



Covid-19 and increasing domestic violence against women: The pandemic of online gender-based violence

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Introduction

“Never forget that it will be enough for a political, economic or religious crisis for the rights of women to be called into question” - Simone de Beauvoir, one of the foremothers of contemporary feminism. This prediction has never been more relevant than during the global Pandemic: six months into 2020 and women’s rights have been seriously impaired.

[Evidence shows](#) that women are disproportionately affected by crises. During crisis situations such as Covid-19 - when women are often isolated from their support system, when trust in institutions and in the future is jeopardized and economic hardship affects everyday life - women are more at risk of backlash and violence. The internet’s role as a safe space for expression, social support, and access to critical services, including gender-based violence support - is being undermined by a pandemic of harassment and violence against women online, as well as growing intrusions to their right to privacy.

Our digital world can also [amplify existing intersectional inequalities](#), and we are seeing that gender gaps in Internet access, digital skills, and online rights and freedoms continue in this crisis. The gender digital gap continues to grow both at regional and global level as - [men remain 21% more likely to be online than women](#). [As domestic violence services turn to digital technologies](#) to offer support services, the gaps mean that women, other groups (eg. elderly people) and including vulnerable populations (rural/remote and marginalised communities, persons with disabilities) are less likely to access online information and services, including support services in response to domestic violence.

The World Wide Web Foundation believes there is a pandemic of online gender-based violence emerging during Covid-19, and it must be addressed now. The increased domestic violence against women witnessed during the crisis is spilling into the online space, turning the lifeline of the internet into a hostile space. Online gender-based violence threatens the ability to access and share information, to use education and health services, to maintain employment and income generation opportunities, and to stay connected for personal wellbeing. There is a need for better design to protect and shape a safe, empowering, and accessible internet for all, especially as more and more women and gender diverse people are connected.

The Web Foundation is pleased to share our submission to the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women [OHCHR 2020 call for Submissions on COVID-19 and the](#)

[increase of domestic violence against women](#) to highlight (1) our serious concerns about the pandemic of online gender-based violence, (2) our policy recommendations about how governments, companies and individuals can do their part to address online gender-based violence, and (3) the Web Foundation's own work to address online gender-based violence through research, policy development and policy advocacy.

Understanding Online Gender-based Violence: Context and the Evidence Gap

Context

Online gender-based violence is a broad concept with a focus on use of the internet/Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) to harm someone based on their gender identity. It is a form of gender based violence because it [affects women more than men and targets women's gender and/or sexuality](#).

- It has a [strong racial component](#), with [a study showing that](#) women of color in the United States are more likely to be targets than white women, and black women targeted most of all, with 59% of black women reporting online abuse. Online attacks are often centred on gender identities, targeting individuals who are breaking gender stereotypes in political and public life.
- Research carried out in 2018 by the International Women's Media Foundation and Troll Busters found that nearly [two thirds of female journalists surveyed](#) said they have experienced online harassment. 40% of respondents said they avoided reporting on certain stories because of experiencing such abuse. According to a 2018 [report from the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women](#), an estimated 23% of women have experienced online abuse at least once in their life

Online gender-based violence includes the following acts of violence, though this list remains incomplete as new forms of violence emerge and are frequently reported:

- sharing images/video without consent
- online stalking and related cyber-crimes such as identity theft, theft of private data (financial data, images, video, personal communications, etc.), spreading false information for the purpose of defamation, and doxxing (the public sharing of private information)
- abusing someone online verbally or otherwise, threatening someone online
- creating fake images/videos of a person without consent, and

- facilitating sex trafficking.

It covers experiences across different devices-- from mobile phones to desktops to IoT (Internet of Things) devices-- and across different platforms, from SMS to social media. [Most forms of violence develop on a continuity of platforms](#), on both public and private spaces and include a repetitive aspect.

The permanence and virality of content leads to the constant re-victimization of victims. A [study in the United States of gender based violence programs](#) reported that 97% of programs identified abuse perpetrated through technology and/or social media.

In relation to domestic violence, violent (ex) partners also abuse, monitor, track, threaten and perpetrate violence with digital tools.

- Whereas violence is perpetrated with the use of [Internet of Things \(IoT\) appliances or tracking apps](#), or on social media platforms through online abuse and non-consensual image or video sharing, these types of violence are sometimes difficult to report, because of the various legal grey areas and law enforcement's lack of knowledge regarding digital platforms and tools.
- As a result, victims are often left alone with their experience, an experience that is normalized and invisibilised on social media and in society in general, driving victims to silence and shame, exposing them to their perpetrators, and sometimes leading them to self-harm, depression and suicide.

The Evidence Gap, and the Web Foundation's Efforts to Fill the Gap

It is difficult to understand the full scope of online gender-based violence, in part because of the nature of the violation, and in part due to the difficulty in building evidence on this issue. There is a significant data gap that we need to collectively fill. The World Wide Web Foundation has worked towards building evidence by assessing the laws and law enforcement response to the issue. Based on our assessment of the policy landscape so far, there are few policy solutions that have been deemed effective in addressing these harms.

- In 74% of countries included in our 2014 [Web Index study](#) (including higher income countries), law enforcement agencies and the courts are failing to take appropriate actions in situations where technology is used to commit acts of gender-based violence.

- Oftentimes victims of online gender-based violence do not know that they can report cyber-crimes and violence to law enforcement.
- In some countries, legal frameworks and institutional response mechanisms simply do not exist.
- In many countries, law enforcement lacks training and knowledge of how to respond to cases of online gender-based violence.
- Costly legal services further prevent women and girls from taking any action.

Through our [Women's Rights Online Research](#) and collaboration with partners we have been able to gather experiences and perspective of online gender based violence.

- Our [WRO Survey research 2015](#) found that 13% of women and 11% of men who use the Internet had suffered abuse via emails or social media posts.
- Young people were most likely to have suffered harassment online, with over six in 10 women and men aged 18 - 24 living in urban marginalised communities (who use the internet) saying they had suffered online abuse.

In our ongoing [Women's Rights Online research - to be published in August 2020](#) - we interviewed thousands of men and women and conducted focused group discussions in Colombia, Ghana, Indonesia and Uganda in their experiences of accessing and using the internet.

- A major emerging insight is that infringements on women's privacy, safety and expression online fundamentally reduce their trust in online services. This heightens the challenge for responses to domestic violence that rely on digital technologies.
- We found that the likelihood of experiencing online gender violence, in particular sexual harassment, increases as women become more active internet users.
- Our qualitative focus groups discussion revealed stories of women facing social, economic, and mental health related impacts because of witnessing or experiencing online gender-based violence.
- For some young women who had experienced online gender-based violence, they opted to completely leave social media platforms for their safety and mental well-being.

[Our 2020 research with the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts](#) found over half of young women surveyed have experienced violence online — including being sexually harassed, sent threatening messages or having their private images shared without consent.

If these trends do not change, the increased use of technology could ultimately reinforce offline patterns of female sexualisation, subordination and silence. As underscored by UNICEF earlier in 2020, “sexual objectification of women in the media contributes to harmful gender stereotypes that normalize violence against girls.”

This is a matter of great concern given the increased use of the internet to connect young people to education during this pandemic. Use of the internet and social media among 12-16 year olds in the UK, for example, has doubled during Covid-19, with 60% of young people also reporting that time spent online negatively affects other areas in their life, including sleep, diet, exercise and study.

The Scaling of Online Gender-Based Violence during Covid-19

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the scale of online gender-based violence has increased, such as non-consensual image and video sharing, including consensual sexting content being shared without consent.

- For example, in France there’s a trend of creating a [new type of Snapchat or Telegram account called “ficha”](#) (for “afficher”: ridiculizing in public). These local accounts repost young women’s – sometimes underage – nudes, revealing both their identity and contact information, directing mobs of sexual abusers at them, in their local community.
- Distribution or threats of sharing non-consensual intimate images also takes place largely within contexts of intimate partner violence. In the UK, traffic to the Revenge Porn Helpline doubled in the week beginning 23rd march. Sophie Mortimer, who manages the UK “Revenge Porn” Helpline, accounts that for the increased report, [50% of cases were linked to domestic violence](#).

Channels for reporting abuse on social media platforms (as the first point of recourse) are often incomplete and non-responsive.

- Tech companies have developed a handful of product solutions like better reporting flows for harassment, but they need to be pushed to do more.
- [Priority during the pandemic has been given to addressing misinformation and disinformation](#) - without considerations specifically to gendered disinformation, or the ways in which [targeting people of different genders through disinformation campaigns limits their democratic participation](#).
- The lockdown has seen social media moderators sent home, [leaving moderation to Artificial Intelligence, creating a void in platform response to abuse](#).

- Morgan Barbour founded [Community Standards](#) to illustrate the dramatic increase in online sexual harassment she has been experiencing during the lockdown. Although not directly related to domestic violence, this highlights the gap in responsiveness to these issues during the pandemic. According to her experience, during lockdown, the platforms have been unable to follow up on users reports due to a lack of moderators.

"This abuse is nothing new, but Instagram's response to it has taken an insidious turn. Every report is now met with this message: 'We couldn't review your report. We have fewer people available to review reports because of the coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak, so we're only able to review content with the most potential for harm.' The first report that received this response was for a DM from a user threatening to find me, rape me, and murder me. It would seem 'most potential for harm' is subjective."

Web Foundation Response: Tech Consultations on Online Gender-Based Violence

The Web Foundation organized the first in a series of consultations on online gender-based violence on the sidelines of the 2020 Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). The consultation provided an opportunity for representatives from women's civil society organizations, particularly from the Global South, to share priority concerns around tech companies' management of online GBV. Tech companies also had an opportunity to share their work in this domain and to discuss technical or other challenges that delay or impair implementation of solutions. The consultation surfaced several priority issues, including the specific harms experienced by women activists, women politicians and journalists, and young women and girls. Participants highlighted concerns around content moderation and reporting mechanisms, privacy and data protection, and the need for enhanced digital skills and digital literacy to combat online gender-based violence.

- Building on this first consultation, the Web Foundation is developing a roadmap of subsequent consultations and policy design workshops. The consultations are focused on gathering evidence and closely examining concrete threats to women's fundamental rights online. Web Foundation will then convene policy design workshops, informed by the evidence gathered during the consultations, to provide a space for women's rights organizations and tech companies to co-create solutions to online gender-based violence by using a more human-centered approach: listening

to and understanding the needs of women who use and are impacted by tech companies' products and services, and designing policy and product solutions that are accountable to women and girls.

- We plan to focus the three upcoming consultations on the experiences of women activists, women politicians and journalists, and girls and young women.
- The second consultation will focus on the experience of women activists (including women working on racial and ethnic justice) and the specific risks they face, in the form of racist and sexist hate speech, racialized and gendered threats, as well as surveillance and the invasion of privacy and harassment, including by state actors. These risks impact women activists, specifically the mental and physical health of women activists; slows down social change; and has a chilling effect on democratic participation.
- The third consultation will look at the experience of women politicians and journalists, especially women of color, who face risks of racist and sexist hate speech, racialized, sexual, and gendered threats, as well as defamation and libel. These OGBV risks impact their career and their political engagement, driving some of these politicians and journalists away from the political arena.
- The fourth consultation will take a closer look at the experience of girls and young women, paying specific attention to the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and age. Young women face specific forms of online gender-based violence and are more at risk if they identify as members of the LGBTQI+ communities or if they are racialized. The violence they experience online hinders their participation in creative, political and citizen innovative practices and impacts their psychological health.
- All three consultations will also provide an opportunity to analyse the ways in which tech platforms respond to the specific risks encountered by these groups of users and how existing reporting flows, content moderation policies, privacy protections and digital literacy initiatives account for these risks.
- Following the four tech consultations, the Web Foundation will organize three policy design workshops where women's rights organizations and tech companies will co-create policy and product solutions to online gender-based violence using a human-centered approach: designing policy and product solutions that account for women's needs at the beginning of the design process.

Initial Policy Recommendations

2020 must be the year governments and companies tackle online harms against women as a top priority to ensure a safe and empowering internet for all. The web cannot serve as an empowering space unless everyone's rights are protected online. Governments and companies must ensure the web is a safe space for women and girls by protecting fundamental women's rights in the digital age, and ensuring that policy, legislative, and regulatory processes uphold all people's digital rights.

Governments should:

1. Invest in ongoing national awareness campaigns to help women understand what online gender-based violence looks like, and how to report abuses they experience online.
2. Pass strong, comprehensive privacy laws, aimed at protecting the privacy rights of both women and men.
3. Ensure that domestic violence reports account for harms perpetrated through digital technologies, with timely response and actions taken by both law enforcement and online platforms.
4. Ensure that women and girls can take legal action against perpetrators of online violence, and that police and judiciary have the training and resources to pursue such cases.
5. Provide adequate resources for law enforcement personnel to train on a gender-sensitized digital safety curriculum so they can address complaints of online violence.
6. Provide timely technical assistance, counseling and support to women who report.

Companies should:

1. Employ "gender by design" when developing services-- think about the impacts of products and services on women from the very beginning of the design process, for example building products based on gender-disaggregated data, considering the safety and security of women when building location-based features, etc.
2. Consult with women in the design of technology products, platforms, and terms of service. One option would be to set up an advisory group of women's rights and gender and technology experts.
3. Conduct regular gender audits of products and services.
4. Contextualise reporting flows to consider language variations as well as social and cultural nuances of domestic violence. This requires working with women's safety organisations, localising products and engaging in awareness campaigns as tools are rolled out.

5. Commit to privacy, transparency, and accountability by clearly and effectively communicating any updates and changes regarding privacy and online safety policies, as well as changes to products and services and the impact on individuals' privacy rights and data protection/digital identity.
6. Develop women's safety programs and work with country-based organizations supporting domestic violence to provide safe spaces for women to communicate via the social media platforms safely and securely and share resources of community guidelines with domestic violence organisations.

Citizens should:

1. Civil society and citizens should work together to design and collect resources for digital literacy on online safety. The resources need to be adapted to local languages, and content should be more readily available in both online and offline formats. Civil society projects, such as the innovative app [DocuSafe helps survivors collect, store, and share evidence of abuse](#), such as domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, online harassment, and dating violence.
2. Citizens need to stand in solidarity with one another to not simply become bystanders when they witness online safety violations but to show diligence in being [an active bystander](#) (report, reply, encourage the victim) as GlitchUK's founder Seyi Akiwowo explains. [Women's solidarity](#) online is also very strong during the pandemic, and in countries where laws exist to punish nonconsensual image and video sharing for example, young feminists are taking the matter into their own hands and massively reporting problematic and unlawful accounts to the police and platforms. In other instances, digital platforms are being used with [associated codewords to signal domestic violence](#) and need for help to existent domestic violence support systems.

About the Web Foundation:

At the World Wide Web Foundation, we strive to promote the Internet as a human right and a public good. We believe the Internet is an important tool for everyone to seek and access information, build associations, innovate, and solve problems, and to participate in civic life. The Web Foundation brings expertise in research, evidence-based policy development and advocacy, communications, public campaigns, and coalition convening. Our strategy builds on the Web Foundation's expertise as a convenor, our experience working with big tech

companies and governments, and the global credibility and mobilising power of Tim Berners-Lee's voice.