



United Nations Working Group on
Discrimination against Women and Girls
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The Role of Sexist Abuse and Objectification in Women's Activism

Input to the Thematic Report on Girls' and Young Women's Activism
for the 50th Session of the Human Rights Council

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About this Submission

We welcome the opportunity to provide an input to the report to the 50th Session of the Human Rights Council by the Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls. We do so in a private capacity as researchers of human rights law, technology, and feminist theory at UNSW Sydney, Australia. The views expressed are our own, and not of UNSW Sydney or any other institution. In line with our expertise, our input is limited to questions raised under “Challenges and Structural Barriers” in the *Questionnaire on Girls’ and Young Women’s Activism*.

The activism of girls and young women faces many challenges and structural barriers across the globe and in Australia. The central concern of our input is the necessity of ensuring and safeguarding the conditions under which girls and young women can speak freely and openly, so that what they say is heard locally and globally. In this context, the prevalence and normalisation of sexualised, objectifying, and humiliating images of girls and young women, as well as technology-facilitated violence and pornographic content in the digital environment, limit the activism of girls and young women. Many aspects of these structural barriers, which we argue form systemic discrimination against women, affect both young and older women, and circumscribe the ways in which they are heard or not heard. We draw attention to three major issues.

Sexist Objectification and Hyper-Sexualisation Undermines Girls’ and Young Women’s Activism

Both online and offline, girls and women encounter objectifying and hyper-sexualised portrayals of themselves, which not only humiliate particular women, but undermine the activism, participation and political voice of young women in general. Activism requires freedom of speech and expression, and takes shape through cultural and political voice. Australian girls aspiring to be activists in their society see how women politicians such as the former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard become targets of misogynist, objectifying, and sexualised satire and jokes.¹ Girls also see how young women working in the Australian Parliament and associated public spaces are addressed and treated, as in recent incidents concerning the sexual assault and harassment of young women in parliament and in the course of political employment.²

¹ See Helen Pringle. ‘The Pornification of Julia Gillard’ in *Bewitched and Bedevilled: Women Write the Gillard Years* ed. Samantha Trenoweth (Melbourne: Hardie Grant, 2013).

² The *Review of the Parliamentary Workplace: Responding to Serious Incidents* [Foster Report], Canberra: Australian Government, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2021, <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/review-parliamentary-workplace-responding-serious-incidents-final.pdf>, provides an overview and recommendations in this area.



The activism of women and girls is further undermined by their sexualisation online. Girls at increasingly younger ages are portrayed in a sexualised manner on social media, on the accounts of so-called influencers and by the digital advertising industry.³ Objectification and sexualization are linked to a broad array of mental health problems many of which lead to low self-esteem, and severe lack of confidence in young women and girls.⁴ Sexualisation and objectification by others also induce self-objectification, a process whereby young women in particular learn to see themselves as objects for the use and pleasure of others.⁵ Because of social and cultural pressure on girls and women to appear sexually attractive, their right to express themselves in political forums and in non-sexual ways is impeded on intrapersonal as well as social levels. Such forms of sexist objectification undercut the authority of female voices, so that what they say is not taken seriously or even as truthful⁶ – an important precondition of the effectiveness of activism.

Sexist hostility and intimidation have a particularly strong impact on the voices of Indigenous women in politics, with online abuse being severely damaging. Indigenous women and women of colour in political space in Australia, for example, have extensively documented their experiences of abuse.⁷ Even where there are legal sanctions to address such cases – as in specific provisions of the Commonwealth Criminal Code in Australia that address different forms of online abuse⁸ – these measures are seldom followed through by police investigation or prosecution.

³ Plan International, *Free to Be Online: A Report on Girls' and Young Women's Experience of Online Harassment* (2020), <https://plan-international.org/publications/freetobeonline>, based on research with over 14,000 girls and young women in 31 countries across the world. See Sandra Amankaviciute, Helen Pringle and Monika Zalnierute, *Freedom of Expression of Women in the Public Sphere: From Objectification to Technology Facilitated Sexual Violence*, Submission to the Thematic Report for the 76th Session of the General Assembly, 23 June 2021, available at https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3866497.

⁴ American Psychological Association, *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls* (2008), <https://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report>; and England Children's Commissioner, *The Big Ask—The Big Answer* (September 2021), https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/the_big_ask_the_big_answer_09_2021.pdf.

⁵ Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, "Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks" (1997) 21 *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 173.

⁶ Sandra Amankaviciute, Helen Pringle and Monika Zalnierute, 'Sexist Abuse Undermines Women's Political Voices' *Broad Agenda* (9 September 2021), <https://www.broadagenda.com.au/2021/sexist-abuse-undermines-womens-political-voices/>.

⁷ See, e.g., Australian Senator Mehreen Faruqi, *Love Letters to Mehreen*, available at <https://www.facebook.com/mehreenfaruqi/photos/its-love-letters-to-mehreen-timetodays-love-letter-to-mehreen-is-from-charlie-wh/1053052154759898/>, and former Senator Nova Peris, 'Nova Peris Reveals Extent of Racial Abuse She Faced as a Senator', SBS News (3 March 2020), <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/nova-peris-reveals-extent-of-racial-abuse-she-faced-as-a-senator/c10901ee-f48d-45e3-8c9a-03f69a949e09>.

⁸ Criminal Code Act 1995 (Cth), <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2021C00360>, sections 470-474, esp. 474.14-474.17.



Girls' and Women's Activism is Hindered by Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence

Girls and young women activists encounter a range of behaviours that belittle, harm, and objectify them through use of technology, which in turn undermines their activism and political voice. These behaviours, often collectively known as Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence (TFSV), involve the use of digital technologies to blackmail, control, coerce, harass, humiliate, objectify or violate other persons, commonly young women.⁹ Intimidation through TFSV often takes similar forms as in the offline world, with parallel attempts to exclude and undermine the voices of girls and women through online sexual harassment, gender and sexuality-based harassment, cyberstalking, image-based sexual abuse (colloquially known as “revenge porn”) and technology-facilitated unwanted sexual experiences.¹⁰ Girls and women activists who become the victims of TFSV frequently respond by limiting or self-censoring their online participation, deleting their profiles, and removing themselves from online spaces.¹¹ TFSV against women has a significant impact on freedom of expression and speech, and thus on activism, in the public space.

Girls and young women's activism and their political voice are further undermined by the pornography industry and its offshoots.¹² Young women activists are often targeted for “deep fake” pornographic content, in the interests of profit, revenge or humiliation. Pornography sites profit by uploading and circulating “deep fake” porn videos, and by not taking them down despite repeated requests by women who were targeted.¹³ Young women whose images have been “deep-faked” and circulated online often retreat from speaking and acting in public. These deliberate strategies by online pornography sites to undermine the standing of girls and women hinder our activism and political voice, our right to full and free participation in the public sphere.

⁹ Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell, ‘Sexual Violence in the Digital Age: The Scope and Limits of Criminal Law’ (2016) 25 *Social & Legal Studies* 397.

¹⁰ Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell, ‘Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence: A Literature Review of Empirical Research’ (2018) 19 *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 195.

¹¹ George Veletsianos et al., ‘Women Scholars’ Experiences with Online Harassment and Abuse: Self-Protection, Resistance, Acceptance, and Self-Blame’ (2018) 20 *New Media & Society* 4689.

¹² See generally on the impact of pornography on young people, the synoptic report by Miranda A.H. Horvath, Llian Alys, Kristina Massey, Afroditi Pina, Mia Scally and Joanna R. Adler, ‘Basically... porn is everywhere’: *A Rapid Evidence Assessment on the Effects that Access and Exposure to Pornography has on Children and Young People*, Project Report of Office of the Children's Commissioner for England (2013), https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Basically_porn_is_everywhere.pdf.

¹³ See Mary Anne Franks and Ari Ezra Waldman, ‘Sex, Lies, and Videotape: Deep Fakes and Free Speech Delusions’ (2018-2019) 78 *Maryland Law Review* 892.



Sexist Objectification, Harassment and TFSV are Forms of Structural Discrimination

The prevalence and normalization of sexualized images of women and girls, harassment and technology-facilitated violence against women, including in the pornography industry, hinders the activism of girls and young women. We argue that such sexist objectification is a form of systemic discrimination, which marks out public space as a male domain, where girls and women are mere objects and in which their political voices are frequently subject to derision and mockery. By using the framework of systemic discrimination, we emphasise that sexist objectification of girls and young women activists forms the underlying social and cultural framework within which women activists engage and speak in public spaces of activism.

Sexual and sex-based forms of harassment against girls and young women are frequently (mis)understood as simply inappropriate behaviour rather than as systemic discrimination against women, thereby undermining its seriousness.¹⁴ This misunderstanding also runs counter to the promise of substantive equality set out in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women [CEDAW], which aims to eliminate ‘any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field’.¹⁵

Many states address harassment only, or primarily, in the workplace. However, recognition of the systemic nature of harassment and its role in wider structural discrimination against women, requires that all areas of public life be subject to the legal prohibition of forms of harassment.¹⁶ The creation of a ‘sexually hostile’ environment at work is mirrored throughout public life, by the use and display of sexually explicit material and pornography, for example. Systemic harassment places a heavy burden on young women directly and immediately, as well as providing a warning of what they will face as they enter public spaces in the future as full participants in the life of their

¹⁴ See for example Helen Pringle, ‘The Making of Women’s Un-freedom: Sexual Harassment as Harm’ in *Freedom Fallacy: The Limits of Liberal Feminism* ed. Miranda Kiraly and Meagan Tyler (Ballarat: Connor Court, 2015) 69–79.

¹⁵ Article 1 of *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*, 18 December 1979, United Nations Treaty Series, vol. 1249.

¹⁶ See the recommendations of Helen Pringle, Sandra Amankaviciute and Monika Zalnieriute, ‘Addressing Harassment as Systemic Discrimination: Realising CEDAW’s Promise of Substantive Equality’, Submission to [Australian Government Senate] Inquiry into the Sex Discrimination and Fair Work (Respect at Work) Amendment Bill 2021, 14 July 2021, available at https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3884875.



societies. Measures against harassment aid in recognising their standing and their voices, a precondition of effective activism.

Recommendations and the Way Forward

We invite the *Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls* to call on digital platforms and governments to work together to develop approaches to tackle technology-facilitated violence against women. These approaches can be grounded in both criminal and human rights law; and the latter should involve a development of a binding international human rights law for private actors to remedy the violations of freedom of expression and assembly of women in the digital environment.¹⁷ However, importantly, these legal approaches should not only resist the “ethics” and “transparency-washing” initiatives aimed at avoiding regulation by digital platforms,¹⁸ but build on a wider effort to de-normalize objectification and sexualisation of girls and young women, including in mainstream advertising and the multi-billion pornography industry. Only then can girls and women activists enjoy freedom of expression and association and dignity both online and offline, without discrimination.

We also invite the Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls to call on governments to expand national anti-discrimination laws so that harassment and abuse, online and offline, are clearly and explicitly placed within the framework of systemic discrimination, rather than simply treated as individual wrongs or harms. Systemic harms such as harassment and abuse require systemic and structural changes. Strong legislative responses on discrimination can open the way to the realisation of a full substantive equality, in which the activism of young women and girls can flourish.

¹⁷ Monika Zalnieriute, ‘From Human Rights Aspirations to Enforceable Obligations by Non-State Actors in the Digital Age: The Case of Internet Governance and ICANN’ [2019] *Yale Journal of Law & Technology* 278.

¹⁸ Monika Zalnieriute, “Transparency-Washing” in the Digital Age: A Corporate Agenda of Procedural Fetishism? (2021) 8 *Critical Analysis of Law* 39.