



Submission to Gender Justice and the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression

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Issued by: Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of freedom of opinion and expression

Purpose: To inform the thematic report on the right to freedom of opinion and expression and gender justice for the 76th session of the General Assembly

I.

- a. What barriers, challenges and threats do women in the public sphere face in exercising their freedom of opinion and expression online and offline?*

Glitch is a UK charity that exists to end online abuse and to increase digital citizenship across all online users. We believe that our online community is as real as our offline one, and that everyone should work together to make it a better place. We work to promote good digital citizenship and address online harms such as online abuse, online hate speech and information disorders, and have developed bespoke training programmes covering Digital Citizenship, Active Bystander and Digital Self Care and Self Defence. As part of this, we have delivered training to women in public life.

In our view, the current narrative around freedom of expression online has created a false trade-off between ‘free speech’ and online violence. Online abuse disproportionately affects women and in particular women of colour. Since we started our work in 2017, we have documented the scale and abuse of online violence targeting women and girls in the UK as well as marginalised communities and have seen how this abuse undermines free speech by attempting to silence marginalised communities and women and persons of colour who are involved in public life. Too often, ‘free speech’ has become a smokescreen for abusers and perpetrators of online violence.

Freedom of expression is not the freedom to abuse and we should be careful about framing ‘freedom of expression’ and ‘harassment’ in opposition to one another. Without safeguards against harassment or hate speech, freedom of expression is undermined and diverse political representation is stifled. We do recognise that there are difficult legal questions to answer in relation to, for example, what constitutes ‘gross offensiveness’ online but these questions should not distract from the problem at hand: the sheer scale of online abuse targeting women and girls, and marginalised communities.

The right to freedom of expression should not cover any manifestation of online violence against a user, group of users or community. At Glitch, we define online abuse as an umbrella term covering a wide range of behaviours, from sexual harassment, discriminatory language and threats to doxxing and swatting.

Sadly, online abuse and harassment is extremely common and affects women and girls and marginalised communities disproportionately. Globally, women are 27 times more likely to be harassed online. A poll conducted by Amnesty International¹ (2017) across eight countries including the USA and UK showed that nearly a quarter (23%) of the women surveyed across the eight countries said they had experienced online abuse or harassment at least once, including 21% of women polled in the UK.

¹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/11/amnesty-reveals-alarming-impact-of-online-abuse-against-women/>



- b. *What are the distinct challenges faced by those who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination?*

In 2020, Glitch and EVAW (End Violence Against Women coalition) produced a report [The Ripple Effect: Covid-19 and the Epidemic of Online Abuse](#), which highlighted issues around intersectionality and online abuse. Our survey was limited to women and non-binary individuals and received 484 responses, the largest investigation into gender-based and intersectional online abuse during the pandemic in the UK.

Since its formation in 2017, Glitch has been campaigning to make online spaces safe for all, particularly women, girls and people with intersecting identities who are disproportionately affected by online abuse.

Our survey found that most of the abuse took place on mainstream social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) despite tech companies' commitments to making their platforms safe and addressing gender-based and intersectional abuse.

There is an urgent need for greater financial investment from governments, tech companies and employers in digital education programmes and research. While our research is the most ambitious attempt to document online abuse against women and non-binary people in the UK during COVID-19, more research is needed into gender-based and intersectional abuse, as well as the impact of online abuse on Black and minoritised communities.

In addition to speaking about intersectionality, Glitch also refers to the concept of “multiple identities,” acknowledging that “women who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination offline because of their different identities (i.e. race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, etc.) are also likely to be targeted with discrimination that targets their multiple and intersecting identities online.

The findings from the survey show that Black and minorities women and non-binary people were more likely experience online abuse during COVID-19 and more likely to report the abuse being worse during the pandemic. This highlights the need to implement responses that include an intersectional lens.

Respondents were asked what aspect(s) of their identity the abuse they faced was related to.

- Gender was the most often cited reason for online abuse - some 48% of respondents reported suffering from gender-based abuse,
- 21% of respondents reported suffering from abuse related to their gender identity and sexual orientation, followed by 18% for their ethnic background and 10% for their religion and 7% for a disability.
- Black and minoritised women and non-binary people were almost as likely to be abused based on ethnicity as they were to be abused based on gender, with 46% of Black and minoritised respondents of colour reporting abuse based on gender and 43% based on ethnicity.
- Black and minoritised respondents were also more likely to be abused for their religion than white respondents.
- While the sample of nonbinary respondents was too small to draw statistical conclusions, anecdotal evidence shows non-binary people overwhelmingly experienced abuse related to gender identity and gender expression (7 out of 11).



Other research from the UK published by Girlguiding UK² in 2019 showed that 33% of girls and young women aged 11-21 had received mean or abusive comments on social media; and 43% of girls admitted to holding back their opinions on social media for fear of being criticised – creating a situation where diversity is threatened.

A 2018 report by Amnesty International³ examined tweets sent to 778 UK and US female politicians and journalists, finding that 7.1% of tweets received by these women were abusive or problematic, with Black women 84% more likely to receive such tweets than white women in the study.

- c. *How have the pandemic, economic crises and recent political unrests affected women's ability to communicate, protest and access information online and offline?*

In 2020, Glitch and EAW (End Violence Against Women coalition) produced a report The Ripple Effect: Covid-19 and the Epidemic of Online Abuse, in which we present our findings that in the UK almost 1 in 2 (46%) women and non binary people reported experiencing online abuse since the beginning of COVID-19 (participants were surveyed in the summer of 2020) and 1 in 3 (29%) of those who had experienced online abuse prior to the pandemic reported it being worse during COVID-19. Online abuse not only violates an individual's right to live free from violence and to participate online but also undermines democratic exercises.

This report shows that 38% of all respondents experienced online abuse while this figure increased to 50% of Black and minoritised respondents.

27% reported increased online abuse during Covid-19. This figure increased to 40% for Black and minoritised respondents. While samples of respondents by specific Black and minoritised background were too small to draw statistically significant conclusions, the limited data we have shows that 50% of Black British respondents faced online abuse since the beginning of COVID-19 lockdown; the proportion was 58% for Asian British respondents.

One person stated that "Social media has always tended to be contentious and abusive but since COVID and lockdown I believe the vitriol has increased exponentially."

2. *What legislative, administrative, policy, regulatory or other measures exist in your State to promote and protect women's freedom of opinion and expression online and offline? To what extent do these measures take into account intersectionality?*

The UK Government has recently published its draft Online Safety Bill⁴, which aims to address 'legal but harmful' online abuse, as well as illegal harms. The Law Commission is also conducting a review of hate crime laws, to consider expanding these to include new protected characteristics including misogyny.⁵ The emergence of the draft Online Safety Bill coincided with a high-profile boycotting of social media by UK football clubs, to raise awareness of online hatred towards people in sport, including racist abuse. In reaction to this, the UK Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Oliver Dowden CBE MP announced that on the Online Safety Bill was a landmark law to

² Girls' Attitude Survey 2019 <https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/research-and-campaigns/girls-attitudes-survey-2019.pdf>

³ Emily Dreyfuss, "Twitter Is Indeed Toxic for Women, Amnesty Report Says," Wired, 12 October 2020 <https://www.wired.com/story/amnesty-report-twitter-abuse-women/>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/draft-online-safety-bill>

⁵ <https://www.lawcom.gov.uk/reforms-to-hate-crime-laws-to-make-them-fairer-and-to-protect-women-for-the-first-time/>



‘keep children safe, stop racial hate and protect democracy online’.⁶ The bill is due to go through pre-legislative scrutiny in order to test how robust it would be to achieve the end of racial online abuse as it is currently unclear how this will effectively be achieved.

While the draft legislation does not include intersectionality specifically, a clause around ‘certain characteristics (or combination of characteristics)’ is included:

"In this section “affected person” means a person, other than a user of the service in question, who is in the United Kingdom and who is—

- (a) the subject of the content,
- (b) a member of a class or group of people with a certain characteristic (or combination of characteristics) targeted by the content,
- (c) a parent of, or other adult with responsibility for, a child who is a user of the service or is the subject of the content, or
- (d) an adult providing assistance in using the service to another adult who requires such assistance, where that other adult is a user of the service or is the subject of the content.”⁷

However, we are concerned that despite ongoing conversations between our organisation and others in the sector to emphasise the gendered nature of online abuse, the disproportionate impact of online abuse on women is not recognised in the draft legislation. References to women are likely to follow in list of harms as part of the secondary legislation, though we believe that women need to be on the face of the bill to appropriately address and end online abuse against women.

Women Members of the UK Parliament (MPs) have been increasingly speaking out against the abhorrent online abuse that they and their staff members face on a daily basis⁸ as these issues are discussed in the UK Parliament. Male MPs are also speaking out, either on behalf of themselves, their staff or their constituents.⁹

Women MPs are cutting their political careers short because of the volume of online abuse that they receive.¹⁰ Our democracy is weakened by the lack of diversity that this creates. The Online Safety Bill must do more to protect the UK political spaces in order to protect democracy.

The UK Government is also currently working on its violence against women strategy and has just passed the Domestic Abuse Act. We believe that these, together with the Online Safety Bill need to recognise online abuse against women and girls and part of a continuum of violence against women that happens both in the online and offline spaces and that online abuse can be part of a series of behaviours related to violence against women, such as domestic abuse. As such, the specialist violence against women sector and organisations focusing on online abuse, particularly against women, need to be funded to deliver ongoing work to not only prevent online abuse but also support survivors of online abuse.

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/landmark-laws-to-keep-children-safe-stop-racial-hate-and-protect-democracy-online-published>

⁷ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/985033/Draft_Online_Safety_Bill_Bookmarked.pdf

⁸ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2021-04-20/debates/2B92BF79-53E8-42A6-92ED-D04054F5752B/a#contribution-B3827910-830D-409C-AED7-74994EC093E2>

⁹ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2021-03-24/debates/378D3CBD-E4C6-4138-ABA6-2783D130B23C/OnlineAnonymityAndAnonymousAbuse>

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/oct/31/alarm-over-number-female-mps-stepping-down-after-abuse>



- 3. In your view how effective are they in supporting women's empowerment and public participation? Please provide statistical data and judicial decisions, where available.*

In addition to what has been stated above, UK police and law enforcement have struggled to respond to the problem of online abuse. Law enforcement officers lack appropriate training to respond to the problem and there is anecdotal evidence that cases of online abuse are not dealt with appropriately. The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women recently recommended increased training for law enforcement on violence against women. In [The Ripple Effect](#), our latest report on the impact of COVID-19 on online abuse, we gathered multiple testimonials from victims of online abuse who reported not being taken seriously by law enforcement despite receiving direct threats.

- 4. What do you believe States should do to a) uphold women's human right to freedom of opinion and expression b) protect women from violence, harassment and intimidation online and offline and c) promote women's public participation?*

Online is a continuation of our offline reality, of the spaces and places we interact and operate in every day. We cannot talk about online safety, tech accountability, or digital citizenship education without discussing the deficit in political education, the great need to decolonise our curriculum so we learn about race, sexism and other forms of systemic oppression.

Digital citizenship is key in addressing online abuse and should be made available to young people and adults alike in settings such as workplaces, industry organisations and trade unions. [Our report on COVID-19](#) showed that 9% of victims faced online abuse from a colleague or superior at work – this means that employers need to put in place robust harassment policies in the workplace and introduce digital citizenship training for their employees, bearing in mind that the latter can also be perpetrators.

Greater investment in digital citizenship initiatives for adults would ensure that organisations providing such training can deliver their services at scale. The government and policy makers should also ensure that digital citizenship resources are widely distributed to the greater public.

The State needs to ensure that online abuse is recognised as a form of violence against women and that there is join up between the UK Government's forthcoming Violence Against Women Strategy, the Domestic Abuse strategy, the Media Literacy Strategy and the Online Safety Bill in order to bring an end to online abuse against women, which is such a barrier to women's participation in public life.

The online abuse sector and the specialist violence against women's sector need to be sustainably funded at a rate that meets the demand needed to both support survivors of all forms of violence against women, including online abuse and so that organisations like Glitch, who offer training to women to increase their digital safety are resourced to continue to deliver vital safety initiatives and upskilling for women in or interested in entering public space.

Tech accountability is also key. As the UK Government looks to introduce new laws to make the UK the safest place to be online, we are urging the Chancellor of Exchequer to ring fence 10% of the new digital services tax to help achieve this. To efficiently and effectively combat online abuse, this 10% should be pledged to civil society organisations to help fund the vital work of ending online violence and abuse outlined in the previous paragraph, such as through training on good digital citizenship and online safety, providing resources and awareness raising and supporting survivors of online abuse and violence.

Police and law enforcement need to be both trained and upskilled to improve support for survivors of online abuse. The Online Safety Bill must increase protections for women, be intersectional, and help police and law enforcement to protect women and girls online, rather than maintaining barriers to justice that currently exist, with improved relationships between police and tech companies.



5. *What specific measures have platform providers and intermediaries taken to i) protect women's freedom of opinion and expression; ii) protect women from online gender based violence, harassment, intimidation and disinformation; iii) promote women's equal access to the digital space; iv) address grievances and provide remedies to women users; v) ensure accountability of the intermediaries?*

Despite platforms' growing investment in content moderation, we have to recognise that moderation policies are not achieving good enough results and are not properly enforced. Online abuse continues to thrive on social media platforms, which is why:

- Platforms should ensure their policies are properly enforced and constantly reviewed to reflect changes in language and take into account mechanisms that allow abusers to bypass their detection mechanisms
- Platforms should make their content moderation policies as clear and understandable as possible
- Platforms should improve their reporting mechanisms. In particular, platforms should acknowledge all reports of inappropriate behaviour and notify the user of the steps being taken to address the issue. They should review those reports within 24 hours, send a warning to the flagged users, and then, if the problematic user persists, remove them from the platform.

While policies are in place, they are still not properly enforced and reporting mechanisms are complicated to navigate for victims of online abuse.

Beyond content moderation policies, social media's content moderation processes need to be changed to provide greater transparency, including:

- Algorithmic transparency: an independent regulator should be able to audit tech platforms' content moderation algorithms
- Transparency about the number and nature of reports received and why content moderation decisions are made – this information should be made available to the regulator and to trusted research organisations

We believe that the design of social media platforms has allowed harmful behaviours to thrive, by allowing content to go viral unchecked. Platforms' business model is also closely linked to the attention economy, with recommendation algorithms presenting social media users with ever more extreme and sensationalised content to capture our attention. We need to recognise that platforms' business priorities cannot take precedence over the online safety of users. The UK Government's draft Online Safety Bill has set out a 'duty of care' for platforms towards their users. Platforms therefore need to change their processes to ensure they do not fuel online abuse – for example reduce virality mechanisms or make sure repeat offenders who have been banned from platforms cannot create new accounts.

Regarding anonymity online, social media companies should enforce a zero-tolerance culture to online abuse in order to deter those creating accounts solely to abuse and sow discord. Sadly, many of the perpetrators of online abuse hide behind anonymous accounts. Due to the lack of consequences for poor online behaviour, there is a feeling of immunity afforded to those creating and using anonymous accounts online and people are emboldened to behave in ways they would not behave in the real world. Platforms which allow for anonymity (e.g Twitter and YouTube) face high levels of online abuse. This suggests that these platforms need to review their processes to verify accounts better and put in place measures to protect their users from abuse and harassment from anonymous accounts, for



example put in place filters and mechanisms that allow people to interact or see content only from verified accounts.

- 6. Please provide examples of good practices by States, internet intermediaries or other stakeholders to enhance women's right to freedom of opinion and expression and empowerment and public participation of women.*

In April 2021, we published Dealing with Digital Threats to Democracy: a Toolkit to Help Women in Public Life be Safer Online and circulated this widely ahead of local and national (Welsh Parliament and Scottish Parliament) elections.

In response to the Black Lives Matter protests that swept the world in 2020, at Glitch we offer free digital self-care and digital self-defence training for Black Lives Matter activists, who are using their voice to publicly speak out against racial injustice. We've also launched a petition¹¹ calling for social media platforms to provide better controls over violent and triggering content, which can lead to PTSD.

At Glitch, we have a range of workshops for women who want to understand how to have an online presence that will be a positive force to help them achieve their goals both professionally and personally. These workshops are particularly suitable for women either in or thinking about stepping into leadership roles, public appointments, and all forms of public life and activism.

- **Digital Self Defence:** participants learn vital digital self-defence tips, how to effectively document abuse, gain the skills needed to be safe when using online spaces and how to use digital tools to protect their information and privacy.
- **Digital Self Care:** participants learn how to set and stick to personal digital boundaries and have a flourishing online presence centred around their self-care and wellbeing. They come away with practical tools and feel in control of their online presence that will support them mentally and emotionally. They will be equipped to plan your response to online abuse and begin building their digital resilience action plan.
- **Digital Self Defence and Self Care:** Our most popular workshop covers our top Digital Self Defence strategies and Digital Self Care methods. Participants gain the skills needed to be safe when using online spaces, be able to use different digital tools to protect their information and privacy, understand how to set boundaries in online spaces, and begin building digital resilience action plan. They will also understand what to do if they witness someone else experiencing online abuse and how to be a good online active bystander. We also offer a standalone workshop focusing on being an Online Active Bystander.
- **Hosting Conversations with our Toolkit 2.0:** This aims to help participants feel prepared to use our toolkit 2.0 with their community or network and looks at how Online Gender Based Violence is an intersectional issue that disproportionately impacts Black women and gives participants the skills and knowledge to host their own conversations about OGBV to help end it.
- **Digital Citizenship for Schools:** The objective of the Digital Citizenship workshop is for young people to leave with greater knowledge and understanding of digital rights and

¹¹ <https://www.change.org/p/social-media-companies-black-lives-matter-online-too>



responsibilities, democracy and law in online spaces and interaction, how to be responsible digital citizens and digital health, wellbeing and critical thinking.

- **1-2-1 Training:** Our 1hr 1-2-1 Training Sessions are designed to give the participant the skills and tools to feel confident using their voice online. These sessions equip them with digital self-defence tips, share ways to prioritise your own wellbeing online and help them set and stick to their personal digital boundaries. The sessions will explore different scenarios to help them to construct their responses to online abuse to help them feel prepared.
 - **Digital Democracy:** Online abuse is a barrier to women seeking a career in politics or activism. At Glitch, we want women to feel safe to use their voices online, as well as offline, at all stages of their political career, whether a student activist, a campaigner, an elected official, or someone seeking to stand. This workshop will help women to look after themselves online and to support those around them.
7. Please share any relevant documents, reports, news or academic articles that you believe should be considered by the Special Rapporteur in the preparation of her report.
- Glitch and End Violence Against Women Coalition (EVAW) [The Ripple Effect: Covid-19 and the Epidemic of Online Abuse](#), September 2020.
 - Glitch [Dealing with Digital Threats to Democracy: a Toolkit to Help Women in Public Life be Safer Online](#), April 2021.
 - Emily Dreyfuss, “Twitter Is Indeed Toxic for Women, Amnesty Report Says,” Wired, 12 October 2020 <https://www.wired.com/story/amnesty-report-twitter-abuse-women/>
 - Girls’ Attitude Survey 2019 <https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/globalassets/docs-and-resources/research-and-campaigns/girls-attitudes-survey-2019.pdf>
 - Amnesty International poll 2017 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/11/amnesty-reveals-alarming-impact-of-online-abuse-against-women/>
 - Dr Sofia Collignon, Assistant Professor in Political Communication at Royal Holloway, University of London, has shown that women and young political candidates are [more likely to suffer from harassment](#), which can stop MPs from standing for re-election.
 - At Glitch, we have created [this free toolkit](#) to help end online gender-based violence – especially against Black women, who are 84% more likely than White women to be mentioned in abusive or problematic tweets. It contains a series of questions and prompts that make it easy to host conversations for your network e.g. friends, family, colleagues or activist groups. If you're just hoping to become a better ally to Black women online, feel free to use this resource too.
 - In 2017, [The Law Commission](#) in the UK reported, “28% of UK internet users were on the receiving end of trolling, harassment or cyberbullying”.
 - This has a detrimental impact on a person’s mental health and physical integrity, particularly for young people. [Cyberbullying makes young people twice as likely to self-harm or attempt suicide](#). Online abuse disproportionately affects women and girls. [One in ten women](#) in Europe have experienced some kind of online abuse since the age of 15.