How Technology is Being Used to Perpetrate Violence Against Women – *And to Fight it*

The Facts

- **The World Health Organisation states that women are disproportionately the victims of violence worldwide[1].**

- **The UN estimates that 95% of aggressive behaviour, harassment, abusive language and denigrating images in online spaces are aimed at women and come from partners or former male partners[2].**

- **Both men and women are affected by cyberstalking, but a survey in India found that victims aged between 18-32 were predominantly female[3].**

- **Research in Argentina shows that a woman's mobile phone is one of the first items to be destroyed by a violent partner[4].**

- **Information and communications technologies (ICTs) like the internet and mobile phones are a double-edged sword – they can be used by abusers to deepen their control *and* by survivors of violence to connect to help and by women's rights defenders to inform, denounce and strategise to end violence.**

This briefing relies on new research into how new technologies are being used by abusers and by women fighting back. The cases were uncovered in research commissioned by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) in 12 developing countries in 2009, unless an additional website reference is included.

1   World Report on Violence and Health, World Health Organisation
    whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2002/9241545615_eng.pdf
2   United Nations. daccessods.un.org/TMP/7121883.html
3   Xu, Weiting. www.genderit.org/es/node/2212
4   Peralta, Christina. www.genderit.org/content/argentina-violence-against-women-and-information-communication-technologies

How is technology changing abuse by intimate partners?

This is an abuse of power in a personal or family relationship, where one person attempts to control and dominate the other through physical, psychological and/or sexual violence or the threat of violence, or by controlling of the other person's finances, mobility or social life. APC's research discovered that abusive intimate partners are using technology in the following ways:

- *Mobile text message (SMS) monitoring*
  In just two weeks in Uganda in December 2008, there were two reports of men murdering their wives. The men accused their spouses of receiving "love SMSs". One man beat his wife to death, the other, a Member of Parliament, shot his wife. The phenomenon is such that musicians have composed a song in the Luganda language which tells the story of a domestic dispute triggered by the use of mobile phone.

- *Intimate photos and video blackmail*
  Organisations which work with violence survivors of in Malaysia report that there has been an increase in calls from women – especially younger women – who are trapped in violent relationships because their husband or partner has intimate video clips or photographs of them.

- *Lack of consent and mobile phone tracking*
  Mobile service providers in a number of countries offer the option of tracking another mobile phone. In Malaysia advertising is directed at parents. It is unclear whether the permission of the party being tracked is required and implicit in the advertisement that it is not. There is no law to protect an individual's privacy in Malaysia and the lack of legislation has created a situation where personal privacy protection is non-existent.

- *Email account control*
  Congolese researchers commented that it is common to find women and girls using an email account set up for them by a male who then keeps the password details. They state that the reverse is rarely occurs.

How is technology changing sexual harassment?

Online harassment or cyberstalking is the use of technology to follow and harass someone – often to the extent that the person fears for their safety. Cyberstalking includes (repeatedly) sending threats or false accusations via email or mobile phone, making threatening or false posts on websites, stealing a person's identity or data or spying and monitoring a person's computer and internet use. Sometimes the threats can escalate into physical spaces.

- *Persistent mobile calls from strangers*
  In a survey carried out for APC in Pakistan in 2009 approximately 94% of women respondents had received harassing calls and messages from men they did not know.
  Repeat calls from strangers were so common that most women had even stopped being bothered by them. One in 10 women received threats from strangers and in one case the woman received death threats and decided to leave Pakistan.

- *Manipulating photographic images*
  In India, Delhi police note that of all cybercrime cases reported almost half are filed by women who discover their faces morphed onto pornographic images and posted online, usually accompanied by a personal phone number and an invitation for strangers to call (Weiting).

- *Fraudulent postings and advertisements*
  False postings to popular websites have led to violent attacks and harassment of women in the USA. A woman was raped by a stranger who said he was answering her Craigslist ad[5]. The woman's ex-boyfriend had pretended to be her in the ad saying she was looking for a man to fulfil her violent rape fantasy. The ex-boyfriend and the man who answered the ad were charged.

How is technology changing sex trafficking?

The United Nations' Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2000) recognises that women are often in an unequal power situation and make decisions because of their lack of choices or the authority of the person or persons with whom they are dealing. In 2005, an APC paper speculated about the ways traffickers were likely to use technology to traffic women and girls[6] - and their images. The new research supports those earlier claims.

- *Traffickers are using the internet to communicate with and recruit victims*
  Fake online "marriage agencies" are common in Colombia. As are web pages that advertise non-existent work or study opportunities and include the photos and profiles of young people, many of whom end up in forced marriages, said researchers.

  In Mexico the Federal Police report that more than 600 children were recruited over the internet by child-trafficking criminal gangs in 2009. Mexican lawyer Teresa Ulloa reported that her anti-trafficking organisation received its first internet-related abduction case in 2005.

- *Commercialising private home videos*
  In Cambodia sex video clips on CDs can be easily bought from the side of the road and in public places. These 40-minute CDs cost less than a dollar and feature videos of young women and men shot by phone for their personal use. The clips have been obtained and sold by image traffickers without the knowledge of the people filmed. In August 2007, the Cambodian press reported on a case of a sex video clip with a boy and a girl who were high school students. The clip was not only transferred from one person to another by CD but also phone to phone via Bluetooth. With the girl's face visible and eventually recognised in her home province, the girl dropped out of school because she felt so ashamed and her family was forced to move.

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5   www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5gjkSsx7K3ot-ehcTMQi5nfMPvelQD9F886SG0

6   Digital Dangers: Information & Communication Technologies and Trafficking in Women, Kathleen Maltzahn
    www.genderit.org/en/index.shtml?apc=r90501-e91637-1

What makes ICTs so handy for abusers?

ICTs have a number of characteristics that make them ideal for perpetuating crime:

➢ **Action from a distance** Identification of and ability to take action against the harasser becomes much more difficult.
➢ **Ease of production and propagation** Anyone with a cellphone can now take and upload images and videos nowadays and the images can be replicated thousands of times at no cost.
➢ **Automation** Some technologies specialise in documenting and informing exactly where someone is via the technologies they use.

In most cases, people do not know what to do to protect themselves against such violations. Telecommunications companies, internet service providers and software developers need to protect users' privacy, security and safety. And governments need to ensure laws and policies respond to these new forms of violence against women.

How women are "taking back the tech" to end violence

Women's rights activists use the internet, mobile phones and other technologies to strengthen their campaigns and advocacy, expand their networks, prevent violations and support healing of survivors. Particularly social networking tools and mobile phones are making it possible for women's rights groups to reach constituencies that they didn't before.

As well as traditional telephone hot-lines and assistance, research has uncovered other strategies used by women and assistance groups.

Using ICTs for prevention

Two SIM cards, double the safety
A study in Uganda found that some women have acquired two SIM cards to avoid domestic violence. One card is used at home or when with the controlling husband. A second number is shared with those who would cause suspicion if they were to call when the husband is present. This line is activated at the office or in the absence of the husband.

Keep your chats exactly that![7]
Researchers found that it is common for South African high school girls from all backgrounds to spend anything up to six hours a day on their mobile phones texting. This campaign helps young girls educate themselves about phone chats and messages in order to prevent them from becoming victims of violence or harassment when using the internet and cell phones. It provides practical tips to 6th and 7th graders and runs workshops with children, teachers and parents.

In the Republic of Congo, radio and television programmes on women's rights ask viewers to share their stories and concerns by sending in a mobile text message.

Using ICTs for recognition

Raising visibility of violence on YouTube
In Pakistan in March 2009 a video was published on YouTube of a woman being flogged in the tribal area of Swat for being in public with a man who was not her immediate relative. In the video, the heavily-covered woman is held down by two men while a third flogs her as she begs for them to stop. This video was first made public by a women's rights activist and was subsequently aired on local television, running in a loop on an Urdu cable channel. The incident generated national and international coverage, with Pakistani talk shows and commentary discussing the growing "Talibanisation" in Pakistani society, the place of religious law and to a certain extent its effect on the rights of women.

Participatory video production brings rarely-heard voices and images into the civic arena
Teenagers in rural South Africa have learned how to use computers to make "digital stories"[8] and talk about issues in their communities and the roles and rights of men and women. One girl Tokozile profiled the story of a close friend whose boyfriend had raped her. Her friend who gave Tokozile permission to use her story had never reported the incident. The digital story technique gives

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7   www.womensnet.org.za/campaign/keep-your-chats-exactly
8   www.genderjustice.org.za/projects/digital-stories

people a chance to talk about abuse or abusive attitudes to help someone who has been through the same thing. Following the making of the story, Tokozile's friend has become a peer educator raising awareness amongst teenagers around rape.

Mobilising national advocacy
A number of women's organisations in Uganda have also used the internet in combination with television, radio, newspapers and other print media to highlight rape, victimisation and harassment carried out by the security agencies. In a country where the parliament recently considered capital punishment for gays, the internet is used by sexual minorities to disseminate information about their work and mission, as well as court victories and rulings.

In Brazil Bem Querer Mulher[9] (Beloved Woman) is an anti-violence campaign from UNIFEM. Beloved Woman is raising funds to provide services and is supported by a number of famous people including a popular soap opera star whose character is abused by her intimate partner. The site includes VAW statistics and helpline information as well as videos and campaign spots. Online Brazilian campaigns are using Twitter extensively to spread their message.

Using ICTs for redress

Mobilising global networks and bodies
Margaret was repeatedly battered by her husband and he eventually killed her mother and sister. The case was never taken to court because of rampant corruption. Isis-WICCE came to learn about the case through their rural women information units where the use of tape recorders enables this women's rights group to document rural women's concerns. Isis-WICCE used the recorded information to contact the relevant government bodies but in vain.

So they then put out the information online and shared it with global online human rights networks, which put pressure on Uganda. The World Organisation Against Torture based in Geneva also took up Margaret's case as a Uganda case that required a government response. It was only then that this case was given the urgency it required and justice was eventually done.

Find out more...

About the Take Back the Tech! To end violence against women initiative
www.apc.org/en/projects/mdg3-take-back-tech-end-violence-against-women
This initiative began in January 2009 and brings significant resources to 12 developing countries for documenting violations of women's rights online, capacity building for activists and survivors in the creative and safe use of ICTs, and advocating for policies to strengthen protection of rights online. This project is part of a global effort to achieve Goal 3 –achieving gender equality– of the Millennium Development Goals.

APC research in 12 countries on violence against women and technology
www.apc.org/en/node/10360/
Countries researched include:
- Argentina, Brazil, Cambodia, Colombia, Congo Rep of, Congo Democratic Republic of, Malaysia, Mexico, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Africa and Uganda.

About the APC and APC women's programme
Founded in 1990, Association for Progressive Communications (APC) is an international network and non-profit organisation that wants everyone to have access to a free and open internet to improve our lives and create a more just world. The APC WNSP is a global network of women who support women networking for women's empowerment through the use of ICTs and is a programme of APC.
Visit *www.apc.org* and *www.apcwomen.org*.
Follow us on Twitter using #takebackthetech.

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9   www.bemquerermulher.com.br/