

The Digital Evolution of Intimate Partner Violence: A Review of Gender-Based Violence

OKE LOLADE EMMANUEL¹, AJAYI MUTIAT OLAYINKA²
^{1,2}*Dept. of Criminology and Security Studies, Venite University, Iloro-Ekiti*

Abstract- The proliferation of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the landscape of intimate partner violence (IPV), creating new mechanisms for perpetrators to exert control, surveillance, and abuse. This review examines the emergence and evolution of technology-facilitated intimate partner violence, exploring its manifestations, gendered dimensions, psychological impacts, and the challenges it poses to victim safety and legal frameworks. Drawing on empirical research and theoretical frameworks, this paper synthesized current knowledge on digital IPV, highlighting the intersection of gender, technology, and violence while identifying critical gaps in research and intervention strategies.

I. INTRODUCTION

Intimate partner violence has long been recognized as a pervasive public health crisis affecting millions globally. Although anyone can be a victim regardless of age, race, gender, sexual orientation, faith or class, (Intimate partner violence, United Nations, n.d.). Women disproportionately experiencing severe physical, sexual, and psychological abuse from current or former intimate partners. The United Nations refers to Intimate Partner Violence as the “domestic abuse” or “domestic violence” hence the level of close relation between the victim and the person perpetrating the crime. Intimate Partner Violence, often referred to as domestic violence or relationship abuse, encompasses a distressing spectrum of behaviors that one partner inflicts upon another within an intimate relationship (Messing et al 2020)

The World Health Organization estimates that “approximately one in three women worldwide have experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime”, underscoring the magnitude of this issue. (World Health Organization, 2021). However, the rapid advancement and ubiquitous integration of digital technologies into daily life have introduced novel dimensions to IPV that extend beyond traditional forms of physical and

psychological abuse. Doxing, Technology-facilitated abuse, digital dating abuse, cyber-stalking, and image-based sexual abuse represent emerging forms of violence that exploit digital platforms, devices, and connectivity to harass, monitor, threaten, and control intimate partners. These digital manifestations of IPV do not exist in isolation from offline violence but rather intersect with and amplify traditional forms of abuse, creating what scholars have termed a “continuum of violence” that spans physical and virtual spaces. (Spence, 2019). The gendered nature of this violence remains consistent with historical patterns, with women and gender minorities experiencing disproportionate rates of technology-facilitated IPV.

Understanding the digital evolution of IPV is critical for developing effective prevention strategies, supporting survivors, and informing policy responses that address the unique challenges posed by technology-mediated abuse. This review synthesizes existing literature on the intersection of digital technology and intimate partner violence, examining how technological tools have been weaponized in abusive relationships, the gendered dynamics that characterize this phenomenon, and the implications for intervention and future research.

Defining Technology-Facilitated Intimate Partner Violence

Technology-facilitated intimate partner violence encompasses a broad range of abusive behaviors perpetrated through digital means within the context of current or former intimate relationships. Researchers have proposed various conceptualizations and taxonomies to capture the diverse manifestations of digital abuse. Broadly, “technology-facilitated IPV includes behaviors such as persistent monitoring through GPS tracking applications, unauthorized access to personal devices and accounts, threatening or harassing messages via text or social media, non-

consensual distribution of intimate images, impersonation online, and the use of spyware or other surveillance technologies. Perpetrators often exploit social media and location-tracking technologies to harass, threaten or blackmail victims” (Mutua, 2019). The integration of technology into IPV represents both an extension of existing control tactics and the creation of entirely new forms of abuse unique to the digital environment. Unlike traditional IPV, “technology-facilitated abuse can occur continuously regardless of physical proximity, enabling perpetrators to maintain psychological control and surveillance even after physical separation” (Denizet-Lewis, 2020). The permanence and potential virality of digital content, particularly in cases of image-based sexual abuse, create lasting harm that extends beyond the immediate abusive relationship.

Digital IPV exists on a continuum ranging from behaviors that may be normalized in some relationship contexts to clearly criminal acts. This ambiguity presents challenges for victims in identifying abuse, for researchers in measuring prevalence, and for legal systems in adjudicating cases. The rapid evolution of technology means that new platforms, applications, and devices continuously emerge, creating fresh opportunities for abuse that outpace both research and regulatory responses.

Below is a power and control wheel which explains some traits of IPV and the possibility of becoming physical or sexual violence among the intimate partners (Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, n.d.)



Figure 1 Power and wheel control

The image above is a power and control wheel which explains some traits of IPV and the possibility of becoming physical or sexual violence among the intimate partners (Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, 1984)

Prevalence and Patterns

Research examining the prevalence of technology-facilitated IPV has proliferated in recent years, revealing alarmingly high rates across diverse populations and geographic contexts. Studies consistently demonstrate that digital abuse frequently co-occurs with offline IPV, with victims experiencing both forms of violence simultaneously. Young adults and adolescents appear particularly vulnerable to technology-facilitated dating violence, given their high rates of technology use and digital literacy combined with limited experience navigating intimate relationships (Borrajo, Gámez-Guadix, & Calvete, 2019).

Surveillance and monitoring represent among the most common forms of technology-facilitated IPV. Perpetrators employ various tactics including demanding passwords to social media and email accounts, using GPS tracking to monitor partners' locations, checking call logs and text messages, and installing spyware on devices. These behaviors create an environment of constant surveillance that restricts victims' autonomy, isolates them from support networks, and generates persistent fear and anxiety (Donovan et al., 2021).

Harassment via digital communication channels constitutes another prevalent form of abuse. Perpetrators send excessive controlling or threatening messages, use multiple platforms to contact victims who attempt to block them, and leverage the asynchronous nature of digital communication to maintain psychological pressure across time and space. The ease of creating anonymous or fake accounts enables perpetrators to circumvent blocking attempts and continue harassment despite victims' efforts to establish boundaries (Hinze et al., 2020)

Image-based sexual abuse, including the non-consensual creation, distribution, or threats to distribute intimate images, represents a particularly harmful form of digital IPV with severe and lasting

consequences for victims. The permanent nature of digital content and the potential for viral distribution amplify the harm, creating ongoing victimization as images may resurface repeatedly. Perpetrators weaponize intimate images as tools for coercion, threatening distribution to compel victims to remain in relationships or comply with demands either in cash or material gain. (Donovan et al, 2021).

Gendered Dimensions of Digital IPV

The gendered nature of intimate partner violence persists and in some ways intensifies in digital contexts. Research consistently demonstrates that women experience higher rates of severe technology-facilitated IPV compared to men, mirroring patterns observed in offline intimate partner violence. “The gendered dynamics of digital abuse reflect broader societal inequalities, gender norms, and power imbalances that characterize intimate partner relationships”. (Woodlock, 2017)

The statistical data clearly indicate that intimate partner violence (IPV) disproportionately affects women, who experience it at much higher rates, with more severe consequences and higher risks of lethality compared to men.

According to the data available by the World Health Organization and Center for Disease Control and prevention, the details below were found to be proven that:

- Globally, about 30% of women have experienced physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner or non-partner (World Health Organization, 2021).
- In the United States, 41% of women have encountered contact sexual violence, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime, compared to 26% of men (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023).
- Women are nearly three times more likely than men to suffer related impacts such as injury, fear, or PTSD due to IPV (CDC, 2023).

Table 1 Comparative Analysis of Violence Types by Gender

Category of Violence	Women (%)	Men (%)
Severe Physical Violence	24.3	13.8
Rape by an Intimate Partner	9.4	<1.0
Stalking by an Intimate Partner	10.7	2.1
Injuries Resulting from IPV	14.8	4.0

Note: Data adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2023)

The table above presents a comparative analysis of various types of intimate partner violence (IPV) experienced by women and men, highlighting significant gender disparities in the severity and impact of violence.

1. Severe Physical Violence: Women experience severe physical violence at a notably higher rate (24.3%) compared to men (13.8%). This indicates that women are almost twice as likely as men to endure physically severe abuse from an intimate partner.
2. Rape by an Intimate Partner: The incidence of rape within intimate relationships is disproportionately higher for women (9.4%) than for men (less than 1%). This stark difference underscores the gendered nature of sexual violence.
3. Stalking by an Intimate Partner: Women are more frequently subjected to stalking by an intimate partner (10.7%) compared to men (2.1%), showing that such controlling and threatening behaviors predominantly affect women.
4. Injuries Resulting from IPV: Injuries sustained from intimate partner violence are reported by 14.8% of women, which is significantly greater than the 4.0% reported by men. This reflects the greater physical harm women suffer as a result of IPV.

While psychological aggression is reported at similar rates across genders, severe and life-threatening forms of violence disproportionately affect women.

Women victims of technology-facilitated IPV report higher levels of fear, psychological distress, and life disruption compared to male victims, even when experiencing similar frequencies of abusive behaviors. “This differential impact relates to the broader context of gendered violence in which digital abuse occurs, including higher rates of co-occurring physical and sexual violence, economic abuse, and threats to physical safety” (Glass et al., 2020). For women, digital monitoring and harassment often serve as extensions of comprehensive patterns of coercive control that permeate multiple life domains.

Image-based sexual abuse demonstrates particularly pronounced gender asymmetries. Women are disproportionately targeted for non-consensual image distribution, and the consequences of such victimization are shaped by gendered double standards regarding sexuality. “Women victims face greater stigmatization, blame, and social consequences compared to male victims, reflecting broader rape culture and misogyny that pervade digital spaces” (Henry & Powell, 2020).

“Gender minorities and LGBTQ+ individuals face unique vulnerabilities to technology-facilitated IPV, including threats of forced outing through digital means, harassment based on gender identity or sexual orientation, and barriers to accessing supportive resources designed primarily for cisgender heterosexual victims” (Miller & Drouin, 2021). The intersection of multiple marginalized identities creates compounded risks and reduced access to appropriate interventions.

Psychological and Social Impacts

The psychological consequences of technology-facilitated IPV are profound and multifaceted. Victims report elevated rates of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and suicidal ideation. The pervasive and inescapable nature of digital abuse contributes to a sense of hypervigilance and loss of safety that extends beyond specific incidents to permeate daily life. “Unlike some forms of offline abuse that may be temporally or spatially bounded, digital harassment can occur continuously, creating chronic stress and preventing recovery” (Fisher & Barak, 2020)

The surveillance and monitoring characteristic of technology-facilitated IPV generates what researchers have termed “digital captivity,” wherein victims experience their devices and online presence as spaces of danger rather than connection or empowerment. “This fundamentally alters victims' relationships with technology, potentially limiting access to resources, employment opportunities, and social support that increasingly depend on digital engagement” (Bauman et al., 2021).

Social isolation represents both a tactic and consequence of digital IPV. Perpetrators use technology to monitor and restrict victims' communications, spreading false information through social networks, and impersonating victims online to damage their reputations and relationships. “The public nature of some forms of digital abuse, particularly image-based sexual abuse and online harassment, subjects victims to community scrutiny and blame that compounds trauma and reduces help-seeking” (Powell & Henry, 2020).

Economic consequences of technology-facilitated IPV include costs associated with changing devices and accounts, legal fees, lost employment due to workplace harassment or monitoring, and reduced career growth progression when online reputations are impounded. “These economic impacts can trap victims in abusive relationships and hinder recovery following separation” (Postmus et al., 2021).

Technological Tools and Tactics

Perpetrators of technology-facilitated IPV exploit a wide range of consumer technologies and applications to enact abuse. Smartphones, which many individuals carry continuously, provide multiple avenues for surveillance, harassment, and control. GPS tracking through native device features, shared location apps ostensibly designed for family safety, or covertly installed spyware enables continuous monitoring of victims' movements and whereabouts. (Wood et al., 2021, p. 225).

Social media platforms serve as both weapons and targets in digital IPV. Perpetrators unleash hell on victims through direct messages, post threatening or defamatory content on public feeds, tagging victims in humiliating posts and use social media to gather

information about victims' activities associations and network. The social connectivity platforms designed to strengthen have turned into a weakness that perpetrators use to extend their reach to their victims. Smart home technologies, including internet-connected cameras, thermostats, locks, and speakers, have emerged as novel tools for abuse. Perpetrators who retain access to smart home systems can remotely monitor victims, manipulate home environments to create distress or demonstrate continued control, and use these technologies to undermine victims' sense of safety within their own homes. The integration of these technologies into home infrastructure can make them difficult for victims to detect or disable without technical expertise. (Wood et al., 2021, p. 227).

Spyware and monitoring applications marketed ostensibly for parental control or employee monitoring purposes are frequently weaponized in intimate partner violence contexts. These applications can capture keystrokes, record communications, access stored data, activate cameras and microphones remotely, and track locations, all while operating covertly (Williams & Kumar, 2019). The commercial availability and relatively low cost of sophisticated surveillance technologies have democratized access to tools previously available primarily to law enforcement or intelligence agencies.

Barriers to Recognition and Response

Multiple barriers impede recognition of and response to technology-facilitated IPV at individual, social, and systemic levels. At the individual level, victims may struggle to identify digital behaviours as abusive, particularly when monitoring or excessive communication is framed as evidence of love or care. The normalization of certain invasive digital behaviours within relationship contexts, such as password sharing or location tracking, obscures the boundary between healthy relationship practices and abusive control. (Drouin et al., 2019)

Social barriers include victim-blaming attitudes that attribute responsibility for image-based sexual abuse or online harassment to victims' decisions to create intimate images or maintain public online presences. Misunderstanding of technology and digital privacy leads some observers to minimize the harm of digital abuse or suggest that victims could simply disconnect

from technology, failing to recognize that digital engagement is increasingly necessary for employment, education, and social participation. (Smith et al., 2021)

Legal and criminal justice system responses to technology-facilitated IPV remain inadequate in many jurisdictions. Laws often lag behind technological developments, creating gaps in legal protections for victims. Even where applicable laws exist, enforcement is inconsistent, and law enforcement officers frequently lack training in digital evidence collection and the dynamics of technology-facilitated abuse. Protective orders, a primary civil remedy for IPV, were developed for physical abuse and may not adequately address digital harassment and surveillance. (Goldberg & Crabtree, 2019)

Service providers, including domestic violence advocates, mental health professionals, and legal aid attorneys, face challenges in supporting victims of technology-facilitated IPV. Limited technological literacy among some providers impedes their ability to assess digital risks, provide safety planning around technology use, or collect digital evidence. Resource constraints limit capacity to provide specialized digital safety planning or access to technological resources such as new devices for victims whose existing devices have been compromised. (Harris & Woodlock, 2020)

Interventions and Safety Strategies

Addressing technology-facilitated IPV include, but not limited to, multi-level interventions spanning individual safety strategies, organizational responses, technological solutions, and policy reforms. Digital safety planning has emerged as a critical component of comprehensive IPV intervention, helping victims assess technological risks, secure devices and accounts, and make informed decisions about technology use in the context of abuse.

Individual-level interventions include education about technology-facilitated abuse, assessment of digital risks, and development of personalized safety strategies. These may include periodical or constant change of passwords, Personal Identification Number (PIN) or login details using secure methods, enabling two-factor authentication, reviewing privacy settings

on social media platforms, checking devices for unauthorized applications, worms or malware and creating safety plans for ongoing technology use. However, safety strategies must be individualized to each victim's circumstances, as overly restrictive recommendations to disconnect from technology can increase isolation and limit access to resources. (Woodlock, 2017)

Organizational responses include training for domestic violence service providers, law enforcement, legal professionals, and healthcare providers on recognizing and responding to technology-facilitated IPV. Specialized programs have developed protocols for digital evidence documentation, technology safety assessment, and referrals to technical assistance resources. Some organizations have established technology safety specialist positions to provide intensive support for victims navigating complex technological abuse. (Alaggia et al., 2019)

Technology companies bear responsibility for addressing how their products and platforms are weaponized in Intimate Partner Violence. Some platforms have implemented features such as enhanced privacy controls, harassment reporting mechanisms, and account recovery processes designed to support victims. However, critics argue that voluntary industry efforts remain insufficient and that stronger regulatory frameworks are necessary to compel comprehensive safety-by-design approaches. (Lyon, 2021)

Policy interventions include legislative reforms to criminalize technology-facilitated abuse, strengthen protective order provisions to address digital harassment and surveillance, and improve institutional responses through mandatory training and protocol development. Some jurisdictions have enacted specific statutes addressing non-consensual pornography, cyberstalking, and unauthorized computer access in intimate partner contexts, though significant gaps remain in legal coverage and enforcement. (Holt & Blevins, 2019)

Future Directions and Research Gaps

Despite growing research attention to technology-facilitated IPV, significant gaps remain in understanding and addressing this phenomenon.

Longitudinal research is needed to examine trajectories of digital abuse, identify risk and protective factors, and evaluate long-term outcomes for victims. Most existing research relies on cross-sectional designs that capture snapshots of technology-facilitated IPV but cannot address questions of causality, escalation patterns, or the impacts of interventions over time.

The rapid evolution of technology means that research findings may become outdated quickly as new platforms, devices, and applications emerge. Researchers must develop flexible methodological approaches that can adapt to technological change while maintaining rigor and comparability across studies. This includes attending to emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, deepfakes, and augmented reality, which present novel risks for intimate partner abuse.

Greater attention to diversity and intersectionality is critical for understanding how technology-facilitated IPV is experienced across different populations. Most existing research focuses on young, heterosexual, cisgender women in Western contexts, leaving significant gaps in knowledge about technology-facilitated IPV among older adults, LGBTQ+ populations, racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and populations in non-Western contexts. Intersectional analyses are needed to examine how multiple marginalized identities shape experiences of and responses to digital abuse. (Crimmins et al., 2020) Evaluation research examining the effectiveness of interventions for technology-facilitated IPV remains limited. While numerous safety strategies and program models have been developed, rigorous evaluation of their impacts on victim safety, well-being, and perpetrator behavior is largely absent from the literature. Such research is essential for evidence-based practice and efficient allocation of resources.

The role of technology companies in preventing and responding to platform-facilitated abuse requires critical examination. Research should investigate the effectiveness of platform policies and features designed to address abuse, the unintended consequences of safety measures, and opportunities for innovation in safety-by-design. Greater transparency from technology companies regarding

abuse reporting, content moderation, and user safety is necessary to facilitate independent research and accountability.

CONCLUSION

The digital evolution of intimate partner violence represents a fundamental transformation in how abuse is perpetrated, experienced, and addressed. Technology-facilitated IPV extends perpetrators' capacity for surveillance, harassment, and control while creating new forms of harm unique to digital contexts. The gendered nature of intimate partner violence persists in digital spaces, with women and gender minorities experiencing disproportionate victimization and severe consequences. Addressing technology-facilitated IPV requires coordinated responses across multiple sectors, including domestic violence services, law enforcement, legal systems, healthcare, technology industry, and policy makers. Effective intervention demands ongoing adaptation to technological change, increased attention to digital literacy and safety, and commitment to centering victim experiences and needs in the development of responses. As digital technologies become increasingly integrated into all aspects of daily life, the distinction between online and offline violence continues to blur. Understanding intimate partner violence in contemporary contexts requires attending to both traditional and technology-facilitated forms of abuse and recognizing how they intersect and compound one another. Only through comprehensive, evidence-based, and survivor-centered approaches can we adequately address the digital evolution of intimate partner violence and support those affected by it.

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