

Lifeline or Weapon?

Online & Technology-facilitated abuse against Australian women

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Keynote speech to the National Summit on Women's Safety, 7 September 2021

Introduction

Thank you for that very kind introduction and hello everyone.

As Australia's eSafety Commissioner, I'm truly honoured to be speaking to you at this landmark summit, and to be sharing the virtual stage with some truly courageous and influential women.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land on which we live and work. I pay my respects to their Elders, past and present, and the Aboriginal Elders of other communities joining us today.

As the national regulator of online safety, I am often asked why eSafety has a specific focus on women.

The answer is quite simple.

Women are disproportionately targeted in every form of online abuse we deal with.

Gendered abuse starts young and is universal, with almost 60% of all girls worldwide experiencing some form of online sexual harm.

Moreover, the Economist's Intelligence Unit has found that the prevalence of online violence witnessed against women globally stands at a staggering 85%.

In Australia, the vast majority of eSafety's reports relate to online violence directed towards women and girls. Two-thirds of our youth-based cyberbullying reports, our image-based abuse reports and informal adult cyber abuse complaints are received from women and girls.

Online abuse against women is very different than harassment targeted at men.

It tends to be violent, sexualised, focused on appearance, and may question a women's supposed virtue or even their fertility. It may also involve threats of rape or harm towards children.

This type of abuse is rooted in misogyny and designed to demean, control and ultimately silence women.

We know the Internet is critical for working, learning and connecting. But we cannot continue to let coercive control, online misogyny and other forms of gendered abuse become normalised.

The societal stakes are simply too high.

Hearing women's voices

I'd like to now share some real stories about the women we help every day.

Look at the images on the screen. It's an exquisite collection of diverse and beautiful faces of Australian women from different backgrounds, cultures and religions.

These faces represent the 4 in 5 Australian women who have or ARE, experiencing some form of technology-facilitated abuse.

Knowing this, it's hard to look at these images the same way. Like me, you're probably now wondering how many of these faces mask a much darker reality.

Allow me to introduce you to some of these women.

Meet Amira. Her husband has become increasingly abusive and controlling. He limits her access to the family finances, only giving her money for essential items.

He also controls her access to technology, limiting her contact with family and friends. This has left her isolated and vulnerable.

English is not Amira's first language which makes it even more difficult for her to seek help and support.

Her husband has installed a kill switch in the family car to prevent her from going any further than the local school or shops.

He also threatens to share intimate images of Amira with her family overseas if she doesn't do as she is told - images captured without her knowledge or consent.

This is Angela. Angela's ex-husband has pressured their children into making secret recordings of her and her new partner. Despite their parents' acrimonious split, the kids still love their dad and aren't too keen on the man that could be his replacement.

Her ex-husband has told the children: "If we can catch him doing something wrong, we can get him thrown in jail or get rid of him".

On several occasions, Angela has found a mobile phone under her pillow, set to record. The children's father has been asking the kids to airdrop the recorded conversations to him.

They feel deeply uncomfortable about this, but their dad tells them they are being disloyal if they don't follow through.

This is Gina. Gina's abusive ex-partner is now in prison. She has started over in a new town with her young son, but fears being tracked down by her former partner once he's released.

And this fear is warranted. Her ex's mother has been crowdsourcing information from Gina's friends and family on Facebook about her new identity - trying to find out where she might be living and working.

Facebook won't remove the posts about Gina because technically, it doesn't violate their terms of service, but her family violence case worker believes Gina and her young son are in dire physical danger.

Let me introduce you to Jodie. Jodie and her daughter live in a refuge, in a location kept secret from her ex. At a recent custody changeover, Jodie's ex-partner insisted she take a doll he says their daughter loves and cannot sleep without.

Jodie takes him at his word but becomes suspicious when her daughter shows absolutely no interest in the doll.

Within days of the meeting, Jodie's ex starts texting her photos he has taken in the suburb she is living in and even the street where the refuge is located.

Gripped by fear, she decides to take a closer look at the doll and finds a small GPS tracking device hidden inside.

We've met four women with seemingly different stories, yet they share a common thread – they are all victims of coercive control through technology-facilitated abuse.

What does eSafety do?

We at eSafety are dedicated to supporting women to prevent this type of abuse and support them when things go wrong.

We were created in 2015 and are the first government online safety regulator in the world whose sole purpose is the protection of its citizens online.

We have a range of civil powers to compel takedown of illegal or harmful content, whether it's child sexual abuse material, pro-terrorist content, the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, or the serious cyberbullying of a child.

As the world's first online safety regulator, there was no play book for preventing online harms, so we've had to fill the pages in as we've gone along. We've learned that as long as humans are in the frame, we should never underestimate how everyday technologies might be misused or weaponised.

We've also learned we will never regulate or arrest our way out of online harms – behaviour needs to change at a societal level.

And I'm proud to say we believe we now have a successful and practical model for addressing online harms. Our model operates on three distinct pillars:

- Protection through our reporting and investigative schemes;
- Prevention through research and evidence-based education and training programs; and
- Proactive & Systematic change, where we encourage the tech industry to take more responsibility and build safety into their designs and products from the ground up.

We apply this model to every aspect of our work, including the protection of women.

And it's crucial these pillars work in tandem to minimise the threat surface for the future and to ensure all Australians can have safer, more positive experiences online.

Now that you know a bit more about us, let's take a deeper look at technology-facilitated abuse or TFA.

What is technology-facilitated abuse?

TFA involves technology being used to isolate, harass, monitor, stalk, impersonate, threaten or humiliate someone else and we know it is primarily used against women.

It may take many forms including sharing or threatening to share intimate images and using tracking devices, voice recorders or cameras - which can be hidden in cars, children's toys, or even on the undersides of prams.

For the past five years, through our eSafety Women program, we've been at the forefront of trying to understand and address how technology is used against women, particularly in domestic and family violence situations, and we've learned a lot.

While drones flying over safe houses and kill switches installed in cars do make the headlines, most TFA is decidedly low tech.

It involves things as simple as sending harassing or threatening messages or creating imposter accounts on social media.

We know TFA is overwhelmingly gendered, with the victims almost always women and abusers almost always men.

This type of abuse commonly surfaces after a relationship breakdown or a “change of life event” like the arrival of a new baby or a woman starting a new job.

In these situations, the male might feel ignored or neglected and will try to use technology to regain a perceived loss of control. In many cases, these men may not think they are doing anything wrong and the women they are abusing may not be aware they are victims of abuse or crime.

While TFA may not leave visible bruises, the psychological and emotional scars it creates can run extremely deep.

We often hear women describe feeling suffocated and trapped in their own homes, which really should be their havens.

They may be convinced they are going crazy or become paranoid they are being watched and recorded. The frightening reality is that, in most cases, they probably are.

Importantly, we now recognise that technology-facilitated abuse is an indicator of future physical violence. We also know that more than 99% of Australian victims of domestic and family violence have also experienced some form of technology-facilitated abuse.

This was precisely the scenario that played out in the tragedy of Hannah Clarke and her 3 beautiful children.

Technology facilitated abuse is intersectional

Like most types of abuse, TFA takes many forms and is often intersectional in nature.

It affects women in our society in different ways, particularly those from diverse and vulnerable communities.

Our recent research into the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in remote and regional communities revealed they most commonly experience TFA as threats, harassment, and stalking by a current or former partner.

These women often gain strength from their close social networks and kinship structures, but this can also make it easier for perpetrators to gather information and locate them after they have fled.

The sharing of devices, mobile phone plans and even passwords is also more prevalent in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities than across the general Australian population.

The downside for women of course, is that the sharing of devices and passwords makes it easier for their abusers to gain unauthorised control of their accounts.

Digital devices like mobile phones are often critical in helping women stay safe and connected to their families and communities. As a result, mobile phones are often withheld or damaged by

abusers as a form of punishment. Unfortunately, many women don't recognise this behaviour as a form of abuse.

This is where eSafety is working to close the gap by educating and improving digital literacy so women can recognise TFA when it is happening and know where to get support.

Because distance can reduce access to in-person support services and training, we are delivering online resources to remote and regional communities, where it is needed most.

And by supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to do the same, we're providing dual levels of support.

To that end, we recently provided grants to eight Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to create culturally appropriate, place-based resources and training to support women experiencing TFA in their communities.

Another key group of women we support are those with an intellectual and cognitive disability.

These women often rely on digital technology for social connection, friendships, and a sense of community, but this reliance can also be used against them.

These women can be particularly vulnerable because in many cases their abusive partner may also be their carer and may restrict or completely remove important technological lifelines as a means of exerting more control.

Our recent research on how TFA manifests for women with an intellectual or cognitive disability, shows that in family violence situations these women are often threatened with losing their children.

These types of threats may mean women are more likely to endure the abuse instead of seeking help.

They are also more susceptible to what has been termed, "mate crimes" where a perpetrator will befriend them to exploit their perceived vulnerabilities.

Perpetrators may also control victims with intellectual or physical disabilities by placing tracking devices on wheelchairs, tampering with hearing aids or other critical assistive devices.

If the perpetrators also serve as carers, they can also use their intimate knowledge of the victim, including passwords and log-in details, to take over financial and social media accounts, further isolating victims and making them even more dependent on their partners or carers.

We found that a fear of not being believed is a primary barrier to women with intellectual disabilities seeking help for TFA, as is the fear they will lose access to their devices and technology.

We recently launched a range of resources for domestic violence and disability support workers. These resources raise awareness about TFA and build an understanding around important support pathways.

I've got a short clip to show you that gives an insight into how women living with intellectual or cognitive disability may experience TFA. Let's take a look.

 eSafety_90secCutdown.mp4

Unfortunately, the experiences you've just seen are based on common lived experience.

Women from culturally and linguistically diverse or CALD backgrounds, also face unique challenges when dealing with technology-facilitated abuse.

Perpetrators often use threats of deportation especially for women on spousal visas. They may also use the threat of honour killings, and as we saw in Amira's case, threaten to humiliate them by sending intimate images to a woman's family.

Women from CALD backgrounds may not seek help for online abuse due to language barriers, social isolation, low digital literacy and a lack of awareness that TFA is a form of abuse.

There may also be cultural differences at play, a mistrust of government institutions, or a lack of understanding from local police and some support services.

These factors can all contribute to making it harder for women from CALD backgrounds to seek out and obtain appropriate levels of support.

Sadly, children often play a role in the perpetration of technology facilitated abuse.

As we saw in Angela's story earlier, we're seeing an increase in perpetrators using their children as pawns in the abuse of their mothers.

In fact, children are now involved in over a quarter of all domestic and family violence cases where TFA is present.

Children commonly experience being monitored, threatened, intimidated, and having communication blocked. They could also be unwittingly involved in abuse directed at their non-abusive parent.

The impacts on these children can be profoundly damaging - increasing feelings of isolation, fear and anxiety, affecting their mental health and their relationship with their custodial parent.

What are we doing?

eSafety is leading global government efforts on the technology-facilitated abuse confronting women and people in less dominant relational roles.

A key objective for us is to raise awareness of the existence of TFA and the role it plays in most family and domestic violence cases.

The very fact that I am here with you today at this important summit and delivering a speech about TFA, is in and of itself an important landmark on this journey.

TFA was really once on the fringes of National Plan discussions, and there was a time when managing this form of abuse might have involved women being told to simply switch off their phones, get off social media, or unplug from the internet altogether.

Today, our understanding of TFA is thankfully far more sophisticated and the treatment of women who fall victim to it is far more empathetic and constructive. We now recognise the lifeline that the internet and technology provide for women and their families, but we must continue to act.

The time is now for us to encourage even more sweeping societal, cultural, and institutional changes in terms of how technology-facilitated abuse is understood and ultimately, addressed.

eSafety has focused considerable time, energy and resources not only on raising awareness of TFA with the public but also within the agencies that support women in domestic violence situations. These include case workers, allied health professionals, law enforcement and the court system.

eSafety Women

Through our eSafety Women program, we have successfully trained thousands of frontline, specialist and support staff in the domestic violence sector.

We've delivered this training through face-to-face workshops, webinars and through our unique online training program which is now available to frontline workers worldwide.

We've also developed practical web-based tools to help women in these situations protect themselves and their families - giving them the knowledge they need to start taking back control of their lives. Our resources are refreshed on a regular basis so they are current, targeted and accessible.

eSafety also provides critical support to women through our reporting schemes, particularly our image-based abuse scheme.

Image-based abuse is another common form of abuse experienced by women in domestic and family violence situations.

Women often don't want to go to the police or pursue a criminal justice pathway for fear of the chain of events that might follow. And really, what they often tell us they want is the images to be taken down.

eSafety therefore provides an alternative, using civil powers and powerful remedial actions to help women experiencing online harms.

We can have distressing online material removed, as well as alert social media services to accounts being used to share intimate content.

In some cases, we can also take civil action against the person who posted, or threatened to post, an intimate image without consent.

We also ensure victims are safe and supported by referring them to other support and counselling services.

And we remain steadfast in our resolve to do more.

As we know, the statistics around family and domestic violence are appalling and represent too many lives being ruined and lost.

Knowing that TFA causes real trauma and can be an early indicator of future physical violence could quite literally save lives. This recognition would enable authorities to intervene before a situation escalates.

Understanding TFA as a red flag for future and further physical violence needs to be a key take away from our discussions here.

All of us who can help these women are officially being put on notice that TFA cannot, and should not, be dismissed or ignored.

This is why eSafety has been advocating for the last six years that TFA be recognised in specific conditions within domestic and family violence intervention orders and in Apprehended Violence Orders and we will continue to fight for these changes.

Beyond this important advocacy for institutional and structural change in the criminal justice system, eSafety has utilised funding from the Fourth Action Plan to support Australia's most vulnerable women.

We are working directly with at-risk communities to co-develop resources and tailor interventions, but we're also working to ensure the domestic violence sector is supported on the ground.

In the last Federal Budget, eSafety also received funding to develop training, technology-based tools and other resources to support children and young people experiencing technology-facilitated abuse.

The new resources will also help those who engage with children to identify early warning signs of TFA and provide them with the skills to support children as they seek help.

This is a complex ecosystem we are working in. From governments to frontline delivery sectors, we need to share best practices and resources, and work together so these vulnerable women and their families are better supported.

The wider issue of online abuse of women and girls

While most of what I've been talking about today has focused on technology-facilitated abuse, it's important to circle back to my opening remarks about why eSafety has a particular focus on women and girls.

The prevalence of online harassment directed at women and the often vitriolic and menacing manifestations of online violence targeting women warrant this additional focus.

I've already mentioned how most complaints we respond to are from women and girls experiencing cyberbullying, image-based abuse, and adult cyber abuse.

Even child sexual abuse is gendered - with recent Australian research finding that 90% of the perpetrators of these abhorrent crimes are men and 84% of the victims are girls.

Last year, Plan International research found that 65% of Australian girls and young women aged 15-25 have experienced a range of online harms on social media. This is 7% higher than the global average.

New analysis by the Australian Bureau of Statistics has shown that female victims of childhood sexual abuse are three times more likely to experience sexual assault later in life.

This demonstrates why we can no longer treat the online world as separate to the offline world when it comes to sexual harassment and abuse.

In my roles, both within the tech industry and now as eSafety Commissioner, I have witnessed online harms first-hand and I have seen how destructive they can be.

Working in the Tech Industry – my experience

During my time inside the tech industry, I saw some of the world's most resilient women crumbling under the devastating avalanche of online hate.

This online hate towards women and its insidious effects first hit me during my early days working at Twitter back in 2014.

I had really been inspired by the pivotal role of social media had played in the Arab Spring, and I believed platforms like Twitter could serve as a great leveller, giving voices to those who had none and enabling the disenfranchised to speak truth to power.

Within my first few months at Twitter, Hillary Clinton came to speak at our All Staff meeting.

She spoke extensively about her own experiences as a public figure playing out online. What stuck with me was her reflection on how online abuse targeting women manifests so differently than abuse targeting men. These are her words.

"As a woman in the public eye, you see the deep outlines of misogyny and reinforcement of double standards. Women in the public eye often have very personal criticisms levelled about them."

As my time at Twitter progressed, I saw daily how the internet was being weaponised against women and how social media was surfacing and amplifying the abuse to effectively enable “sexual harassment in the cloud.”

I started to get a real sense of how vicious, relentless, and commonplace this gendered violence had become.

Ex-partners engaging in one of the worst forms of “relationship retribution” - image-based abuse - with the burden falling upon the female victim to prove she was the target in the intimate image before it was taken down.

Spurned lovers ruthlessly seeking to undermine a woman’s credibility in the eyes of her family, friends and work colleagues.

Repeated, menacing “death wishes” made to Muslim activists and their children that fell just below the policy threshold of “direct threats of violence”, but still dehumanised them and left them fearing for their family’s safety.

The relentlessness of organised “rape trolls,” many of whom were part of the Incel ‘movement’, whose sole purpose was to seek out survivors of sexual assault, belittle their experiences – even publicly questioning if they’d been assaulted – in a concerted effort to undermine their confidence and credibility and to ultimately, silence their voices.

In 2021, we know a lot more about how extreme misogynistic movements like the “involuntary celibates,” or Incels, can spill over into real world violence, as we just saw with the recent mass murder in Plymouth, England last month.

We need to understand that online misogyny can lead to real-world violence. And that’s why we’ve used our notification powers to ensure that images glorifying of the brutal murder of a young American woman, weren’t shared further online.

But it’s important to remember that we’ve also seen some incredibly promising movement of the dial on sexual harassment here in Australia. I believe it is the clear and powerful voices of young women like Grace Tame, Brittany Higgins and Chanel Contos, who are helping enable this cultural shift in the right direction.

In fact, data from the 2021 Australia Talks National Survey revealed that 55% of Australians now believe allegations of sexual assault are almost always truthful. While we still have large hills to climb, we are light years ahead of where I sat, even 5 years ago when I served as a “safety antagonist” inside of Twitter.

As much as I wanted to help so many Australian women experiencing online abuse whilst at Twitter, I had no local tools at my disposal to moderate harmful content. I was dependent on the centrally controlled moderation machine at headquarters. The sheer volume of abuse that social

media platforms are processing is absolutely mind boggling, but I still knew more could be done and needed to be done to stop people falling through the cracks.

And this is why I changed careers – to fight the good fight from the outside. And why I have pushed so hard to strengthen the Online Safety Act to combat this type of abuse.

Impacts of online harassment

In the age of COVID, the online and offline worlds have never been less separate.

We know the abuse women experience online is not always distinct from what we call “real life”. And we have clearly seen that people’s personal and professional lives are increasingly intertwined.

So, when online harassment results in substantial impacts on mental health – and almost 60% of Australian women have told us that it has – the flow-on effect is that there is a professional impact, affecting not only confidence in one’s ability to work, but also a women’s self-esteem and identity.

This is further heightened by concerns about physical safety, which compels women to limit their online presence and diminish their professional profile and reputation.

In fact, one quarter of Australian professional women told eSafety they had pulled back from pursuing leadership opportunities that would require elevating their public profile online.

So, we can clearly see the vicious cycle here. A cycle that must be disrupted.

Women in leadership positions or who maintain an online presence as part of their professional lives, face unacceptably high levels of gendered abuse online.

Women with intersectional characteristics, including those with diverse sexualities or fluid genders, different ethnicities, abilities or religions are THREE times more likely to cop targeted online abuse than the general public.

In fact, it was precisely this scenario we saw play out in 2020 through a series of organised volumetric attacks – otherwise known as ‘pile ons’ or brigades – targeting prominent Australian women.

Of course, gendered online abuse isn’t limited to women in high-profile roles or women with specific vulnerabilities. Online abuse happens to women across Australia, every single day.

Australian girls witness their role models in sport, entertainment, journalism or the business community being repeatedly harassed online.

So, what does this say about the culture we are creating let alone the online world we are now all inhabiting?

One image that reflects the challenges of our time is this amazing photo of AFLW player Tayla Harris. When I see this image, I see an incredible athlete in her physical prime, demonstrating precision kicking action, in full, glorious flight. And I am full of admiration.

While this image is the pinnacle of female athleticism and should inspire young girls everywhere, it became well known for all the wrong reasons. When it was posted on social media, it was swamped by abusive and sexist comments, and Tayla became the target of terrible personal abuse.

Now, Tayla could have gone to ground, but instead she chose a different path. She stood up and she spoke out, not because, she said, she needed to stand up for herself but because she felt she needed to stand tall and face bigger societal and cultural issues head-on.

I think we'd all agree the stand Tayla took was incredibly brave, but for most women the idea of taking on the trolls directly, comes with an overwhelming fear of making things much worse.

And that's why for most women, it's often easier to self-censor, to refrain from sharing opinions online, or even to withdraw from social media altogether.

Our approach and research

And our recent research shows this is precisely what most Australian women do.

In fact, 56% of Australian women don't respond to online abuse because, understandably, they want to prevent an escalation of online vitriol. They do so to protect their own well-being, but they also tell us, they do it out of a sense of helplessness.

We believe women need to be empowered, assured and confident in their use of technology. These beliefs led to our 2018 initiative called Women In The Spotlight – or WITS – a program to teach Australian women skills in social media self-defence.

We cannot effectively promote women's voices online unless we are also helping them to protect their voices online. One of the primary goals of the WITS program is to both

The 'upstander' message is at the core of this work, encouraging women to express solidarity and building strength by supporting each other online. And this is why we use the two hashtags #ReportandSupport and #WomenwithWITS.

We are poised to release landmark new research about how women who dare to raise their heads above the parapet become "situationally vulnerable" to targeted online harassment and how these impacts reverberate at a societal level, further entrenching gender inequality.

In shaping the WITS program, we have drawn from the experiences of diverse, impressive and empowered women from all over the globe. If you would like to learn from real stories about how women manage online abuse and read our research please visit our website at esafety.gov.au.

It's important as women, that we protect and educate ourselves and we don't become immune to the impact online abuse can have on our everyday lives, and the lives of others.

Sadly, our research shows that 35% of working Australian women have experienced cyber abuse as part of their professional lives in the past three years.

The personal and social toll of this targeted abuse can have far-reaching effects at a time when interacting online isn't a choice or a luxury – it is essential.

Nor should we think of having an online presence – and suffering online harms – as simply the “cost of doing business” for women.

There are lessons to be learned through our WITS work that also applies directly to technology facilitated abuse, which we know is not always constrained to the household.

It can also spread to the world of work and may involve an abuser undermining a woman's reputation with her employer and her colleagues.

We know that often one of the impediments for women to leave an abusive relationship is economic, and so undermining a woman's ability to be independent and support herself is another form of control designed to keep her tethered to her abuser.

And, we have seen many perpetrators seek multiple online methods to undermine a woman's professional credibility and her personal integrity as a means of undermining her economic security.

So how do we change the future?

While we've been working very hard in the TFA and online harassment space for the past six years, we must continue to do more and think about places we haven't gone before.

We're looking closely at new ways expert technology support can be provided to women in domestic violence situations.

We know, from the frontline workers we train, and from the women who come to us for help and advice, that there are gaps in service provision here, particularly when it comes to sophisticated tracking and surveillance devices that can be hard to detect and remove.

As such, we are expanding our online resources and advice to give more hands-on technical support, particularly for those women with low levels of digital confidence.

We're also expanding our social media self-defence training to meet the ever-increasing demand from industries and organisations looking to protect their staff online. The need for this program has been recognised by women across a range of work settings, from sports players to small business owners.

We've collaborated with SafeWork Australia to ensure that online harassment is designated a psycho-social workplace harm.

We are also working to provide more detailed guidance to employers on how to better support their staff who experience online abuse in the course of their jobs, framing this as a fundamental duty of care.

Women who are proactively supported by their workplace are less likely to step back from public forms of online engagement, including when they are a voice for their organisation.

eSafety is working to consolidate and expand our frontline worker training to build the skills needed to meet the challenges of new technologies, and to reflect the intelligence we gather from our reporting schemes.

We also aspire to reach a broader range of audiences – whether they be support workers, police, the court system, or the many others who work with women impacted by domestic and family violence - to improve understandings of the harms caused by technology-facilitated abuse.

We need to expand the technical support ecosystem around women, so they know where to go to for help if they experience online abuse or need help with their device.

Our teams are working on building a safety tech centre to test solutions to detect and remove spyware, stalkerware and provide more expert guidance to help all Australians.

Adult Cyber Abuse Scheme

eSafety operates the world's first and only government-backed image-based abuse scheme. We have an 85% success rate in removing non-consensually shared intimate images from thousands of websites - most of which are hosted overseas.

We also have remedial powers to help people whose intimate partners share or threaten to share their images online or weaponise deepfakes.

eSafety is also scoping new technologies to allow us to identify intimate images that have been shared online without consent repeatedly and at-scale.

Our soon-to-be-operational, novel adult cyber abuse scheme will provide new pathways for women who are on the receiving end of cyber stalking and threatening online abuse.

The scheme will be effective from January 2022, and we are using the next five months to carefully consider our approach to creating a model that balances fundamental rights, like free speech, against the right for people to be protected from seriously harmful online abuse.

eSafety alone cannot solve the issues that underpin online abuse. Nor can we remove all online racism, misogyny and hate.

But what we CAN do is to help Australians when all other avenues have been exhausted, and when cyber abuse targeting an individual veers headlong into the lane of serious online harm.

These are provisions that no other country in the world affords its citizens, bridging the inherent gap that exists between the tech behemoths and everyday Australians.

We will have significant civil penalties available as a path of final recourse, sending the message that perpetrators cannot continue to throw digital stones with impunity and nor can platforms shirk their responsibility for allowing this toxic behaviour to flourish.

Help from the tech industry

It's time for the tech industry to step-up.

The platforms haven't made the kind of progress we need to see in terms of making online spaces safer and less toxic for women.

Other governments around the world are waking up to their responsibility to support women online and holding big tech to account.

Thankfully, the Australian Government has been an early and decisive mover in this space, and because of this we have a six-year head start.

The rise of the internet of things means smart devices are being weaponised against women – inside and outside the home.

We need device manufacturers and technology providers to understand how their tech is being weaponised and actively engineer out the potential for misuse.

This is a key principle of our Safety by Design initiative that was launched earlier this year.

It was developed in conjunction with industry to ensure that companies are embedding safety protections in at the front end, rather than retrofitting fixes after the damage has been done.

We think companies need to do a basic risk assessment and build in protections so their products cannot be used as a surveillance device by a violent current or former partner.

We also believe that like car manufacturers, the tech companies have the responsibility to build-in virtual seatbelts and digital guardrails to safeguard their users from harm.

This doesn't just mean whiz bang safety features deployed via press release, this means consistently enforcing more rigorous policies, and when required, taking swift action.

We all know that the quicker we can remove damaging content, the quicker we can provide relief to the victim.

It might surprise you to know that 72% of Australian women today, believe it is futile to report cyber abuse to a social media site and that there will be no repercussions for perpetrators on their platforms.

They are not wrong, and this is precisely why the Online Safety Act has been expanded.

The new powers established through the Online Safety Act, will include stronger regulation, robust industry codes and the development of Basic Online Safety Expectations that Government expects all platforms to adhere to.

This will ensure the platforms are building in these safety protections as a licence to operate and are applying and upholding their own policies and those established through the Online Safety Act.

There is no question that we need a new era of radical transparency from Big Tech as opposed to the current reality of “selective transparency.” The status quo must change.

So how have we directly helped women?

Now that you have heard what’s coming, let’s revisit the stories of the four women we met earlier, to give you some insights on how we were able to help them.

It was obvious Amira was experiencing controlling behaviour and some of this was happening through the misuse of technology.

Her case worker had been trained through one of our eSafety Women seminars and was able to recognise the signs and help Amira take steps to protect herself, in her native language.

Amira was also able to report her husband’s threat to share her intimate images to eSafety’s image-based abuse scheme where her case was investigated.

In the end, she decided not to pursue formal civil action against her husband, but he is on notice. We also referred Amira to relevant support services. Now she fully understands her rights, has increased her digital protective competencies and has a direct escalation path for help from eSafety.

For Gina, we were able to use our reporting lines to Facebook to provide greater context regarding her situation. We were able to explain why her mother-in-law’s seemingly innocent posts on the platform, looking for information about her whereabouts, posed a significant risk to Gina’s safety.

Facebook removed the posts and shut down her mother-in-law’s account. Our new adult cyber abuse scheme will give us a stronger hand to play in the future when helping women like Gina.

An eSafety trained domestic violence caseworker was also able to help Angela. Recordings like the ones Angela’s ex was pressuring his kids to collect, are often used as a means of gathering evidence submitted in Family Court matters to prejudice against the custodial parent.

Angela's case worker was able to recognise this, so it could be addressed as legal proceedings continued.

As I mentioned earlier, we're also currently building a program to support children and young people who are experiencing technology-facilitated abuse, to help them deal with the kinds of destructive pressures they experience in these types of situations.

And as for Jodie, her case worker had also been through one of our TFA webinars and incorporated questions about technology in Jodie's risk assessment to identify other tell-tale signs of abuse.

The case worker helped her develop a new safety plan and she was moved to a different refuge. A family violence intervention order was taken out against her ex which placed specific conditions around how and when he could contact Jodie and her daughter. This included any unauthorised contact through technology.

Conclusion

These stories bring us full circle and close the loop on why the work we do at eSafety is critical for so many Australia women and their families.

I want to thank you so much for the opportunity to speak to you today about technology-facilitated abuse and the online violence faced by women in Australia, and around the world, every single day.

I think the great power of an event like this is how it can bring us all together, different government agencies, the private sector, NGOs and the Australian public, to not only highlight the problems facing women, but also to find solutions.

We know from our interactions and research that these issues are complex. They require multiple support measures to change the trajectory of victim's lives.

Delivering our compassionate citizen services is the hallmark of eSafety's work – and will remain a core deliverable.

I hope you take away a better understanding of technology-facilitated abuse and what women who are the targets of this form of abuse are truly experiencing. If you now know where to get help, then I will have done my job as eSafety Commissioner.

We need broader societal change, to grow a culture where girls and women are respected, and their voices are not silenced. A world where they can make choices, engage in work and social discourse and not have their economic viability undermined.

We've also heard about women who are withdrawing from online debate and discussion and self-censoring to feel safe.

But our online world needs to be one where all voices can be heard that is respectful and responsible.

We at eSafety cannot do this alone. This will take all of us working together, across all our areas of expertise, whether focused on prevention, protection or proactive change.

It is my great hope that by coming together like this and sharing our unique insights and experiences, we can better support women in the future and ensure that technology serves as a lifeline for them, not as a weapon.

Thank you and please do visit esafety.gov.au for advice, guidance, support and to report online abuse.

Julie Inman Grant

eSafety Commissioner

End

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