

BRIEFER

Online Gender Based Violence: Challenges and Responses

Introduction

With the advent of the digital era, online tools have been viewed as having especial potential to empower marginalized groups, including women and girls, by generating new modalities of expression, learning, organization, solidarity, and consciousness.¹ Some of this promise has been fulfilled, with the Internet and social media facilitating new forms of mobilization by women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and activists.² At the same time, “[d]espite the benefits and empowering potential of the Internet and ICT, women and girls across the world have increasingly voiced their concern at harmful, sexist, misogynistic and violent content and behaviour online.”³

Over the last year, the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) has supported the work of two partner organizations aimed at raising public awareness about the impact of online gender-based violence (“online GBV”) on fundamental freedoms and identifying collective strategies to protect WHRDs against these attacks. In this brief, we present some background on online GBV, and describe the ongoing work by our partners in pushing back against the use of online spaces and tools to violate the human rights and civic freedoms of women and girls.

Definition and Characteristics of Online GBV

As the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, has explained, “online violence against women ... extends to any act of gender-based violence against women that is committed, assisted or aggravated in part or fully by the use of ICT [information and communications technology], such as

¹ Neema Iyer et al., *Alternate Realities, Alternative Internets: African Feminist Research for a Feminist Internet* (Aug. 2020): 3, https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/Report_FINAL.pdf.

² Civicus, *In Defence of Humanity: Women Human Rights Defenders and the Struggle against Silencing* (Mar. 15, 2019): 9, https://www.civicus.org/documents/WHRD_PolicyBrief.pdf.

³ Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Women Journalists and Freedom of Expression: Discrimination and gender-based violence faced by women journalists in the exercise of their profession* (Oct. 31, 2018): para. 46 (“IACHR Report”), <https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/expression/docs/reports/WomenJournalists.pdf>.

mobile phones and smartphones, the Internet, social media platforms or email.”⁴ Online GBV is a related but more expansive concept: as Neema Iyer, Bonnita Nyamwire, and Sandra Nabulega note in a 2020 report, “[o]nline gender-based violence is commonly defined as an action facilitated by one or more people that harms others based on their sexual or gender identity or by enforcing harmful gender norms, which is carried out by using the internet or mobile technology.”⁵

Online GBV can take a variety of forms. In a 2015 report, UNESCO found that the most frequent forms of online violence against women journalists and media workers include monitoring and stalking, posting personal data, trolling, smearing, defamation or disparagement, and viral hatred.⁶ Iyer et al. identify six types of online GBV: hacking, impersonation, surveillance/tracking, harassment/spamming, recruitment, and malicious distribution.⁷ And the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association has warned that

online gender-based violence remains a major barrier to women’s rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association. ... Women human rights defenders consulted in the preparation of the present report described rampant online harassment and massive social media attacks that seemed coordinated. These campaigns often include the dissemination of doctored pictures, usually of a sexualized and gendered nature; the spreading of information designed to discredit, often full of harmful and negative gender stereotypes; violent hate messages and threatening messages on social networks, including calls for gang rape and for murder; and breaches of privacy.⁸

As Chioma Nwaodike and Nerissa Naidoo note in a 2020 report, “women are more likely than men to experience online violence and face more severe and consequential forms of it.”⁹ Online GBV thus constitutes a further manifestation of patterns of gender-based violence and discrimination in society at large.¹⁰ It has been estimated that 23 per cent of women have experienced online abuse or harassment at least once in their life.¹¹ Women prominently engaged in the exercise of civic freedoms are

⁴ Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, *Online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective* (June 18, 2018): para. 23 (“Simonovic Report”), <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/38/47>.

⁵ Iyer et al., p. 10.

⁶ UNESCO, *World trends in freedom of expression and media development: special digital focus 2015*, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000234933>.

⁷ Iyer et al., p. 10.

⁸ Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, *Celebrating women in activism and civil society: the enjoyment of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association by women and girls* (July 20, 2020): para. 64 (“Voule Report”), <https://undocs.org/A/75/184>.

⁹ Chioma Nwaodike & Nerissa Naidoo, *Fighting Violence Against Women Online: A Comparative Analysis of Legal Frameworks In Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal, South Africa, and Uganda* (Aug. 2020): 4 (“Pollicy Report on Legal Frameworks”), https://www.ogbv.pollicy.org/legal_analysis.pdf.

¹⁰ IACHR Report, para. 48.

¹¹ Simonovic Report, para. 16.

particularly exposed to such violence. In a 2017-2018 global survey by the International Women’s Media Foundation, 63% of the 597 female journalists surveyed reported being threatened or harassed online.¹² The incidence of online GBV is only magnified by forms of prejudice and violence against other vulnerable and marginalized groups. Amnesty International researchers have found that black women journalists and politicians in the US and UK, for example, were 84% more likely to be the target of hate speech online than their white counterparts.¹³

The consequences of online GBV on victims and civic space more generally are profound. As the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences has noted, “[o]nline and ICT-facilitated acts of gender-based violence against women and girls include threats of such acts that result, or are likely to result, in psychological, physical, sexual or economic harm or suffering to women.”¹⁴ In a 2017 survey, Amnesty International found that at least 41 per cent of women who had been abused online feared for their physical safety, and 24 per cent feared for their family’s safety.¹⁵ There is a “continuum of violence” between online and offline spaces, “whereby violence that begins online can be continued offline and vice-versa.”¹⁶ And online GBV against WHRDs, journalists, and politicians often leads to self-censorship, reduced levels of online activity, or a decision to leave activism entirely. “Ultimately, the online abuse against women journalists and women in the media are a direct attack on women’s visibility and full participation in public life.”¹⁷

Responsive Measures to Online GBV

Principles of human rights law, including the prohibition of gender-based violence, apply equally online, thus requiring that States prohibit gender-based violence in its ICT-facilitated and online forms.¹⁸ However, as Iyer et al. have observed, “violence against women online is often trivialized with poor punitive action taken by authorities, further exacerbated by victim blaming.” Even in those countries that have attempted to address online measures through legal and other means, “the enforcement of such measures has proven tricky due to a lack of appropriate mechanisms, procedures and capacity.”¹⁹

Internet service providers and platforms also have human rights responsibilities, as described in the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. However, the

¹² IACHR Report, para. 38.

¹³ Pollicy Report on Feminist Internet, p. 12.

¹⁴ Šimonovic Report, para. 27.

¹⁵ *Statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein* (June 21, 2018), <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23238&LangID=E>.

¹⁶ Pollicy Report on Feminist Internet, p. 4.

¹⁷ Šimonovic Report, para. 29.

¹⁸ Šimonovic Report, para. 17.

¹⁹ Pollicy Report on Feminist Internet, p. 9.

response of these private companies to online GBV has generally been lacking. The IACHR Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression summarizes the deficiencies:

These problems include the lack of reliable, easy-to-use, and transparent complaint mechanisms for the procedures to be followed after a complaint is received. Many of the complaints filed by social network users go unanswered, are not addressed promptly, or are dismissed on the grounds that the reported acts of online gender-based violence do not violate community standards There is also no clear information on who makes these decisions²⁰

The UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association thus concludes that “efforts made by social media companies in content moderation and transparency have not been sufficient,” and that “many States also continue to fail to protect women in civil society from online attacks and violence.”²¹ In a positive recent development, however, Facebook, Google, TikTok and Twitter have announced a package of commitments to address online GBV, including by offering more granular access settings, more accessible safety tools, additional support during the abuse reporting process, and greater ability for users to track and manage reports of abuse.²²

Partner-Led Action to Counter Online GBV

In 2020, ICNL issued a call for applications to raise public awareness about the impact of online gender-based violence on fundamental freedoms, and to identify collective strategies for developing counter-narratives and mechanisms to protect WHRDs against attacks. Following a competitive selection process, ICNL has provided support to two partner organizations to implement activities aimed at pushing back against online GBV: [Fe-Male](#), a feminist collective based on Lebanon, and [Ciberseguras](#), a network of feminist digital rights organizations in Latin America.

Fe-Male’s project activities include producing an Arabic-language training toolkit for WHRDs that outlines safe cyber-security practices and defenses against cyber-crimes. This will be the first such toolkit developed in the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region. Fe-Male will also conduct a series of training workshops based on the toolkit for WHRDs and women’s rights activists in the region, to provide them with tips and information on how to protect themselves from online abusers and cyber-blackmail.

Ciberseguras’s project activities include the design and development of an urgent help kit for WHRDs facing gender-based online violence, which will provide technical

²⁰ IACHR Report, para. 49.

²¹ Voule Report, para. 65.

²² Web Foundation, “Facebook, Google, TikTok and Twitter make unprecedented commitments to tackle the abuse of women on their platforms” (1 July 2021), <https://webfoundation.org/2021/07/generation-equality-commitments/>.

information on defending against online GBV, as well as advice on obtaining psychosocial support and conducting advocacy and legal campaigns to counter such violence. Ciberseguras will work with local CSOs in Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico to disseminate the help kit, including through a streaming audio program featuring interviews with WHRDs who have faced online violence.

The toolkit and help kit developed by Fe-Male and Ciberseguras, respectively, will be tailored to address the needs and challenges faced by WHRDs and women's rights activists in their regional contexts. Ciberseguras will conduct a review to document cases of online gender-based violence in Latin America from 2019-2020, which will incorporate consultations with WHRDs and feminist and LGBTI+ collectives in the region, and which will then inform the design of the urgent help kit. Fe-Male has already completed a survey of WHRDs from across the MENA region which explores the importance of the Internet in their work and the extent to which online GBV affects their activism and digital safety. Results of the survey, which will inform the toolkit under development, may be accessed [here](#).

The Path Forward

The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, and the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, have outlined recommendations on combatting online GBV.²³ These include: for states, enacting new measures to prohibit emerging forms of online GBV; and for Internet intermediaries, greater transparency in decision-making and the application of standards regarding online GBV. Participation by WHRDs, women's organizations, and other civil society actors in the implementation of these recommendations, and in bolstering public awareness and resiliency in the face of online attacks on women and girls, will be critical.

So, too, will be the development of additional resources and spaces to safeguard the civic freedoms of women. ICNL is advancing this work through such initiatives as the Women in Civil Society Lab, which will build the capacity of feminist and women-led organizations in the MENA region to navigate restrictive legal frameworks impacting civic freedoms, and provide tools to respond and advocate for reform; and the Women and FOAA toolkit, a soon-to-be published guide to civic freedoms for WHRDs and women's CSOs developed by the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association. We will also be soliciting additional proposals for activities aimed at pushing back against gender-based violence.

Through these and other engagements, and together with partners, we can work to expand civic space, both online and offline, for women and girls around the world.

²³ See Šimonovic Report, paras. 89-119; Voule Report, para.