

March 2024



Roundtable on

Technology Facilitated Abuse

Summary Report

Background

On 14 March 2024, the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission (the Commission) with and the eSafety Commissioner co-convened a roundtable on technology-facilitated abuse (TFA). The roundtable had 27 participants from across the domestic, family and sexual violence and government sectors and was generously hosted by Professor Anne Summers and the University of Technology Sydney as a part of the Elsie Conference.

The Commission recognises that technology plays a vital role in creating connections and enabling action across these domains, but also acknowledges that increasingly, publicly available technology is being used by perpetrators to monitor, control, harass and in some cases, terrorise.

The roundtable is part of an ongoing series from the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission to create a space for national conversations on areas of priority identified in the National Plan.

This summary has been developed through an aggregation of common themes and ideas from the notes taken in each small group discussion. Comments and suggestions have been de-identified.

***“It’s not the real world versus the online world anymore.
They are inextricably linked.”***

Key Themes

The roundtable commenced with an opening from two representatives from the Commission’s Lived Experience Advisory Council, Akii and Libby. Libby shared some of her experience of TFA and image-based abuse and her concern that TFA remains a domain where victim blaming continues to persist. Akii discussed the ongoing need to protect oneself in online spaces and the importance of co-design and engagement with lived experience in order to develop effective interventions.

eSafety Commissioner Julie Inman Grant and Professor Anne Summers provided a scene setting discussion that explored the nature and development of TFA in the context of domestic and family violence over the last three decades. The eSafety Commissioner also discussed her perspective on some of the emerging areas of concern around artificial intelligence and deep fakes and the deeply gendered nature of that material. She also highlighted the chilling effect that TFA has on women participating in public life.

During group discussions, a number of key themes emerged:

- The need for education and awareness about technology as a mechanism for abuse
- Removing the onus on the victim and improving service responses to TFA
- The importance of safety by design
- The need to keep ahead of the challenge of technological changes.

Education and awareness about technology as a mechanism for abuse

Within the community there is still not a strong understanding of TFA and financial abuse. As such, there is a need to ensure that people understand what TFA is, how to respond to it and the support that is available. In particular, participants noted that many women engaging domestic, family and sexual violence services may be unaware of the ways in which technology can be harnessed for abuse. However, participants acknowledged that there are significant risks in providing information as this also provide perpetrators with information that can facilitate perpetration.

There was discussion about the importance of making sure that information, resources and support are accessible for all. This is particularly so for people with disabilities, who are at greater risk of violence and may also be reliant on assistive technology that can be used to facilitate abuse.

Attendees identified potential options for improvement in this area, including:

- Placing responsibility on technology companies to implement safety and information systems, similar to those already in place for people who seek out information on self-harm and terrorism.
- Including technology education in respectful relationship and consent education programs to support building behaviours for healthy online use.
- Early intervention work to intervene and change behaviours to prevent further abuse. One participant noted that in the context of people using banking technology, often a warning letter from the bank can be enough to prevent further abuse.
- Including technology in work to understand and change men's behaviour.
- Commissioning research to learn more about the effectiveness of bystander intervention in relation to TFA.

Removing onus on the victim and improving service responses to TFA

Participants discussed the way that oftentimes responses to TFA are focused on the victim changing their behaviour online rather than on perpetration. As one participant noted, language around TFA often mirrors the language of 'what was she wearing' that is seen in the context of sexual assault. It is not always practical or desirable for victim survivors to leave platforms or online services and doing so can isolate victims by removing their access to technology. Participants emphasised the need to flip the conversation and put the responsibility on perpetrator behaviour and on technology providers to ensure safety.

Attendees emphasised the need for a trauma-informed approach to advice and support in relation to TFA. Participants noted that victim-survivor agency is critical and the act of support and response, or lack of response, can cause further trauma for victim-survivors.

Linked to this, a number of participants discussed the way that frontline services respond to TFA:

- Services need to be supported to develop greater capability and capacity to be able to assess risk in relation to TFA and provide advice and support.
- Police must take TFA seriously and recognise that it is causing significant harm. Policing of TFA requires a significantly different capability and knowledge to the policing of physical abuse.
- Some participants suggested that our laws have not kept pace with technological change and that police are often hampered in their ability to act. Participants recognised that the task of

collecting evidence and building a case around TFA was significantly different from other forms of violence.

Importance of safety by design

Participants emphasised the importance of the Safety by Design principles and approach advocated for by the eSafety Commissioner. Participants discussed that the people who build technological products are rarely cognisant of the risks when they are being designed and developed. One pointed to the lack of gender diversity in the technology sector and the need for safety by design to be something that is taught to students of business, web development, and technology.

An example of where technology is being used to intervene in TFA was the Commonwealth Bank's use of AI to identify customers using banking technology as tool to perpetrate TFA. The Commonwealth Bank has made the AI model open source for any banks to adopt worldwide and others are now following suit.

Keeping ahead of the challenge of technological change

In discussing the rapidly changing nature of technology facilitated-abuse, attendees talked about the need to be deliberate about share information between services and policymakers. Participants with research expertise suggested that this sharing was also critical in the context of research into TFA, where currently there is repeated replication of findings rather than coordinated development of new knowledge.

Participants acknowledged that the knowledge held by people with lived experience and workers at the frontline of service delivery on emerging methods of abuse are critical to ensuring the interventions can support safety.

What's next?

This roundtable was part of an ongoing program of engagement for the Commission. These roundtables are not only a mechanism for input; they are part of our commitment to a genuine ongoing conversation, in which we are accountable to participants.

The Commission will work in partnership to maintain momentum and facilitate national conversations about what it will take to end gender-based violence. The intent of this is to ensure that the input, expertise and experience brought to these conversations is translated into genuine change that the community can see.

The Commission and eSafety Commissioner are grateful for the expertise and contribution of all participants who took part in the roundtable.