

# THE CONVERSATION



## Domestic violence and Facebook: harassment takes new forms in the social media age

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Australian law is yet to catch up with new forms of networked digital abuse against women.  
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Domestic violence is now widely recognised as a national crisis. However, there are significant gaps in responses to the intimate violence enabled by social media platforms like Facebook.

Cyberstalking, non-consensual internet pornography, exposing private information, reputation damage, impersonation or false representation, and other online attacks carried and amplified by networking technologies constitute the new face of violence against women. Technology-based domestic violence also includes using Facebook to monitor, track and harass victims' children, friends and family members.

Such pervasive and intimate abuses of trust further isolate victims from their social supports – especially when victims are compelled to close down or withdraw altogether from social media.

### **The rise of online harassment**

In Australia, the law is yet to catch up with these new forms of networked digital abuse against women. This is especially the case with “revenge pornography” disseminated via social media. Facebook has become a powerful tool for perpetrators to maintain power and control in new, ubiquitous and targeted ways – for example, by posting intimate photos of a victim on her work webpage.

In the social media age, when image and reputation are everything, perpetrators can devastate their partner or ex-partner psychologically, socially and financially, while remaining cloaked in anonymity from cyberspace.

Research conducted in the US found more than one in four stalking victims reported suffering some form of cyberstalking. The majority of these victims identified the stalker as a former intimate partner.

The US-based Pew Research Centre reports that 66% of internet users who have experienced online harassment said their most recent incident occurred on a social networking site. This is by far the most common form of online harassment.

Only 16% of those surveyed experienced harassment and abuse in online gaming environments. While gaming culture's hegemonic masculinity has received extensive critique, the abuse hosted on social media platforms like Facebook is relatively uncharted – especially in the Australian context.

On the front line of domestic violence prevention, Australian women's centre workers have observed increasing numbers of women who have been harassed, stalked and found through Facebook.

## Facebook, feminism and free speech

It is perhaps ironic that so much digital intimate violence occurs on social media platforms. In recent years, Facebook's "face" has been both female and feminist. Sheryl Sandberg, a Facebook executive and author, has been lauded as "the Betty Friedan of her generation" for urging women to transform their lives by working harder.

Social media is becoming a dangerous place for society's most vulnerable women. But for elites like Sandberg, it presents new opportunities for advancement. Her success narrative – flying through Harvard, Google and Facebook as a tech-savvy entrepreneur surrounded by other educated and enlightened elites (supportive husbands, male mentors and family members) – is not one many subjugated women will relate to.

These women's lives are typically more messy, complicated and dangerous than that. Victims are locked in a psychological and sociopolitical bind. They are put under pressure to exercise agency in their life and in their work. But, at the same time, both the abuser and hegemonic masculinity generally are undermining their autonomy.

While Sandberg is Facebook's most visible female face, the majority of tech companies are staffed by men and reproduce a culture of hegemonic masculinity. Most moderators are young men who inevitably bring their own unconscious biases to the definition of "community standards" and what constitutes a threat.

Postings and pages celebrating the abuse of women have been permitted to remain on Facebook under the category of controversial "humour". The concern with these sites is not just that they reveal the extent of abusive behaviour in relationships, but that, by publicising and glorifying domestic violence, they normalise dysfunctional relationships.



Sheryl Sandberg is

Facebook's ubiquity in contemporary social life means victims can feel constantly under surveillance or under attack. This can exacerbate existing anxiety and hyper-vigilance.

Facebook's most visible female 'face'. Reuters/Mike Blake

There is frequent tension in the Facebook philosophy between protecting users' free speech and protecting other users from gender-based abuse. Facebook's liberal individualism has produced some illiberal effects.

Taking domestic violence seriously at a systemic and cultural level must include questioning the hegemonic masculinity and neoliberal values that now flow seamlessly across both public and private spheres.

Ultimately, addressing violence against women must include addressing the wider cultural, gender and class-based bias that implicitly blames and shames some victims for the "choices" they make in their real and virtual personal lives.

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*The National Sexual Assault, Family & Domestic Violence Counselling Line – 1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732) – is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week for any Australian who has experienced, or is at risk of, family and domestic violence and/or sexual assault.*



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