

Factsheet: Gender & Online Harassment

Note: this Factsheet deals with issues of a sensitive nature relating to harassment and gender-based violence.

The relationship between gender and online harassment

Online harassment and intimidation through text messages, phone calls or social media — often known as cyberstalking or cyber-harassment — severely restricts the enjoyment that persons have of their rights online, particularly vulnerable and marginalised groups, including women and members of sexual minorities. There are [various types](#) of online harassment, ranging from cyberstalking and Distributed Denial-of-Service (DDoS) attacks, to doxing and online sexual harassment.

While the internet provides a forum for people to seek information about their identities and sexual orientation, and to express themselves on these topics, many people suffer a wide range of attacks in doing so, including attacks on sexuality, exposing personal information, and the manipulation of images that are then used for blackmail purposes and in order to destroy credibility. Research has shown that online harassment is often focused on personal or physical characteristics, with political views, gender, physical appearance and race being among the most common.

Online harassment and violence relate closely to the same issues offline, however the internet enables anonymity and the avoidance of consequences more easily than similar crimes committed offline. And although all genders experience harassment online, women and gender minorities experience harassment of a sexual nature at higher rates, reflecting the [deeply rooted gender inequalities that exist in our societies](#). [Research](#) has found that “fake online accounts with feminine usernames incurred an average of 100 sexually explicit or threatening messages a day, while masculine names received only 3.7 messages.”

As described by the [Pew Research Center](#): “In its milder forms, [online harassment] creates a layer of negativity that people must sift through as they navigate their daily routines online. At its most severe, it can compromise users’ privacy, force them to choose when and where to participate online, or even pose a threat to their physical safety.”

For those who experience online harassment directly, these encounters can have profound real-world consequences, ranging from mental or emotional stress to reputational damage or even fear for one’s personal safety. Furthermore, whether one is affected directly or indirectly, it can lead to significant self-censorship to avoid incurring such harassment, limiting women and gender minorities’ participation in online environments.

The [2019 UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech](#) highlights that:

“Around the world, we are seeing a disturbing groundswell of xenophobia, racism and intolerance – including rising anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim hatred and persecution of Christians. Social media and other forms of communication are being exploited as platforms for bigotry. Neo-Nazi and white supremacy movements are on the march. Public discourse is being weaponised for political gain with incendiary rhetoric that stigmatises and dehumanises minorities, migrants, refugees, women and any so-called ‘other’.”

Harassment of women journalists

Online harassment is particularly problematic for women journalists, and those identifying as LGBTQI. According to the [International Women's Media Foundation](#) (IWMF), nearly 2 out of 3 women journalists and media workers said they'd been threatened or harassed online at least once, and of those 40 per cent said they avoided reporting certain stories as a result of online harassment. Perhaps most worryingly, nearly 30 per cent of IWMF's respondents indicated the threats and attacks they received made them think about leaving the profession, raising the prospect of worsening representation in the media sector.

The UN has also [reported](#) that women are facing increased challenges in the online environment. It has been recognised that “[o]ver the past 15 years there has been ‘a marked increase’ in cyber harassment, making the safety of women journalists a significant issue for reportage in today’s digital era.”

The risks that women journalists [face](#) in the course of their work — both on- and offline — include: in the physical realm, sexual harassment, physical assault and rape, which may limit their physical mobility; and in the digital sphere, acts of harassment and threats of violence. Similarly, female sources face increased risks when acting as whistleblowers or confidential informants. As such, women journalists need to be able to rely on secure, non-physical forms of communications with their sources, in particular secure digital communications. According to [UNESCO](#), female whistleblowers “also need to have confidence in the ability to make secure contact with journalists to ensure that stories affecting women are told — secure digital communications can be an enabler for women’s participation in public interest journalism.”

Practical steps for women journalists to protect themselves online:

- Be wary of the hashtags you use on social media, to avoid alerting coordinated troll attacks on specific issues.
- Do not share your live location data on social media until after you have left the scene.
- When threats become explicit, share them with your editor, management or colleagues, and work with them to set up procedures to ensure your safety.
- Allow yourself the space to process the emotional toll of what you are experiencing — speak to friends, colleagues or a professional who can assist you.
- Consider reporting the threat or attack to the platform on which it was sent, particularly if it clearly violates the platform’s code of conduct.
- Encourage your media organisation to establish a protocol for educating staff about harassment and addressing it.
- For more information, review resources from the [IWMF](#) and [TrollBusters](#).

Non-consensual dissemination of intimate images (NCII)

A particular form of harassment, typically towards women, is that of private and sexually explicit images, usually of women, being shared publicly online without their permission or consent, often by former partners in retaliation for a break-up or other falling out, or for the purposes of extortion, blackmail or humiliation. However, few countries’ cybercrime legislation specifically caters for offences related to non-consensual dissemination of intimate images (NCII), often leaving victims with little recourse against perpetrators.

NCII is often referred to as ‘revenge porn.’ However, activists and researchers have universally rejected the term as being [misleading](#). Firstly, the word ‘revenge’ implies that the victim has committed a harm worth seeking revenge for, and ‘porn’ conflates the practice with

the consensual production of content for mass consumption, which NCII decidedly is not. Secondly, the term “[repackages an age-old harm as a new-fangled digital problem](#),” belying the long history that exists of images of women being distributed non-consensually across a range of mediums. Lastly, the term [oversimplifies](#) the offence by ignoring the many different types of perpetrators that may exist and invoking a moralist reaction against the victim.

Practical steps for victims of NCII:

Because few countries have laws explicitly protecting women from NCII, victims often need to know how to carefully navigate their own path towards justice and accountability. While procedures may vary from country to country, here are some common steps that can be taken:

- Make a record (and copies) of the content posted online, to ensure permanent documentation of the crime. This should include the date the content was posted, where it was posted, and who posted it. Screenshots are a useful way to do this.
- Seek psycho-social and legal assistance.
- You may be able to [interdict](#) the further dissemination of images or video, depending on the laws in your country.
- File a report with the police. Even if your country does not have a specific provision for the non-consensual dissemination of intimate images, an offence may be located within the existing criminal law.
- File a [report](#) with the platform on which the content was posted. It might also help to include a copy of the police report in your report to the platform.

Cyberbullying

Another online harassment trend, common amongst children, involves so-called ‘cyberbullying,’ which is the sending of intimidating or threatening messages, often via social media, and which is [pervasive](#) — and [growing](#) — among children and young adults.

According to [UNICEF](#):

“[Cyberbullying] can take place on social media, messaging platforms, gaming platforms and mobile phones. It is repeated behaviour, aimed at scaring, angering or shaming those who are targeted. Examples include:

- Spreading lies about or posting embarrassing photos of someone on social media;
- Sending hurtful messages or threats via messaging platforms;
- Impersonating someone and sending mean messages to others on their behalf.

Face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying can often happen alongside each other. But cyberbullying leaves a digital footprint — a record that can prove useful and provide evidence to help stop the abuse.”

Practical Solutions

In order to protect themselves against gendered harassment online, women and gender minorities online can take the following steps:

- Be careful of your digital security settings and aware of best practice regarding digital hygiene. For example, set a strong password, change it regularly, and do not use the same password for different accounts. For more guidance, see Tactical Tech’s [Digital Detox Kit](#).

- Be aware of the options available to you on social media sites. Most social media platforms enable blocking of specific users. Instagram also allows a more subtle “[Restrict](#)” feature.

At a broader societal level, the following [actions](#) are needed to make progress on tackling this concerning and growing trend:

- There is a need for social media and platform companies to share more data about the prevalence and nature of gendered online harassment on their platforms to enable researchers to better understand the problem, and develop appropriate solutions.
- Awareness programs aimed at potential harassers should be developed to reduce and prevent harassment.
- Likewise, educational programs designed to inform women and gender minorities about harassment and how to protect themselves should be rolled out across social media platforms.
- Regulators and governments need to take a more active role in understanding the phenomenon and designing appropriate solutions to address it, to hold social media companies accountable for the behaviour facilitated by their platforms.

These and other potential solutions are further detailed in the [2019 UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech](#).