

# TECHNOLOGY AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

This policy position statement is drawn directly from WESNET's [Second National Survey on Technology and Domestic Violence](#).

## Policy position

- Violence is not acceptable. Living free from violence is a fundamental human right.
- Women's digital inclusion and access to the internet and other technology is fundamental and essential to women's social, political and economic participation.
- Technology-facilitated abuse (TFA) in the context of domestic and family violence is not a stand-alone issue, and stand-alone responses will be ineffective in supporting victim-survivors experiencing TFA.
- Domestic and family violence (DFV) victim-survivors have better outcomes when they are supported by specialist women's services rather than generalist services. That said, all measures to increase the coordination between, and understanding of, all sectors that work with victim-survivors is strongly supported.
- Any interventions to support DFV victim-survivors in relation to TFA need to be integrated with the existing service responses and not sit as standalone or 'bolt-on' response or service outside the system.

## Understanding technology-facilitated abuse

TFA is a form of gendered violence and abuse, particularly implicated in DFV, using mobile, online and other technologies. TFA can include stalking and monitoring, threats and abuse, image-based abuse ('revenge porn'), as well as sexual violence and harassment.

Recent research has shown that TFA is a growing problem due largely to the rapidly evolving nature and accessibility of technology. WESNET's (2020) [Second National Survey on Technology and Domestic Violence](#) found that most DFV perpetrators used various forms of technology to intimidate, stalk and control, with the most prevalent means of TFA including persistent and abusive use of messaging and social media applications, along with surveillance and tracking. It is clear that since the first 2015 survey the extent of TFA has increased.

A further large-scale study is currently underway, led by the Australian National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS), to better understand the nature and characteristics of TFA and to improve the evidence base to inform practice innovation and further development of prevention and responses to TFA ([ANROWS, 2021](#)).

## Recognising intersectionality

While all women can be the target of TFA, some women may be more vulnerable and may find accessing assistance more difficult than others. It is essential to note also that it is not people's identities that cause vulnerability but is instead systems and practices that are based on outdated and discriminatory biases and assumptions.

- Women with disabilities are one of the most marginalised groups of women and experience violence at significantly higher rates, for greater duration, and with more severe impacts than that of their female peers ([ABS, 2017](#)). While there is limited evidence about TFA against women with disabilities, available research shows that people with a disability are at a high risk of cyberbullying, with young women seen to be more likely to be victims ([Heiman & Olenik-Shemesh, 2015](#)).
- The [WESNET survey \(2020\)](#) found that, with respect to CALD women, perpetrators call, text and use social media to contact family and friends from overseas to spread rumours and isolate women, as well as use image-based sexual abuse in particular ways to shame women from CALD backgrounds.
- Research has noted that technology is used in specific ways to abuse Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women due to the importance placed on community and connection ([Woodlock, 2015](#)), with the WESNET survey also finding that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women are at particular risk of isolation, with limited adequate support available.
- The [WESNET survey \(2020\)](#) found that the perceived risk for all these cohorts of women - as for all women - has increased since 2015.

## About WESNET

WESNET is Australia's leading non-government organisation expert on TFA, working closely with international experts on TFA since 2009, and training over 8500 frontline workers. The WESNET Safety Net Australia project was established in 2011, providing a wide range of training, technical advice, and policy guidance on the topics of technology safety, investigating and evidence collection, and victim privacy and security rights.

WESNET and Curtin University led a research team to oversee and publish the [Second National Survey on Technology and Domestic Violence](#). WESNET is a research partner on the ANROWS led project [Technology-facilitated abuse: Extent, nature and responses in the Australian community](#).

## Recommendations for Action

### Research and evidence development

**Recommendation 1:** The findings of WESNET's Second National Survey on Technology and Domestic Abuse indicate the importance of repeating this study at least every five years, and therefore we recommend that another survey be funded and conducted in 2025 - if not earlier - given the speed of the development of new technologies.

**Recommendation 2:** Perpetrators' risk assessments should include assessing perpetrators' existing misuse of technology as part of their abuse tactics, and obtaining information on their technological skills, their access to digital data and the sectors in which they are employed. For example, a perpetrator who works in real estate may be able to access online databases that could reveal the location of victim-survivors.

### Training and awareness raising

**Recommendation 3:** Priority needs to be given to training police, magistrates and other legal professionals about non-physical forms of violence such as TFA within a broader understanding of coercive control. This training should be developed and conducted with DV specialist organisations in order to convey the consequences and impacts for victim-survivors.

**Recommendation 4:** Continued specialist training and development of the DV sector—such as that undertaken by WESNET—is necessary to keep pace with technological developments and responses in this area and this training must have a gender lens.

**Recommendation 5:** Legal and judicial professionals must be educated about TFA, particularly in relation to the ways that contact orders are being misused by perpetrators to use technology to abuse, threaten and harass women.

### Partnerships between the technology and DFV sectors

**Recommendation 6:** Technology companies and those that use technology must: (1) build systems that include safety by design with a correct threat assessment, broader than cybersecurity and privacy aimed at prevention of fraud; and (2) recognise that their customers/clients are very likely to be experiencing TFA on their platform and need to have dedicated customer service pathways for TFA victims.

**Recommendation 7:** Technology developers must consult with specialised DV services about changes and developments, noting that perpetrators adapt and adjust their behaviour as rapidly as technology develops.

### Prevention measures

**Recommendation 8:** Prevention strategies focused on TFA need to be situated within the larger framework of preventing men's violence against women and children. Framing TFA as a form of cyberbullying ignores the gendered nature of this abuse, the intentions of perpetrators, and the impacts on the victims.

**Recommendation 9:** Prevention strategies must include a program of promoting technology literacy and digital inclusion for women and girls, with the aim of enabling women to manage and control their digital devices and accounts without interference from partners and ex-partners.

**Recommendation 10:** Prevention training and education for boys and men must include the responsible and ethical use of technology, aimed at ensuring men and boys take responsibility for their abusive actions and decisions to misuse digital tools and devices.

## Future policy and legislative development

**Recommendation 11:** In recent years laws concerned with image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) have been progressively introduced across Australian jurisdictions. The impact of these laws must be evaluated in order to assess the value of this strategy in reducing IBSA. Similarly civil penalty schemes for Image-based abuse and adult cyberbullying also require evaluation.

**Recommendation 12:** Policy makers in partnership with the justice sector and women's specialist DV services should consider how TFA could be more consistently and effectively responded to by police and courts, including the collection of evidence about the various patterns of TFA that are being used by perpetrators alongside other tactics of coercive control. An understanding of these patterns would increase understanding of their interlocking nature and awareness of the significant and sometimes long lasting impacts on victim-survivors.

## References and further reading

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2017). [Personal safety survey](#).

Brown, C. and Hegarty, K. (2018). Digital dating abuse measures: A critical review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 40, 44–59.

Fiolet, R., Brown, C., Wellington, M., Bentley, K. and Hegarty, K. (2021). Exploring the Impact of TechnologyFacilitated Abuse and Its Relationship with Domestic Violence: A Qualitative Study on Experts Perceptions. *Global Qualitative Nursing Research*, 8, 1–8.

Flynn, A., Powell, A. and Hinds, S, (2021). [Technology-facilitated abuse: A survey of support services stakeholders](#). ANROWS.

Heiman, T., & Olenik-Shemesh, D. (2015). [Cyberbullying experience and gender differences among adolescents in different educational settings](#). *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 48(2), 146-155.

Woodlock, D. (2015). [Remote control](#). *DVRCV Advocate*, 1.

Woodlock, D., Bentley, K., Schulze, D., Mahoney, N., Chung, D. and Pracilio, A. (2020) *Second National Survey of Technology Abuse and Domestic Violence in Australia*. WESNET.

## Box: Technology facilitated abuse

- Over 99% of frontline workers have clients experiencing technology facilitated abuse (Woodluck et al., 2020).
- TFA behaviours include but are not limited to: stalking and omnipresence, tracking, intimidation, impersonation, humiliation, threats consistent harassment/unwanted contact, sexting and image-based sexual abuse (Fiolet et al., 2021).
- TFA should be seen as an extension of other DFV behaviours (Brown & Hegarty, 2018).