



VIRTUAL WORLD, REAL FEAR

- Women's Aid report
- into online abuse,
- harassment and stalking



Report Author

Clare Laxton

With thanks to:

Hilary Fisher

Siân Hawkins

CONTENTS

Forewords	3
Polly Neate, Chief Executive, Women's Aid	
Caroline Criado-Perez	
Definition of terms	5
Introduction	6
The links between online abuse and domestic violence	8
The impact of online abuse, harassment and stalking	10
Response of social media providers	13
Response of the police	14
Response of criminal justice agencies	15
Culture of misogyny	16
Support for survivors	18
Conclusion and recommendations	19

Acknowledgments

Women's Aid would like to thank everyone who attended the online stalking, harassment and abuse conference in September 2013 – without your contribution this report would not have been possible. Thank you also to Katie Ross for organising the conference, the entire Women's Aid staff for making it possible and Avon for sponsoring the conference.

Production and Design:

Susannah Marwood

Published by:

Women's Aid Federation of England,
PO Box 391, Bristol, BS99 7WS
© Women's Aid 2014
ISBN 978-0-907817-77-2

Women's Aid is the national domestic violence charity that supports a network of around 300 local services working to end domestic violence against women and children in England. Our member services are integrated domestic violence service providers delivering a range of holistic services for women experiencing domestic violence and their children. Keeping the voices of survivors at the heart of its work, Women's Aid campaigns for better support for women and children, provides training and resources for professionals and delivers a package of vital 24 hour lifeline services through publications, websites and the National Domestic Violence Helpline (run in partnership with Refuge).



FOREWORD

Polly Neate, Chief Executive, Women's Aid



It should come as no surprise that perpetrators of domestic violence are now routinely using technology and social media to commit crimes against those they victimise. Domestic violence has at its root a desire for control and to instil fear. The potential for technology and social media in particular to achieve both those objectives is obvious.

Unfortunately the ingenuity of the criminal justice system has not kept pace with that of the perpetrators. Given the inadequacy of the response to domestic violence as a whole, and in particular the urgent need for more comprehensive training for police officers, this is hardly surprising.

Just as social media provide a vehicle for perpetrators of abuse, they also provide a platform for any aspect of our culture that thrives on anonymity. Someone who hates women may well feel safer to express that hate when anonymity can be guaranteed. That's why the mantra that what is a crime offline is a crime online must inform the response to online abuse of both the criminal justice system and online service providers, who can perfectly well take action if they choose.

As the Women's Aid conference which produced this report heard, the fact that the perpetrator can be anonymous does not lessen the fear of the victim, in fact it increases it. Imagine receiving threat upon threat of violence, with no idea how many people are behind it, who they are, whether or not they know you, are watching you, or anything about them.

Despite this, the impact of these crimes continues to be minimised. Just as domestic violence as a whole is minimised, victims are blamed, silenced, undermined, even ridiculed and hated. In this respect, and in the urgent need for prevention as well as better enforcement, online harassment and abuse must be seen as a manifestation of the widespread violence against women which is caused, tolerated and exacerbated by our culture of misogyny.



FOREWORD

Caroline Criado-Perez



“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” So goes the playground refrain. A lying chant we weave around our children in an attempt to ward off the psychological damage that, deep down, we know is being done to them. The cynical part of me wonders how much this is said for our children’s benefit – and how much for our own. How much is this simply not wanting to see these invisible scars – because once we see them, we will have to face up to how huge this problem is?

“Don’t feed the trolls.” Another pat phrase. Another “solution” to the trauma, the horror, aroused by “names”. By “words on a screen”. By the irrelevant, the dismissible, online world. I cannot begin to count the number of times I’ve been offered this online version of the childish chant as a panacea to being hunted online. As if these paltry words will dispel the ever-present, soul-crushing fear as people threaten to rape you, to mutilate you, to pistol-whip you, to make you beg to die, to kill you. As these people start spreading your address around the internet. As they publicly start to hone in on where you are.

We need to move on from the playground. We need to move on from protective word-amulets. We need to accept that fear is trauma. That freedom from fear is a human right. That “words on a screen” don’t stay on a screen, but take up residence in our minds, and are carried around with us forever, controlling what we say, what we do, where we go. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can create a psychological prison. And a prison is not where victims belong. It’s where abusers belong. It’s time we started releasing victims – and closing in on their abusers. I hope that those who have the power to change the way victims of cyberstalking are treated, will listen to the compelling evidence gathered by Women’s Aid in this important report. I hope they will listen, and I hope that they will start to take action.



DEFINITION OF TERMS

The following terms will be used throughout this report. See below for the Women's Aid definitions of these terms.

Domestic violence

Domestic violence is any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. This can encompass but is not limited to the following types of abuse:

- psychological
- physical
- sexual
- financial
- emotional

Controlling behaviour is a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour. Coercive behaviour is an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim.

Online abuse

The use of the internet or other electronic means to direct abusive, unwanted and offensive behaviour at an individual or group of individuals.

Online harassment and stalking

The use of the internet or other electronic means to stalk or harass an individual, group of individuals or organisation. Stalking is unwanted or malicious communication, damaging property and physical or sexual assault which is persistent and unwanted and causes fear. Harassment is intentional behaviour which is found threatening or disturbing and of a repetitive nature.



INTRODUCTION

2013 was the year that saw the shocking levels of online misogynistic abuse, harassment and stalking experienced by women explode into the wider public sphere. In September 2013 Women's Aid hosted a conference to discuss the impact of online stalking and harassment on women across England: as the campaigner, Caroline Criado-Perez describes it, "the tidal wave of hate". The conference addressed widespread concerns about rising levels of online stalking and harassment, particularly through social media platforms, and looked at responses to this new form of violence against women and girls from police and social media providers.

Women's Aid's intention in hosting this conference was to draw a clear link between offline and online abuse of women and to demonstrate the intrinsic link between online abuse, harassment and stalking, and domestic violence as part of a pattern of behaviours by perpetrators. The conference explored the fear that online abuse, harassment and stalking created and the impact it had on women.

Speakers at the conference and press event included Polly Neate, Chief Executive of Women's Aid; Caroline Criado-Perez, campaigner and co-founder of The Women's Room who had been subjected to a deluge of online abuse in 2013; Helen Lewis, Deputy Editor of the New Statesman; Stella Creasy MP; Nimko Ali, founder of Daughters of Eve; Laura Richards, Director of stalking advocacy service Paladin; Rachel Griffin, Director of the Suzy Lamplugh Trust; the End Online Misogyny campaign; Sharon Stratton from the College of Policing; and Jennifer Perry, a digital stalking expert. The delegates included many women bloggers and campaigners with a strong presence on social media, as well as specific campaign groups including End Victim Blaming and No More Page 3 and organisations working to end violence against women such as Imkaan and the End Violence Against Women coalition. This report draws together the knowledge and expertise of all the speakers and delegates from the conference.

According to the British Crime Survey 2010/11, 18% of women in England and Wales have experienced stalking since the age of 16¹. The National Stalking Helpline estimates that approximately 5 million people experience stalking in any given year and that stalking can include various forms of malicious communication such as email, text and social media². The majority of stalkers are known to their victims (for example as partners or ex-partners) and 80% are male³.

November 2013 marked one year since the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 which created two new offences of stalking. The two new offences set out examples of acts which are associated with stalking (including following and contacting or attempting to contact a person through friends, colleagues or technology) and provided further options for

1 Crime in England and Wales 2010/11 (2011) Home Office.

2 <http://www.stalkinghelpline.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/Stalking-and-Harassment-Guide-for-Parliamentarians2.pdf>

3 Ibid.

prosecutors to consider when selecting charges. Research by Paladin⁴ showed that in the first six months that the new offences were in force there had been 320 arrests, 189 charges and 33 convictions in England and Wales⁵. Women's Aid welcomed the introduction of the new offences and is disappointed to see the small number of convictions in proportion to the scale of stalking experienced and its impact on victims.

Women's Aid knows that many women experiencing domestic violence are not only abused offline but are harassed, abused and stalked online by their partners or ex-partners. Online stalking and harassment can be part of a pattern of behaviour which encompasses online abuse and street harassment as well as domestic violence and murder. Many perpetrators of domestic violence use online abuse as a way of controlling their partners.

This report analyses the experiences of women of online abuse, stalking and harassment and investigates the responses they have had in reporting the online abuse and harassment, including the actions of social media providers. The report will make urgently needed recommendations to improve protection and support for women and prevent online abuse, harassment and stalking.

The use of technology to commit stalking and to abuse victims is highly prevalent, often enabling perpetrators easy and unchallenged access to allow them to continue to offend. Stalking remains a high risk factor for victims of domestic abuse. Professionals working with or on behalf of victims must ensure that they have the knowledge and capability to support those affected and to prevent further opportunities for re-offending. This requires a coordinated response from support services, the police and criminal justice partners and social media providers, who should be provided with the best training and appropriate resources to respond effectively.

The introduction of stalking legislation in the UK is driving this activity and the announcement that the Home Office is to re-instate the national stalking and harassment steering group is welcomed. The College of Policing is ensuring that the role of investigators in all Forces is further professionalised by ensuring that training for stalking and domestic abuse has elements of learning relating to the use of technology mainstreamed throughout the products. The Women's Aid conference was an important platform for those working in the field to share information and best practice.

Sharon Stratton, National Public Protection Training Co-ordinator, College of Policing

4 www.paladinservice.co.uk

5 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/10278324/Stalking-laws-lead-to-just-33-convictions-in-first-six-months.html>



• THE LINKS BETWEEN • ONLINE ABUSE AND • DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Prior to our conference in September 2013, Women's Aid carried out an online survey of 307 women survivors of domestic violence⁶. The survey found that:

- 45% reported experiencing some form of abuse online during their relationship, including through social networking sites or over email.
- 48% reported experiencing harassment or abuse online from their ex-partner once they'd left the relationship. 38% reported online stalking once they'd left the relationship.
- 75% reported concerns that the police did not know how best to respond to online abuse or harassment. This includes 12% who had reported abuse to the police and had not been helped.

Most stalking now includes an online element and stalkers will assist their offline activities with online tools as well. Stalking by ex-partners accounts for the largest group of victims with the majority of victims being women⁷. In 50% of the cases when a woman was stalked by her ex-partner, the stalking started while they were in the relationship⁸. Furthermore, a Metropolitan Police review of domestic violence homicides found that 40% of victims of domestic violence murders were also victims of stalking⁹.

Women survivors of domestic violence can be at further risk of harm from perpetrators who also stalk and harass and abuse them online as the perpetrator may have more personal information and insight into them which they can use to abuse online¹⁰. For many women survivors, online abuse, harassment and stalking are part of the same violence they experience offline at the hands of the perpetrator and increase their risk of physical and emotional harm. The current legal system in England does not criminalise coercive and controlling behaviour that happens within an intimate relationship; however as soon as the relationship ends that behaviour is criminalised by stalking laws. Recent research has identified this gap and states, "quite suddenly, context matters; ongoing conduct becomes legally significant, as do the nonphysical harms that result when a person is subjected to power and control. In its approach to stalking, the law adopts a model of crime that, nomenclature aside, seems more closely aligned with the realities of domestic violence."¹¹ This is a clear gap in protection for women experiencing domestic violence.

The link between domestic violence and online abuse, harassment and stalking is clear.

6 'Women's Aid conference links online abuse to off-line violence against women' Women's Aid, September 2013 www.womensaid.org.uk/stalking-links

7 Perry J (2012) *Digital Stalking: A guide to technology risks for victims*. Women's Aid, National Stalking Service and Nominet Trust.

8 Mullen, Pathe and Purcell (2009). *Stalkers and their Victims*. Cambridge University Press.

9 Findings from the Multi-Agency Domestic Violence Murder Reviews in London. Metropolitan Police (2003)

10 Perry J (2012) *Digital Stalking: A guide to technology risks for victims*. Women's Aid, National Stalking Service and Nominet Trust.

11 Tuerkheimer, D. *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism* (2013) *51 BREAKUPS, *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*.

Online tools are merely another way for perpetrators to intimidate, control and coerce women. Online abuse, harassment and stalking are part of the continuum of violence that is perpetrated against women every day.

Amy¹² was stalked online after she had managed to leave her abusive partner.

During the six years they were together he bullied her verbally and psychologically, controlling her every move and phoning her constantly on the rare occasions she left the house. He denied her any money, even for deodorant or clothes and food, and forced her to commit benefit fraud, saying he didn't work or wasn't living with them, and to give him the money she received. After she gave birth to their first child he regularly raped her, and would push, shove, and strangle her at his most violent.

After contacting her local service, she put together a plan over the course of a few weeks and escaped from their house one day while he was out. She went to a refuge and subsequently moved into a house of her own. She changed phone numbers five times as he would find out her new number. He sent constant messages through Facebook, watched to see where she was going and would follow her. When she stopped him seeing their child, the harassment got worse. As well as harassing her through Facebook, email, and text he used Facebook among other things to track down her new addresses when she moved so he could harass her at her house. She was forced to move four times, before a support worker recommended a moonlight flit. She and her child had to drop everything to move across the country in the middle of the night, moving house, schools, and jobs. She is afraid to use social media now, in case he tracks them down, and is worried when the child is a bit older in case they want to use social networking.

Women's Aid strongly believes that online abuse, harassment and stalking should be clearly recognised as part of the **spectrum of domestic violence** not as a separate, disassociated form of violence against women.

¹² Names have been changed to protect identities.



THE IMPACT OF ONLINE ABUSE, HARASSMENT AND STALKING

Domestic violence has a drastic and long-lasting impact on women and their children, and online abuse, harassment and stalking is no different. Domestic violence costs women their lives as two women are killed every week by their partner or ex-partner. It affects every aspect of women's lives including their emotional health and wellbeing, social life and finances.

The impact on children can also be great and long-lasting. Approximately 750,000 children will witness domestic violence every year and the vast majority of them will be in the same room or next room when domestic violence occurs. Although children's responses to witnessing domestic violence will vary they can include being anxious or depressed, having problems at school, difficulty sleeping and feeling isolated and insecure.

As well as this huge impact on the lives and wellbeing of women and their children affected by violence, domestic violence also demonstrates a huge economic cost to society. Research shows that domestic violence costs the British economy nearly £16 billion every year¹³. This cost was calculated including the cost of domestic violence services, cost of lost economic output due to time off from work due to injuries and the human and emotional costs of domestic violence.

Caroline Criado-Perez is a freelance journalist, campaigner and co-founder of The Women's Room. In 2013 she ran a campaign asking the Bank of England to review its decision to have an all-male line-up on banknotes. In July 2013 the Bank of England announced that Jane Austen would appear on the new £10 note, which represented a success for the campaign. It was this success that spurred a deluge of online abuse and harassment towards Caroline and those who supported her. Caroline spoke at the Women's Aid conference in September 2013 and talked about the impact of this abuse on her life:



*The impact of all this on my life has been dramatic. When it was at its height I struggled to eat, to sleep, to work. I lost about half a stone in a matter of days. I was exhausted and weighed down by carrying these vivid images, this tidal wave of hate around with me wherever I went.*¹⁴

At the Women's Aid conference in September Alison Boydell and Louise Pennington from the online campaign End Online Misogyny¹⁵ also discussed the impact of online abuse on women. They described the social isolation it creates for women who are effectively cut off from their online social life because the abuse and harassment they are receiving is not being dealt with properly.

¹³ Walby, S (2009) *Cost of Domestic Violence Up-date 2009*, University of Lancaster

¹⁴ Caroline's full speech is available here: <http://weekwoman.wordpress.com/2013/09/03/womens-aid-speech-on-cyber-harassment/>

¹⁵ Website: www.endmisogyny.org. Speech at the Women's Aid Online Stalking Conference: www.endmisogyny.org/eoms-womens-aid-speech-at-cyber-stalking-and-harassment-conference-september-2013/



Given the percentage of abusers who stalk their partners/exes online, there is clearly a strong link. Social media provides another means of power and control for abusers to terrorise. It also allows them to monitor movements and even locations (if the geolocate feature is activated on the device, for example). Furthermore, at EOM we believe that online behaviour reflects offline. Online abuse of women is driven by misogyny and male entitlement, much in the same way that domestic violence and abuse is.

Most women who campaign or have any kind of cause are targeted with abuse. Many feminists on Twitter are similarly targeted.

Being abused is horrific and frequently the abuse aimed at women is of a sexual nature. Being stalked and harassed is terrifying as you just have no idea who these people are or what they're capable of. Furthermore, for many women social media is a lifeline. For those with disabilities, life limiting conditions, caring responsibilities, leaving or being driven off social media would leave them completely isolated.

There should definitely be some form of support for survivors. The National Stalking helpline was excellent when I phoned them when I was being stalked and something similar for all victims of online abuse would be a good idea. Receiving a rape and death threat is utterly terrifying. However, we would like to stress that there are many other tactics that abusers use.

Social media providers, police, criminal justice system all need to be more responsive. The police need to be trained as existing laws apply to many of the abuses online. However, there is little awareness and a tendency to not take online abuse seriously. There also needs to be support for those affected. It can have a devastating impact and leave one feeling violated, scared and vulnerable. The anonymity aspect is also frightening as the abusive tweeter could be someone known to you, someone with a violent history - there is no way of knowing when that violent tweet pops up in your mentions.

End Online Misogyny campaign

The National Stalking Helpline (run by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust) has highlighted that incidents of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are found to be highest in victims who had experienced a combination of offline and online stalking¹⁶. This again highlights the huge detrimental impact that online stalking can have on women.

¹⁶ *Cyberstalking in the United Kingdom* (National Centre for Cyberstalking Research, 2011).

It was clear from the Women's Aid Conference on Online Stalking that many victims of cyberstalking are left without access to support and protection when they try to seek help, leaving them at risk of significant psychological and physical harm. Improvements are required from all criminal justice agencies and online organisations including social media providers, the police and prosecutors. In order for improvements to be made we make the following recommendations.

- Train all those within the criminal justice system on the nature of cybercrime and the effect it can have on a victim
- Social media providers and internet service providers should work with support organisations to improve their response to their customers who disclose abuse and to help ensure individuals using their services are safe online
- Increase the number of police officers and/or staff who are trained in obtaining digital forensic evidence
- Raise awareness amongst the general public about safety precautions that can be taken online and inform them about what can be done should they experience cyberstalking.

Rachel Griffin, Director of Suzy Lamplugh Trust

Emma's¹⁷ ex-partner stalked and harassed her online after they had broken up.



Ultimately he sent me several hundred messages, texts, emails, and Facebook chats – more than ten messages every day in one medium alone. It was only when I contacted the police, who went to talk to him, that he stopped trying to contact me. For years afterwards, I wouldn't answer a call from a number I didn't know, wouldn't open emails from unrecognised email address, and was nervous about Facebook because I was scared I'd have messages from him. My privacy settings are as high as they can be, I never check in, and I approve all posts before they go on my timeline, because he would contact me talking about stuff I'd done as though he'd been there, and I knew he'd seen it on Facebook even though I'd blocked him.

When Nimko Ali appeared in a London newspaper discussing Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) she was not prepared for the onslaught of abuse and harassment it caused her. She experienced a range of online abuse including death threats for 'daring' to talk about FGM and the impact on women and girls in public. This had a huge impact on her and caused her anxiety and stress.

¹⁷ Names have been changed to protect identities.

RESPONSE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PROVIDERS



The use of social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook has risen dramatically over the past few years. Twitter, with 140 million users worldwide, now boasts over 10 million users in the UK with 80% of those accessing the social media site on a mobile phone¹⁸. The Office of National Statistics' (ONS) latest release of internet use by adults in Great Britain shows that 53% use the internet for social networking activities; this has risen from 45% in 2011¹⁹. Those aged 16 to 24 years old are the most likely age group to use social networking²⁰. This is the same age group that is most likely to experience domestic violence.

With social media becoming an integral part of so many of our lives it is vital that it is a safe space for everyone to use and not a playground for domestic violence perpetrators and abusers of women.

Many aspects of social media that make online abuse, stalking and harassment easy for perpetrators were highlighted at the Women's Aid conference. Jennifer Perry talked about the 'digital advantage' that perpetrators have in social media as it is inexpensive to access, they are anonymous, and it enables them to monitor a woman, gather information about them and spread that information publically all from the comfort of their home.

When Caroline Criado-Perez reported the abuse she was experiencing (and the failure of the current blocking system) to the social media company Twitter, she was faced with a wall of silence. Nimko Ali also talked about the need for more robust reporting systems hosted by social media providers.

Social media providers *can* respond better to women victims of online abuse, harassment and stalking if they choose: with improved reporting and blocking systems, staff training specifically to deal with reports of abuse and engaging with users and experts on how they can improve this aspect of their service.

18 <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2012/may/15/twitter-uk-users-10m>

19 ONS (August 2013) Internet Access - Households and Individuals, 2013

20 Ibid.



RESPONSE OF POLICE

The response that a woman receives when reporting violence, including online abuse, harassment and stalking, is vital in creating a supportive, non-judgemental environment for her. This in turn will lead to better reporting and better outcomes following reports. We know that fear of what will happen when reporting abuse to the police or any other criminal justice agency often prevents women from reporting violence in the first place.

When women do report online abuse, harassment or stalking it is vital that they are believed and treated with respect. It appears, however, that this is not always happening.

Police responses do not always reflect the reality for women. Responses such as “the police said it wasn’t ‘real’ threats as done online,” “Total waste of time, I was told I should forget it,” “it is seen as him sharing his opinion” seem to be typical of the responses domestic violence victims receive from police when they have reported online harassment and abuse. These responses are informed by the prevailing culture of inequality and misogyny: a culture that needs to change if violence against women is ever to be eradicated.

Caroline Criado-Perez received little support from the police when she first reported the online abuse she had been receiving. Initially the police did nothing about the rape and death threats she was receiving online. After national media coverage and background pressure they did investigate what was a crime – a daily deluge of hate speech and harassment. Following investigation of the evidence from the media, two people have subsequently pleaded guilty to sending ‘menacing’ tweets to Caroline and were sentenced to custodial sentences in January 2014.

The police are rightly taking other forms of cyber and e-crime very seriously, for example the Metropolitan Police have established the Police Central e-crime Unit which works towards “the provision of a safer and more secure cyber environment²¹.” Although this unit is designed to tackle the most serious aspects of cyber crime in economic terms, including computer intrusion and internet-enable fraud, it demonstrates the increasing need to tackle online crime and support its victims. The same recognition should be given to online violence, harassment and stalking.

21 <http://content.met.police.uk/Article/What-we-do/1400015320495/pceu>

RESPONSE OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE AGENCIES



Research by Paladin looked at stalking victims' experiences of the criminal justice system. The survey of 140 victims revealed "deep dissatisfaction" with the criminal justice system response to online and offline stalking²². The victims talked about the secondary victimisation they felt when going through the criminal justice system – a response that domestic violence survivors also commonly talk about.

Stalkers steal lives and take lives and they will use any means, including technology to stalk, harass, bully and control their victims. Cyberstalking can be terrifying and, ultimately, it can lead the victim into far greater physical danger when combined with real-world stalking. Some of the most dangerous cases happen when domestic violence, stalking and coercive control occur. This is where women and children are more likely to be murdered and early identification and intervention is vital to saving lives. In fact research shows that one in two domestic violence stalkers, when they make a threat, will act on it²³. Therefore it is important that threats to kill are taken seriously.

Often victims are told to change their phone and stay offline. This is not practical in reality; it further isolates the victim, closing down their space for action, infers it is their behaviour that is the problem and, if fixation is present, the stalker will just find the new number and other ways to track the victim. It is the stalker's behaviour that needs to be held to account and it is vital professionals including the Police and CPS understand the on-line and off-line risks and how to collect evidence when technology is involved.

Laura Richards, Director, Paladin

It is over a year since the new offences of stalking were introduced in the UK yet it appears that there remains much progress to be made in the criminal justice system's understanding of the new offences and how to respond to victims of online abuse, harassment and stalking.

²² *Victim's Voice Survey: the victims experience in the Criminal Justice System*. (Protection against stalking, 2011).

²³ MacKenzie, R. D., McEwan, T. E., Pathé, M. T., James, D. V., Oglloff, J. R. P., & Mullen, P. E. (2009). Stalking risk profile: Guidelines for the assessment and management of stalkers. Melbourne: StalkInc & Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science, Monash University.



CULTURE OF MISOGYNY

Social media does not in itself cause the online abuse, harassment and stalking that women experience. It does not create the misogynistic culture that enables this behaviour to go unchallenged and which is a root cause of violence against women, though it does perpetuate it. This culture needs to be tackled if we are ever going to rid the virtual sphere of abuse, harassment and stalking of women.

The unequal power relations between women and men are not only a cause of this online abuse and violence but also a consequence of the discrimination that women face. The tacit acceptance and unchallenged nature of online abuse, harassment and stalking in society puts women at risk of violence and murder. Only through combating discrimination against women and achieving gender equality can the unacceptable levels of domestic violence in this country genuinely be tackled.

Trigger warning



#tenfeetunder

#godie

Wouldn't mind tying this b***h to my stove

I hope you get r*p*d and die soon after #b***h

Women that talk too much need to get r*p*d

I will find you



Examples of the online abuse received by Caroline Criado-Perez

Women are being targeted by perpetrators on social media and online because of the inequality they experience in society and the sexism that is accepted in our society. Women who stand up for equality and change are targeted for daring to challenge the status quo and speak up for women. For those women that are engaged in campaigning and social change this online abuse and harassment has severe implications as it limits their ability to participate²⁴. This is clearly demonstrated by the experiences of Caroline Criado-Perez following the campaign victory to have a woman on banknotes.

24 For example <http://www.forbes.com/sites/tomwatson/2014/01/20/stifling-womens-online-speech-with-sexual-harassment-why-it-matters-to-social-change-movements/>

Online spaces form a very real part of young people's social environment and individual identity. We do not "switch off" from online spaces, and therefore the impact of stalking/harassment/abuse that occurs online is as real and impactful as any abuse that occurs offline.

We would recommend the following:

- ▶ For all bodies involved in raising awareness around digital stalking and harassment to consider:
 1. the nuanced way in which young people relate to online spaces and how awareness raising material can better reflect the way in which people experience digital stalking and harassment.
 2. how awareness raising material can be used to ensure that people are better equipped to recognise when they themselves or people around them are subject to digital stalking and harassment, including ensuring that the material reflects the diversity of victims.
- ▶ For all bodies interacting with victims (including but not limited to specialist support services, social media providers, police and the criminal justice system) to actively consider what assumptions are being made about the credibility of a victim based on their identity; and how such assumptions could impact subsequent responses towards victims.
- ▶ For bodies responsible for addressing digital stalking and harassment to take it as seriously as they would were it not digital, but to respond in a way which relates to the specificity of online spaces.

Ikamara Larasi and Lia Latchford, Imkaan

A key part of tackling this culture of misogyny and also informing young people about internet safety is prevention through education. Many speakers at the Women's Aid conference called for compulsory relationships and sex education in the National Curriculum to equip young people with the skills and knowledge they need to know what a healthy relationship is and how to seek support if they need it. This education should also cover internet safety and responsible use of social media, ensuring that young people understand that behaviour they would deem unacceptable in "real life" is also unacceptable online. Making relationships and sex education a compulsory part of the National Curriculum is vital if preventative measures on domestic violence are ever to succeed.

It was clear from the conference that there are pockets of knowledge and awareness from a variety of settings. But there is no cohesion between government, professionals, agencies and service providers.

Jemma Price, National CRUSH co-ordinator, West Mercia Women's Aid





SUPPORT FOR SURVIVORS

Women's Aid has shown that there is a crisis of funding for specialist services to meet the needs of survivors of domestic violence, including women who are survivors of online abuse, harassment and stalking²⁵. Services offer holistic women-only support, providing a safe space in which women and their children can rebuild their lives.

Women need to be informed of and be able to access specialist support services that meet their needs following experiences of online abuse. These services should include counselling and other emotional support services, and support with navigating the criminal justice system, as well as outreach support and refuge. The services that best meet women's needs, and what women want, are those that are dedicated gender-specific services delivering specialist support²⁶.

However, these services are under threat. Between 2010/11 and 2011/12 domestic and sexual violence services saw funding cuts of 31%²⁷. These cuts are drastically affecting gender-specific specialist services and the women they support. We know that localism is opening up an accountability vacuum for the funding of these services as the commissioning process doesn't always contain the expertise needed to commission specialist domestic violence services.

Furthermore, Women's Aid Annual Surveys of member services in 2012 and 2013 showed that around a third of respondents that were currently receiving local authority funding stated they would receive less funding in the next financial year (33% and 30% respectively). Women's Aid Annual Survey in 2013 also showed that nearly half of respondents (48%) were running services without any funding at all. This included six refuge services and 9 helpline services²⁸. The sustainability of the domestic violence sector is crucial to enable specialist services to offer the support that women survivors of domestic violence, offline and online, really need.

A common misconception is that victims of domestic violence and abuse will make the police their first port of call when they seek help. In fact, it is frequently only when a woman feels safe through the support from a specialist service that she then feels ready to turn to the criminal justice system. Without the specialist services to support them women survivors of online abuse, harassment and stalking will be deterred from reporting to the police, going through the criminal justice system and seeking the support that they need from the justice system. The effect of this is that perpetrators are not identified and prosecuted, and are free to continue with impunity.

25 *A growing crisis of unmet need*. Women's Aid (2013)

26 *Why women only?* Women's Resource Centre (2007)

27 Towers, J and Walby, S (February 2012) *Measuring the impact of cuts in public expenditure on the provision of services to prevent violence against women and girls*. Lancaster University.

28 Women's Aid Annual Survey 2013

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



The violence women experience from online abuse, stalking and harassment is completely unacceptable. Violence against women is recognised internationally as a violation of women's human rights and a form of discrimination against women²⁹. The impact that this online abuse has on women's lives has been underestimated by all statutory services. It is vital that online abuse, harassment and stalking is seen and dealt with as part of the spectrum of domestic violence.

Women's Aid believes that the responses that women victims of online abuse, harassment and stalking receive from the police, criminal justice system and social media providers are currently inadequate. We call on these agencies and companies to review their policies and procedures for dealing with online abuse, harassment and stalking and ensure that women's safety and protection needs, and preventing the ability of perpetrators to use social media to abuse, are at the heart of how they respond to these crimes.

The Coalition Government's *Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls Action Plan*, published in March 2011, clearly stated its commitment to eradicating violence against women and girls and improving the response that victims receive when reporting³⁰. The update to the Action Plan in 2013 stated that the Government was determined to, "see a society where abuse is no longer tolerated, where all businesses and organisations offer support to those who may be victims, where those affected by domestic or sexual violence feel confident in coming forward to report their experiences and are fully supported for doing so³¹."

When women do receive the response they need in reporting online abuse, harassment and stalking, the support services they need in order to cope and recover from the violence also have to be in place. With a 31% cut in funding for domestic and sexual violence services we are at risk of not being able to meet women's needs arising from online abuse. Women's Aid is calling for sustained and secure funding for the domestic violence sector and specialist gender-specific dedicated services to enable women to access the support they need.

Online abuse, harassment and stalking are caused by negative attitudes to women and sexism in society. The misogyny that feeds and is fed by online abuse, harassment and stalking should be recognised and tackled as this is the root cause of the online abuse that women face every day. Misogyny needs to be tackled and challenged at every level – from the individual social media user to government – only then will the culture that tacitly accepts violence against women begin to crumble.

29 General recommendations made by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. General Recommendation No. 19 (11th session, 1992), see also Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, 2011, (Istanbul Convention) Article 3 – Definitions. The Istanbul Convention was signed by the UK Government in June 2012.

30 Ibid, Home Office (March 2011).

31 Ibid, Home Office (March 2013).

This report demonstrates that online abuse, harassment and stalking often goes hand-in-hand with offline abuse and is all part of the spectrum of domestic violence used by perpetrators to control, intimidate and abuse their partners or ex-partners. It is time this was recognised, and practices developed to make the online world safe for survivors, as we strive to achieve in the offline world.

Recommendations

To prevent and combat online abuse, harassment and stalking, and improve responses for women survivors, Women's Aid recommends:

Government

Addressing the issue of online abuse, harassment and stalking that women experience is a vital part of the Government's ambition to address violence against women and girls.

- The update of the Government Action Plan on VAWG³² should emphasise that online abuse is a key part of violence against women, and state that what is a crime offline is a crime online.
- The Government should ensure sufficient resources are provided by local government to ensure specialist support services are able to meet the needs of women experiencing violence, including online abuse, stalking and harassment.
- The Government needs to look at ways of closing the legislative gaps in domestic violence and addressing criminalising coercive control and patterns of violent behaviour in relationships.
- Relationships and sex education, which includes education on healthy and respectful relationships and internet safety, should be made a statutory part of the National Curriculum for all primary and secondary schools in England.
- Senior members of the Government should publicly condemn online abuse, harassment and stalking, as well as offline abuse and send a clear message to perpetrators that their actions are unacceptable and will be punished.

Social media providers

Ensuring the safety and protection of their users and sanctioning perpetrators of online abuse, harassment and stalking should be a central element of social media providers' service provision.

- Social media providers like Twitter and Facebook should review their policies and procedures to ensure that they actively tackle online abuse, harassment and stalking of women. They should engage users, experts and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport in the review of these policies and procedures.
- Social media providers should ensure that any perpetrator of online abuse, harassment and stalking of women through their platforms is curtailed as soon as possible. This should be done through the development of online abuse, stalking and harassment policies and

32 Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls Action Plan 2011, Home Office (March 2011).

protocols, and creating easier reporting and blocking mechanisms to safeguard victims of abuse.

Criminal justice agencies

Criminal justice agencies should respond appropriately and recognise online abuse, harassment and stalking as a crime and as part of the spectrum of domestic violence.

- Guidance and training should be provided for all professionals engaged in VAWG cases in criminal justice agencies, including the police and the Crown Prosecution Service, on the nature and impact of online abuse, harassment and stalking and the need to recognise it as part of the spectrum of domestic violence perpetrated against women by men.
- Reports from women of online abuse, harassment and stalking should be believed and treated in the same way as reports of offline abuse, harassment and stalking. They should not be looked at in isolation but in conjunction with other reports of abuse or harassment against a certain perpetrator.
- There should be effective and comprehensive training provided for all police officers and criminal justice agencies not only on dealing with reports of online abuse, harassment and stalking but also on the new offences of stalking that came into force in 2012.
- Cases of online abuse should be investigated thoroughly, with evidence obtained to support effective prosecution and perpetrators found guilty should receive punishment that reflects the severity of the crime and the harm done to the victim.

Women's Aid believes that until these changes are made women will continue to experience the devastating impact of online abuse, harassment and stalking as part of a campaign of control by domestic violence perpetrators.

“Women’s Aid helped me to rebuild my life after it had been shattered by years of abuse. Now, instead of being terrified in our home, my kids and I feel safe and secure – we have a happy new life – thank you”

Diane, survivor of abuse.



PLEASE HELP US TO KEEP WOMEN AND CHILDREN SAFE

Since 1974, Women’s Aid has helped millions of women and children living in fear of domestic and sexual violence. Today, we support a network of around 300 local services working to end domestic violence against women and children in England. Our member services are integrated domestic violence service providers delivering a range of holistic services for women experiencing domestic violence and their children. Keeping the voices of survivors at the heart of its work, Women’s Aid campaigns for better support for women and children, provides training and resources for professionals and delivers a package of vital 24 hour lifeline services through publications, websites and the National Domestic Violence Helpline (run in partnership with Refuge).

One in four women experience domestic violence in their lifetime, and two women are killed every week by a current or former partner. To leave an abusive relationship demands incredible courage. Support for women at this critical time can mean the difference between getting out safely or extreme danger – and that’s where Women’s Aid comes in.

We need your support to enable us to continue to protect women and children and help them to move on to happy and healthy lives. The need for our services is huge, however due to the hidden nature of abuse it can be difficult to raise the funds to support every woman or child who needs our help.

To make a donation visit www.womensaid.org.uk/donate or text **ACT to 70300 to donate £3*** and play your part in making a difference for abused women and children across England.

* 100% of donation goes to Women’s Aid Registered Charity No: 1054154

Whether you work with survivors, deliver a service, or are an employer wanting to support your staff, our unrivalled knowledge and expertise will equip you with the tools to understand and respond effectively to domestic violence.

Qualifications

The Award is a nationally recognised qualification that was specifically developed for those whose work brings them into direct contact with women and children experiencing domestic violence (for example Social Workers or Civil Servants). This qualification is also suitable for volunteers who work in the domestic violence sector.

The Certificate qualifies professionals as a Domestic Abuse Prevention Advocate (DAPA) and enables you to become a registered practitioner. Practitioner's are registered at the point of qualifying.

The Diploma is the highest level of qualification delivered in the sector, available only to those who have completed the Certificate.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Training Courses

Supporting survivors as a McKenzie Friend in court

Following cuts to Legal Aid, this course will give you the relevant knowledge of family law to become a 'McKenzie Friend' for survivors representing themselves in court.

Supporting Eastern European women living in the UK – available 2014

Offer better advice and support by improving your understanding of domestic violence in relation to Eastern European women migrating to the UK.

Domestic violence and teenage relationships

The Home Office definition for domestic violence has recently reduced the age of victims from 18 to 16. This training day aims to cover issues and possible implications for help and support for people who experience or perpetrate domestic abuse in teenage relationships.

Domestic violence and the impact on children and young people

This training day is a must for professionals whose work brings them into contact with children and young people with current or previous experiences of domestic violence.

To find out more about all the training opportunities available with Women's Aid visit www.nationaltrainingcentre.org.uk

Contact us on 0117 944 7190, or training@womensaid.org.uk

Virtual world, real fear: Women's Aid report into online abuse, harassment and stalking

Women's Aid Federation of England,
PO Box 391, Bristol, BS99 7WS
T: 0117 944 4411 F: 0117 924 1703
E: info@womensaid.org.uk W: www.womensaid.org.uk www.thehideout.org.uk

0808 2000 247
Freephone 24 Hour National Domestic Violence Helpline
(run in partnership between Women's Aid and Refuge)

© Women's Aid 2014 ISBN 978-0-907817-77-2