

## **Technology-facilitated stalking and abuse**

After experiencing a traumatic marriage breakdown, Michelle\* fled with her children to a safe location expecting to be free of the violence they had experienced. Over the ensuing months she found herself encountering her ex-husband in all sorts of locations unexpectedly, and started to face the abuse all over again. He then moved to sending abusive text messages, so Michelle changed her number, only to start receiving them again soon after.

Unable to understand why this was happening, Michelle sought the help of an IT savvy friend, only to discover her children had tracking software on their phones and that her computer also had spyware which her ex-husband had been using to keep track of her. This is known as ‘technology-facilitated stalking and abuse.’

Along with the many positives of modern technology, this more serious aspect suggests that *digital abuse* has become the new frontier for domestic violence. The Federal Government’s recent announcement of [extra funding to combat domestic violence](#) includes \$5 million in funds for safer technology, including the provision to supply 20,000 pre-paid safe mobile phones over three years to at-risk women. These new phones will allow at-risk women to maintain their support network while escaping the threat of spyware and tracking software on their old phones. The Government will work with telecommunications providers to supply these phones.

The threat of technology-facilitated stalking and abuse is very real. [A survey](#) by Women’s Legal Services NSW, WESNET and Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria, with funding from ACCAN, found that 98 per cent of domestic violence workers had clients who had experienced technology facilitated abuse. Serious incidents of cyberstalking have occurred where people are being controlled, threatened or harassed through on-line and mobile technologies.

Sadly, there have been numerous cases where tracking software has been installed on mobile phones and computers, stolen passwords to social media accounts used to post derogatory and offensive messages in the name of the user. Even more troubling is the phenomenon of ‘revenge porn,’ where sexual images or chat sessions captured during a relationship are dispersed through the internet after a break up. Victims starting fresh lives find themselves trapped all over again, or worse, lose their jobs and friendships due to sensitive material being put on the internet.

Women’s Legal Services NSW is completing an ACCAN Grants Scheme project on the issue of technology-facilitated stalking and abuse - [Recharge: Empowering women to end digital abuse](#). The project is compiling resources so that victims of this sort of abuse will be able to check for and update privacy settings, remove hidden software, and take advantage of legal resources. Legal and other support workers will also have access to current materials applicable for all states of Australia so that they can better assist victims of this sort of abuse. Material created in this project will be progressively added to the [smartsafe website](#).

The Women’s Legal Services NSW has deep experience in supporting women and children facing domestic violence. Increasingly, they are seeing these new forms of abuse and unfortunately there are few resources available to advise case workers. The materials produced in this project will be of use to a wide range of people across all states of Australia.

\*Not her real name. Cases have been combined for illustrative purposes.