

Digital Abuse in an Intimate Partner Relationship

"Haven: A Place of Safety"

The rise of technology is phenomenal. By simply reaching for our phones we are able to reach anywhere in the world. The benefits of this are great in terms of connectivity, communication and networking. But what happens in a domestic violence setting where it can be used against victims? The lasting impacts of digital abuse can be profound and often irreversible.

Perpetrators of domestic violence often know how to manipulate technology and social media platforms to exert inescapable power and control over his victim. This can include logging in to and monitoring Facebook, Twitter, messaging or email accounts. Monitoring browser history and call logs. It can include the 'mirroring' of electronic devices so that they have access to communication streams. It can also involve using digital tracking or spyware to map a woman's movement and whereabouts- even when they're not physically together, he is in control.

The power of the internet and evident rise of revenge porn demonstrates how damaging and lasting digital abuse can be. Intimate images or personal sensitive information once shared with an intimate partner can be used as a means to blackmail, coerce, degrade and humiliate a person very publicly and permanently. Women can be made to live in fear and terror at the hands of a perpetrator who can use this power to damage her relationships, reputation, career- her future.

The internet is forever, but the suffering of domestic violence doesn't have to be. Technology can also have the power to change things for the better. Last week saw the launch of **'Haven: Belfast'** the first App of its kind in Belfast for victims of domestic & sexual violence and the professionals working to support them. The App created by the Belfast Domestic & Sexual Violence and Abuse Partnership, utilises technology to offer another form of support to people experiencing domestic & sexual violence.

The app contains information on how to identify and respond to domestic violence and signposting to relevant support services. Over 75% of people in Northern Ireland use a smartphone on a daily basis. Therefore as an App, 'Haven: Belfast' is readily available, accessible, discreet and is also free to download. It is hoped that the app can be used as a tool to empower victims and help them take back control. Whether it's physically, emotionally, financially or digitally- everyone deserves to be safe.

Sarah Bruce

women's aid

Belfast and Lisburn