

Please note that the contents of this document should not be regarded as legal advice. The information contained within is relevant as of March 2024.

Technology tools have become woven into the fabric of our daily lives in every aspect, and unfortunately sexual assault is no exception. Offenders misuse technology in order to commit, and cover up, sexual assault. In addition, the vast amount of information available online can compromise the privacy of women experiencing violence. However, the digital trail left by an offender can be used by women experiencing violence and those who work with them to hold offenders accountable, and ensure that women experiencing violence can access technology tools that help increase privacy and safety as well as accessing online spaces to support their healing.

Technology and the Dynamics of Sexual Assault

In the majority of cases of sexual assault, sex offenders are known to the woman experiencing violence. Sex offenders manipulate positions of trust to gain access to victims, or to avoid being held accountable for their actions. These positions of trust include those within relationships, social groups, religious or faith-based communities, schools, workplaces, health care settings (including in-home care), and legal settings (jails, prisons, immigration facilities or juvenile detention).

As technology becomes woven into every aspect of society, offenders are able to misuse the technology in those settings to perpetrate sexual assault, or to cover it up. Just as the dynamics of sexual assault differ from domestic violence, the misuse of technology looks different when sexual assault occurs outside of an intimate partner relationship. Some examples of how offenders might misuse their power, and technology, to perpetrate sexual assault include:

Community Settings (teachers, coaches, and religious leaders)

- Misusing messages and online communities to groom victims
- Misusing access to databases to gain information, or plan an attack

- Threatening to share embarrassing information or images, or to change grades or other status

Families (non-IPV, for example child sexual abuse, elder abuse)

- Misusing tech to create and share child pornography
- Internet-based sex trafficking
- Limiting access to tech to keep a victim from seeking help or information
- Giving “gifts” that allow an offender to monitor or access a child (toys, games, devices)

Workplaces (employers, supervisors, recruiters)

- Misusing access to databases to identify, gain information, or plan an attack
- Threatening to share embarrassing information or images, to effect employment status
- Misusing surveillance cameras to monitor or humiliate a victim, or to cover up an assault

Authorities (law enforcement, corrections, immigration, military)

- Misusing access to databases to identify, gain information, or plan an attack
- Limiting access to accurate information for a victim seeking help
- Misusing surveillance cameras to threaten, monitor or humiliate a victim, or to cover up an assault
- Using the Internet to facilitate sex trafficking

Health Care & Social Services settings (medical and mental health professionals, caseworkers, in-home caregivers)

- Misusing access to databases to identify, gain information, or plan an attack
- Threatening to share embarrassing information or images gained while providing care
- Withholding or damaging needed equipment or services to control a victim

Housing (landlords, housing authorities, repair people)

- Misusing surveillance or security cameras to take pictures or videos of victims
- Misusing security systems, smart locks, or video doorbells to gain access to a victim
- Misusing access to databases and the Internet to deny housing, violate privacy, or plan an attack

Privacy Concerns

If a woman experiencing violence chooses to be involved with a legal system in the wake of an assault, or to participate in public life, their privacy may be at risk in regards to the assault. Cases in the public eye can generate distressing comments on news stories and social media, even if the identity of the woman affected by violence is protected. Online access to police and court records, or to sex offender registries may inadvertently compromise a victim's privacy. If the anonymity of the woman experiencing violence is compromised, they may also become the target of online harassment, doxing or other retaliation.

Technology and Root Causes

Online spaces amplify existing attitudes and beliefs, and so can support rape culture through memes, viral posts, image-based abuse (sometimes known as revenge porn) sites, etc. At the same time, online advocacy and activism efforts have used online spaces to counter rape culture through awareness, events, bystander intervention and more.

In addition, even those who work with women affected by violence may inadvertently apply victim-blaming attitudes to the use of technology by women experiencing violence. Women affected by violence have a right to access technology including mobile devices, social media, online communities for dating or gaming, and other tools. Technology can be essential for access to school, employment, benefits, civic engagement, community and healing.

Research has shown that sex offenders exploit power imbalances in our society such as demographic factors (age, race, language, faith), disabilities, legal status (immigration, history of crime, dependency), and leadership roles in work, school, and communities. Power imbalances in the real world also shape inequities in the access to technology.

Acknowledgement

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