



## Regular Article

## Conceptualising *TechViolence Nexus*: Experiences of ambiguities at the intersection of digital coercive control and (socio)digital inequalities

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## A B S T R A C T

This short communication is based on a qualitative study investigating the relationship between digital technologies and gender-based violence (GBV). The term, *TechViolence Nexus*, introduced in this article, offers an in-depth understanding of the cyclic interaction between digital coercive control and (socio)digital inequalities. It highlights the ambiguities created by technologies in victim-survivors' lives, revealing the ways in which digital coercive control intensifies and prolongs the reach of perpetrators and excludes women from technological spaces. Our framework calls for a reimagining of technology design and policy implementation that accounts for the impacts of GBV and digital inequalities on women's experiences of technologies.

Digital technologies today, while offering unique opportunities for connectivity and empowerment, also create new societal challenges (Goedhart et al., 2019; Helsper, 2021; Helsper & Reisdorf, 2017). Technology-facilitated violence is one of these challenges, extending the continuity of violence from offline to "technosocial" spaces (Henry & Powell, 2015, p. 760). As a more nuanced concept, digital coercive control, introduced by Harris and Woodlock (2019), refers to the tactical and intentional use of digital tools against women in the context of intimate relationships to further harass, intimidate, monitor, and control the victims. Rather than being considered as a "distinct" form of violence, it is conceptualized as situated within the already existing coercive control dynamics in intimate relationships (Harris & Woodlock, 2019), "part of the spectrum of harm" to which women are subjected to throughout their life cycles (Harris, Dragiewicz, & Woodlock, 2020, p. 326). In this sense, digital coercive control, like every form of gender-based violence (GBV),<sup>1</sup> is framed as a gendered and intersectional phenomenon (Harris & Woodlock, 2019; Harris et al., 2020). It is deeply embedded within the broader context of pre-existing gender and social inequalities, reflecting the complex interplay between technology and societal power dynamics.<sup>2</sup>

This form of violence exploits the capabilities of digital technologies

to exert control over victims (Yardley, 2020). It limits women's "participation and sense of belonging in a digital world" (Henry et al., 2022, p. 1981), restricting their power, agency, and freedom to enter and explore digital spaces based on their interests and needs (Woodlock et al., 2023). The digital world becomes inaccessible and threatening, leading to avoidance due to the risks of harm (Dragiewicz et al., 2019; Harris & Woodlock, 2019; Woodlock et al., 2023). This nature of digital coercive control reveals its link with digital inequalities, which we deem highly crucial for developing effective policies and interventions. These efforts aim not only to combat digital violence but also to foster digital inclusion. Therefore, the term *TechViolence Nexus*, introduced in this commentary, provides a conceptual framework for understanding the interplay between digital technologies and GBV, analysed through the perspectives of digital inequalities and feminist intersectionality. It seeks to articulate the multifaceted challenges and dynamics at the juncture of technologies and violence and emphasizes the dual potential of digital mediums in both facilitating and countering violence. Furthermore, it asks how and in which contexts digital spaces can become sites for seeking support, information, connection, and achieving safety and well-being.

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<sup>1</sup> GBV is explained elsewhere as an umbrella term encompassing any form of abuse power aimed at harming victims (UNHCR, 2020). We view digital coercive control as a specific form of GBV, where technologies are abusively used to exert power over victims.

<sup>2</sup> Based on an intersectional point of view, we conceptualize power as structural and relational. This means that within a given society, the distribution of resources and privileges leads to the oppression, silencing, and marginalization of specific groups over others. When it comes to intimate relationships, the concept of digital coercive control, as discussed by Harris and Woodlock (2019), is viewed as a direct manifestation of gender power imbalances where men's position of power allows them to exploit technologies to create harm and exert further control on women, and, thereby, reinforce their position of power.

## 1. Situating the *TechViolence Nexus* framework

The *TechViolence Nexus* framework builds upon and speaks to feminist and intersectional understandings of the technology-gender relationship. We view technologies with their ambiguities and complexities. This perspective addresses technologies' simultaneous doing of concealing and reinforcing but also challenging and transforming existing gender power relations and multiple forms of inequalities (Faith, 2022; Henry et al., 2022; Wajcman, 2010). Our framework, thus, while acknowledging the promise of digital technologies to facilitate the combat against GBV through digital advocacy and support practices, primarily aims to explore intersecting barriers to the realization of these promises. Conceptualizing GBV as an intersectional phenomenon (Cardenas, 2023), we assert that women's experience of these barriers is not only shaped by the digital coercive control dynamics in their interpersonal contexts but also by the broader societal and contextual realities of their lives. The *TechViolence Nexus* situates digital inequalities into this broader context, viewing it both as a source and consequence of social inequalities (Helsper, 2021). Digital inequalities, then, in a cyclic interaction with digital coercive control dynamics, determine the degree and quality of the online and offline resources that are available and accessible to women in their life cycles.

The *TechViolence Nexus* emerged based on insights gained through a two-year community-based qualitative research project on digital technologies and GBV.<sup>3</sup> The project involved in-depth interviews with 12 domestic violence practitioners and ten women victim-survivors<sup>4</sup> at a domestic violence shelter in Norway and four psychotherapists from a community mental health center specialized in GBV services. We conceptualize the *TechViolence Nexus* to provide a nuanced comprehension of the dilemmas and ambiguities faced by victim-survivors, as well as by the practitioners in the field, at the intersection of digital coercive control and digital inequalities. While we acknowledge that the conceptualization that we offer in this commentary is located within the specific dynamics of the Norwegian context -especially regarding its gender equality politics and wide-scale digitalization policies, we consider the *TechViolence Nexus* as a potentially transferable, applicable, and relevant framework in other national contexts.

## 2. Four interconnected dimensions of *TechViolence Nexus*

The *TechViolence Nexus* is elaborated through four interconnected dimensions, each highlighting a distinct component of the relationship between technology, digital coercive control, and digital inequalities. These dimensions are i) technologies as a source of distress and harm, ii) digital coercive control as something "unstoppable," iii) (socio)digital inequalities both as a source and consequence, and iv) technologies as a tool for counteracting violence. This comprehensive framework focuses on the multifaceted challenges faced by victim-survivors and provides insight into the roles digital technologies occupy in both perpetuating and mitigating digital coercive control. From the distress and harm reinforced by technologies in interpersonal contexts to the portrayal of digital coercive control as an overwhelming challenge and the amplification of vulnerabilities through (socio)digital inequalities, each aspect contributes to a deeper understanding of this complex issue. Additionally, the last aspect explores the digital strategies that can be employed to counter violence, examining their application and effectiveness.

### 2.1. Technologies as a source of distress and harm

The first dimension of the *TechViolence Nexus*, by focusing on

<sup>3</sup> Ethics approval of the research was obtained by the Sikt – the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, in October 2022.

<sup>4</sup> The age range of women was 19–56 years old, and all were separated from their partners at the time of study.

women's experiences of digital coercive control, highlights how digital technologies become a source of distress and harm in women's interpersonal contexts due to the power and control dynamics created by the perpetrators. Through the tactical use of internet-based tracking devices, social media platforms, or smartphones by the perpetrators, technological spaces become spaces of surveillance, harassment, and intimidation. This exploitation of digital tools allows for the extension of "offline" coercive control beyond the physical boundaries and challenges them to find safety from violence.

For women who experience digital coercive control, neither their private nor public spaces were safe. As Nora,<sup>5</sup> a participant in our study states: "My phone had one function, to ensure control on me. I had to be available, even if I was in a meeting, no reason was good enough not to answer, or it got violent consequences when I got home." This crucially shows how the omnipresence of technologies has blurred the lines between public and private spheres in women's lives, making it easier for the perpetrators to extend their violent behaviours beyond domestic boundaries. Digital coercive control also targets personal data and account privacy, which is explained by a practitioner: "You must give up your data... The perpetrators would just threaten women. Saying no is often impossible because it would lead to more violence. Your partner can log into all your devices and accounts." (Irene-P<sup>6</sup>)

Digital coercive control was strategically used by the perpetrators to sever women's connections with their support networks, exemplified by Hanna's experience: "He put a video camera in the house. I did not have the freedom to call my family, friends... it is to be recorded and used against you. I was in a tight corner." This experience addresses the psychological reach of perpetrators, who manage to constrain women's autonomy and communication, creating a shadow over their sense of freedom, even in their absence. The influence of this 'shadow presence' often persists beyond the termination of the abusive relationship. For instance, a practitioner recounted a distressing strategy used by perpetrators: "The child gets a present from the father for her birthday, an iPad. Then we realize that this is a kind of spyware, he uses it to see what's going on in the house." (Kari-P)

In addition, the findings also demonstrated that women had limited or no experience utilizing online advocacy resources (e.g., online chat services, GBV websites, or social media groups). Navigating the internet to find the information or resources needed was underlined as a challenging task, as stated by Ella: "You must be quick... You expect it to be easy, but it is not... you arrive at a page then click on the next link and it gets the ball rolling a bit." Furthermore, due to the constant monitoring of the perpetrators, the women were left with slim chances, if any, to use the digital resources without risking their safety further: "He is always there, somehow always watching you. When do you think you can take the phone, search something?" (Chioma)

What we mainly see in these examples is that the technologies create arenas where control and abuse are exerted. The abusive exploitation of digital tools in the context of GBV further reinforces women's entrapment into violence by limiting their "space for action" (Harris & Woodlock, 2019, p. 534) and making the perpetrators' violent presence even more inescapable in their lives.

### 2.2. Digital coercive control as something "unstoppable"

The second dimension of the *TechViolence Nexus* involves practitioners' accounts describing digital coercive control as something that is highly challenging to foresee and prevent. It is described as "a problem all over the place" (Martin-P) but with limited solutions. Proper technological expertise and knowledge were revealed as something missing in the GBV services, as highlighted by a shelter worker: "We do not have the necessary knowledge and training. I discussed this with the police

<sup>5</sup> All participants were given pseudonyms.

<sup>6</sup> The letter "P" indicates that the quotation is from a practitioner.

because I thought maybe they would know more, but they don't either." (Ida-P) The practitioners then become obliged to develop their own "ad-hoc strategies" (Freed et al., 2017, p. 2) to be able to address the needs of their clients: "Since many of my clients use TikTok... I created a TikTok account because I need to know how the settings are, just to try to use it to understand how it works." (Liv-P)

The rapid advancement of digital technologies are emphasized as a crucial factor opening up new, mostly unprecedented avenues for digital coercive control. Technologies are viewed as developing so quickly, making it difficult to keep up with: "There are so many new ways and so many devices that can be used... that are impossible to recognize." (Anne-P) Practitioners highlight that circumstances are different with each of their clients, so the needs and strategies differ. In some cases, they discover things that is hard to "imagine": "with GPS tracking it can go above our heads sometimes... we turned off everything like mobile phone, computer ... but we didn't know that it was possible to GPS track a hearing aid." (Olav-P)

These examples reveal how technology has increased the complexity of safety work that the practitioners carry out with their clients. Gendered harm arises from the intentional misuse of technologies by the perpetrators; harm that mostly remains unaddressed or underrecognized at the systemic level, particularly in the technology sector. This systemic failure in turn creates an additional burden on GBV organizations and practitioners to oversee the risks and implement particular solutions. Furthermore, considering the rapid and wide-scale digitalization of public services in Norway, this burden intensifies, as underlined by a practitioner: "Her ex-partner had all the control over this online account ... it took us so long to get them to... cut him off... This is how the systems are inflexible." (Abel-P)

### 2.3. (Socio)digital inequalities both as a source and consequence

The third dimension of the *TechViolence Nexus* situates women's experiences of digital coercive control into the broader context of (socio) digital inequalities in their lives. It addresses how digital inequalities, in terms of access, skills, and engagement, can exacerbate their vulnerabilities by hindering the opportunities for seeking help, accessing vital information, and utilizing digital support resources. Additionally, it also shows that women's experiences of digital inequalities, while not always originating within their interpersonal context, are deepened by the coercive control dynamics they are subjected to.

The data reveals that when living with a controlling partner, women's chances to access and use technologies become very limited. Preventing women's ownership of technological devices or limiting their access to the internet was shown as a control strategy frequently used by partners, as shared by Parveen, a migrant woman from South Asia: "I had my computer and phone before I came to Norway but when I moved with my husband, I was not allowed to use any technologies, phones or computers." This shows how digital control can result in women having unequal access to digital resources. Digital coercive control dynamics, intersecting with migration-related factors (e.g., language barrier, social isolation, unfamiliarity with the system), limit the positive outcomes of technology engagement, as explained by an undocumented migrant woman, Shirin: "You cannot understand much from the Internet. Especially when you do not know Norwegian or English, it is a waste of time."

Lacking digital competence is highlighted as a challenge for women to benefit from technologies. The practitioners underscores the gap in digital skills as a significant barrier to integration and independence for victim-survivors, particularly in the Norwegian context: "We have a system that is more and more digitalized... so if you are going out to live independently today without any digital competence, I would say that is impossible." (Ida-P) For migrant women, this becomes a particular problem combined with affordability barriers, preventing their efficient use online public systems (e.g., online banking, welfare services, or digital health): "I am not good at the using of PC. When I came, I had

only a phone... it was a broken one... There was no way I could even go into the system and apply for anything." (Hanna) In the following example, we also see how being subjected to digital coercive control creates a "fear" toward technologies and deprive women of their chances to develop their digital skills: "Not everyone trust the digital system, there is a feeling that someone always watches, which is understandable. So, we see clients even afraid of trying to use some digital solutions. Then they never learn." (Lucas-P)

These reflections address how digital inequalities (access, engagement, skills, and outcome inequalities), in combination with digital coercive control, disrupt women's opportunities "to stay equally included" (Helsper, 2021, p. 78). The findings also show how extensive digitalization of the public arena, as we witness occurring globally today, may result in further isolation of victim-survivors of GBV due to the ubiquity of digital control in their lives. Additionally, from an intersectional perspective, particularly based on the experiences of migrant women in our study -but not limiting to them, our study primarily reveals how digital inequalities, as well as digital violence, may become deeply intertwined with other forms of social inequalities.

### 2.4. Technologies as a tool for counteracting violence

The fourth dimension of the *TechViolence Nexus* explores the affordances of digital technologies in helping victim-survivors access information, resources, and support to counter their experiences of violence. While our findings reveal common barriers that restrict the accessibility of digital technologies in women's lives, some of the experiences shared by both the women and practitioners address the beneficial use of technologies in facilitating women's access to information, helping them connect, and alleviating their isolation.

In the following instance, the internet search emerges as a crucial part of the stay-leave decision-making process as information increases awareness: "When I searched about the things that I was going through, I learnt that violence can also be emotional. It took a long time, but the things I read helped me decide and move away." (Noor) Women's opportunities for online engagement increase once they separate, and the option of anonymity mitigates the risks of disclosing and seeking emotional support: "The people you talk to, they do not see you, they do not know you, they do not know where you live, what you do... like you are talking to a psychologist." (Shirin) Sharing online or just having the chance to read what others experience helped them to feel less isolated and more connected: "It is good for me to be able to read this without sharing, to be anonymous... feel that others feel what I feel... I am not that alone with my story." (Nora)

The practitioners highlight that the visibility of their services may have increased at least for some of their clients, which is considered as a factor partly increasing help-seeking: "I think finding us through the website is easier... I think people do it much faster these days than 10 years ago... So maybe people seek help earlier than before." (Olivia-P) What follows next provides a significant example of how online support seeking can be a milestone to reach out to help and escape violence: "I have known a client who had been isolated for nearly 15 years, in an apartment, even not knowing her own address, and through Facebook she was able to contact us." (Sofie-P) Additionally, the integration of digital technologies into their practice has also proven helpful, particularly with younger clients, increasing the effectiveness of their work: "Like watching videos together, reading online information or saying that just check it out what is there, this mostly works my younger clients, it becomes part of our connection, it increases their engagement with us." (Maya-P)

These reflections first reveal how navigating the digital landscape and reaching out to relevant resources is far from straightforward. They crucially illustrate that just because online resources are there does not mean they are easily accessible or become automatically operational in women's lives. However, despite the existing vulnerabilities, the data also underlines how digital technologies can be transformative in

empowering victim-survivors, providing them with access to crucial information, support networks, and services.

## 2.5. Concluding comments

The exploration of the TechViolence Nexus through these four interconnected dimensions offers an in-depth understanding of the impact of digital technologies on the trajectories of victimization to GBV. The analyses demonstrated the impossibility of privacy and confidentiality in accessing and using technologies under constant control and surveillance by the perpetrators, making digital technologies threatening and distressing for victim-survivors. Digital coercive control then becomes a crucial barrier to women's unrestricted and autonomous access and use of technologies, which also deprives them of their rights and opportunities to develop their practical and technical competence in using technologies. It reinforces women's exclusion from technological spaces and reinforces their experiences of (socio)digital inequalities. Under the circumstances of additional intersecting vulnerabilities (e.g., migration background, low-socioeconomic status, age, disability), these inequalities may result in aggravation of harm caused by the combination of digital coercive control and digital inequalities. The ones most needed to access and use technologies to be equally included in a given society become those with the slightest chance of doing so.

The TechViolence Nexus also reveals the potential of technologies to create positive outcomes for victim-survivors in overcoming their vulnerabilities. Yet, these potentials seem to be realized in the lives of victim-survivors only arbitrarily due to the lack of systemic interventions and proper legal and policy frameworks addressing digital violence and inequalities. This brings us to the conclusion that the affordances of digital technologies in addressing and counteracting GBV can only be realized if the impacts of digital coercive control on women's lives are carefully considered during the design and implementation of technologies. Furthermore, our framework indicates how the wide-scale digitalization of societies within and beyond the Norwegian context creates additional trade-offs for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, reinforcing the social exclusion and alienation they already experience. Digital strategies and solutions can be effective in mitigating inequalities, countering violence, and creating transformation only if they are planned and employed as part of a broader context of long-term real-life advocacy targeting structural and systemic changes.

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## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Busra Yalcinoz-Ucan:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original

draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Hande Eslen-Ziya:** Writing – original draft, Supervision, Conceptualization. **Margunn Bjørnholt:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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