Researchers: Canadian schools need to address digital sexual violence in their curricula and policies

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Technology-facilitated sexual violence (TFSV) is on the rise among

Canadian youth. In an [international study](link) that included Canada, over half of the young women and girls surveyed reported being sexually threatened and/or sexually harassed online. This kind of sexual violence can include online sexual harassment, extortion, receiving unsolicited explicit images and non-consensual distribution of intimate images.

[More than four in five undergraduate students in Canada](link) have reported experiencing online sexual [violence](link), including sexually explicit comments, emails or messages.

Not all youth face the same risks with online harms. People with marginalized races, ethnicities, genders and sexual orientations are significantly more likely to experience TFSV. A recent report from Statistics Canada found that young women and non-binary youth are [more likely to be targets of online abuse](link) than young men. Black people, Muslim people and LGBTQ+ people experience [higher rates of online harassment](link) than their peers.

Technology-facilitated sexual violence can have significant consequences on a person's health and well-being. Young people who experience TFSV have reported [increased social isolation](link), [fear and psychological distress](link), and [adverse effects on their mental health](link).

Given these [negative impacts](link), it is imperative that schools take steps to address and prevent technology-facilitated sexual violence.

Digital sexual violence in Canada

Our team at the [DIY: Digital Safety](link) research project, along with the [Sex Information and Education Council of Canada](link), recently released a [report outlining how secondary schools across Canada can address TFSV](link) in their curricula and policies. We found that TFSV-related concepts are insufficiently addressed in Canadian schools, and that when TFSV is

addressed, there are major gaps that need improvement.

Within educational curricula, very few provinces and territories recognize that sexual violence can occur online. Many do not include content on TFSV-specific online behaviors or discuss the legal consequences of online behavior.

Three provinces and one territory—Ontario, British Columbia and Yukon (which uses B.C.'s curriculum)—provide students with the most comprehensive understanding of TFSV. Students there learn about the potential harms related to technology (like cyberbullying, sexual predators and sexting risks) and that people can be targeted because of their gender or sexual orientation. Students also learn about the legal ramifications of cyberbullying and TFSV-related behaviors.

Although Ontario, British Columbia and Yukon are the most thorough in addressing TFSV, educational approaches across the provinces and territories are not comprehensive. We recommend that all Canadian secondary schools teach their students that sexual violence can occur online, inform them about the online and offline impacts of TFSV and educate them about the harms and legal consequences related to TFSV.

Specific legislation needed

Twelve provinces and territories (all but Nunavut) have some form of anti-bullying provisions in their educational legislation, which often includes cyber, electronic or written bullying.

Only Manitoba, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador currently have specific legislative provisions that prohibit TFSV-related behaviors, like sharing or distributing intimate images without consent. These legislative provisions are not directly related to educational policy, but they are tools that young people and schools may choose to engage with.

Provincial non-consensual intimate image laws can help students respond to TFSV. [British Columbia is the most recent province](#) to introduce such legislation, as well as criminal laws such as the extortion, child luring and the non-consensual distribution of intimate images.

It is necessary to recognize the power of language used in legislation, educational curricula and policies. Using cyberbullying as an umbrella term to refer to TFSV-related behaviors [may diminish or dismiss the harms](#) experienced by young people. This may also impact the help that students receive and the resources available to them, such as their ability to access legal or policy supports related to sexual violence.

Our analysis found that TFSV-related behaviors are rarely addressed within the context of [intersectionality](#). Educational curricula in Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador and P.E.I. recognize how unequal power dynamics and control contribute to violence and abuse, while Ontario considers how power dynamics contribute to discrimination and biases.

However, educational curricula in these provinces do not consider how power dynamics and oppression experienced by people from marginalized groups can contribute to technology-facilitated [sexual violence](#).

British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, and Québec consider intersectionality in supplemental or optional resources, but not in core curricular documents. Considerations of equity and diversity should not be optional in students' education. An intersectional approach to TFSV is necessary to help students gain a comprehensive understanding of this problem and its impacts on diverse populations.

How schools can address TFSV

Secondary schools should include specific references to TFSV in their curricula and policies. It is important that schools empower students and refrain from taking a risk-based approach to technology. A risk-based approach emphasizes potential harms, and it can stigmatize students or make them feel ashamed when they experience TFSV.

We encourage schools to empower students and help them understand what tools and resources are available when they want to seek support or help others respond to TFSV. We also recommend that students learn about their technology-related rights and responsibilities, as well as what resources and supports are available to them when they need help.

Lastly, schools need to include information on how power and intersecting forms of oppression factor into students' experiences with TFSV. Our research team is developing resources for youth, translated into 13 languages, including Indigenous languages, to help them learn about TFSV.

With new technologies being developed and the rise of artificial intelligence, there is a growing concern about how students in Canada learn about online sexual harms and how youth are protected from such harms. Secondary schools across the country should update their curricula and enact policies to protect young people and teach them how to respond to TFSV.

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