

Summarising the evidence

# ONLINE HARASSMENT AND ABUSE AGAINST WOMEN

Context brief



Australian Government

Australian Institute of  
Family Studies

**RESPECT  
VICTORIA**



# To what extent will addressing the gendered drivers of men's violence against women help to prevent online abuse and harassment against women?

This brief is part of a suite of resources produced as part of the *Summarising the evidence* project. Visit the [project page](#) for the accompanying research summary, information about the scope and aims of the project and how it was conducted.

Respect Victoria gratefully acknowledges the work of the Australian Institute of Family Studies and all authors in conducting this work.

This brief is a companion document to a research summary by Harris<sup>1</sup> which examines the prevalence, perpetration and dynamics of online abuse and harassment against women. Respect Victoria has used the findings in that summary, and other academic and practice literature, to consider how to apply and adapt existing approaches to preventing men's violence against women in the rapidly evolving contexts where online and technology-facilitated abuse occur.

## THE GENDERED DRIVERS AND REINFORCING FACTORS OF MEN'S VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

*Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia*<sup>2</sup> identifies four gendered drivers of men's violence against women:

- the condoning of violence against women
- men's control of decision making and limits to women's independence in public and private life
- rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity
- male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control.

These drivers are each addressed with actions to prevent violence against women. These actions challenge the social contexts that allow violence to occur and help to address reinforcing factors that make violence more likely (explained in more detail below). The essential actions to address the gendered drivers are:

- challenge condoning of violence against women
- promote women's independence and decision-making in public life and relationships
- build new social norms that foster personal identities not constrained by rigid gender stereotypes
- support men and boys to develop healthy masculinities and positive, supportive male peer relationships.

Understanding these drivers – and importantly, the actions to prevent them – are an important foundation for primary prevention efforts. This work helps us to understand the dynamics that allow violence to occur, including how power and control are used and abused.

Alongside the gendered drivers, *Change the story* also identifies further factors that can serve to reinforce violence against women. These do not predict violence against women on their own, but may influence the likelihood, prevalence or dynamics in different settings and contexts:

- condoning of violence in general
- experience of, and exposure to, violence (particularly during childhood)
- factors that weaken prosocial behaviour (e.g. disasters and crises; settings where there is heavy alcohol consumption)
- resistance and backlash to prevention and gender equality efforts.

## INTERSECTIONAL APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING PREVENTION

*Change the story* emphasises that other forms of structural oppression intersect with gendered inequality to shape how and why men's violence against women occurs. However, more work is needed to understand how they combine to shape the drivers of different forms of gendered and family violence and the way they are experienced across our communities.

The following evidence guides and frameworks have begun to explore these intersections, mapping shared and distinct drivers across different communities and developing tailored prevention approaches:

- *Changing the picture: A national resource to support the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children* which looks at how the gendered drivers play out as they intersect with colonialism for Aboriginal women<sup>4</sup>
- *Changing the landscape: A national resource to prevent violence against women and girls with disabilities* which looks at how violence against women with disability is shaped by the intersection of ableism and the gendered drivers<sup>5</sup>
- *Pride in prevention* which looks at the role of heteronormativity and cisnormativity alongside rigid gender roles in driving violence against LGBTIQ+ people<sup>7</sup>
- *Intersectionality Matters: A guide to engaging immigrant and refugee communities to prevent violence against women* which considers how intersections between the gendered drivers and other forms of structural oppression can be addressed to prevent violence against women who are from immigrant and refugee communities.<sup>8</sup>

Understanding the impact of different sources of oppression will also help us refine and expand upon the known actions to address the gendered drivers of men's violence against women, creating safer communities for everyone.

## What is online abuse and harassment of women?

Harris<sup>1</sup> sets out five categories that help to understand how and where online abuse is perpetrated:

1. technology facilitated abuse
2. online harassment
3. digital dating abuse
4. technology-facilitated family violence
5. technology-facilitated sexual violence.

Online abuse and harassment often occur in the context of on-going intimate partner violence, including post-separation. Women with a public profile or who become a focus of public attention (e.g. journalists, advocates, leaders) are often targeted for online abuse and harassment. Women who speak out in their workplace or community in favour of gender equality may also be targeted.

Perpetration can take many forms, including:

- trolling (posting to deliberately provoke or distress others)

- defamation
- gender-based hate speech, often combined with racist, transphobic, homophobic, ableist or classist hate speech
- doxing (revealing someone's personal information online without the victim's consent, usually with the intent to cause harm to the victim)<sup>6</sup>
- stalking
- rape and death threats
- sexual harassment
- verbal abuse
- image-based sexual abuse
- controlling behaviours
- violations of privacy
- controlling a victim's finances
- committing fraud
- stalking and monitoring.

Restricting, monitoring or destroying access to technology is also a common form of family violence.

## What do we know about gender and online abuse and harassment of women?

Patterns of perpetration and victimisation of online violence and harassment against women are strongly gendered. Online harassment of women is more often perpetrated by men, and often includes sexist or misogynistic overtones. Online violence that occurs outside of family or dating violence is typically carried out by men unknown to the victim; however it may be difficult for studies to account for men using anonymous profiles to hide such abuse.<sup>9</sup> Online violence sometimes takes the form of mob harassment, where a single woman is targeted by large groups of men, sometimes as part of a coordinated effort over a sustained period of time.<sup>10</sup> Online work-related harassment affects women in greater numbers in male dominated industries.<sup>11</sup>

Research into technology-facilitated intimate partner violence in Australia indicates that the perpetrators are most often male, reflecting the gendered patterns of intimate partner violence more broadly.<sup>1,12,13</sup> Studies also show that both young men and women engage in technology-facilitated controlling and monitoring behaviours when dating. Motivations differ, however: women typically engage in these behaviours due to concerns about a male partner's infidelity, while men's actions are more often driven by a desire to exert control in their relationship and may be part of broader patterns of IPV.<sup>14</sup>

## Where might addressing the gendered drivers help in preventing online abuse and harassment of women?

Addressing peer cultures where violence is excused and celebrated as a way of demonstrating masculinity and dominance is key to preventing online abuse and harassment of women. These peer cultures are strongly expressed and reinforced online, with the sharing of intimate images without consent serving as a form of male bonding.<sup>15</sup> The relative anonymity and distance provided by online platforms

embolden users to express views they might not express in their 'offline' life,<sup>16</sup> often leading to more extreme, hostile, and coordinated violence.

Challenging social norms that condone violence against women is crucial to help address online abuse and harassment. This violence often involves perpetrators and bystanders shifting blame to victim survivors, suggesting that their behaviour or actions provoked the violence.<sup>16</sup> In these scenarios, allegations against partners or mothers are used to justify abusive behaviours. Additionally, police and support networks sometimes inappropriately blame victim survivors for their use of technology in abusive situations.<sup>1</sup>

Challenging rigid gender stereotypes and encouraging alternatives to dominant forms of masculinity will help prevent technology-facilitated family violence. Men may justify controlling household technology as protecting their family, in line with traditional gender roles.<sup>14,17</sup> These dynamics are shaped by different structural factors that intersect with the gendered drivers of violence against women, and can result in unique forms of abuse for some migrant and refugee women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and women with disability.<sup>1</sup>

These patterns are evident across categories of online abuse. It is important to remember that they are also echoed in the ways violence against women is discussed and thought about in the 'offline' world, in the spaces where people live, work, learn, play and socialise. Addressing the underlying drivers of violence against women to prevent online harassment and abuse is therefore likely to have preventative outcomes across many settings, relationships, and forms of violence.

## Future directions for preventing online abuse and harassment

### **Better practice guidance and action for shifting social norms in online spaces**

Addressing the gendered drivers of men's violence against women is necessary to prevent online violence and harassment of women. However, online spaces are more than just a vehicle for perpetrating violence or sharing content. They are also a setting that shapes and are shaped by social norms and trends, cultural values, and legislative and institutional policies.<sup>2</sup>

Online spaces have unique characteristics that set them apart from other settings. For example, online interactions may lack the consideration and accountability that is more accessible in face-to-face interactions, leading to anti-social behaviour. The anonymity and physical distance of online communication can lead to a decrease in empathy and an increase in self-centred and aggressive behaviours.<sup>18</sup> This can normalise and glorify violence that is common in certain forums, social media groups, and comment sections. Users may share, like or comment positively on abusive, violent, dehumanising or degrading content, creating an environment where violence is not only accepted but encouraged.

This includes but is not limited to violent pornography. Inequitable gendered dynamics, including subjugation of women as sexual partners, are common in online pornographic content; a high proportion includes varying degrees of violence and abuse, including strangulation and sexual assault.<sup>19</sup> Some studies indicate that these materials can normalise and create expectations of rough or violent sex,

particularly where pornography tacitly becomes a key aspect of sexual education for young people.<sup>20</sup> Sharing images and recordings with the intent of causing distress is a form of abuse in and of itself.<sup>21</sup>

It is crucial that there be more locally led and international efforts to prevent online abuse and violence against women. Effective prevention efforts would work with regulatory bodies alongside the global companies that host social media platforms, chat forums and dating applications. These efforts should be aimed at identifying effective approaches for moderation and intervention in gendered online abuse, including the spread of disinformation. They should include the development of innovative online prevention solutions.<sup>2</sup> A review of the literature on engaging men and boys found dedicated social media campaigns that actively engage with online communities (as opposed to just sharing campaign materials) are rare.<sup>22</sup> This review identified a range of potential approaches to online engagement, but further work is required to translate these ideas into practice and implement them at scale.

## **Strengthening anti-vilification legislation**

Much of the gendered online abuse and harassment described in the summary by Harris could be considered vilification, in that it ‘incites hatred, serious contempt for, or revulsion or severe ridicule of a person or group of people.’<sup>23</sup> In Victoria, current anti-vilification laws do not address vilification perpetrated on the basis of gender, sexuality or disability. An inquiry into these laws made 34 recommendations, including strengthening the current Act to: protect people with disability; protect women and LGBTIQ+ people from gendered hate speech and conduct; make it possible for people to report vilification on the basis of multiple characteristics; and advocate to and work with the Commonwealth to better regulate online media platforms (including those that house professionally produced and amateur content).<sup>24</sup>

It is critical that the roll-out of these laws is supported with targeted education and behaviour change campaigns designed for online audiences. Introducing a positive duty on social media platforms and other organisations and institutions will also ensure that responsibility for addressing gender-based vilification is shared across systems. This will help ensure that prevention efforts are reinforced across all levels – from the individual through to organisations and systems – and that those victimised are not made solely responsible for seeking redress.

## **Responding to online backlash and links to other harmful movements**

Efforts to address the drivers of online abuse and harassment need to address the role of the ‘manosphere’ in fuelling online backlash against gender equality and peer cultures where violence is excused and celebrated.

## WHAT IS THE 'MANOSPHERE'?

The manosphere refers to diverse websites, social media accounts, chat forums and other online communities formed as backlash to the perceived threat of feminism, feminists and women (or people of any gender who are seen to disrupt rigid gender norms and ideas of 'natural' patriarchal power). The manosphere can include spaces where issues like men's health and well-being are discussed, but these may include or overlap with forums where participants' resentments or sense of disenfranchisement are aired in ways that promote or feed into male supremacist and misogynistic views.<sup>3</sup>

Social media platforms and web-forums are some of the central vehicles used by Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) for organised backlash against feminism and gender equality, and the recruitment and radicalisation of young men and boys.<sup>25</sup> The vast reach and anonymity afforded by these platforms enable individuals and groups opposed to these ideas to:

- promote their views widely and rapidly
- actively recruit others into their beliefs
- network and organise with others across jurisdictions
- amplify their voice using hashtags, viral content, and online campaigns
- test and refine effective messaging using social media engagement tools
- mobilise in mass numbers very quickly against specific individuals, groups or around particular issues.<sup>26</sup>

MRAs increasingly attempt to position themselves as a "reasonable voice," falsely claiming expertise in gender equality, intimate partner violence and father's rights to recruit new members, influence public narrative, and lobby policy makers.<sup>2</sup> There is a strong crossover in membership of MRA groups with other "manosphere" groups such as father's rights groups, "pick up artists" and incel (involuntary celibacy) communities. These groups promote opposition to gender equality and harmful beliefs that position men as victims of feminism, and excuse and promote violence against women.<sup>26</sup> Consumers of these groups often go on to consume other "Alt Right" content that promotes white supremacy and backlash against minoritised racial, religious, LGBTIQ+ communities and people.<sup>27,28</sup> There is evidence to suggest that these movements have inspired acts of violent extremism<sup>29</sup> and have played a key part in the rise of populist far right political movements that have dismantled hard won rights like abortion and trans equality.<sup>30</sup>

The relationships between existing and emerging online communities aligned with backlash against social progress and equality need to be understood to prevent online violence. Groups such as MRAs, trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs), the Alt-Right and neo nazis, while distinct in their specific focuses and targets, promote supremacy of one group over another and sometimes have overlapping strategies, memberships and histories.<sup>31</sup>

Further research and consultation with policy makers and industry partners is required to develop agile and innovative strategies to respond to these movements. These frameworks should aim to proactively engage with online backlash to mitigate or limit its harmful impact, and to prevent the recruitment of individuals into these harmful ideologies in the first place.



## **Greater attention to combined forms of discrimination in online abuse and harassment**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience high rates of online abuse and harassment. This includes racist and sexist vilification and technology-facilitated abuse resulting in unique types of harm.<sup>1,32,33</sup> In addition to strengthened regulation and enforcement of anti-vilification laws, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, communities and community-led organisations need to be resourced to address these issues. Support from non-Aboriginal organisations or institutions must be attentive to community-led guidance and prioritise not causing harm that may result from insufficient understanding of crucial social contexts.<sup>34</sup>

These same principles are required to address online abuse and harassment of other minoritised communities. Women with disability experience online violence and harassment at greater rates than other women.<sup>35,36</sup> Online discourse frequently includes ableist language and stereotypes, perpetuating harmful narratives. Prejudice against LGBTIQ+ communities is pervasive online, expressed through hostile comments, misgendering, cyberbullying, targeted harassment, slurs, and the dissemination of harmful stereotypes and misinformation.<sup>37</sup> This violence can be perpetrated by people of all genders, and there has been increased visibility of abuse perpetrated by cis women against trans and gender diverse people in recent years.<sup>38</sup> Racialised abuse of women online, including in the context of dating apps and perpetrated as part of intimate partner and other family violence is widespread.<sup>39</sup>

Proposed amendments to Victorian anti-vilification laws will help increase protections for women, all LGBTIQ+ people, and people with disability. Moreover, the Inquiry's recommendation that amendments allow for multiple and concurrent forms of vilification to be included in complaints is an important step towards more intersectional approaches to addressing and preventing online abuse and harassment.

## **Greater attention to lateral violence in minoritised communities**

Lateral violence refers to 'organised, harmful behaviours within an oppressed group.'<sup>40</sup> This type of violence often stems from internalised oppression and can manifest as bullying, shaming, and social exclusion. Social media, messaging apps and other online platforms have been studied as sites or methods for this kind of abuse, particularly in relation to the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and LGBTIQ+ people.<sup>31,32,37</sup> The gendered dimensions of how these forms of violence are perpetrated can be different to family violence, dating-related violence or workplace harassment. Studies referenced by Harris suggest that this form of abuse is informed by factors such as past history of trauma and precarious social and economic contexts.<sup>1</sup>

Greater investment is needed to support community-led efforts to understand lateral violence online and implement actions to prevent it. This requires a nuanced understanding of the unique challenges faced by those affected by it; the ways that structural oppression and privilege intersect to complicate how and why it is perpetrated and experienced; and research to inform targeted strategies to prevent it.

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# Further reading

All resources from Summarising the evidence can be found on the [project page](#).

## Research summaries

- Adolescent violence in the home (E Campbell & L Wall)
- Child maltreatment: a snapshot summary (D Higgins & G Hunt)
- Intimate partner violence perpetrated against women by men (Respect Victoria)
- Intimate partner violence perpetrated by women against men (M Salter & D Woodlock)
- Online violence and harassment perpetrated against women (B Harris)
- Non partner sexual violence (A Quadara)
- Sexual harassment occurring in the world of work (S Charlesworth & C Deen)
- Violence perpetrated against older people by another family member or carer (E Stevens, R Kaspiew & R Carson)

## Context briefs

- Summarising the evidence: Exploring what we know about drivers of violence against women, family violence and other forms of gendered violence - Project overview
- Summarising the evidence: Adolescent violence in the home
- Summarising the evidence: Child maltreatment
- Summarising the evidence: Elder abuse
- Summarising the evidence: Online harassment and abuse against women
- Summarising the evidence: Women's intimate partner violence against men
- Summarising the evidence: Work-related sexual harassment

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## Acknowledgement of Country

Respect Victoria acknowledges Aboriginal peoples throughout Victoria as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands and waterways on which we rely. We proudly acknowledge the Aboriginal communities throughout Victoria and their ongoing strength in practising the world's oldest living culture.

We acknowledge the significant and ongoing impacts of colonisation and commit to working alongside Aboriginal communities to effect change. We recognise the ongoing leadership role of Aboriginal communities in addressing and preventing family violence and violence against women, and will continue to work in collaboration with First Peoples to eliminate these forms of violence from all communities.

## Victim survivor acknowledgement

Respect Victoria acknowledges the significant impact of family violence and violence against women on individuals, families and communities, and the strength and resilience of the children, young people and adults who have, and are still, experiencing this violence. We pay our respects to those who did not survive, and to their loved ones.



Respect Victoria is the state's dedicated organisation for the prevention of family violence and violence against women. Our vision is a Victorian community where all people are safe, equal and respected, and live free from family violence and violence against women.

To achieve our vision, we lead and support evidence-informed primary prevention and act as a catalyst for transformational social change. Primary prevention aims to stop violence from occurring in the first place, by changing the culture that drives it. We drive coordination and effectiveness of the prevention system. We build and promote primary prevention knowledge and evidence. We keep prevention on the public and policy agenda. We guide prevention wherever Victorians live, work, learn and play. We raise awareness that violence against women is preventable and influence community conversations to fuel social change.

We are an independent voice, with functions, powers and duties enshrined in legislation.