

'For my safety'

Experiences of technology-facilitated abuse among women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability

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eSafety research program

The eSafety Commissioner (eSafety) supports, encourages, conducts and evaluates research about online safety for Australians. The eSafety research program tracks trends and collects, analyses and interprets data and uses this to provide an evidence base to develop eSafety resources and programs. eSafety also works closely with domestic and international agencies to proactively identify and explore current and emerging online safety issues.

eSafety research is available at: esafety.gov.au/about-us/research.

For any enquiries about the eSafety research program, please contact research@esafety.gov.au.

With thanks

This is an edited version of a report commissioned by eSafety in 2020 from Harris and Woodlock (based at and affiliated with Queensland University of Technology). We would like to thank our research partners and those who assisted the research; WWILD, WESNET, SECASA and Women with Disabilities Victoria) the study participants and especially the survivors and professionals who gave their time to contribute to a greater understanding the impacts of technology-facilitated abuse. Your knowledge makes a difference.

eSafety recognises the details reported here represent lived experiences. We acknowledge the damaging effects of technology-facilitated abuse on families and communities. This report discusses issues that some people may find distressing and it includes abusive language.

If you or someone you know is at risk of immediate harm, please call Triple Zero (000). For counselling and support, please contact:

1800 Respect 1800 737 732

Lifeline 13 11 14

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Executive summary

Women with disability in our society face marginalisation and exclusion. Compared to women in the broader population, they experience violence at significantly higher rates and with more severe impacts (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017; Dowse et al. 2013; Frohmader et al. 2015; Women with Disabilities Australia 2007). Domestic and family violence practitioners in Australia also consider this group of women to be at high risk of technology-facilitated abuse (Woodlock et al 2015). This typically arises from perpetrators seeking to exploit a woman's perceived vulnerabilities, such as social isolation.

In Australia, there are major gaps in the evidence base of the extent of violence against women with disability in general, and further limitations in knowledge of the abuse of women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability.

To address this deficit in evidence, in 2020 eSafety commissioned qualitative research from researchers at and affiliated with Queensland University of Technology. A specific aim of the research was to hear the stories of women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability who have experienced technology-facilitated abuse (TFA). The research explored a range of areas including the situations that TFA can manifest, insights into perpetrator profiles and identifying preferred pathways of support. Perspectives from frontline workers provided additional perspectives into the wider impacts of this form of abuse on women they support.

The research comprised interviews and focus groups with six women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability who had experienced TFA. This was complemented by interviews and focus groups with fifteen frontline workers and other women's specialist advocacy services from across Australia who provide support to women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability.

Participants were recruited through the WWILD Sexual Violence Prevention Service (WWILD) in Queensland, and the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault and Family Violence (SECASA) in Victoria. These services were enlisted to ensure that appropriate support was available for the women should they experience any trauma from recounting their experiences. This meant the groups had to be conducted in a safe space on provider premises. Restrictions introduced due to COVID-19 impacted the recruitment of participants. While the Queensland groups were able to progress, those scheduled in Victoria were unable to proceed as planned. The research team looked at recruiting participants from other states but travel restrictions during the survey period prevented this option. Despite these obstacles, the experiences of these women in combination with frontline worker interviews, provided a rich source of understanding into the topic.

The research found that technology featured in the women's lives in important ways. They used a variety of digital devices and platforms to connect with others, including in their friendships, intimate relationships, with family and for entertainment.

Women regularly used social media platforms (in particular Facebook, TikTok and Instagram), online games (such as Minecraft and Candy Crush), dating websites and apps (such as Plenty of Fish). Various technologies were used for managing home systems and lifestyles (such as Google Nest smart home technology) or to find others or assist with travel (like GPS and map applications). To manage finances and healthcare, some women had banking apps or MyGov on their phones.

While these modes and uses of technology provide opportunities for communication with others, contact and abuse through these channels also made the women feel afraid or upset, often impacting their use of and feelings around technology.

This research revealed that the tactics used to enact technology-facilitated abuse on women with intellectual and cognitive disability are similar to those used on women without disability. The abusive behaviour typically involves harassment, coercion, and manipulation. Many women are targeted by known perpetrators who may have physical access to devices and relational knowledge that enables digital access to accounts and profiles. There are some unique differences, however, as the pool of perpetrators could potentially extend to people beyond intimate partner (and ex-partner) relationships. For women with intellectual or cognitive disability, perpetrators can also be family members (parents, children and siblings), carers, as well as strangers. Frontline workers also expressed concern about situations where clients in shared homes give support workers and carers access to their digital devices and passwords, potentially compromising accounts and leaving women open to exploitation.

The findings from this research will provide a valuable evidence base to help inform future policy development as well as eSafety's own continued resource development and education and prevention initiatives for disability workers and frontline domestic and family violence workers and the women they support.

Key findings

Women with intellectual or cognitive disability experience various types of technology-facilitated abuse (TFA)

- Image-based abuse – the threat of having their intimate images shared on social media or being pressured to send intimate images.
- Unsolicited communications – receiving unwanted images on dating apps and websites.

- Misuse of accounts – the hacking of social media accounts or the creation of fake accounts set up to impersonate them.
- Abuse and harassment – receiving abusive calls and messages, including messages that target a woman’s family or friendship networks.
- Monitoring using devices (such as GPS trackers in vehicles, prams and baby monitors) – perpetrators using recording devices and software (for example spyware) to monitor and surveil.
- Controlling technology in the home – perpetrators using smart home technology to control household devices, such as lights.

Women with intellectual or cognitive disability can be particularly susceptible to TFA for several reasons

- While perpetrators of TFA are most commonly a partner or ex-partner, almost anyone could potentially use technology to exercise control over a woman. Perpetrators can include children, parents, carers, strangers and even service providers.
- A woman’s situation can be complicated because her partner may also be her carer. Frontline workers described how women in domestic violence contexts are told that if not for their partner, they would not have custody of their children. Women can feel trapped into enduring abuse to maintain access to their children.
- Frontline workers find that women can face prejudicial assumptions about their capabilities and trustworthiness as witnesses because perpetrators can confuse a woman and exploit any difficulties she may have in communicating.
- Perpetrators can forge a friendship or relationship with the intent of abusing and exploiting the women. This is sometimes known as ‘mate crime’ – the befriending of people perceived to be vulnerable for the purpose of taking advantage of them. Another scenario described as ‘cuckooing’ can occur where a perpetrator moves into the home of someone they perceive as vulnerable and then treats the home as their own.

Perpetrators use a range of strategies and tactics via technology to commit the abuse

- Perpetrators can target a woman’s disability in unique ways such as placing GPS tracking devices on wheelchairs, tampering with hearing aids and other assistive devices, making threats to disclose a woman’s health information, or using information gleaned from the relationship (such as knowledge of passwords and login details) to access online accounts without a woman’s authorisation.

- Perpetrators can weaponise technology to attack a woman's reputation. Tactics are leveraged to frame the woman as the abuser – for example, by provoking her and recording her subsequent retaliation, but not showing the full incident.

The misuse of technology impacts on women's lives in several ways

- Women with intellectual and cognitive disability rely on digital technology for social connection and online friendships and communities of interest can become an important lifeline. When perpetrators, including caregivers remove technology from these women, it can have far-reaching impacts on their autonomy, wellbeing and safety.
- Some women were afraid to continue with their normal online activities when affected by technological-facilitated abuse and other forms of online abuse. Some chose to keep and not delete social media accounts, risking further abuse because they valued maintaining communication channels with others.
- Frontline workers explained that some women had experienced physical harm or sexual assault as the result of meeting up with people through online channels.

Women with intellectual or cognitive disability face numerous challenges when attempting to seek help for TFA

- Not knowing who to contact to report online abuse creates barriers to accessing pathways to support. Many of the women did not contact formal agencies for help. Instead, they mainly sought assistance from friends and family. Several frontline workers in this research indicated they would seek support from the eSafety Commissioner or WESNET.
- Fear was a primary barrier for women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability to report and get support for TFA. This included fear of having technology, apps and internet access removed, or of not being believed.
- Women with children are particularly reluctant to seek help from authorities because of experiences of having children removed from their care when reports about a partner's abuse are made. There is an increased risk of women losing custody of their children, even if they are the target of violence by their partner.
- Lack of awareness among practitioners about TFA compounded assumptions that a woman was not competent or capable of understanding what was happening to her, that the abuse was unbelievable, or the woman was making it up.

An integrated, consistent and intersectional approach is required to provide the support women with intellectual or cognitive disability need

- The absence of an integrated approach and co-ordination among support services contributes to problems in providing assistance to women. There is little crossover between the domestic and family violence sector, the disability sector and the justice system. This siloing of sectors was noted as making the pathways for support complex to navigate.
- The level of support received from some police jurisdictions was largely dependent on the state in which a frontline worker and her client were based. Common responses, such as disengaging from technology, were problematic as women with disability often rely on technology to communicate with family, support networks and service providers.
- Intersectional factors need to be taken into account throughout the support process. This includes considerations relating to an individual's cultural background or socio-economic status.
- Frontline workers emphasised the importance of a whole of community effort in providing support to the women.

Research participants were eager to learn about safer ways to use technology and had a range of suggestions on how this could happen

- Guidance is needed in accessible formats, including 'how to' videos and visual guides showing what safety measures to employ. Women favoured learning how to operate their devices independently, rather than having to rely on other people.
- Clear information could be provided by social media companies (preferably in picture form) about their safety offerings, such as how to block people.
- Awareness raising about TFA among women with intellectual or cognitive disability was important, which could be conducted through government services like Centrelink.
- There was an appetite for having technology experts attend women's support groups to talk about technology safety.
- Frontline workers identified benefits in their clients being trained to use technology confidently as an essential part of independent living skills. They highlighted the importance of women having access to resources such as 'easy read' (or plain English) guides, direct information for clients, as well as education around healthy relationships and safe use of technology.

- Resources and technology experts could assist frontline workers, who often resort to producing their own materials about online issues to use with their clients. They felt overwhelmed by the subject matter, believing it was beyond their direct area of expertise.

Introduction

Technology can be used to facilitate 'offline' forms of harm and crime such as theft or financial abuse, sexual violence or in-person stalking. It can also involve online abuse – which is not limited to – perpetrators using technology to:

- post or send harassing or abusive messages
- stalk – tracking someone's activities, movements or communications
- dox – publishing private information that can be used to identify someone
- engage in image-based sexual abuse – produce or distribute intimate images or video without consent
- make or share clandestine or conspicuous audio or visual recordings of another person
- impersonate or steal another person's identity
- gain unauthorised access to a person's digital accounts, profiles or devices
- change functions, impair authorised functions or cause an unauthorised function on a digital account, profile or device.

Additionally, technology-facilitated abuse (TFA) can involve perpetrators restricting their target's access to technologies.

To enact TFA perpetrators may use devices (such as computers, tablets, phones or GPS trackers), virtual or electronic accounts (such as social media profiles, email accounts, consumer accounts, institutional or employment portals) and software or platforms to enact harm. It can also involve perpetrators using force, coercion, manipulation, deception or stealth and intimate knowledge of a target.

Abuse can also be highly individualised and involve activity that may seem acceptable in other contexts, but is harmful because of the target's specific history of abuse. For example, a perpetrator may call at a certain time so that this call acts as a reminder of a specific assault that also occurred at that time. While this could seem harmless to others, for the target of the abuse, it can invoke fear and distress.

On the above definitions and framework of TFA, see Dragiewicz, et al. (2018); Dragiewicz, et al. (2019); Harris (2020); Harris and Woodlock (2019); Harris and Woodlock (forthcoming a); Harris and Woodlock (forthcoming b).

Available evidence (see Appendix on previous research) shows that women with disability are subjected to abuse at higher rates than women in the general population and that this abuse can be specifically targeted towards their disability. While recognising this over-representation,

researchers emphasise that reported and recorded victimisation rates are likely underestimated. This is, in part, because of limitations with data gathering processes. Misconceptions, stereotypes and a lack of support and acknowledgement of harm also contributes to this 'dark figure' of crime. The TFA of women with intellectual or cognitive disability is another area where there is a dearth of research, with the limited studies available indicating this cohort is at particular risk of being targeted. This hinders prevention initiatives, and the progression of policy and practice that better supports these women when subjected to online harm and abuse.

Detailed findings

Profiles of the women

The women in our research were aged from 20 to 40 years and most chose pseudonyms for their profiles. Care has been taken to change any identifying details that relate to the participants. We are very grateful for the opportunity to hear their stories, voices and experiences.

'Star'

Star is in her 20s and likes playing computer games. She uses a Fitbit and has an iPhone that she uses for messages and calls. She was using dating apps and Facebook to talk to men, but some of these men pressured her to send intimate images of herself to them, which she did. They also sent intimate images of themselves back to her. She reached out to her sister for help and her sister removed her access to the internet. She said she was grateful for her sister's help but finds it a bit boring without the internet and hopes she will be able to use the internet again soon.

'HM'

HM is in her 30s and likes playing Minecraft and speaking to her friends and family on Facebook. While using Facebook, she worried that she had been hacked by an ex-boyfriend. She felt he had tried to take over her Facebook account. She wasn't sure where to get help on Facebook so had to ask her father for assistance. This has made her feel afraid of being on Facebook. She thinks that service providers should do more to make sure the people using their platforms are safe to interact with.

'Linny'

Linny is in her 40s and has three children. She has an iPad and an iPhone and likes using Facebook and going on TikTok to watch videos. She has had to block her ex-partner on Facebook

as he was sending her abusive messages. Despite blocking him, she was still able to see abusive things he said about her as he wrote them on her friends' timelines.

He also posted photos featuring Linny, but when she reported this to Facebook it was not seen as violating their terms of use. This upset her but she did not want to stop using Facebook, as it was important to communicate with her other friends.

She also had to block her ex-partner on her phone as he would constantly call and text message her. When she blocked him, he would often use a private number to try to contact her. She is also only able to block him for short periods of time, as he is the father of two of her children and she is required to have contact with him.

'Hailey'

Hailey is in her 30s and enjoys using Facebook, playing games on her iPhone like Candy Crush and using email to communicate with family. She was recently sent an email saying that she needed to pay a fine into an account for going through a red light, even though she doesn't have a car. This made her feel very worried, so she went to her local police for help. They told her that it was a scam, but now she is scared of using her email. She has also been sent messages on Facebook saying she had won money and to send her bank account details. This has made her wary of using Facebook. She previously used Uber but had an upsetting incident using the service which made her feel very afraid. She is now afraid to use Uber and also feels worried using taxis.

Hailey had been contacted by people on dating sites who made her wary. They offered to pay her to meet up and/or pressured her to send intimate images. She has been harassed by an ex-boyfriend and his family in person and over the phone.

'Louisa'

Louisa is in her 30s and owns multiple iPhones. She has two teenage boys who use her iPhones to play games. She also plays iPhone games. Now and then she also likes going on Facebook to stay in touch with her friends and family. Louisa talked about getting friend requests from people she did not want to connect with, including requests from strangers, and being harassed on the platform. At times, she also received unsolicited phone calls. Louisa has blocked contacts on Facebook and on her phone when unknown numbers called. She uses location-based settings sometimes to help find new places.

Louisa has used dating apps and websites and talked about receiving unsolicited pictures from men and being wary of people's identities. She had an abusive relationship with someone she met on Plenty of Fish. She spoke about an ex-boyfriend who would call and harass her. When she blocked one number, he would call from another number.

'Lily'

Lily is in her 20s. She has a private Facebook account and was aware of how to manage and change settings. She had been harassed by people on the platform and was cautious of catfishing, specifically from older men pretending to be her age. She was also concerned about people hacking apps and turning on device cameras. She used location sharing with family members, so she could check where they were.

Lily played some online games and enjoyed meeting people she did not know who were playing too. She had used smart home devices previously, but not at the time she met with researchers. While using dating apps, Lily previously had the experience of someone trying to scam her. She also knew of a friend who had been stalked by someone who they met on an app. Lily talked about friends posting pictures of her, without her consent, and how she was pressured into sending intimate images by an ex-partner. She was worried he had shared these images on social media. Like Louisa, she spoke about sometimes receiving unsolicited calls from people who seemed to know her name and had an ex-partner who used the phone to harass her and her family.

Technologies and abuse of women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability

How women use technology

The women who participated in the focus groups spoke of a variety of important ways technology featured in their lives. Devices such as smartphones, tablets, fitness trackers, Xboxes, smart TVs and computers were mentioned. They identified a wide range of digital devices and platforms they used to connect with others, including in their friendships, intimate relationships, with family and for entertainment. This included social media (in particular Facebook, TikTok and Instagram), online games (such as Minecraft and Candy Crush), dating websites and apps (such as Plenty of Fish). Various technologies were used for managing home systems and lifestyles (such as Google Nest smart home technology) or to find others or assist with travel (like GPS and map applications). To manage finances and healthcare, some women had banking apps or MyGov on their phones.

Frontline workers agreed the above technologies were used by their clients, but also reported perpetrators co-opting other devices (such as GPS trackers, listening and recording devices) and software (such as spyware) to enact abuse. Practitioners also described incidents where perpetrators had accessed women's banking and social media apps, or changed or impaired functions on devices (including smart home technology).

Harassment via technology

Harassment can be understood to be unwelcome intrusions – communications that seek to insult, shame or defame a target. As the participants explained, it can also include unwanted approaches. These were often high in volume and could become increasingly aggressive to elicit a response from the target. This largely occurred on social media, with Facebook identified as a platform often used by perpetrators to abuse women.

Frontline workers described how social media platforms like Facebook served as an important avenue for socialising and connection for many of their clients. One worker described how this important communication channel was also open to exploitation:

‘In terms of women with intellectual disabilities or cognitive impairments, the online groups and connection points are really important ones. So, where they might be not able to go out of the house and on a bus off to a group, things like Facebook and other sort of groups that people gather in online become a really important lifeline. So then of course the opportunity for them to be abused within that framework is there as well.’

Technology-facilitated abuse could be enacted by strangers, but more commonly it was by current or former partners. Hailey spoke of blocking her ex-partner after he continued to send accusatory and aggressive messages following their separation. Linny, likewise resorted to blocking her ex-partner after he harassed her online, as she said:

‘When me and my ex are bickering and when his numbers are blocked, he found a way to contact me through Facebook. He’s on my friend’s list, so he puts it [abuse] up on my posts... on my Facebook timeline.’

Former partners also called and messaged frequently. Several women spoke of men abusing them over phone calls, in voicemails, and via text message. Louisa spoke of the high volume of abuse she received from her ex-partner over the phone, telling researchers:

‘I’ve got an ex-boyfriend that was like that [another participant’s ex] too; constantly ringing up and then on the phone “oh, we’re sorry” and that. “We don’t mean to say all this,” and it’s like, thinking what, why are you doing it for? “I don’t want to talk to you and then I block your number and then you ring on another number,” and then you think, why? Stop harassing me and annoying me because I don’t need it.’

Star described a situation where her ex-partner threatened to kill her:

'I had somebody do a death threat to me on a normal phone. He left a voicemail on the answering machine. It was directed at me and my mum. Whenever the phone rang, we didn't answer it, just in case.'

Some women talked about receiving abusive communications from family members. Linny said she had subsequently blocked her mother on Facebook who had made her feel uncomfortable and upset.

Dating websites and apps were also identified as sites where women encountered abuse. Louisa said that on Plenty of Fish:

'I just went on there to try to find someone and they were nice to start off with and then... they just turned nasty.'

Technology-facilitated stalking

Frontline workers emphasised how technology was used to stalk – tracking the activities, movements and communications of women. Multiple workers detailed how GPS trackers have been used in children's toys and put into children's prams. One frontline worker commented:

'We've noticed tracking devices on prams is another one, really minute little tracking devices put on the kids' prams.'

Additionally, technology designed to keep children safe (such as baby monitors) was used to track the mother. A frontline worker explained what happened to one of her clients:

'Her ex-partner gave her a baby monitor to monitor the baby. He was actually living next door. He could listen to what was happening in the home via the baby monitor. That was a tricky one to support the client to understand what was actually happening and how the baby monitor wasn't safe because again he would turn up at the front door at times that suited him.'

Tracking devices were also reportedly attached to women's wheelchairs and their vehicles. This can pose challenges in rural areas, where there are limited resources to perform safety and surveillance checks. Speaking to this, one frontline worker reported:

'Women are experiencing trackers in motor vehicles which we find are particularly difficult. The region that I work in, it's a large regional city but it's difficult to find an expert to sort out trackers on cars.'

Women also spoke about themselves and friends being stalked by people they met on dating websites and apps, as Lily shared:

‘Like the Plenty of Fish and people say that they think that you’re cute, sexy and all this and then you think well, I don’t know what you look like, can I see what you look like and then yeah, you just can’t trust anything and that. I think on the dating apps people can stalk you like if you’re not careful, so you have to be really careful when you go on them. I’ve heard of, well, one of my friends got stalked on one of them. It was bad, she had to go to the police and everything.’

Technology-facilitated stalking was connected to and facilitated in-person stalking – ‘online’ and ‘offline’ stalking were inextricably linked. There were many accounts of how technology was used to track a woman’s whereabouts and then a perpetrator would unexpectedly turn-up at her location to follow, harass and intimidate her. A frontline worker described this, providing examples of the multitude of ways that women were stalked and how technology facilitated offline stalking. She noted:

‘A client recently whose house, car, computer and mobile phone all had some form of surveillance on it. Women will often talk about perpetrators arriving at the supermarket and then wondering how they know that they’re there or turning up at appointments ten minutes before she arrives.’

Soliciting and unauthorised posting and distribution of images

Perpetrators of image-based sexual abuse – pressuring, threatening or coercing women to share images and distributing images without consent (eSafety 2017) – were both known (dating and intimate partners) and unknown to the target.

According to research participants, strangers on social media sometimes solicited or pressured women to send intimate images. As one woman said:

‘Facebook is the worst one with people on there because... sometimes when you're on Facebook, you want to make new friends and you're sat there, then they ask you questions like “oh, you're beautiful, can I have a photo of you?” I thought hang on, I'm going to block you. I reckon there should be someone on there watching them all the time because that's just wrong.’

Strangers would also pressure women on dating apps to send intimate images:

Lily: 'Someone who forced me to do that. It's someone I didn't know like the kid asking and repeating the same message like they're trying to force you to do it.'

Facilitator: 'Yeah, if you're comfortable, can you tell me what happened? Did you send an image?'

Lily: 'Yes. I didn't want to but just happened like I'm just being honest.'

Facilitator: 'Did you talk to anybody about being upset by that or asking for help with it?'

Lily: 'I didn't know who to ask and I didn't know how I could get help to get the images off the internet so the whole internet didn't see it, you know what I mean? So I wanted to try and get rid of it. They want you to take a photo of yourself, then they put it on a website to everyone to see. I just know that it's out there and I don't know where it is and that's what's freaking me out.'

Star's family decided she could not have access to the internet because, after being pressured to do so, she had sent intimate images. She explained:

Star: 'I want to go back on the internet, but I don't in a way, just in case if something happens again.'

Facilitator: 'What happens again?'

Star: 'I used to send shirtless photos or something like that to random guys.'

Facilitator: 'When you sent things out, did you get a few messages and stuff like that?'

Star: 'No, they sent photos back.'

Facilitator: Okay. 'Then your family decided maybe it wasn't a good idea [to be online]?'

Star: 'Yep, [for] my safety. It's what my sister said.'

While Star conveyed that she was grateful for her sister's help, research shows there can often be a power imbalance between caregivers and people with disability (Barkhuus et al. 2011). This has been particularly studied around the use of smartphones, with there being a significant gap between the wishes and rights of people with cognitive disability around their use of smartphones, and the caregivers' feelings of responsibility. This often results in the caregivers trying to protect those they are caring for through restriction rather than education (Heitplatz et al. 2019).

Women also talked about friends upsetting them by not respecting their wishes or privacy and sharing images featuring them on social media, without their agreement. One woman recalled:

'Well, I had a friend, she posted a picture of me on Facebook with her and she didn't ask for my consent, so she just did it as you would and then I'm like "I don't want that up there," and she's like, "well I want to keep it up there." I went "no, you're not doing that, you didn't even ask for my consent." I made her take it down because I said, "I'll go to the police if you don't take it down".'

Scams and requests for money

Women were often contacted by strangers asking them for money on Facebook and in other ways, such as via text messages. They spoke of feeling they were being scammed. In a focus group, women discussed this happening on Facebook:

Louisa: 'Someone said that I won this much money and I think it's not right, but it's.... a scam, yeah, I know.'

Hailey: 'It's a scam yeah because I had someone ask me on Facebook ... for my bank details. I thought no, I'm not going there.'

Louisa: 'Well, they didn't ask for the bank details and they said "oh, you've won this much money" and it's like...'

Hailey: 'Yeah, well some fella...because he said he was going to put some money in my account, I thought no way, I know what you're up to, mate. I'm not stupid.'

Women were also targeted via text message and phone calls, as one participant notes:

'People ring me saying "I'm such and such, can I have your credit card number and we'll send you this." I said "well, haha did you pay for my phone number?" and they hang straight up. Or even if people ring on a private number... you don't know who it is too and that... No, it's a scam.'

The feeling of being scammed and the idea that people could be trying to take advantage of them created a distrust of technology. Phone calls and text messages from private or unknown numbers also made women feel wary and afraid. In one focus group women discussed the impacts of this:

Lily: 'People randomly texting you out of the blue and you don't even know who they are and they're like oh... I'm like "I don't know who you are, I'm going to take this to the police... if you don't tell me who you are." So, it's like where did you get the number from?'

Louisa: 'Yeah, because I don't know... I had the same too like someone rang and that and I was like I don't know the number, but I'm thinking how did you get the number?'

Lily: 'They just say "oh, hi" and I'm like who the heck's this and because it's like I don't know the number and they just say "hi, how are you"... I don't reply back because I don't know who they are, and they don't text me back their name or anything. I'm like oh, that's creepy. It makes you feel unsafe.'

Gaining control of accounts and devices

Several frontline workers mentioned that perpetrators would take control of women's devices, changing passwords, setting up accounts and ensuring that all the women's banking, security questions and location information would only be accessible by them. This could be to either control a woman or to control her assets. A frontline worker explained:

'What we've found is that people will access the client's Apple account for example and then they'll put on the location settings and then they'll change the password and change the recovery email address, then that client loses everything. You can't even back the phone up because everything that the person does on that phone goes through to their laptop and stuff like that.'

Likewise, another frontline worker commented about the complexities of assisting clients who have had their passwords changed by a perpetrator. She said:

'I... have found that perpetrators will be like, oh "no I've changed the password. Oh, your cameras aren't working." They will inform the client of that and the client not being sure what to believe and feeling that they don't have enough information or enough capacity to check their systems and to know if they're being lied to and stuff like that. I find that that's a really big challenge as well.'

Changing, impairing or using unauthorised functions

Incidents of perpetrators manipulating the functions of a target's devices, such as with the 'internet of things' (see also Tanczer et al. 2018), were reported by frontline workers. One noted that they had begun to see smart home technology being used by perpetrators. She explained:

'The other one has been... Google Home. Somebody had access to the whole home through Google Home and the internet. He could turn her lights on, could turn her security system on and off. He could turn TVs on. He could do everything from Google Home.'

Recordings of women

Several frontline workers explained they were seeing perpetrators using technology to record women when they retaliated against the abuse. Perpetrators then used this in cross applications. This means the defendant applies for an Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) against the protected person. A frontline worker said:

'I've seen an increasing number of women being taped while there's an argument happening, recorded, photographs being taken, all for the purpose of building a case to actually call police against her in order to have evidence for an AVO, "So here is her being aggressive." "Here is her screaming abuse back at me." Whatever. I mean just capturing little bits which are then pieced together to show cops.'

Numerous frontline workers said they had seen an increase in cross applications used against women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability, and recordings were increasingly used to evidence these applications.

Disability specific technology-facilitated abuse

Restricting access to accounts such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participant portal and threatening to disclose health records via MyGov were both perpetrated on women according to frontline workers. MyGov provides access to a range of government services online such as Medicare, Centrelink and/or child support. Technology-facilitated abuse like this is possible because only the perpetrator knows the passwords. Hiding women's hearing aids or restricting their use was also discussed.

Case study one – needing to access disability and government services via technology

Lynne is a disability worker with a domestic violence and sexual assault service in rural NSW. Many of her clients are required to use technology to access their NDIS, Centrelink and other services.

One client could not access her MyGov account without the perpetrator's assistance. After she left him, she attempted to access her account by going into the office in person. She was told she had to use the website for this. An assumption was made that she had free and easy access

to technology. Consequently she had to re-establish contact with the perpetrator so he could help her access her MyGov account.

Case study two – using technology to confuse and exploit women

Jo is a specialist family violence frontline worker in Victoria. She has a client who has been subjected to technology-facilitated abuse from her ex-partner.

He recently set up a fake Instagram account that looks identical to the target's account, with one letter changed in the account name. He impersonated messages from her, and uploaded snapshots of real messages so her personal communications to him are now in the public domain.

The messages from the fake account have also been used as evidence to initiate a cross application against her. She then needs to present counter evidence to show who she is and what account was genuinely hers. In court it was difficult to prove that she was the target of abuse – not the perpetrator – and she was extremely distressed when her personal messages were on display.

According to Jo, it was common for perpetrators to present well in court, but for women with cognitive disabilities, it can sometimes be upsetting and very stressful to appear in court. This can then align with prejudicial assumptions about their capabilities and trustworthiness as witnesses (Burns 2007).

Jo also commented that this kind of technology-facilitated abuse, where the perpetrator assumes the identity of the target of the abuse, is quite common against women with cognitive disability, as the perpetrator can confuse the target and exploit any difficulties she may have communicating.

Who are the perpetrators of technology-facilitated abuse?

Perpetrators were often unknown (strangers), but could also be known (friends, family and current and ex-partners). Many participants and frontline workers spoke of abuse from male partners or ex partners.

A psychologist shared that some of her student clients met or connected with 'men in their community' who were 'in their early 20s' through the internet. Some were, she noted, actually 'members of their parent's friendship groups' who entered sexual relationships with the teenagers and 'provide them with drugs and cash and alcohol and cigarettes'.

Domestic violence and disability support workers also noted that for women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability anyone could be a perpetrator, including parents, carers and

children. This is in line with general findings on the abuse of women with disability, which show abuse is usually perpetrated by a wide range of perpetrators (Plummer and Findley 2012). As frontline workers noted, perpetrators were often also carers:

‘Everyone can be a perpetrator... mainly obviously from a DV [domestic violence] point... we get a lot of referrals for women with disabilities where it’s the ex-partner, but they’re also their carer. Because of their disability, they’re their carer as well as their partner.’

Frontline workers spoke about the complex web of perpetrators who are involved in the abuse of women, which may include ex-partners and their families and/or friends. A frontline worker explained who she saw as the main perpetrators:

‘[They are] former intimate partners and their family members. So almost like a two-pronged approach where they’re ganging up on women either directly, so the woman knows it’s coming from [the] intimate partner plus his family member, and also creating false identities via social media and the woman thinking “oh this is a new friend or someone who can share my experience,” only to then discover, no... that’s not the case. Then...those additional feelings of shame, distress and distrust coming up as well.’

Women talked about this too. Hailey shared that her ex-partner and his family were troubling her, explaining:

‘His [my ex’s] partner’s rang up and abused the crap out of me... and next minute, they came to see me and I thought because I changed my number, stopping the family ringing me because they had a go at me for no reason, then they rocked up at my door. I said “no, sorry, I’ve changed for a reason because I don’t want you to ring me.”’

The networks (of abusers and abuser allies) also targeted those in the women’s networks. Lily reported:

‘Well, my ex-partner harasses my family and calls them up all the time when I don’t want him, when they don’t want him too. And all my family sort of changed their numbers because he’s calling up being stupid. Just constantly calling and not saying anything or being drunk or something. It’s like, what the heck is wrong with you?’

Star’s family was also targeted by her ex-partner in threats made over the phone.

‘We recently had a woman who was living with her adult children and they were the perpetrators. All of the family members had cognitive disabilities, so it was quite a complex setting to support our primary client in the context of her adult male children living in the same house as her who were the perpetrators. So, we’re seeing a mix. Predominantly it’s intimate partners or ex-intimate partners. Or in some cases it’s been an intimate partner’s ex-partner who has also colluded with him as well, so combinations of relationships.’

Similarly, another frontline worker mentioned her clients were being abused by a mix of perpetrators, including their own children, as well as ex-partners and their family.

Sometimes others (friends, family or support workers, such as NDIS workers) would offer to set up or help women use technology. Frontline workers worried their access to physical and digital property could facilitate control and technology-facilitated abuse. As one frontline worker recounted:

‘Because some of them [my clients] have a disability, they’re not able to type in fast, as well, there’ll be another person say, “oh, give me your phone. I’ll do it for you.” As soon as they take that phone, they can enter anything they like in there. They can add anyone’s name in there, in their Facebook account. They can [add] anyone on their contacts. The person now has no idea what’s been typed in there.’

An NDIS worker suggested disability support worker access to devices could be problematic:

‘Some [people]... they ask [the] support worker to deal with all this computer work, technology and this. Which is risky in the sense because [it means they are] relying on someone. For me, like I will be genuine, I’ll be honest and I’ll do the right thing, but there’d be people who’d be using other people’s log in. Like, for example, the disabled person’s login and using their computer and could be misusing. Watching porn and things. God knows. Who knows?’

There is some evidence to suggest women with disability are more likely than women without disability to be targets of abuse from strangers or recent acquaintances and this was noted by frontline workers as common in technology-facilitated abuse (Groce and Trasi 2004). Sharing personal contact information on social media (such as phone numbers) could result in women being targeted through these channels, by unknown persons or anonymous profiles.

Frontline workers explained some women had experiences of harm caused by meeting people (or groups of people posing as one person) on dating apps. A frontline worker said:

‘Women who have made friends with people over the internet and they believe that they truly are their friends, and there’s nothing wrong with their behaviour, when in fact it’s quite risky. Once the meeting takes place, sexual assault or domestic violence sometimes occurs.’

Another frontline worker mentioned her client was physically abused when she met up with someone she thought was an online friend, and this abuse was public for others’ amusement:

‘I’ve had clients that have agreed to meet the so-called friend and they’ve actually been beaten up at the first meeting in a public place after being tricked into going to that location, with an audience of others who were there to stand and laugh at what was happening.’

Frontline workers spoke of how certain platforms, such as Facebook, are easily exploited by perpetrators because of the friendship networking aspects of social media:

‘Friends of friends are the main perpetrators. I think Facebook lends itself to particular vulnerabilities around who people befriend and then what happens as a result of that. They’re usually people around either a similar age or within a similar broader group of people. For some of them you know, a lot of the friends that they do have on Facebook are other people with similar types of identities that lead to some type of disability. So... because there’s community groups and groups and friendship circles I think if the person, if they don’t know them directly, they know that they’re a friend of a friend and that almost creates a vulnerability in itself because they’re trusting the person because this other person over here knows them.’

Several frontline workers mentioned there was deliberate targeting of women with intellectual or cognitive disability online, with men forging a friendship or relationship with the intent of abusing and exploiting the women. This is sometimes known as ‘mate crime’ – the befriending of people perceived by perpetrators to be vulnerable for the purpose of taking advantage of them. However, in the context of violence against women with intellectual or cognitive disability, mate crime can often be difficult to discern from domestic violence. This is particularly true with coercive control, where a partner will intentionally isolate and control every aspect of a target’s life (McCarthy 2017).

Women spoke of feeling anxious and afraid when people they did not know contacted them on social media, and of being scammed and hacked on platforms such as Facebook. They faced pressures to send and share intimate images from unknown people and from people they had met on dating apps. They also received abusive messages on social media, text messages and

harassing phone calls from current and former partners, as well as their partners' family members.

Types of co-occurring abuse with the use of technology

Technology-facilitated abuse enacted by an intimate partner rarely occurs in isolation. Typically, technology is one of a series of tools perpetrators use when engaging in coercive and controlling behaviours (Harris and Woodlock 2019; Woodlock et al. 2020a). The main types of co-occurring abuse alongside technology-facilitated abuse noted by frontline workers were emotional abuse, financial abuse, animal abuse and sexual abuse. While technology was used in these forms of abuse, it was used by the perpetrator to facilitate other forms of domestic violence.

Financial abuse was most often performed by taking control of accounts and credit or debit cards, as well as women's assets such as their homes. A frontline worker explained the complexities involved with financial abuse:

'So many women that I see haven't got their card with them. They've had it taken. They don't understand they can actually open another account, that we can help them have their Centrelink payment put into another account. I know that move in itself will be a danger sign. But they actually are completely unaware that they can change that reality, that the perpetrator can access all their money the minute it goes into the account. It's a huge issue, teaching some financial skills and regaining a bit of control over their own finances.'

As detailed previously, perpetrators will often target women who they perceive to be vulnerable, and frontline workers explained that women would be manipulated into signing over assets such as housing and businesses. When targets seek help and attempt to explain how this has happened, they were often disbelieved because the abuse (offline and online) seemed so 'unlikely'. A frontline worker explained:

'There's an example of a client recently who... he manipulated her into creating the impression that they were in a relationship. So, they started a business together. She gave him money. He moved into her house, into her spare room. She was saying recently that now that their friendship is ended, he's using all of that evidence that he has about being in an intimate relationship with her to actually access her assets. She's quite asset rich. He's now taking her through family law on the premise that they are in a relationship and wanting half of her house.'

In this scenario the perpetrator used their relationship to gain access to her online personal accounts and then utilised this information as further evidence of their relationship. This type of abuse is not uncommon against women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability and is closely related to the practice of mate crime. Known as ‘cuckooing’, it is when a perpetrator will move into the home of someone they perceive as vulnerable and treats that home as if it is their own (Gravell 2012).

Sexual and physical abuse was also noted by frontline workers as common, with image-based sexual abuse seen as a problem. Perpetrators would often film consensual or non-consensual sexual activity and then threaten women with these images. A frontline worker explained:

‘It is a huge problem, especially collecting evidence like filming those instances to blackmail her into either not doing something or threatening to show it to other people.’

Similarly, another frontline worker said these videos could be used to prevent women from seeking help. She said:

‘Perpetrators will record them having sex and then use it as revenge porn. They’ll say, “well I recorded us having sex and if you go to the police, well I’ve got this recording that shows you’re enjoying it, or you weren’t resisting.” I mean they can just keep resurfacing [the recording] it’s quite harsh.’

Case study three: GPS tracking

Jill is a specialist domestic violence frontline worker in rural Victoria. She has a client with an intellectual disability who is being GPS tracked by her ex-partner so he knows when she leaves the house.

He has been threatening to harm her assistance dog provides support for her disability. Recently he has been using GPS tracking to locate her while she is walking her dog and then attempting to take her dog. She has been extremely distressed as her ex-partner is calling to the dog causing the dog to yank and pull on the lead. She then restrains the dog, causing it harm. She is terrified her ex-partner will take her dog and this now restricts her from leaving her home.

Case study four: image-based sexual abuse

Mike is a frontline worker who works in a domestic violence and sexual assault service. They have a client who is a young woman with a cognitive disability. She had been pressured for over a year by two male friends to send them a nude image via Snapchat. The young woman was extremely distressed and confused when this image was shared. She was later bullied by her

friends about what she had done. It was difficult for Mike and the client to find suitable resources to support her through this process.

Impacts of technology-facilitated abuse

The misuse of technology had significant impacts on the women's lives. Star was not able to use the internet after being coerced into sending intimate images, which meant she was unable to use functions on her phone such as the 'maps' app. Other women had to change phone numbers, block numbers and ensure they had their Facebook settings on private.

The burden of the abuse was often left to the women and their families to carry. Many had to stop using various platforms and types of technology to keep themselves safe. This 'safety work' was extensive, and often meant the women were constantly trying to ensure they had their privacy and security settings configured appropriately.

After being contacted by strangers on Facebook, one woman in a focus group explained how much work she had to do to keep herself safe. She said:

'I don't go on it much because if I do, I'm careful, I watch what I'm doing now and who I talk to because I only mainly go on there to talk to my older sister and that's about it and my mum. But I'm pretty careful now and that time they send me more friend requests, I just decline it, don't accept it no more.'

When asked if she knew how to keep her settings more secure on Facebook she said:

'You have to change them like if you're going to post something, you have to change it straight away like instead of public, you've got to change it straight to private if that's what you want like you have a choice.'

Women not only spoke of the efforts they made to feel safer using technology, but they also mentioned the fear and unease they felt. In one of the focus groups, women discussed the toll and impacts:

Facilitator: 'So, when you've had people hassling you like on Facebook and in messages and everything, how does it make you feel... like about your phone and technology and about Facebook?'

Lily: 'Scared. Really scared because you don't know what to expect. It just feels wrong. You just don't know what to expect. You think Facebook would have something there to be more safer, to make it more safer.'

The consequences of not being able to use Facebook safely were significant for the women, especially when it was one of their main ways of communicating with others. Lily said:

'I've got friends that are all over Queensland like all over Australia and I can't contact them all the time because I've got other people trying to harass me when I'm trying to contact them at the same time. Because you can't delete a Facebook account, because then you can't talk to your family because you haven't got their phone number. Sometimes, it's the only way you can connect with your family. That's the only way I can do with my mum and that, through Facebook.'

Challenges in seeking help

The women and frontline workers detailed the numerous barriers and challenges faced when attempting to seek help for technology-facilitated abuse. Most of the women did not go to any formal agencies for help about the way technology was misused, and mainly had friends and family assisting them.

Unsure of who to contact

In a focus group, women who mentioned their ex-partners had abused and harassed them using technology said they had not gone to a domestic violence service for help. The women were unsure who to reach out to, lamenting that 'I've always wanted to, but I just don't know how I could get help' and 'I didn't know who to ask and I didn't know how I could get help'.

Fear of having technology removed

Women's families were mentioned as helping them when they had been abused, but this often meant the women's apps and internet access would be revoked. Star went to her sister to tell her about sending intimate images and her sister said she was no longer able to use the apps. She said: 'I went and talked to my sister. Like, how to stop it. I think that's what I said. It was a while ago, so she deleted some of the apps, yeah took them off'.

While there is limited research in this area, studies show there are often dilemmas with caregivers and women with intellectual or cognitive disability in how they work around access to technology. Caregivers and support workers in a study by Martin et al. (2021) were often conflicted around balancing risk and safety, but also felt it was their role to judge the capacity of the person they were supporting. This resulted in caregivers making their decisions about access to technology based on risk rather than promoting empowerment.

Support services such as WWILD Sexual Violence Prevention Service were identified by women as being a place they could go for help. They learnt about blocking numbers and other services they could go to for assistance from such agencies.

Fear of not being believed

Frontline workers spoke of the other challenges women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability faced seeking help when they are the targets of technology-facilitated abuse. As an NDIS worker said:

‘Sometimes people don’t report it [technology-facilitated abuse]... because they felt okay, “no one [is] going to listen, nothing [is] going to happen, it’s just going to stay there, what’s the point?” Or the amount of red tape they have to go through to lodge an application and they said “okay, forget it. Don’t worry.”... They are worried it will be hard. There won’t be much support. No one there to look into it.’

Studies indicated that inaccuracies, myths and stereotypes pertaining to intellectual disability or cognitive disability can result in negative experiences for women when seeking support and responding to violence (Dowse et al. 2010). One of the main issues identified in this research was that women were not believed when they did seek help. This happened in two ways which often intersected. Firstly, people did not believe what they were explaining was possible. Secondly, even if the abuse was credible, they did not believe the perpetrator would be targeting a woman.

A frontline worker explained how women were not believed when detailing the extent of the technology-facilitated abuse to which they were subjected, recounting a client’s frustration that ‘no one would believe what is happening to her’:

‘It sounded incredulous in terms of what he was able to do to access her personal data. It sounded absolutely incredulous. Her frustration was that she couldn’t - she didn’t get a sense that service providers such as police, I think there was Child Protection involvement, were not believing her, that this was actually happening to her. There were so many barriers for her. Because she had Child Protection involvement and there was no belief around what was happening there were a whole lot of assumptions made around her capacity to parent and to care for her children. Whereas, in reality, he was doing it and it was extensive.’

Lack of awareness about technology-facilitated abuse

Another frontline worker discussed how a lack of knowledge around technology-facilitated abuse often compounded existing assumptions that women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability were not competent and capable of understanding what is happening to them. She said:

‘Some of these women are dealing with workers who may be disability workers or NDIS or a whole range of people who actually have very little knowledge about this sort of technologically assisted abuse. So that’s partly why they’re not believed. They think they’re making it up because it sounds too unbelievable. Yet the person we’re dealing with actually understands and has worked through getting help, getting advice, trying to change what they’re doing. There’s an assumption that she’s not capable of actually having done all those steps because the person she’s dealing with has such limited knowledge around this stuff so therefore doesn’t believe her. I find that a lot with the police. I find it a lot with FACS [Family and Community Services]. I find it a lot with disability workers.’

Fear of children being removed

Frontline workers emphasised that often the perpetrator would present himself as calm, sometimes as the target of the abuse, and this would lead to women not being believed he would harm her (for discussions on how perpetrators present in comparison to targets of the abuse see Bancroft 2002). A frontline worker explained:

‘I can think of one particular example in relation to interfacing with Child Protection. Because the perpetrator had set up the mother in such a way it really aided in creating this narrative around her lack of capacity as a mother and lack of ability to meet the needs of her children. ...The eyes were always on her, never back at dad. Because when he presented, he presented as functioning and fairly normal. Mum, on the other hand, didn’t.’

Frontline workers explained that, for many of their clients, there was a fear and reluctance to seek help because they were concerned their children might be removed from their custody by child protection. This is an issue commonly seen in research into violence against women with intellectual or cognitive disability. There is an increased risk of these women losing custody of their children, even if they are the target of the abuse (Woodlock et al. 2014).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who have intellectual or cognitive disability face an intersection of risk due to institutionalised racism when they seek help for abuse, including

being fearful of losing custody of their children, and being imprisoned themselves (Baldry et al. 2014).

Women with cognitive disability in the 'Voices Against Violence' research conducted by Woodlock et al. (2014) reported their children being placed with the perpetrator of domestic violence after going to the police for assistance. This is also seen in research by Burns (2007) where several children were removed from the women's custody and placed with the perpetrators' families.

Numerous frontline workers indicated that almost all the women they worked with had their children removed from their custody, with one frontline worker saying:

'I don't think I've come across one case where the woman has actually managed to get the children back and nearly 100% removal when domestic violence is notified. A huge issue, I think.'

Given this experience, women were reluctant to seek help, particularly in rural communities, where it was commonly known to happen. A frontline worker explained:

'The word goes around a community that if you notify it's likely that your children will be taken because there are so many examples within a community. We live in a regional area so that network is a word-of-mouth network. People know. If they go to people who are friends within that network, they'll tell them: 'That happened to so and so. The cops did this, FACS [Family and Community Services] did that. Don't tell them that anything is happening'. So yeah, definitely a huge disincentive to getting help because you don't know who you can trust.'

Frontline workers spoke of how this discrimination against mothers with intellectual disability or cognitive disability would often contribute to women staying with perpetrators, with service providers emphasising to women that they would lose their children if not for the perpetrator:

'Actual workers have told women the only reason you have the children is that that person has capacity and you don't. So why would they come forward and say they're a victim of domestic violence because that other person, like was said before, is the person that looks reasonable and looks like they have capacity. They're ticking all the boxes and they're saying all the right things. The person with the disability is the person

that actually is being told 'you only have your kids because of that other person' even though they're being beaten and controlled and manipulated by them day in day out.'

It is not uncommon for women with intellectual or cognitive disability to be positioned as less capable parents than abusers. Such assumptions are underscored by discrimination and serve to hinder women's abilities to respond to violence, exit violent relationships and continue to parent their children. Consultation with frontline workers revealed women's experiences with police were at best mixed. There were regional variances in perceptions of police effectiveness in this arena, as explored in the next section.

Justice system responses to technology-facilitated abuse

Research has documented a 'profound failure of the service system that is responsible for upholding justice, for supporting people with a disability, and for assisting women to safety when they experience violence' (Woodlock et al. 2014:4).

Frontline workers who participated in this research were located throughout Australia and their experiences with police were often shaped by where they were based. Frontline workers from Victoria expressed largely positive experiences with police, where there have been significant reforms, particularly due to the Royal Commission into Family Violence in 2015.

Conversely, frontline workers in New South Wales were concerned about the lack of support women would receive from the police, with one frontline worker on the border of New South Wales and Victoria saying there was a clear difference in police practices between the states.

A psychologist suggested that in Western Australia, while there had been some progress with police identifying technology-facilitated abuse, for some time 'the police just didn't seem to know enough and didn't seem to take it seriously'.

One of the key concerns frontline workers in New South Wales had about police responses to technology-facilitated abuse was a sense that because it happened online, it was out of their jurisdiction. A frontline worker explained:

'When we talk about the technology stuff the police have a brilliant out which 99% of the time is... if it's on Facebook, if the abuse or the control is on Facebook or Instagram or whatever, they can't do anything because it's Facebook. They can't do anything because they don't control Google. It's just...the things that people do electronically to other people and put it out there... they say oh well even if it was harassment or intimidation... they can't prove that it was that particular person because it's a Facebook page and they can't control what happens on Facebook.'

Alongside this unwillingness to follow-up on the use of technology, frontline workers felt there was a lack of training around how to work with people with disability. One frontline worker shared this example:

‘They were saying that she was creating all of this stuff [multiple identities on Facebook]. She had a disability. She didn’t know what was happening. She’s like the police are knocking on her door and then the police have no compassion or understanding around... or training around disabilities.’

Women were often told they need to adjust their behaviour and use of technology. The most common remedies advised by the police were that women should close their accounts or block their friends and family. This response has been observed in policing of technology-facilitated abuse, more broadly (see also Harris and Woodlock 2019, forthcoming b). Traditionally, police responses have centred on physical abuse, overlooking other forms of abuse (Douglas 2019). It is often focussed on requiring women to change their online behaviour or disengaging from technology or blaming women for their use of technology. Changing or ceasing to use technology has heightened consequences for women with disability ‘who have specific reasons to rely on technology to communicate with family, support networks and service providers’ (Woodlock et al. 2020b:9).

There has arguably been much less focus on perpetrator’s abuse of technology (Harris and Woodlock, forthcoming a). Additionally, there has been a tendency to view technology-facilitated abuse as less serious than or disconnected from other forms of violence. This can result in police electing not to regulate violence, despite available legal frameworks and police policy (Harris 2018; Harris and Woodlock, forthcoming a). On this issue, one frontline worker explained:

‘It’s just this technology stuff that’s occurring that people are saying “just block them on Facebook”... but you can’t really do that because then they go and create a whole new account and start this basically bombardment of this person that even when they do block them, their family and friends then send the messages from a different account. I find that really... a huge barrier is the police willingness to actually do something about the technology stuff. ...She was put into hospital because it was affecting her mental health so badly and the police still wouldn’t do anything.’

Frontline workers felt that much of this dismissal of the abuse experience by women relied on the assumption they would be poor witnesses in court. Police were unwilling to proceed with the matter, because of this misconception. A frontline worker said:

'I think that it goes back to the fact that people have disabilities. People make the assumption where even if they did screenshot it or even if they did have the evidence is that person going to be able to get up in a court of law and beyond a reasonable doubt show that this is occurring. They don't even give the person an opportunity to actually have the say or ability to have their voice heard. Their rights aren't being advocated for. I think that that's got a ...huge amount to do with the disempowerment of women with disabilities... that there's no justice in some cases. Well, I see it quite a lot in my role as a disability worker where the assumption is because they have a disability, they can't get any sort of legal outcome for some horrific things that have occurred.'

Victorian frontline workers felt there was more understanding from police around technology-facilitated abuse and how this may specifically impact women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability. One frontline worker was co-located with a family violence and sexual assault police unit. She felt able to work collaboratively with police into the investigation of technology-facilitated abuse, and said:

'It's very helpful for women to be able to take screenshots. The police have the technology to actually track it down. It's sort of the short version of it. I am able to speak to the person that does that. I'm actually able to drill down around what's possible. We often have conversations around what's possible... what's probable... it's possible that he's doing this but it's actually not probable that he's doing it because he's not... what he's saying that he can do is not probable at the level of computer skill that he had. So, yeah, it's a really helpful relationship to have.'

Despite this good relationship with the police, many frontline workers expressed frustration with the lack of cohesive support for women with intellectual or cognitive disability who had been subjected to abuse. A siloing of sectors was noted as making the pathways for support complex to navigate.

Pathways for support

Participants in the research felt that women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability made numerous attempts to seek help, but the systems that exist to support them do not engage with each other, nor provide complete and comprehensive assistance. A frontline worker explained:

'I think women with disabilities try many times to try and access help. The problem that we have, that I think is a big problem, is that the domestic violence sector or sexual

assault sector and the disability sector are on complete parallel highways. They very rarely cross. They don't even understand what each other does very well. Disability workers often don't lead those women to help in a DV [domestic violence] or a sexual assault service. Because I'm in this crossover role where I work in a health service I'm dealing with both highways. But they don't know each other. It's just sheer luck and accident half the time that I'm getting the referrals that I am. I'm out there trying to promote it in a regional area to both sectors. But it's a lot of work because they don't talk to each other.'

This siloing of services and the lack of communication between them has been identified as a major barrier to justice for women with disability. Frohmader et al. (2015:18) argue in their assessment of the current policies and discourses around addressing and preventing violence against women in Australia that 'the multiple forms and complex nature of violence perpetrated against women and girls with disability currently sit in a legislative, policy and service response vacuum'. This assertion is supported by the frontline worker experience documented in this research.

Several frontline workers in health and parenting services felt their positioning was 'neutral territory' – neither disability nor domestic violence service – and found many women referred to them were subjected to family violence which had not been identified previously. A frontline worker said:

'I think for me working at a parenting service is really good because that was kind of neutral territory. The Orange Door [a free service for adults, young people and children who are experiencing or have experienced family violence and families needing support with care of children], which was the referral point, they would most often refer women with cognitive impairment for parenting. Like I said that was more neutral territory and then after working for a while you would realise that there was family violence and other abuse going on. So... they would mostly come for that but then the real issue is actually the family violence. A lot of the referrals were there from child protection.'

Several frontline workers mentioned for technology-facilitated abuse they would go to eSafety for support and also WESNET. They also felt there needed to be more training in this area, for police as well as frontline workers. One frontline worker stated:

'We go to regular eSafety workshops... I used to work in the ACT. I used to be able to go to the police and actually get that connection like others were describing. New South Wales, a complete waste of time. They don't even know what you're talking about half the time. They think we're being alarmist by raising this stuff because their level of

knowledge is so low. So, we really need WESNET. We really need someone with a high reputation that we can quote or that we can consult with to actually say “...is this what I think is happening?” How can we actually get some action on it?’

Similarly, another frontline worker felt there needed to be service providers that could assist with both the technology and the domestic violence front:

‘I think that there needs to be service providers that are specialists in not only domestic violence but also in technology. Like protective groups and stuff like that. There needs to be training given to police officers for more than half a day around what family domestic violence is and also around disability. ...the people that I go to are eSafety as well as [organisations supporting] people with disabilities.’

Other frontline workers recommended to women that they should report the abuse to eSafety as they felt this would legitimise their claim if they then took it to the police:

‘I go into disability workplaces and I work with groups of women around safety education. I tell them that if they want to report online abuse that they don’t report it to local police. They actually report it to the federal police contact or the eSafety Commissioner. Then when they need to make the steps with local police, we do what we would normally do but try and get them to be conscious that [with] online abuse, our cops are not up to the task. But it’s good evidence that you’ve already reported it to another authority when you do take it back to New South Wales Police because it calls them to account. We shouldn’t have to do this of course but it does help.’

One digital educator said clients could have reservations and tensions when cutting technological contact with people who had harmed them. These people had previously been a significant part of their life. In these cases, she would initially frame blocking as a short-term disconnection ‘maybe in a month’s time, maybe you can unblock it and see if that person has stopped sending you those text messages’. But it could be overwhelming for some clients, ‘they’ll say, ‘no, no, no... I want to keep it. I want to keep that person’s name. I don’t want to lose that’. The digital educator worried about keeping contact open because, in her experience ‘the next week, they’ll say, ‘have a look at all the abusive [messages]’. She also emphasised the need to recognise and respect client agency:

‘I can never take control... it’s my job to teach them, to help them, but not to take control of their device. They are still the one, even with the abuse and all that, [they] are still the ones who say, ‘yes’ or ‘no’ [to blocking]. That’s my hardest pull-back.’

Frontline worker requests for resources

Frontline workers felt there was a need to develop resources for both their clients and also to support them when they encounter technology-facilitated abuse targeting women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability. This included plain English guides for clients, as well as education around healthy relationships and safe use of technology. They also suggested videos pitched at different audiences, particularly for young people and their parents around technology-facilitated abuse, as well as focusing on healthy relationships and technology use. We note that Emerson et al. (2021:3), in their United Kingdom study of adolescents with and without disabilities emphasised the need for '[e]ducation and prevention strategies that address the increased vulnerability of adolescent girls with disability to cyber victimisation'. The team made specific mention of the importance of 'accessible, online information provided in a variety of formats', including those produced by the eSafety Commissioner (Emerson et al. 2021:3).

In the absence of this material, workers were producing their own resources which was time-consuming and frustrating, given services are overburdened and under-resourced (Fraser-Barbour 2018; Harris et al. forthcoming). As one frontline worker explained:

'Some plain English resources around the more sophisticated versions of technological abuse. I'm having to make up my own handouts and my own material when I go in and work with disability service providers who are sympathetic to me educating their clients. But the material is too dense, too complex, too wordy. It goes into a whole lot of other stuff that's not actually relevant. So, we're having to develop our own stuff... not really my role. I don't know how good I am at doing it. But there needs to be plain English, much simpler, direct information for clients about how to keep themselves safe.'

Frontline workers felt there was a lot of pressure on them to be experts in numerous areas. New and emerging technologies, forms and practices in perpetration complicate and constrain their efforts. Frontline workers are required to consistently upskill, monitor and update their resources (Harris 2020; Harris et al. forthcoming). One frontline worker said:

'I just think resources that really... focus on the basics because in the tech world it can get so tricky and so complex. I think us as frontline workers shouldn't be expected to know it all. We should just... know where to go to fix it. If this is the case, great. What types of supports do we need? Do we need to go and see the tech guys? Do we need to write to the eSafety Commissioner? But what is it that we need to do for that client? I think just a simple guide of, if we think it's bugged these are the steps you can take [or] ... whatever it might be. I think that when we are using that plain English it's really

important but also using pictures in relation to the guides that we give as well so it's really clear. That's what I'd like to see.'

Several frontline workers agreed with this, and felt there needed to be more of a community response to this abuse, with support from and training of technology experts in domestic violence:

'I know that this is probably... a bit of an alternative solution but employing technology companies to be able to assist and to be specialised in preventing family violence. That would be amazing. Instead of training up social workers to become tech guys, using tech guys to become more aligned with DV [domestic violence]. That would be a lot easier and a lot less training for really, really good results. I think that also ties in with the whole way we're going in family violence at least in Victoria... it's a community effort. It shouldn't be up to individual people or frontline workers. It should be the whole community on board on how we eradicate this.'

One frontline worker in a region with a large community of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples felt that an appropriate pathway to talk about technology and safety would be to present at a yarning centre that has groups for women with intellectual disability. She thought a technology expert could come to the group to look over women's phones and devices if they felt there were any issues. She said:

'If I was to present something to an Aboriginal group of women, I might meet them at the yarning centre for a while to get that connection before I actually went there and said okay, well we're going to talk about technology-facilitated abuse. But I wouldn't even say that, I would say, just come to have a chat about if someone's tried to get you to share photos or they seem to know where you are all the time. Even just having a phone safety day with a technology expert present, just to check up on your phone, would be good.'

Creating a whole of community response to the issue of technology-facilitated abuse of women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability would mean each sector could bring their strengths together to respond to – and ultimately prevent – this violence.

Women's suggestions for technology safety

Women were enthusiastic about making technology safer and had numerous suggestions on how this could happen. This included that awareness raising and assistance related to

technology-facilitate abuse should occur via a variety of outlets. Lily suggested that funding should be available through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS):

'NDIS could fund if you go to a phone shop, you actually get it privately done for someone who's got a disability so it's easier and it comes out of your funding. Something like that I reckon. They should have like a guide there to show you exactly what to do like with Facebook or with... any of these, you know? Like any of them, have a guide. But they should have one of those located in every phone store like somebody who just manages with media like any media I reckon.'

They also suggested that government services like Centrelink could provide assistance and raise awareness on technology-facilitated abuse.

Women highlighted much of the help available was not always accessible for them and it needed to be provided in different formats, including 'how to' videos, and visual guides to show them what to do. This included help pages on Facebook where they thought it should be easier and clearer on how to block people. Lily suggested:

'I think that it could have it in picture form for people who have a disability so it's easier. So, if it's a green colour or something, just press on that and it completely blocks them straight away, that sort of thing instead of in letters. Because not everyone can read as well.'

Women found it helpful to talk in their support groups about technology and they thought it could be good to have technology experts come in person to talk about safety:

'If you don't know how to do it, then somebody else could show you. In support groups, I don't know if the support group would be the place to show people. A different type of group maybe, like if it was for technology groups for learning about safety and risk with social media, a group like that would be good.'

Women said often it was suggested to simply not go onto social media, but this was not a solution. Linny said:

Linny: 'You could just not add Facebook at all, but that's not easy.'

Facilitator: 'I think that's a great point, because so often if people have bad experiences or feel unsafe on things like Facebook, sometimes people tell them just to stop using it.'

Linny: 'If I didn't have Facebook, I think my brain would go insane.'

Women expressed that technology was an important part of their life and they enjoyed using it to communicate with others, keep in touch with their family and friends and for entertainment. But they often felt afraid and unsafe and were eager to learn more about how they could use technology safely. Summing up the feelings of the women who participated in this research, one of the women said ultimately the message she wanted to convey was:

'Protect the people... people who have disabilities are more vulnerable to the system than anyone else and they should be acknowledged like if they're having a problem, they should be getting help straight away.'

The importance of digital literacy and security

Women wanted to learn more and feel more confident using their devices. They did not want other people to just turn off their settings but wanted to know how to use it themselves. Hailey explained that when she went into telecommunication stores, she liked it when they took their time to assist her:

'Some shops you go into, you ask them a question, how do you do this on - I've got something wrong with my phone, some of them take their time and show you how to do it and some people don't; they say "oh, there you go, it's done," and they don't even show you.'

Frontline workers maintained that training and supporting people to safely and confidently use technology was an essential part of independent living skills and also addressed technology-facilitated abuse. Digital educators said that understanding the functionality of devices and platforms, as well as the security and privacy issues, was key.

Frontline workers recommended sessions on

- How do you search correctly?
- How do you know if it's a secure website you're logging into? How do you know it's a secure website?
- How do you know not to tap links?
- Do you know not to tap links in pop-ups?
- What are you doing with your tech device? For example, what kind of things do you do on your device and how do you keep it safe?

- Do you know that it needs updating?
- How do you log in and connect with me?

They also stressed the importance of passwords and not 'handing over' devices.

However, for some digital educators responding to and managing technology-facilitated abuse was actually beyond the scope of their role, but something they felt was important to continue anyway – sometimes against their employer's recommendations.

Educators recommended using analogies to capture concepts, such as thinking about devices like other personal items, like rings or watches, 'you don't take it off and give it to [another] person to put on', just as you would not 'hand over your device to anybody', especially 'if you don't want to have a password'.

In relation to internet and app settings and access to data, one participant cautioned:

'I say to them, "if you're walking down the street, do you knock on a door and just walk into a person's house? Would you know if they're a good person or a bad person? Once they lock that door, you're in their home. Would you?" They go, "oh, no, I wouldn't knock on someone's door and go into their house." I said. "why would you do that on the internet?".... I say "would you stay in your home, open your front door, and leave it open to make your bed daily? Would you do that? No. So why would you leave your device access to other notifications and websites, to be able to come into your contacts, grab your contacts, grab your pictures?"'

Visuals were said to be useful in sessions and translator apps were used to connect with clients who spoke languages other than English. Educators called for technology resources that are jargon-free and accessible. While emphasising the need for these, they also recognised the infantilising that can occur in resources and training. One participant contended that 'how I teach my clientele is not in a childish manner. You have to teach them in an adult manner'. For her, this was also key because 'they're dealing with adults online, and they're dealing with very dangerous people, at times'.

Educators lamented that sometimes colleagues would assume their clients could not use tools or engage with concepts, such as encrypted links because they were 'too complicated'. They maintained these were workable, with clear and consistent information and instruction. Using particular emojis, for instance, to show the communication was from an educator and could be trusted, was one strategy employed. One educator suggested the use of biometrics (their voice, fingerprint, and facial recognition) could be useful for storing passwords and securing devices

and accounts. Note there are potentially issues with biometrics that are beyond the scope of this paper to explore (see Smith et al. 2018).

Educators noted clients would not always identify or emphasise technology needs. It was important, one participant said, she thinks about technology needs in the contexts of 'chats'. For instance, if clients talked about meeting up with online friends or buying goods online.

Technology industry recommendations

Digital educators lamented the ways some technologies were designed, developed and managed. One participant commented 'when I hear the word inclusive, I get very annoyed, because it's not actually followed up'. She spoke about how user needs and experiences need to be accounted for both in theory and in practice.

Recognising context

Traditionally, responses to adult cyber abuse and online security have focused on unknown perpetrators. However, as frontline workers and educators noted, many women are targeted by known perpetrators who may have physical access to devices and relational knowledge that enables digital access to accounts and profiles.

As such, the 'intimate threat model' is important to understand the threats and challenges, and the opportunities to respond to both. This model was also highlighted by digital educators who told us they often supported clients in share houses where it was not uncommon for support workers to have access to women's devices and accounts. As confirmed by the NDIS worker who participated in this research, support workers (some who are tech savvy and some who are not) had this type of access.

Conclusion

Overall, it is evident from this research that technology has significant meaning in the lives of women with intellectual or cognitive disability and that further effort is needed to ensure they can use it safely. The women in the focus groups spoke of how it is an important aspect of their social and everyday activity. They enjoyed playing games, communicating with friends and family, talking with others and online dating.

Frontline workers' insights and perspectives aligned with the women's experiences, and they identified several ways that technology is being misused against women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability. These included:

- pressure to send intimate images to partners, ex-partners and strangers
- intimate images shared without consent
- hacking into and impersonating social media accounts
- others gaining control of accounts and devices, both authorised and unauthorised, through relational knowledge of a woman
- changing functions of devices, impairing functions or using unauthorised functions
- destroying devices
- recording women retaliating to provocation and using this as evidence to discredit their character
- disability specific technology-facilitated abuse, such as restricting access to devices, assistive technologies and essential online government accounts – also via threats to disclose health records
- using technology to harass and threaten, which also targeted a woman's wider networks
- using technology to stalk and monitor via tracking and recording devices and software
- leveraging of smart home technologies to control lights and televisions.

Both frontline workers and the women in this study said that perpetrators of technology-facilitated abuse were primarily male partners or ex-partners, however it also included other people a woman may have contact with, such as parents, children, friends, carers, service providers and strangers.

Women faced a variety of obstacles when seeking help for abuse. Environmental and social structures, as well as discriminatory attitudes contributed to these barriers and shaped responses to women and available pathways to support. Frontline workers identified that siloed service delivery, particularly between disability and domestic and family violence sectors, as

well as the justice system, needed to be improved to provide women with cohesive and holistic support. Frontline workers noted that women were sometimes disbelieved by authorities, had their concerns about the abuse dismissed, were cast as the aggressors or were deemed unreliable witnesses. Some practitioners revealed that responses from police were mixed and location-dependent. In some settings women's lack of confidence in using technology, and reliance on others to help with using devices (such as carers and support workers), could potentially compromise devices and personal data.

When seeking help, women were unsure about who to contact to address the abuse, with most deferring to family and friends. The women in this study spoke of being discouraged from using technology after negative experiences, particularly by their families and even police. When technology was used in ways that made them feel afraid it resulted in deep mistrust and anxiety using platforms and services. Moreover, some women were reluctant to seek help because of a real fear of losing custody of their children, which kept some women entrapped in their situation.

The research uncovered women's preferences for resources and advice in accessible formats, that included video resources and visual guides. The women who participated were keen to bolster their understanding about technology safety and desired in-person instruction on operating their devices. This included bringing technology safety experts into their support groups and sessions. They emphasised that to feel safer using social media platforms it was incumbent upon those platforms to be more responsive to online harms and to make it easier for women with disability to report abuse. Further, platforms should offer easy to understand reporting mechanisms communicated in images and videos, as well as in writing.

Frontline workers believed their clients should be supported with 'easy read' guides, healthy relationships education and direct instruction in safe use of technology. They felt overburdened by having to consistently upskill, monitor and update their resources about technology-facilitated abuse. In their view, the responsibility for responding to and preventing abuse should also be carried by the technology industries.

It is important that women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability can participate safely in the digital society and their rights as digital citizens are prioritised. This sentiment is reflected in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), of which Australia is a signatory. Women in this research are telecommunication consumers and as such should be entitled to support and resources, in accessible formats, from these companies to ensure their safety. Part of this education needs address the ways that technology can be misused, and more broadly about patterns of abuse and domestic and family violence, that is grounded in a framework focused on the specific nature of violence directed at women with disability.

This research, although limited by its small sample size, highlights the importance of education and prevention measures in supporting women with intellectual or cognitive disability, as well as their support services, with essential skills to identify and respond to the impacts of technology-facilitated abuse.

Methodology

Phase one

Phase one of the research comprised frontline workers who came from the fields of domestic violence, sexual abuse and disability services. This provided ‘practice-based knowledge’ and ‘a depth of knowledge and expertise which is often inaccessible to even the most skilled researchers’ (Coy and Garner 2012:296). A low-risk ethics application was made for this phase of the research through Queensland University of Technology (QUT), with Ethics Approval Number 2000000351.

Convenience sampling was used, with our project partner WESNET promoting the research throughout their networks. Frontline workers were invited to participate if they worked with women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability who had been subjected to technology-facilitated abuse. Types of intellectual disability or cognitive disability that clients might have were not specified, and researchers were open to having frontline workers involved based on their own organisations’ definitions of these disabilities.

Drawing on the knowledge of frontline workers as an ‘epistemic community’ (Coy and Garner 2012:296) is a common approach to researching violence against women, however there are limitations to this research method. Frontline workers’ recollection of events can be affected by observer bias, where they may not accurately recall events, overestimating or underestimating the abuse of their clients.

Frontline workers were asked about:

- The organisation they worked for, their role and their work with women with intellectual and/or cognitive disability.
- The kind of technologies being used or misused to facilitate abuse of women with intellectual and/or cognitive disability.
- The ways that technologies were being used or misused against women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability and the strategies of perpetrators.
- How the technology-facilitated abuse manifested distinct from – and alongside – ‘offline’ abuse.
- How technology-facilitated abuse has particular meanings and impacts for women with intellectual and/or cognitive disability.

The perpetrators of technology-facilitated abuse, such as current or former dating or intimate partners, paid/unpaid carers, co-residents, friends, online friends, family, strangers or service providers – recognising these are not always distinct categories.

Their perceptions of intersectional responses and the needs of women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability, such as for culturally and linguistically diverse and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

In addition, frontline workers were asked about:

- Preferred pathways for women when seeking help and trusted sources of help.
- Barriers and challenges restricting women seeking help, support and responses to violence.
- Insights and ideas about how best to raise awareness and enhance responses to technology-facilitated abuse of women with intellectual and/or cognitive disability.
- Whether or not they felt sufficiently equipped to support a woman with intellectual disability or cognitive disability who was experiencing technology-facilitated abuse.
- The resources they used and the types of resources and responses that would be useful for their clients and their organisation.

There was a total of 15 participants, with eight participants in our focus groups, and seven interviews. The groups and interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed.

Phase two

An essential aspect of the methods used in this research was to collaborate with organisations including WWILD Sexual Violence Prevention Service (WWILD) in Queensland and South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (SECASA) in Victoria, who both have extensive experience working with women with intellectual and/or cognitive disability. The research processes were led by their expertise. The organisations assisted researchers with the ethics application, guiding on best practices in recruiting, consent, supports, interview processes, interview questions and follow-up processes. WWILD and SECASA worked with researchers to develop all the recruiting material and consent. The project was granted ethics approval from QUT (Ethics Approval Number 2000000322).

The recruitment and research processes included specific supports around the following areas.

Recruitment

While researchers encountered significant challenges due to COVID-19 (see below) the original recruitment processes developed included working with each organisation, WWILD in

Queensland and SECASA in Victoria, to recruit clients that were already supported through their organisations to participate. This process was used in Queensland but was unable to proceed in Victoria due to COVID-19 restrictions. Working with clients that were already known to the service ensured that participants, their specific capacities to receive information, their histories and any susceptibility to distress were already known to the services. It also meant that participants were comfortable with the services, including discussing their experiences of abuse, and that protocols already implemented by the services around consent could be used in the research. These procedures were familiar to the participants.

As there could be issues with clients of the service feeling pressured and/or obligated to participate in the research, researchers also implemented the support of an independent third person (also referred to as a 'trusted third party') who could also consult with the women regarding their participation in the research. Throughout all these processes there was messaging to clients that whatever their decisions were regarding the research, there would be no impact on her relationship with the service.

Consent

Women's decisions about being involved in this research were supported by the service. This could mean that a participant may have needed information tailored to their particular needs, including assistance from the service to communicate their decision and additional time to make a decision.

Interview/focus group processes

Researchers worked with services to assess if and how participants' intellectual disability or cognitive disability may increase their susceptibility to discomfort or distress. To minimise the effects of this susceptibility, researchers developed protocols to ensure that participants were supported by the services prior, during and after the interviews. Researchers also emphasised that participants knew that they could stop the interview at any time. Researchers worked with each participant at the beginning of the interview/focus group to establish how the participant wanted to proceed if they became uncomfortable or distressed. This included raising their hand to stop the interview, or time out to receive private support from the service. In the focus groups, green and red balls were also held up by participants to show when they were comfortable to discuss a topic (green) or wanted to stop the discussion (red).

As there are varying levels and types of intellectual and cognitive disabilities, there is no clear agreement that the nature of the participants' disability will increase their susceptibility to distress. Foley (2017) argues that there is a strong paternalistic regime which people with intellectual disability or cognitive disability live within and assumptions are made about the universality of their capacities for consent and decision making. While the participants may have

felt discomfort or distress during the interviews, they were able to make their own decisions – with the support of a trusted professional if required – about their participation.

Interview/focus group questions

Our interview and focus group questions were semi-structured and were guided by eSafety, SECASA and WWILD. They included:

- Demographic information on the participants.
- What sort of technology women used and how they used technology in their everyday lives (a range of images of different sorts of technology were used as prompts with this question, women were able to point out which kinds of technology and devices they used).
- How has technology been used to upset them, make them feel afraid and in ways they did not like?
- Who used technology to make them feel afraid?
- Had this person done other things to make them feel afraid?
- What did they do when they were upset and afraid?
- How did this make them feel, did they change the way they used technology?
- Was there anyone they talked to about what happened, did they get the help they needed?
- What ideas did they have to help other women and to help make things safer using technology?

Two focus groups were held in Queensland with five women in total (two in one group and three in the other). There was one interview in Queensland. These were all completed face-to-face. All six women were clients of WWILD and were supported through the interview and focus groups by WWILD. The focus groups were held at WWILD with one of the researchers attending the WWILD office. The interview was conducted at a client's residence with a support worker present.

COVID-19 impacts

Phase one was not significantly impacted by COVID-19. However, phase two was complicated by COVID-19 restrictions, particularly those implemented in Melbourne, Victoria. The Victorian partner organisation, SECASA is located in Bentleigh, a suburb that was under restriction during both the first and second waves of COVID-19 in Melbourne. These restrictions have impacted on service delivery at SECASA, as since March 2020 they were providing a very limited face-to-face

service, with the majority of client contact occurring via phone or telehealth. This meant that the organisation's ability to assist researchers to work with clients in a safe and respectful way was impacted. It also restricted the way that the project could be promoted to frontline workers.

Prior to COVID-19 the project materials could have been taken in person to internal meetings, and promotional material would have been displayed in waiting rooms and counselling rooms, prompting both clients and frontline workers to discuss the research. However, following the restrictions all staff meetings were held via teleconferencing. The promotion of the project was no longer straightforward as frontline workers had to remember to promote it electronically when on telehealth, or verbally when on a phone session. Without prompts such as flyers in the room, this became harder to achieve.

Frontline workers also had to adapt their counselling to a different format, and this also applied to the promotion of the research project. There were also numerous changes to service delivery after March 2020, creating an extra layer of administration and work for all staff at the service, from leadership staff, administration staff and advocates, contributing to delays in other additional projects.

Without face-to-face interaction in a counselling room environment, it was difficult for frontline workers to safely identify clients who may have been suitable for the project. Prior to the restrictions, clients would have been able to come to SECASA, a location they were familiar with. The focus groups and interviews would have been held in the presence of researchers and SECASA support staff, allowing time after the focus group for debriefing if needed and providing follow up phone calls. With the restrictions, the focus groups could no longer be held, and interviews needed to be held via teleconference. This required clients to have access to appropriate technology and supports in their own environment to participate safely.

Due to these factors, it was decided that this would not be an appropriate way to conduct the research. Instead, other Australian organisations that were not under the same restrictions as Melbourne were contacted to ascertain if they may want to participate in the project. Unfortunately, none were available to assist in this research. Consequently, researchers adjusted recruitment processes to work with Women with Disabilities Victoria (WDV). WDV promoted the research through their communication channels and researchers presented information about the project during one of their 'Experts by Experience' working group meetings. Members of the group are women with disability who support the work of WDV and other organisations by sharing their lived experience of disability. Group members provide advice and feedback on WDV projects, resources and materials. While consultation could not take place within the scope of this project, interviews and focus groups with women will inform subsequent eSafety work in this space.

Notes about analysis

The interview and focus group data from phase one and phase two was coded thematically, using NVivo analytical software.

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Appendix – Wider Research

What do we know about violence against women with intellectual or cognitive disability?

In Australia, there are major gaps in the evidence base of the extent of violence against women with disability in general, and even further limitations in knowledge of the abuse of women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability. This is due to several factors such as conflicting conceptualisations of disability and violence in data collection across time. The data is also siloed into separate surveys focused on either disability or gendered violence (Dowse et al. 2016; Mitra-Kahn et al. 2016). The Personal Safety Survey is the only Australian survey that measures the prevalence and incidence of violence against women with disability. However, this data is also limited as it excludes women with a communication disability and those living in non-private dwellings such as residential group homes (Mitra-Kahn et al. 2016). The questions asked in the survey also do not measure disability-specific forms of abuse, such as restricting the use of mobility aids and interfering with medications (Dowse et al. 2016).

The Personal Safety Survey results do provide some insights into the reported prevalence and incidence of violence against women with disability. The most recent survey findings show that 6% of women with disability residing in private dwellings reported being subjected to violence in the year prior to the survey, compared to 5% of those without disability (ABS 2014b). Those with psychological or other disabilities (which included intellectual disabilities, head injuries and stroke), were much more likely to report being subjected to violence in the past 12 months at 12% (ABS 2014b).

Dowse et al. (2016) conducted additional statistical interrogation of the disability-related data from the Personal Safety Survey and found that when examining violence since the age of 15, 62.2% of women with a disability under the age of 50 had been subjected to violence, compared to 38.3% of women without disability. This equates to more women with a disability being subjected to violence than those who are not.

It is also important to highlight that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability are at a particularly heightened risk of physical and sexual violence from a young age, therefore that percentage could be significantly higher for this population (Baldry et al. 2012).

It should also be emphasised that violence against women with disability is often unreported, and when it is reported, women's disclosures are mostly ignored or their experiences of victimisation normalised (Frohman et al. 2015). Violence against women with disability is often poorly investigated, particularly when the targets of the abuse have cognitive disabilities

(Camilleri 2009). As Steele (2017:423) contends, criminal justice agents may perceive women with disability as:

‘oversexualised (invite sexual violence) or undersexed (incapable of engaging in sexual activity), irrational (cannot be trusted or believed) and incapable (cannot comprehend sex or violence).’

This can result in negative experiences when seeking assistance, as their allegations may be dismissed or not addressed (Dowse et al. 2010).

What do we know about technology-facilitated abuse against women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability?

Broader studies into the online abuse of people with intellectual disability or cognitive disability can provide insights into the specific ways that technology can be abused, while also demonstrating the importance of access to technology. Studies on the use of the internet by people with intellectual disability indicate that technology is an important space where they can find a place they belong and define their identity (Sallafranque-St-Louis and Normand 2017). In a study with young women with intellectual disability, O’Shea and Frawley (2020) found that social media, especially Facebook, was a valued and productive space, particularly around exploring their sexuality and relationships. Participants in a study by Shpigelman and Gill (2014) reported that it was easier for them to communicate with others and make friends online than it was face-to-face and that it helped them feel like everyone else.

Worryingly, research shows that people with disability are at a high risk of online abuse, with young women more likely to be targeted (Emerson et al. 2021; Heiman and Olenik-Shemesh 2015). A study of the online abuse of people with intellectual disability indicated that around 15% have experienced adult cyber abuse, which is significantly higher than the general population. Jenaro et al. (2018) put the rate in the general population at 6.6%. A Swedish study (see Fridh et al. 2015; Fridh et al. 2018) found higher rates of technology-facilitated abuse of students with disabilities than the broader cohort (with overall rates 24% as compared to 15%; girls 28% as compared to 18% and boys 20% as compared to 12%). A United Kingdom study on peer victimisation of 14 year old adolescents (using ‘Wave 6’ of the *Millennium Cohort Study*) found higher prevalence of cyber and non-cyber abuse of those classified as with disabilities (defined as “physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expecting to last 12 months or more”) was higher than the broader cohort (Emerson et al. 2021: 2). Emerson et al (2021: 3) report that victimisation “appears to be moderated by gender with very high rates of exposure to cyber victimisation among girls with a disability”.

Technology-facilitated abuse can be specific to their disability, using language that targets their disability, which Alhaboby et al. (2016:1141) define as ‘disability-based targeting’. The impacts of the abuse were also related to the targets' disability, with a deterioration of existing health issues noted, including mental and physical health (Alhaboby et al. 2016; Bonomi et al. 2018). Friends, family and carers of targets have also become targets for online abuse, particularly when they have attempted to intervene in the abuse, which can further isolate targets (Maple et al. 2012). Studies have shown that abusers will befriend targets through deception and identity fraud, many claiming to have a disability to manipulate the target (Alhaboby et al. 2016).

There has been minimal research on the role of technology in the abuse of women with disability. Broader studies on digital victimisation have found that women with disability may be placed at greater risk of this abuse, in part due to their increased reliance on assistive technology.

Research by Woodlock (2015), with the Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria, WESNET and Women’s Legal Services NSW asked 546 domestic violence frontline workers if there were any specific cohorts of women that were at increased risk of technology-facilitated abuse – women with disability were seen as one of the most at-risk groups.

Frontline workers felt that perpetrators would exploit any perceived vulnerabilities that these women had, such as their social isolation and reliance on technology for their expression and interaction. One worker said: ‘[f]or women with disability, there may be a higher need for using technologies to communicate or link in with services and the community’ (Woodlock 2015:11). A follow-up study in 2020 showed the perceived risk for women with disability subjected to technology-facilitated abuse increased by 115.3% from 20.57% in 2015 to 44.3% in 2020 (Woodlock et al. 2020a).

An Australian study on image-based sexual abuse found that 56% of respondents who had a disability had been targets of this form of abuse, however, this finding was not disaggregated by sex, so it is unclear how many targets were female. More than half of those targeted (53%) had a nude or sexual image taken without their consent, 42% had an image distributed and 41% had been threatened with the distribution of an image (Henry et al. 2019).

In studies on technology-facilitated abuse, there is limited discussion of women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability and their experiences. What information is available has been found incidentally and has not been a focus of the research. A United Kingdom study (where 15 women with learning disabilities were interviewed about domestic violence they were subjected to), had several women mention the way that technology featured in this abuse (McCarthy et al. 2016). In this research, it was noted that a participant was sent text messages from her ex-

partner where he threatened to kill her. Much like broader research on technology-facilitated abuse has shown, the responsibility to stop this abuse was placed back on the target, with police instructing her to turn her phone off and acquire a new device (see Harris and Woodlock 2019).

Technology-related abuse was one of the main types of domestic and sexual violence found by Bonomi et al. (2018) in their interviews with 27 female college students who had cognitive disabilities in the United States. The abuse included constant text messages, phone calls and harassment on social media – all perpetrator tactics commonly seen in technology-related domestic violence. However, the content of this abuse was very specific to the women’s disability, with one perpetrator encouraging the target of the abuse to overdose on her ‘crazy pills’ (Bonomi et al. 2018:364). Another participant told of constant text messages from her ex-partner requesting that she send him sexually explicit images. A frontline worker, in a study conducted by Woodlock (2015), felt that women with intellectual disabilities were at risk of technology-facilitated abuse due to their disabilities, but also because of the ways they were made vulnerable in a disabling culture, with polarisation and marginalisation. She explained:

‘I work specifically with women with intellectual disabilities. I believe they are less likely to be aware of the different ways in which technology can be used to track and abuse. They also have more difficulty accessing and understanding information about how they can protect themselves, such as privacy settings on Facebook. They experience high levels of social disadvantage and poverty so are less likely to have a phone with advanced features, such as a setting through which you can block callers’ (Woodlock 2015:12).

