"Can I just share my story?" Experiences of technology-facilitated abuse among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in regional and remote Australia.

Chay Brown, Mandy Yap, Annick Thomassin, Minda Murray and Eunice Yu

Abstract

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are disproportionately affected by violence against women, in all its forms, and are overrepresented as domestic, family, and sexual violence victims. Access to technology is vital to ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women can safely report and access support services. Whilst technology can be helpful and life-saving for women experiencing violence, technology can also be misused by perpetrators to stalk, intimidate, coerce, harass and humiliate their victims. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in regional and remote areas face additional and multiple forms of oppression (coercive control, lateral violence and racist violence) owing to their status as both women and living in low-resource settings. The context in which they are living further present barriers and obstacles in seeking and receiving help. This paper demonstrates these multiplicities of vulnerabilities by amplifying the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their specific experiences to present the ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women identify different forms of online violence and their responses to them. These voices along with key findings from interviews with frontline services are the basis for recommendations for programmatic and policy responses to prevent and reduce the harm of technology-facilitated abuse.

Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are disproportionately affected by violence in all its forms. To date, the majority of the literature and findings describe lateral violence and family violence as the more known forms of violence in the context of Indigenous Australians (Clark, Augoustinos, & Malin, 2017). Due to the ongoing impacts of colonisation, disempowerment and trauma among Indigenous people can manifest as lateral violence (Clark, Augoustinos, & Malin, 2017; Carlson & Frazer, 2021; Bailey & Shayan, 2021). Lateral

violence occurs between members of oppressed groups and takes the form of physical violence as well as verbal abuse, threats, and emotional abuse (Clark, Augoustinos, & Malin, 2017). In this paper, the term lateral violence is used to refer violence between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Family violence refers to different forms of violence between family members, and in the context of Indigenous Australia, includes extended family and kinship networks (Cheers, et al., 2006). This violence therefore often involves multiple victims and multiple perpetrators (Brown, 2020).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are overrepresented as domestic, family, and sexual violence victims (The Northern Territory Government, 2018). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are 35 times more likely to be hospitalised as a result of violence than White women and Indigenous women report three times as many incidents of sexual violence compared to non-Indigenous women (Olsen & Lovett, 2016, p. 13). Indigenous women are also far more likely to be killed due to assault than non-Indigenous women (Our Watch, 2016). Indigenous women are also hospitalised due to family violence at three times the rate of Indigenous males (Our Watch, 2018).

With the increasing use of electronic and communication technology and internet connectivity in regional and remote areas, and increasing levels of social media use in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Carlson, 2020; Matamoros Fernandez, 2017), technology-facilitated abuse (TFA) is believed to be becoming more widespread and provides an additional platform for perpetrating violence, yet the extent of it in regional and remote areas remains relatively unexplored. TFA refers to abusive behaviour using mobile phones and other devices, as well as social media and online accounts. There are four main types of technology-facilitated abusive behaviours: harassment, stalking, impersonation, and threats (Office of the eSafety Commissioner, 2019). TFA therefore covers the sharing of sexual images without consent; the use of GPS technology to monitor a person's location and movement; the creation of fake social media accounts (such as on Facebook, and Instagram) to impersonate and humiliate a person; and threatening or abusive messages.[1] Research on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's experiences of TFA is important and timely.

---

[1] While it is not discussed in this paper, TFA also includes the use of digital communication technologies and social media platforms to lure women and girls into prostitution and human trafficking networks (Bailey and Shayan, 2021).

Access to (including the use of) technology is vital to ensuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women can safely report and access support services (Bailey & Shayan, 2021; Carlson & Frazer, 2021). Mobile phones in particular, have been identified by women in some Aboriginal communities as being crucial to community safety (Brown, 2019; Brown, 2020). Social media platforms, whilst being a place of vulnerability to TFA, is also used as a social support and community advocacy for social and racial justice (Clark, Augoustinos, & Malin, 2017; Matamoros Fernandez, 2017). Whilst technology can be helpful and life-saving for women experiencing violence, technology can also be misused by perpetrators to stalk, intimidate, coerce, monitor, harass and violate their victim (National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, 2020). The nature of TFA renders the experiences of women invisible and further reduce their ability to make choices and respond to and mitigate risk.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, rates of violence against women have increased dramatically (Vaeza, 2020) . However, women in some regions have been less able to report violence, likely due to proximity to perpetrators in lockdown, and lack of private access to technology (Graham-Harrison et al., 2020). Yet the pandemic has also seen an increase in the use of alternative reporting mechanisms, such as online tools and messaging services such as WhatsApp, to report and seek a support service (Zwartz, 2020). The COVID-19 context highlights how important it is for all women who are at risk of violence to have access to support and a safety plan as well as safe access to technology to facilitate this.

This paper contributes to the understanding of TFA in regional and remote settings by highlighting the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in two ways. First by amplifying the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in three regional and remote locations in Australia. Second, by complementing voices with key findings from interviews with frontline services, all of whom work closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and some of whom are also Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander themselves. The narratives in the paper speak to the specific experiences and ways Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women identify and respond to different forms of online violence to inform recommendations for programmatic and policy responses to prevent and reduce the harm of technology-facilitated abuse. These narratives must also be understood in the context of ongoing colonisation and associated intergenerational trauma, and the ways this continues to drive violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, families, and communities (Carlson & Frazer, 2021). The paper begins by outlining the methodology, before presenting

the key findings about the forms of violence and the strategies women use to identify and respond to TFA. The paper finishes by giving some recommendations.

Methods

The research was designed to document the TFA experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women through two avenues, one-on-one yarning with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who have intimate experiences of TFA in three different regional and remote locations in Australia: Central Australia, remote Western Australia, and regional NSW and by interviewing frontline services and stakeholders who work closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who have experienced TFA. This two-stage approach provides a more nuanced understanding of this complex and sensitive issue. Given the challenges and sensitivity associated with recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, the study began first with interviews with frontline services workers. Four community-based researchers, three of whom are Aboriginal women, were employed as part of the research team in all three sites to ensure local protocols were adhered to and for providing and facilitating context specificities in the analysis. The employment of community-based researchers also enabled the research to take place in a COVID safe manner. The fieldwork regions were selected because of their regional/remote status, their comparatively low rates of COVID-19; and the existing professional and personal relationships with the research team.

Prior to the fieldwork commencing, two separate discussion guides were developed, one for interviews with frontline service workers and one for yarning with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Interviews with frontline staff from a diverse range of frontline services were used to explore their perspectives of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women from regional and remote areas who have experienced TFA. These interviews discussed referral pathways and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's preferred ways of seeking help and support.

Five semi-structured interviews were conducted with frontline services and stakeholders in each site. The participants worked for a range of frontline services including: women's services, legal services, drug and alcohol services, health services, Aboriginal corporations, men's behaviour change programs, police, and Youth Services. Of the interview participants, five were Indigenous and 10 non-Indigenous and 14 of the 15 were female. While two thirds of frontline service workers were non-Indigenous, they were employed in Indigenous

organisations or delivered Indigenous specific organisations enabling critical insights from working in this context. Nine of the interviews were conducted in person, with six conducted online via Zoom. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. The research team circulated the questions to the participants before the interview so they could prepare their responses and mitigate the risk of vicarious trauma. All participants have been assigned a random code which is used in place of their name to safeguard their confidentiality. All direct quotes from participants are attributed to the participant's code. We have also highlighted the Indigenous status of the participant to emphasise the voices Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences.

Yarning was used to gain insight into regional and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's experiences of TFA, and how this experience impacts their lives and wellbeing. We also wanted to understand the context in which they live, their levels of digital literacy, including their knowledge of online and device safety and security, and their experiences when reporting TFA.

Yarning is considered more culturally appropriate (Aveling, 2013) and involved sitting down with the women, having a conversation and listening to their stories in a free flow manner on a list of possible topics in the discussion guide. Vignettes were used to facilitate yarning discussions in a sensitive and culturally safe way. These vignettes provided a way for the women to be able to talk about this type of abuse without being asked directly about their own experiences. They also allowed women to talk about the TFA they had witnessed in their communities, rather than having to exclusively talk about their own experiences.

Eleven yarning sessions were conducted with twelve Indigenous women across the three sites. One of the yarning sessions involved two women who expressed their preference to be in each other's presence. The sessions lasted between 20 minutes and 60 minutes. In line with the WHO & UN Women's guidelines for research about violence against women and girls, all one-on-one yarning sessions were conducted in person (World Health Organisation & UN Women, 2020). Most yarnings were conducted by the community-based researchers. All women participants have been assigned a code to protect their safety and privacy.

The data collected across the three sites during the yarnings and interviews were compiled and coded using the NVivo software. The codes were then refined and regrouped into themes that underpinned the data analysis.

Findings

The thematic analysis revealed several key themes in relation to the types of TFA and online violence experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in remote and regional areas, the drivers of this violence and how it impacts women (Brown, Yap, Thomassin, Murray, & Yu, 2021). Many of these themes reinforce the findings from established literature on violence against Indigenous peoples and women more generally (Carlson 2019; Clark et al 2017) and highlight the layer of complexity when technology use and technology platforms acts as enablers.

The findings are structured in two parts. The first describes the diversity in the forms of technology facilitated violence and how technology can be used as a platform for exacerbating existing forms of violence. The findings are centred on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices (women and frontline service workers). Identification of online violence and coping strategies are then presented in the latter part of the findings which are informed by both the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women but also non-Indigenous frontline service workers supporting women who have experienced TFA. In most cases, the women's voices from the yarning sessions are highlighted and prioritised. In cases where perspectives from frontline service workers are drawn, this is made clear.

Forms of violence

Both women and frontline workers reported that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience technology-facilitated abusive behaviour in the context of multiple forms of violence. The exposure to violence within the personal space of the women (intimate partner and family violence) but also take the form of lateral violence, instances of image-based abuse and experience of racism. It was clear that the multiple forms of violence were related and interconnected and that they also needed to be understood in relation to the broader settler colonial context. This echoes the arguments made in other literature relating to Indigenous peoples' experience of violence (Clark et al 2017). Typically, women reported TFA occurring between intimate partners as a form of coercive control which then escalates into physical violence, a finding mirrored in other studies (Carlson, 2020). This violence can involve and extend to families and even whole communities.

Intimate partner violence

TFA was most reported by the women in the yarning sessions as being used within the context of intimate partner violence. This mainly took the form of men (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) using technology facilitated abuse as an extension of coercive control of their female partner or ex-partner. The most common types of technology facilitated abuse behaviours reported by women include harassment, threats, monitoring and impersonation by male partners and ex-partners to assert control over them. This form of abuse tended to occur gradually, becoming more intense and consuming over time, before escalating into physical violence. The challenge associated with TFA is that most women typically did not identify or report the issue until it had escalated and become physical violence (if they reported at all). This is in line with underreporting of other forms of violence against women (UN Women, 2020), and illustrates how the onus cannot be placed on women to end the abuse and that relationships with police and justice responses must be improved to facilitate trust, especially with Indigenous women (Brown, 2020, 2019).

> "Yes, so he used to call me consistently when I made the decision to leave him it was very hard. Given that he was losing his control over me and the abuse was ending. He would call me constantly in one day. I had about 50 missed calls, I had to report it to the police and then go through the process of [getting] an intervention order." OK02, Indigenous yarning participant

> "In the end, I just didn't have a phone because he would take it from me. He didn't want anyone to talk to me at all in the end. Just the behaviour of control, it's all about control." Y001, Indigenous yarning participant

However, there was also one reported case of a woman experiencing TFA from another woman – the latter is the current partner of the former woman's male ex-partner.

> "But then she sent the bomb squad around. And it was the first time the cop there was hinting that […] 'you're in a domestic violence situation, you've got to get help'. […] they all came around with the vest on and look through the house and because she said we had guns up in the roof and […] he said, 'You've got to go and get help'." – FU01, Indigenous yarning participant

Family violence

Participants also reported TFA occurring within the context of family violence with the violence typically beginning on social media, often Facebook, and would come to involve

several family members. Yarnings with women revealed that conflict would often begin between young people receiving abusive and threatening messages and comments on these platforms, who would show their parents. Family members would then become involved in the conflict and, similar to intimate partner violence, this could escalate into physical violence. Family violence tends to crossover from the private to public domain in remote and regional context as the small size of these communities means increased likelihood of families encountering each other.

> "You know you've got them bickering over social media. And then the parents get involved so when the parents see each other down the street […], you know something's gonna happen." Y003, Indigenous yarning participant

> "What was happening girls were hacking other girls accounts and sending other girls messages and doing exactly the same creating fights, with a lot of families coming to school threatening to flog certain girls." CF33, Indigenous yarning participant

Elder abuse is an aspect of family violence facilitated through technology. This can take the form of adult children withholding or damaging their elderly parents' mobile phones to prevent them from contacting police or calling for help. There were also reports of adult children using their elderly parent's mobile phones and online banking, including their MyGov account, to apply for loans in their name.

> "Yeah, I can't have a phone. My son took it from me. [speaking language] I can't help it, you know." – GR57_2apps, Indigenous yarning participant

Lateral violence

TFA was also reported as occurring in the form of lateral violence between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. While lateral violence occurs in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the role of technology in this experience takes the form of impersonation and image-based abuse. Many women reported being vulnerable to impersonation where typically women would hack social media accounts (usually accessing their logged in accounts through shared mobile phones) and/or make fake accounts of another woman to send messages to other community-members to humiliate or incite violence against her.

> "I have had a sister message a bunch of my friends in her own account. And you know said a lot of things about me" – Y001, Indigenous yarning participant

Lateral violence perpetrated by women was often reported as being a product of 'jealousing' or perceived sexual misconduct with a male partner. In this context, technology-facilitated abusive behaviours, particularly impersonation and image-based abuse, were used to publicly shame and humiliate other women, as well as incite physical violence against them by other community members.

> "For this town, it's *very* normal for those young girls. And I just think 'she wasn't married to you, he was'. You need to have a go at him, not her. Don't have a full on go at her. Him. You're married to him. But they like to blame that woman." – CF33, Indigenous yarning participant

> "...from my knowledge in my experience, I get attacked a lot by females. It's just lateral violence around jealousy. Because where I come from, who I am, my identity, my family connections, and where I work, who I work with." – SP02, Indigenous yarning participant

Image-based abuse

Image-based abuse can be further fuelled by the introduction and access of technology as reported by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the yarning sessions. Whilst in many incidents, this was the sharing of sexualised images without the woman's consent, it also included reports of unsolicited nude pictures being sent to women.

> "I went to purchase a fridge and a washing machine from a rental place. And there were no female working in that space, though. Just all males. I walked in there right. And he gets all my details, my phone numbers and everything and I go 'oh well, because it's a business. I'm okay with it'. I go home. Two days later, I'm getting the nude pic of this fella. Literally a nude pic. I froze. I literally froze for half an hour. My sisters were like 'you alright? What's wrong with you?' I think I've just been kicked in the guts. ' – SP02, Indigenous yarning participant

The use of image-based abuse was common in the context of intimate partner violence, where an abuser would share a sexualised image of a current or ex-partner to shame and humiliate them. These images were often shared on Facebook or via text messages.

> "You know, with photo [speaking language]. Rude messages. They put rude things about that lady…[They do it to make women feel] shame. Making people shame. And then they get embarrassed when that other person say that 'we're seeing you on the Facebook' and all that." – GR57_1, Indigenous yarning participant

Women also reported that abusers would share personal images of them with their ex-partner as another means of manipulation and exerting control.

> "After that, he would send me photos that were of us when we were together so photos of me when I was pregnant, photos of me during labour, and he would just be taunting me with these images. Just to prove that he had the control over me still." - OK02, Indigenous yarning participant

Other reports of image-based abuse consisted of sharing of everyday photos to incite violence against the woman. This often occurred in the context of lateral violence perpetrated by women, where women shared photos of other women, and sometimes of their children, on social media to spread rumours and to humiliate the woman.

> "She put a picture up on Facebook, because I'm friends with her, of a married man of him with his current new girlfriend. She said that 'they'd been sleeping together for this long. I've got an STI off her', all this stuff she put on social media. And so people can, imagine this just rounding up the crowd. 'Oh we'll bash her' and all this sort of stuff, calling her everything, this poor innocent woman in this photo." – CF33, Indigenous yarning participant

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women reported a multitude of ways in which the various forms of TFA impacted them and their children, with the most reported being fear, isolation, and financial impacts. There is not the space in this paper to expand on these impacts, but they are important to understanding how TFA affects the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and they are discussed in the full report (Brown, Yap, Thomassin, Murray, & Yu, 2021).

Racist violence

Some women who participated in this research also reported feeling affected and victimised by racist and threatening comments made online, usually in open Facebook groups. In one study location, several open Facebook groups are used by community members to post about events and news in the town. Increasingly, community members have used these open Facebook groups to report instances of crime and anti-social behaviour in the town, which then becomes open to and dominated by racist rhetoric, particularly in discussions about local youth crime. These women also reported that this constant racist commentary online affected their wellbeing and sense of security in the town.

"So if someone says 'kids running amok again' and people say, 'Oh, they have to be black kids. Well, […] why don't we all put our gear on and go smash them to teach them what's right and wrong because they need to be put in a box'. Or 'why don't want to we run them over in a car'. and it's like, these are eight-year-old kids you're talking about…" CF33, Indigenous yarning participant

"And I get really tired of people putting Indigenous people in the same bucket, saying that we're all drunks, we're all this, we're all that. Well we're not because just like everybody else we all, everybody's different, you know, some of us are really good, and we try and make a good life for ourselves, but still get chucked in a bucket. So there's this [Facebook] forum…and they just straight up discriminate racism on every single comment. I mean, it just gets too much like how can someone have so much hatred and live in this town? […]so I removed myself from that group, it became too much and it was starting to actually affect me as well at work, in life……" FN23 Indigenous frontline service worker

Identification and responses to online violence

Both women in the yarning sessions and frontline service workers reported how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women use a variety of strategies to identify and respond to TFA, seek help and ultimately keep themselves safe.

Disengaging or removal of exposure

The primary way that women responded to TFA was through removing themselves from the exposure or risk by blocking – both phone numbers and social media accounts. This is akin to the avoidance coping strategies employed by Aboriginal women in an Adelaide study on lateral violence (Clark et al 2017). However, this form of TFA required women to block multiple accounts and numbers as often their abuser would continue to make new accounts and numbers to contact them.

"I would have been doing all that [blocking on social media]… [but] she kept changing her profile all the time. Yep. I think it just become that we just left and how it was. And we just kept recording everything or kept everything saved everything… it was all just mainly over phone, texting, and messaging, I'd block her. On my phone, I blocked her over 20 times, different profiles." – FU01 , Indigenous yarning participant

In addition to these responses, women also deactivated their social media accounts, secured their phones and accounts with privacy settings, and even had to resort to relocated towns.

Changing phone numbers was a commonly reported strategy to disengage. Many women mentioned having to change their mobile phone and phone number to put an end to harassment and abuse via phone calls and text messaging. However, the constant changing of phone numbers was not only burdensome but had a significant impact on their access to support services and made it difficult for friends and family to contact them. Women also reported that this strategy was only temporary as inevitably their abuser was able to gain their contact details, usually via friends and family, and continue their harassment.

> "It's hard like it's not as simple as just blocking someone's number because they can they put their phone…on private and call. [You can] go and get another SIM card and renew or they can use someone else's [phone]." – RT03, Indigenous yarning participant

> "Yeah, it does get frustrating like you just want to smash your phone, you want to snap the SIM card and all of this, but you know, you know everyone else has got your number, like your family. And then, you know, your bank knows your phone number for security reasons, My Gov, you know, all of these things, like, you just sort of trapped in a way, like you feel trapped like you can't delete. You know or you can't snap your Sim and get a new number because then you have to change everything else around. But then at the same time, you know you're wanting to get rid of, you know this person who's threatening, tormenting you, through these avenues, you know? Doesn't matter if you block them they still find that, find other ways to still get in touch." – Y003, Indigenous yarning participant

Collecting evidence and reporting

An important avenue for responding to TFA was through collecting evidence. Women shared that they would screenshot conversations, save messages, emails, and call logs, and record the abuse in order to report the behaviour to support networks and/or the police. This often stemmed from women needing proof for an intervention order or for the police to respond to the abuse. In this instance, technology can enable the documentation of important evidence to alleviate the fear of women that they would not be believed. Some women highlighted that despite keeping this evidence and reporting the abuse a number of times to police, they were not taken seriously especially where escalation to physical violence had not yet occurred.

"I don't even remember half of what she's done. But anyway, still got all that evidence, but nobody was believing us. You know nobody was actually listening to our story… Nobody was believing about the messages, even though [we have proof] because we've printed them all off. I don't know it just was so hard to get help or legal help ." – FU01, Indigenous yarning participant

All the women who participated in this study said that once realising TFA was a crime, they could and would (and many had) report TFA to the police. For those who reported the TFA incidence, the response from police varied with some women saying that police took it seriously and acted immediately, whilst others noted the lack of seriousness being taken by the police. Having a good relationship between the police and communities was seen as being critical to women's safety and their ability to report abuse.

"I talked to my daughter and said, if they come around, you just have to make one phone call to the police and tell them that they threaten you. Show them what the text message is." – GR57_1, Indigenous yarning participant

Criminal Justice System

Frontline workers also discussed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's differing experiences when engaging in the criminal justice system. Most often, women's engagement was through police or women's legal services, and this was usually to put a non-contact intervention order in place. Many frontline workers reported that the abuse continued even after intervention orders were in place, which often led to charges of harassment and stalking. However, frontline workers emphasised the toll that this took on women who were often burdened with the responsibility of collecting evidence and advocating for themselves to police, lawyers and judges. This was regarded as especially taxing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in regional and remote areas because of cultural sensitivities, language barriers, and lack of available services, especially culturally safe and appropriate services.

"I don't know [any services] that [address TFA]. And not all services have access to certain areas." – MCP02, Non-Indigenous frontline service worker

"I wouldn't have liked to have had the restraining order, that's not something that I wanted to do. I felt like I had no other choice. And so, I would like to see more support. I don't think that there's very much, because I think that, like I said earlier, people are scared to contact the police. They don't want to. I didn't want to do. And then after I had, I felt I'd done the wrong thing and I felt guilty for ages and… My partner's in prison at the moment so it's taken a long time to kind of be

okay with me feeling like... Even though he'd done the wrong thing, I went through a lot of guilt, and I can see why women won't report it or want to do anything about that. Or otherwise they go into the complete extreme and relationships break down and family feud starts and whatever else." – FW002, Indigenous frontline service worker

The experience of violence often continue from prison whereby male or ex-partners would persist with their abusive behaviour using phone calls directly from prison, or by contacting friends and family members. These family members would then exert pressure on the woman, usually through abusive and threatening phone calls and messages, to 'drop the charges' against the man. This is illustrative how, within the context of intimate partner violence, perpetrators are able to use technology as well as their other relationships to continue the harassment, even if the woman is physically safe.

"And even when men have been incarcerated at times… they have… bombarded family, or… the woman who's been victimised by their violence. So often bombard them with phone calls and put the pressure on them to drop charges and things like that but then that can also extend to their family network… Yeah, to kind of isolate that woman further and discourage them from accessing justice through the legal system." – BNK01, Non-Indigenous frontline service worker

As Mobin et al. (2017) have argued, in this context, we need to better understand how "intergenerational trauma and the after-effects of colonialism" play out through conflictual peer relations online (in Carlson & Frazer, 2021, p.158).

Other strategies

The over-reliance on personal and individual action minimises the importance of broader accountability that has to take place including with the abuser and prevention work that engage with women, men and communities from an early age.

"I also think men [need to be educated] as well. In terms of, you can't, you can't message that woman, you can't ring them non-stop, you know, those type of training workshops as well. So it's not only the victim, I think the perpetrators need to be trained as well and educated around what they can, what is acceptable for technology use. And that even though nobody's watching, you still can't ring your wife 50 times, or can't track them and things like that." – Y002, Indigenous yarning participant

Indigenous and non-Indigenous frontline services participants concurred that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women they work with do compile evidence and report their

experience of TFA. Yet, while these women's responses are encouraging, typically the abuse had been occurring for quite some time before women sought help, this was usually because the women were unaware they could report this form of abuse, were reluctant to report, and/or did not know who to report it to. In line with this, many frontline workers also discussed the needs for more preventative work and accountability by the system and the public at large.

Some frontline workers reported that police would respond swiftly to TFA, whilst others reported that it was difficult to get police to take the abuse seriously, because of the attitude that violence is not 'serious' unless it is physical. This reinforced the experience highlighted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the yarning sessions.

> "I went to the police for her and showed them the threats she received. Yeah. And they've just gone 'you can't prove anything' basically. Just the way that they treated me and her that moment on that day was one of the most disgusting things I've ever seen. Really how my blood was boiling… So you think like you could see clearly who was messaging. Police just said this messaging stuff, 'that could be you on a fake account'… And again, that's putting, accountability, on the affected family member… and not the perpetrator." – PE04, Indigenous frontline service worker

In areas where frontline services worked with police in multiple jurisdictions across multiple states, response differed between jurisdictions and that coordination between police in different states made it difficult to respond to TFA and to support women.

> "So I think there needs to be clear… responses from police, and more… clear legislation that isn't different state to state. So that women know what their rights are. And so that services know what women's rights are." – BNK01, Non-Indigenous frontline service worker

Recommendations

This study has sought to highlight that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in regional and remote areas have diverse and unique experiences of TFA. Their location often presents additional barriers and obstacles to seeking and obtaining help. Similarly, this context presents several complexities for policies and programs aiming to prevent TFA.

Education and Awareness

There is already education and awareness initiatives addressing violence against women (Brown, Homan, Simpson, & Leung, 2021; Blagg, et al., 2018). Significant work needs to be done to raise regional and remote communities' awareness around the forms that TFA can take, how it impacts groups such as young people, LGBTQI+, women and Elders differently and how family or community members can inadvertently contribute to the problem, for example, by giving out personal details.

To reach a critical mass, awareness campaigns and programs should aim to educate both the broader population as well as the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, particularly in relation to the multiple forms TFA can take as well as online racist violence against Indigenous people. As such, education requires a multipronged approach combining locally relevant televised and social media public campaigns as well as local activities and awareness campaigns during community events, in schools, in women's, men's, youth and Elders' groups. Workshops on online safety and privacy and knowledge of online resources that can help develop strategies to prevent, mitigate or stop TFA would also be critical. There is also a need to consider informal forms of support such as peer group sharing and teaching or even enhancing digital literacy within families through children and parent exchanges.

Responses to Technology-Facilitated Abuse

A wide range of responses was suggested to address the multifaceted and continuously evolving issue of TFA. Preventing, mitigating and stopping this form of abuse is understood as requiring both tailored individual and all-of-community approaches.

Responses to support the victim

Greater understanding and awareness of the complexity and impacts of TFA and knowledge of the resources available could help to improve the programs and services offered to the victims and work with them on strategies. Guidance for the women on how to document the abuse and collect evidence to build their case (e.g. avoid deleting abusive communication, take screenshots, etc.) was also raised as a way to support the women.

Responses to work with the perpetrator

There is a need to place responsibility on the perpetrators of violence by designing and developing programs which increase awareness of their destructive behaviour in the short term and work with them to change their behaviours in the longer term. Participants in this study

emphasised the need for accountability and criticised responses which place the onus on the woman to end the abuse she is experiencing.

Appropriate and safe avenues for reporting

While mandatory reporting may go some way to minimising the exposure and harm associated with TFA, it may also make women more vulnerable to it especially where the avenues of reporting or agencies and individuals responsible to acting on the report are not well equipped to deal with or be responsive to the report. When reports are not responded to appropriately and efficiently, this can expose the woman to further abuse in the form of reprisal violence. Experiences of TFA do not occur in a vacuum. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's experience of ongoing colonisation and racism influence their trust and willingness to engage with various services, the police, and the justice system. Some of the solutions proposed to build better relationships and understanding between the police and the community could include community-police days, as well as hiring more Indigenous police officers and Indigenous liaison officers.

Support for frontline workers

Frontline workers have expressed their struggles to keep up with technology changes as well as with the perpetrator's evolving tactics. Regular training around the use of technology, privacy settings and online safety would equip them to better understand the needs and support of the women they are working with.

Responsibility of big tech companies

One of the simple strategies recommended to and adopted by the victims of TFA is to block perpetrators accounts, phone numbers and email addresses from their accounts and devices. However, the ease with which the perpetrators can create new or fake accounts means that this strategy is not always effective. The research findings point to the critical role that big tech companies can play in addressing abusive behaviours facilitated through their platforms. This includes:

- responsibility to monitor what is published via their platforms;
- roles in awareness/education campaigns teaching the young people how to safely use these platforms including terms and conditions and use of their personal information;
- improved clear and accessible codes of conducts defining what constitutes unacceptable behaviour and illegal practices online;

- greater clarity surrounding reporting mechanisms for abusive content and behaviours;
- revision of account suspension rules associated with offences and cancellation of accounts.

Technology-based responses

Other technology-based responses could include the use and/or development of applications that enable women to alert the police or another third party quickly and discreetly during an emergency. It was also suggested that applications that filter or flag particular words in order to help the victim manage the messages, phone calls and images they receive could also be useful.

A key strategy for victims to stop TFA is to change their phone, phone number and potentially their email and social media accounts. Their phone number, however, is what connects many of these women to relatives, friends, and services. The need to contact many people to inform them of the number change can be significantly daunting for women who are already dealing with a crisis situation. The research highlights the need to provide further support to women employing these strategies given the privacy mechanisms in place may prevent a third party such as frontline workers from supporting or helping the women change their personal details.

Conclusion

Although the use of technology is instrumental to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's safety, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the yarning sessions described experiencing multiple types of technology-facilitated abuse within different forms of violence. The women also reported the diverse ways that their experience of TFA impacted them and affected their sense of safety, security and wellbeing. The women sharing their perspectives highlighted a wide variety of strategies they employed to identify and respond to their experience of online abuse. However, in a context where technologies are always changing, it is also clear that the experience of TFA was often coupled with low levels of awareness about online safety, how to report TFA, and how to use devices safely.

TFA is still largely unknown in the wider public, so there is a similar general lack of awareness among Aboriginal and Torres Strait women in the three regions about TFA. This lack of awareness means that cases of TFA may be reported only once they have escalated to physical abuse. To address this, the most critical and important avenue to prevention is to raise

awareness and educate communities about TFA. Protective and legal systems also need to be strengthened, and in particular police, financial institutions, and big tech companies need to be educated and made aware of TFA and their responsibilities in addressing and preventing this behaviour. In addition, there remains considerable work to be done on addressing online racist violence, which can be embedded into anti-racist educational programs directed at non-Indigenous Australians.

This research shows that measures to educate about TFA as well as the design or response must consider the particular circumstances of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women from remote and regional Australia. Online racist abuse, as well as trust in the police and the criminal justice system to respond to other forms of TFA, is also connected to past and ongoing violent and discriminative colonial practices and institutions. In the end, to address and prevent TFA, so much rests on a resetting of relationships, addressing the ongoing colonial violence that continue to be perpetuated by settler colonial institutions and the trauma associated with it, and the importance of centring the lived experiences and voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

References

Aveling, N. (2013). *Don't talk about what you don't know' : on (not) conducting research with/in Indigenous contexts.* Retrieved from Murdoch University Repository retrieved 06/04/2016: http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/11141/1/Author_copy_Don%C2%B9t_talk_about_2.pdf

Bailey, J., & Shayan, S. (2021). The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Crisis: Technological Dimensions. In J. Bailey, A. Flynn, & N. Henry, *The Emerald International Handbook of Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse* (pp. 125-144). Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited.

Blagg, H., Williams, E., Cummings, E., Hovane, V., Torres, M., & Woodley, K. (2018). *Innovative models in addressing violence against Indigenous women: Final report.* Sydney: ANROWS.

Brown, C. (2019). *Where are the safe places? Safety mapping with Town Campers in Alice Springs.* Canberra. doi:10.25911/5df8a0dfe3f6d: Commissioned Report no. 3, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University.

Brown, C. (2020). *From the roots up: Principles of good practice to prevent violence against women in the Northern Territory.* Canberra: Australian National University.

Brown, C., Yap, M., Thomassin, A., Murray, M., & Yu, E. (2021). *"Can I just share my story?" Experiences of technology-facilitated abuse among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women from regional and remote areas.* Canberra: The Office of the eSafety Commissioner.

Brown, C., Homan, S., Simpson, C., & Leung, L. (2021). *Rante rante ampe Marle and Urreye: "Safe, Respected and Free from Violence" projects evaluation.* Sydney: ANROWS.

Carlson, B. (2020). Love and hate at the Cultural Interface: Indigenous Australians and dating apps. *Journal of Sociology, vol.56,no. 2*, 133-150.

Carlson, B., & Frazer, R. (2021). Attending to Difference in Indigenous People's Experiences of Cyberbullying: Toward a Research Agenda. In J. Bailey, A. Flynn, & N. Henry, *The Emerald International Handbook of Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse* (pp. 145-163). Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited.

Cheers, B., Binell, M., Coleman, H., Gentle, I., Miller, G., Taylor, J., & Weetra, C. (2006). Family violence: An Australian Indigenous community tells its story. *International Social Work 49(1)*, 51–63.

Clark, Y., Augoustinos, M., & Malin, M. (2017). Coping and preventing lateral violence in the Aboriginal community in Adelaide. *The Australian Community Psychologist Vol.28(2)*, 105-123.

Emma Graham-Harrison, A. G. (2020, March 28). *Lockdowns around the world bring rise in domestic violence.* Retrieved from The Guardian: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/28/lockdowns-world-rise-domestic-violence

Jonscher, S., & Brash, S. (2020, June 22). *Significant increase in domestic violence recorded in NT during pandemic.* Retrieved from ABC News Alice Springs: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-22/domestic-violence-increases-in-nt-during-pandemic/12379148

Kennedy, T. (2020). *Indigenous Peoples' Experiences of Harmful Content on Social Media.* Sydney: Macquarie University.

Matamoros Fernandez, A. (2017). Platformed racism: the mediation and circulation of an Australian racebased controversy on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. *Information, Communication and Society, 20(6)*, 930-946.

National Resource Center on Domestic Violence. (2020). *Technology facilitated abuse.* Retrieved from VAWnet: www.vawnet.org/sc/technology-facilitated-abuse

Office of the eSafety Commissioner . (n.d.). *Empowering women to take control online.* Retrieved from www.esafety.gov.au/women

Office of the eSafety Commissioner. (October, 2019). *Online safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women living in urban areas.* Canberra: eSafetyresearch, Australian Government.

Olsen, A., & Lovett, R. (2016). *Existing knowledge, practice and responses to violence against women in Australian Indigenous communities: State of knowledge paper.* Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Our Watch. (2016). *Facts and figures.* Retrieved from Our Watch: https://www.ourwatch.org.au/understanding-violence/facts-and-figures

Our Watch. (2018). *Changing the picture: A national resource to support the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children.* Melbourne: Our Watch.

The Northern Territory Government. (2018). *The Northern Territory's Domestic, Family, and Sexual Violence Reducation Framework 2018-2028: Safe, respected and free from violence.* Darwin: The Northern Territory Government.

UN Women. (2020, November). *Facts and figures: Ending violence against women.* Retrieved from UN Women: https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures

Vaeza, M.-N. (2020, November 27). *Addressing the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Violence Against Women and Girls.* Retrieved from United Nations Chronicle: https://www.un.org/en/addressing-impact-covid-19-pandemic-violence-against-women-and-girls

World Health Organisation & UN Women. (2020, April 17). *Violence Against Women and Girls Data Collection during COVID-19.* Retrieved from https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/vawg-data-collection-during-covid-19-compressed.pdf?la=en&vs=2339

Zwartz, H. (2020, May 23). *Amid coronavirus lockdowns, use of online domestic violence reporting tool spikes.* Retrieved from ABC News, : https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-23/coronavirus-lockdown-domestic-violence-spikes-in-australia/12238962

Authors

Chay

Chay Brown was born and raised in Mparntwe/Alice Springs, and has been researching violence against women in the Northern Territory since 2013. Chay completed her PhD in 2020 on what works to prevent violence against women in the Northern Territory – this involved the participatory development of a contextually-specific framework of principles and indicators of good practice to prevent violence against women. Chay has a long history working and researching with Tangentyere Council Aboriginal Corporation. Chay has previously lead safety mapping on Alice Springs Town Camps with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and she has researched with Aboriginal people in remote communities throughout the Northern Territory. She has also written about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Aboriginal women experiencing violence in the Northern Territory.

Mandy

Mandy Yap is currently employed at CAEPR as a Research Fellow. Since 2013, Mandy has been working with the Yawuru community and local Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations based in Broome on conceptualising and measuring wellbeing. Her experience in Broome includes designing and implementing local research centred on Indigenous worldviews and priorities. Specifically, this involves working in partnership with Indigenous organisations and communities to undertake data collection, both qualitative (focus groups and semi-structured interviews) and quantitative (surveys) and building local research capacity within communities and organisations. Previously, she co-led a study on the gendered nature

of poverty in two of the poorest districts in South Sulawesi, Indonesia which included aspects on experiences of violence and the lack of voice. Mandy completed her PhD at the Australian National University in 2017.

Annick

Annick is a Research Fellow at CAEPR. She has 16-years of experience in the field of anthropology and political ecology and has extensive experience in conducting qualitative fieldwork and action-research. Her research focuses on Indigenous fisheries and environmental stewardship practices, Indigenous economic alternatives, sovereignty, Indigenous-settler state relations and coastal resources (co)management and governance structures. She has strived to co-design research projects informed by decolonising research methodologies both in Australia (Torres Strait and South Coast) and internationally (Canada and Vietnam). Annick is currently a Research Fellow at CAEPR co-leading a project exploring the question of Indigenous Life Projects with a particular focus on the restoration and maintenance of Indigenous fisheries and environmental stewardship in urban spaces. and working as part of a team evaluating the NSW Aboriginal Affairs OCHRE Local Decision-Making initiative. She was awarded her PhD (McGill University, Canada) in 2019

Minda

Minda Murray is a proud Yorta Yorta and Duduroa woman from the Murray River country in regional Vic and NSW. She was born and raised on Yorta Yorta country, learning culture and lore from her family. She has a Bachelor of Environmental Science and a decade long career in the Victorian Public Service in land management and Indigenous engagement, cultural safety and policy, with community networks extending throughout Victoria and NSW. More recently as a First Nations Research Associate at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy and Research, she is embarking on a PhD in Aboriginal Self-determination and Policy Reform.

Eunice

Eunice is a Yawuru woman from Broome. She has extensive experience and active involvement across community for the past 25 years, working to facilitate change through strategic research and innovative policy development. She has lengthy administrative and managerial experience gained whilst working for the Australian Government for over 20 years. Eunice is a former Councillor with the Shire of Broome and a former Board Member of the Kimberley Development Commission. Eunice sits on the Roundtable for Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander Statistics with the ABS and Ipsos Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group. She is Coordinator at Nagula Jarndu.