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Technology-facilitated coercive control

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Content warning

This practice guide includes information about intimate partner violence, including sexual, physical and psychological abuse. If you require assistance or would like to talk to a trained professional about the issues described in this paper, please call:

- Lifeline: 13 11 14
- Sexual assault and family violence service: 1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732)

If you believe someone is in immediate danger call Police on 000.

Overview

This practice guide describes the research evidence on technology-facilitated coercive control (TFCC). It covers:

- what TFCC is
- strategies used by perpetrators
- the interaction between face-to-face and technology-facilitated strategies of coercive control
- client groups who may be at an elevated risk of TFCC victimisation
- the impacts of experiencing TFCC
- risks of expecting victim-survivors to stop using technology
- tips for supporting clients who may be experiencing TFCC.

Abbreviations

IBA Image-based abuse

IPV Intimate partner violence

NCD Non-consensual creation and/or distribution of sexual images and videos

TFA Technology-facilitated abuse

TFCC Technology-facilitated coercive control

Introduction

Technology-facilitated coercive control (TFCC) is the use of digital technologies to coercively control current or former intimate partners (Dragiewicz, Woodlock, Harris, & Reid, 2019). Coercive control is behaviours or strategies used by (mainly male) perpetrators against (mainly female) victim-survivors to control them and make them feel inferior (Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety [ANROWS], 2021). Coercive control is the broader situation within which TFCC and intimate partner violence (IPV) occur (ANROWS, 2021). Traditional kinds of IPV (such as physical, emotional and sexual abuse) are used in TFCC, 'but digital media shape the form these take and enable new abusive strategies and opportunities for responding' (p. 245). As the research on TFCC focuses mainly on female victim-survivors, this practice guide describes the experiences of female victim-survivors of TFCC.[1]

This practice guide synthesises research evidence on TFCC. It outlines the:

- definition and key features of TFCC
- strategies used by perpetrators to enact TFCC
- co-occurrence of face-to-face and technology-facilitated strategies
- client groups who may be at an elevated risk of victimisation
- outcomes associated with victimisation
- risks associated with expecting victim-survivors to stop using technology
- practice tips for supporting clients who may be experiencing TFCC.

This practice guide is for non-specialist practitioners: (a) working in areas that increase the likelihood of exposure to women and children experiencing coercive control but who (b) do not have specialist training or experience in family, domestic and sexual violence.

What is coercive control?

As stated above, TFCC involves the use of technology to coercively control a current or former intimate partner. Understanding coercive control is key to understanding TFCC.

Even though the need to address coercive control is becoming more widely recognised, there is no single, consistently used definition of coercive control. A literature review found that there were 22 different measures and definitions of coercive control used by researchers (Hamberger, Larsen, & Lehrner, 2017). In this paper, we use Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety's (ANROWS) definition of coercive control. This ensures that this paper is consistent with and comparable to other work across Australia on coercive control. ANROWS' definition of coercive control is also consistent with that proposed by Stark (2007), who originally developed the concept of coercive control. ANROWS is an independent, not-for-profit national body for research on domestic and family violence in Australia (ANROWS, 2021).

ANROWS (2021) defines coercive control as behaviours or strategies (including physical and non-physical violence) used to control a victim-survivor and make them feel inferior to, and dependent on, the perpetrator enacting these behaviours or strategies. Coercive control involves ongoing and repetitive strategies that add up over time to impact the victim-survivor's independence, freedom and equality (ANROWS, 2021). The perpetrator's dominance and control over the victim-survivor has the potential to impact 'every aspect of her life, effectively removing her personhood' (ANROWS, 2021, p. 1). ANROWS (2021) describes coercive control as the broader situation within which intimate partner violence (IPV) occurs.

1 The rapid review method used to identify relevant literature for this practice guide did not identify any studies that focused on perpetrators of TFCC. In the absence of this information, links to information about perpetrators of technology-facilitated abuse (TFA) have been provided in the further reading section at the end of this paper. TFCC occurs in an IPV context, whereas TFA can include abuse in the IPV context but also other forms of TFA such as bullying and trolling.

Essential to this definition of coercive control are two components: (1) it includes physical and/or non-physical violence and (2) the physical and/or non-physical violence is an ongoing pattern. Viewing the victim-survivor's abuse as incident-specific (i.e. in isolation from other incidences of violence or abuse perpetrated by the same person towards the victim-survivor) or viewing physical injury or trauma as a more serious form of abuse, 'disaggregates, trivialises, normalises, or renders invisible' the ongoing oppression they experience (Stark, 2007, p. 1510). ANROWS (2021) describes coercive control as a kind of power that (almost exclusively) male perpetrators use against female victim-survivors. This is, in part, supported by national Australian data suggesting that women have a greater likelihood of experiencing family, domestic and sexual violence than men (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2018).

How is technology used to enact coercive control?

Technological strategies used to enact coercive control vary and can include (Dragiewicz et al., 2018):

- harassment on social media
- stalking using GPS data
- clandestine and conspicuous audio and visual recording
- threats via SMS
- monitoring email
- accessing accounts without permission
- impersonating a partner
- publishing private information ('doxing') or sexualised content without consent.

One Australian study interviewed 55 domestic and family violence victim-survivors from Brisbane, Australia, and asked about the use of technology in their abuse experiences (Douglas, Harris, & Dragiewicz, 2019). The study found that ex- or current intimate partners had controlled victim-survivors' access to technology, tracked their physical location and online activities, and used social media to interfere with their relationships (Douglas et al., 2019). Similar experiences were reported in an interview and one-on-one yarning study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women (Brown, Yap, Thomassin, Murray, & Yu, 2021). Australian research also suggests that children are sometimes used by perpetrators to access the victim-survivors' passwords or to transport tracking and surveillance devices (Dragiewicz, Woodlock, Salter, & Harris, 2022). Perpetrators might also use video calls with children to identify where the child and mother are (Dragiewicz et al., 2022).

Timmons Fritz, Clark-Crumpton, Daskaluk, and Wilson (2018) sampled 200 Canadian college student and found that 67.5% of them had experienced technology-facilitated verbal abuse from their intimate partner. Participants were also asked if their partner had used technology to try to control them and 86.5% said yes. Several different methods were used by perpetrators to abuse victim-survivors: phone calls, text messaging, email, instant messaging and social networking websites. Common experiences for participants included having to explain their whereabouts for the day, the perpetrator bringing up past events to upset them and being sworn at or insulted.

Another strategy that perpetrators might use is the non-consensual creation and/or distribution of sexual images and videos (NCD).[2] The content may have been provided or created consensually earlier in the relationship, created or copied from a device without the knowledge of the victim-survivor, or created without their consent, through coercion or sexual assault. For example, in a study of US college students, almost 90% of women who had experienced NCD said that the perpetrator was an ex- or current partner (Dardis & Richards, 2022). In about 60% of cases where there were threats of NCD, the threat was used to demand more images or for the perpetrator to gain romantic/sexual access (Dardis & Richards, 2022).

Similarly, women in an Australian study described experiences where perpetrators had used or threatened to use NCD to pressure them into sexual acts or to change their testimony at an upcoming court proceeding (Douglas et al., 2019). Another Australian study found that perpetrators used NCD to intimidate victim-survivors, entrap them in the relationship and to live within the perpetrator's rules, and to shame them (Henry, Gavey, & Johnson, 2022).

2 NCD is a specific kind of image-based abuse (IBA).

How do face-to-face and technological strategies of coercive control interact?

TFCC should not be viewed as separate from other forms of IPV. Research focusing on North American college students found that victim-survivors experiencing TFCC were also likely to experience other kinds of abuse from their partner (Dardis & Richards, 2022; Timmons Fritz et al., 2018). This included psychological abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and unwanted attention and being physically followed by the perpetrator (Dardis & Richards, 2022). For example, technology can be used to continue face-to-face behaviours, such as stalking and emotional abuse (Afrouz, 2021).

Harris and Woodlock (2022) interviewed and conducted focus groups with victim-survivors of IPV in regional, rural and remote areas of three Australian states (New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland). The focus was on the experience of technology in the abuse they had experienced. In this study, all victim-survivors of online abuse had also experienced sexual, physical, financial and psychological abuse (Harris & Woodlock, 2022). Frontline domestic violence practitioners suggest that technology extends the perpetrator's power, reach and control (Fiolet, Brown, Wellington, Bentley, & Hegarty, 2021). Victim-survivors may or may not be aware of the ways they are impacted by TFCC, and the behaviours may continue after separation from the perpetrator (Fiolet et al., 2021). Broader research on coercive control (not specifically TFCC) has found that coercive control and violent behaviours in intimate partner relationships continue and may escalate during and after separation (Bruton & Tyson, 2018; Douglas, 2018; Eriksson, Mazerolle, & McPhedran, 2022; Monckton Smith, 2020). To our knowledge, there has not yet been research on whether TFCC, specifically, also escalates after or during a period of separation.

Which client groups may be at elevated risk of victimisation?

Evidence suggests that communities who experience social, health and geographical disadvantage may be at greater risk of TFCC victimisation. Some groups of women who have been identified to date include women from migrant backgrounds, women with disabilities and women living in regional, rural or remote areas (Afrouz, 2021). However, this is not a complete list and there may be other groups who have not yet been researched but experience elevated risk of TFCC. Key research findings are summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Client groups that may experience elevated risk of TFCC victimisation

Migrant women

Newly arrived migrant women are at a heightened risk of TFCC due to potential financial and other kinds of dependency on their partners. Perpetrators may force victim-survivors to behave a certain way by using threats of cutting access to technology that connects the victim-survivor with friends and family abroad (Douglas et al., 2019).

Women in regional, rural and remote areas

The use of technology to continue harm, isolation and control is heightened for women in regional, rural and remote areas (Harris, 2018). Things such as distance, limited resources and infrastructure, social and economic disadvantage, reduced security and privacy in small communities can impact help seeking and opportunities to exit violent relationships (Harris & Woodlock, 2019; Woodlock, McKenzie, Western, & Harris, 2020).

Women with disability

Women with disability may be more reliant on technology to communicate with others or contact support services and so may be more vulnerable to abuse facilitated by technology (Woodlock et al., 2020).

How does TFCC impact victim-survivors?

The use of TFCC can make victim-survivors feel like the perpetrator is everywhere, all the time (Afrouz, 2021; Douglas et al., 2019; Harris & Woodlock, 2022; Woodlock et al., 2020; Yardley, 2021). The perpetrator can harass, track, monitor and control women via multiple methods at any time of the day or night, making the woman feel trapped and always 'having to look over their shoulder' (Woodlock et al., 2020).

Research suggests that TFCC can impact victim-survivors in several ways. Victim-survivors may experience:

- a sense of loss from one or more of the following: the relationship ending with the perpetrator, loss of connection with who they were before the abuse, reduced trust in technology, and loss of safety and freedom (Woodlock, Salter, Dragiewicz, & Harris, 2022)
- reduced ability to engage in work, education and social life (Douglas et al., 2019; Harris & Woodlock, 2022; Yardley, 2021)
- isolation from family and friends (Douglas et al., 2019; Dragiewicz et al., 2022; Harris & Woodlock, 2019; Woodlock et al., 2020)
- elevated symptoms of stress, fear, anxiety, hypervigilance, withdrawal, depressive symptoms and aggression (Douglas et al., 2019; Fiolet et al., 2021; Harris & Woodlock, 2022; Timmons Fritz et al., 2018; Woodlock et al., 2020)
- increased dependency on the perpetrator (Douglas et al., 2019)
- limited ability to seek help from police, health providers, family and friends (Douglas et al., 2019; Woodlock et al., 2020)
- reduced confidence and self-esteem (Harris & Woodlock, 2022)
- increased self-harm behaviours (Harris & Woodlock, 2022)
- relationship strain with children who are being used by the perpetrator to enact TFCC (Dragiewicz et al., 2022).

The risk of expecting victim-survivors to stop using technology

In responses to TFCC, there has been a reported tendency to advise women to stop using technology (Harris & Woodlock, 2019; Yardley, 2021). For example, some domestic violence practitioners have been concerned that women can be unfairly judged by police, courts, family law services and community members for not wanting to change their technology and social media use, phone numbers or other accounts (Woodlock et al., 2020). This can increase the burden on women to protect themselves and can lead to victim blaming and reduce help-seeking behaviour due to shame and embarrassment.

However, the evidence suggests that asking victim-survivors to disengage from technology by switching off devices or deleting accounts may not improve their safety. Perpetrators can make up for this loss of control with face-to-face aggressive behaviours and may become more violent (Afrouz, 2021; Yardley, 2021). There are also circumstances, such as shared parenting, where women are not able to stop using digital communication completely, and this leaves them unable to escape abuse (Afrouz, 2021; Woodlock et al., 2020; Yardley, 2021).

How to support clients who may be experiencing TFCC

This section provides some practice tips for supporting clients who may be experiencing TFCC. These tips come from the research evidence synthesised in the above sections, as well as from consultation with practitioners working in services that support families experiencing family, domestic and sexual violence. These tips are a good starting point for supporting clients who may be experiencing TFCC but this is not an exhaustive or definitive list:

- Prioritise the client's confidentiality and privacy to minimise the risk they might experience by accessing your service.
- Discuss support options and action plans with the client. They are expert in what is going to keep them safe.
- Be aware that client's safety will not be improved by them completely disengaging from digital communication. Instead, practitioners can:
  - Support the client to work through the eSafety Commissioner's online safety checklist for anyone in a domestic violence situation. This includes useful information for clients living with an abusive partner as well as those having left an abusive partner.
  - Consider your own and the client's level of digital literacy.
  - Remember that the perpetrator is accountable for their own behaviours, not the victim-survivor.

- Be mindful of any online processes or services your organisation might require the client to engage in and whether this creates a unique risk for those experiencing TFCC.
  - Have organisational-level discussions about policies and processes that might be problematic when supporting clients who are experiencing TFCC. For example, the use of technology to make appointments or sending appointment reminders may inadvertently alert the perpetrator that the victim-survivor is engaging with the service if they use a shared device/calendar or are monitoring the victim-survivor's device.
- Continue learning about the ways technology can be used to facilitate coercive control (refer to the Further Reading section below). This is important because the way technology is used in service provision and by clients evolves at a fast pace, and these changes mean there are evolving ways for perpetrators to take advantage of technology to cause harm.
  - Share learnings and practice experiences with other practitioners to increase awareness of what TFCC is and its association with other forms of violence.
- Engage clients in a way that does not unintentionally reinforce their personal sense of shame and/or guilt. Perpetrators of coercive control often try to make victim-survivors feel ashamed and/or guilty.
- Refer clients to specialist services. For instance, you might provide information about the National Domestic and Family Violence Counselling Service.
  - Consider if you can provide a safe space for the client to contact specialist services where the perpetrator will not know the contact has taken place.
  - Familiarise yourself with relevant websites and explain how to use the quick exit option that is generally provided on such websites. Clicking the quick exit button provides a fast way to return to a page like Google if the client thinks that they are about to be seen viewing a support service site.
- Consider the capacity of your organisation to engage a special risk assessment service to provide home, care and device sweeps for technology-facilitated threats, including monitoring and surveillance devices.

Conclusion

TFCC is unlikely to occur in isolation from face-to-face strategies and behaviours. Victim-survivors commonly experience a combination of technology-facilitated and face-to-face psychological, physical, sexual and/or financial abuse. Technology can be used to facilitate as well as extend the perpetrator's ability to monitor and maintain surveillance of the victim-survivor. It provides many different avenues to harass, threaten and shame victim-survivors, manipulate their social relationships and ensure they behave in the way the perpetrator demands.

Some client groups that may be at a unique or elevated risk of experiencing TFCC include women: (a) from migrant backgrounds, (b) with disability, and (c) residing in regional, rural or remote areas. The impacts of experiencing TFCC are diverse and cover psychological, emotional and social factors. An important consideration for practitioners is that victim-survivors experience limited ability to seek support.

Further reading

Resources about technology-facilitated coercive control

How to support clients exposed to technology-facilitated coercive control

Drawing on the latest research and practitioner insights this AIFS webinar: (1) describes what technology-facilitated coercive control looks like in practice, (2) provides examples of the ways that victim-survivors might experience technology-facilitated coercive control, and (3) suggests strategies for face-to-face and telehealth practice.

Extended Q&A for: How to support clients exposed to technology-facilitated coercive control

The introduction of this AIFS webinar summarises some key discussion points and highlights from the December 2022 webinar *How to Support Clients Exposed to Technology-Facilitated Coercive Control*. This introduction is followed by an extended Q&A with the December 2022 webinar panel answering more audience questions.

Technology-facilitated coercive control (TFCC): Evidence-based insights for practice

This AIFS recording provides an overview of key trends in the research literature relating to technology-facilitated coercive control.

Online safety checklist

This eSafety Commissioner checklist sets out the essential online safety steps for anyone in a domestic and family violence situation.

Technology and safety

1800RESPECT provides information about technology and safety, as well as broader safety planning and documenting abuse information.

Documentation tips

This TechSafety site provides tips about how to document technology-facilitated coercive control.

Families navigating the online world: Opportunities and challenges – Keynote address

This video is the keynote address by e-safety Commissioner Julie Inman-Grant on Day 2 of the AIFS 2022 Conference, 15–17 June 2022.

In 2020–22, the Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) conducted a national project that examined the prevalence, victim-survivor experiences, perpetrator motivations and practitioner perceptions of technology-facilitated abuse. Technology-facilitated abuse was defined as 'the use of mobile and digital technologies in interpersonal harms such as online sexual harassment, stalking and image-based abuse' in Australia. A webinar and three reports were developed:

- Technology-facilitated abuse: Extent, nature and responses in the Australian community
- Technology-facilitated abuse: A survey of support services stakeholders
- Technology-facilitated abuse: Interviews with victims and survivors and perpetrators
- Technology-facilitated abuse: National survey of Australian adults' experiences
- Fact sheet about self-reported TFA perpetrations by Australians aged 18+

The eSafety Commissioner provides professional development through online training:

- Technology-facilitated abuse in domestic and family violence situations
- Supporting children and young people – technology-facilitated abuse in domestic and family violence situations.

They also provide a broad range of technology-facilitated abuse resources that address perpetrator motivations for IBA and the unique challenges experienced by:

- women with intellectual or cognitive disability
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women
- people who identify as LGBTIQ+
- women who have an active online presence as part of their work.

People experiencing online abuse can report this to the eSafety Commissioner, who may be able to provide further support, such as in the areas of:

- Adult cyber abuse
- Image-based abuse.

Resources about coercive control

The power in understanding patterns of coercive control

This AIFS webinar explores ways that services can use the language of coercive control to support women to expose patterns of abusive behaviour.

Sadie's story: Helping women affected by domestic and family violence navigate a fragmented system

This AIFS webinar focused on one woman's story of domestic and family violence. Sadie (not her real name) is an Aboriginal woman and mother of two. Her story sheds light on how fragmented service systems can often fail to meet women's needs and may even exacerbate the challenges they experience at the intersection of gender and racial inequality.

Defining and responding to coercive control: Policy brief

This policy brief by ANROWS is designed to assist policy makers developing legal or policy and practice frameworks to prevent or respond to coercive control in relation to domestic and family violence.

Australians' attitudes to violence against women and gender equality: Findings from the 2017 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey

This ANROWS report documents findings from the 2017 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS) and considers them in the context of other related research.

Intersecting systems and the needs of families: Family law, child protection and domestic violence

This AIFS webinar reunited the panellists from the AIFS 2022 Conference event Intersecting Systems and the Needs of Families: Family law, Child Protection and Domestic Violence. The panellists discuss this topic with a focus on implications for practitioners working in areas related to family and domestic violence, family law and child protection.

How to ask adult mental health clients about sexual abuse

This AIFS short article outlines: (a) why adult survivors of sexual abuse may not disclose their abuse experiences to mental health practitioners, (b) why practitioners might avoid asking about it, and (c) research findings from mental health practitioner samples on how to safely ask clients about sexual abuse histories.

How this practice guide was developed

This practice guide is part of a broader evidence package on coercive control for the Child Family Community Australia (CFCA) information exchange. The literature reviewed was identified through a rapid review and synthesis of international empirical coercive control research focused on victim-survivors. The CFCA audience identified TFCC as a topic they would like more evidence about to inform practice. Qualitative data provided by attendees at previous coercive control related CFCA webinars also informed the topic development.

Finally, six practitioners, service leaders and researchers who are experts in domestic and family violence were consulted between February and April 2022. The initial plan for potential evidence-based resources for practitioners was shared with a group of experts for feedback, including this practice guide and an accompanying webinar. The experts also suggested research, policy and practice questions that might be useful to generalist practitioners working with individuals and families impacted by coercive control.

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