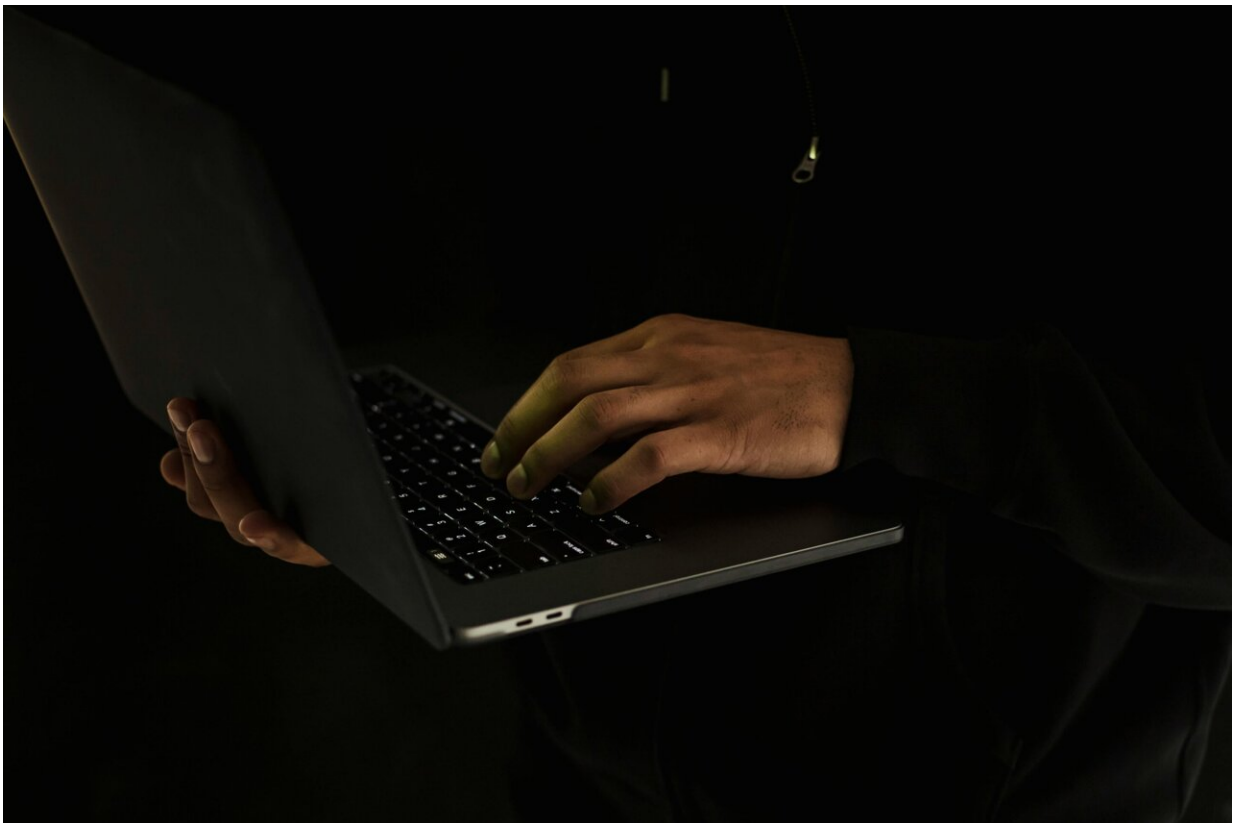# Tackling digital sexual violence in Canada requires updated policies and procedures

August 7 2024, by Yimin Chen, Chandell Gosse, Jaigris Hodson and Kaitlynn Mendes

Credit: Sora Shimazaki from Pexels

Online abuse affects one in six school-aged children, according to a recent World Health Organization survey of Europe, Asia and Canada.

This statistic is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to online abuse, though, as this issue affects more than just school-aged children.

Other reports have found that over 80% of Canadian undergraduate students have suffered at least one form of online abuse and 95% of anti-violence workers have worked on cases where technology was a contributing factor.

These types of abuse are known as technology-facilitated sexual violence (TFSV). It's the term researchers and activists use to talk about the sexualized and intimately intrusive side of online abuse. TFSV encompasses non-consensual sexual imagery like deepfakes and unsolicited dick pics, gendered harassment and cyberstalking, as well as misogynistic narratives spread through social media.

TFSV can be a traumatizing and isolating experience. It is also one that disproportionately affects women, children, racialized, queer, and neuro- and gender-diverse people.

Recent online attacks against a transgender teacher in British Columbia are just one example of how this unfolds. A teacher in Pitt Meadows, B.C., filed a human rights complaint in June after they were sent online messages of hate and violence after being doxxed by a social media account.

And, worryingly, one recent survey found that nearly one in five Canadian adults reported engaging in at least one type of TFSV.

A rapidly evolving problem

Over the past few decades, communities, governments and educational institutions have intensified efforts to combat gender-based discrimination, abuse and sexual violence.

These efforts include raising awareness, adopting policies and providing training programs. [Canada's National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence](#) is one such initiative. However, technology changes rapidly and the pace of advancements have outstripped many of these policies.

Take, for example, the incredible speed of advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) applications. These AI apps have been used to commit new forms of abuse. In Winnipeg, [high school students recently used AI](#) to generate fake nudes of their classmates. Similar stories have emerged from elsewhere, [including London, Ont..](#)

When policies and programs don't reflect how violence unfolds in our digitally-connected world, they cannot be effective. To genuinely protect people, these approaches need to adapt alongside [technological advancements](#).

TFSV prevention in Canada

Our research team investigated how Canadian institutions are adapting to the new reality of technology-facilitated sexual violence. We identified 81 universities and community-based organizations across Canada that provide instructor-led anti-violence education or [training programs](#).

We then evaluated whether these programs directly addressed TFSV. [Our study found](#) the vast majority of these organizations did not. Only one-fifth included any content that specifically dealt with the technological aspects of sexual violence and abuse.

We spoke with several anti-violence service providers about why such a vast gap exists between what is needed to address TFSV and the services currently available. Here's what they said,

- The staff at these organizations are dedicated, but often stretched

thin. They simply do not have the time or resources to create and update their programming to include TFSV. This is even more difficult when the technological landscape can change so rapidly.

- Although there is a large and growing body of research on TFSV, it is not always easy for front-line workers and practitioners to make sense of it. There are also few how-to guides that help to translate research into practice.
- The perception that online harms are less damaging than offline harms is still troublesomely persistent. This belief is known as digital dualism. This idea that the online world isn't "real" ignores just how much digital technologies have interwoven themselves into our financial, social and romantic lives.

Where do we go from here?

There are promising efforts underway to help Canadians understand and act against technology-facilitated sexual violence.

For example, the Tech Safety Canada project, which is run by Women's Shelters Canada, operates an informative website explaining the issue. The site offers several downloadable toolkits on topics ranging from digital assistive technologies to legal remedies for TFSV. Organizations like the Canadian Women's Foundation and Egale also provide valuable information.

However, such efforts require sustained support to grow and adapt to the changing landscape of TFSV and online abuse more broadly. With the decline of human moderation on sites like X (Twitter) and Facebook, this problem is only getting worse.

Our research team, along with other collaborators across Canada, have been committed to creating resources to help. There are still significant gaps in how we deal with TFSV in Canada, but these are also

opportunities to improve the way we address gendered violence and [abuse](#).

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