

# 'Can I just share my story?'

Experiences of technology-facilitated abuse among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women from regional and remote areas

## Executive Summary and Key Findings

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## Executive summary

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women living in remote and regional areas, the internet and mobile phones are a lifeline of connection and support. However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are disproportionately more likely to be targets of online abuse, and they experience online abuse at higher levels and in different ways to other sectors of the Australian population.

In 2019 eSafety commissioned research on the experiences and impacts of technology-facilitated abuse (TFA) involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women living in remote and regional areas. The research was conducted in an effort to better understand the specific experiences of TFA by a subset of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. This research will inform eSafety programs, policy and messaging responses, particularly initiatives for frontline workers, to prevent and reduce the harm that TFA does to Indigenous women living in regional and remote Australia.

This report was produced by The Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University. The research team used qualitative methods to collect, analyse and report on information provided by frontline workers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women living in three different indicative regional and remote locations in Australia: Central Australia, remote Western Australia and regional NSW. The report addresses a critical gap in research in understanding the specific issues encountered by women in remote and regional areas that had been identified by previous eSafety research work on 'Online safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women living in urban areas' (eSafety, 2019).

This research found that the experiences of Indigenous women living in remote and regional areas are widespread and diverse but share common risks when experiencing technology-facilitated abuse. The research found that the impacts of TFA on women who participated in the study were serious and long lasting. It also identified a general lack of awareness about TFA among both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and frontline workers in the three regions. This highlighted how raising awareness of TFA is a critical and important avenue to prevention and providing safe avenues for reporting.

This report gives voice to a vulnerable sector of the population and highlights the critical need to listen to these voices, in order to begin to deal with the problem of technology-facilitated abuse experienced by Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander women living in regional and remote areas. It also recognises that while the perpetrators of TFA are not necessarily Indigenous themselves, the solutions needed to respond to this form of abuse should consider the unique challenges many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women face, including disproportionate rates of poverty, violence, abuse and imprisonment. The safety of women and children should also be at the centre of all responses and initiatives designed to reduce the harm caused by TFA.

## Key findings

- This research found that women had diverse experiences of TFA which was further complicated by living in regional and remote contexts.

### **Types and forms of technology-facilitated abuse:**

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women most commonly experienced TFA from a current or former male partner within the context of intimate partner violence.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experienced different forms of TFA, and the most commonly reported behaviours were threats, harassment, monitoring and stalking, followed by impersonation.
- Different forms of violence were associated with different technology-facilitated abusive behaviours, for example, impersonation was commonly linked with lateral violence<sup>1</sup> perpetrated by women, whilst monitoring was most commonly linked with intimate partner violence.
- The tools and tactics used to perpetrate TFA against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women were many and varied, but the most commonly reported vehicles were messaging, phone calls, fake social media accounts, and monitoring apps or platforms.
- TFA against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women is primarily driven by jealousy and gender inequality.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Lateral violence' or 'horizontal violence' refers to the violence within communities and perpetrated by oppressed peoples against one another (Priday, Gargett, & Kiss, 2011). 'Lateral violence' is the term used by the participants in this research to refer to TFA and violence by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women against other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. The use of the term 'lateral violence' in this report is therefore informed by the research participants and is intended to distinguish this type of violence from TFA perpetrated by men against women, as well as from family and community violence.

- TFA perpetrated by women against other women was often driven by jealousy and usually in response to perceived sexual misconduct with a man.
- There were also differing experiences of TFA across age groups. Those in the younger age groups were more likely to experience imaged-based and monitoring types of abuse whereas Elders were more likely to experience technology-facilitated financial abuse.

### **Risk factors**

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in remote and regional areas are vulnerable to technology-facilitated abuse because of a lack of education around identifying TFA, and, particularly in remote areas, a lack of education about digital literacy and accessible services.
- Close social networks and kinship structures can be sources of strengths to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experiencing TFA, but they can also inadvertently make it easier for the perpetrator to gather information and locate women, increasing women's vulnerability to violence from multiple abusers.

### **Benefits of technology**

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women receive a lot of benefits from using technology, including safety and the ability to stay connected to family and friends.
- Technologies, particularly phones, are reported to be critical to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's safety, and as a result, were often withheld or damaged by their abusers.

### **Response and prevention**

- Awareness of TFA and women's rights and education on digital literacy and online safety is pivotal to preventing TFA of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.
- To minimise the impacts of TFA, and to support women experiencing abuse, there needs to be culturally appropriate and accessible services, good relationships between the community and services and police, and there needs to be clear and consistent legislation.
- Social media and technology companies must have some accountability and play a role in preventing online abuse.

- Banks and financial services must be involved in addressing the financial aspects of TFA.
- TFA must be taken seriously by the criminal justice system and addressed prior to the abuse escalating into physical violence.

