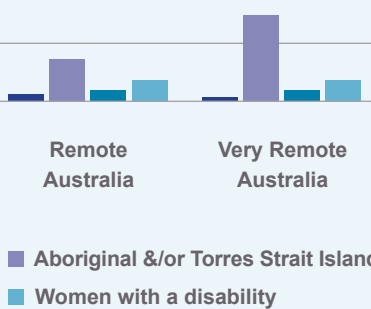
Technology-facilitated abuse is a common tactic of abuse experienced by survivors of domestic and/or family violence. In a 2015 survey of domestic violence practitioners, 98% reported seeing technology used as a tactic of abuse against the clients they support (DVRCV 2015).<sup>6</sup> The tactics of abuse are similar regardless of the community a woman lives in.

Technology-facilitated abuse occurring within the context of domestic and/or family violence is generally a tactic of control, coercion, harassment, and intimidation. Abusers may smash technology devices, lock a woman out of her accounts, send harassing messages, or post reputation-damaging content online.

## This research project

WESNET wants to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of technology-facilitated abuse on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and/or CaLD women, and the unique barriers that can exacerbate the abuse or make addressing the abuse more difficult for these women. This will enable us to provide more targeted support to frontline workers assisting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and/or CaLD survivors of technology-facilitated abuse.

This research project supports WESNET's goal to provide training and educational resources to frontline workers to support survivors of technology-facilitated domestic and/or family violence, and our commitment to supporting women from marginalised groups.



<sup>5</sup> The Safe Connections program is a multi-sector partnership between WESNET and Telstra with funding support from the Commonwealth government.

<sup>6</sup> DVRCV Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria 2015, *The ReCharge: Women's Technology Safety National Study Findings*, DVRCV Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria, Melbourne, p. 5.

# Approach and methodology

The approach taken was to meet with frontline practitioners working directly with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and/or CaLD victim/survivors and capture their perceptions, opinions and insights into the issues.

## **A nationwide listening tour was conducted**

WESNET conducted a listening tour with domestic and family violence/social services agencies working with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and/or CaLD victim-survivors in order to learn how to better support workers assisting survivors of technology-facilitated abuse in these communities. The goal of the listening tour was to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of technology-facilitated abuse experienced by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and/or CaLD survivors, and the types of training and resources that would be most helpful for workers to better assist survivors. WESNET set out to record and analyse worker perceptions and understandings of: (1) *how* technology-facilitated abuse occurs for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and/or CaLD clients, (2) *the impact* of technology-facilitated abuse on these clients, and (3) *what workers need* in order to support these clients.

## **Agencies were selected to participate based on their work with target clients**

Through the WESNET Safe Connections program, agencies providing smartphones to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and/or CaLD clients were identified. Due to budget constraints, listening sessions were unable to be conducted with all agencies that work with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and/or CaLD survivors. Instead, agencies that distributed at least half of their smartphones to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and/or CaLD women were selected to participate.

Of the thirty-two agencies invited to participate in the listening tour, twenty-one accepted. Between March and April 2018, WESNET facilitated thirteen listening sessions in agencies from urban and regional areas across Queensland, Northern Territory, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia. Six of the listening sessions focused on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities and nine focused on CaLD communities. In all, ninety frontline workers participated in the listening sessions.

## **Listening sessions were delivered to frontline workers**

The two-hour listening sessions consisted of a presentation on technology safety by a WESNET technology safety specialist covering issues ranging from smartphone misuse to social media, and a facilitated discussion with participants about the women they support. Questions during the discussions captured the worker's perceptions in relation to the themes: (1) examples of technology-facilitated abuse experienced by their clients, (2) unique barriers their clients face, (3) technology-facilitated abuse experienced by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and/or CaLD survivors that might be different to survivors from other communities, and (4) resources that would be helpful for women and workers.

## **Limitations of this approach, and cautions**

A unique aspect of this approach, and a noted limitation, is that frontline workers were engaged, rather than survivors. Although some listening tour participants may identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and/or CaLD, the findings and conclusions drawn are based on the experiences of the advocates who work with women from these communities.

The conclusions in this report should not be assumed to represent the experiences of all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and/or CaLD women, as these communities are incredibly diverse. Moreover, a wide range of intersecting factors impact a woman's risk of, and vulnerability to, technology-facilitated abuse, not simply the particular community a woman identifies with. As identities are intersectional and the experience of abuse and discrimination can be intersectional, so too are the factors that contribute to a woman's vulnerability to, and risk of, technology-facilitated abuse. These intersecting factors might include the survivor's technology skills and access to technology, English literacy, discrimination by systems and services, and the perpetrator's ability to misuse technology.



# Findings – frontline worker perceptions of technology-facilitated abuse in **Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities**



## **Finding 1: The level of digital inclusion of the abuser influences how technology-facilitated abuse is perpetrated and experienced by the survivor**

Workers typically identify the type of abuse experienced by their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander clients as being ‘more basic’ or ‘low tech’, such as harassment and limiting the victim-survivor’s access to technology. The types of harassment their clients face include unwanted contact via phone calls or text messages, abuse on social media (either by the perpetrator or friends and family of the perpetrator), and harassment via image-based abuse (either through text, email, or social media). Workers report that tactics their client’s perpetrators use to limit access to technology include taking, stealing, smashing or pawing her mobile device; or stealing her money or Basics card so she can’t buy more credit or pay her phone bill.

Workers often see the types of abuse in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities occurring at the overlap of lower socioeconomic status and low digital literacy. This finding could be explained by the lower levels of digital inclusion of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people (Thomas et al 2017).<sup>7</sup>

Digital inclusion is a measurement of social and economic participation with regards to technology and is based on the premise that everyone should be able to make full use of digital technologies (Thomas et al 2017)<sup>8</sup>. Digital inclusion is very much about social inclusion and is measured by three dimensions: (1) access (e.g. access to technology), (2) affordability (e.g. funds to pay for technology), and (3) digital ability (e.g. skills to use technology and attitudes about technology) (Thomas et al 2017).<sup>9</sup>

In the context of technology-facilitated domestic and/or family violence, it makes sense that the abuse tactics of people with low digital inclusion would be of a ‘more basic’ nature and not as ‘high tech’ as someone who possesses higher levels of digital inclusion and therefore better accessibility, capabilities and economic resources. Different levels of digital inclusion would influence the types of tactics used.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, C, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, Tucker, J & Rennie, E 2017, *Measuring Australia’s Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2017*, RMIT University, Melbourne, for Telstra, p 6, 16. Digital inclusion of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people ranks below the national average in access, and ability indices, with the biggest gap being affordability as the majority of people identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander have mobile-only connectivity, not fixed-line.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, C, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, Tucker, J & Rennie, E 2017, *Measuring Australia’s Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2017*, RMIT University, Melbourne, for Telstra, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, C, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, Tucker, J & Rennie, E 2017, *Measuring Australia’s Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2017*, RMIT University, Melbourne, for Telstra, p. 7.



## Finding 2: Victim-survivors with low levels of digital inclusion are more at risk of abuse and face barriers addressing the abuse

The Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander sessions raise elements of digital exclusion including low digital literacy, lack of access to technology, and lack of funds to pay for technology, as factors that exacerbate the impact of technology-facilitated abuse, reduce options for safety, and limit a victim-survivor's ability to access support.

### Low digital literacy

Workers consistently note that survivors with low digital literacy can, in some ways, be considered more at risk because they are often not aware of practical strategies that could be used to increase their safety, such as increasing their privacy or security settings or blocking his number. One agency gives the example of a survivor being unaware she could call emergency 000 without credit on her phone. Others report the issue of clients, whose phones had been smashed by the abuser, not knowing that they can still retrieve their contacts or access their backup. Workers note that it can further contribute to feelings of isolation when a survivor believes her contacts and data have been permanently lost.

### Lack of access to technology

Workers also report that a survivor's low digital literacy further compounds her lack of digital access to information and resources, either because of the controlling behaviour of the abuser (preventing her from accessing technology), limited finances (no phone or no money for credit or internet), or limited reception/internet/access to a private phone.

A worker from a remote town reports that in certain town camps, network reception is limited or non-existent, and pay phones are few and far between, which can leave victim-survivors of domestic and/or family violence at risk of being isolated from help or services.

Workers consistently report that in communities where clients don't have as much access to technology, they are more at risk when their phones are smashed or controlled, because they can't just go online and find help. A worker (from a remote town) says, ***"It's not always an option for someone to 'just Google' something. It's pretty rare that people have internet in their homes. Even if it's on their phone, most people use credit – so they can't be on these websites to be able to look at because it would chew up their data"***. Workers report that this often means that the issue does not get addressed until the survivor is face-to-face at an appointment with a service provider.

Another worker (from a different remote town) notes that many of their clients sleep rough in the bush because of the domestic and/or family violence. These women don't always have access to a power supply which can limit their ability to stay connected and access support.

This feedback is consistent with research by Rennie et al (2016)<sup>10</sup> which found internet access in remote Aboriginal communities is predominantly 'mobile-only' (phone or dongle) with pre-paid credit being preferred to post-paid billing. Further, Thomas et al (2017)<sup>11</sup> reported mobile-only users as experiencing relatively high levels of digital exclusion linked to socioeconomic factors such as low-income households, unemployment, and low levels of education.

10 Rennie, E, Hogan, E, Gregory, R, Crouch, A, Wright, A, and Thomas, J, 2016, *Internet on the Outstation: The digital divide and remote Aboriginal communities*. Institute for Network Cultures, Amsterdam, p. 180-181.

11 Thomas, J, Barraket, J, Wilson, C, Ewing, S, MacDonald, T, Tucker, J & Rennie, E 2017, *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2017*, RMIT University, Melbourne, for Telstra, p. 23.



### Finding 3: The number of people involved in the violence can expand

Several workers report that what may start as intimate partner violence or family violence can often expand into community violence, meaning a survivor can end up being subject to more than one abuser. The following themes emerge in this area:

#### Online shaming and harassment

Abuse via social media is raised as a predominant theme in the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander listening sessions. The perpetrator tactics that workers describe are fairly typical with online abuse and include: adding the victim-survivor's friends/family as 'friends' on social media in a bid to find out information about the victim-survivor, creating fake accounts to get in touch with her, harassment via messenger, and posting comments on her wall. Some tactics are subtler and may not be identified as family violence by others; one worker describes these as **"comments that are cryptic and not direct or obvious, but clearly directed at her."**

Once the message is online however, given the 'social' nature of social media, the community can 'weigh in' on the harassment. This includes other community members either sending direct messages to the victim-survivor or her family, writing abusive posts about her, or tagging people in the comments or posts. Therefore, what might have started out as harassment by the perpetrator can expand to harassment by the community.

#### Image-based abuse

Another tactic that can expand and invite more perpetrators is image-based abuse, which workers report as very prevalent.

**"Image-based abuse is a big thing – including the threat to post intimate images,"** says a worker. Workers report abusers posting intimate (or intimidating) photos of the victim-survivor and/or her children on social media (often tagging family and friends in the photo), sending intimate photos or videos via email to other people (including her family and friends, his friends, etc.), or messaging images via text to other people. A worker shares, **"One perpetrator posted to Facebook nude photos of the survivor and videos he secretly took of them having sex. He tagged all her friends. It was reported and taken down immediately."**

Workers also share how offline rumours and gossip spread about a victim via text message, while not necessarily an 'intimate image', can end up on social media (as a screenshot), allowing further opportunities for community members to 'weigh in' or further perpetuate the abuse.

#### Retribution or 'payback' for reporting abusive behaviour

Intimate partner violence can often turn into broader family violence when a woman tries to report the abuse (and the abuser's family become perpetrators), so victim-survivors often have to worry about the broader impact if they report. A worker explains, **"Families will take sides. If they take his side, they will threaten her with 'payback' if she 'puts' him in jail."** Another worker adds,

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***"If she reports, she becomes the bad guy, and the family will pick on her."***

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For some survivors, reporting the abuse may mean the need to also plan for her safety, not just from the abusive partner, but from the community as well. **"We'll have her go to the safehouse because even if he goes to jail, she can't go back to the community because of threats from his family,"** a worker shares. This additional fear makes it difficult for women to report and for abusers to be held accountable.



#### **Finding 4: Sharing devices (in the context of domestic and/or family violence) can make survivors more vulnerable to abuse**

Another common theme raised by workers is the negative impacts of sharing devices. Workers consistently comment on how their client's phones are often a shared resource due to the woman's sense of cultural obligation to share material resources with family members. In the context of family violence, the lack of individual ownership of technology devices and accounts raises the following concerns:

##### **Reduced privacy and access to technology**

Workers report that when a survivor's phone is shared, privacy is a concern. When anyone can access the device (which could include the perpetrator), it is difficult for the survivor to connect with services and support. She can't easily ring a service provider from the phone (and keep it secret from the abusive person), and service providers cannot easily get in touch with her. A worker explains, ***"Some partners are very controlling and will always answer her phone. This makes it difficult for us to reach her and get into contact. Sometimes, she will go through a family member to get in touch with us, so he doesn't find out."***

Another worker says, ***"When we contact Aboriginal women, we have more security questions to make sure that the abusive person doesn't have access to her phone. We don't often leave messages, even when it's said that we can leave a message."***

Besides additional safety concerns in relation to the making and receiving of calls and messages, information that is stored or accessed by the device, such as personal emails or social media accounts, can be seen by others when the phone is shared.

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***"Aunty might end up with access to the phone and everything that comes with it, which could include the apps and accounts logged in from the phone – even accounts that aren't hers,"*** a worker says.

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##### **Increased use of credit/data**

Another common concern is that when multiple people use one device, the credit and data limits can be exceeded fairly quickly. A worker shares, ***"Kids are also more likely to be using her phone too, so it is likely to chew through the credit."*** When data and credit are not available, a woman is not able to use her phone when she needs it to ring someone in an emergency or to research information and access support.

##### **Sharing can lead to abuse and coercion**

Workers report that, ***"in some cases, the sharing of phones is not voluntary."***

Although the survivor may not want someone else to have access to her devices and accounts, she may not feel as though she can tell them they can't have access to her phone. Some survivors will have a second, secret phone that no one knows about, so they can keep certain communication private.

Other survivors may not recognise that although sharing their phone is a social norm, someone misusing her personal information to abuse or control her is not. Not recognising this form of abuse may make it more difficult for survivors to seek help regarding technology-facilitated abuse.



### **Finding 5: Living in a rural or remote area can be an additional barrier**

In addition to limited mobile reception and the limited, or slow, internet access often associated with living in a rural or remote area, workers also report that a perceived lack of privacy and a lack of resources are two other barriers associated with living in these areas.

#### **Lack of privacy**

Workers report that clients sometimes grapple with the lack of privacy (perceived or real) or confidentiality in small towns. Survivors worry that if they visit a specific service (such as a domestic and family violence service), they might become the subject of town gossip. As one worker explains, **“Some women don’t want to go to a community-based domestic violence service because they don’t want everyone to find out.”** This could be because the victim-survivor may not want people in her community to see her going to the service or may not want the people who work there (who are also members of her small community) to know about the domestic and/or family violence. This lack of privacy can be a barrier to women getting assistance.

Workers in towns where domestic and family violence services are co-located with other services or services that are discrete, report that women can come in under the guise of another type of appointment such as emergency relief, or a doctor’s appointment, and then get assistance relating to the domestic and/or family violence and feel that their privacy is protected.

#### **Lack of resources - particularly for dealing with complex issues**

Workers in remote communities note that the lack of other services (mental health, substance abuse, homelessness, etc.) for both victim-survivors and perpetrators, makes it difficult to offer holistic services to adequately address the range of complex issues a survivor may be experiencing. **“When there are no or limited services in town for intersecting issues, it makes it hard to adequately address the violence,”** said one worker. Services are lacking even in regard to domestic and family violence, as the worker added, **“We don’t have perpetrator programs to support the men perpetrating violence.”**

### **Finding 6: Language and literacy barriers compound abuse, isolation, and access to safety strategies**

Workers report that low literacy and English language proficiency is a barrier for some women. Aboriginal languages are not written languages, so even when women do speak English, **“a lot of older women have low English literacy, since they wouldn’t even read in their own language.”** Limited English literacy impacts a victim/survivor’s ability to seek assistance or understand how to use their technology.

**“When Telstra sends alerts about her service,”** explains a worker, **“it’s not accessible to her because it’s in English.”** Low technology ability, in addition to low literacy, increases women’s isolation. The problem is exacerbated when technology introduces terms and concepts that are new or unknown. A worker shares, **“Even the term ‘technology-facilitated abuse’ is too complicated; it requires a higher level of comprehension to understand.”**

# Findings – frontline worker perceptions of technology-facilitated abuse in **CaLD communities**

## Finding 1: Technology can permit higher levels of control by abusive partner

An issue that emerges consistently from workers is the high level of control the abusive person has over the victim-survivor's life, including her technology.

**“He has access to all of her private information, from Centrelink to bank accounts to email,”** says a worker.

This control compounds when the abusive person buys the technology, sets up the technology, and creates the accounts linked to the devices; he effectively controls everything. With so many aspects of life communicated through or accessed via technology, the abusive partner can access and effect full control over a victim-survivor's life.

Workers share that women who are in Australia on spousal visas are vulnerable to even higher levels of control because they are dependent on their abuser.

**“The level of control is built into the system,”** explains a worker, **“even the Department of Immigration will only communicate with the sponsor – usually the perpetrator. Whatever he says is right because it's the only information she gets.”** Women are not given basic information and are at the mercy of the abuser.

## Finding 2: Survivors often don't recognise technology-facilitated coercion and control as abuse

Many workers report that some survivors don't seem to consider the abuser's access to her accounts, and his complete control of her technology, as a tactic of abuse. Some survivors see it as normal.

**“In some cases, women come from places where men run the show,”** says a worker.

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*“Women need to be aware that they have a right to things: You have a right to your own Facebook account. You have a right to not share your password. You have a right to your own things, a right to privacy.”*

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## Finding 3: Survivors who have low technology knowledge and skills are quite vulnerable

An issue that emerges consistently is how women's low technology knowledge and skills can impact their ability to address the technology-facilitated abuse.

**“Some survivors don't know that they can port their number to another phone if he smashes it,”** says a worker.

Another worker adds, **“They lose all their contacts, and they don't realise they can go to the Telstra store, where an employee can help them import their contacts, or that their contacts are in the cloud.”**

One of the reasons women's technology skills are low is because the abusive person doesn't allow her to have access to technology. Worker's stories include a woman who is not allowed to touch the computer if the abusive partner is not home, and another woman who is not allowed to connect her smartphone to the home Wi-Fi.

Not only does a lack of access to technology limit a woman's ability to connect with friends or research options for assistance, it also results in the woman having low confidence in her ability to use technology. **“When her tech confidence is low, she is used to, and prefers to, have someone else do it,”** says a worker. When women don't understand how to use technology, they put their trust in a stranger, their children, or their abusive partner.



#### **Finding 4: The impact of abuse is greater when survivors are geographically, socially, and technologically isolated**

A common theme is isolation, particularly geographic and social isolation. A CaLD survivor may be living far from her community and support network. If she doesn't speak English, her isolation increases. If she lives in a rural area, leaving requires funds for a plane ticket. ***"The disparity between the victim and abuser is huge,"*** says a worker.

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***"He's educated, has English skills, and is employed. He has social status and is liked in the community. While she's at home, taking care of the children, and unable to take English classes. She is invisible."***

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These factors, combined with low technology skills or forbidden access to technology, means it can be extremely difficult for women to seek information and assistance or to leave an abusive partner.

#### **Finding 5: Technology-facilitated abuse is often basic: harassment, destroying technology, forbidding access**

Perhaps due to low technology skills, the type of technology-facilitated abuse experienced by some CaLD women tends to be fairly basic, such as destroying technology, forbidding access to technology, or harassment via calls, texting, and social media.

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***A refuge worker shares that for some survivors, "once they come to refuge, and we give them a new phone, the tech abuse tends to stop".***

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One worker says that sometimes it's psychological abuse and intimidation, rather than actual tampering with her technology. ***"He'll want to know why she wants a phone. He tells her she doesn't need a phone,"*** says a worker. ***"In fact, some survivors will choose to not have a phone, just because they don't want to increase his scrutiny or suspicion."***

Harassment via social media is very common. Workers share examples of abusers defaming the survivor by sending messages or posting abusive content on Facebook. Once abusive content is online, family members and community members can also get involved. ***"Social media allows people to choose sides. In some cases, community members will put pressure on the victim, or they would refuse to support the woman for fear of saying anything against the husband,"*** says a worker. ***"It gets messy and can cause a lot of harm and hurt for everyone,"*** adds another worker.

#### **Finding 6: Technology can permit greater involvement in the abuse by the family – in Australia and overseas – both as abusers or as victims**

Most workers share that technology allows greater involvement of the children and family overseas. In one example, the abusive father forced his child to create false audio recordings of the mother 'abusing' the child. In most situations, however, the extended family is brought in, either as additional abusers or as victims. ***"We've had situations where a woman's family overseas was threatened by the abusive partner,"*** shares a worker.

Using the family overseas as a threat is another method of technology-facilitated abuse. ***"Women have been threatened with having intimate photos published or shared with conservative family overseas, if she didn't do what he wanted,"*** says one worker.

Another worker shares, ***"one of the differences between CaLD women and 'Western society,' is that in 'Western society' the focus [of the abuse] is on the woman. For CaLD women, the focus is toward the family. This is really hard for the women and workers to manage, since the threat is not just to her but her family overseas."***

Extended family overseas can become perpetrators also, by harassing the victim-survivor, even if the survivor is in Australia. A worker shares a story of a brother-in-law, living overseas, sending harassing and threatening messages to the survivor if she tries to seek help. Another worker shares that with one woman she worked with, ***"within minutes of her seeking help, she started receiving text messages from family members in her country of origin, pressuring her to return. The pressure is immediate."***

## Finding 7: The lack of English proficiency is a major barrier to addressing technology-facilitated abuse

Lack of English proficiency is a huge barrier for many reasons and has significant impact for survivors experiencing technology-facilitated abuse. ***“When text messages are in a different language – this makes it harder to get it into court,”*** explains a worker. Many survivors cannot afford to have the abusive messages translated into English, and even when it is translated the context and meaning can be lost. A worker relates an instance where her client’s abuser had threatened to kill her and her family and it was translated into ***“you have killed this marriage.”***

Just seeking services can be challenging if a woman doesn’t speak English. While interpretation is available, it is expensive, and in some cases women are not comfortable sharing intimate details with interpreters and are worried about privacy. One worker notes that, particularly in emerging communities with not enough trained translators, women are worried that what they share via the interpreter will be found out by everyone.

Even when women are provided interpreters, workers may not be addressing technology-facilitated abuse with the survivor. ***“Because of the cost of the interpreter service and the dynamic of speaking via another person, we tend to be very task oriented. We focus on the main issues and we work through safety strategies and options. There isn’t often time to explore other things that are happening,”*** shares a worker. Another worker says, ***“Technology is a pretty sophisticated conversation, so if English isn’t their first language, then it can be a difficult discussion to have.”***

## Finding 8: Identifying and addressing technology-facilitated abuse isn’t often a priority for workers or survivors

Workers admit that on a whole, identifying and addressing technology-facilitated abuse is not a huge priority. Although workers acknowledge that technology may permit higher levels of control by the abusive partner and that technology-facilitated abuse is a concern, there are so many other things that need to be addressed first. Some of the CaLD survivors workers engage with have more immediate concerns that need to be addressed, including legal status, housing, employment, and other self-sufficiency needs.

Some workers wonder if perhaps technology-facilitated abuse is not an issue for their CaLD clients, but concede that they are also not proactively asking about it. Workers suggest that the reasons technology-facilitated abuse may not appear to be a major problem could be that some survivors do not see it as concern. Many workers report that unless the survivor brings it up as an issue, technology-facilitated abuse tactics are not addressed.

Another challenge is that addressing technology-facilitated abuse often includes education and helping the survivor become more ‘tech-savvy’. ***“The best way to help a woman feel confident with technology is to sit next to her and help her do it. As a crisis service, we don’t often have the luxury of time to go through her technology,”*** says a worker. ***“We’re focusing on immigration issues, housing needs, the children, etc.”***





# Conclusion and analysis

Common themes emerge during the listening sessions for both the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and CaLD sessions.<sup>12</sup> While the type of technology-facilitated abuse and overall experience of the abuse may be different for each woman, the following issues are consistently raised by frontline workers as factors that make women more vulnerable or make it more difficult for them to address the abuse.

## Factors that increase risk and vulnerability to technology-facilitated abuse

### 1. Low technology literacy

Women are more vulnerable to technology-facilitated abuse when they have low technology skills. When women don't know how to use their technology they feel less confident in using their technology, are less able to use their technology in ways that can increase their privacy and security, and rely on others, including the perpetrator, to manage their technology and information.

Women with low technology skills often have partners who purchase and set up their technology, giving their abuser full control from the beginning. Even after they realise their abusive partner is able to monitor their activities, they don't know how to take back control of their technology. Instead, they often ask their children or others in their community to help them recover their technology, which puts their privacy at risk or makes them vulnerable to being taken advantage of by those they ask.

### 2. Not recognising technology control and coercion as a form of abuse

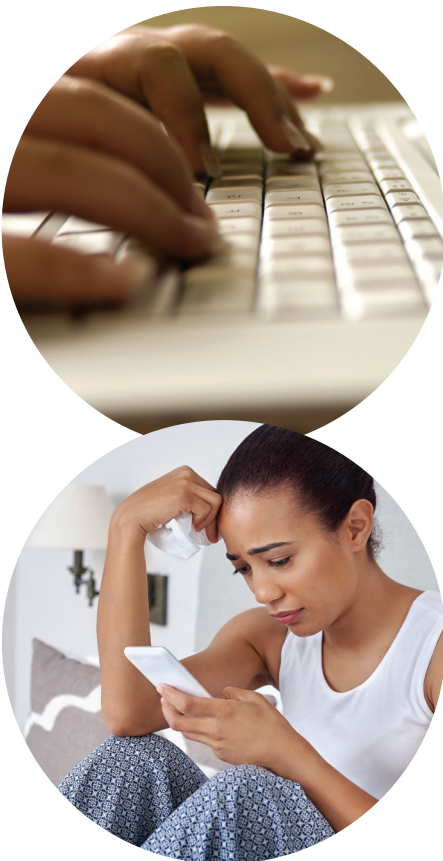
While some forms of technology-facilitated abuse are obvious – overt harassment, locking someone out of their account, stalking them via GPS – other forms are subtle: wanting to know her passwords, reading her texts and emails, and even telling her she doesn't need access to technology. When it is the norm for a woman's partner to know all her passwords or to read her text messages, it may be difficult for her to realise when that behaviour becomes controlling or coercive.

### 3. Isolation can be technological as well as social and geographical

When isolated, women who are victim-survivors of domestic and/or family violence have more difficulty accessing help, have less safety options, and find it harder to leave an abusive partner. The isolation can be: social (they are in a community with no social support), geographical (they live in an area with no easy way to move around), and technological (they have limited or no access to technology).

Without access to technology, women are not easily able to access information about available resources, reach out for help (or allow services to ring them back), connect with their support system, or use technology as part of their safety strategies. Limited access to technology can be a result of low technology literacy, lack of limited funds, living in an area with limited technology, or because the abusive person forbids access to technology.

<sup>12</sup> In WESNET Safety Net Australia's broader work on examining the intersection of technology and violence against women, we find these risk factors consistent across all survivors of domestic violence, regardless of background.



#### **4. Technology permits close-knit communities to be closer positively and/or negatively**

When women are part of close-knit communities, technology can permit greater support. Even if a woman is far away from friends and family, technology can permit her to communicate with family overseas who can offer guidance and assistance. However, technology can also open up the abuse, and expand the number of abusers, including allowing family overseas or community members to act as additional perpetrators or put pressure on the survivor.

Close-knit communities and technology can also make it more difficult for women to maintain privacy. For example, in some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities, ownership of technology – whether it is a smartphone or an email address – does not belong to an individual. In some communities, a smartphone may be shared by the family or community. In another community, emails don't go to an individual but to a shire council, who then passes the message along to the person the message is for.

When it is the social/cultural norm for technology devices and accounts to be shared with partners, family, and the community, women have less privacy and can be more vulnerable to coercion and control by the abusive person or others.

#### **5. Lack of money or poverty**

Lack of money is a huge barrier for domestic and/or family violence survivors. From a technology-facilitated abuse perspective, lack of funds can limit a victim-survivor's ability to access technology. Without funds, they may not be able to top up their prepaid services, pay their bills, purchase new technology devices if their current ones are compromised, or hire technology experts to review their current devices for viruses or malware.

#### **6. Limited English proficiency or literacy**

Not being able to speak or read English is a major barrier for victim-survivors in Australia. Most devices and most resources on technology safety are written in English. If a survivor isn't able to understand her technology, she is forced to rely on others to help her. Moreover, because Australian services – from social services to the legal system – are set up for English speakers, they are not well equipped to assist women who don't speak or read English well. Workers share stories of women with limited English proficiency being unable to get help or attain safety, where emergency 000 calls went unlogged, and Courts misunderstood abusive text messages.

#### **What can we do?**

One of the key factors that can be addressed by the sector is low technology literacy. Empowering women to become more 'tech-savvy' can help women feel more confident and in control. When women know how their technology works and have control over it, they can better identify risks and strategise for their safety. For example, if a woman lives in a community where her smartphone is shared by the community, she can protect her privacy by being aware of what personal information is accessible on the device and take steps to remove or limit access to that personal information.

Another key factor that can be addressed by the sector is women's access to technology. As revealed through the listening sessions, women are more vulnerable and at risk of abuse when they don't have access to technology. Yet, workers share examples of how women use technology creatively to manage their safety, from using a second (and secret) phone, to using cameras in their homes and cars, to using specific apps on their phones. Giving survivors of domestic and/or family violence access to technology and empowering them to use it safely will help victim-survivors address technology-facilitated abuse.

# Education and resources needed



One of the primary goals of the listening tour was to gain a better understanding of the types of resources and training needed by frontline service providers to help Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and/or CaLD victim-survivors.

## For survivors

A clear theme that emerged was that survivors need more education on technology safety. Although many resources are available, including a wide range of resources from WESNET, workers identified some barriers in accessing those resources.

### Resources need to be accessible, basic, and simple

Many resources may be too technical for some survivors, particularly for survivors with language barriers or low literacy levels. A worker shares, *“I had a client who was worried that the father was going to track them. We went through the book (the safety planning guide) and online, and there was nothing available in layman’s terms.”* Other workers want step-by-step guides with pictures. *“Some Aboriginal women have commented that the handouts are too much to read,”* a worker says.

### Resources need to be diverse

Workers share that long, written resources can be difficult for survivors especially when they are in trauma. A worker explains, *“When working with women who are in trauma, nothing goes in. They just can’t absorb the information. We don’t want to pile on so much that they won’t remember. It has to be simple, something to take away, something they can do later.”* Workers suggest short, sharp, and easy-to-understand videos or small cards or pamphlets with a (short) focussed message (that is not overly wordy and includes images) that a client can take away.

### Education is needed for children

Further feedback from workers is the concern around children and their use of technology. Children often have their own technology and are unaware of security and privacy concerns, and children who are victim-survivors of abuse or children of a parent being abused have different types of safety risks. Workers note a major worry for women is the technology remaining safe and secure when the technology travels between their home and their abusive partners.



## For frontline workers

Many workers note that more education for them would be helpful. *“Technology is constantly changing,”* one worker says.

### More WESNET technology safety training

Workers share their appreciation for WESNET’s training and resources, and in particular the local training. Local training means that more workers are trained versus just the one or two who can travel to a conference. The training helps workers feel more confident assisting their clients, and many workers want more training from WESNET. A worker says, *“Training has helped us increase our own knowledge and privacy, and we can share that knowledge with survivors.”*

### Trained specialist located in their agency or someone to whom they could refer survivors

Some workers wish they could have a ‘technology safety specialist’ located in each agency who can be responsible for assisting clients with technology safety.

### Strategies on how to discuss technology safety with survivors

Workers often don’t have the time or confidence to fully assess for technology issues. Workers suggest it would be helpful to have easy ways that they can confidently discuss technology safety with the survivors they support. Other workers suggest a technology safety training curriculum that could be used in support groups to teach women how to use their technology safely and feel empowered.

### More awareness of existing resources

One of the issues is that many workers don’t know that a lot of resources already exist and can be accessed by them. It is clear that workers don’t know where and how to access these resources.

## Systemic advocacy

In addition to education for survivors and frontline workers, it is noted that there should be more systemic advocacy. Workers suggest media campaigns or public awareness campaigns.

### Education is needed in other sectors

A final suggestion is to offer technology safety education to other community sectors that may be in contact with survivors, including schools, libraries, and other community centres that work directly with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and/or CaLD victim-survivors.



## **WESNET's proposed resource development**

WESNET has taken into consideration all the feedback provided by the frontline workers who participated in the listening tour. Based on this feedback, and acknowledging budget constraints, WESNET proposes the following new resources:

### **'This is Tech-Abuse' poster**

One message that was made clear in all the listening sessions is that survivors do not identify technological control and coercion by their abusive partner as a form of domestic violence and abuse. When workers are busy responding to the complex crisis it is often up to the survivor to raise the technology related issues they are experiencing.

To address this concern, WESNET will create a poster that agencies can pin on their waiting room board. This poster will illustrate simple technology-facilitated abuse tactics that survivors may identify with. The purpose of the poster is to help the survivor self-identify the tactics she may be experiencing, to recognise that the behaviour is not appropriate, and to prompt her to ask/tell her worker about the abuse. The poster will be in English and also translated into Vietnamese, Simple Chinese, Arabic, and Hindi.

### **Conversation facilitators (brochures)**

Another message highlighted by the listening tour is that technology can be complex and challenging, even for workers who have attended WESNET Tech Safety training. Not only do workers want strategies on how to start the discussion, they want something simple and clear. To address this need, WESNET will develop a series of conversation facilitators (brochures that will help guide the worker to discuss common issues around technology-facilitated abuse).

This tool is for the worker and will be a double-sided instrument: the front-page using images for the worker and survivor to identify the issue and talk about what abuse is occurring, and the back side with detailed text to help the worker discuss what can be done. Tentatively, the four topics will be: location, social media, accounts, and harassment. Since these facilitator brochures are for workers, they will be in plain English and not translated.

### **Take-home wallet accordion**

Another clear message is that victim-survivors need short, easy-to-understand guides on what they can do, and perhaps something that they can read later after the discussion with their worker. WESNET will develop a series of take-home brochures on specific topics for survivors to take home. The brochures will include practical tips on a range of technology topics. These brochures will be in English and also translated into Vietnamese, Simple Chinese, Arabic, and Hindi, and cover specific topics.

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## Vision

**WESNET** seeks to ensure that all women and children live free of domestic and family violence and its consequences.



**WESNET**  
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