

# When Inclusion Increases Harm

A practical guide to compounding risk in digital and automated systems

*Inclusion without safety is not empowerment.*

Expanding access to technology is not the same as making it safe. When we bring more people into digital systems without changing how those systems work, we can shift risk onto the very people we set out to help. It distils what we see across our work on online safety, gender-based violence, child protection, and automated decision-making, and offers a short screen to apply before you build, deploy, or scale.

<p><b>01</b></p> <p><b>Vulnerability stacks</b></p> <p>It is a state, not a trait. When disability, gender, isolation, or language barriers overlap, risks do not add up. They multiply.</p>	<p><b>02</b></p> <p><b>Safety is an environment</b></p> <p>Not a personal responsibility. Telling people to be more careful does not fix a system built to scale harm.</p>	<p><b>03</b></p> <p><b>Harm is not random</b></p> <p>It is shaped, repeated, and intensified by systems that learn and adapt faster than our safeguards do.</p>
--	--	---

## The harm patterns we see

<b>Escalating content</b>	Recommendation systems draw isolated young people into worsening patterns of content, faster than anyone is watching.
<b>Visibility penalties</b>	Women who build a presence online meet harassment and suppression that limit the opportunity inclusion promised.
<b>Digital overload</b>	Engagement-driven design erodes mental health, attention, and sleep, with the heaviest toll on those already struggling.
<b>Disconnection as risk</b>	Loneliness and isolation strip away the relationships and protective factors that keep people safe online.
<b>Automated denial of care</b>	Standardised assessments exclude people whose needs do not fit the template, displacing the cost onto unpaid carers, mostly women.
<b>Automated coercive control</b>	When a system denies funding for housing or transport, it can remove the autonomy a person needs to leave a violent situation.
<b>Cultural and linguistic exclusion</b>	Models without cultural context do not recognise the needs of diverse communities, and care is wrongly denied.

## The compounding-risk screen

Eight questions to ask before you build, deploy, or scale any system or inclusion initiative.

- 1 If this fails, who carries the harm, and is it the same people it is meant to help?
- 2 Does it optimise for engagement and efficiency, or for safety and wellbeing?
- 3 What happens to a person whose needs are not captured in the standard data?
- 4 Could it remove something essential, housing, income, care, or transport, and with it, someone's autonomy?
- 5 Does it account for vulnerabilities that overlap and compound, rather than treating each in isolation?
- 6 Is there meaningful human oversight, or only a record that a process was completed?
- 7 Who was consulted, and did people with lived experience shape the design?
- 8 If harm here is predictable, who is accountable when it happens?

**From reaction to prevention**

- **Design for safety from the start**, not after the first harm.
- **Measure wellbeing**, not only engagement.
- **Keep a human in the loop** who can actually intervene.
- **Test with the people most likely to be harmed**, including survivors.
- **Place accountability** where harm is foreseeable.