



World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts  
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15<sup>th</sup> of February 2024

Dear High Commissioner for Human Rights Council,

I am writing on behalf of the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) to provide a submission to the study on the solutions to promote digital education for young people and to ensure their protection from online threats to be presented at the 57th session of the Human Rights Council in September 2024.

The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts is the largest voluntary movement dedicated to empowering girls and young women in the world.<sup>1</sup> We represent over 8 million girls in 153 countries. As part of our work, we deliver programmes addressing a number of key global issues including digital safety and access.

One of the main challenges that obstructs in the safe admission to digital education for young women is exposure to digital harm. According to the We Protect Global Alliance's 2021 Global Threat Assessment report, which surveyed over 5,300 18-20-year-olds who had regular access to the internet as children, found that 57 per cent of girls and 48 per cent of boys had experienced at least one online sexual harm, with some regions – like North America, Australasia, and Western Europe – being even higher.<sup>2</sup>

Plan International's 2020 report, "Free to be online?", highlighted the experiences of 14000 girls worldwide and found that 58 per cent of girls experienced online harassment with 50 per cent saying they experienced more online harassment than street harassment.<sup>3</sup>

Against this backdrop, in November 2022 WAGGGS launched a global survey of girls and young women as part of 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence titled "She Surfs Freedom",<sup>4</sup> to understand the experiences of the girls in online spaces, particularly with a focus on online violence. The results of this survey results formed the basis of WAGGGS advocacy at the 67<sup>th</sup> United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.

The She Surfs Freedom survey gathered responses from girls and young women from the age of 13 years and over. The majority of responses came from girls between the ages of 13-18. Over

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<sup>1</sup> World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS)

<sup>2</sup> 'Global Threat Assessment 2021 Shows Dramatic Increase in Online Child Sexual Exploitation & Abuse | End Violence'. End Violence Against Children, <https://www.end-violence.org/articles/global-threat-assessment-2021-shows-dramatic-increase-online-child-sexual-exploitation>. Accessed 2 Feb. 2024.

<sup>3</sup> 'State of the World's Girls 2020: Free to Be Online?' Plan International, <https://plan-international.org/publications/free-to-be-online/>.

<sup>4</sup> World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts. She Surfs Freedom Survey Results. Feb. 2023, [https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/waggs.prod/documents/CSW67\\_-\\_Survey.pdf](https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/waggs.prod/documents/CSW67_-_Survey.pdf).

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1000 girls and young women from 70 different countries responded to the survey to share their experiences.

Sixty-six per cent (66%) of respondents said that they had seen adult sexual or violent content online that made them feel uncomfortable and forty-five per cent (45%) of girls said they received unwelcome sexual messages with forty-two per cent (42%) saying they changed their behavior online as a direct result of this.

Asked if they felt safe online, we received a number of responses highlighting that many digital spaces leave girls feeling unsafe.

***A girl aged between 16-18 from Malaysia (identity kept confidential) told us,***

*"I have received sexual comments from people older than me, especially at the start of having my own Instagram account, which was 13. These guys sent me inappropriate pictures and also questions that made me feel very uncomfortable such as, if I'd already had my first period and if my breasts are big or not."*

Social media is often perceived as an unsafe space for young women. A new study suggests algorithms used by social media platforms are rapidly amplifying extreme misogynistic content. This is because the algorithm has been found to favor extreme contents focused on blaming and anger towards women. Researchers have detected four-fold increase in such content in Tik-Tok platform and these findings were likely to apply to other social media platforms too.<sup>5</sup>

We believe such trends have a long-term negative impact on young women's confidence and leadership abilities impeding their ability to engage in online spaces. A study commissioned by Plan International involving 33 countries found the gendered disinformation undermines girls' ability to see themselves as leaders and the opinion worth listening to.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, appearance-based discrimination has a severe impact on their mental health. WAGGGS's body confidence program suggests girls who use social media believe they are put under pressure to look a certain way.<sup>7</sup> A study that explores the effect of online harassment directed towards female journalists in Pakistan found that 77% of those surveyed self-censor on the internet as a means of countering online violence.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "Social Media Algorithms 'Amplifying Misogynistic Content.'" The Guardian, 6 Feb. 2024. The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2024/feb/06/social-media-algorithms-amplifying-misogynistic-content>.

<sup>6</sup> Plan International (2021) "The Truth Gap: How Misinformation and Disinformation Online affect the lives, learning and leadership of girls and young women".

<sup>7</sup> Free Being Me, "Why Advocate for Body Confidence?" WAGGGS, <https://www.waggs.org/en/what-we-do/action-body-confidence/what-advocacy/>.

<sup>8</sup> Kamran, H. (2019) "Media Matters for Democracy. Hostile Bytes – a study of online violence against women journalists".

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In many countries, the existing legal frameworks to address online gender-based violence are fragmented without a standardised definition and others lack formalised gender-responsive policies in preventing online violence and protecting users. In addition to States taking concrete steps, social media companies also need to be held responsible for ensuring their platforms are a safe space for women and girls. This is not about advocating for censorship of free speech, but recognising that online violence has real world consequences and seeks to silence women and girls and therefore their right to free speech also. Seventy-five per cent of girls that took part in our survey said that they believe social media channels should be responsible for making online spaces safer.

Taking the responses from the WAGGGS She Surf's Freedom Survey, young women who were part of the WAGGGS Global Advocacy Champions 2023 created a call to action addressing online violence against women and girls and how they would like to see decision makers create a more equitable digital world.<sup>9</sup> Their recommendations can be accessed here in full [https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/waggs.prod/documents/CSW67 - CTA - 02\\_26.pdf](https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/waggs.prod/documents/CSW67 - CTA - 02_26.pdf)

Thank you for considering these valuable inputs for the study.

Yours faithfully,

Dikchya Raut

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<sup>9</sup> Global Advocacy Champions, 'The Outcome We Want: WAGGGS at CSW67', SheSurfsFreedom, World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, Mar. 2023, [https://duz92c7qaoni3.cloudfront.net/documents/CSW67\\_-\\_CTA\\_-\\_02\\_26.pdf](https://duz92c7qaoni3.cloudfront.net/documents/CSW67_-_CTA_-_02_26.pdf).

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