

Technology and domestic abuse

Experiences of survivors during the Covid 19 pandemic

Women's Aid 2022

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Introduction

In recent years abuse that has been based in or facilitated by technology has received growing attention. In 2017, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence sought to better address the “pervasive and devastating crime” that is online abuse (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence and Abuse, 2017). In support of this work, Women’s Aid published the [Tackling domestic abuse in a digital age](#) report which called for, amongst other things, online abuse to be recognised by the Government, judiciary and all relevant agencies as a harmful form of domestic abuse and violence against women and girls.

At Women’s Aid we know that the area of online, digital and technology-based abuse (tech abuse) is one that needs more research and evidence gathering. We also know that concrete action is needed now to start to address the issue. With the rise of personal technology and social media over the last few decades there are more tools than ever that abusers can use to control, abuse, and degrade victim-survivors. Recognising the breadth of the problem of online abuse as a form of domestic abuse and violence against women and girls is one small step towards responding effectively to issues.

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 recognised the issues of tech abuse by “extend[ing] the offence of disclosing private sexual photographs and films with intent to cause distress (known as the “revenge porn” offence) to cover threats to disclose such material”. This Act created “a statutory definition of domestic abuse, emphasising that domestic abuse is not just physical violence, but can also be emotional, controlling or coercive, and

economic abuse” and “extend[ed] the controlling or coercive behaviour offence to cover post-separation abuse”. These measures go some way to ensuring that tech abuse is taken seriously as a part of the pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour which underpins DA, and that victim-survivors have routes to justice and support and that perpetrators can be held to account.

There is no denying that the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted all of us, across all aspects of our lives, particularly in relation to technology. As a result of the restrictions brought into manage Covid-19, for many, life ‘moved online’. Work became virtual for many (see report on economic impact), in person interactions were prohibited during lockdowns meaning socialising also became a telephone or virtual experience, home-schooling for children and education courses for adults continued online (see report on children and the pandemic) , and for most people, due to risks of transmission, food shopping, medical services, and financial services all took place remotely. From Women’s Aid evidence base of the impact of the pandemic which was brought together in our report [A Perfect Storm](#), we know that many victim-survivors experienced lockdown in the same environment as the abuser and they and their children experienced heightened abuse.

156 of our 283 survey respondents reported that they have experienced tech abuse. Our survey respondents were all female, from a range of age groups and parts of the country. The stories help us to see and state what changes are needed to bring about an end to domestic abuse, including in relation to tech abuse.

Findings

At Women’s Aid we have defined tech abuse as, but not limited to, the following behaviours: controlling phone / computer access, breaking communications (tech) equipment, revenge porn, online harassment, or using tech to monitor your location. We believe that these behaviours and tools are used by abusers to further their control over their victim-survivors and deepen the victim-survivor’s feelings and fears of isolation.

Tech abuse is, without doubt, a tool for coercive control; an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim-survivor. Controlling behaviour around tech and communication equipment and media is designed to make a person dependent by isolating them from support, exploiting them, depriving them of independence and regulating their everyday behaviour.

Coercive control creates invisible chains and a sense of fear that pervades all elements of a victim-survivor’s life. It works to limit their human rights by depriving them of their liberty and reducing their ability for action. Coercive control has been likened to being taken hostage; “the victim becomes captive in an unreal world created by the abuser, entrapped in a world of confusion, contradiction and fear” ([What is Coercive Control](#)).

At Women’s Aid we’ve recognised the following behaviours as some common examples of coercive control, many of which are carried out online or using technology:

- Isolating you from friends and family
- Monitoring your time
- Monitoring you via online communication tools or spyware
- Taking control over aspects of your everyday life, such as where you can go, who you can see, what you can wear and when you can sleep
- Depriving you access to support services, such as medical services
- Repeatedly putting you down, such as saying you’re worthless
- Humiliating, degrading or dehumanising you
- Making threats or intimidating you

Majority of respondents experienced tech abuse in first year of pandemic

Sadly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, the data we collected in relation to tech abuse during the Covid-19 pandemic shows that over half of our respondents experienced this type of abuse during the first year of the pandemic.

Table 1: Did tech abuse start or escalate during the Covid-19 pandemic (i.e. since March 2020)?

Response	% of total respondents (number)
No, I've never experienced this	25.4% (72)
No, it reduced	4.6% (13)
Not sure	5.3% (15)
Stayed the same	16.6% (47)
Yes, it started	5.3% (15)

Yes, it escalated	23.3% (66)
Not sure/Not answered	19.4% (55)

Out of our 283 respondents 72 noted they have never experienced tech abuse and 55 chose not to answer this element of the survey. Despite these answers it is worth noting that whilst people told us they didn't experience tech abuse from their abuser, they did experience it elsewhere:

"During the pandemic, I joined [app] where I then joined a singles group. One man tricked me into giving him my mobile number and then exposed himself to me; another sent me an unsolicited sound file of him masturbating. I wasn't in a relationship with either of them, but the point is that tech is being abused. I was shocked and stressed by both the incidents mentioned but fortunately both have been resolved for me."

For a small number - 13 people (4.6%) - tech abuse reduced during the pandemic. For others their abuse "stayed the same" (47 respondents, 16.6%). This number is difficult to analyse as we are not in a position to know what their situation was before this survey or the Covid-19 pandemic. However, as people had the option to say they had never experienced tech abuse and they chose to say instead that levels of abuse had stayed the same, we can gauge from this that some tech abuse was likely to be taking place.

Overall, over half of respondents (156 out of 283) had experienced tech abuse with almost one third of the 283 respondents (28.6%) telling us that their experiences of tech abuse started or escalated since the start of the pandemic in March 2020. This shows us the extent to which many abusers started to use or extended their use of tech as a tool of abuse during the pandemic.

For some this related to telephone and text communications:

"[My abuser] would read and reply to my text messages before I had a chance to see what they said or who they were, where from and then deleted it all so I was unaware of who was reaching out to me. He would control everything- I wasn't allowed to answer phone calls either."

For others tech abuse related to social media:

"They took my phone away from me and used it to access my social media account, to watch my messages."

In an attempt to understand the impact of the pandemic on victim-survivor’s experiences of tech abuse and coercive control, Women’s Aid asked several questions related to technology that explored the tools abusers used especially during the pandemic. The sample size of respondents to these questions varied from question to question. Therefore, for the following analysis all tables will indicate the sample size of respondents.

Access to tech as a tool of abuse during the pandemic

Survey respondents were asked whether their abuser had controlled their access to technology. Of the 188 respondents to this question, 61.7% (111) people said this had not happened whereas 38.8% (72) told us that it had.

This means over a third of the 188 respondents had their access to phones, laptops, social media and other technology controlled by their abuser.

Those who answered yes to this question were then asked to explain how this happened. When asked the question in Table 2 below, respondents were able to tick multiple boxes and many did, highlighting the pervasive and multi-faceted impact of controlling victim-survivors access to technology.

Table 2: During the pandemic, has your abuser controlled your access to technology?

Response	% of 188 respondents
They controlled when you could use your phone	28.2% (53)
They controlled when you could use your laptop / computer	15.4% (29)
They controlled which websites you are able to access	9.0% (17)

They have intentionally broken your phone / laptop / computer	13.3% (25)
They have deleted your social media accounts	8.5% (16)

Our survey respondents shared more details through the survey about how these acts of abuse were enacted:

"I wasn't able to have a phone, laptop, etc. I had no technology access. He closed my accounts [...] and then broke my laptop and phone."

"I was continually 'watched' online through mediums of being able to see online activity status on things such as WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook, and accusations made because I was online. Social media apps also allowed him to see who I was interacting with, which also contributed to his abuse and forcing me to delete people he disapproved of, not being allowed to reply to people unless he said I could and making me delete social media accounts."

These figures and the stories our respondents have shared indicate clearly that tech and access to tech was used repeatedly and significantly as a way to abuse power and control throughout the pandemic. For many, this abuse increased the levels of isolation they felt and resulted in them feeling even less able to access support.

"He didn't control my use of my phone but when speaking to my parents on my phone, I felt pressured to end the call because he would be glowering or slamming things down."

"He used to check my phone and laptop if I left it unattended."

"[They] broke and snapped my phone in half when I tried to phone the police."

"Continuously tried to get me to leave social media to isolate me from the only people I had left."

Limiting access to tech as a form of abuse also had an impact on victim-survivors' children, education and jobs;

“If he is in a temper, he'd just take the phone off me. Out of my hand. On one occasion I was in the middle of sending an email to my kid's teachers, I didn't get the phone back until the next day, when he'd cooled down.”

“My phone and laptop are my connection to the outside world. He is well aware of this and has increased his scrutiny of my screen time, often “banning” me and also threatening that I can no longer do my online studies.”

“He has bad mouthed me on Facebook and twitter. Commented unwelcome things on my post. Threatened to put things on my public business page.”

“The control of my laptop was turning off wi-fi or not letting me have the power cable, because he knew it would affect my ability to work from home. This was a deliberate attempt to punish/threaten me with something important to me because he said at the time, he knows how important work is to me.” There were many instances like this one recorded across our research, where victim-survivors shared that they had experienced employment sabotage and economic abuse related to working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic (see report on economic impact).

These findings show how controlling access to tech during the pandemic led many victim-survivors to feel more isolated and fearful, more controlled, and less free and independent to seek support.

Use of technology to survey and monitor victim-survivors

At Women's Aid we recognise that tech abuse is a form of domestic abuse and violence against women and girls that requires more attention, from a research, policy, and support perspective. This survey was able to show us that throughout the pandemic, for many victim-survivors, tech abuse was used as yet another tool for control by abusers. To explore this a little further we asked two questions relating to:

- abusers' use of tech to survey and monitor victim-survivors
- abusers' use of tech to abuse in other ways.

The findings again show that tech abuse was used extensively during the first year of the pandemic, enabling perpetrators to exact further coercive control on the victim-survivors.

Constant, and often non-consented, monitoring is a tool that perpetrators use to increase fear, anxiety, and feelings of isolation in victim-survivors. In our survey we asked if this was something that had happened to people during the pandemic.

Table 3: During the pandemic, has your abuser used tech to survey you / monitor your location?

Response	% of 204 respondents
They seemed to know about conversations that you've had when they've not been present	31.9% (65)
They turned up unexpectedly / known your whereabouts	21.1% (43)
They used location tracking apps on your device	13.2% (27)
They used your online accounts to monitor what you are doing / where you are, e.g. banking, social media accounts	20.1% (41)
They used smart devices to listen in to or record what you are doing	10.3% (21)

Survey respondents shared a range of experiences that showed numerous ways in which abusers were able to use tech to keep track of their whereabouts. This included using location tracking apps and devices to record victim-survivors as well as monitoring their online activity.

"He has to know where I am all the time and is constantly checking to see what time I've been on my phone."

"Made me turn my location on so he can see where I am constantly."

"He has hacked my account several times and watches my conversations. I am conscious of speaking to anyone about him via social media or messenger."

"Got others to stalk my social media accounts after I blocked him"

Children, family members and friends were also made part of this abuse (see impact on children report) or caught up in it, in a number of experiences that people shared with us;

"He uses my daughter's phone to 'track' the both of us."

"They used a daily video call with my son to find out my movements to follow me."

“I had to account for what I was doing to stop him from doing things. If I told him I was out he would drive to family members' houses to see if my story added up and who I was with accessing if their vehicles were at home or not.”

“[They] watched everything I did on my social media. Got other people to watch and report back. Tried to hack my accounts. Followed lots of my friends to see what I was doing. Stalked my family and friends via social media.”

This type of abuse, like all others, leaves victim-survivors feeling insecure, unsafe and like they always have to explain themselves. They live in real fear of retribution.

Other ways tech was used to abuse victim-survivors

Our final question tried to understand the various methods and approached perpetrators of tech and domestic abuse used during the pandemic. These categories are far from extensive so again our respondents were encouraged to share their experiences more directly through open text boxes. It is clear to see from these responses how damaging this form of abuse is.

Table 4: During the pandemic, has your abuser used technology to abuse you in other ways?

Response	% of 193 respondents (number)
They constantly call, text or message you online	44.6% (86)
They constantly call, text or message your family and friends	25.9% (50)
They shared or threatened to share intimate photos/videos of you (so called revenge porn, deep-fake)	14.5% (28)
They shared or threatened to share other information about you online such as confidential information, photos/videos of you or information that could cause you embarrassment	23.3% (45)
They used social media to carry out abuse, e.g. used fake social media profiles to harass you, posted from your account, published posts about you which encourage others to harass and abuse you	22.8% (44)

They used smart devices to gaslight* you	26.4% (51)
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Many people, and their families, experienced abuse and harassment (or the threat of it) via phone calls, text messages.

"I was watched and listened to on internal cameras in the house. The house, which was his, was open plan so I had to find blind spots to be able to look at my phone, so he couldn't see me."

"He would give me silent treatment but then text me if he was in another room. But as soon as he saw me, he would ignore me. He tried to get me to video myself at work masturbating, but I refused. He wanted to video us having sex, but I said no."

"He didn't constantly call, text or message my family and friends as such but the threat of him doing it meant he didn't have to as he knew I wouldn't do anything or go anywhere I wasn't supposed to in case he checked up on me. I got stuck in traffic because of a nasty accident on my way back from therapy and he didn't believe me because he couldn't find anything about the accident online. He questions everything I do to the point where I answer questions before he's even asked them a lot of the time to save the anxiety caused by waiting for him to start. He will calculate the time he would expect to be able to do what he wants me to do and if I'm longer than that time he gets angry."

Others were victim-survivors of so-called "revenge porn" and the threat of it; *"My abuser secretly recorded and videoed me and when I left him, he began to upload these videos to YouTube. Part of the ongoing emotional abuse meant that he would never respond to me or contact me despite constantly being on his phone and in contact with others. This undermined my self-esteem hugely over a long period of time."*

"My nude and confidential pictures were shared to strange people and they were given my contact details [with the] intention of causing me harm."

Many perpetrators used social media and websites to exact their abuse; *"They used social media and all contact points to terrorise me, send over 100 messages on various platforms every day for 4 months during the pandemic. During the relationship there had been constant messages every day but during the pandemic this had turned to threats and advice about how I lived my life."*

"He subscribed me to lots of funeral websites and so I constantly receive emails telling me to plan my funeral."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, tech and social media were tools used by many perpetrators to gaslight victim-survivors; *"He would always comment on girls/female posts on Facebook, so I would see the notifications, then deny he had written anything. He talked about a neighbour a lot and used to always putting love hearts on her posts and pictures and make flirty comments on her posts."*

These behaviours are used to utterly undermine victim-survivors of domestic abuse;

"I found that the constant accusations and harassing messages were having a huge negative impact on my mental health. I couldn't focus on work and felt emotionally drained trying to handle different situations, which I knew were orchestrated to cause disruption and discord in our family. I also found out that my brother-in-law (also an abusive man) was recording conversations with my sister, many of which may have included private conversations, which I believe he passed on to my husband. He removed me from several of my own business accounts, which caused distress and prevented me from accessing my business messages. He tried to set up a fake account under my main business account. The main impact is emotional stress and anxiety, as well as the inability to work these accounts, and time taken away from my children trying to sort out such issues with my solicitor."

It's also clear how much more needs to be done to support the victim-survivors of this type of abuse, including increased prosecution and conviction of perpetrators, and increased education and accountability of various agencies who are supposed to support victim-survivors; *"I was made to feel like I was in the wrong like it's my fault for having social media. I was told by a police officer that I should expect it if I'm on social media."* (see more on this in the seeking support report).

Conclusion

As [A Perfect Storm](#) showed that from the start of the lockdown perpetrator's behaviours evolved to include new tools for control and manipulation. Coercive and controlling behaviour exhibited by perpetrators has been central to the way we have seen them use the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions as an integral part of the abuse they inflicted.

Our follow up questions relating to tech abuse show in no uncertain terms that perpetrators used tech as a key tool for exacting their control. As we move out of restrictions and work towards "living with Covid-19" Women's Aid will work to ensure support for all victim-survivors of abuse and further advocate for more action in the area of further criminalising and prosecuting tech/online abuse and addressing coercive control as a form of abuse and violence as a priority for the government.

References and links:

For more information on the questions asked in our survey and the demographics of our survey respondents please see One Year On report).

*Gaslighting is a form of psychological abuse where the perpetrator manipulates their partner. This can make victims doubt themselves, their memories and judgement.

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