

LearningNetwork Brief 06

Understanding Technology-Related Violence Against Women: Types of Violence and Women's Experiences

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Technology is playing a role in all categories of violence against women (e.g., sexual violence, harassment and stalking; intimate partner violence). Telephones, computers, and the internet can be used to harm women.

Technology-related violence affects children and adults. It can be perpetrated by females and males and both can be victims/survivors of this violence. All technology-related violence is concerning and unacceptable. Given the mandate of the Learning Network, our focus is on violence against women (VAW).

Women's risk and experience of violence is contingent on a complex number of intersecting factors such as age, race, class, disability. For instance, young women are at increased risk of some types of violence (e.g., sexual violence, intimate partner violence). Her risk increases further when her social context includes poverty and racism. Young women and their similar aged intimate partners or peers likely spend more time using and use more technologies than any other age group. Accordingly, young women may be at increased risk for all types of technology-related violence. Future research is likely to show that those who are most vulnerable in the offline world, are at the greatest risk in the virtual world.

The UN estimates that 95% of aggressive behaviour, harassment, abusive language and denigrating images in online spaces are aimed at women and come from partner or former male partners. ([The Association for Progressive Communications, p. 1](#))

While the dynamics of violence largely remain the same, technology extends the reach and creates new forms of abusive behaviour. For instance, technology-related violence can be anonymously perpetrated and committed from any location with relative ease due to automation and the accessibility of many technologies. The outcome is the erosion of a woman's sense of security: concepts of "safe distance" and "safe place" are threatened.

Although under-researched at this time, the consequences of technology-related violence seem to be similar or amplified when compared to violence not involving technology. Regardless of whether technology is used, the root causes of violence against women are inequality and discrimination, and a woman's experience of violence is shaped by her social location (e.g., intersecting factors such as class, race, age). Potential consequences affect every domain of a woman's life, including psychological impacts (e.g., shame, stress/anxiety), health impacts (e.g., stress related illnesses), privacy concerns, fear, and social effects.

Increased accessibility and rapid advancements in technology make it challenging to keep abreast of ways in which technology is being used to harm women. To assist with this challenge, the Learning Network team scanned available publications on technology-related violence

against women to identify as many types of violence as possible. In this Brief, we grouped the violence into seven broad categories (including the catch-all category “other”). Within each category, we list a number of specific examples and provide illustrations of a woman’s experience for some types of violence. We have made minor changes or created a composite experience in order to protect the privacy of the women who have shared their experiences. We hope that this Brief helps to name the issue in order that individuals and anti-violence organizations can help reclaim technology for women, support women affected by this violence, and proactively work to prevent technology-based violence against women.

1. Hacking – using technology to gain illegal or unauthorized access to systems or resources for the purpose of acquiring personal information, altering or modifying information, or slandering and denigrating the victim and/or VAW organizations.

Examples include:

- violation of passwords
- controlling computer functions (e.g., freeze the computer; log off the user)
- accessing information from a cell phone or TTY device such as text messages, call histories, and contact lists
- using data broker sites to gain access to personal information such as home address, phone number, and marital status

Andrea’s Facebook account got hacked by her ex-boyfriend. He changed her name to ‘slut’ on her profile page, defaced the profile picture of her and

her current boyfriend, and changed her password so he would have total control over her account and she would be unable to log-in and delete the changes.

2. Surveillance/Tracking – using technology to stalk and monitor a victim’s activities and behaviours either in real-time or historically.

Examples include:

- mobile phone tracking/GPS
- keeping track of web-browsing
- tracking email, program, and chat activity
- tracking files transferred and keystrokes typed on the computer

Lauren’s partner, Chris, gave her a smartphone with a card saying “I care about you.” She was thrilled with the gift and pleased that he loved her enough to give her a gift even when there was not a special occasion. However, her feelings soon changed. Chris texted her constantly and insisted that she text him back to let him know where she was and who was with her. When she told him that she was going to get in trouble if she kept texting so much at work, he accused her of having an affair with a co-worker and increased his controlling monitoring of her activities. He continued to constantly text her and demanded that she send him pictures of herself and her surroundings every time he texted to find out where she was and who was with her. A co-worker expressed concern but Lauren said it was okay and that Chris just needed a lot of reassurance.

3. Impersonating – using technology to assume the identity of the victim or someone else in order to access

private information, embarrass or shame the victim, contact the victim, or create fraudulent identity documents.

Examples include:

- impersonating someone in instant messaging applications
- impersonating the victim/survivor while sending emails from her account or creating a fake profile for social networking sites
- 'spoofing' -- the ability to change what someone sees on their caller ID display and, in some cases, alter the caller's voice
- destroying credit rating by way of identity theft
- counterfeiting documentation using advanced printer and computer technology
- impersonating victims who are deaf, hard of hearing, or speech-impaired by using their TeleTypewriter (TTY) or Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS)

Joan, a woman who is hearing impaired, in a wheel chair, and a survivor of sexual abuse, reported to police that John, an attendant in the group home, had sexually assaulted her. One day, the police received a call on the TTY, allegedly from Joan, reading, "If you don't drop the charges against John, I will kill myself." When help was sent to Joan's residence it was found that she had been visiting her father in the hospital when the TTY call was made. John had impersonated her in an

attempt to get the charges against him dropped.

- 4. Harassment/Spamming** – using technology to continuously contact, annoy, threaten, and/or scare the victim. This is ongoing behaviour and not one isolated incident.

Examples include:

- persistent mobile calls or texts
- persistent unwanted emails or messages
- filling up voicemail with messages so no one else can leave a message

Debbie met an acquaintance who had worked for the same company as she briefly did several years ago. She agreed to join him for a quick coffee in the mall where they had met. They caught up on mutual co-workers, exchanged contact information, and agreed to stay in touch. He called the next day and invited her out. She thanked him for calling and said that she was busy. He continued to call. She became uncomfortable, and after consulting with a friend, asked him not to call anymore. Subsequently, she received constant calls and texts during the day and the night. Initially the messages varied between anger and pleading. He accused her of having led him on or not being faithful to him and then would send messages saying he loved her and pleaded with her to not break up with him. Overtime, the messages became increasingly angry, accusatory and threatening. Debbie became more annoyed and worried for her safety. She let all messages go to voicemail in case it was him calling, asked a friend to move in with her until the harassment stopped, only went out in the evening with others, and avoided

going to areas of the city close to the mall where they had accidentally met and had coffee.

Eventually, Debbie went to the police.

5. Recruitment – using technology to lure potential victims into violent situations.

Examples include:

- using the internet to recruit victims of human trafficking
- fraudulent online postings and advertisements (e.g., dating sites; employment opportunities)
- traffickers using chat rooms, message boards, and websites to communicate or advertise with each other and with customers

Nicki answered an online ad looking for “fresh, new faces” to model bathing suits. She submitted her picture and completed the online application form. She was excited when she was selected for an interview. She had always dreamed of being a model. With some trepidation, she went to the location of the photo shoot. There were two men in the room and they had cameras and a number of bathing suits. Nicki thought it was an odd place for a photo shoot but the men were nice and stepped out of the room while she changed into the two piece bathing suit. They took many photographs of her and their encouraging comments became increasingly sexual. Nicki felt pleased that they liked her body but started to feel self-conscious and uncomfortable. She said she had to go. The men said that was fine and that she should change. This time they did not leave the room. When Nicki started to put her clothes on over the bathing suit, one of the men

said they had to have the bathing suit for the next model and that it would be stealing if she left with the suit. Before Nicki got out of the room, she was sexually assaulted by one of the men. She believed the sexual assault was her fault and did not report it to the police.

6. Malicious Distribution – using technology as a tool to manipulate and distribute defamatory and illegal materials related to the victim and/or VAW organizations.

Examples include:

- Blackmail by threatening to distribute intimate photos or video
- Manipulating photographic images and distributing them
- unauthorized use of personal videos/images/photographs
- posting slanderous, defamatory material on social networking sites
- using technology as a propaganda tool for supporting violence against women
- using file swapping programs and peer to peer networks to share illegal material

Jill was in love with Robert. She sent two nude pictures of herself via phone texting as a Valentine’s gift for Robert. A few months later, Jill and Robert broke up because Robert had begun a relationship with someone else. Shortly after, Jill’s friends and classmates saw the nude photos she had given to Robert through Facebook. The caption below the photo read, “A REAL HO – Want some?” Jill was angry, hurt, ashamed, and embarrassed. A number of male acquaintances made comments about

the pictures online and in Jill's presence. She withdrew from social activities because she felt like everyone had seen the pictures and she did not want to face anyone.

7. Other – some types of tech-related violence do not fall under these general categories.

Examples include:

- forcing women to do illegal tech activities
- traffickers using e-business technologies to make anonymous financial transactions with customers

[Click here to access these related Learning Network Publications:](#)

Learning Network e-Newsletter Issue 4: Technology and Violence Against Women

Guidelines for Information Communication Technology (ICT) Safety. Learning Network Brief 08

Technology and Trafficking in Persons. Learning Network Brief 07

Glossary of Terms Related to Technology

Links to Online Resources on Technology-Related Violence Against Women