

# Towards A Sociotechnical Methodology for Responsible Research on Violence Against Women and Girls

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Online spaces are increasingly becoming overwhelmed with violence against women and girls (VAWG), such as stalking, hate speech, deepfakes, and similar crimes, which have made investigations around VAWG critical for online safety. In this paper, based on our experiences of designing and conducting sociotechnical research, we present considerations for a sociotechnical method for understanding and addressing VAWG through the lens of responsible innovation, which includes: (1) recruiting local participants, (2) ensuring high standards of ethics and safeguarding, and (3) co-designing age-appropriate and topic-sensitive study designs. We conclude with open research questions for the HCI community to guide future research on sociotechnical methods for safe online spaces.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Human computer interaction (HCI)**; **HCI design and evaluation methods**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Sociotechnical Methods, Violence Against Women and Girls, Online Harms

## ACM Reference Format:

Habiba Farzand, Rui Huan, and Kopo Marvin Ramokapane. 2026. Towards A Sociotechnical Methodology for Responsible Research on Violence Against Women and Girls. In *CHI'26: ACM CHI, April 13 - April 17, 2026, Barcelona, Spain*. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 3 pages. <https://doi.org/XXXXXXXX.XXXXXXX>

## 1 Introduction

Violence against women and girls (VAWG), such as stalking and physical threats, remains common in digital spaces, with significant proportions of women reporting experiences of text-based and image-based abuse [4, 6]. However, efforts to address it have largely focused on technical mitigation strategies, such as content moderation, hate speech detection, and bias reduction in AI systems [1, 5]. While these approaches have made a significant impact, they often overlook the sociotechnical assumptions that shape how gender-based harm is defined, studied, and addressed.

Investigating VAWG presents significant methodological, ethical, and conceptual challenges. Research in this area requires engaging with survivors of abuse in ways that are trauma-informed and safeguarding-sensitive. Recruitment is regularly constrained by safety risks, emotional burden, and mistrust in institutional processes. Moreover, ethical review processes (i.e., IRBs), while very important, do not always fully account for the evolving and relational nature of digital harm and the people who are involved. In addition, the terminology and categories used to frame “harm,”

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“safety,” and “responsibility” are not neutral; they reflect broader sociotechnical imaginaries about who is accountable, whose experiences are legitimised, and what forms of violence are made visible or actionable.

To this end, we argue that researching VAWG should be understood as a site of responsible design. Research approaches should not just be tools for data collection but interventions that shape imaginaries of digital responsibility and justice. Reimagining research practices can shift the focus to embedding ethics into practice and creating sustainable impact. Drawing on our experience of conducting sociotechnical research, we present considerations for designing a sociotechnical method to understand and address the interplay among such crimes in online spaces through the lens of responsible innovation.

## 2 Considerations for Designing Sociotechnical Methodology

- **Recruiting Local Participants:** Recruiting participants from communities affected by VAWG remains a significant challenge. Stigma, lack of trust in research institutions, safety concerns, and risk of re-triggering traumatic experiences of violence can discourage participation. One way to reach local people is to partner with community or service-based organisations, as they have built trust over time, and embedding research designs into their day-to-day activities can help address and understand the tensions around VAWG. However, this approach may inadvertently exclude individuals who are not associated with community- or service-based organisations, raising broader questions about access, representation, and whose voices shape research agendas. This raises the question: *How might responsible design practices expand participation beyond institutional networks while maintaining safety and trust?*
- **Research Ethics & Safeguarding Participants:** Research ethics are often treated as procedural or legal compliance. However, in VAWG research, ethics transcends to the core component of responsible design. Decisions around consent processes, documentation, and data handling directly shape participants’ safety and agency. While the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Forms are important documents for transparency, a key question arises: *Should consent be obtained in written or verbal form [7]?* Written consent reinforces formal accountability, but it can also introduce additional risks by creating traceable records which may potentially compromise participants’ safety. These choices go beyond paperwork; they reflect underlying assumptions about risk, protection, and responsibility within the research process.
- **Co-Designing Study Materials:** Working with participants with diverse backgrounds brings the challenge of research designs that are age-appropriate, topic-sensitive and tailored to target participants’ language skills, level of familiarity with technology, and educational levels. One way to ensure that research designs reflect all named attributes is to adopt Participatory Action Design Research [2, 3], which combines action research, participatory design, and technological iterations to develop research materials tailored to the needs of target participant groups. Using this approach, research materials are reviewed by researchers who work directly with these populations or by community organisations that serve these groups, as they are best positioned to understand their members’ needs and to engage with them effectively. *A key challenge with this approach is how to maintain a balance between co-designing and methodological rigour.*

## Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge the support from Safer Streets - a project funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI 2785). This work was also supported by REPHRAIN: National Research Centre on Privacy, Harm Reduction and Adversarial Influence online (EPSRC Grant: EP/Y036611/1) and Equitable Privacy (EPSRC: EP/W025361/1).

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