



For women and children.
Against domestic violence.

October 2021

~~Un~~social Spaces

make online spaces safer for women and girls

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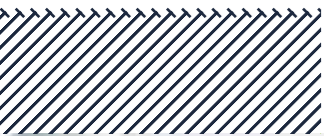
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Foreword

Ruth Davison, CEO Refuge

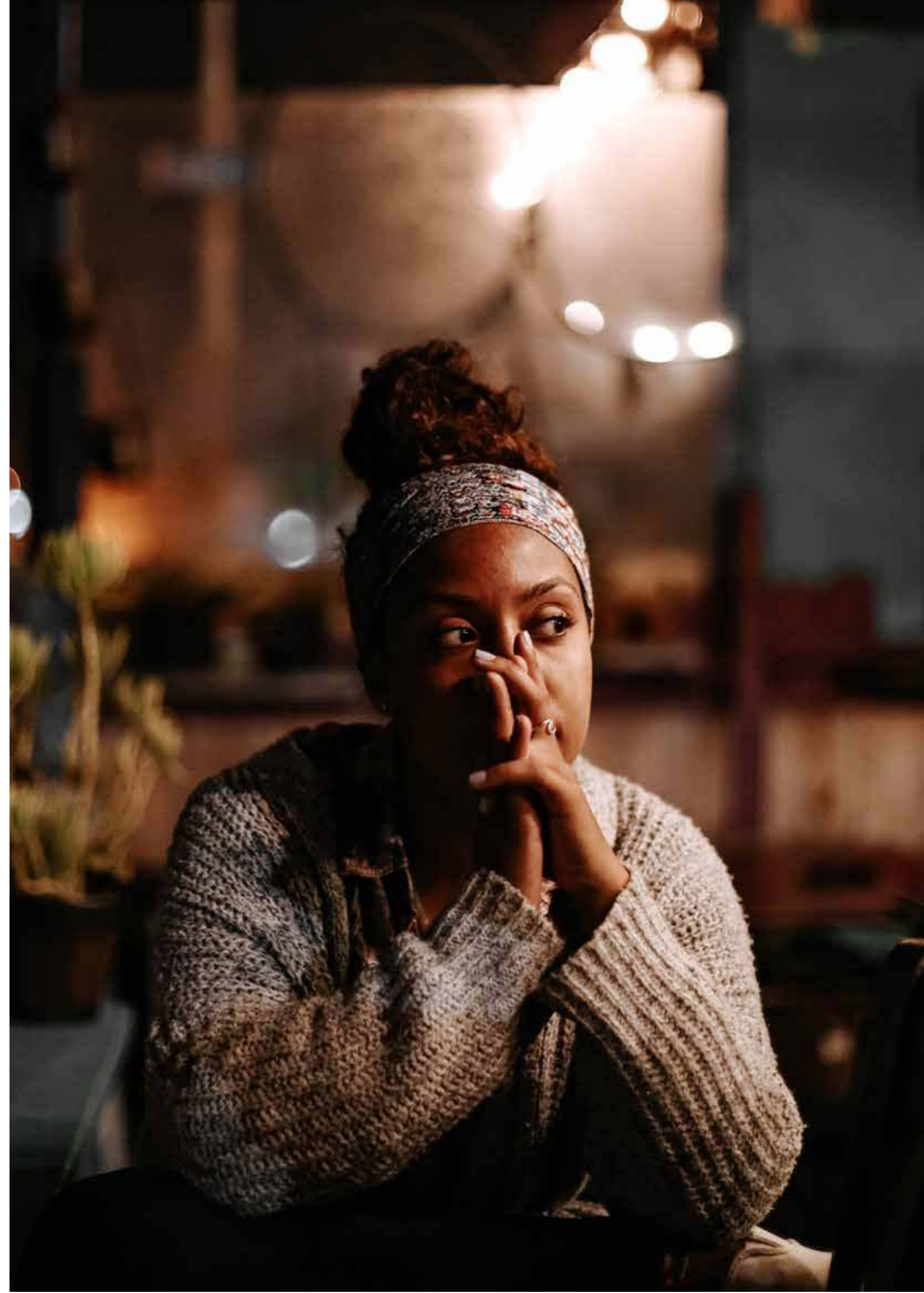
Domestic abuse is getting 'smarter'. When Refuge first started work 50 years ago, domestic abuse was widely thought of as black eyes and broken bones. The reality for women now is that domestic abuse can take many different, insidious forms. One of those is tech abuse - where perpetrators use technology to harass, stalk, intimidate and control women.

Refuge has a specialist tech team - the only such team in the country that works across frontline services. Tech abuse is a widespread problem - and the solution to this form of abuse cannot be to force women offline - it must be to make online spaces safer. With so much of our lives being lived online, it is absolutely vital that the government and technology companies provide the protection that women need and deserve. At the moment, much of the work keeping women safe in online spaces is happening across our frontline services. Policies and practices must catch up.

Every day Refuge speaks to women who have faced tech abuse - many of them have experienced that abuse on social media. We use social media to stay in contact with friends and families - much more so during the pandemic - but what happens when this space becomes a tool of abuse? Are social media companies equipped to protect women? Does the

law hold them to account? Do they understand what tech abuse is and how they can ensure their platforms are safe for women?

The government tell us that they are absolutely committed to addressing violence against women and girls - and we see signs to indicate progress - but at Refuge we also know much more needs to be done. Legislation must reflect the realities that women face every day. The government has a real opportunity to take great strides to ensure women and girls are protected online through current and future legislation. This report sets out our findings and recommendations to ensure women and girls can access online spaces without fear and without facing abuse, and we will be campaigning to see these implemented swiftly. We hope the government will listen to, and hear, our calls for change. Women's lives depend on it, and we cannot wait.



Executive summary



1 in 3 UK women (36%) have experienced online abuse perpetrated on social media or other online platform at some point in their lives. This is over 11 million women across the UK. Of these women, 1 in 6 (16%) experienced this abuse from a partner or ex-partner, meaning almost 2 million women have been abused in this way.

Whilst the rise of social media has undoubtedly helped many of us stay connected with our loved ones and participate in public debate, the sad reality is that online abuse is a major part of online life, particularly for women. New research commissioned by Refuge, the national domestic abuse charity has, for the first time, revealed the scale of online abuse and harassment as a tool of domestic abuse. We found that 1 in 3 UK women (36%) have experienced online abuse perpetrated on social media or other online platform at some point in their lives. This is equivalent to over 11 million women across the UK. Of these women, 1 in 6 (16%) experienced this abuse from a partner or ex-partner, meaning almost 2 million women have been abused in this way.

Technology-facilitated domestic abuse, or tech abuse, is becoming increasingly prevalent, as technology provides perpetrators with further tools to control, coerce and abuse survivors – Refuge has seen the number of complex tech abuse cases almost double in the past year. Over a third of cases reported to Refuge’s specialist tech abuse team involve social media. Tech abuse can take many forms, and we have supported women who have experienced a broad range of abuse across social media and other online platforms which host user-generated content, including:

- Online harassment
- Stalking, monitoring and location-tracking
- Threats of physical and sexual violence
- Having accounts hacked or controlled
- Online impersonation
- Sharing of intimate images or videos without consent, or threats to share
- Having personal details shared online without consent, also known as “doxing”

In order to explore the prevalence and impact of this form of abuse, Refuge commissioned a representative survey amongst UK adults (n=2,264) and conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 survivors of domestic abuse. This research highlighted both the scale of violence and abuse women and girls encounter online, and its disproportionate effect on particular groups of women. For example, more than 1 in 3 women (36%) reported experiencing at least one behaviour suggestive of online abuse or harassment, a figure which rises to almost 2 in 3 (62%) among young women (aged 18 – 34).

Our research found that tech abuse has a significant impact on survivors’ mental health and can increase the risk to their physical safety. Yet survivors are not afforded the protections they need from social media companies or the criminal justice system. 38% of women who experienced abuse on social media from a partner or former partner said they felt unsafe or less confident online as a result. 95% said the abuse had an impact on their mental health, or impacted them in other life-debilitating ways, such as by affecting their income.

Women are being abused online for lengthy periods of time - on average, women are experiencing tech abuse from a partner or former partner for more than 6 months. Despite the ongoing experience of abuse, initial findings suggest that over half of those who sought support from the police or social media said their report was handled badly. Many said they did not receive a response at all from the social media company - almost a third of women (29%) reporting online abuse did not receive a response to their report.

Urgent action is needed to improve safeguards for survivors and hold perpetrators to account, ensuring women can fully participate in online life, and further abuse is prevented.



¹Between April 2020 and May 2021, Refuge saw on average a 97% increase in the number of complex tech abuse cases requiring specialist tech support when compared to the first three months of 2020.
²Analysis of issues reported to Refuge’s tech abuse team between January 2020 and March 2021.
³User-generated content refers to messages, photos, videos, music and other forms of communication which are created, uploaded or shared by a user/s via the internet

1 in 5 women experiencing domestic abuse reported this starting during the pandemic



The government has made national and international commitments to prioritise the safety of women and girls and to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online, so it is time that tech companies are held accountable for abuse perpetrated on their platforms. Refuge urges the government to use every opportunity at its disposal to safeguard survivors online.

Our research shows there is strong support among the public for increasing regulation and accountability of online platforms, with 45% of UK adults saying online platforms are unaccountable to their users.

The Covid-19 pandemic has meant that we are spending more time online than ever before. For many women, this also coincided with the start of their experience of tech abuse. 1 in 5 women (21%) experiencing online abuse from a partner or former partner reported this starting during the pandemic.

As the availability of increasingly sophisticated technologies grows, more perpetrators will turn to technology to abuse women. Our initial findings suggest that online abuse is more prevalent among younger women, meaning this form of abuse is likely to continue to grow in prevalence, unless proactive steps are taken to address it.

As a growing number of intimate relationships are built and conducted online, such as on dating apps, it is essential that we respond to this shift ensuring that women and girls have equal protection in both online and offline spaces, now and in future generations.



Deandra's story

My ex would post horrible things, threatening things like "Tell Deandra I'm coming for her." Sending me loads of private messages. He hacked into every single social media account I had and then changed my passwords. He would contact me through my professional and personal accounts with messages, hundreds of messages. If (my employer) posts anything on social media, he will comment on there.

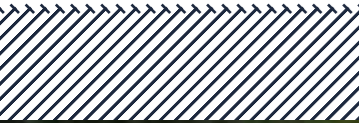
I reported to Facebook, and they just came back with "you can block this person's account." A lot of the time you go to report things and they (online platforms) don't really do much. I was frustrated that there wasn't any action.

I ended up deleting (many of) my accounts. I was in a really dark place, him constantly posting stuff - I had really bad anxiety. I'd have panic attacks and it was [a] constant worry of what he's going to post next. Is it going to impact my job? Am I ever going to be able to move forward? My new partner as well, is he going to stay with me? What's coming next? Unless for Refuge I wouldn't - I don't know - I was at the point where I wanted to end my life.

Deandra, survivor of domestic abuse*

*All survivor names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

⁴For example, see G7 Interior and Security Ministers' Ministerial Commitments 7-9 September 2021, Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls strategy and the Plan for Digital Regulation.



Online spaces are the “town square” of modern day life

They provide vital social connections and access to public debate, and we need to ensure they are safe for women and girls to access.

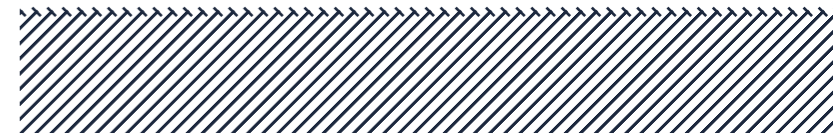
As it stands, women are being advised to block perpetrators, or simply remove themselves from online spaces far too often. The responsibility for preventing and responding to online abuse should not lie with women, but with the platforms and police, targeting perpetrator behaviour.

However, Refuge research shows that the response to online abuse is typically poor, placing the onus on survivors, if survivors receive responses at all.

Ultimately, robust statutory regulation of social media is needed to ensure companies sufficiently respond to tech abuse, underpinned by a strong criminal justice response.

Our action plan for change - recommendations

1. All online platforms should be legally obliged to prioritise the prevention and investigation of tech abuse occurring on their platforms
2. Statutory regulation of online platforms should explicitly reflect the harms and impact of tech abuse and other online violence against women and girls (VAWG)
3. Online platforms should be obliged to cooperate with the police and with other platforms to pursue perpetrators of tech abuse
4. Online platforms must consider how their products can be used to perpetrate tech abuse, and a responsibility placed on platforms to embed safety by design
5. Online platforms should be regulated by a robust, independent regulator and regularly report on tech abuse taking place on their platforms
6. Social media companies should invest in human moderation to support reporting and content moderation systems, and training and support which enables staff to respond effectively to tech abuse – domestic abuse is too nuanced and too dangerous to rely solely on artificial intelligence (AI) or algorithm responses
7. Government should fund specialist violence against women and girls services which provide support to victims of tech abuse and other forms of online VAWG
8. Training on tech abuse should be rolled out to the police, and the police must be allocated sufficient resources and technology to promptly investigate tech abuse
9. Government and social media companies should invest in raising awareness of tech abuse and social media companies should routinely develop and promote safety guidance for users



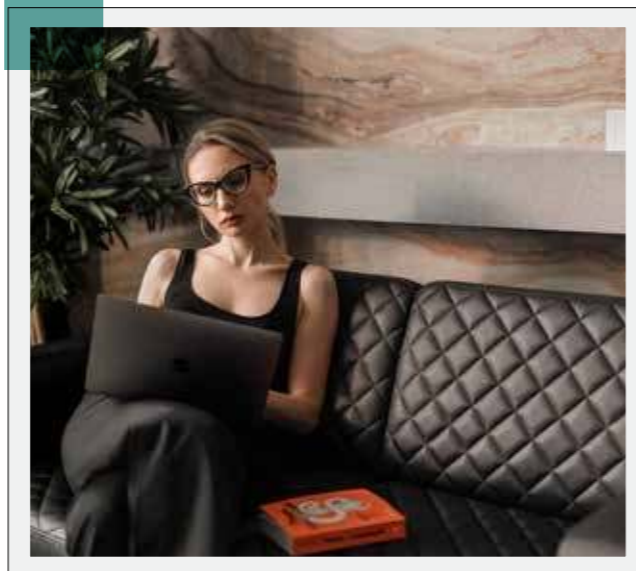
Refuge’s specialist tech abuse team was set up to ensure women did not have to stop using their technology after it had been misused by an abuser.



Refuge’s tech abuse service

In response to the growing threat of tech abuse, Refuge pioneered a specialist tech abuse service which launched in 2017.

Our expert team has been trained specifically to support survivors experiencing complex forms of tech abuse. The team support women with safety planning, empower them to use technology safely and ensure Refuge continues to adapt to the new ways in which abusers use technology. Refuge is therefore uniquely placed to offer insights regarding new and emerging forms of tech abuse, as well as make evidence-based, survivor-led recommendations for change.



As the only specialist support service for survivors of tech abuse in this country, our expert team performs vital work. A great amount of advocacy, in-depth knowledge and on-going training in relation to new and emerging forms of tech abuse is required to support survivors. This includes building relationships with social media platforms in order to fast-track high-risk cases. The tech abuse team provides critical support to survivors who have few other places to turn, to social media companies in identifying tech abuse, as well as the police, and is highly effective in improving outcomes for survivors.

Since 2017 and the creation of our tech abuse team, Refuge has supported thousands of women facing this form of abuse. More recently, we launched a Tech Safety Website (refugetechsafety.org). The website, which was co-developed with survivors, provides further resources for victim-survivors of tech abuse, including step-by-step guides on securing devices and online accounts. Since its launch, the website has been viewed over 38,000 times.

Demand for Refuge’s unique tech abuse service is high. Between April 2020 and May 2021, Refuge saw on average a 97% increase in the number of complex tech abuse cases requiring specialist tech support when compared to the first three months of 2020. Between October 2020 and February 2021, this number jumped to an average of 118% more complex tech abuse cases compared to before March 2020. Tech abuse is pervasive, pernicious and on the rise.

It is therefore more pressing than ever to ensure that survivors can access the specialist support they need, from specialist services who can deliver the high-quality support survivors need, backed by expert training.

With specialist support, women and children can and do overcome their experiences of abuse and go on to live fulfilling lives.

Despite this, Refuge and other specialist service providers are forced to rely on insecure, fundraised income to run such services, coming from philanthropic trusts, individual donations from the public, and challenge events such as the London Marathon.

For the financial year 2021/22, more than half (56.62%) of Refuge’s own income, and 89% of the tech abuse service, was generated from such sources. Relying on voluntary income is fundamentally unsustainable as service providers are ultimately dependent on the good will of donors. Instead, in order to meet growing demand, and support every woman and child in need, the government must fully fund specialist services which provide support to victim-survivors of tech abuse.

Refuge’s specialist tech abuse team was set up to ensure women didn’t have to stop using their technology after it has been misused by an abuser. Across Refuge’s services, we were noticing increasing incidents of social media accounts and other tech being used to harass, humiliate and stalk women. Often the only advice given by other agencies was “just delete your social media account.” We don’t think that’s fair and it’s simply not a viable solution for women.

Refuge’s expert tech abuse team supports women to comb through their account and device settings, supporting them to check whether their abuser has access to any of their private information. The variety of accounts and devices that people use these days means this can be a lengthy process, made more complex by the ways many accounts and devices are linked and how much personal information is stored on them.

We work closely with women to empower them to use social media platforms safely and we do often run into challenges when harmful content has been shared by abusers online. While we work quickly to inform tech partners about content that needs to be removed, the responses are inconsistent and some women wait months for an acknowledgement, only to find out that the platform has closed their case as the offence does not go against their community standards.

The complexity of the cases we see day to day is growing and it’s crucial that we have the resources to support the increasing numbers of women who access our service. – Emma Pickering, Refuge Tech Abuse Team manager



1 in 6 women

1 in 6 women (16%) said that the online abuse they suffered came from an intimate partner or former partner.

Tech abuse on social media in the UK



As the country's largest provider of specialist domestic abuse services, and having pioneered a growing programme of tech abuse support, Refuge is in a unique position to investigate this form of abuse and make recommendations for change. Our frontline staff support women facing abuse on social media every day. In fact, abuse perpetrated on social media platforms features in 35% of issues reported to the tech abuse team. The experience of our tech abuse team coupled with hearing directly from survivors about their experiences provides us with a unique insight into the barriers they face in securing protection and justice.

To explore this issue further amongst the general public, we commissioned a nationally representative survey in August 2021, which was completed by 2,264 UK adults, of which 1,158 were female. In this survey, we asked respondents about online abuse they experienced to better understand the prevalence, nature, and

impact of abuse occurring on online platforms. We also asked about experiences of reporting abuse to social media and the police and respondents' views on actions that could be taken to increase protection for survivors and hold perpetrators to account.

To complement the findings of the survey, we conducted semi-structured interviews with survivors of domestic abuse to gain a more in-depth understanding of their experiences of tech abuse. In June 2021, we spoke with 18 survivors, whose views and experiences have been reflected throughout this report. Refuge is grateful to these survivors for sharing their stories with us as well as all survivors who shared their experiences with us via the survey. All names have been changed to protect survivors' anonymity.

Prevalence

Around 11 million women have suffered from abuse and harassment on social media - more than 1 in 3 women (36%) reported experiencing at least one behaviour suggestive of online abuse or harassment. Online abuse is twice as common among young women, with 62% experiencing online abuse.

1 in 6 women (16%) said that the online abuse they suffered came from an intimate partner or former partner. This is equivalent to almost 2 million women. Again, this figure rises among young women - 1 in 5 (22%) reported online abuse from a partner or former partner. The increased prevalence of tech abuse among younger generations indicates this issue will only continue to grow if unchecked, as more perpetrators utilise social media as a tool for abuse.

⁶Analysis of issues reported to Refuge's tech abuse team between January 2020 and March 2021

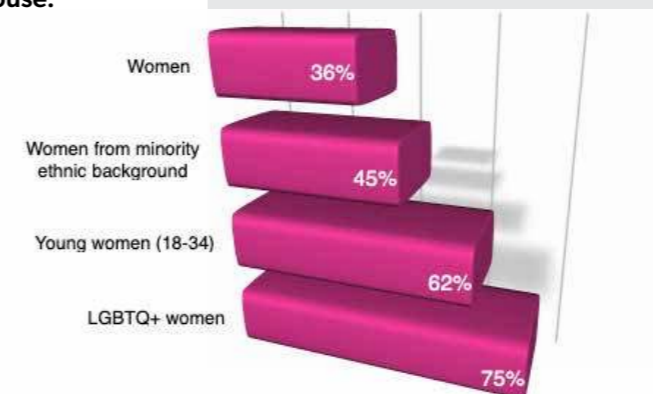
Despite how widespread technology-facilitated domestic abuse is, public awareness is low. Of the 18 survivors interviewed, 13 had not heard of tech abuse until receiving support from Refuge.

Additionally, while more than 1 in 3 (36%) women, when asked if they had experienced specific forms of online abuse, such as receiving abusive messages or being stalked or monitored online, selected at least one of these behaviours, only 1 in 5 (21%) self-identified as experiencing abuse on an online platform. This indicates a gulf between those who are experiencing tech abuse, and those who are able to identify and name the abuse.



This demonstrates the desperate need to raise awareness of tech abuse and give survivors and the public the language they need in order to identify, name, and respond to tech abuse. It is vital that the government and technology companies use their resource and reach to ensure their users and the general public is aware of tech abuse and should invest in awareness raising campaigns to this end.

Prevalence of online abuse:



Some groups of women are even more disproportionately affected by online abuse. LGBTQ+ women were much more likely to have experienced abuse than women who do not identify as LGBTQ+. 75% of LGBTQ+ female survey respondents said they had experienced online abuse, compared to 33% of non-LBQTQ+ women. Young women and women from an ethnic minority background were also more likely to be affected, with 62% and 45% of respondents respectively indicating they had been victim to online abuse.

Impact of tech abuse

95%

of the women responding to the survey said that the abuse from their partner or former partner on social media impacted them negatively.

Our research reveals the devastating effect of tech abuse on women's mental health, physical safety and their access to online spaces and therefore open public debate.

Many survivors said the abuse had an impact on their mental health, including generating feelings of fear, anxiety, shame and isolation. More than 1 in 3 women felt anxious and stressed (37% and 36%), and 1 in 5 felt ashamed and isolated (21% and 19%). Shockingly, although not surprisingly, 1 in 10 survivors (10%) felt suicidal as a result of the abuse. Survivors interviewed by Refuge said that post-separation abuse served as a painful reminder of the abuse perpetrated against them during the relationship, and that it also impacted on other relationships, such as with new partners.

"I was so devastated. I don't even do any purchases online anymore. I used to use Amazon sometimes; I don't even do that anymore. I don't give out bank details. I'm quite cautious now. I don't bother with the dating stuff now, I've just deleted it. I don't want to do any of that."

Willow, survivor of domestic abuse.

I think it was as soon as we got married, he was getting in my Facebook, and I thought it was a joke but then I realised, that he was checking - tracking me. I used to be a very positive, outgoing person, now I feel like a person who wants to be very invisible. I don't want to share anything. It really makes me emotional too. I would say [it's] trauma. On top of that they (the perpetrator) can get away with that - it's incredible.

– Cece, survivor of domestic abuse.

My business is all online. He started posting stuff about me that wasn't even true on (my employer's) public page. And that really upset me, I had to call my [employer] and tell them the story.

Survivors also detailed how the tech abuse had impacted their jobs and businesses. Refuge has supported women whose business social media accounts have been targeted, demonstrating again the pervasive and far-reaching impacts of tech abuse.

It stops your life, you know you want to be free; you want to be reassured that everything is safe. But small things trigger you to feel like you're not safe at all. With every[one] that you talk [to], you always ask where [are] my details going? Are my details going to be public, do you need to put my name on or my kids name? Even [the] school is not allowed to put on their website the full name of my kid.

Joana, survivor of domestic abuse.

Tech abuse is closely linked to women's physical safety. Almost 1 in 5 women (17%) said they felt afraid of being attacked or being subjected to physical violence because of the tech abuse. 15% felt their physical safety was more at risk, and 5% felt more at risk of so-called "honour"-based violence. In addition, 12% of survivors felt afraid to leave the house because of the abuse.

The fear of physical abuse is well-founded. Abusers often seek to use technology to determine a survivor's location, for example via location settings on her devices and accounts. 1 in 5 survivors (19%) supported by Refuge's tech abuse team said their location had been compromised because of the tech abuse⁷. In our experience, if survivors block the perpetrator or otherwise prevent them from getting in touch via technology, it is common for the abuse to escalate, such as the perpetrator showing up to survivors' properties in person.

The survey and interviews with survivors of domestic abuse also demonstrated how tech abuse has an impact on women's decisions and actions, and on their livelihoods. As a result of the tech abuse, many women are reducing their online presence, or coming offline entirely. 38% of survivors said they felt unsafe or less confident online as a result of the abuse on social media. 30% of survivors supported by our tech abuse team said the abuse left them unable to use their devices⁸. This increases their isolation by limiting their access to social networks, as well as impeding their freedom of expression by limiting their ability to participate in online debate, and reducing their ability to perform everyday tasks such as online shopping and banking.

Perpetrators of abuse

A significant number of women reported abuse or harassment online from a partner or former partner – 1 in 6 (16%) of all those who experienced some form of online abuse reported this to be the case. Of these women, the majority (65%) said that the perpetrator was male. Women were also more likely to experience abuse on social media from a partner or former partner than men. 16% of women reported the perpetrator was a current or former intimate partner compared to 10% of men.

In addition, 5% of women suspected the abuser was their partner or former partner, but were unable to say for certain. The reasons for why this is the case vary, but include the use of fake social media accounts, a common tactic used by perpetrators. Refuge’s tech abuse team frequently supports survivors who have experienced abuse and harassment from fake accounts. In some cases, survivors have been contacted by dozens or hundreds of fake accounts, all of which they suspect to be the perpetrator.

Fake accounts can be set up with relative ease and survivors, even when supported by Refuge’s tech abuse team, face significant barriers when trying to persuade online platforms to take action. In our experience, social media companies typically fail to acknowledge the presence of fake accounts on their sites or to investigate suspected fake accounts, such as when survivors

believe an account is run by the perpetrator, but is not in the perpetrator’s name.

Despite fake accounts frequently being used as a tool to perpetrate tech abuse, in Refuge’s experience, platforms almost never remove suspected false accounts, leaving survivors with few options. It is therefore critical that platforms are required to take action to tackle the proliferation of fake accounts in the context of tech abuse.

Perpetrators are increasingly using social media as a dangerous tool of coercive control during relationships with survivors, and post-separation. 66% of women who experienced tech abuse from an intimate partner said they were an ex-partner at the time of the abuse, and 18% said the perpetrator was a partner at the time of the abuse.

Similarly, of the 18 survivors we interviewed, 7 said that the perpetrator was their ex-partner at the time of the abuse. The research also found that tech abuse often lasts for an extended period of time, particularly for women experiencing tech abuse from their ex-partner. 1 in 4 women (24%) reporting abuse from a former partner said they experienced tech abuse on many occasions. This highlights the opportunity social media presents to perpetrators to continue to coerce and control survivors at distance when little is being done to challenge this behaviour.

When I was pregnant I was getting threats about my child. A lot of (the messages) were fake accounts – so it was over 40 accounts.



Orisa, survivor of domestic abuse

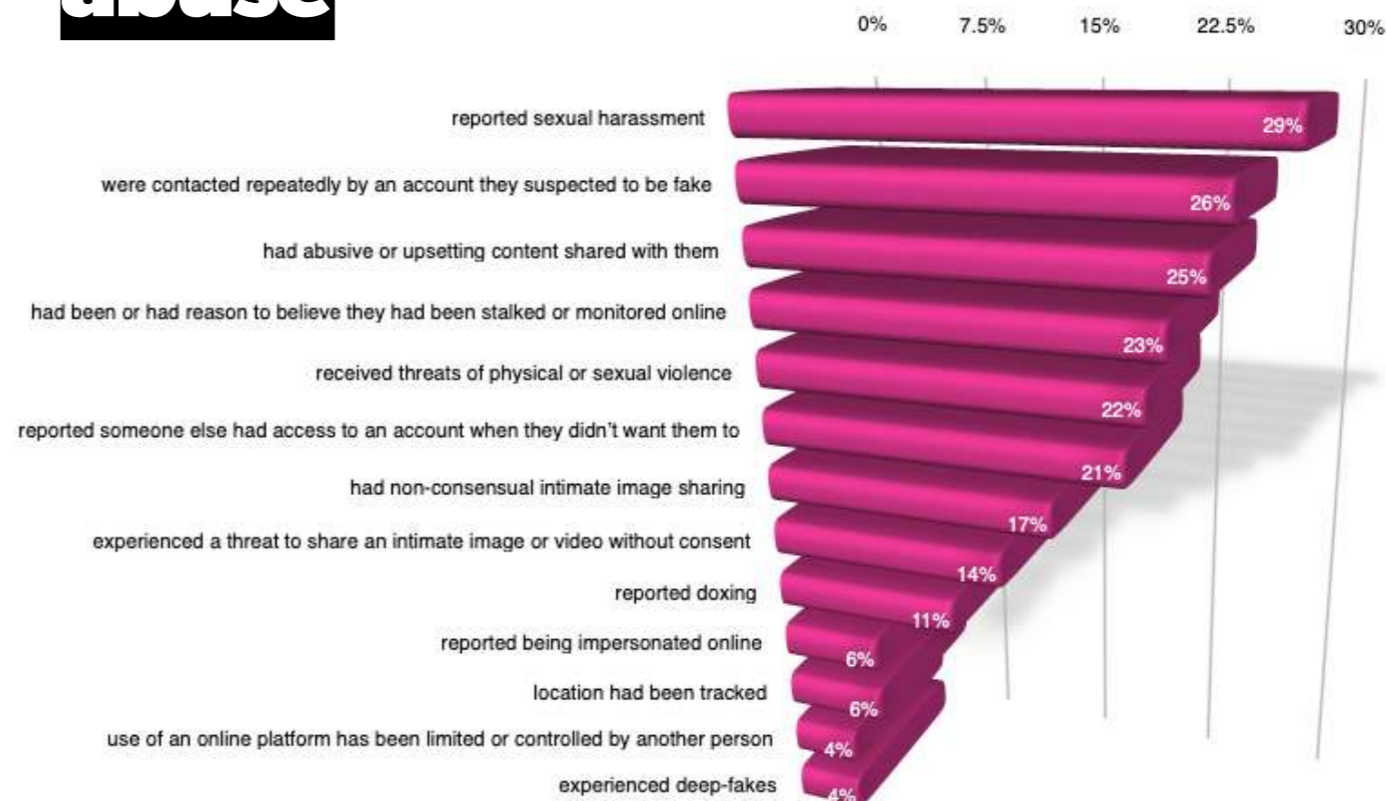
Our research has also revealed the extent to which perpetrators of tech abuse encourage other people to act on their behalf, or in support of them in perpetrating tech abuse.

For over half of women (51%) who were abused on social media by their partners or former partners, a third party was also involved in the perpetration of abuse. 19% said that the family of their partner / ex-partner was involved in the abuse, and 8% said their partner’s friends were involved.

This suggests online platforms provide perpetrators with tools to ‘crowdsource’ the abuse. ‘Pile-ons’ and other forms of group harassment can cause significant fear and distress for the survivor, yet are very poorly understood, particularly when occurring in the context of domestic abuse. Despite this, inciting or encouraging online group harassment is not currently a specific criminal offence - a gap in the law which must be closed.

Types of tech abuse

Survey respondents who experienced tech abuse from a current or former partner reported the following forms of abuse:



Tech abuse can take many different forms, and survivors often experience a combination of types of abuse over time. Among the survivors Refuge interviewed, common forms of abuse on social media disclosed were online harassment (for example, being bombarded by abusive messages), monitoring and stalking, and hacking and controlling accounts. Survivors also received threats and experienced intimate image abuse and online impersonation, whereby perpetrators used fake accounts to contact the victim or pretended to be them. In addition, attempts by perpetrators to determine survivors’ location via social media were frequently reported.

The survey also highlights the gendered nature of online abuse. Women are seven times as likely to experience sexual harassment on social media, and more than twice as likely to encounter sexist or misogynistic comments online, compared to men.

Laurel, a survivor of domestic abuse supported by Refuge, described the tech abuse she experienced as the main form of abuse her partner used as a tool to gaslight her. She spoke of the tech abuse occurring throughout the relationship. Her partner had access to her social media accounts, impersonated her online, blocked other users from her account and coerced her into posting positive messages about him online. He also intercepted and deleted messages to make her question her memory, suggesting she seek medical help for her mental health. Laurel was also physically abused by her partner, but spoke about the tech abuse and gaslighting as being the worst part of her experience.

Which platforms did the abuse take place on?

All major social media platforms in the UK are being used to perpetrate domestic abuse. Nearly all women (99%) responding to the survey who experienced tech abuse from a partner or former partner said that this took place on a Facebook-owned platform (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp).

Whilst the survey suggests that a large amount of tech abuse occurs on larger online platforms, Refuge has supported women who have been subject to abuse on much smaller platforms with a relatively small user base. Perpetrators do not discriminate by size of the platform, and will use any means to contact and harass survivors, including contacting the survivor on all her social media platforms.

The survey findings showed that Facebook is the most common site used to perpetrate abuse, with almost half of women (45%) saying this is where the abuse from their partner or former partner occurred. 14 out of 18 of the survivors Refuge interviewed also stated that they had faced abuse on Facebook. Indeed, an analysis of all Refuge cases involving social media revealed "Facebook" to be the most commonly used term.⁹

Additionally, 32% of female survivors reported abuse taking place on Instagram and 21% said it occurred on WhatsApp. 1 in 5 (20%) said their partner or former partner abused them on Snapchat, 13% said TikTok and 8% Twitter. 12% of women had experienced abuse on a dating website or app.

It is therefore essential that all online platforms, regardless of size, should be legally required to prioritise preventing and addressing tech abuse.

I was on two dating apps. I got stalked by him (former partner) and his friend. I knew it was his friend, because on his Facebook he's got a picture of that friend. ”

Tami, survivor of domestic abuse.

It is important to note that survivors may have experienced abuse on more than one platform. Perpetrators will often move from one site to another, for example if the survivor blocks the perpetrator on one platform. This cross-platform abuse compounds stress and fear for the survivor, as they feel unable to escape the harassment. There are also few consequences for the abuser – platforms will rarely ban the perpetrator from using their site by preventing them from setting up multiple accounts, and even if platforms do take

robust action individually, which is rare, they do not take joint or coordinated actions against perpetrators, meaning they are often able to continue the abuse on another platform. Better collaboration between social media companies and increased sanctions for abusers would help ensure perpetrators are more easily identified and joint action taken to prevent further abuse. This would help protect survivors by stopping abuse at an earlier stage and communicate to perpetrators that a zero-tolerance approach will be taken to tech abuse.

The children have got [a] PlayStation and he was paying for it. So every time the children turn the PlayStation on, his name pops up on the screen. The children wanted to delete him. I think (the tech abuse) is still ongoing because he's paying for the PlayStation. ”

Tanice, a survivor of domestic abuse, describes her suspicions that her former partner has attempted to contact her children by creating accounts and inviting them to play on a gaming platform.

Refuge's tech abuse team works to build relationships with all social media companies to help improve and speed up reporting of tech abuse. However, the team has found that engagement with many major platforms is generally poor. For example, Facebook state that their response to reports will be slower than normal due to the Covid-19 pandemic. On average, it currently takes around 4 to 6 weeks for a report to be acknowledged on the platform. Prior to the pandemic however, reporting responses were poor and frequently slow. Most reports of online abuse and harassment and fake accounts were sent back to the team as they were deemed not to meet Facebook's reporting criteria.

Social media as a tool of domestic abuse

The vast majority of women (94%) experience other forms of domestic abuse alongside the abuse they receive on social media. This proves how frequently technology is weaponised by perpetrators of domestic abuse, and that tech abuse rarely occurs in isolation, but as part of a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour.

60% of those who experienced abuse on social media also reported emotional abuse, and 21% experienced coercive control, highlighting the fear and control abusers seek to impose across all aspects of a victim's life. Almost a third (32%) of survivors said they experienced sexual abuse, and 23% reported physical abuse. Women were almost three times as likely to experience sexual abuse from the person who abused them online compared to men.

It should be acknowledged that social media is just one tool which facilitates tech abuse. Our frontline staff support women who have been abused via a broad range of increasingly inexpensive devices and platforms. For example, 14% of survivors in the survey had experienced non-consensual sharing of intimate images or videos, and 13% faced threats to share these images and videos. These images may have been shared, or threats made to share them, either on social media or directly with a survivor's friends, family, new partner, or employer. Following a Refuge campaign, threats to share intimate images with the intent to cause distress was made a crime in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

14% of survivors indicated they had also experienced economic abuse alongside the online abuse. Economic abuse involves an abuser restricting a survivor's ability

to acquire, use or maintain money or other economic resources. Tech abuse and economic abuse are closely linked, in part due to the growing shift to online platforms in the financial world. For example, perpetrators have restricted survivors' access to online banking accounts or impacted a woman's online business by leaving malicious negative reviews on her business' social media accounts.

In addition, abusers are involving survivors' family and friends, in an effort to extend their control and abuse. Half of women surveyed (50%) said that their family or friends had been targeted as part of the online abuse, including 12% who sadly reported their children had been targeted by their partner or former partner. Following the passage of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, children are now legally recognised as victims of domestic abuse in their own right, due to the damaging impact of living with and experiencing this abuse.¹⁰

In Refuge's experience, children's safety is intrinsically linked to the safety of the non-abusive parent, usually the mother, who is often a significant protective factor for the children. For example, it is common for abusers to attempt to contact children after they and the non-abusive parent have fled the perpetrator, for example through social media or the children's gaming consoles. Perpetrators may try to use this contact to find out where the survivors have fled to, thereby threatening the physical safety of both the mother and child. This again illustrates how social media can be a powerful weapon for perpetrators of domestic abuse, particularly post-separation when they lack physical proximity.

When did the abuse start?

The majority of survivors experience tech abuse towards the end of, or after, their relationship with the perpetrator. 27% of women said that the abuse on social media started towards the end of the relationship and 35% said it started after the relationship had ended.

The Covid-19 pandemic may have exacerbated and, in some instances, triggered tech abuse. 1 in 5 women (21%) experiencing online abuse from a partner or former partner reported this starting during the ongoing pandemic¹¹.

The survey and discussions with survivors showed that women are enduring tech abuse for extended periods of time. On average, survivor respondents to the survey experienced tech abuse for at least six months. Of the 18 survivors interviewed by Refuge, six said that the abuse was ongoing. A number of survivors were also unsure if the abuse was still ongoing because they had come offline as a result of the tech abuse. This is likely to cause further stress and harm, as survivors did not know if the perpetrators were continuing to post abusive messages and posts about them without their knowledge.

Tech abuse also frequently escalates over time, putting the survivor at greater risk of harm. Almost half of the female survivors responding to the

survey (48%) said that the abuse they experienced on social media got worse over time. 19% indicated it got worse because the perpetrator started targeting their family or friends. 15% said the abuse worsened when they reported the perpetrator or took an action to mitigate the abuse, such as blocking the perpetrator online. 14% reported an escalation during the Covid-19 pandemic, and 14% reported the abuse intensified because the perpetrator moved to a different online platform/s.

These stark figures highlight the need for speedy actions being taken against perpetrators of tech abuse in order to prevent escalation and hold perpetrators to account. Increased sanctions against abusers will help prevent an escalation of abuse. Responses to tech abuse must be informed and driven by specialist insight from the violence against women and girls sector to ensure they do not inadvertently increase the risk of harm to the survivor.

1 in 5 women (21%) experiencing online abuse from a partner or former partner reported this starting during the pandemic. ¹¹

He'd send me voicemails - you can do that on Instagram. He made other accounts where he threatened to kill me and then he messaged my family on (social media). When I fell pregnant, that's when all his history come up. It still continued after the relationship ended, he's still trying to get in contact with me.

Scarlett, survivor of domestic abuse.

Many women reported the tech abuse escalated over time, including in the following ways:



¹¹ Since March 2020



The response to tech abuse on social media

We asked women what happened after they experienced abuse on social media. Many did not feel empowered to report to the police or to social media companies, and when they did the response they received was poor.

Half of survivors (49%) said they told no one about the abuse and only a small proportion of women (13%) reported the abuse to the social media platform they experienced the abuse on. Only 1 in 10 survivors (10%) felt empowered to report to the police. This indicates a widespread lack of confidence in both the police and social media platforms, or awareness of the options available to survivors. 1 in 5 survivors (18%) did not tell anyone because they were not sure how to report the abuse, reflecting the low awareness of tech abuse and provision of support to survivors.

Due to the very low proportion of survivors who felt confident and empowered enough to report tech abuse, the sample size of respondents to survey questions on police and social media responses to domestic abuse on social media is small¹². There was strong support expressed in the survey for tech companies taking more action to tackle online abuse, such as creating more robust systems to deal with abuse. 96% of all women respondents, and 100% of women experiencing domestic abuse, said platforms should take more action to address online abuse. The findings from our research, as well as the years of experience from Refuge’s tech abuse team, show that social media companies are not adequately responding to and preventing abuse being perpetrated on their platforms. Therefore, all social media companies should be obliged to prioritise the prevention and investigation of tech abuse occurring on their platforms. It is also crucial that survivors can access

specialist, holistic support services, and that they are supported by a policing response which prioritises women’s safety and holding perpetrators to account.

There wasn’t much communication with Facebook. No I don’t think they helped me to be honest, I don’t think they guided me to do anything.”

Willow, survivor of domestic abuse.



¹² Where the baseline of respondents fell below 50 people, results should be seen as initial findings and indicative only. Caution is advised when drawing conclusions for the entire population.

How do social media companies respond to tech abuse?

As a primary tool of tech abuse for many women, it is vital that social media companies take robust and speedy measures when their users inform them of abuse taking place on their platforms. Whilst Refuge is aware some platforms are taking positive steps to tackle abuse, the overall picture emerging from survivor interviews and the survey is that tech companies are failing to support survivors, leaving perpetrators free to abuse with impunity, and silencing women.

Among those who reported the online abuse to the social media site, initial findings show that over half (52%) of female respondents said the platform handled their report badly. This figure rises to 56% among women experiencing abuse from a partner or former partner. Almost a third of female respondents (29%), and 42% of women experiencing domestic abuse, said they did not receive a response to their report at all. Indeed, an analysis of survey responses to a question on what online platforms did following a report of online abuse showed the most commonly term used was “nothing”¹³.

For those who did receive a reply from the social media company, many faced a lengthy wait for that response. Initial findings show that 29% of female survey respondents, and 42% of women reporting abuse at the hands of a partner or former partner, said that it took too long for the online platform to respond to them. 1 in 4 women (24%) reporting domestic abuse

said it took up to a week to receive a reply. In Refuge’s experience, a survivor’s priority is often for public abusive content to be removed as quickly as possible. Waiting long periods for a reply to requests for content removal only compounds the stress and trauma they are experiencing¹⁴.

He was checking my Facebook, who my friends [were], reading the conversations I had with my friends in Messenger. Another issue has been sharing images of my child on Facebook. Anyone in the world could see his (the perpetrator’s) profile. He planted the picture on this public space. I reported [to] Facebook and they came back to me [saying] ‘there is nothing inappropriate there.’ I was looking how to report it and I found the reporting tool. It was difficult to use – if your options are not there you are restricted. It’s ABC. You cannot report anything additional to that. The only exit was closing the account and starting a new one. So from there I used Facebook to the minimum. Zero personal information in my Facebook, I feel restricted about that.”

Cece, survivor of domestic abuse.

¹³ Analysis of free text responses to a question on what steps the online platform took in response to reports of online abuse revealed the most common one-word term used was “nothing”.
¹⁴ The base size for data used within this section often falls below 50 respondents and should be seen as indicative only

A common theme emerging from our research is of content reporting systems not being fit for purpose. Social media companies often do not have appropriate processes in place to respond to tech abuse, and awareness and understanding of tech abuse in these companies is very low. From our interviews with survivors and the tech abuse team's experiences of supporting survivors to report abuse on social media, we identified several key issues with these systems:

- Processes frequently require users to complete an automated form and select a reason the content is harmful from a finite list. Domestic abuse is rarely included on these lists, meaning survivors cannot easily tell companies that they are experiencing domestic abuse, often leading to even lengthier delays.
- Systems are often unable to account for the context, complexity and subjectivity of domestic abuse. For example, survivors supported by Refuge have received images of their front doors and road signs after fleeing the perpetrator and moving to a safe, secret location. This can be traumatic for survivors, with women feeling physically unsafe because the perpetrator knows their location. When judged at face value, as simply images of a door, such content would likely not be deemed in breach of social media platform community standards, despite the significant and serious harm caused by such content. Training and investment in content moderation staff could help improve companies' ability to identify tech abuse on their platforms.
- Survivors usually have to report individual pieces of content in turn. Perpetrators will often send dozens or hundreds of messages, making reporting a time-consuming and potentially re-traumatising process for survivors. Survivors should be able to report an account instead of each individual piece of content, with the onus for investigation on the platform.
- In addition, where abuse has been cross-platform, users must report content to each platform individually. This appears to be the case even when platforms are owned by one parent company, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram.
- Some social media companies are not taking adequate steps to tackle fake accounts. For example, Facebook states that fake accounts do not fall within their reporting options. This makes it even easier for perpetrators to continue the abuse, even if survivors have blocked them, or their account has been removed.
- As well as a lack of cooperation with other platforms, survivors have suggested links could be improved between the police and social media companies. This could, for example, expedite collection of data and evidence to prosecute perpetrators.
- Evidence gathering is made all the more difficult by some design features on platforms, such as self-destructing content or anonymous communications. Poor safety by design can cause great harm to women and girls.

The shortcomings of these systems serve to highlight how social media platforms are letting survivors down. Refuge calls for robust regulation of social media, which should establish clear steps for

companies to take to tackle tech abuse and a set of clear, enforceable, minimum standards in relation to tech abuse and other forms of online VAWG. Because of the poor response from social media companies, the onus is therefore placed largely on the survivor to take steps to protect themselves from the abuse.

Yet the options available to survivors are limited. Often, they are restricted to blocking the perpetrator – which has minimal impact when the perpetrator can easily set up new fake accounts – or coming off of the platform which only negatively impacts them yet more. This also risks escalating the abuse as perpetrators may opt to show up in person if they are unable to get in touch with survivors online.

The people that he gets to stalk me - his friends. He's using other people to put stuff on my Facebook. I reported all this (fake accounts) to Facebook. There's nothing wrong they said. There's no picture, there's no friends on there (the fake account). It's blatant someone's done a dud profile.

Tami, survivor of domestic abuse.



How does the criminal justice system respond to tech abuse?

A large proportion of tech abuse occurring on social media is illegal. This includes online harassment, stalking, non-consensual sharing of intimate images/videos, and, following a Refuge campaign, threats to share intimate images/videos. However, initial findings show that over half (55%) of women who reported domestic abuse to the police said that they handled their report badly, and nearly a third of women (30%) responding to the survey said the police response was poor¹⁵. As with social media companies, an analysis of survey responses suggests there is a lack of action following reports of online abuse, as the term most commonly used by respondents to describe the police response was "nothing"¹⁶.

Some survivors have even been advised by the police to come offline, as a "solution" to the abuse they are experiencing. Refuge is clear that the answer to tech abuse is not for women to remove themselves from online spaces – this silences, isolates, and alienates women, and potentially increases their risk. The policing response to tech abuse should be on training to recognise the pernicious nature of tech abuse, investigating appropriately and charging perpetrators.

It is likely that the poor response survivors receive is, in part, due to the low awareness of tech abuse amongst those tasked with responding to it. Indeed the survivors that Refuge supports often report the tech abuse they experienced was not investigated adequately by law enforcement agencies or not understood within the context of domestic abuse, as the survivor stories set out here show.

Laurel, a survivor of domestic abuse supported by Refuge, wanted to report the tech abuse she experienced to the police but was told by the family courts that if she did it at that time it would be seen as "malicious."

I reported it to Snapchat; well I haven't heard anything back to be honest. I reported three times. I reported it to the police because it became too much. Their advice [was] to get rid of social media

Orisa, survivor of domestic abuse, describes her experience of reporting threats to the police and social media.

The criminal law has also not kept pace with technological change. Laws governing harmful online communications were created long before the rise of social media, and do not adequately respond to some forms of tech abuse (Malicious Communications Act 1988 and Communications Act 2003). The law in this area is also vaguely defined and sometimes poorly understood by law enforcement officers. Refuge has seen very few investigations and prosecutions for these offences when women report the abuse they've experienced to the police.

The failure to take online offences seriously means that perpetrators face few repercussions and are effectively able to continue to abuse with impunity. The police must be given sufficient resources, training and the legal tools to promptly investigate tech abuse and support survivors.

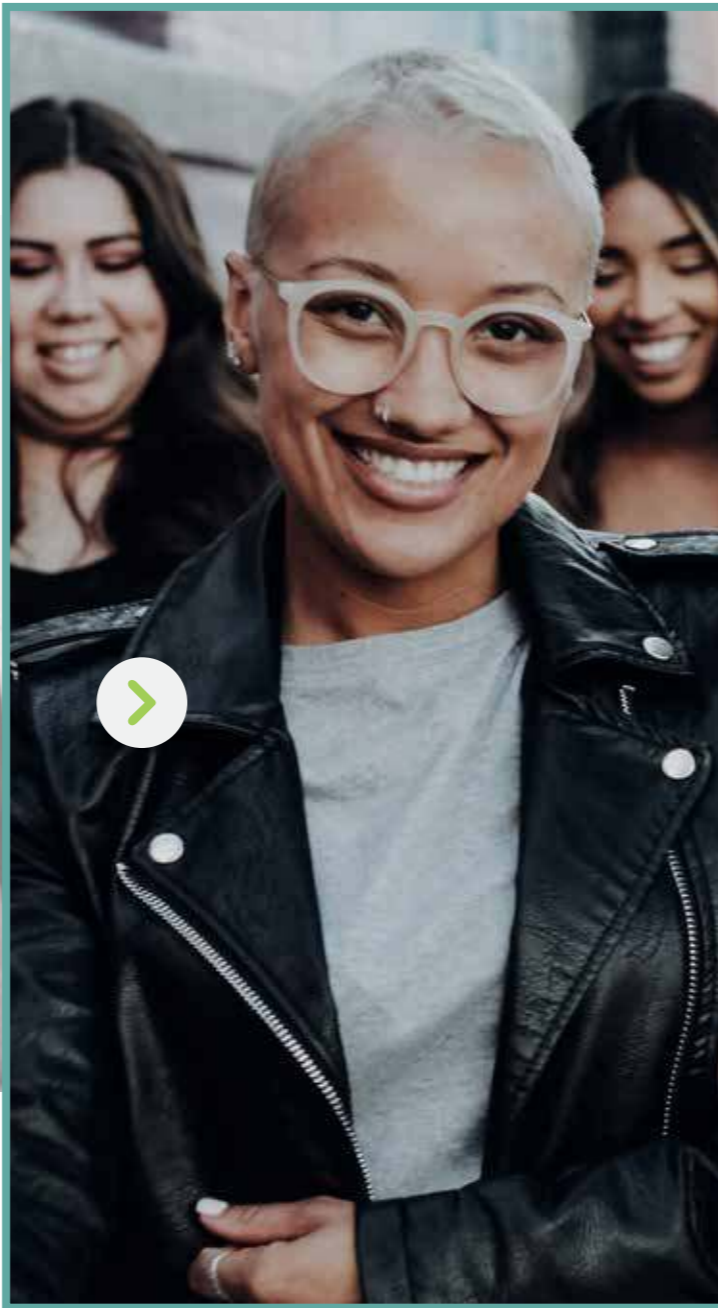
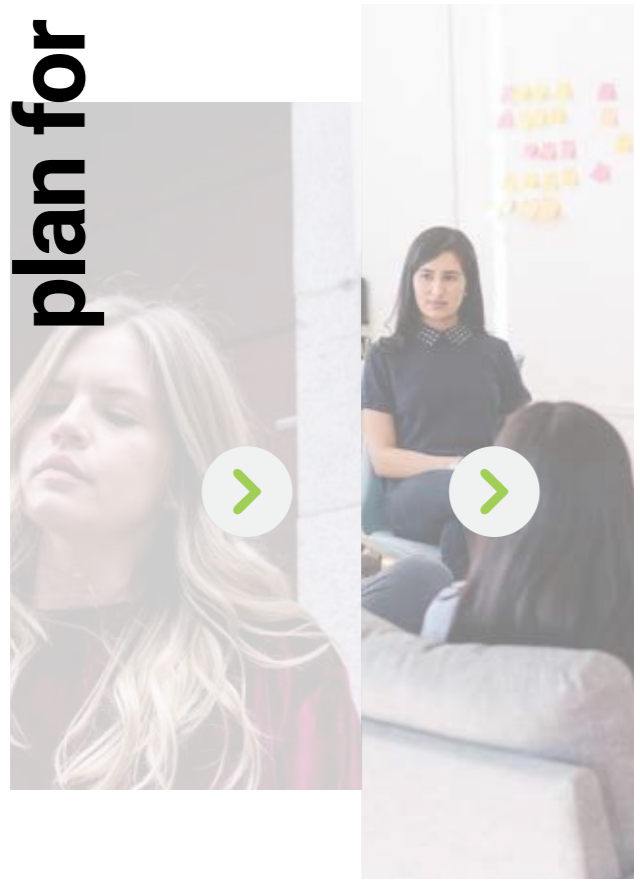
Everything was in his laptop, my Instagram my Facebook. He check[ed] basically everything on my mobile and my bank account. The police just told me you can delete him at first and I told the police, I don't want to delete him, I just want to prove that he is (in the account) – he has control even now and he has no right to control me. After that I just delete[d] him, and the next week the police call[ed] me and told me we can help you with Instagram - it was too late I [had] already deleted him

Kasi, survivor of domestic abuse.

¹⁵The base size for data used within this section often falls below 50 respondents and should be seen as indicative only.

¹⁶Analysis of free text responses to a question on what steps the police took in response to reports of online abuse revealed the most common one-word term used was "nothing."

An action plan for change



The survey and experiences of survivors supported by Refuge clearly demonstrate that survivors are not being afforded the protections and support they deserve to safely use social media and fully participate in online life. Tackling tech abuse is not seen as a priority by social media companies or the police, and there are very limited routes to protection and justice for survivors. Perpetrators are also not being held accountable for their actions, meaning they can continue to abuse with impunity.



If there is a report they [online platforms] should not ignore it. I was expecting for them to tell me, we are looking at that, we [are] doing [an] investigation, we will remove their account or whatever. No answer, [they] just ignor[ed] the situation

”

Cece, survivor of domestic abuse.

Our research findings and insights form the basis for Refuge’s action plan for change. The most effective way to address the online violence and abuse being perpetrated at women and girls is to introduce robust regulation of online platforms which reflects and responds to their experiences. There is strong public support for action to tackle online abuse and for greater accountability of social media companies - every woman experiencing domestic abuse who responded to the survey said that platforms should take more action to address online abuse.

1. All online platforms should be legally obliged to prioritise the prevention and investigation of tech abuse occurring on their platforms

Online platforms are being used to perpetrate domestic abuse and other forms of online VAWG, and social media companies are not responding adequately to these harms. Almost 2 million women have experienced tech abuse on social media and over half (52%) of women responding to the survey said their report of online abuse was handled poorly by the social media platform. Therefore, social media should be regulated, and regulations must centre and prioritise tech abuse and the experiences of women and girls online. We are half the population, and it is essential that we have equal access to these spaces. Regulation should place legal obligations on companies to protect their users from online abuse.

Every social media company and online platform which hosts user-generated content should be required to prioritise tech abuse, regardless of the size of the company’s user base. This would ensure that platforms large and small are working towards the same goal of eradicating abuse from their platforms.

Recommended minimum standards for social media platforms

In order to ensure all social media companies take appropriate actions to tackle tech abuse, Refuge recommends that enforceable minimum standards be introduced. These standards would set out steps to sufficiently respond to tech abuse, particularly via reporting processes, and to more proactively prevent abuse from occurring in the first place.

Standards should include requirements for social media companies to:

- Make the reporting process as quick and efficient as possible
 - o All platforms should acknowledge reports within 24 hours. Serious offences should be actioned in 24-48 hours maximum, and within 3-4 working days for less serious offences. These response times must be adhered to, and details published on the speed at which platforms respond.
 - o Victims should also be able to provide the user name of the perpetrator, rather than reporting individual pieces of content.
- Have clear policies and procedures to deal with threats to inflict harm, including protection from fake accounts
- Set up systems which can take into account the context of reporting abuse when responding to reports, for example by investing in and training content moderation staff instead of over-relying on AI and algorithmic solutions
- Provide law enforcement with data and evidence to investigate and prosecute perpetrators
- Cooperate with other platforms to ensure that perpetrators can be more easily identified and removed from platforms when cross-platform abuse is taking place
- Improve the detection and tackling of fake accounts set up by perpetrators, including their removal
- Increase sanctions for perpetrators on platforms, in consultation with the survivor and in tandem with measures to address fake accounts.
 - o This could include timed and permanent user bans, with permanent bans for serious cases of tech abuse.
 - o Platforms should work together to take joint actions against perpetrators. Parent companies should also ensure users banned on one of their sites are banned across all platforms.
- Develop and routinely promote user safety guidance

2. Statutory regulation of online platforms should reflect the harms and impact of tech abuse and other online violence against women and girls by explicitly recognising and prioritising VAWG

Awareness of tech abuse is low and this form of abuse is poorly understood by social media companies, the police, and general public. This is reflected in the lack of priority given to tackling tech abuse, and in the poor response survivors often receive from social media and law enforcement when reporting tech abuse. Whilst more than 1 in 3 women (36%) reported experiencing forms of online abuse, when asked about specific examples, only 1 in 5 (21%) self-identified as experiencing abuse on an online platform. Statutory regulation is therefore needed to ensure companies understand, and prioritise, the response to tech abuse. Regulations must sufficiently account for the harms and gravity of tech abuse, and be designed in partnership with the specialist violence against women and girls sector, including by explicitly recognising and prioritising online VAWG in regulation and associated policies.

3. Online platforms should be obliged to cooperate with the police and with other platforms to pursue perpetrators of tech abuse

The response to tech abuse by social media companies is currently disjointed, meaning perpetrators are able to move between platforms with ease to perpetrate abuse. Survivors have expressed strong support for a more coordinated approach to tackling tech abuse. 47% of women responding to the survey who experienced tech abuse said that platforms should work closer with the police, and over a third (34%) supported closer working links between different social media platforms.

Social media companies should work hand-in-hand with the police and with other companies to protect their users and hold perpetrators to account. The police should be able to access the evidence they need from social media to conduct investigations into tech abuse. This could include online platforms passing on information to the police when a report of online abuse is made and the police making increased requests for information and evidence from social media sites.

Processes for requesting and providing evidence should be informed by clear guidelines to ensure user privacy is maintained.

Such actions would help act as a deterrent to perpetrators and offer reassurance to survivors that action is being taken in response to their report of tech abuse. Barriers to cooperation should be dismantled – to this end, government should foster links between the police and social media. Regulation of social media should also build in requirements for companies to cooperate with other online platforms and to provide law enforcement with the data they require to investigate and prosecute perpetrators.

Yes, they [online platforms] should obviously help with the evidence side of things, if there's deleted messages they should be able to get that up.

Faye, survivor of domestic abuse.

If someone has been reported, the person should be blocked on all his accounts.

Joy, survivor of domestic abuse.

As tech abuse is closely related to women's physical safety, Refuge also recommends that Domestic Homicide Reviews be empowered to make recommendations to tech companies, the police and other statutory agencies where tech abuse factors in a domestic homicide and for tech companies to have a duty to respond to recommendations.

4. Online platforms must consider how their products can be used to perpetrate tech abuse, and a responsibility placed on platforms to embed safety by design

Some features of social media platforms inadvertently allow or encourage tech abuse. This includes anonymous, untraceable or self-destructing content and generic default passwords. Companies should consider from early design stages how their products may be used to abuse women and girls, and work in consultation with the specialist violence against women and girls sector. Over a third of women (37%) who experienced online abuse from a partner or former partner suggested social media companies should make improvements to security, so that it is harder to hack accounts or create fake accounts. There is a clear need to improve measures

to tackle fake accounts, given their frequent use by perpetrators. Measures to identify perpetrators by using IP addresses could be considered, where fake accounts are reported by survivors.

5. Online platforms should be regulated by a robust, independent regulator and regularly report on tech abuse taking place on their platforms

Social media companies are not being held liable for the abuse occurring on their platforms. 45% of UK adults said that online platforms were not accountable to their users. A strong and independent regulator should oversee compliance with regulations. The regulator should have powers to issue content take-down notices, hold senior management of social media companies criminally liable, and to support individual users experiencing tech abuse and other online VAWG.

Companies should also frequently collect and publish data on tech abuse, and other forms of online violence against women and girls, occurring on their platforms and actions they have taken in response. This would help improve accountability, as well as identifying emerging forms of tech abuse.

6. Social media companies should invest in human moderation to support reporting and content moderation systems, and training and support which enables staff to respond effectively to tech abuse

As well as making improvements to reporting systems, it is important that the staff responding to reports of tech abuse are fully trained in identifying different types of abuse. To the untrained eye, tech abuse can often be hard to recognise without an understanding of the broader context of domestic abuse and coercive control. Staff should be equipped to identify these nuances and support users. Such training should include new emerging forms of abuse, and clinical supervision made available to staff.

An element of human oversight in content moderation will always be needed – it is likely that AI moderators would fail to identify the nuances and contextual nature of tech abuse given its highly subjective nature.

7. Government should fund specialist violence against women and girls services which provide support to victims of tech abuse and other forms of online VAWG

Refuge's tech abuse team provides vital advocacy and holistic support to survivors of domestic abuse, and is highly effective in improving outcomes for survivors. However, demand for these services is high and the VAWG sector is severely underfunded. Refuge has seen

the number of complex tech abuse cases almost double in the past year, yet the vast majority (89%) of our tech abuse programme of work is reliant on fundraised income, which is inherently insecure. 38% of women responding to the survey who experienced tech online abuse from a partner or former partner agreed that more support should be provided to people experiencing online abuse. To meet growing demand and to provide support for everyone who needs it, the government must fully fund specialist services which provide support to victim-survivors of tech abuse.

8. Training on tech abuse should be rolled out to the police, and the police must be allocated sufficient resources and technology to promptly investigate tech abuse

A large proportion of women reporting their experiences of online abuse to the police said that their report was handled badly (30%)¹⁸. In Refuge’s experience, the current policing response to tech abuse is not focused on pursuing perpetrators. Some survivors have been advised by the police to come offline to “resolve” the tech abuse, an action which can actually escalate their risk of harm. This also suggests a lack of understanding of tech abuse within the police. Government should fund training for the police to increase understanding of tech abuse and ensure crimes are investigated and prosecuted fully. This training should be developed by specialists in tech abuse, such as Refuge. In addition, cybercrime units in the police are underfunded, and additional resource should be provided to ensure that the police are equipped to fully investigate tech abuse.

There is no penalty, there is no accountability, there’s nothing. I’m not being stalked outside my house, I’m being stalked [by] someone with a laptop and a phone. They’re invading my boundaries, and I don’t even know it sometimes. There should be more accountability to people that do this. ”

I think they need to have more security in place around setting up a new account for a start. It was just so easy for him to make these fake accounts up and nothing ever happened. You could tell it was a fake account. Literally it was just a name, a complete blank account.

Deandra, survivor of domestic abuse.

Tami, survivor of domestic abuse.

Reforms are also needed to modernise the law and allow the police and criminal justice system to use it to protect people from harm and abuse. In particular, we support the recommendations made by the Law Commission for a new harms-based communications offence to replace section 127(1) of the Communications Act 2003 and section 1 of the Malicious Communications Act 1988.

9. Government and social media companies should invest in raising awareness of tech abuse and social media companies should routinely develop and promote safety guidance for users

Public awareness of the use of technology to perpetrate domestic abuse is currently low. This is reflected in the fact that of the 18 survivors interviewed for this report, 13 had not heard of tech abuse until receiving support from Refuge. Government-funded public awareness raising campaigns, developed in partnership with the specialist violence against women and girls sector, would help spread understanding of the prevalence and effects of tech abuse. These campaigns should focus on communicating that online abuse is not acceptable and encourage members of the public to report harmful content they see online.

Social media companies should also routinely develop and promote safety guidance for users. This should include recommended steps to take if users suspect they are victims of tech abuse, as well as guidance on what support is available to them.

They should definitely realise that their products are being used in these ways to abuse people and they should address it as much as possible. I think it’s very important that people understand how to protect themselves online. ”

Mau, survivor of domestic abuse.



¹⁷ Between April 2020 and May 2021, Refuge saw on average a 97% increase in the number of complex tech abuse cases requiring specialist tech support when compared to the first three months of 2020. Fundraising-sourced income data is for the financial year 2021-22.
¹⁸ The base size for data used falls below 50 respondents and should be seen as indicative only.

Conclusion

Our research has concluded that tech abuse on social media is affecting a significant proportion of the population, and is set to increase. Over 1 in 3 UK women (36%) report experiencing at least one behaviour suggestive of online abuse or harassment, with 1 in 6 of these women (16%) experiencing abuse from an intimate partner. This is equivalent to almost 2 million women in the UK who have faced online abuse from a partner or former partner. Children are also affected by tech abuse. Half of women experiencing tech abuse from their partner or former partner said that their family or friends were targeted as part of the abuse, including 12% who said their children had been targeted.

This issue is only likely to become more common as our use of technology grows. Younger women are more likely to have experienced abuse online – a staggering 62% said they had encountered at least one behaviour suggestive of online VAWG. 1 in 5 of these women (21%) said the perpetrator was a partner or former partner.

Tech abuse has a severe and detrimental impact on survivors' mental health and physical safety. 95% of survivors said the abuse had an impact on their mental health or impacted them in other negative ways, including 1 in 10 who felt suicidal. This is shocking, although unsurprising, given that on average women experience tech abuse for at least 6 months. Many reported feeling physically unsafe as a direct result of the abuse. 38% of survivors felt unsafe or less confident online following the abuse, illustrating that tech abuse also has ramifications on women's access to the internet and their freedom of expression, limiting their participation in public debate.

Despite the high prevalence and significant impact of tech abuse, social media companies and the police are not adequately responding to this growing threat, ensuring that women are safe online, or that perpetrators are held to account. Over half of women experiencing online abuse from a partner or former partner said that the police and/or social media platform they reported to handled their report badly (55% reporting to police, 56% reporting to platform)¹⁹. Every woman experiencing domestic abuse who responded to our survey said that social media companies should take more action to address online abuse.

In addition, a large number of survivors do not know where to turn for help with the tech abuse they are experiencing. Half (49%) told no one about the abuse – likely due to a combination of low awareness of tech abuse, limited reporting options, lack of confidence in the police and online platforms, and threats from the perpetrator not to disclose the abuse. Increased funding for specialist support services and awareness-raising could help encourage survivors to seek support, as well as ensuring robust procedures and minimum standards when it comes to tech abuse perpetrated on social media platforms.

Urgent action from government, social media companies and the police is needed to protect women and girls online. The steps outlined in the action plan would lead to real change for survivors - alongside robust regulation of online platforms which prioritises tech abuse, perpetrators must be held to account and prevented from perpetrating further abuse, and survivors able to access safety and specialist support.

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About Refuge

Refuge is the largest specialist provider of gender-based violence services in the country, supporting over 7,000 women and children on any given day. Refuge opened the world's first refuge in 1971 in Chiswick and, 50 years later, provides: a national network of 48 refuges, community outreach programmes, child support services, and independent advocacy services for those experiencing domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence.

We also run specialist services for survivors of tech abuse, modern slavery, 'honour'-based violence, and female genital mutilation. Refuge runs the 24-hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline which receives hundreds more calls and contacts from women experiencing domestic abuse every day and can be reached on **0808 2000 247**.

www.refuge.org.uk
www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk
www.refugetechsafety.org

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