ORIGINAL ARTICLE

"What's Mum's Password?": Australian Mothers' Perceptions of Children's Involvement in Technology-Facilitated Coercive Control

Molly Dragiewicz[1] · Delanie Woodlock[2] · Michael Salter[2] · Bridget Harris[3]

Abstract

This is the first article to analyze children's involvement in technology-facilitated coercive control in Australia. The primary research question was ''How do mothers describe their children's involvement in technology-facilitated coercive control?''. This article is based on incidental findings from a larger study on Australian women's experiences of technology-facilitated abuse in the context of domestic violence. Although children were not the focus of the study, semi-structured interviews with twelve mothers yielded discussion of children's involvement in the abuse. We used thematic analysis to identify key dynamics and contexts of this abuse. We found that mothers and their children are co-victims of coercive control. Mothers interviewed for the study reported that children were involved in technology-facilitated coercive control directly and indirectly. This study bridges the gap between the extant research on children and coercive control and technology-facilitated abuse by highlighting the ways children are involved in technology-facilitated coercive control. The social and legal contexts of co-parenting with abusive fathers exposed mothers and children to ongoing post-separation abuse, extending abusive fathers' absent presence in the lives of children

Keywords Coercive Control · Children · Women · Technology · Domestic Violence · Digital Media · Cybercrime

Introduction

Domestic violence is one of Australia's most serious social problems. Its impact is felt across major social systems such as healthcare, justice, and government. Conservative estimates from Australia's Personal Safety Survey indicate that 17% of women have experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or previous partner since the age of 15 (Australian Institute and of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2019, p. vii).[1] About one fifth of hospitalizations for assault injury in Australia are due to partner violence (AIHW, 2019, p. 28). Approximately one third of civil cases finalized in magistrates' courts involve family or domestic violence protection orders (AIHW, 2019, p. 24). Altogether, intimate partner violence against Australian women cost an estimated $22 billion in 2015–2016 (KPMG, 2016, p. 4). Technology-facilitated coercive control has been linked to serious outcomes for children, including domestic and family homicide (Domestic and Family Violence Death Review and Advisory Board, 2019).

Domestic violence is a form of gendered violence, meaning that it is primarily directed against women and disproportionately affects women due to pervasive patriarchal structural inequality (Dragiewicz & Lindgren, 2009; Šimonović, 2018). But children are also deeply affected by men's domestic violence against women. The convergence of women's and children's risks make it important to discuss children's involvement in technology-facilitated abuse. Accordingly, this is the first article to examine children's involvement in technology-facilitated coercive control in Australia. The research question explored in depth in this article is: ''How do mothers describe their children's involvement in technology-facilitated coercive control?'' The article reports on incidental findings from a larger study on Australian women's experiences of technology-facilitated

✉ Molly Dragiewicz
m.dragiewicz@griffith.edu.au

1 Griffith University, Southport, QLD, Australia

2 University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW, Australia

3 Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, QLD, Australia

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[1] For a discussion of the measurement limitations of the Personal Safety Survey and relative merits of data sources, see (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013, pp. 14–18).
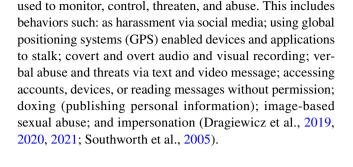
abuse in the context of domestic violence. It is based on interviews with the 12 mothers in that study who discussed of their children's exposure to technology-facilitated abuse. The article contributes to two bodies of research on children's involvement in coercive control and the role of technology in coercive control.

In the sections below, we first define key terms and concepts. Second, we review the literatures on children's involvement in coercive control and technology-facilitated coercive control. Third, we outline "absent presence," the conceptual framework for the article. Fourth, we describe the study methodology. Fifth, we present study results, using examples from the interviews to illustrate important themes. We discuss how mothers and children are co-victims of technology-facilitated abuse; show how parenting is a key site of technology-facilitated coercive control; discuss mothers' experiences reporting technology-facilitated abuse to police; and describe the impact of technology-facilitated abuse on children and parenting. Finally, we conclude with discussion of the implications of the study, with study limitations, and suggested directions for future research.

Key Terms

In Stark's (2007) formulation, coercive control is an ongoing pattern of physical, sexual, or non-physical abuse against current or former intimate partners in which male abusers leverage social and structural gender inequality to effectively restrict women's liberty. Coercive control is a re-articulation of earlier feminist theories of men's abuse of female intimate partners as multicausal and engendered by persistent, historical, deeply gendered forms of power and control in heterosexual families (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Donovan & Hester, 2014; Radford & Hester, 2006). In coercive control, the combination of persistent micromanagement via non-physical abuse, credible threats of physical and sexual violence, gendered relationship norms, and structural gender inequality entraps women in abusive relationships (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Stark, 2007).[2] Coercive control is commonly understood as the social problem of domestic violence. Therefore, in this article, we use the terms domestic violence and coercive control interchangeably.

Technology-facilitated coercive control is a subset of domestic violence aided by digital media and devices. Technology-facilitated coercive control includes tactics

used to monitor, control, threaten, and abuse. This includes behaviors such: as harassment via social media; using global positioning systems (GPS) enabled devices and applications to stalk; covert and overt audio and visual recording; verbal abuse and threats via text and video message; accessing accounts, devices, or reading messages without permission; doxing (publishing personal information); image-based sexual abuse; and impersonation (Dragiewicz et al., 2019, 2020, 2021; Southworth et al., 2005).

Literature Review

This article contributes to two rapidly evolving bodies of literature. We begin by reviewing key findings from the research on children's involvement in coercive control. We then highlight emerging research on the role of technology in coercive control. Both areas are increasingly important to contemporary understandings of domestic violence. This article fills a gap at the convergence of these two areas of interdisciplinary research by positioning mothers' reports of children's involvement in technology-facilitated coercive control in the context of the extant literature.

Children and Coercive Control

Practitioners have long recognized men "using the children" as a core component of heterosexual domestic violence. It is one of the tactics on the original Power and Control Wheel published in 1984 (Pence & Paymar, 1993, p. 3). Social work and health scholars have led the research on the many ways in which children are involved in domestic violence. Over time, concerns about children witnessing domestic violence have evolved into a nuanced discussion of children's exposure to domestic violence (Holden, 2003; Holt et al., 2008; Øverlien & Holt, 2019). As Holden explains, "'Exposed' is a better term than 'witnessed' or 'observed' because it is more inclusive of different types of experiences and does not assume that the child actually observed the violence" (2003, p. 151). Characterizations of children as passive witnesses to violent incidents are now outdated as many studies have documented how children actively manage and resist ongoing physical and non-physical abuse (Dragiewicz et al., 2020; Edleson et al., 2003; Feresin et al., 2019; Johnson, 2005; Katz, 2016; Katz et al., 2020; McGee, 2000; Morris et al., 2015; Mullender et al., 2002; Øverlien & Holt, 2019; Radford & Hester, 2006). Katz (2016) suggests that the coercive control frame can help draw attention to the overall pattern of ongoing non-physical abuse that jointly affects mothers and their children in addition to physical violence.

Key to understandings of children's role in coercive control is recognizing that many abusers who are fathers use children as a core tactic in abuse targeting mothers (Bancroft

[2] Stark's articulation of coercive control is based on research on heterosexual women. This framing is sufficient for the purposes of this article based on interviews with heterosexual women with male abusers. While researchers like Donovan and Hester (2014) have begun to empirically investigate and explain how coercive control can be adapted and applied to same-sex couples, this literature is beyond the purview of this study and therefore not discussed here.

et al., 2012; Harne, 2011; Jaffe et al., 2003). This has significant implications for family dynamics and children's well-being (Bancroft et al., 2012; Harne, 2011; Katz, 2016). Recent research has highlighted multiple ways children are involved in coercive control including as direct victims; through exposure to violence against their mothers, siblings, and pets; trying to intervene in the abuse; being caught in the middle of violence directed at mothers; and by being manipulated into participating in the abuse (Callaghan et al., 2018; Harne, 2011; Jaffe et al., 2003; Katz, 2016; Katz et al., 2020; McDonald et al., 2015). In the first study designed to investigate the ways abusers use children to harm and control women, Beeble et al. (2007) found that 88% of mothers who were domestic violence survivors in their sample reported abusers using children against them for purposes such as: staying in their lives (70%), keeping track of them (69%), harassing them (58%), or intimidating them (58%). Mothers also reported that abusers tried to turn children against them (47%) or used children to frighten them (44%) (2007, p. 57).

Domestic violence has been found to have a wide range of outcomes for children. For example, children exposed to domestic violence may be more vulnerable than other children to negative outcomes such as developmental delays, cognitive impairment, internalizing and externalizing behaviors, emotional problems, diminished school performance, homelessness, and death (Bancroft et al., 2012; Callaghan et al., 2018; Campo, 2015; DFVDRUAB, 2019; Harne, 2011; Johnson, 2005; Holt et al., 2008). At the same time, children's responses to domestic violence are heterogenous and can vary amongst children in the same family, depending on the nature and duration of the abuse and children's risk and protective factors (Buckley et al., 2007; Holt et al., 2008; Katz, 2019; Stanley et al., 2012). Domestic violence also affects parenting. Abusers may deliberately undermine relationships between mothers and children and these relationships may be indirectly harmed by the overall dynamics of abuse. The effects of domestic violence may have deleterious consequences for abused women's abilities to optimally parent their children (Bancroft et al., 2012; Harne, 2011; Jaffe et al., 2003; Katz, 2019).

Children's role in abuse often escalates at separation, similar to men's violence against women (Campo, 2015; Dragiewicz et al., 2019, 2020, 2021; Holt, 2015; Jaffe et al., 2003; Katz et al., 2020; Markwick et al., 2019). As abusers lose other avenues to control estranged partners, post-separation parenting may become a key site for continued abuse. Domestic violence offenders frequently use family law systems and child contact as opportunities to continue abuse (Bancroft et al., 2012; Campo, 2015; Crossman et al., 2016; Elizabeth, 2017; Feresin et al., 2019; Harne, 2011; Jaffe et al., 2003; Johnson, 2005; Katz et al., 2020; Kaye et al., 2003; Mullender et al., 2002; Radford & Hester, 2006). In Australia, Kaye, Stubbs and Tolmie's study of 40 mothers

who had to negotiate and facilitate contact arrangements with abusive ex-partners found that 97.5% of these women were abused post-separation, with 85.7% of resident parents abused in the context of child contact (2003, p. 25). In Radford and Hester's studies in the UK, 92–94% of women were abused in the context of child contact (2006, p. 91). In Italy, Feresin et al. found that 78.9% of separated women experienced abuse in the context of post-separation parenting with their abusers (2019, p. 481). The manipulation of legal systems as tools to abuse is known as "systems abuse" (Douglas, 2018) or "paper abuse" (Miller & Smolter, 2011). In this type of abuse, perpetrators use legal processes to retain access to victims and extend the duration of coercive control post-separation.

Abuse in the context of post-separation co-parenting can be lethal. Data from Australia's National Homicide Monitoring Programs show that that parental separation is a key risk factor for filicide, citing numerous examples of children killed on access visits (Kirkwood, 2013). The Queensland Domestic and Family Violence Death Review and Advisory Board (DFVDRUAB) also identified custody and access disputes as a lethality risk factor, with 30% of filicide cases in the 2018–2019 reporting period occurring in this setting (DFVDRUAB, 2019, p. 62). This demonstrates the need to understand and intervene in domestic violence whether it occurs in the context of pre- or post-separation co-parenting.

Technology-Facilitated Coercive Control

Scholars have begun to investigate the role of technology in coercive control. As digital media and devices play a growing role in our daily lives, they have become integral to intimate relationships. While most Internet users report that technology has a positive effect on their relationships, about a quarter report that the impact of technology is mixed or mostly negative (Lenhart & Duggan, 2014, p. 15). To date, research on domestic violence and technology has documented abusers' use of technology to engage in traditional coercive and controlling behaviors such as isolation, verbal abuse, stalking, physical abuse, and sexual abuse more easily than in the past. Digital technologies have also made novel forms of abuse possible (Dimond et al., 2011; Dragiewicz et al., 2019, 2020, 2021; Freed et al., 2017; Hand et al., 2009; Harris & Woodlock, 2019; Markwick et al., 2019). For example, abusers can now enlist strangers in networked abuse, participate in online image based sexual abuse, and engage in doxing (Dunn, 2020).

Australian research with adult survivors of technology-facilitated coercive control has found that everyday technologies like texting, emailing, GPS, cloud-based storage, and Facebook monitoring are most frequently used by abusers. Technology-facilitated abuse often increases rather than desisting or decreasing at separation, with post-separation
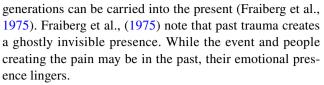
co-parenting a key site of technology-facilitated abuse (Dragiewicz et al., 2019, 2020, 2021; Harris & Woodlock, 2019). Despite being non-physical and often minimized by police and courts, technology-facilitated abuse intensifies the effects of domestic violence (Dragiewicz et al., 2019). The spaceless characteristic of technology-facilitated abuse, wherein abusers can contact their targets any time regardless of their physical location, exacerbates the harm of abuse before and after separation (Dragiewicz et al., 2019, 2021). The networked character of technology-facilitated coercive control also enables abusers to enlist others in contacting victims to participate as proxy abusers or encourage reconciliation (Dragiewicz et al., 2019, 2020, 2021).

Domestic violence scholars have identified an "intimate threat model" for cybercrime in the context of domestic and family violence. The intimate threat model includes risks due to intentional sharing of passwords, accounts and devices; intimate knowledge that allows guessing of passwords or answering security questions; and physical access to passwords, accounts, networks, and devices (Dragiewicz et al., 2019, 2020, 2021). Intimate relationships are a unique and under-investigated cybersecurity environment (Doerfler, 2019). One American study reported that 67% of Internet users share passwords for online accounts with partners (Lenhart & Duggan, 2014). These sharing behaviors are even more common for parents, 71% of whom share passwords with partners (Lenhart & Duggan, 2014, p. 10).

The combination of children's central role in coercive control, increasing use of technology in abuse, and unique cybersecurity risks in intimate and family relationships merits targeted investigation. There is a need to critically assess the role of technology in coercive control in families. As qualitative research on technology use by domestic violence perpetrators is still emerging (Markwick et al., 2019), this article fills a key gap in the research on how children are involved in technology-facilitated coercive control, drawing on interviews with abused mothers.

Conceptual Framework

Thiara and Humphreys (2017) use the concept of "absent presence" to describe how fathers and stepfathers who are perpetrators of domestic violence remain involved in mothers' and children's lives after separation. This presence manifests via the lasting traumatic effects of prior violence and ongoing coercive controlling contact with mothers and children. The concept of absent presence has a long philosophical history, challenging the notion that absence and presence must be understood as mutually exclusive (Gergen, 2002). Absent presence also has its roots in studies of intergenerational trauma, where trauma and pain inflicted on previous

generations can be carried into the present (Fraiberg et al., 1975). Fraiberg et al., (1975) note that past trauma creates a ghostly invisible presence. While the event and people creating the pain may be in the past, their emotional presence lingers.

Gergen (2002) has used the concept of absent presence to describe the ways information and communication technologies can render us physically present yet consciously absorbed elsewhere. Gergen describes absent presence as the "diverted or divided consciousness invited by communication technology, and most particularly the mobile telephone. One is physically present but is absorbed by a technologically mediated world of elsewhere" (2002, p. 227).

This article synthesizes Thiara and Humphreys' (2017) and Gergen's (2002) framings of absent presence to examine how information and communication technologies can amplify and extend perpetrators' abusive absent presence in the lives of children and mothers. We theorize intrusive absent presence via technology as a mechanism of coercive control. Our findings show how technology has become a key component of coercive control of mothers and their children (Katz, 2016).

Methodology

This article reports incidental findings from a larger study on Australian women's experiences of technology-facilitated coercive control. The overall study included semi-structured interviews with 20 survivors of domestic violence in Queensland and New South Wales (for more information see Dragiewicz et al., 2019). Fourteen participants in the full study were mothers. Twelve of these 14 women discussed their children's involvement in technology-facilitated coercive control. This article is based on semi-structured interviews with those 12 mothers.

Qualitative research on survivors' experiences of abuse is essential because identical behaviors and technologies can be used to establish and enforce coercive control or to survive, resist, and protect others from abuse (Dragiewicz et al., 2019; Northwest Network, 2017). As a result, quantitative research on abuse is insufficient to provide a holistic picture of coercive control (Noble-Carr et al., 2020). Qualitative approaches to studying abuse are deeply important due to the context-dependent meaning of behaviors. Non-physical forms of coercive control and ambiguous uses of technology in intimate relationships are notoriously difficult to measure (Brown & Hegarty, 2018; Dragiewicz, forthcoming). Accordingly, this study addresses this deficit by using semi-structured interviews to collect rich, deeply contextualized data on women's reports of children's involvement in technology-facilitated coercive control.

Survivors were asked questions about demographics, their experiences of technology-facilitated coercive control, the effects of the abuse, help-seeking strategies, and recommendations for improving responses to this type of abuse. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Survivors received a $50 gift card as a token of appreciation for their contribution to the research. The study was funded by the Australian Communications Consumer Action Network Grant *Domestic violence and communication technology: Victim experiences of intrusion, surveillance, and identity theft* (2017–2018). Ethical approval was provided by Queensland University of Technology's Office of Research Ethics and Integrity (QUT Ethics Approval numbers 1900000218 and 1800000562) and Western Sydney University (External Ethics Approval Recognition number H12987).

Sampling and Recruitment

This study used a convenience sample. Our recruitment methods were designed to minimize risks to survivors. Potential participants who had experienced technology-facilitated abuse in the context of domestic violence were identified by women's legal services in Queensland and New South Wales. Service staff reviewed recruitment documents with potential participants. The services organized interviews with participants. Participants were interviewed via phone or face-to-face depending on their preference. The services provided a deidentified phone number to conduct phone interviews and private space at their offices for face-to-face interviews. As the services are experienced at working with domestic violence, they used established, survivor-centered, communication practices to ensure the safety of participants. This involved individualized communication protocols based on women's specific situations. Interviews began in 2018 and finished in 2019.

Participants

Participants were 12 mothers who were 31 to 65 years old, with an average age of 42. The women were born in Australia (6), India (2), Northern Ireland (1), Italy (1), South Africa (1) and Japan (1). None of the women identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Pseudonyms are used to identify participants in this article.

Data Analysis

Findings from the full study are published elsewhere (Dragiewicz et al., 2019, 2021). This study used thematic analysis to interpret the interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the initial open coding phase for the full

study, [blinded for review] used a semantic approach to coding, wherein we sought to identify patterns in participants' explicit statements and meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When meeting to discuss the initial codes, we realized that many mothers in the study had volunteered information about incidents involving their children, despite not being questioned about that. Based on this information, we decided to proceed with a separate analysis of this subset of interviews.

In the second phase of coding, Woodlock and Dragiewicz re-coded the full set of interviews with mothers (N = 14), identifying all cases where the mothers discussed technology-facilitated coercive control involving children (N = 12). We used the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software NVivo to produce a coding summary of discrete themes and exemplars that contributed to answering our research question. During this axial coding phase, we applied a template approach to analysis. Template analysis is appropriate when researchers have identified some a priori themes but remain open to identifying additional themes based on the data (King et al., 2019). We developed a template based on the phase one coding, adding to it and adjusting as we re-coded each interview to focus on children. After fully re-coding all interviews wherein mothers talked about children's exposure to technology-facilitated coercive control, Dragiewicz, Woodlock, Salter and Harris developed higher order themes helped to build understanding of the abuse and its impact. In the interpretation phase of coding, we identified links with previous research on children and domestic violence and technology-facilitated abuse. In this phase, we found that the concept of absent presence (Gergen, 2002; Thiara & Humphreys, 2017) provided a useful theoretical framework for interpreting the data.

Results

Mothers and Children as Co-Victims of Technology-Facilitated Abuse

Our findings show that mothers and their children are co-victims of technology-facilitated abuse. We use the term co-victims to indicate that mothers and children are jointly victimized in domestic violence (Nagia-Luddy & Mathews, 2011). For example, children's control over their devices and accounts was compromised by perpetrators seeking to surveil and control their mothers. Mothers reported that perpetrators tracked and monitored their partners and children pre- and post-separation. For Sarah, this began after the birth of her first child, when her abuser turned on a GPS tracking app on her phone. Sarah explained:

...he said at the beginning, this way I can see when you're coming - because when we had our little daughter, being a newborn, he said, "Oh, it will be much easier because then I can see you both."

Aoife's devices were purchased by her abusive partner. Aoife said:

All our phones, my own phone, my two elder daughters who had phones, any iPads or anything that was purchased, was purchased by him, set up by him, email accounts were set up by him, everything.

In these examples, abusers explained control over the family's devices and accounts as a form of care for mothers and children during the relationship, justified by the men's putative technical expertise. After separation, abusers' control over accounts and devices often continued, making it difficult for women and children to use technology safely. As many women could not afford to get new devices for themselves or their children, they had to risk the ongoing use of phones and tablets that may have been compromised by ex-partners. Yume explained:

My ex-husband bought the iPhone for me and my daughter. Since we separated I don't have a lot of money. I have hardly any money. Everyone tells me to get a new phone but I don't have money to do that. Because he bought the iPhone he has the 'find my phone' app turned on and he knows where we are.

In this example, technology enabled perpetrators to be present in ways not previously possible post-separation, such as tracking women and children from a distance. This pattern of technological surveillance demonstrates the capacity of technology to suffuse family networks with the absent presence of abusers and perpetuate patterns of coercive control established during the relationship.

Parenting as a Key Site of Technology-Facilitated Coercive Control

As discussed above, parenting is often a key site of coercive control in couples with children. Abusers exploited this issue in a variety of ways pre- and post-separation. Coercive control may occur while the couple is still together, and often continues in the context of court ordered and voluntary co-parenting with abusers post-separation.

Technology-Facilitated Systems Abuse

Anaya and Michelle reported that their abusers engaged in image management around parenting. Their abusers put false claims in writing in apparent preparation for future parenting disputes. Anaya explained how her partner used emails about parenting arrangements to document the false claim that he was providing a high level of financial support for their son. In reality, he paid little child support, but his emails left a paper trail to the contrary. Anaya said:

[I]n the emails he is writing, "I am always there for my son. I can support him financially" - this and that - but in the [child support], he is paying $34 per month for a child. Even the nappies cost me more than that. This is how the technology abuse [works] - that they are writing something else in the email that "Okay, we can do this for our child, we can do that for [our] child," and in the reality, he is paying $34 for his son.

Likewise, Michelle felt that her abuser used parenting communication as a way to attack her, shaping a narrative in which he was the victim. Michelle said:

Yeah, look, so he does it through email and through the solicitor now. But he messaged me last night, or the night before he messaged me and was telling me how I was dragging us through court. He's trying to make it - he's very much [the] one [saying] that "It's your fault. I don't take any responsibility for it."

Some abusers used video technology to manipulate interactions around child contact to their benefit. Sarah was subjected to various forms of monitoring and surveillance by her abuser during the relationship, including via video and recording devices. After separation, Sarah's abuser continued to take video recordings of her, particularly during handovers in front of their child. Sarah explained:

I guess there was a lot more taking videos afterwards, after I left, that was probably less beforehand because he had full access to me. So I noticed that a lot more, like he would - the surveillance would go to direct videoing of me, I guess gathering evidence.

Jessica felt exhausted from the amount of work she had to do to keep her and her child safe. In particular, she mentioned being drained from having to give her abuser monthly updates about her child via email. These were legally required, but they allowed her abuser to twist her words and use anything she said against her. Jessica explained how the obligation to communicate with her abuser via technology affected her parenting.

I have to give him a monthly update via email, and I can't even tell you how that - it makes for a lot of pressure on me, when I feel like I have to be very - everything's always thrown and twisted around, thrown back at me, so I'm kind of in fear of - I go over it. It takes me hours and hours to send a simple update email with some pictures, and then I become so stressed where

then I'm not being able to be there for my son, you know, emotionally or physically.

Having to communicate with abusers about children, knowing that this was an avenue for ongoing abuse, made mothers vulnerable at a time where they needed to recover from abuse and support children's healing. As these examples show, some abusers used technology in a performative type of image management, cultivating a false impression of their involvement in the family and seeking to gather evidence that could be used against mothers in the future. Requirements for post-separation contact also provided an avenue for abusers to enforce ongoing communication despite separation due to abuse, backed up by the power of the State.

Pressuring Children to Provide Passwords to Mothers' Accounts

Aoife gave a detailed description of how her ex-partner involved their daughters in technology-facilitated abuse. During the relationship, he expected to have access to Aoife's phone, obsessing over the details of her phone calls. She began to thwart his behavior by changing her password. When she refused to provide it, the abuser moved on to his daughters, pressuring them to provide the new password. Aoife said:

I started putting a new passcode on and then if he couldn't get into my phone, he would ask me for the passcode. If I didn't want to give it, that would start a huge fight. If I didn't give it, he would go and demand my two older girls to "give me mum's, do you know mum's password? Give me the password!" Yeah, so it would just get into a whole argument.

When Aoife's daughters resisted his interference with Aofie's phone, he retaliated with verbal abuse against one daughter. Aoife explained:

[S]he said to him, "why are you doing that to mum's phone?" Because I must have left it on the settee whenever I'd walked out to the kitchen. "What are you doing with mum's phone? Why are you doing that?" He just fired it down on the settee, and he said to her, she's written this down but he said to her, "you're nothing but a sneaky bitch."

Aoife's abuser expected their daughters to remain silent about his misuse of her phone and supply him with information about her login details. This expectation placed them in an uncomfortable position: they could obey their father and betray their mother or disobey their father and risk abuse. Aofie reported that this double bind caused her daughters a great deal of anxiety.

Julia also reported that her abuser pressured her son to provide login information to his father:

He gets my number through my son - yeah he gets it through our son. So when my son will go stay with him, he will get my phone number out of his phone. Even like with Netflix, just a couple of months ago he was saying to our son, "oh just give me the password to your mum's Netflix account" and he's like "no."

In this example, Julia's abuser would use their child to get contact and account information without permission.

Using Children to Transport Devices

Children were also indirectly used by their fathers to track and monitor their mothers via items passed back and forth between each parent's house. Aoife's daughter was given an iPad by her father that she took back to the refuge they fled to when escaping abuse. The device had GPS tracking enabled. Because of the potential risk, Aoife and her children were forced to move to another refuge. Several other women in the study were fearful about the ways that abusers could use children's belongings to monitor and track them using technology. Women worried about toys and devices their children brought home after seeing their fathers. Michelle articulated her fears:

It scares me that if that iPad went to his dad's house, that his dad has downloaded something so that he can sit here, and he can turn it on and listen to what we're saying. It's just frightening, even though I know this all sounds really stupid. I would check my son's bag when it would come back to make sure it didn't have any listening devices in it.

Similarly, Sarah reported checking everything when her daughter returned from visits with her father:

I check every time - every time our daughter comes home to me, we check everything for devices. And just you know if I can wash a toy, I'll wash it, just in case there's something in it, but yeah, we just check for things.

While women sometimes felt that such checking and rechecking made them seem paranoid, it is clear that some perpetrators do use the children to deliver compromised devices.

Using Video Calls with Children to Engage in Reconnaissance

Abusers also used video calls with children to gather information about their whereabouts and activities. Sarah was

under pressure from her abuser to allow their child to Face-Time with him even though this was not a condition of their court order. Sarah said:

> Something that really increased post-separation was FaceTime - my God that's a nightmare. So we had court orders that we were both allowed to call two times in a week whoever - wherever our daughter was, and he insisted on FaceTime even though in our orders it said by telephone and by Skype…. you know he asked her questions about everything in our house and in her room. We'd just moved to a new apartment and he's going "oh show me this, show me that."

Using video calls with children to gather information about the family's whereabouts and activities was a particular challenge for mothers, most of whom were trying to facilitate safe communication between the children and their fathers despite the abuse.

Impersonation

One perpetrator contacted his child via technology in a way she experienced as harassing and intimidating. Post-separation paternal harassment caused confusion and upset for children that was further amplified when fathers engaged in outright deception. Yume reported that her abuser contacted her daughter on Instagram by impersonating a child. Yume explained:

> [My daughter] has an Instagram account and her father messaged her on Instagram pretending to be her friend from school. Then my daughter found out it was him and she had so many feelings. She was angry and scared and worried that he pretended to be her friend and she thought it was her friend.

Yume's daughter was deeply disturbed by her father's conduct. She became afraid of her father and refused contact with him, including his efforts at video chat and text messaging. However, when she disengaged from him technologically, he insisted on seeing his daughter in person. Yume continued:

> When my daughter got scared of him and stopped doing FaceTime and stopped texting he said he would come to see the kids directly. I told him "No, that would scare them," trying to help them but he didn't listen. He showed up at the pool, twice.

In this case, technology provided a mode by which the abuser could continue his control and surveillance of Yume and her children post-separation. When technology-facilitated contact was interrupted, he sought to re-establish control in person.

Abuse by Proxy

Some mothers in the study reported that abusers recruited other family members to contact their children via technology when the children refused to talk with them. For example, Yume's daughter would often receive messages from her stepbrother, pressuring her to contact her father. Yume said:

> He also has a son from a previous marriage that my daughter thinks of like a brother, and sometimes her father has him message my daughter and say things for the father like "why won't you talk to him?" So he's using his other son to contact her for him because they are close.

In this way, Yume's child's father did not need to be physically present in his daughter's life to exert control over her. Technology facilitated a variety of methods of control for abusive fathers. Impersonating others online and recruiting proxy abusers to contact children on their behalf extended abusers' reach, leaving children and their mothers with a constricted sense of safety and freedom.

Mothers' Experiences Reporting Technology-Facilitated Abuse to Police

Unfortunately, women's efforts to curtail technology-facilitated abuse could go unsupported by police, who seemed not to grasp the double bind faced by women who were required to remain in communication with abusers about parenting matters. For example, Ajinder was blamed for providing her email address. She explained:

> I just called a police officer, [to say] that I'm getting this type of emails, and they said, "Why are you giving him the email, your own email? Why [did] you disclose to him? It's not an abuse." So I told my social worker, and this is happening, [the police] said that "It's your fault. You disclosed the email to him." So my social worker just called them, like, to the Police, and talked about this matter. She told them that I had to disclose the email just because of the children, and you can't say it like this to her. Then they took the action.

Similarly, Jessica reported her abuser breaching a protection order via abusive emails, yet she was admonished by police for allowing contact. Jessica said:

> I went back with more breaches, whereas this time the police officer that did the reporting was saying, you know, "you need to make it no contact." I'm trying to say, "well, I've been legally told because of the situation with trying to arrange stuff with the son, trying to get him to go to mediation or do supervised visitations…" or something along those lines.

These examples show the challenges posed by conflicting mandates to facilitate communication between children and abusers and to cut off all contact with abusers.

Impact of Technology-Facilitated Abuse on Children and Parenting

Fear of abusers' presence online shaped mothers' and children's technology use. Some mothers restricted their own and their children's Internet access in order to try and increase safety. Others were forced to endure GPS-facilitated stalking due to the high cost of mobile devices and plans or fear that risk would escalate if they blocked their abuser's access.

Relationship Strain Between Mothers and Children

Aoife's ex-partner's technology-facilitated abuse meant that she held concerns about her teenage daughters' use of social media, causing her to restrict their usage. Aoife said:

> They don't - well they do have Facebook accounts but they don't use them, and I've told them not to use them. I'm even worried about that because if I send an email photo home of us or anything, I'm worried that with this geotagging and everything that he'd have it.

Aoife's reasons for restricting her children's use of social media were protective. However, Aofie perceived that limiting the children's social media use had negatively affected her relationships with her daughters. Aoife suggested that there should be training for children around the safe use of technology so her children would not dismiss her concerns as overprotective. Mitigating the risk of her partner's technological surveillance stressed Aoife's relationship with her daughters, introducing a new source of frustration into circumstances already strained by abuse, separation, and relocation.

Precarious Access to Basic Services Essential to Parenting

Other participants noted that financial abuse and limited support payments made access to phone service precarious in ways that affected their parenting. Rebecca said,

> [Vodafone] were ringing me because my bill was overdue…. They were going to cancel my phone. I couldn't lose my phone number because all the schools had the number and it was school holidays, so my kids were at friends' houses and stuff like that. So it made it even more stressful that they were not willing to help in my situation, even just to put me on a minimal payment plan until I found my feet.

This example shows how mobile phone service is essential to mothers. It also demonstrates the burden of losing existing numbers, and the lack of concern from some telecommunications companies. Despite the costs and effects, many women had to close social media accounts and change phone numbers and email addresses due to technology-facilitated coercive control. They also had to monitor children's accounts and devices, respond to perpetrators' emails about child contact in line with legal advice, and gather evidence of domestic violence order breaches for reporting to police.

Repetitive Contact Interrupting Parenting

Mothers described the harmful absent presence of abusive fathers via repetitive, unwanted contact via mobile phones. Several mothers remarked on the fact that abusers would call repetitively during key parenting times, such as when children were preparing to go to school or at mealtimes. Amahle described how her abuser interfered with her parenting via numerous intrusive phone calls:

> I had a thought at one point of oh, if this was the 1990s or something, like I would have some reprieve from this constant availability that I had because of my mobile phone. So that was just, I guess, harassment more like, he was just phoning and wouldn't let me get off the phone with him and I'd be trying to bath or cook dinner for the kids and he'd just be refusing to, and if I hung up he'd call back and it was just, that was harassment I suppose.

Rebecca described a similar dynamic:

> So it's quite stressful because I can't - I'm always jumping whenever my phone rings. My kids, as well - if I get too stressed out, obviously, if they start feeding off the stress, so then they start arguing and fighting, and then it just becomes a big mess.

These quotations reveal the long-lasting harm of domestic violence for mothers and their children. Abusers' absent presence was reflected in the persistent harms of past abuse and ongoing intrusive contact and communication post-separation. These examples illustrate how coercive control affects parenting.

Discussion

Our findings provide novel examples of how technology has become a key component of coercive control. The dynamics discussed in this article contribute to the extant research on children's experiences of coercive control by adding technology into the discussion. Mothers described how children

were indirectly exposed to fathers' technology-facilitated abuse, such as when key parenting tasks were repeatedly interrupted. The accounts show how children were directly abused via technology, such as when one father impersonated a child to speak to his daughter and another father called his daughter "a sneaky bitch" when she refused to provide her mother's password. Participants also recounted how children were drawn into technology-facilitated abuse aimed at the mothers, for example by being asked to provide passwords to abusers or show abusers around their new house via FaceTime. Abuse often escalated at parental separation as abusers lost some avenues of control but gained access to others.

This study indicates that rather than children being passively exposed to abuse as witnesses, women and children are effectively co-victims of technology-facilitated coercive control. This comports with the extant literature on the centrality of children to the dynamics of coercive control, with controlling tactics jointly affecting children and mothers and involving children in diverse ways (Bancroft et al., 2012; Callaghan et al., 2018; Campo, 2015; Feresin et al., 2019; Holt, 2013; Øverlien & Holt, 2019; Katz, 2016; Mullender et al., 2002; Morris et al., 2015). This has significant implications for violence prevention and intervention. As Nagia-Luddy and Mathews (2011) have argued, the failure of systems to identify mothers and children as co-victims of abuse results in missed opportunities for preventing future violence and risks inappropriate interventions. As they explain:

> service providers do not identify the link between experiences of violence against the mother and that of the child as a co-victim. A lack of a gendered understanding of domestic violence clearly impacts on the manner in which services are provided, with the blame placed on women for their abusive situations. (Nagia-Luddy & Mathews, 2011, p. I)

Mothers provided examples of these dynamics in their accounts of reporting technology-facilitated abuse to police.

Technology enabled abusive fathers' absent presence before and after separation, compounding the destabilizing and traumatic dynamics of domestic violence. Our work thus extends upon Gergen (2002) and Thiara and Humphreys' (2017) application of absent presence to the phenomenon of technology-facilitated abuse. Abusers' intrusive absent presence was a mechanism of coercive control which mothers noted had deeply involved and profoundly affected their parenting and children. Technology facilitated ongoing abuse even when perpetrators were not physically present. While Gergen's (2002) concerns were centered on users' voluntary engagement with technology mentally removing them from their physical location, we found that intrusive contact from abusers pushed survivors

into a state of absent presence without their consent. Thiara and Humphreys' (2017) found that perpetrators cast a shadow across the lives of women and their children long after separation, calling for understanding of these dynamics in order to build more effective interventions for domestic violence. Our study confirms this shadow, building on this theorizing by showing how technology extends the impact of absent presence by enabling perpetrators to be omnipresent in the lives of children post-separation.

This research reinforces earlier findings indicating that many domestic violence offenders use child contact as an opportunity to continue abuse post-separation (Bancroft et al., 2012; Campo, 2015; Crossman et al., 2016; Dragiewicz et al., 2019, 2020, 2021; Elizabeth, 2017; Feresin et al., 2019; Katz et al., 2020; Kaye et al., 2003; Markwick et al., 2019; Mullender et al., 2002; Radford & Hester, 2006). A major dilemma faced by participants in our study was that post-separation co-parenting often necessitated communication with abusers. Some women were court-ordered to communicate with abusers using technology. Others endured intensive technology-facilitated coercive control in efforts to appease abusers and avoid in-person violence, or due to financial dependency on abusers for essential parenting resources like mobile phones. Whether the contact was court-ordered or not, communication between parents created opportunities to exert ongoing coercive control which many abusers seized. These findings echo earlier research on post-separation contact with abusive fathers, wherein parenting provides opportunities for ongoing abuse. Nonetheless, technology-facilitated communication is frequently ordered as a solution to domestic violence in the context of family law cases (Hardesty, 2002; Kaye et al., 2003; Radford & Hester, 2006; Feresin et al., 2019; Douglas, 2018; Macdonald, 2017; Miller & Smolter, 2011).

Conclusion

In sum, this exploratory study highlights the role of children in technology-facilitated coercive control, making the case for understanding children and mothers as co-victims of abuse. Mothers provided examples of children being exposed to fathers' abuse of technology directly and vicariously. Some fathers enlisted children as participants in abuse against their mothers. The study documented children's agency and resistance to this manipulation, but also their unwitting compliance. We found that paternal technological abuse introduces additional strain into mothers and children's relationships, interfering in their recovery from domestic violence post-separation. This study provides compelling evidence for the necessity of qualitative research to understand technology-facilitated coercive control and

its impact on survivors, their children, and broader social networks. The complex dynamics described in this article would be impossible to capture using survey research or official records.

Like any study, this one has limitations. Most importantly, this article is based on incidental findings from a study on women's experiences of technology-facilitated coercive control. Women were not directly asked about their children or their involvement in the abuse. Participants' comments are necessarily incomplete and all mothers in the study did not comment on the same issues. The study used a small convenience sample. Accordingly, these findings cannot tell us anything about the prevalence of particular types of abuse and are not generalizable. Participants were recruited from two Australian states, and women's experiences may vary across Australia and elsewhere.

This article is also based on interviews with mothers rather than children. However, mothers and children may have different perspectives on abuse (Buckley et al., 2007; Holt et al., 2008; Stanley et al., 2012). Mothers may underestimate the impact of abuse on children due to over-estimating the success of efforts to shield children from abuse or assumptions that younger children will not be affected by the abuse (Buckley et al., 2007). They may also be unaware of a significant portion of their experiences, due in part to mothers' reluctance to discuss the issue (Holt et al., 2008; McGee, 2000). In addition, children increasingly have technology-facilitated opportunities to communicate privately with abusers, such as via their own mobile devices, gaming, and social media, where abusers may contact them without their mother's knowledge.

Future Research

This study demonstrates a clear need for future research specifically designed to gather information about technology-facilitated coercive control involving children and parenting. We concur with Øverlien and Holt (2019) that research with children can best answer questions about their experiences of abuse. Accordingly, studies with child and adult participants are desirable. Such research would help provide a more holistic perspective on the abuse and potential solutions. In addition, larger samples are needed across Australia and internationally to better understand the forces at work. Qualitative and quantitative studies would help build the knowledge base on this issue. Future research could examine differences between abuse in urban and rural communities which may have different dynamics and implications due to issues like Internet access, community privacy, and access to services. Research is also needed on diverse communities of women, including immigrant women, to better understand differences. While half of our sample was born overseas, we did not have the opportunity to investigate similarities and

differences across cohorts based on factors like immigration status, country of origin, and time in Australia. Finally, no participants in this portion of the study were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Future research co-designed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars and communities is needed to identify key research priorities and understand how technology use by and against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Carlson & Frazer, 2018a, b) may affect technology-facilitated abuse and its prevention.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Our study shows how women's capacity to protect their children from technology-facilitated abuse is often constrained by the imperative to co-parent with abusive fathers, requiring shared contact information and ongoing communication. Mothers engaged in this contact due to legal requirements, because they thought it was safer for the family, or they believed it was best for the children. The quotations above illustrate the disconnect between systems encouraging survivors to cut off all contact with abusers and the realities of communication with children and about parenting.

Other examples show how children actively cope with abuse. However, children should not be responsible for managing adult abuse. Family courts should be aware that separation does not end abuse and that technology-facilitated communication with children or about parenting is frequently abusive where there is a history of coercive control. Police need to be aware that domestic violence often continues post-separation, and many survivors are court-ordered into ongoing communication with their abusers. Prosecution of domestic violence offenses like stalking and breaches of domestic violence orders should not be abandoned just because there are children in the relationship. In fact, children are at heightened risk when such crimes are not addressed. By identifying novel characteristics of technology-facilitated coercive control involving children, and outlining key priorities for additional research, we hope to encourage future work in this area to increase understanding, improve systems responses, and encourage prevention of technology-facilitated coercive control.

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