

“Women shouldn’t be expected to pay this cost just to participate.”

Online Gender-Based Violence and Abuse: Consultation Briefing

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With special thanks to all the participants who shared their experiences with us as part of the Tech Policy Design Lab consultations.

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Introduction

From finding and fostering online communities to accessing education and work opportunities to organising and getting involved in political movements, the web can be a lifeline for many. But despite the potential benefits, too often our digital world amplifies existing violence, abuse and discrimination that women and girls face offline. This can silence, discredit, and censor women's voices online. If this issue is not addressed urgently, the web will remain as one more medium in which women, and particularly women from marginalised communities, are attacked and have their voices suppressed, instead of being the platform that amplifies gender equality and spearheads positive change that we know it can be.

In response to this urgent issue, the Web Foundation held a series of consultations around online gender-based violence and abuse throughout 2020 and 2021. The consultations were part of the Web Foundation's [Tech Policy Design Lab](#) which aims to bridge the gap between technologists, policymakers, researchers, and those who use online services. The consultations were crucial in informing the development of concrete policy solutions based on the expertise and lived experiences of participants.

This digest covers how we define this problem, and pulls out key concepts from across the consultations. **These findings are not exhaustive, but instead highlight the key themes and powerful stories shared during the sessions.** Full readouts from each of the consultations, as well as additional resources and research around the issue of online gender-based violence and abuse, can be found [here](#).

Defining online gender-based violence and abuse

Online gender-based violence and abuse includes different tactics and harms that are perpetrated against women online. It can take many forms – perpetrators might threaten women online with physical or sexual violence, or subject women to sexist or misogynistic comments (which often focuses on their physical appearance and is rooted in harmful and negative gender stereotypes). Individuals or groups might also coordinate abuse and harassment against women online to overwhelm and intimidate them, share non-consensual intimate images of a woman, or publicly share someone's personal information with the aim to cause her distress and alarm (doxing).

The scale of the problem is enormous: [a recent Economist study](#) found that 38% of women have experienced some form of online abuse, and the number rises to nearly half for Millennials and Gen Z.

Importantly, **online gender-based violence and abuse is both a systemic and intersectional issue.** First, [systemic discrimination](#) is when laws, policies, practices or cultural norms create disadvantages for certain groups and privileges for others.

Women's experiences of gender-based violence and abuse online are therefore an extension of the systemic discrimination they face offline. Although misogyny and discrimination against women are not new, they can take on new forms when they occur online.

Second, women with intersecting identities, such as women of colour (and Black women in particular), LGBTQ+ people, or women from religious minorities are often disproportionately targeted by online abuse. For example, [research from Amnesty International](#) about abuse against female politicians and journalists on Twitter in the US/UK found that Black women in the study were 84% more likely to receive abuse on Twitter than white women. Not only do women from marginalised communities face more abuse, they experience specific forms of abuse which often targets their multiple and overlapping identities.

We need to talk about this

Today's internet is dominated by a relatively small number of companies that shape the online experience of billions of people. When they fail to consider women's experiences on their platforms, the consequences are enormous.

To better understand this problem, between March 2020 and February 2021, the Web Foundation convened four multi-stakeholder consultations. The series of consultations convened global perspectives and brought together some of the world's largest tech platforms, civil society organisations, government representatives, academics and those directly impacted by online abuse to engage in constructive dialogue around women's experiences of abuse online. Across all consultations, we brought together over 120 participants from 85 organisations and 35 countries.

In the first consultation, participants identified three groups of women that are disproportionately impacted by online abuse: women activists, women in public life, and young women. Building on this, the following three consultations focused on unpacking the experiences of each of those groups with a focus on how abuse works systematically and intersectionally.



It is important to note that these groups (women activists, public life, young women) are not mutually exclusive. In many cases, women's experiences and associations cut across the different groups. This was the case for many of our participants – for example, one of our participants spoke of the particular challenges of young women activists they work with in South Asia – “young women express fear of being moderated in their advocacy and accountability around government actions around specific political issues.”

Women Activists

For women activists, social media can be a crucial tool for growing their movements and amplifying their messages. Throughout the consultations, participants spoke about how vital these spaces have been for building trust and reputation, and connecting with like minded people. But as one participant put it, being online “can also carry great danger” for women.

Regardless of the form it takes, participants emphasised that women activists are often targeted with abuse designed to silence them and their movements. In particular, many participants raised issues around two types of challenge that women activists regularly experience: **pile-ons** and **content moderation**.

1 Pile-Ons

Pile-ons are when someone is directly targeted by a coordinated wave of online abuse – which can include sexist comments and image-based abuse – all at once. Pile-ons are often instigated by a single event that leads to a wave of attacks. As one of the participants noted, they “see activists being singled out on social media by prominent media figures, put in the middle of political debates and made vulnerable to violence and attacks.” They added that when the activist is LGBTQ+ or a woman of colour, the abuse is often much worse.

When facing this kind of abuse, **some women told us that they are forced to self-censor online due to fear of speaking out**. And several participants pointed out that right now, the existing settings on many platforms are not granular enough to stop pile-ons of abuse of activists — for example, users are often unable to mute specific videos or images on some platforms, and there are not enough tools to bolster self-care and user control.

This means that often, the only recourse activists have for managing abuse is through reporting channels. But activists from marginalised communities told us that reporting systems are not effective. One participant working in the Asia region said that they feel that the

content moderators (or the algorithms) assessing reports of abuse do not necessarily have enough understanding of the local language or context to understand why something may be abusive and against the community guidelines. Another participant added that English is both a minority language and a colonial language, and translations can introduce misinterpretations of context. These concerns around context and language in reporting systems were echoed by both women in public life and young women in our later consultations.

[Read the consultation readouts ↗](#)

Tech company representatives acknowledged the complexity of these challenges, with one adding that:

“ *harassment is one of the most difficult types of online gender-based violence to moderate and fight against because it is focused on individuals. In order to combat harassment, there is the need to have geopolitical and cultural context.*

(Consultation 2, July 2020)

2 Content Moderation

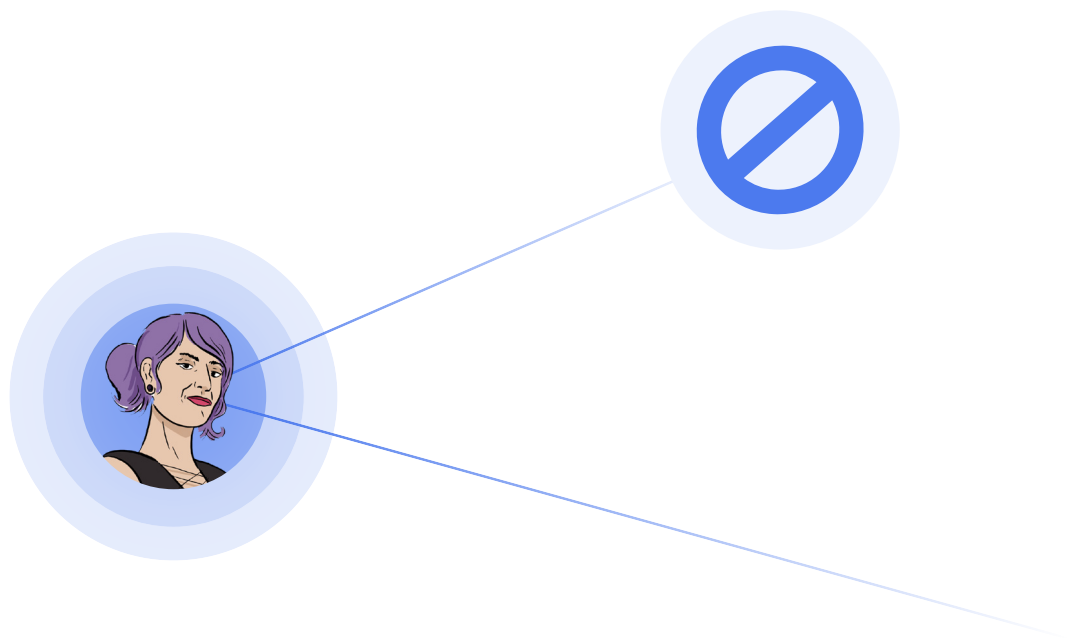
Content moderation refers to instances where activists have their content reported, blocked, removed or otherwise hidden on a platform.

Participants noted that, too often, content moderation fails to consider the needs and experiences of women from marginalised communities and different regions around the world. They feel that tech companies tend to focus their resources and efforts around content moderation in the US and Europe, leaving serious gaps in investment and enforcement of community guidelines in other regions. Others added that there is also unequal enforcement of content rules between activists and perpetrators of abuse: as one activist highlighted:

“ *There is a stark imbalance of feminists and racial justice advocates being sanctioned for calling out abuse while the originators of the hate are not sanctioned.*

(Consultation 2, July 2020)

One participant gave the example of the removal of a series of campaign videos created by a women's rights group working on issues of reproductive and sexual health. The women's rights group do not know who reported the videos, but guessed it may have come from “anti-rights” groups. The reports led the platform to cancel their channel on the basis of “promoting prescription drugs”, when in reality the videos informed people about voluntary termination of pregnancy. While the women's rights group eventually managed to recover the channel (and later the campaign videos), the removal of their content severely impacted the reach of the campaigns.



Women in Public Life

As with women activists, abuse directed at women in public life also works to silence their voices and limit their ability to participate in public spaces. But for many women in public life – specifically, politicians and journalists – the public demands of their jobs often comes with an added visibility online, and with this visibility comes heightened levels of abuse online. As one journalist put it:

“Over the course of the past five years, the abuse is so constant that I have normalised it. I often forget about it and have stopped reporting most of it.”
(Consultation 3, November 2020)

While all women in public life are at risk because of greater visibility online, their experiences of abuse are not identical. For example, participants explained that while more prominent journalists and politicians often receive more abuse, they may also have better access to resources like digital security training, or staff and legal support. And as other groups of women described, the abuse is also intersectional. Participants shared

experiences and research showing how women in public life who are LGBTQ+, Black or women of colour experience more abuse than white women in the same roles, and this abuse often directly targets their multiple and overlapping identities.

Threats of violence and abuse online can also have offline impacts. During the session, one politician said, “I was forced to close my office as I could no longer guarantee the safety of my team. At one point, the abuse got so bad that a member of my staff bought themselves a stab vest as a means of protection” (Consultation 3, November 2020) These examples showcase why it is so important to think about online abuse as a continuum of offline abuse and part of the same system.

During our consultation, participants working in politics and journalism raised key challenges facing women in public life: **cross platform abuse**, **economic impacts** of abuse and the **generational impact** of abuse.

1 Cross Platform Abuse

Cross-platform abuse refers to abuse that occurs across multiple online platforms.

Participants said that this kind of abuse can be especially challenging to deal with because different platforms not only have different policies around the type of content they allow, they also have different systems for reporting abuse. So even if someone is successful in reporting abuse on one platform, abusive content targeting them can still reappear or remain on another platform. Participants also shared how difficult it can be to manage and keep track of all these reports across different platforms. Tech company representatives acknowledged these concerns, including a representative who shared that:

“one of their priorities is making sure that women in public life have escalation channels so they can flag urgent issues.”
(Consultation 3, November 2020)

Many women in public life also noted that in addition to the complexities of navigating multiple reporting systems when experiencing cross-platform abuse, they often do not hear anything back from platforms when they make a report. This sentiment was also echoed by women activists and young women -- in fact, during every consultation, participants described instances where they reported something to a platform and never heard back from them. Across all groups, we heard how the lack of response leads to a significant lack of trust in reporting systems, and discourages women from reporting again.

One journalist shared that after publishing a story on human rights, perpetrators and cyber-mobs threatened and harassed her across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and even via email. The abuse was so relentless and spread across various channels that she felt she had no choice but to deactivate her Facebook and Instagram accounts, lock her Twitter account, and for the first time, even block abusive emails. (Consultation 3, November 2020)

2 Economic Impact

While some women might be forced off platforms because of a pile-on of cross-platform abuse, the journalist noted in the example just above, only deactivated her accounts temporarily. This is because for women in public life, there are direct and serious **economic impacts** to not being online. For many women in public life, 'logging off' for an extended period of time is simply not an option because online platforms are often closely tied to their ability to generate an income. For journalists, it is a way to connect with sources, track breaking news, and share their articles, and for politicians, being online gives them a platform to share their views with wider audiences, connect with constituents and build support.

And so, despite the many risks and harmful impacts of online gender-based violence and abuse, many women in public life stay online. But doing so can also lead to other risks. For example, participants noted that a common tactic of abuse includes perpetrators questioning their legitimacy as women journalists or politicians. As one journalist said:

“ *my reputation as a credible journalist was being put on the line – the harassers were questioning and discrediting my reporting by spreading false information about me.*

3 Generational Impact

Another key challenge mentioned in the consultations was the **generational impact** of online abuse against women public figures. Given so many women in public life often serve as role models for younger generations, the torrent of abuse they experience can serve as a major blocker for young women and girls to enter these professions. This is particularly concerning when those from marginalised communities (who are often already underrepresented in public life) are deterred from pursuing roles in journalism and politics due to the fear of experiencing online abuse.

Another participant shared how in particular:

“ *the expertise of Black women can be discredited and their work can be miscited or completely disregarded.*

If effective, this tactic can have harmful economic and professional consequences for women politicians and journalists.

Tech company representatives acknowledged the significance of the risks women in public life face, and one noted that their company “is testing tools in the US to give extra protection to politicians” and are “advocating for this initiative to be expanded globally and that they have done something similar with women journalists.”

As one politician shared:

“ *I want to tell young women to get involved in politics, but I do not want them to be subject to similar forms of abuse online. When you're a Black woman, you have to be extra strong, you are told you have to work twice as hard, and that you must hold your head up and be dignified. It is time for that expectation to change, and time for justice and equality.*

(Consultation 4, January 2021)

Young Women

“ Young women have incredible excitement, curiosity and enthusiasm when they begin exploring online, but then when they face gender-based violence or abuse online, there's a striking amount of shame and silence.

(Consultation 4, January 2021)

Our final consultation focused on young women's experiences of abuse online. During the session, we heard from participants how the web can be a lifeline for many young people. It can give them the opportunity to learn, build relationships, and organise around issues they care about. But **a recent study** from Plan International found that over half of young women and girls experienced abuse or cyberbullying online, and nearly a quarter said that online abuse has led them to feel physically unsafe, experience mental and emotional stress, or caused problems at school and at home.

During the session, participants shared some challenges that young women in particular experience online, including **differences in describing abusive behaviours** and **navigating platforms**.

1 Differences in Describing Abusive Behaviours

Throughout the consultation, a key theme raised by participants is that there can be a **difference in how platforms and young women actually describe abusive behaviours**. As one participant explained:

“ young women can experience things that are abuse, but not recognize it as such.

This can lead to problems when young women report abuse, because the categories offered by the platforms do not always match the way young women would categorize or describe what has happened to them. Many participants noted how this is an even bigger challenge for young women who may speak local languages that are not translated in the platform's guidelines. In these cases, this group will have to find ways to translate and decipher the policies themselves.

These differences in describing abuse risks leading to some young people thinking abusive behaviours are just part and parcel of being online. While some young women may stop using these platforms as a result of the abuse

they experience online, one participant shared that many young women believe:

“ this is the price they have to accept to access any space. They just don't see this ending anywhere they go.

Another participant working with young girls emphasised that this discrepancy in definitions of online abuse is why it is so important for platforms to ensure the terminology they choose is user friendly for young people – too often, technical jargon in policies excludes the experiences of young women. One tech company representative echoed this as one of their priorities, saying how important it is:

“ to have tailored messaging for young people. Some platforms have younger demographics, and policies need to be written for that audience.

2 Navigating Safety Tools

Although many platforms have product features to help improve the safety of women online, we heard across all our consultations how often women are not always aware that these tools exist. During the session on young women, participants shared how difficult **navigating safety tools on platforms** can be for this group in particular. And as with differences in describing abusive behaviours, participants noted that understanding safety and security tools on offer can be especially detrimental for young women who may speak local languages if these tools only exist in certain languages. One researcher shared how in a recent study they conducted, **less than half of young women ensured that their privacy settings were high**.

Both tech company reps and other participants agreed that tech companies must make concerted efforts to raise awareness about safety tools, and ensure such tools and policies are easier to use and find, particularly for young women.

Notably, during the session, we also heard that when young women can not find the safety protections they need (or because the protections they are looking for do not yet exist), they will build their own protections against online abuse. For example, participants noted that young women, and in particular those from activist communities or marginalised groups, will share lists of accounts they have blocked with each other to help stop coordinated abuse. In other instances, young women will put emojis in their names to make it more difficult for abusers to find and target their accounts.

Working towards solutions

It is clear that tackling online gender-based violence and abuse is a complex and challenging issue. Experiences vary significantly across contexts and identities, and harmful online behaviours are both reinforced and bolstered by offline inequalities.

While we can't quickly unwind the misogyny and sexism that drives this abuse, we can redesign our digital spaces and change the online environments that allow misogyny to thrive. Encouragingly, we are seeing tech companies come to the table on this issue, and **commit** publicly to prioritising women's safety on their platforms.

Truly tackling this issue will help create an online world where an activist can have her voice protected, not silenced by false reports. Where a journalist can engage with feedback on her reporting, not assassinations of her character. Where a politician may read complaints about her policies, but not threats of violence. Where a young woman can share what she wants to on her terms, knowing there are systems to keep her safe and hold harassers accountable.

What is most clear is that if we can solve gender-based violence and abuse facing the most marginalised women on these platforms, we can create a safer online experience for everyone.

To find out more about this project and for more information on how to use this work at your organisation please visit ogbv.webfoundation.org or contact ogbv@webfoundation.org