Summarising the evidence

ONLINE HARASSMENT AND ABUSE AGAINST WOMEN

Research summary

Online harassment perpetrated against women

This research summary draws on an evidence review undertaken by Bridget Harris (Monash University) in 2022 as part of the *Summarising the evidence* project. The summary was developed by Respect Victoria in consultation with the evidence review authors.

Visit the *Summarising the evidence* project page for the accompanying context brief, as well as information about the scope and aims of the project.

Respect Victoria gratefully acknowledges the work of the Australian Institute of Family Studies and all authors in conducting this work.

Domain	Summary of research
Definition	Online violence and harassment perpetrated against women incorporates a broad range of behaviours and contexts perpetrated by unknown or anonymous people, people who may be known to the victim/survivor, and/or people who are known to the victim/survivor. There are gendered patterns, whereby men are typically the perpetrators of technology-facilitated violence and harassment against women. Sometimes terms such as 'online-gender based violence', 'online violence against women' and 'online abuse and gender-based violence against women' are used as a 'catch-all', incorporating many different forms of types of behaviours to which women and girls are subjected.[1]
Behaviours	**Technology-facilitated abuse:** the use of mobile and digital technologies to enact interpersonal harms. It includes online harassment, monitoring/stalking, doxing and technology-facilitated sexual violence. It can refer to harms enacted in particular contexts (such as digital dating abuse, technology-facilitated family violence, which are enacted in intimate and familial settings) or as a whole.[2]

Online harassment: the abuse and harassment of women, online. It generally has a gendered aspect in that women are disproportionately targeted and there is often a focus on their sex, gender and sexuality in the content of messages and threats. It includes trolling, defamation, verbal or sexual harassment and unwanted advances and rape and death threats communicated through information communication technology and may be accompanied by other acts such as doxing[1] and monitoring/stalking.[3-6]

Digital dating abuse (DDA): harmful and abusive technology-facilitated behaviours that occur in dating relationships or when using dating apps. Sexual harassment, verbal abuse, image-based sexual abuse, controlling behaviours, monitoring/staking are frequently identified in the scholarship.[7-11]

Technology-facilitated family violence: the use of technology to enact family violence, commonly perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner and targeting their children or their current or former partner's children. It may include the use of technology to send defamatory, abusive or threatening communications; make and/or share clandestine recordings; engage in image-based sexual abuse; dox; impersonate or engage in identity theft; monitor/stalk movements, activities, movements or communications; gain unauthorised access to a device or account or impairing an unauthorised function on a device or account; restrict access to or destroying technologies; or enact other forms of 'offline' abuse.[12-25]

Technology-facilitated sexual violence: the use of technology to facilitate sexual violence and harassment. It includes: unwanted / unwelcome sexual |

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[1] Doxing is defined as 'the release of [or threat to release] personal and identifying information' online.

	behaviour and aggression communicated or facilitated though digital channels; gender-based hate speech; online sexual harassment and cyberstalking;[20,26,27] image-based sexual abuse: the non-consensual taking or creation of sexual or nude images; the non-consensual sharing or distribution of nude of sexual images; threats to distribute nude or sexual images;[28] the use of a carriage service to procure sexual assault;[27] online image-based voyeurism; viewing but not creation of images that have been created and/or shared without consent.[29]
Prevalence	There are no overall or reliable population prevalence studies. Estimates vary between and within the five subtypes. Studies use different and sometimes overlapping definitions across the five subtypes and rely on surveys which include different numbers of people. **Technology facilitated abuse** Ranges from rates of victimization from 51%–60%.[30] A national survey found that three in five Australians with disability experienced technology-facilitated abuse across their lifetime and that two in three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experienced technology-facilitated abuse across their lifetime.[31] **Online harassment** 35% of 1,491 women surveyed who were working or had recently worked reported experiencing online abuse in a professional context.[4] **Digital Dating Abuse** In a survey of 527 young people, 56.1% of women experienced at least one form of digital dating abuse (humiliation, sexual coercion, monitoring and control, threats) within the previous 12 months.[8] **Technology facilitated family violence** In a 2015 survey of 546 family violence practitioners, 98% had clients who experienced technology-facilitated stalking and abuse,[25] The 2020 follow up of the 2015 survey found 93% of family violence practitioners had supported clients subjected to technology-facilitated abuse and stalking.[24] **Technology-facilitated sexual violence** In a survey of 2,956 Australian adults, 62% (1,841) had experienced technology-facilitated sexual violence.[30] More than 1 in 5 of the 30,000 students (male and female) who responded to a survey on sexual harassment and assault at Australian universities reported experiencing technology-based sexual harassment, with women (3.2%) more likely to be victimised than men.[26]
Victim survivor and perpetrator profile	**Technology facilitated abuse** Perpetrators may be any gender identity, but intimate partners who perpetrate tech facilitated abuse have been identified as predominantly male.[31] Women with disability experience technology-facilitated abuse from perpetrators who are known (carers, family members, intimate partners), who may be known (people

who contact them based on a shared online network) and unknown people (who may attempt to solicit images, gain control of their online accounts, or harass them).[32] Lateral violence has also been recorded in studies on Indigenous and LGBTIQ+ communities.[9,15,16]

Online harassment

Online harassment has been found to occur at elevated levels when women work in male-dominated industries,[33] or have public profiles through their work.[3-5] It is predominantly enacted by men who are not known to the target.[33,34]

Digital dating violence

Digital dating violence (DDA) is generally associated with youth cohorts who may be but are likely not residing with their intimate partner. Harmful behaviours may represent isolated instances or may involve a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviours, enacted through technology.[35-37] In contrast, technology-facilitated abuse that occurs in the context of family violence is often seen to be part of a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour (involving technology and other 'offline' channels and strategies).[38,39] Women experience the 'multi-dimensional sexual coercion' pattern more than men.[8,31,40]

There is some insight into dating application ('app') perpetrators; one review of forensic sexual assault investigations found 14% of victims (all women) were assaulted by perpetrator met on a dating app.[41] Both young men and women engage in controlling and monitoring behaviours, but for different reasons, with women concerned with potential infidelity and men with control.[8,42]

Technology-facilitated family violence

Predominantly, perpetrators of technology-facilitated family violence have been identified as current or former male intimate partners.[8,12,13,17,18,22-25] This does not occur in isolation but alongside 'offline' behaviours and other forms of abuse, violence or coercion.[38,39] Technology is a tool used by family violence perpetrators to enact coercive control and involves the use of individualised strategies in a pattern of behaviour, designed to entrap a particular victim/survivor/s.

Technology-facilitated sexual violence

Perpetrators are predominantly men and research shows higher rates of victimisation of women.[43,44] However some research has found symmetry in men and women's victimisation. However, studies indicate that men are significantly more likely to self-report perpetration and be identified as perpetrators, than women.[44,45] Both men and women engage in online image-based voyeurism. However, men cite visiting sites to view images, and there is an association between site visitation and perpetration of image-based sexual abuse for men, whereas women are more likely to visit sites to see if their images have been uploaded.[29]

Researchers' indication of factors associated with violence	Four drivers of online violence and harassment perpetrated against women reported in the academic and grey literature include: condoning of violence against women; men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence; rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity; and male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control.

Condoning of violence against women

Justifications of violence involve perpetrators externalising responsibility for their actions; implying the behaviour or actions of a (victim/survivor) target is to blame for and causes the violence. For example, sexualisation and objectification of women has resulted in perceptions that men are entitled to sex and sexualised images of women.[6,26] In the case of monitoring of intimate partners (amidst digital dating abuse or technology-facilitated family violence), allegations of wrongdoing (where there are said to be deficient or unfaithful partners or mothers) may be given as the rationale for perpetrator behaviours.[6,9,12,13,18,46] Work on technology-facilitated family violence finds that it is not uncommon for police to suggest victim/survivors are at fault for how they have used technology (for example, their online and social media activity) when victim/survivors report abuse.[13,17,18,47,48] Families and support workers of women with cognitive or intellectual disabilities sometimes suggested they had less capacity to use technology – and so were, to some degree, accountable – for abuse they experienced.[32]

Men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence

The dominance of men in various industries (such as the technology sphere) has been regarded as contributing to the exclusion of women and enabling the online harassment and violence enacted against women.[3,33] Ownership, oversight and setting up of technology in the home has been justified on the basis of men's technological awareness and knowledge and as 'taking care' of the household (adopting and referring to 'traditional' gender roles). This provides opportunities for them to have control of and access to technologies and enables technology monitoring in the context of family violence.[12,13,17,18,25] This has been flagged as a particular issue for culturally and linguistically diverse and Indigenous women and women with disability.[9,32,49]

Rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity

Institutions (workforces, such as the media, and universities) with masculinised characteristics can contribute to the proliferation of online harassment,[3,26] and hegemonic masculinity online,[3,5,10,33] where dominance, control and aggression proliferate and can foster violence. The creation and/or distribution of intimate images (image-based sexual abuse) has served to sanction behaviours associated with dominant forms of masculinity, with 'honour' and prestige associated with the possession and sharing of these images.[8,49]

> **Male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control**
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> Norms around men sharing sexts and intimate images with peer networks have been observed in studies on digital dating violence and technology-facilitated sexual violence.[6,8,29,42] Studies on online harassment point to online male peer support networks as engaging in and powering collective responses or campaigns against women,[3,5] and this is heightened in male-dominated industries.[3,33] Male peer relations and cultures can legitimise and facilitate violence.

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Further reading

All resources from Summarising the evidence can be found on the project page.

Research summaries

- Adolescent violence in the home (E Campbell & L Wall)
- Child maltreatment: a snapshot summary (D Higgins & G Hunt)
- Intimate partner violence perpetrated against women by men (Respect Victoria)
- Intimate partner violence perpetrated by women against men (M Salter & D Woodlock)
- Online violence and harassment perpetrated against women (B Harris)
- Non partner sexual violence (A Quadara)
- Sexual harassment occurring in the world of work (S Charlesworth & C Deen)
- Violence perpetrated against older people by another family member or carer (E Stevens, R Kaspiew & R Carson)

Context briefs

- Summarising the evidence: Exploring what we know about drivers of violence against women, family violence and other forms of gendered violence - Project overview
- Summarising the evidence: Adolescent violence in the home
- Summarising the evidence: Child maltreatment
- Summarising the evidence: Elder abuse
- Summarising the evidence: Online harassment and abuse against women
- Summarising the evidence: Women's intimate partner violence against men
- Summarising the evidence: Work-related sexual harassment

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Acknowledgement of Country

Respect Victoria acknowledges Aboriginal peoples throughout Victoria as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands and waterways on which we rely. We proudly acknowledge the Aboriginal communities throughout Victoria and their ongoing strength in practising the world's oldest living culture.

We acknowledge the significant and ongoing impacts of colonisation and commit to working alongside Aboriginal communities to effect change. We recognise the ongoing leadership role of Aboriginal communities in addressing and preventing family violence and violence against women, and will continue to work in collaboration with First Peoples to eliminate these forms of violence from all communities.

Victim survivor acknowledgement

Respect Victoria acknowledges the significant impact of family violence and violence against women on individuals, families and communities, and the strength and resilience of the children, young people and adults who have, and are still, experiencing this violence. We pay our respects to those who did not survive, and to their loved ones.

RESPECT VICTORIA

Respect Victoria is the state's dedicated organisation for the prevention of family violence and violence against women. Our vision is a Victorian community where all people are safe, equal and respected, and live free from family violence and violence against women.

To achieve our vision, we lead and support evidence-informed primary prevention and act as a catalyst for transformational social change. Primary prevention aims to stop violence from occurring in the first place, by changing the culture that drives it. We drive coordination and effectiveness of the prevention system. We build and promote primary prevention knowledge and evidence. We keep prevention on the public and policy agenda. We guide prevention wherever Victorians live, work, learn and play. We raise awareness that violence against women is preventable and influence community conversations to fuel social change.

We are an independent voice, with functions, powers and duties enshrined in legislation.