PLAN INTERNATIONAL

GIRLS GET EQUAL

FREE TO BE ONLINE?

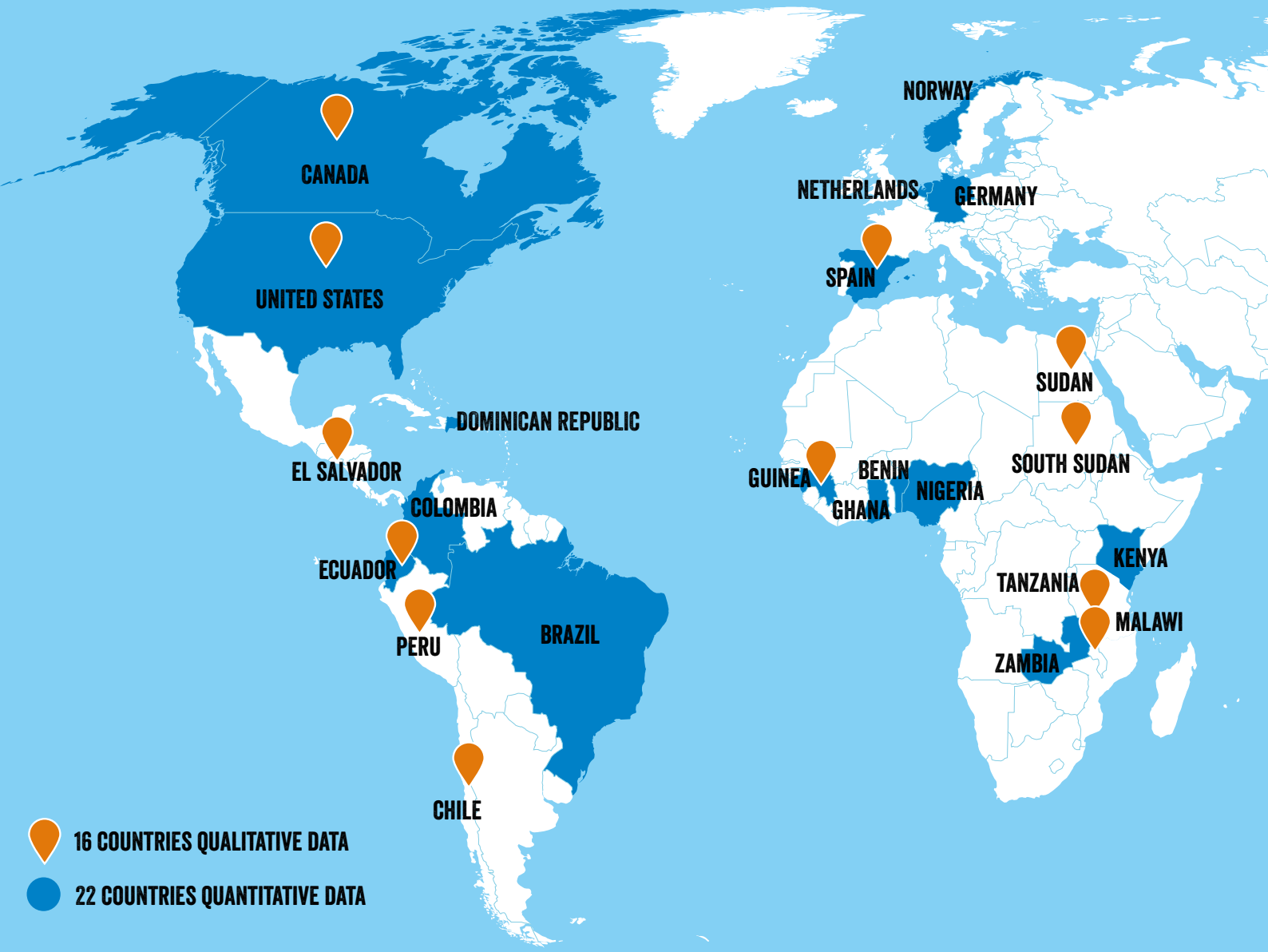
Girls' and young women's experiences of online harassment

THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S GIRLS

2020

FREE TO BE ONLINE?

COUNTRIES FEATURED IN THIS RESEARCH



THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S GIRLS REPORTS

Plan International first published The State of the World's Girls Report in 2007. The 2020 report on girls' experiences of being online on social media platforms is the third in a new series that each year will examine the behaviours, attitudes and beliefs that limit girls' freedom and opportunities in specific environments or sectors.

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PREFACE

Ms Kevin Abalo is executive director of the Resilience Organisation, South Sudan. Set up in 2017, it is a community support agency focusing on gender equality and the rights of women and girls, and campaigning to end violence against children in the Eastern and Central Equatorial States. The organisation works with Plan International's Girls Get Equal campaign, raising awareness of girls' rights, including freedom of expression and the education of South Sudanese girls.

RESILIENCE
Community Support Agency

This report about online harassment is tackling a very serious issue. The use of technology has taken over the world, and the internet plays a big part in this. However, online abuse, harassment and hate are shaping social media in a bad direction. This harassment includes sexual, pornographic pictures (sextortion), death threats and impersonation to mention only a few from a long list.

It is hard to stop it and in developing countries it cannot be reported easily. Sometimes the harassment on the streets and online is so unbearable that you can end up being abusive back or you try to block the perpetrators. In South Sudan, we have set up clubs, in school and out of school, to create awareness of this issue, and campaign for action. We work through radio talk shows, and use songs and drama. In South Sudan, there is no law that punishes online harassment. Perhaps things are different elsewhere, though from the research carried out by Plan International for this report they do not seem so very different.

Nowadays we are unprotected: everything is available everywhere online. When sensitive, private information is posted on various websites it becomes difficult to control and girls and young women are vulnerable to external attackers. It becomes even worse when everyone shares pictures and updates on social media. Attackers can easily photoshop the photos and manipulate them.

It is important to help people protect themselves, and part of the work of the Resilience Organisation is to help girls and young women do this: creating awareness about the use of passwords and storage, not to share any passwords over insecure connections, creating a unique username for each different account and removing personal information from where it can be easily found. Everyone is a target to attackers, so it is necessary to use due diligence and take care to protect our identity.

There is only so much an individual can do and we must all campaign for change, forcing governments and technology companies to put protection in place. Girls and young women are sick of being harassed and in some cases driven away from all the opportunities that, in a better world, the internet provides. This is a human rights issue.

FOREWORD

AB Albrectsen
CEO, Plan International

"The fear is in me every time I go to post something. I think all girls have that fear."

Girl, 17, Ecuador

The theme of this year's State of the World's Girls Report is freedom online – but it reveals the opposite. Rather than free and empowered to express themselves online, girls are all too often harassed, abused and driven from online spaces. With communities now in COVID-19 lockdown and close to 700 million girls out of school, girls are spending more time than ever at home and on the internet. Key societal functions are being moved online to prevent the spread of the virus, and it is more vital than ever that girls enjoy full and equal access to the opportunities social media and the web have to offer.

The research in this report was gathered in conversation with more than 14,000 girls across 31 countries across multiple continents – and they share similar stories of harassment and discrimination. This discrimination is compounded by other layers of abuse that target their nationalities, racial identities, education levels, disabilities and sexual and gender identities. Activists – including girls, young women and LGBTIQ+ young people campaigning for gender equality – are often targeted particularly viciously, and their lives and families threatened. Girls are being silenced by a toxic level of harassment.

The Sustainable Development Goals call for the use of ICT, including universal internet access, to tackle gender inequality. Mobile technology markets are expanding in developing countries, and there has been a rapid increase in access to the internet; but without robust measures to protect girls from online gender-based violence. Nobody is collecting data to reveal the scale and nature of the problem and websites' and social media platforms' reporting mechanisms are often inadequate and ineffective. Not all girls have access to the internet, and we must make sure no one is left behind, close the digital gender gap and demand access for all. But we can't stop there. It's time for technology companies and governments to get tougher on perpetrators of online abuse.

Girls are demanding change, and change is possible. I hope this report and Plan International's Girls Get Equal campaign will bring this issue to the forefront of people's minds, building on the brilliant work that grassroots and girl- and women-led civil society organisations have been doing in this area for many years. I hope that listening to and understanding girls' everyday realities will spur social media companies, governments and civil society into action.

KEY FINDINGS

- **More than half of girls surveyed, from around the world, have been harassed and abused online.**
- **One in four girls abused online feels physically unsafe as a result.**
- **Online abuse is silencing girls' voices.**

Girls are harassed just for being girls and it gets worse if they speak up about issues they care about. Race, sexuality and disability are targeted too. Nowhere feels safe, and for many, online harassment that follows them into their homes, and invades their hearts and minds, is just as frightening, physically and emotionally, as street harassment. The two are interwoven – the result of underlying misogyny that is determined to keep girls and women "in their place."

Perpetrators who threaten rape and physical violence, use abusive and sexist language, post manipulated photos and send pornographic pictures are able to remain anonymous and unconstrained; girls are often afraid, begin to restrict what they post and are forced to try and protect themselves.

It is time for this to stop. Girls and young women are demanding change. Their experiences are not "normal" and girls should not have to put up with behaviour online which would be criminal on the streets. Governments and social media companies must take action.

Governments and society as a whole need to monitor this abuse rigorously and social media companies must use their technological skills and financial resources to put freedom online for girls and young women at the heart of their agenda.

Social media companies have to:

- **Create effective and accessible reporting mechanisms that target gender-based violence**
- **Hold perpetrators to account**
- **Collect disaggregated data that acknowledges girls' intersecting identities and tracks the scale and size of the problem**
- **Take this issue seriously**

"Social media can be a really amazing place to, for example, speak out and share information…but also, it can be a horrible place where, I don't know, crazy people can have an anonymous place to throw shade and hate…"

Young woman, 22, Chile

WARNING: THIS REPORT CONTAINS DESCRIPTIONS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND ABUSE.

INTRODUCTION

This year's Plan International's annual **State of the World's Girls report** is based on research conducted across 31 countries with over 14,000 girls and young women. It aims at uncovering and understanding girls' and young women's experiences of being online on social media platforms: what platforms do they use, what drives their usage, what is their experience of harassment, who are the perpetrators and what is the impact of harassment on them and on their continued usage of social media platforms?

In 2018, the State of the World's Girls Report – Unsafe in the City – was based on research across five very different cities documenting girls' experiences – frightening and pervasive – of street harassment. Two years later, while the focus has moved to online harassment, the stories are little different. The harassment may not be face to face but it is invasive, often frightening and it curtails girls' freedom in similar ways.

Girls are targeted online just because they are young and female, and if they are politically outspoken, disabled, Black or identify as LGBTIQ+, it gets worse. Harassment ranges from being put down for your opinions, to being threatened with violence, to being besieged by unwanted pornographic images. Like street harassment it is unremitting, often psychologically damaging and can lead to actual physical harm.

There are many definitions of online gender-based harassment but for this research, the following has been used: "action by one or more people that harms others based on their sexual or gender identity or by enforcing harmful gender norms. This action is carried out using the internet and/or mobile technology and includes stalking, bullying, sex-based harassment, defamation, hate speech, exploitation and gender trolling."[1]

To all the girls and young women taking part in the research social media is an important part of their lives. They use it for activism, for entertainment, for education and for keeping in touch with friends and family.

"Actually, social media is very important these days, and I often keep using it for three to four hours a day."

Young woman, 18, Nepal

"It plays an essential part in my daily life, and also to communicate and to keep contact with my friends and family."

Young woman, Myanmar, age unknown

During the COVID-19 pandemic being online has become increasingly important: a lifeline for those often isolated at home and an important tool as young people struggle to keep up with their education and stay connected to the wider world.

Internet access, and safety online, is fundamentally a human rights issue and an important indicator of gender equality. Social media platforms can afford girls and young women a space for debate, an opportunity to make their voices heard, but increasingly, as they speak out, they are threatened and demeaned. The misogyny girls experience on our streets, must not be allowed to characterise their experiences online: harassment must not limit girls' and young women's ability to take advantage of all the opportunities social media has to offer. Their voices, the issues they care about, are in danger of being drowned out by abuse, their activism impeded and their confidence drained by systematic bullying. None of this is acknowledged and neither platforms nor perpetrators are held to account.

Whose space, what freedom?

Freedom of speech is frequently quoted as an overriding consideration in terms of how the web and social media platforms are regulated. Often nobody will take responsibility for the misinformation, abuse, or harassment which is part of the online environment. Perpetrators who would be subject to laws offline carry on with impunity, and frequently an empowering anonymity, online.

Freedom can be complicated: whose rights are being prioritised and whose voices are silenced? A system that was designed for us all, to connect us, and provide us with information is in danger of becoming a platform for the already powerful and a force which in the words of the founder of the World Wide Web is "anti-human".[2]

"The web is for everyone and collectively we hold the power to change it. It won't be easy. But if we dream a little and work a lot, we can get the web we want."[3]

Tim Berners-Lee, founder of the World Wide Web

In 2017 increasing levels of internet hate speech, harassment and fake news led to Germany adopting the 'Act to Improve Enforcement of the Law in Social Networks,' otherwise known as the 'NetzDG' Law. It requires social media platforms like Twitter, Reddit and Facebook to remove hate speech and other controversial or offensive content within 24 hours. Failure to remove banned content can lead to fines of up to €50 million. Social media platforms are therefore complying – for example, Facebook has two deletion centres in Germany and employs 1200 workers to monitor content.[4] In June 2020[5] the law was amended to require stronger accountability by social media companies and also criminal provisions for perpetrators. The new amendments now bind social media companies – in addition to deleting posts within 24 hours – to report criminal content to the German Federal Criminal Police Office. It is an effective but controversial law which has come under much scrutiny on the basis that it restricts freedom of speech.[6]

METHODOLOGY

This year's report is based on two strands of data collection and data analysis. The quantitative data was collected in 22 countries and the qualitative data involved in-depth interviews with 18 young female activists from 16 countries.

1. Quantitative data: data was collected using a closed-question survey with 16 questions that asked girls about their social media use, their experience of online harassment, the consequences of online harassment and possible solutions to it. The survey was administered online and via computer-assisted telephone interviews by two survey firms selecting respondents from a pre-arranged pool. Respondents were girls and young women between the age of 15-25.

Overall, there were 14,071 interviews across 22 countries: Australia, Benin, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Germany, Ghana, Guinea, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kenya, Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway, Philippines, Spain, Thailand, USA, Zambia.

2. Qualitative data: data was collected over a three-week period between March and April through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The interviews took between 35 minutes to an hour and were conducted via calls on Skype and WhatsApp. The questionnaire was structured into four sections with between four to six questions in each, using the same headings as in the quantitative survey. All questions were open-ended and intended to be explorative, offering the girls the opportunity to give as much or little information as they felt comfortable with.

The interviewees were a varied group of young female activists with intersectional characteristics. Overall, interviews were conducted with 18 girls aged between 15-24 years old from 16 countries around the world: Canada, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guinea, Indonesia, Malawi, Myanmar, Nepal, Peru, Philippines, South Sudan, Spain, Sudan, Tanzania and USA.

In line with ethics and safeguarding procedures qualitative interviews were conducted by two members of Plan International staff. Information sheets were provided ahead of time, and informed consent and assent, for girls under 18, were given prior to the interviews; verbal consent was also given to record the interviews. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the data collection, analysis and write up process.

English was the primary language used, followed by Spanish and French.

SETTING THE SCENE

Internet use is on the rise and social media platforms provide ever increasing ways of staying connected. The future is certainly digital. 2019 was a landmark year: half of the world had begun to participate online; the 30th anniversary of the World Wide Web was celebrated; and it was estimated that there were 21.7 billion connected devices, with over 74,500 GB of data being sent over the internet every single second.[8] As of April 2020, there are 4.57 billion active internet users and 3.76 billion active social media users with the global online penetration rate being 59 per cent. Despite this global increase, access remains a problem in many countries, and nine of out the ten countries with the lowest internet penetration are in Africa.[9] Regionally, Northern Europe ranks first with a 95 per cent internet penetration rate among the population. The countries with the highest internet penetration rate worldwide are the UAE, Denmark and South Korea.[10]

The World Wide Web went live two years after the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 and a whole 12 years after the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The two human rights frameworks which provide protection to girls and young women – safeguarding their basic rights and allowing for their participation in all aspects of their lives – were drafted at a time when the online world did not exist. Even though the two treaties were drafted so that their application is broad enough for, and pertinent to, most situations, the international human rights community was, in effect, playing catch-up.[11] By 2014, when the UN Convention on the Rights Of the Child held its Day of General Discussion on Children's Rights and Digital Media, it was clear that children's rights within digital media needed some attention. Among the many recommendations which ranged from regular monitoring

of human rights laws and policies to ensure they were keeping up with social changes to providing support for children developing digital skills was one that acknowledged the need to: **"[i]ntensify efforts to ensure the effective elimination of all forms of discrimination against girls and address gender stereotypes and social norms that limit girls' access and use of technology, including through awareness-raising programmes."**[12]

The issue of girls' rights and gender discrimination was clearly recognised but in 2014 the discussion was focused more on access than safety. However, progress was made in 2017 when the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) adopted a General Recommendation recognising that gender-based violence happens in **'all spaces and spheres of human interaction', including 'technology-mediated environments, such as contemporary forms of violence occurring in the internet and digital spaces'**.[13] The General Recommendation explicitly mentions girls and requires states to criminalise and sanction all forms of gender-based violence wherever they occur: specifically gender-based violence which violates women's and girls' physical, sexual and psychological integrity,[14] as well as ensuring that survivors of gender-based violence have access to justice.[15]

Unfortunately, these efforts have not, at national level in countries, resulted in focussed and appropriate remedies for girls and young women who are subject to online harassment. Most of the laws designed to regulate the internet are aimed at transactional, financial and e-commerce matters. Where laws do attempt to tackle harassment, many are outdated and ineffectual.[16]

What is online violence against women and girls?

The **Broadband Commission** defines online violence against women and girls to include hate speech, hacking or intercepting private communications, identity theft, online stalking and uttering threats.[17] The Commission notes that it can entail convincing a target to end their lives (counselling suicide or advocating genocide), as well as facilitating other forms of violence against girls and women including trafficking and the sex trade. It also includes activities such as trolling, cyber-bulling, e-bile, revenge porn and sexting.[18] Clearly, online abuse, in all its many forms, is not carried out solely against women and girls. But, in a world characterised by ongoing gender inequality, women and girls are particularly vulnerable to it.

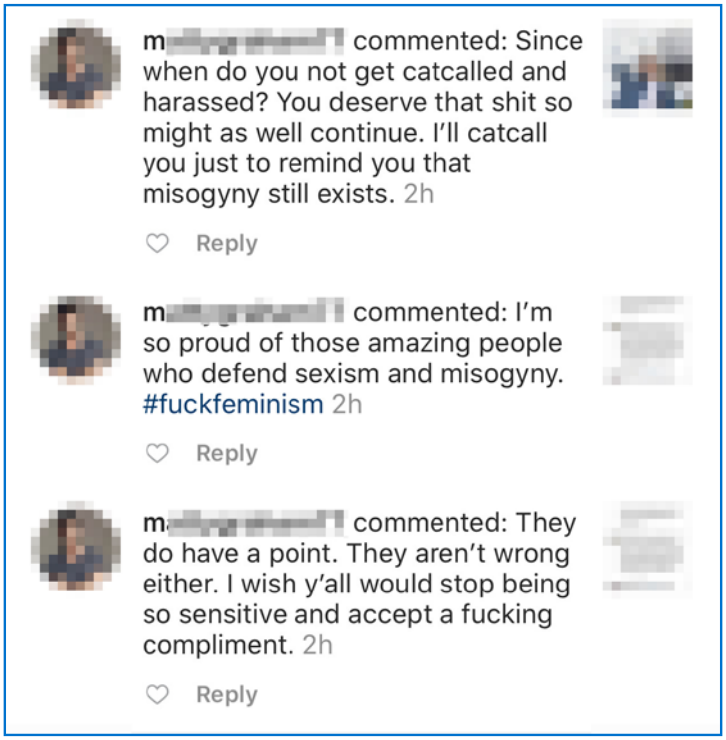
- A 2020 global survey of young people's experience of online abuse and harassment was conducted by **The World Wide Web Foundation and the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts**. The survey found that 52 per cent of young women and girls have experienced online abuse, including threatening messages, sexual harassment and the sharing of private images without consent; 64 per cent of all respondents know someone who has experienced harassment, abuse or violence and young people's top concern is the sharing of private images, videos or messages without their consent – 30 per cent said it is what worries them most.[19]
- **Amnesty International** conducted qualitative and quantitative research about women's experiences on social media platforms including the scale, nature and impact of violence and abuse directed towards women on Twitter, with a particular focus on the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

The study demonstrated that the nature of the abuse included direct or indirect threats of physical or sexual violence, discriminatory abuse targeting one or more aspects of a woman's identity, targeted harassment, and privacy violations such as doxing[20] or sharing sexual or intimate images of a woman without her consent.[21]

- A **2018 study of the persistence of misogyny** cites numerous examples of online harassment against women: 76 per cent of Australian women under 30 report having been harassed online; in the US, young women are disproportionately the targets of severe sexual harassment and stalking online; in Pakistan, online harassment of women is "generally accepted as a routine part of Pakistani women's daily lives." Traditional media has played a role in amplifying or even being the catalyst for online harassment – when a reboot of the Ghostbusters movie starring an all-female leading cast was released in summer 2016, the only leading Black cast member, was forced to leave Twitter temporarily after trolls harassed her with pornography, threats, and racist messages.[22]

- A survey published by the **Broadband Commission** in 2015 references a number of studies to demonstrate the prevalence of online harassment against women and girls. It points out that women aged 18 to 24 are at a heightened risk of being exposed to every kind of online violence and they are "uniquely likely to experience stalking and sexual harassment." To underscore this, reference is made to research in the EU which shows that, from the age of 15, 18 per cent of women have experienced a form of serious internet violence – about 9 million women.[23]

Social media platforms do not own the content posted and do not feel responsible for it but there are increasing calls to say they should be.[24] Managing harmful content may be difficult but it is not impossible[25] and the companies who own the platforms have both the economic resources and the technological skills to do this.



It is an issue that has not had enough attention, particularly with regard to the vulnerabilities of girls and young women. Being online offers many opportunities: for many young people it is an integral part of their lives and can contribute positively to their wellbeing. But they also report negative impacts on their self-esteem, their overall happiness and their ability to benefit from the opportunities that social media has to offer.[26] There is still much to understand about online harassment: who is targeted and why, who are the perpetrators, what is the nature of the abuse and importantly, what is its effect on girls?

This year's **State of the World's Girls Report** looks at these questions in the context of human rights and achieving gender equality. It focuses on the experiences of girls and young women and amplifies their voices as they tell their stories; listening to the solutions they have to offer.

EQUAL MEASURES 2030
GENDER EQUALITY AND INTERNET ACCESS

Equal Measures 2030 was founded in 2016 by a group of cross sector partners to fuel progress towards gender equality by making sure girls' and women's movements, advocates and decision makers have easy-to-use data and evidence to guide efforts to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 and to leave no one behind.

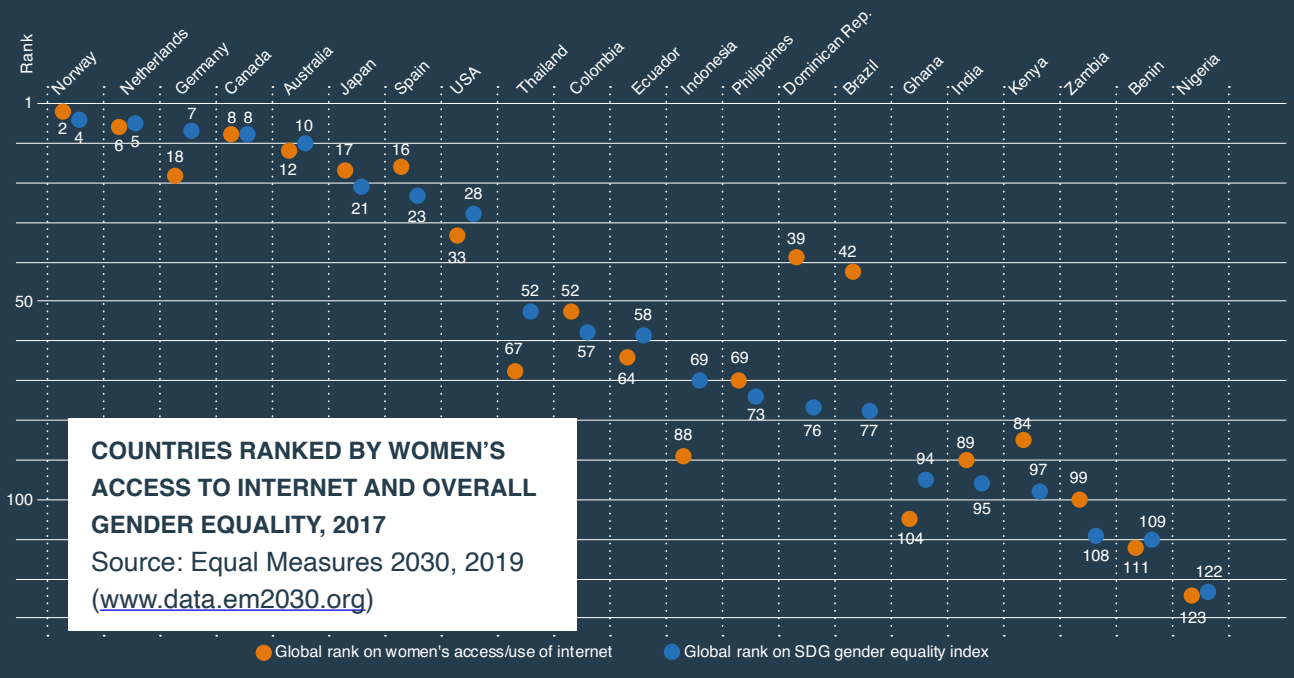
https://www.equalmeasures2030.org/

The 22 countries in the survey represent a wide range of contexts relative to the status of girls and women that are relevant for understanding online harassment. For example, the chart below underscores the differences in global measures of gender equality, covering countries with the highest scores in the SDG Gender Equality Index, such as Norway (fourth in the world) and the Netherlands (fifth in the world), to those ranked much lower like Benin and Nigeria – 109th and 122nd respectively.[27]

However, in terms of the prevalence of women's access/use of internet, the rankings diverge markedly for some countries. The chart shows that Brazil, the Dominican Republic (which ranks 76th in the world on gender equality, but 39th in women's access/use of internet) and Kenya have achieved higher rates of internet access for women than their overall ranking on gender equality might suggest. There are also countries – Germany, USA, Thailand and Indonesia for example – that fall short on women's access/use of internet; their ranking lags behind that for overall gender equality. While this ranking refers to women's internet use, other data show that the biggest gender gaps in internet access are found in India, Benin, Guinea, Ghana and Nigeria.[28]

Amongst the countries with the highest rates of internet use among women, the share of adolescents has grown and stabilised over time. For example, in Norway and the Netherlands, more than 95 per cent of the entire population have been online in the last 3 months.[29] In these countries, universal access to and use of internet and social media is likely to facilitate formal and informal guidance for girls and young women in negotiating the risks inherent in using social media.

On the other hand, in countries with lower rates of female internet use, young women and girls are likely to be more isolated in relation to their online experience. While expanding rapidly, internet use is still very limited in some countries. According to 2018 national surveys, the share of 15-19 and 20-29- year-olds who used the internet in the last 12 months ranged from a low of 6 per cent and 9 per cent in Benin, 14 per cent and 20 per cent in Nigeria and 19 per cent and 22 per cent in Guinea. For many girls and young women, the use of the internet and social media remains uncharted territory.



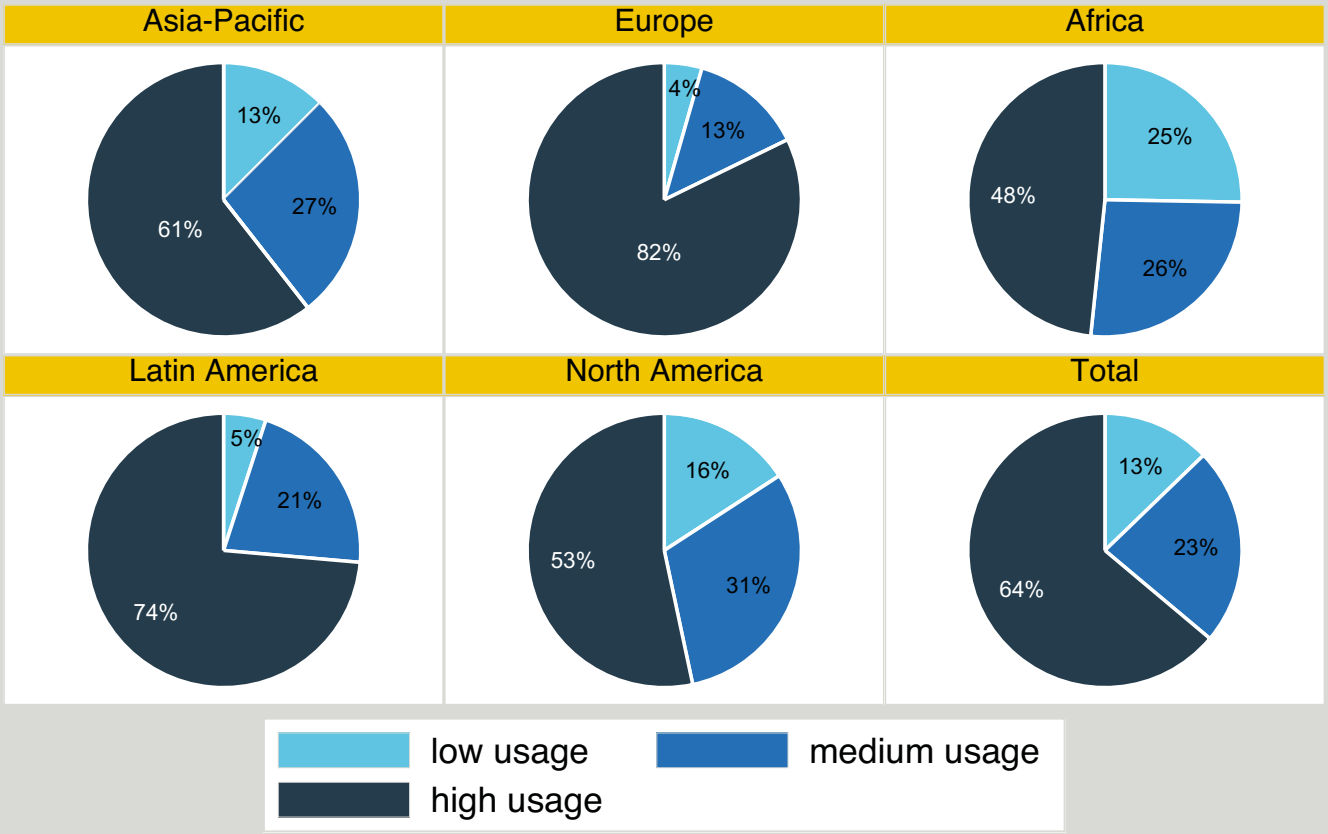
COUNTRIES RANKED BY WOMEN'S ACCESS TO INTERNET AND OVERALL GENDER EQUALITY, 2017
Source: Equal Measures 2030, 2019 (www.data.em2030.org)

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Girls and young women across the 22 countries included in the survey were asked about their social media use: 98 per cent of them use social media, 74 per cent post frequently, or very frequently, and 64 per cent comment, frequently or very frequently, on the social media posts of other users. Across all survey countries, 64 per cent of girls and young women can be classified as having a high level of social media usage, 23 per cent having a medium level and 13 per cent a low level.

LEVEL OF SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE BY REGION



Graphs by region

Social media use is most frequent among 15-year-old girls (72 per cent) and least frequent among 25-year-old women (57 per cent). The importance of social media to girls and young women and the amount of time they spend online is underlined by comments from the qualitative interview participants, with everyone acknowledging that social media is part of their lives. It was considered important for a number of reasons: keeping in touch with friends, communicating with family, job opportunities, spreading and acquiring information, keeping updated with current affairs, interacting with a wide range of people and building online communities.

"They're extremely important to me, to be honest. I mean I grew up in the time where all these applications were becoming very famous, and it's very trendy for young people. But I think I do spend most of my day online… I use it on a daily basis for lots of hours."

Young woman, 20, Sudan

Respondents in the key informant interviews are all activists and use social media to speak out about often contentious issues, ranging from climate change to gender-based violence and female empowerment, that are important to them.

"I put up text and photos and share other people's articles. Also, I comment, sometimes, on topics that interest me."

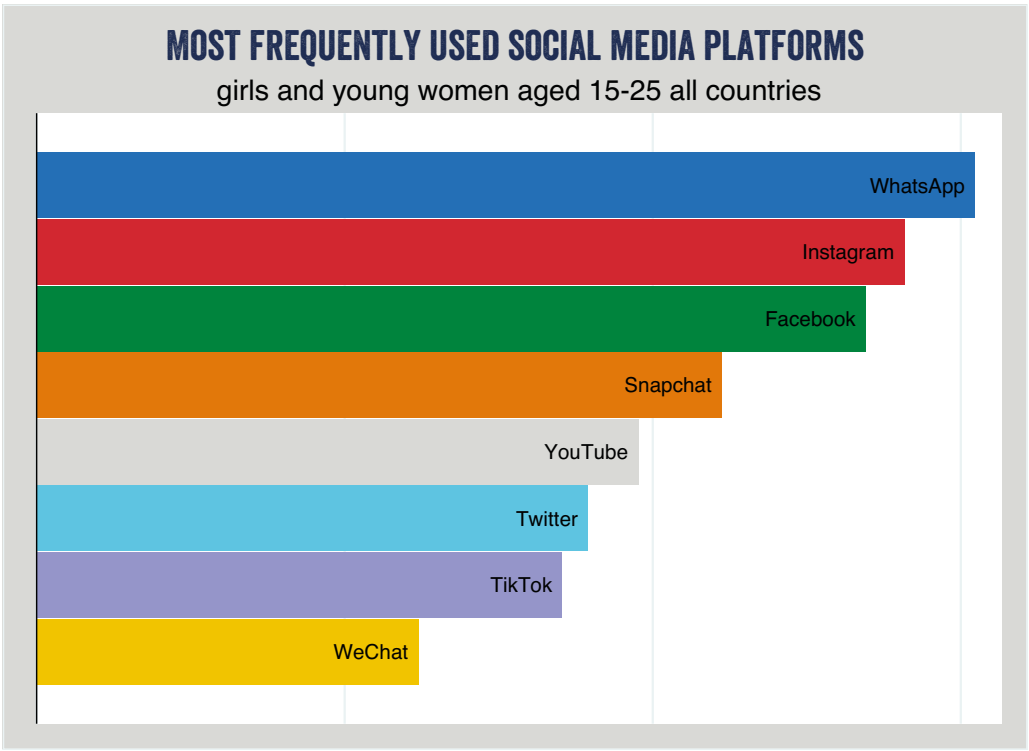
Girl, 17, Ecuador

"I make short articles according to what I study and on topics depending on an important day or political juncture. What I do often is share serious news of rape against women and children."

Young woman, 24, Peru

The online tools and platforms that are used by most girls across all 22 survey countries are WhatsApp (60 per cent), Instagram (59 per cent) and Facebook (53 per cent).

Platform use varies by age: WhatsApp is one of the most frequently used messaging platforms across all ages but young women use Facebook more frequently than adolescent girls who prefer Instagram. Adolescent girls also use Snapchat and the increasingly popular TikTok much more than young women. Not all these platforms are open public chat spaces, WhatsApp, for example, is a closed messaging service, whereas Facebook, TikTok and Instagram have significant open interaction and carry a greater risk of harassment by unknown perpetrators.



2. ONLINE EXPERIENCES OF GENDER-BASED HARASSMENT

"I'm set up so that only my friends can see my pictures, but I got a message from an unknown person saying that if I don't give them my ass, they're going to upload pictures of me. This person, who until now I don't know who he is, sent me pictures of me that nobody else had, of places I was… I told my parents and brother. I'm afraid, the fear is in me, every time I go to post something. I think all girls have that fear."

Girl, 17, Ecuador

Across all 22 survey countries, **58 per cent** of girls reported that they have personally experienced some form of online harassment on social media platforms, backed up by **15 of the 18 participants** in the key informant interviews.

There are only minor regional differences: in Europe 63 per cent of girls reported harassment, followed by 60 per cent of girls in Latin America, 58 per cent in the Asia-Pacific region, 54 per cent in Africa, and 52 per cent in North America.

Even when girls haven't faced gender-based online harassment themselves, the majority of those who were asked know other girls or young women who have. In the qualitative interviews girls who witnessed online harassment happening to others registered its impact on their own behaviour:

"I have never experienced online harassment, although sometimes I got scared to post or give comments on social media for {fear of} getting negative comments or judgements."

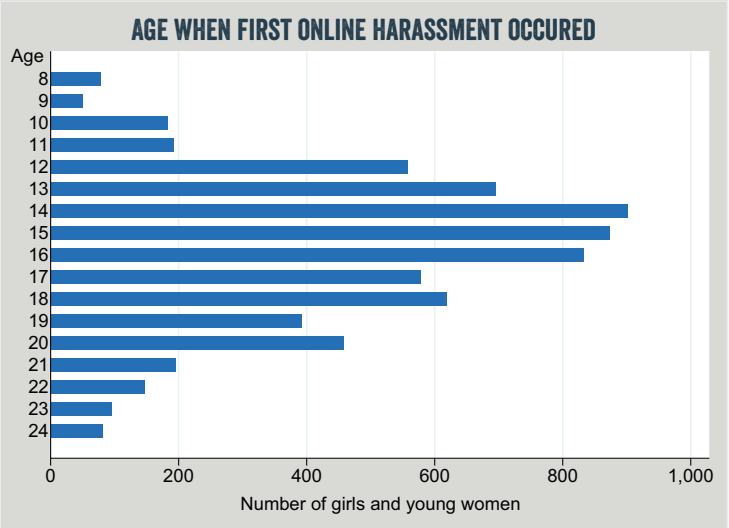
Girl, 17, Indonesia

Most girls report their first experience of social media harassment between the ages of 14-16. Gradually, they learn to protect themselves better. The young woman below is not the only one who blames harassment on her own immaturity rather than, where it belongs, on those carrying it out:

"Now I just turned 20. The time when I faced harassment the most was when I was between nine to 14, I guess. It was that era of my life where I faced harassment because I was immature and I did not know how to respond to most of the things that were happening. And I was trying to be as open as I could so I remember I used to use almost seven social media platforms per day."

Young woman, 20, Sudan

Younger girls are seen as vulnerable by perpetrators. As one young woman from Sudan commented: **"Maybe you know, people will be more comfortable doing it to a young girl."**



Twenty-three per cent of girls and young women reported that harassment happens on Instagram and 14 per cent on WhatsApp but it is on Facebook that they feel particularly unsafe: 39 per cent of girls reported that they face harassment. A wariness of Facebook was also reflected in the qualitative interviews:

"Actually, I can say that I'm (laughs) more careful nowadays, because I don't often go on Facebook anymore. I only do it once in a while, to avoid, you know, like bad comments, or any explicit things, or anything else like that. So, I prefer just staying on WhatsApp, because I feel safer on it."

Young woman, 23, Malawi

"On Facebook I have received many people and eliminated many people, in Instagram I feel less attacked, in Facebook there is more violence."

Young woman, 24, Peru

Young women are more likely than adolescent girls to report frequent or very frequent harassment. This is despite the fact that adolescent girls use social media more often. It does not necessarily mean that they are harassed less frequently but possibly that they are less aware of what harassment is than their older peers.

Awareness of online harassment increases with age: **only 36 per cent of 15-year-olds say that they have heard a lot about online harassment compared to 43 per cent of 24-year-olds.**

Harassment comes in many different shapes, ranging from threats of physical or sexual violence to racist comments and stalking: of the 58 per cent of girls who reported harassment, 85 per cent said they have experienced multiple types of harassment, only 17 per cent say they have faced only one type and 9 per cent of girls said they have experienced every single type of harassment listed in the graph below.

PERCENTAGE OF GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN FACING DIFFERENT TYPES OF HARASSMENT[30]

HARASSMENT APPEARS TO FALL INTO TWO SPECIFIC CATEGORIES:

A. Harassment that girls experience simply for being a girl and for **being online**. It is unrelated to the content of what she posts and is ubiquitous to girls' experiences of social media use. It gets worse if you are Black, identify as LGBTIQ+ or have a disability.

B. A heightened level of harassment when girls are actively engaged in speaking out online. **Activists are attacked for what they are saying** and for their outspokenness. Harassers are interacting with the content, with the debates girls and young women are involved in and the issues they raise.

A. Being online

Girls who face harassment simply for existing online reported harassment which was mainly sexual in nature:

- ➜ receiving sexual comments or explicit messages, including propositions of transactional sex,
- ➜ receiving sexual or explicit photos or images,
- ➜ receiving requests to send photos of themselves, including examples of blackmail,
- ➜ unauthorised sharing of content and/or demonstrating knowledge of the girl's personal information.

"…what happened to me it's when a guy just tried to hold something about me on social media, and saying, 'What currency would you like? Would you like dollars? Would you like euro? What do you want? …You know, just one night I can give you a lot of money that will change your life. I can give you all the money in this world. Come and fuck you and everything.' Can you imagine such things? Yeah. I felt very bad."

Young woman, 23, South Sudan

"I remember this one specific incident, when I was young… I used to get a lot of messages from boys asking me to send nudes or blackmailing me about a picture that I posted that they're going share it or edit it in a bad way and share it with everyone if I don't do this or that. Or just generally talking, like saying bad words to me. At that young age it was, honestly, horrible. So, it was the worst time in my life, using social media. Between the age of 9 and 14."

Young woman, 20, Sudan

Young women in the qualitative interviews also described being sent sexual images, graphic photos of genitalia or pornography:

"Actually it happens even if I don't post anything… It's just like, men have this mentality where they can just play around with you, that kind of thing, they start sending you explicit photos of themselves… having a guy just send me a naked photo of himself… is really freaky.…They just go into your inbox: 'Hey babe,' and then I open this message and I freak out, 'What the hell is happening?'… They are sending you things without your consent, which is just disrespectful."

Young woman, 23, Malawi

Sexual objectification is very much part of a girl's social media experience, with the way girls are dressed or present themselves online being subject to intense and critical scrutiny.

"This sometimes happens when I post something about, maybe gender equality, and when I post a nice photo… many people would comment and, and some people would be like, 'Oh, all the time posting,' calling me some names, and saying, 'You're selling yourself? Are you advertising yourself for a man?' You know, 'Prostitute, selling yourself on social media.'"

Young woman, 23, South Sudan

Especially if they are judged to have broken the rules of conduct for girls and young women or offended conservative ideals.

"I often face harassment online or in public, and it makes me feel unsafe, because every time, whatever I'm doing on social media, people keep commenting. I have to cover my hair, or I have to wear a long dress, or anything and yeah, I just feel I cannot express myself freely."

Young woman, 19, Indonesia

"I have a friend (female), who often receives hate comments and whose posts were being talked about in other group chats regardless of what she posted or shared online. She was being attacked because of how she dresses and because she always puts make-up on."

Girl, 17, Philippines

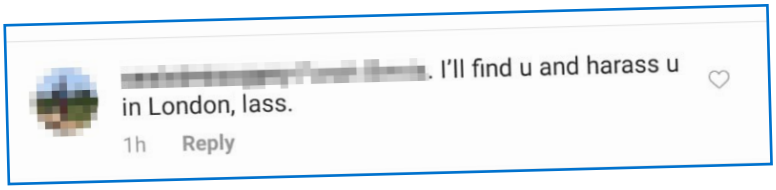
Without my consent

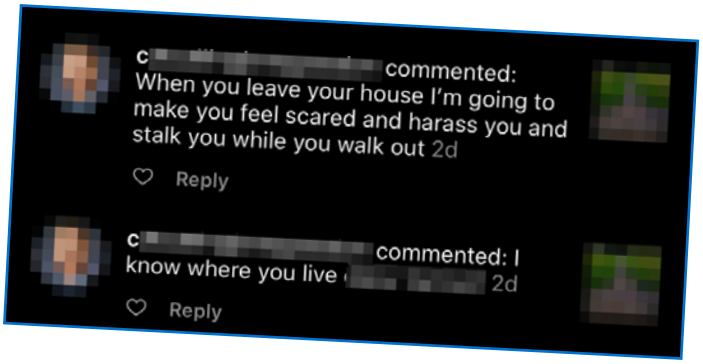
Unauthorised sharing of content and/or demonstrating knowledge of girls' personal information was an issue for 41 per cent of the girls and young women interviewed. Both are an invasion of privacy and in some cases, harassers knew where the girls lived and had information about their relatives. One 17-year-old from Canada commented that it was "really creepy" how easily people found things out about you and could track you down.

In other cases, complete strangers co-opted photos:

"For me, sexual harassment online isn't only about people commenting that on you, or on your photos, or… things about you. But it is also sometimes I find out that some people just share my photos or use my photos there for their profile, without my consent, and that happened often…and there is a guy, and, I didn't know him, and he just started lifting every of my photos on his profile, and I was just real surprised. But then he says that I was beautiful in the photos, which is not a compliment, I think that's sexual harassment, and that's really bad."

Young woman, 19, Indonesia





There was also an example of this happening in a more organised, systematic way, involving multiple harassers and multiple victims, over a sustained period of time rather than as a one-off. The harassment involved an 'under-ground web page' which randomly posted images of women for its users to cyberstalk:

"There was a horrible case, I think it was last year. I don't know how to explain it. Someone would post a picture that he found on some random Instagram, and they would then investigate this woman, and try to find information about her on social media. So, they would even know where this woman lives… And that happened, it was huge because a lot of women were harassed. They would text them, send horrible pictures and things like that… I wasn't personally targeted, but some women that I knew were. At the time I remember it was a fearful thing for most young women in, the city, the country. We had this feeling of fear, to make everything private, delete all your private information on social media, or things like that. Because you knew you could be targeted."

Young woman, 22, Chile

This sort of harassment is particularly frightening as it establishes a link between online and offline harassment and violence and shows how more systematic or networked experiences of online harassment have the potential to create a climate of fear among social media users – affecting not only direct victims but adolescent girls and young women more broadly. It demonstrates also how serious reform is needed, with much more robust security mechanisms put in place.

Girls reported also that male harassers would display more aggressive or inappropriate behaviour to them online after they felt the girl had rejected or turned them down in some way.

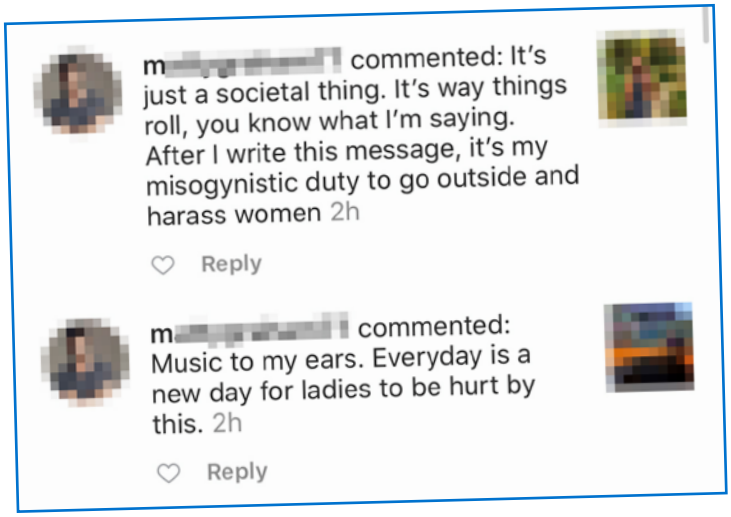
"If they date you and you refuse, they go and talk about you badly on social media, you know."

Young woman, 23, South Sudan

"The person who was stalking me was really interesting because all of the harassment started after I told him I wouldn't go out on a date with him. And I think with street harassment it often escalates after rejection and this is a pattern that I've seen so much and also in the news with various stories. I think that there are similar patterns across both behaviours where maybe it escalates after rejection. It's a way to exert power over someone."

Young woman, 23, USA

The experience of stalking mentioned above is particularly disturbing. After refusing a date the young activist was harassed over a long period of time via multiple social media accounts – including fake accounts and with the harasser pretending to be someone within her online activist group. She blocked him on social media, but he continued pursuing her: sending aggressive comments and demonstrating that he had found out personal information about her and her family. The online harassment could easily have become physical violence: especially as, in this case, the harasser could have joined the face to face events that she organised and attended.



Race, ethnicity, disability and gender

It is not only sexism, just being a girl, that determines girls' experiences online. Racism is also a driver of harassment, as is identifying as LGBTIQ+ or having a disability. If their appearance, their sexuality, ethnicity, race or disability mark them out, girls and young women are targeted even more relentlessly.

"I have friends from the LGBT sector who experience offline and online harassment due to them openly expressing their sexuality."

Girl, 17, Philippines

- **42 per cent of the girls** who identified themselves as LGBTIQ+ and had experienced harassment, said that they get harassed because of it.
- **14 per cent of the girls** who self-identified as having a disability and had experienced harassment said they get harassed because of it.
- **37 per cent of the girls** who identified themselves as from an ethnic minority and had experienced harassment said they get harassed because of it.

Race, as one interviewee remarked, **"gets a lot of people riled up".** She added: **"which is weird…we're starting to talk about it, but it wasn't always there… People don't want to talk about race… Or indigenous issues. Every time I talk about that, there's always one person that goes, 'You're just complaining'."** *Girl, 17, Canada*

Online harassment faced by adolescent girls is not a homogenous experience but parallels the differentiated and intersecting forms of abuse and discrimination girls also face in offline settings: in all regions, disability, race, ethnicity, identifying as LGBTIQ+ increase the harassment girls and young women face just because they are young and female.

B. Attacking the activists

Activists attract particular vitriol and attention, especially in relation to perceived feminist or gender equality issues, which provoke considerable backlash and emerged as a significant theme in girls' and young women's discussions of online harassment: **47 per cent of interview respondents reported being attacked for their opinions.** They felt that often the aim of the attack was to diminish their credibility and knowledge of an issue or to try and silence them altogether – girls shouldn't speak about certain topics. On social media, as offline, they are expected to know their place:

> **"Some of my friends, when they comment or you know give opinions on some of the political matters, there are some people that…are a bit narrow minded, so they tend to use fake accounts and do some harsh comments using rude words, and you know, saying that 'who are you to tell this?' …Using harsh words and 'You are not supposed to do this, you are a girl, just don't mess up with this kind of thing.'"**
>
> **Young woman, 21, Myanmar**

Several girls reported that posting about gender or feminist issues attracted comments, with one saying that they came from lots of different people – both men and women. One 17-year-old from Ecuador who posts about femicide and extreme violence against women reported that she receives lots of "silly comments" from people who are "very closed-minded".

Another young woman who runs an Instagram account that helps share women's experience of abortion says that the reactions are cruel:

> **"It breaks my heart because, obviously the stories that we're telling are a very difficult experience for the woman. And you can read how much suffering she went through with all this. But anyway, these people come, and say things like, 'You should be ashamed of yourself.' How can they comment without seeing the suffering?"**
>
> **Young woman, 22, Chile**

Another interviewee described a potent mixture of anti-feminist comments combined with religious strictures:

> **"…Lots of people commenting especially because I'm a feminist…I think this February, I posted a photo of me at the beach, um, with my legs showing a little bit, and then there is a girl commenting that, actually I didn't know whether the comment belongs to women or men, because it's like a fake account commenting. Saying, 'Your body belongs to god, you have to cover that, and don't wear that kind of dress' because I have to be afraid, like, my parents will go to hell."**
>
> **Young woman, 19, Indonesia**

A young woman from the USA, whose online activism takes the form of speaking out against street harassment by sharing first-hand accounts of women's experiences, characterised the abuse she received as a reaction from men objecting to being viewed as perpetrators:

> **"With the MeToo movement and everything that's going on right now, I think that there's a pattern of backlash from men who feel targeted by it. They feel they have to be defensive because if we're talking about sexual harassment, we must be talking about men doing bad things… I think that wanting to harass does come from a place of just being really defensive… And maybe angry too, that things are changing and that people are speaking up about it and I think also they may feel like they're not important or something. I think that when the stories are all coming from girls and women, maybe they feel, 'Well, what about me? I have a hard life too.' Or there's this certain feeling of entitlement that they should be entitled to be part of this too, but it's not really about them or for them."**
>
> **Young woman, 23, USA**

Not just on social media

Girls' experiences online are many and varied but there is a common thread: a particular type of quiet, modest behaviour is expected of girls – on social media, in public, at home. Gender stereotypes justify harassment, at least to the harassers, and enable them to target girls when they consider them to be acting outside of what is considered acceptable behaviour.

"The communities here are kind of conservative, and they expect us to be polite, and you know, to behave as a girl. Even using, even while using social media we must be very careful with that and we shouldn't say, you know, what we want, so they expect a lot from the girls especially… So, the mindset of the community is also very important to get equality online."

Young woman, 21, Myanmar

Young women are very aware that the harassment they are subjected to online is part of a wider syndrome, "all mixed up" with entrenched ideas about male superiority:

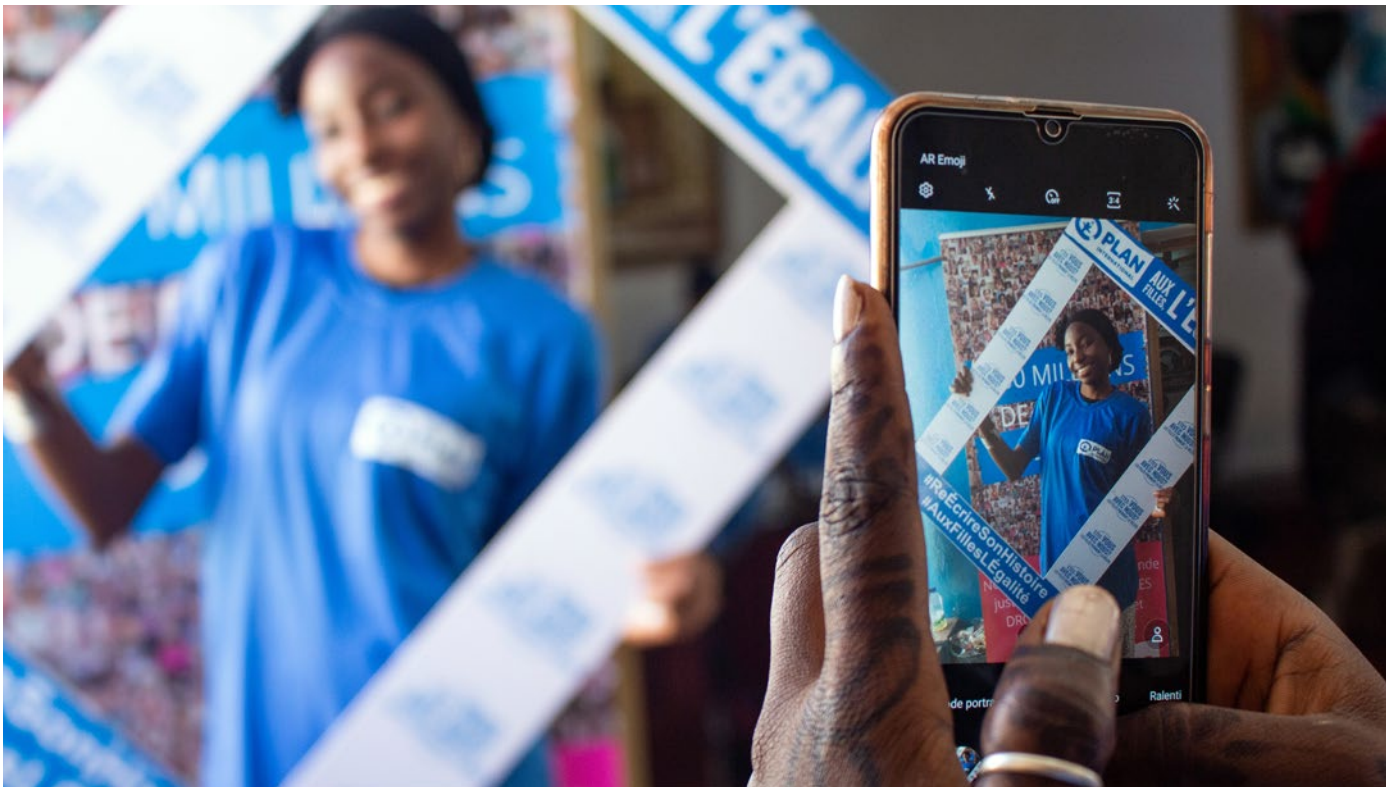
"Sometimes I think it's just more of a cultural kind of thing. Because, you know, people here are just like taught that men are better than women all the time…Just because men are the breadwinners most of the times, and they think that a woman can never be a breadwinner. Maybe because I'm young, that means even if I have a degree, I'll still have to depend on a man. So, I think it's just like all mixed up…"

Young woman, 23, Malawi

Girls and young women often feel unsafe online but for the perpetrators it is different. Social media removes inhibitions. You can abuse people without consequences and without revealing your identity – for the harasser it is a very safe space indeed.

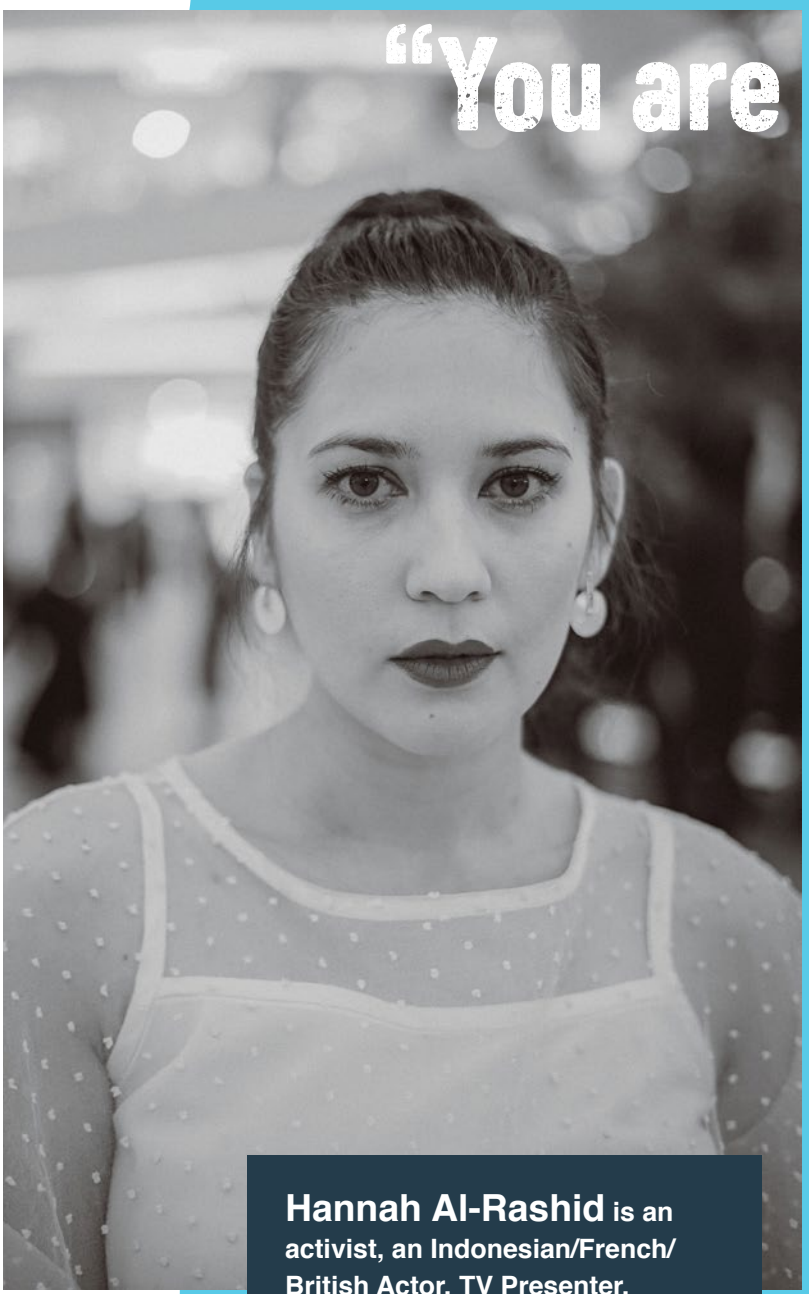
Social media can be a really amazing place to, for example, speak out and share information… but also, can be a horrible place where, I don't know, crazy people can have an anonymous place to throw shade and hate…So, it's very difficult because of that, because you can be anonymous and just like do horrible things."

Young woman, 22, Chile



Special feature

"You are not alone"



Hannah Al-Rashid is an activist, an Indonesian/French/British Actor, TV Presenter, and UN Indonesia Sustainable Development Goals mover for Gender Equality.
Here she talks about her experience of online harassment.

instagram.com/hannahalrashid

I have experienced online harassment.

If I had to point out an experience that comes to mind, it would be the online reaction to my participation at Jakarta's Women's March in 2018. The amount of hate comments and threats I received was overwhelming. I am a feminist but I've had to be very careful when I use that word here in Indonesia because of the negative connotations it has. As a Muslim woman who does not use a hijab by choice, advocating for women's issues clashes with most Indonesian people's expectations of what makes a good or a bad Muslim woman. But we do need to talk about these real issues and misconceptions in our society. They want to silence us but I'm going to keep talking about it.

People assume that everything that happens in the online space is harmless because it's digital, but that's not the case – it is worse. I have felt physically unsafe because of online harassment several times. Radical groups have shared my photos on their social media accounts before, inciting their audiences to come after me, with messages like, "Let's get her so she doesn't speak up again." These experiences have been scary, these people

feel powerful in their anonymity and I don't know who they are. How do I advocate in a way that doesn't threaten them, or put my own safety on the line? I don't want to be silent.

There is also a generation gap. Older people don't view online harassment seriously or recognise fake news. Most of them haven't actually experienced online harassment, so they don't understand the toll it takes. What we really need is for people to empathise and listen to what many girls and women are experiencing.

With COVID-19 more people are on the internet than ever before and I sense that there is more cattiness online. People are more prone to be nasty and you don't have to go far to see tweet wars and misinformation. It does feel like everyone is on edge and you feel self-conscious about what you want to say or share, because it can be misinterpreted and lead to online harassment.

In Indonesia, legally we are never sure how to deal with online harassment. Our legal system is ambiguous when it comes to digital hate, and because it's not formalised in our system, it's understandable that people feel apprehensive about going to a police station to report something. All you really can do is report people on the social media platform itself. When it comes to reporting… I think social media companies need to take it seriously. I feel like they are failing when it comes to addressing reports. For every account I've ever reported, I haven't received a follow-up. I am not aware if anything is being done or not.

In fact, I once heard that the people who moderate reports here are not even Indonesian! No wonder nothing is coming from it. How can you expect for people to feel safe online if the person reviewing these reports doesn't speak Indonesian or understand our cultural context? It's shocking because Indonesia is one of the largest users of social media in the world, you would assume there would be more care.

If I had to give a message to girls who suffer from online harassment or violence, I would tell them that we have the power to create healthier ecosystems online. Mute, block and unfollow accounts. Avoid giving away your personal details to maintain a sense of privacy. In Indonesia, you can approach organisations for advice on this topic such as the Jakarta Feminist Discussion Group, Hollaback Jakarta, SAFENET and Magdalene. Above all, speak up and share your concerns with people you trust – **you are not alone.**

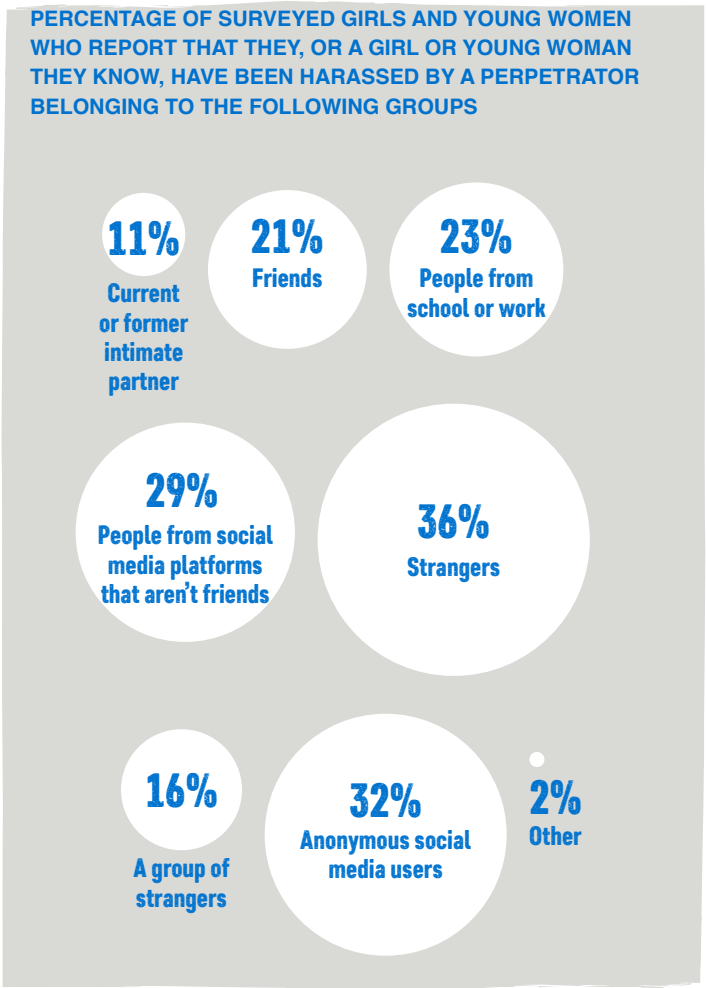
3. PORTRAITS OF THE PERPETRATORS

"They're strange, and mostly men."

Young woman, 18, Ecuador

Despite the anonymity that social media provides, girls and young women do know something about their harassers. Harassment from strangers was more frequent and more frightening than from people they knew. Whilst women were listed in the examples of known harassers, none of the girls interviewed suggested women were behind the unknown accounts, many directly mentioned they thought they were men.

PERCENTAGE OF SURVEYED GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN WHO REPORT THAT THEY, OR A GIRL OR YOUNG WOMAN THEY KNOW, HAVE BEEN HARASSED BY A PERPETRATOR BELONGING TO THE FOLLOWING GROUPS



Dealing with people you know from school or with someone living in your neighbourhood may not be quite as frightening as dealing with a stranger but it is certainly awkward and intrusive:

"It was very overwhelming because I was not in that mindset. 'I don't wanna be with you.' I think that's pretty obvious. But he had it. And so, it was very hard to escape because I couldn't block him because he went to my school. And then that would be a conversation point. And then everyone would know what had happened."

Girl, 17, Canada

"It led me to keep an eye on the social networks and I was afraid to find them on the street. It made me dependent on my cell phone, responding."

Young woman, 24, Peru

Often when the perpetrator is a stranger the abuse is worse:

"Most of the time it's random. And to be very clear with you, most of the time it's from strangers, because they have nothing to lose, you know. They're not going to ruin their relationship with you or anything."

Young woman, 20, Sudan

Girls feel particularly powerless when they realise that not only do they not know who is behind the harassment but it is impossible to find out and so harder to stop:

"Most of them have anonymous accounts. Not all of them…These are not their real accounts, and these are not their real pictures. So even if you do end up trying to sue one of them, it's not a real person…And this is something that was very creepy. I remember my friend wanted to hunt one of the people that sent her a nude picture of himself. And she couldn't do anything about it because he turned out to be unreal."

Young woman, 20, Sudan

Gender, age and political beliefs were some of the characteristics of perpetrators that participants in the key informant interviews were able to pick out:

- **76 per cent of respondents** thought their harasser was probably **male**
- **29 per cent** probably **female**
- **47 per cent** of respondents thought **they knew how old their harasser was**
- **18 per cent** thought that **s/he was in some way religious**
- **6 per cent** of respondents mentioned both **political beliefs and race**.

Girls frequently asserted that men and boys were behind the harassment they faced: it was the norm rather than the exception.

"My feminist friends are usually targeted by males because of the patriarchal society we are living in. These same people do not want other individuals with other genders to be empowered."

Girl, 17, Philippines

"I'm sorry because it's mostly men (laughs) …Yeah it's mostly young men. But also adults and they do the kind of comments that I told you about, trying to invalidate the young women."

Young woman, 22, Chile

Women, often older women, do go on the attack, usually because they disagree with the opinions expressed online or with what an activist describes doing:

"I do feel like everyone who's harassing us are boys and men; that being said there have been some comments from women that don't approve of the project, but when it comes to the sexualisation and the objectification, I definitely get a sense that it's men and boys."

Young woman, 23, USA

Many of the interviewees talked about teenage boys as harassers but others mentioned men who were older and more conservative so that in terms of age there was no clearly defined group. Another characteristic which was mentioned fairly frequently is demonstrated in the quotes below:

"Many of the Christian religion, evangelicals, who wish me death…"

Young woman, 24, Peru

"But the characteristic is that they're a religious person, and most of them are using fake accounts."

Young woman, 19, Indonesia

One 17-year-old from Canada also referred to race: **"I notice a lot more white people that do it and I don't know if it's old white men…I suspect it is white men."** Her comment comes in the context of political activity. She sees friends who are activists, women of colour, dealing with harassment which includes racism.

Overall, the picture of the harasser that emerges is male and conservative, from all age groups: someone particularly enraged when girls and young women speak out and do not conform to their limited ideas of femininity.

"Since we're talking about feminist content, it's common for them to be men first. Sometimes they are young people of my age, sometimes they are even adults... but above all they are young, who are the ones who are most attentive to social networks and want to be annoyed."

Girl, 16, El Salvador

4. THE EFFECT OF HARASSMENT ON GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

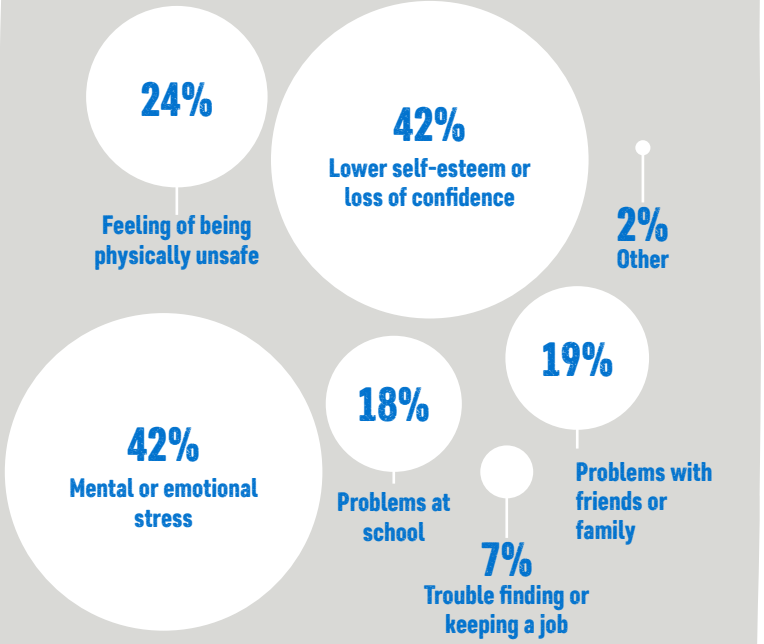
The effects of harassment are as varied and as complex as the types of harassment girls are subjected to. Anger and determination come across in the interviews as do fear, anxiety and self-censorship.

"It's given me a lot of anxiety. Then a lot of anger."

Young woman, 24, Peru

Girls and young women across 22 countries taking part in the research survey said that their experiences of online harassment had resulted in them having lower self-esteem or losing confidence and experiencing mental or emotional stress. Nearly a quarter reported feeling physically unsafe, with others having problems at school, problems with friends or family and in finding or keeping a job.

PERCENTAGE OF GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN EXPERIENCING NEGATIVE EFFECTS DUE TO ONLINE HARASSMENT



There are regional differences. Of the girls who reported online harassment in Latin America and Europe, 33 per cent and 27 per cent respectively, report being most physically unsafe while the percentage of girls who suffer with mental or emotional stress is highest in the Asia-Pacific region (49 per cent) and North America (47 per cent). Forty-two per cent of the research respondents who had experienced online harassment had experienced more than one of the effects discussed.

64 per cent of girls have been seriously affected by their online experiences

What became clear in the more detailed interviews was that girls developed resilience over time and as they got older – they learned to cope:

"Right now, I don't have any negative effects of that harassment…But in the past, it used to affect me badly because I kept on thinking about it. Now I have been able to deal with abusers, so now it's not a big deal."

Young woman, 18, Nepal

"Yeah, at the beginning it probably would affect me a little, but now I feel I'm so used to it, that we just laugh…probably when I was younger, I would stop commenting or things like that. But now, yeah,

Young woman, 22, Chile

For young women, online abuse is just part of life:

"In some ways it has become so normal to get a passing comment that upsets me that I don't often tell people about it because (laughs) it's become a normal part of running the Instagram account. I normally block it and then, move on, because if I were to message someone and tell them about every time it happened, I don't know. It, it would just be pretty frequent."

Young woman, 23, USA

Despite this growing resilience the claim that "it's not a big deal" is not substantiated by many of our interviewees. The findings reveal a number of troubling and unacceptable consequences:

- ➜ feeling afraid, uncomfortable or unsafe
- ➜ feeling upset, anxious or depressed
- ➜ feeling guilty or being made to feel in some way responsible for the abuse
- ➜ feeling embarrassed
- ➜ feeling vulnerable to further online actions
- ➜ feeling like their confidence or ability to express themselves has been affected.

Feeling afraid, feeling anxious

➜ The most commonly identified reaction related to **feeling afraid, uncomfortable or unsafe**:

"And then we saw all the hate and we actually… got a little scared…I remember times that I have been very afraid."

Young woman, 22, Chile

"Of course, just as uncomfortable as when it happens to you in real life. You know, it's not something that you want to see, when you get a, an ugly picture all of a sudden, or being asked to do something that you don't want to do. It's extremely uncomfortable."

Young woman, 20, Sudan

"And in the worst situations, I just felt really unsafe because it confuses me how this one specific guy could find so many details about my life and it made me concerned that he could find my address and come to my house."

Young woman, 23, USA

The risk emphasised by this young woman from the USA demonstrates the very real potential overlap between the online and offline worlds: the escalation of threatening online behaviour, bad enough in itself, to actual physical confrontation.

➜ The second most commonly found effect related to **feeling upset, anxious or depressed**: emotions indicating the sort of distress that could have a significant impact on both mental and physical health.

"I would message my friend about the comment and panic. And my friend would try and reassure me, but that would only do so much because I myself was not okay with this stuff. In the beginning, my friend could say anything to me and I'd just be, 'Yeah, like you know I, I'm still panicking or I'm still nervous'… And it'd make me very shaky. And because I didn't even know how to deal with it, it would end up spiralling."

Girl, 17, Canada

"I felt so sick. I felt like not even eating, I couldn't eat anything…The following morning… I had to go to the doctor, and when I get to the doctor, they run some tests and tell you, you're okay, but you have ... You know, something that I've never had before. So, it has caused sickness in me, a very negative impact."

Young woman, 20, Sudan

Another young woman in South Sudan described how one younger girl was so upset that: **"she was crying. She didn't go to school for three days."** She also talked about how others **"refused to go back on social media again, because it makes them cry. It makes them shed tears. It makes them lose hope."**

The emotional distress caused by harassment on social media is not only upsetting but has a very real impact on girls' opportunities in many aspects of their lives.

All my fault

➜ Girls also discussed feeling that the harassment was **somehow their fault** or at least that their families would blame them:

> **"Actually, when I was facing harassment from the stalker, I was told by my family that I shouldn't post so many photos of myself because he could look at them. And, or, you know, I shouldn't wear certain clothing. It was almost the exact same thing as so many people say when girls are getting harassed in the street, like, 'Cover up,' or 'Go out less.' So that really frustrated me."**
>
> **Young woman, 23, USA**

Embarrassed, wary and disempowered

➜ Harassment is also often **embarrassing**, causing girls to feel ashamed and exposed:

> **"I was harassed to the whole world. I mean, to my friends who are following me on Facebook. I really felt bad. I felt like even leaving social media… And sometimes it also makes me feel ashamed of something that I've not done… It brings in stigma and discrimination.**
>
> **Young woman, 23, South Sudan**

➜ The whole experience of using social media platforms makes girls wary, **nervous of what is going to happen next** and leaves them feeling unprotected:

> **"Totally unprotected. Because supposedly these networks have privacy policies, you can set up who they want you to see and I had it set up and this person was not on my friend list, I had no friends in common…Through the networks he found me and he could see what I was doing. I had to think about where this person would be and what pictures he would have of me and who could help me."**
>
> **Girl, 17, Ecuador**

> **"Perhaps sometimes I feel like maybe I'm being spied on, or maybe someone is hacking my account, or something else is gonna happen next, you know? …I have my head all muddled up, like I don't know what's next… And then you block the person, and then, yah, you just wait for something else to happen."**
>
> **Young woman, 23, Malawi**

➜ The research findings also indicate that online harassment has oppressive and disempowering effects that erode girls' confidence, **chipping away at their self-esteem** and their faith in their own abilities and judgement.

> **"The hardest part is when I go to upload a picture and have to ask half the world if I should. You always worry when you upload a photo that is out of the ordinary…To continue to live in fear, to have to think at least 10 times before posting or writing."**
>
> **Girl, 17, Ecuador**

> **"Some of my friends have that kind of experience, and they are really sad, because they are girls, they don't have the freedom to express their opinion and don't have a chance to speak up as they want."**
>
> **Young woman, 23, Myanmar**

Censored and silenced

One of the many worrying aspects of online harassment is its effect on girls' and young women's freedom online. Many feel that they should post less, be more careful in what they say and in their use of photos. Some of this is a conscious strategy, some of it less so:

"I guess honestly…it's hard to know if maybe subconsciously I've decided to post maybe fewer pictures out with my friends, or people close to me, because I know he could find their profiles… It's hard to know for sure to be honest, but I try to not let it get in the way of posting what I want to post and saying what I want to say…"

Young woman, 23, USA

It is clear from the survey results that the more frequently girls experience online harassment the more likely they are to decrease their use of that particular social media platform or to stop using it altogether.

Of the girls who have been harassed very frequently, 19 per cent said they use the social media platform less and 12 per cent just stopped using it.

This was backed up by the in-depth interviews:

"So, it is happening in my country and a lot of girls are suffering, a lot of girls have dropped Face… I mean, social media generally. And young girls are now staying on their own, you know."

Young woman, 23, South Sudan

"My friends who experienced harassment online became less active on social media platforms."

Girl, 17, Philippines

Clearly, girls cannot speak freely online:

- **18 per cent of girls who face very frequent harassment stop posting content that expresses their opinion**
- **16 per cent of girls who face very frequent harassment change the way they express themselves in order to avoid harassment.**

"I stopped talking about abortion. I don't talk much about LGBTIQ+ either…"

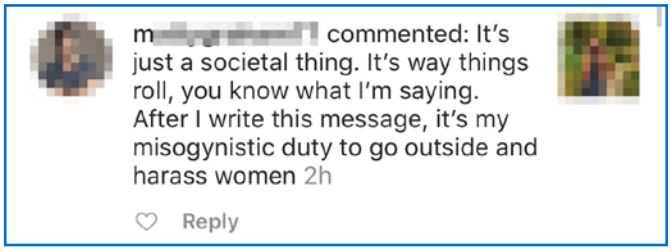
Young woman, 24, Peru

Younger girls tend to be more inhibited about what they post and many, across the age range, begin to avoid what they perceive might be contentious subjects:

"I feel insecure and unprotected from publishing topics related to gender violence and feminism, which has led me to be careful about the kind of things and content I publish… first I think about how people are going to react."

Young woman, 18, Ecuador

Fear for your physical safety, emotional stress, anxiety, reduced self-confidence and being afraid to be outspoken and express what you think and feel means that girls pay a high price for other people's, largely men's, "right" to free speech. They are left to mostly cope on their own with a level of unremitting harassment that would see many of us defeated.



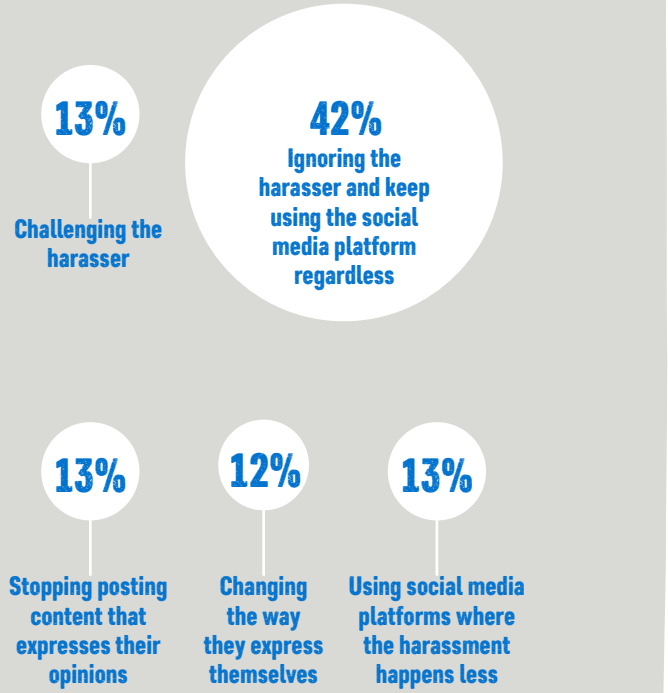
Dealing with it

"We used to take screenshots, so we have an archive of the hate we received. But now we just delete them; we laugh a little, because to be honest, most of them they don't even make sense. It's just random hate words."

Young woman, 22, Chile

Initially, as we have seen, girls really struggle but they are determined and gradually they develop strategies – both behavioural and technological – to deal with the harassment they know to expect. The majority choose to ignore the harasser and carry on regardless.

PERCENTAGE OF GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN WHO APPLY BEHAVIOURAL SOLUTIONS



Some of the interviewees were really upfront in tackling the harasser and with some success:

"So, I have to take a step forward and look for this guy and I went with this lady and I asked, 'What have you done? What have you done to this lady on social media?' ... I demanded him to apologise to this lady and also apologise on Facebook…I told him, 'If you don't do this, I will take you ahead, because this is a crime.' Although in my country it's not considered as a crime at all…but the guy agreed with me and said, 'Okay, fine. I'm so sorry for what happened. I will go ahead and apologise to this girl.'…He apologised in front of me and then went on social media and apologised…I asked him, 'If it was your sister or your mother, well, how would you feel about it?'"

Young woman, 23, South Sudan

On the whole though there was a sense from the findings that directly engaging with the harassers was not very effective or sustainable:

"Well at first of course, you get really angry and when I started experiencing it, I used to reply to everything. And I used to tell my friends to gang up with me… back to the person. But eventually you just learn to ignore it because it never stops them, it only gets worse."

Young woman, 20, Sudan

The finding that girls might confront the harasser when they start using social media but then stop doing so because they realise that it doesn't work, is supported by the quantitative analysis: 20 per cent of 15-year-olds said that they challenge the harasser, dropping to 12 per cent of 23-year-olds. It is also apparent that although initially embarrassment or shame may stop a girl confiding in family or friends about the harassment they are experiencing, they come to realise that speaking up and looking for support is important:

"Yeah, at that time, I was really scared and also embarrassed and kind of ashamed. I had that feeling, and that's why I keep it secret, confidential, telling no one at all. But now, it needs to be shared and, you know, you need to let your close friends, at least your family members know about that. Because if something serious happens then they are the only ones who will help you. But if no one knows about this, no one can help you."

Young woman, 21, Myanmar

Although 42 per cent of girls and young women said they tried to ignore the harassment and just carry on, it is difficult to do this consistently. In many cases, harassment forces girls to be careful both with their opinions and with their personal information. One adolescent girl also mentioned the pressure to conform, not to stand out because it makes you vulnerable:

"For my friends who experienced body-shaming, they became more determined to change who they are just to please others and conform to societal standards."

Girl, 17, Philippines

"I'm a very reserved person on social media and I'm very careful with the content that I post or share…Sometimes we need to be balanced on our view…I'm not very extreme with what I say. I don't want to harm anyone because of what I post…and also while expressing your opinions you need to deliver the message that you want them to know in a well-mannered way."

Young woman, 21, Myanmar

Not everyone adopts this strategy and the young woman quoted above also spoke admiringly of a friend who acted differently:

"She says, 'It's really depressing… I'm so fed up with this, I don't want to do this anymore, I don't even have freedom to share my opinions using my own account.'…But then, she just keeps doing it… she just does what she thinks is right. And now I think she doesn't even care anymore… she doesn't change everything, like, privacy settings or anything, she just posts anything in public."

Young woman, 21, Myanmar

It is not her friend who needs to change, she added. She should be allowed to keep her identity: **"I just want the community and people to be more understanding of our situation."** This idea that it is not girls who need to change but the world around them is picked up by another interviewee:

"So, I kept posting a lot of photos about… the right of girls, the rights of women on social media. Like it or not, this is what I'm going to do…and it is what I've been doing all this time, and I do not change anything and now they're getting used to it."

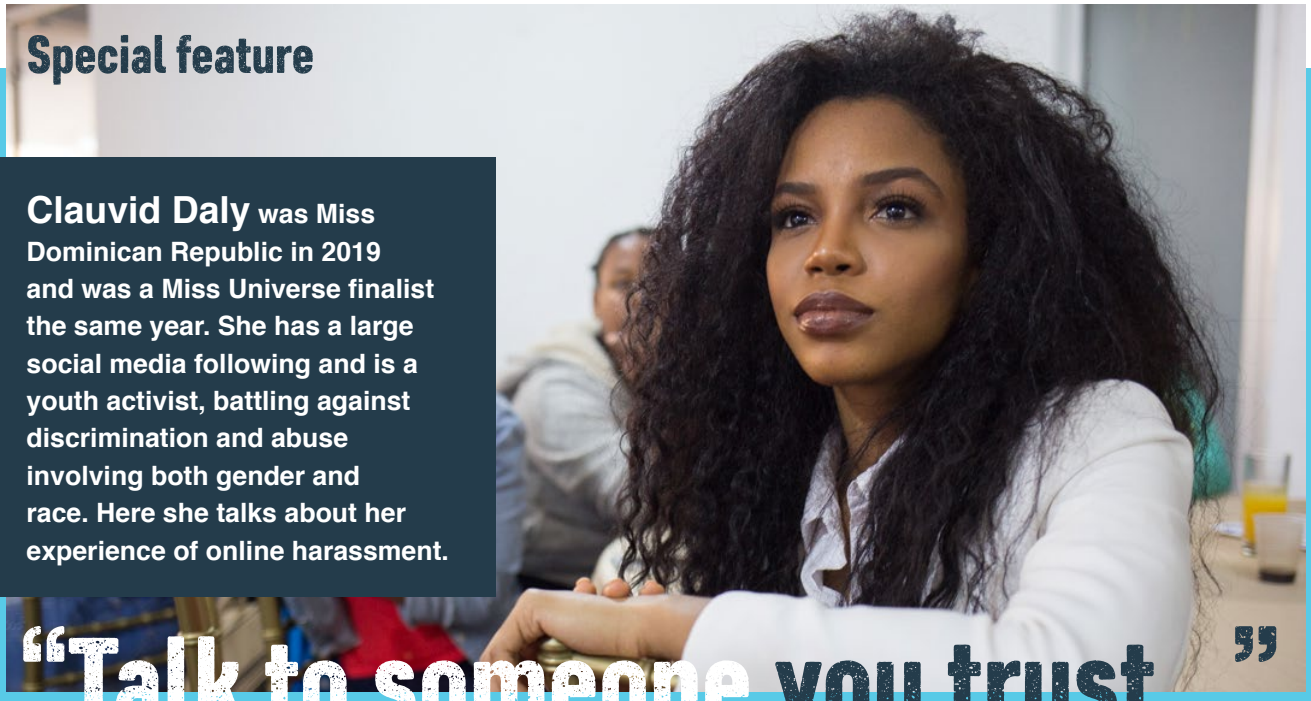
Young woman, 23, South Sudan

Many of the young female activists interviewed are fighting for a cause and it is this that motivates them and determines their behaviour:

"I decided I won't stop sharing the things I care about because of this…I won't change my behaviour because of this thing… I truly believe in this. It's something that I'm very passionate about. Like rights and human rights in general. And as I tell you, I don't think I have to change my behaviour or what I think, what I believe in because of the hate... I won't change what I do because of these people."

Young woman, 22, Chile

Special feature



Clauvid Daly was Miss Dominican Republic in 2019 and was a Miss Universe finalist the same year. She has a large social media following and is a youth activist, battling against discrimination and abuse involving both gender and race. Here she talks about her experience of online harassment.

"Talk to someone you trust..."

As a public figure, it is common to be exposed to all types of harassment and problems occur when a line is crossed and you get death threats and indecent proposals. You don't have to be in the public eye to get harassed though. It happens to everyone on the networks. For me the harassment and violence intensified as I represented my country in international competitions. Negative, racist comments and death threats affected my emotional health and when it all got too much, I sought support from my parents and I started therapy.

People need to understand the impact they can have and the pain they can cause: to recognise that the networks are a weapon and it is up to us how we use them – to create or to destroy. One comment could change the life of a young woman who is just learning about her body, about the world and its intentions.

All social networking sites could do more: they must sanction accounts when users engage in inappropriate behaviour. Sanctions could include blocking your account for a limited time and permanently removing your login. It depends on the seriousness of the offence, and in extreme cases, punishment should carry the weight of the law. Social media companies also need to get involved in providing information and raising awareness among young women on how to be careful on networks and they need to make people understand how harmful their comments can be – behind every phone there is a real person who can be affected. Also make people aware that everything that is published stays in the internet forever, even when your account is private.

I've heard of cases in which the victim is driven to suicide. Although people online were responsible, they were not charged or held accountable. Sometimes they are, such as the recent case of a man who harassed minors online, who was arrested because the parents of the victims and the girls raised their voices. Unfortunately, many cases had to be filed and a lot of evidence had to be gathered before it was given due consideration. It's simply not good enough.

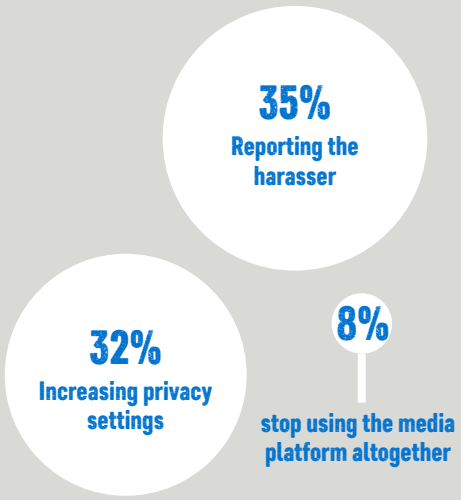
Communication and mutual support are key. If you see someone acting inappropriately, report it.

Finally, and most importantly, we must teach users, in this case girls and young women, not to take things personally. Learn that people in networks will always talk about all kinds of things and know which sites to stay on. Follow people who add to your growth, who you learn from and avoid those that can be harmful. Your emotional and mental health is more important than being aware of what other people are saying about you. Avoid talking to unknown users because you do not know their intentions. The fact that it's virtual gives you an advantage: **if you are being harassed just delete the application, take your time and talk to someone you trust.**

Blocking, reporting and increasing your privacy settings

Rather than modifying their own behaviour, many girls and young women try to tackle the harassment they experience with technology, though with varying degrees of success.

PERCENTAGE OF GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN APPLYING TECHNOLOGICAL SOLUTIONS



Unfortunately, although reporting and blocking were used most in attempting to combat harassment both proved ineffective. You can block an account but harassers continue to make new accounts across different social media platforms:

> **"I would block but he would create more profiles and keep sending me pictures of me."**
>
> **Girl, 17, Ecuador**

> **"The reporting system is not effective because you report the account, it stops for a few days and then you see the person come back again."**
>
> **Young woman, 20, Sudan**

A significant number of people need to report an account before action will be taken, which makes the procedure almost entirely useless for safeguarding most adolescent girls, who may not be supported by huge numbers of people or may be targeted by one-on-one harassment. As one young woman from Chile observed double standards apply: if you report something – for example sexual harassment – nothing happens, yet if content is posted by the girl featuring a nipple **"they will ban you for life."**

Many girls and young women report that keeping themselves safe online involves a lot of hard work:

> **"Doing a clean sweep. Learning how to get rid of people. It's been a lot of emotional work because they're tied to your close connections. It's hard to break ties."**
>
> **Young woman, 24, Peru**

> **"Oh yeah…I sometimes feel unsafe, and that is why I control my Instagram account, I quarterly check through my Instagram that maybe there are many types following me. I always block them. And also checking on my accounts, how many people share my photos, yeah."**
>
> **Young woman, 19, Indonesia**

> **"Well, watch your privacy. Not to publish my full name, my address, the place where I study, work. Also take care of the people who are my friends. Not to make public my personal pictures. Not to accept anyone. Evaluate the profile of the requests that come to me, that is a security protocol."**
>
> **Girl, 16, El Salvador**

Girls have to learn for themselves how to stay safe and often it is an incident of harassment that makes them think about security online:

"From that year I started to find out how to advance my security settings in order to prevent that kind of thing from happening in the future. So yeah, starting a year after using Facebook, I started to do that kind of thing, not from the very beginning."

Young woman, 21, Myanmar

"I mean, it really made me conscious about what I post on social media and what I say… I remember making sure all of my accounts were private."

Young woman, 20, Sudan

In all the accounts of how girls and young women are dealing with harassment, whether it is through how they behave or how they manage the technology, one thing is clear, they are managing largely on their own:

"I don't have anyone who defends me… It's a lone game, yeah, solo games."

Young woman, 23, Malawi

Sources of strength

"I just can't imagine if that happened to girls that do not have a strong support system like me. Because like even my mom, my friends and my organisation of friends, they just talk to me, and keep you know, saying that I am more than that, I have the power, that I can face this because I have them…Especially my mom because she's very supportive."

Young woman, 21, Myanmar

The girls and young women taking part in the research display remarkable resilience. They keep going, motivated often by their passion for a cause but also by the sheer determination not to be driven away. Social media platforms are an integral part of everyday life and they have a right to be there and to be themselves:

"I don't want to change the way I am. This is me. If people do not like that… I think the most important thing for everyone is to get knowledge about gender equality, that is why I will never ever stop doing my activism online or in public."

Young woman, 19, Indonesia

It emerged from discussions that very few girls and young women consciously adopted self-care strategies to help them deal with the unremitting harassment many are experiencing – apart from some awareness that taking a break from social media can prevent you from feeling overwhelmed. Many relied for support on family and friends and other social media users.

"Or like really supportive friends that even if they don't understand what I'm doing per se, they really care that I'm doing it. And so, that stuff is kind of what keeps me going."

Girl, 17, Canada

"Some two or three people from the feminist movement to whom I always resort. I write and tell them."

Young woman, 24, Peru

For many the energy to continue comes from the work they are doing online and from the support they get from followers:

"I think obviously sometimes it's tiring and you don't want to check, why hate, you know? But at the same time…we receive a lot of love from the people who this is helping. So, when you receive that kind of message, you know that everything was worth it."

Young woman, 22, Chile

"I do think that the positivity always outweighs the negativity… And everyone who sends in a message about what has happened to them is so thankful and so appreciative that they have a space to talk about it… I feel like each person who messages in has felt this has made a difference in their life, that they're able to speak up about it. So that really gives me the energy to keep going…always feels really like I'm taking some power back, so that feels great.

Young woman, 23, USA

It is a sense of community that, in different forms, carries girls through. Some mentioned being able to get support from particular organisations but, really, they are just determined to keep posting – sometimes at considerable cost to their own emotional and mental wellbeing.

Online harassment has a profound influence on girls and young women. The majority experience a multitude of negative effects on their lives, ranging from loss of self-esteem, to mental or emotional stress or issues with their families and friends. Online harassment also forces girls to adapt the way in which they use social media and involves them in constant and exhausting vigilance.

Their ability to navigate online with its many highways and spaces is limited in much the same way as it is in the streets, buses and parks of our cities. Sexism, unremitting and negative attention, characterises both: girls and young women are rarely free to just be.

5. BECAUSE YOU'RE A GIRL: HARASSMENT FROM STREETS TO SOCIAL MEDIA

"I think they are similar behaviours, and they have similar motivations too, because I think both street harassment and online harassment are about power and exerting power over someone by making an inappropriate comment…I think it's all part of this experience of being a young woman."

Young woman, 23, USA

One of the questions asked in the research invited girls and young women to compare online and street harassment. Fifty per cent of survey respondents reported that online harassment was more common than street harassment, compared to 19 per cent who felt the opposite. Interviewees drew parallels between the two experiences and felt that the boundaries between them were often breached:

"I would think that's the same. No matter online or public, that's the same because that's still sexual harassment."

Young woman, 19, Indonesia

"I think in both situations predominately girls and young women are just trying to live their lives, maybe go to the grocery store, go to school, post something on Instagram…it's kind of this thing that comes out of the blue and it has frustratingly a lot of power over how we live our lives, because it's a reminder that this could happen at any time while we're on social media or while we're in the street."

Young woman, 23, USA

And, as one young woman from Chile said, both street and online harassment are **"terrible, you can feel a lot of fear"**.

Some young women felt that anything that happens on social media is there for ever and this makes online harassment worse:

"Something in social media lasts longer so it's something that will haunt you, almost all your life. Even if you're trying to change, people will keep something for you…and later on, if they want to post that thing again, they'll do that."

Young woman, 24 Tanzania

"But for cyber bullying, mostly it's getting worse and it's hard to control, it's hard to handle. Once it spreads, it's everywhere, and everyone can see it, and you know, maybe they can make fun of it, they will troll you…I think psychologically, emotionally, it's really depressing and it has more effect than in real life."

Young woman, 21, Myanmar

Not everyone agreed:

"But when like someone tries to touch me, it makes me even feel worse, because that's something physical, you know?"

Young woman, 23, Malawi

The answer to the question where do you feel safe could be simply answered by one word "nowhere".

"I don't feel safe in either space. Online bullying has much more information, on the street you pass, the builders whistle, they yell, but you pass. Online, the stalker still sees you, still has information about you, your family, your likes. The online stalker has much more information."

Girl, 17, Ecuador

"But people, online for me, at least to some extent if I don't want to look at the comment, or if I don't want to look at their message, I can mute them for at least a little bit. Obviously, the mental toll at the end of the day depending on how heavy it is, it's still there. But for me, I guess based on what I've been through, I can see the difference because I can't get out of physical harassment, but I can online."

Girl, 17, Canada

One of the distinctive features of online harassment is the impunity with which perpetrators feel they can act. The harassment may be visible for all to see but they can remain anonymous: they lose any inhibitions they might have had. There is little redress, they are unlikely to be caught, let alone penalised.

"Networks facilitate anonymity. If someone harasses or assaults you through networks, many times you don't even know who to report."

Young woman, 23, Spain

There is limited support from the police or the legal system and not much in the way of any effective process from the social media organisations or the authorities more generally. As we have seen, girls and young women are left to look after themselves online – whereas sexual harassment on the streets would be a visible criminal act and more likely to be prosecuted.

"I'm sure that the harassers in real life are at least a bit more afraid or cautious about what they do to you. But they feel they have no limit to what they say or what they do on social media, 'cause they know that they are behind the screen and there's nothing you can do to them."

Young woman, 20, Sudan

"In the street there are measures you can take, look for someone, run, scream, there are posters that say harassment is violence, people understand that it is a crime, in social networks it is not, it is invisible, for them it is not violence but a comment."

Young woman, 24, Peru

6. BRINGING ABOUT CHANGE

It is very clear that at the moment very little is being done to protect girls and young women online. The treatment they receive is unacceptable, frightening and must be stopped. Someone must take responsibility and overwhelmingly girls identified social media companies and governments.

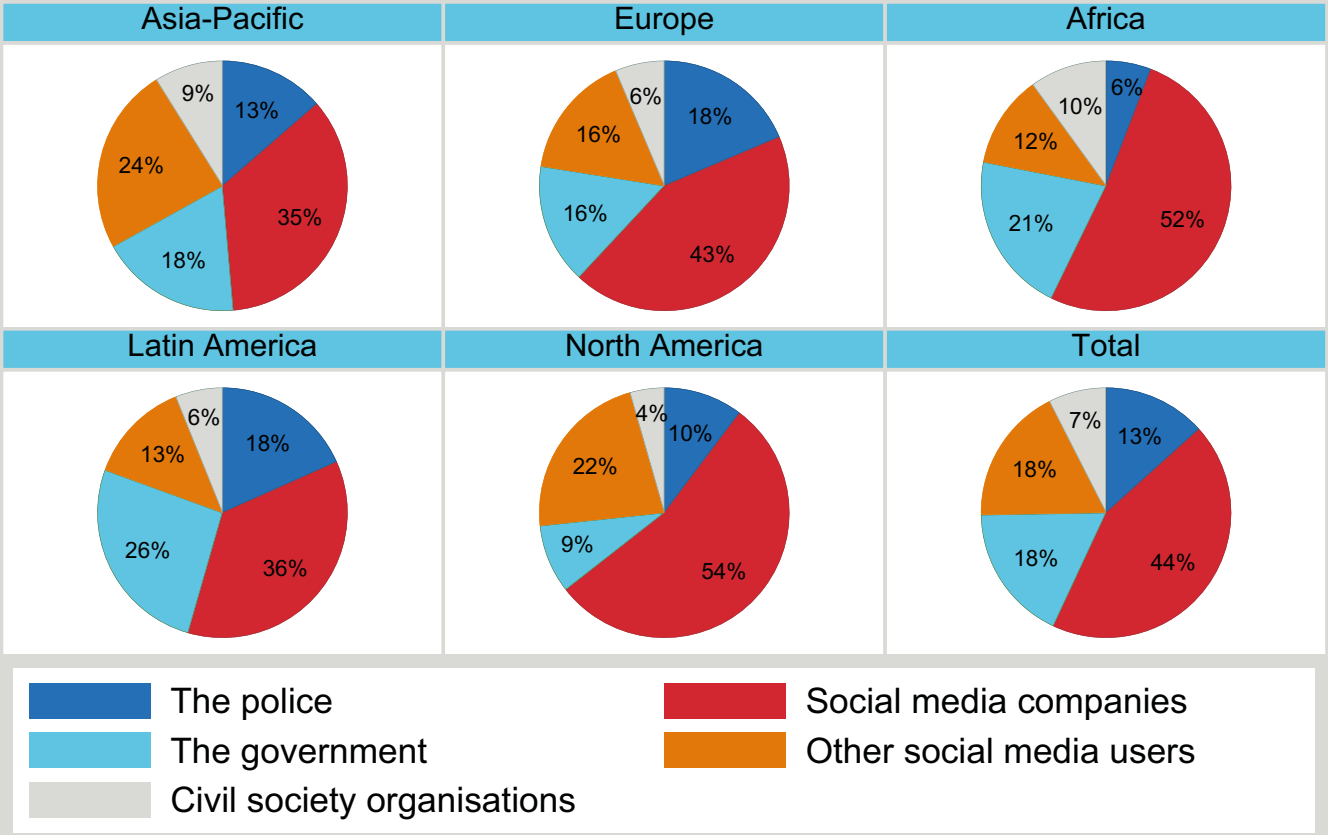
In the 22-country survey, girls were asked who – choosing from the police, social media companies, the government, other social media users or civil society organisations – should do more to fight against online harassment. Social media companies topped the list followed by governments.

The discussions about what could and should be done fell largely under the following headings:

- ➜ **education and awareness raising**
- ➜ **empowering girls and young women**
- ➜ **tackling how girls and women are depicted**
- ➜ **changing the gender norms that pervade society**
- ➜ **establishing and enforcing laws**
- ➜ **harnessing technology.**

ACTORS WHO SHOULD HELP FIGHT ONLINE HARASSMENT AGAINST GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

According to girls and young women



Graphs by region

Raising awareness of the issue

➜ Educating harassers and trying to create a safer and freer environment online was very much a priority:

"More awareness for everyone, the girls themselves and the people that usually harass the girls. Boys should be educated on what they should do online and you should make girls more aware of how they should respond and what they should do"

Young woman, 20, Sudan

"I think we have to share more about what is sexual harassment, what is online harassment, what are the effects of it."

Girl, 17, Indonesia

"Educate people about the risks that exist on the Internet and teach them about the mechanisms for making a complaint of harassment."

Young woman, 18, Ecuador

One 16-year-old commented that parents, media and teachers also need to educate themselves: "they don't have this information" and young people need their help. This was echoed by another young woman who felt that parents needed to take more responsibility for shielding young people from sexual abuse online and for teaching their children how to protect themselves:

"When I joined Facebook, my family, my parents also didn't know about Facebook at that time and they don't know about the privacy settings as I do, because my parents' friends are not more educated. So, I guess there is a big role for parents to save us from social media."

Young woman, 18, Nepal

Public campaigning, education in schools, by the media and by NGOs was also seen as the way forward:

"Doing campaigns and also educating the public and you know raising awareness on our rights and responsibility while using social media in a safe way…So I think especially young people, peer to peer education or maybe from some of the strong or big organisations doing such campaigns and spreading educational content, on social media, news and other platforms… girls don't really know enough when they first start using social media, that's why we need to educate them first."

Young woman, 21, Myanmar

➜ **Empowerment:** Girls also looked to themselves to learn how to be less affected by the harassment. Often, as we have seen, they try to change their own behaviour and attitudes rather than target the perpetrators:

"I think it's important to make young girls very strong: to strengthen their self-esteem so that any comment or message doesn't hurt them, affect them directly, and not be so sensitive."

Girl, 16, El Salvador

➜ **The world around them:** Interviewees also called out the role of the media in perpetuating harmful stereotypes:

"The worst thing is that so many media keep showing that we are an object, we do not have the ability to be a leader, or we are weak. And that is why so many people just see us as, as an object as well. And I think the media have a really big role with that… the media should change the way they see girls. The way they see women."

Young woman, 19, Indonesia

The society we live in

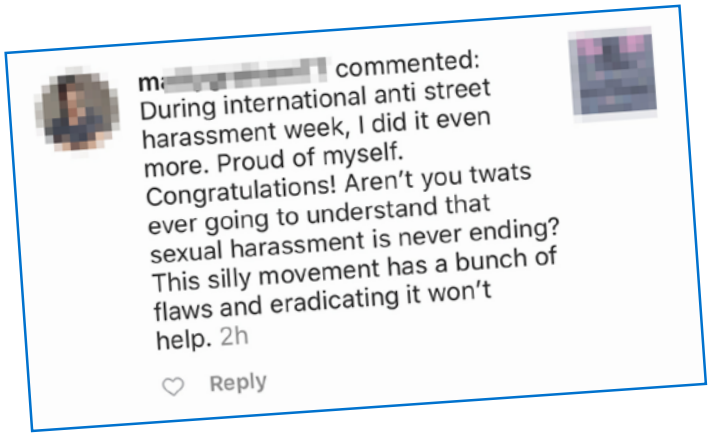
➜ **Society's sexist attitudes to women and girls** were picked up as an issue that contributed to online harassment:

"It takes a lot of courage to go and post something, especially being from an African country …I feel that in African countries, women are just portrayed as people who always have to be behind…And because of that in society every time you do something better than a man, they just feel that they can insult you, because they don't want you to be in the position, at a certain position better than them."

Young woman, 23, Malawi

"As a society we could create a common good, protect girls on social networks because I haven't been the only one. There are worse things like sharing girls' pictures. We have to create campaigns to stop these photos from being shared… In my school, on the computers, they put pictures of a girl…She didn't go out at recess, she stayed in the bathroom and then we didn't hear from her. This is not going to happen to a man."

Girl, 17, Ecuador



Law and government

➜ **Government:** Several interviewees looked to the law and the state to provide some protection and to acknowledge the severity of the harassment they are experiencing:

"'I think there is a law that needs to be put in place in my country that will punish them, give them rules… Because many girls and women are suffering."

Young woman, 23, South Sudan

"Encourage the governments to develop policies that protect people online more, because even if they do exist, they're not implemented. I don't know if it's possible to work with countries to make girls safer. Not just girls, to be honest, but everybody."

Young woman, 20, Sudan

Harnessing technology

➜ Finally, **technological solutions** were discussed in nearly half the responses. And here the ball is firmly in the court of the social media companies. Interviewees frequently underlined the importance of effective reporting mechanisms and information about how to use them, looking to outside organisations and the platforms themselves, for justice:

"Teach them how to report or seek help, and introduce to them people or institutions that can help them."

Girl, 17, Philippines

"… make girls more aware of what, how they should respond and what they should do and everything."

Young woman, 20, Sudan

One young woman mentioned that she thought Facebook had a reporting option but that not many people knew how it worked.

Leaving girls and young women to just muddle through is not good enough and social media platforms could be much more proactive in their approach to stopping online harassment by using their skills to monitor content more stringently, holding perpetrators of gender-based online harassment to account and collecting and publishing gender and age disaggregated data, including capturing information about the impact of harassment on girls with intersecting identities. Also, and crucially, by providing digital citizenship education and secure and visible reporting mechanisms:

"Closed Facebook group or website or WhatsApp group, some platform where activists can report their harassment and receive support…Training on these issues, having a control manual, how to report, etc. To feel more secure that in front of the harassment in networks there are people who support the denunciation."

Young woman, 24, Peru

Underlying their comments is the feeling that the social media companies are not really interested in preventing harassment:

"I think the problem of monitoring comments is, 'Oh, we're very cautious, we monitor X, Y, and Z,' but they never really do… If someone reports someone, there should be people actually going through those reports properly rather than a bot…Because a bot can't identify personal attacks."

Girl, 17, Canada

Overall, reducing online gender-based harassment needs a lot more attention from the platform owners. One young woman pointed out that girls and young women complaining about the treatment meted out to them are often the targets of increased harassment and this is something the social media companies could focus on – if they wanted to.

"I do think there should be a special focus on accounts raising awareness about something maybe taboo or difficult, like sexual harassment… in my broader network I see that people who raise awareness about sexual harassment are more vulnerable to harassment online. I think there should be measures taken to focus in on these accounts doing important work in telling people's stories of sexual harassment."

Young woman, 23, USA

The suggestions from interviewees, targeting social media companies, the law, the state and civil society are practical and stem from bitter experience. Girls and young women are happy to take on personal responsibility and often stress the role of individual social media users, of women in general and activists in particular but it is the big players who really need to support girls' and young women's safety online. Without the relevant technology in place to prevent and report harassment, without laws that hold perpetrators to account and without proper information and awareness no amount of individual action, or female empowerment, will be enough. It is for society to change and for that change to be stringently enforced.

PROGRAMME AND PRACTICE

1. "Know That There is Help" Cyber Safety Projects in the Philippines

Plan International's Cyber Safe Spaces project in the Philippines is concentrating on the most pernicious aspects of online harassment and abuse and has developed a multi-dimensional approach to combating the online sexual abuse and exploitation of children. The project works to empower and educate young people to help them to keep themselves safe and it also educates parents, social service providers, teachers and local officials and provides support to young people who have been the victims of online sexual abuse and exploitation.

The Cyber Safe Spaces project employs a peer to peer methodology, training young people as champions to help pass on digital knowledge and awareness of what constitutes abuse and exploitation. These champions learn about sexuality and reproductive health, as well as being involved in social media campaigns.

Jenny is 12 and an active member of the youth support group in Manila. She encourages other young people to look out for abuse, to report it and to realise it is never the fault of the victim. They must, she says: **"have open minds, choose not to share malice on social media and know that there is help".**

The project runs cyber awareness sessions for young people, has re-activated helplines and works with national and local authorities to formulate policies and implement laws to keep children safe. Multi-disciplinary teams composed of social workers, medical practitioners, and police officers have been reorganised and strengthened to enable effective coordination between everyone involved in tackling child sexual exploitation. Online reporting mechanisms have been established and protocols formulated or updated to guide the different participants – the teams, peer support groups and the community – in the safe reporting and referral of victims.

To implement this project Plan International Philippines works with many different partners including schools, local authorities, technology companies, internet cafes and other campaign groups and has reached large numbers of young people at risk as well as their parents and carers.

Digital is fundamental to Plan International's work in the Philippines. A partnership with Facebook, the Digital Tayo Platform, provides accessible learning modules and resources to build skills for a digital world, helping to shape the Philippines' digital community. Last year, in partnership with Facebook, Microsoft and the government agency in charge of information, communication and technology they held a Cyber Telenor Youth Summit, with 500 youth discussing online safety. Last April, the Philippines government passed a new law penalising sexual harassment in online and offline spaces, and the team are now working closely with the government for its implementation. The next step is partnering with the Philippines Commission of Women for a national campaign, including online safety for girls.

The experience of implementing the Cyber Safe Spaces project and other digital programmes has shown that cyber safety is not only about technology. It is equally about changing the behaviour of children, adults and the entire community when using the internet. Technological solutions have their place but there is also a continued need for organisations to support behaviour-change efforts and address the risks that vulnerable children face in this connected world. Changing behaviour takes time and funders and donors need to initiate funding cycles that are more realistic, over a longer time-frame.

2. Plan International Partnership in the Pacific: a digital literacy project to increase online safety

Plan International Australia and ChildFund Australia, in partnership with the Young and Resilient Research Centre at Western Sydney University, are currently working on research to map the challenges and opportunities children's technology use presents in Solomon Islands, Kiribati and Papua New Guinea.

The findings of this research are being used to inform the design of a two-year online safety project in the Solomon Islands, commencing in July 2020, which will equip young people, their parents and their community, with the knowledge and skills to promote youth-led and gender-responsive approaches to online safety that respects and promotes the rights of children and young people. The project is jointly funded by Plan International Australia, ChildFund Australia and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Cyber Cooperation Programme.

"I personally think these issues are riskier for girls, because young girls are mostly targets for men and boys."

Girl, 12, Solomon Islands

Online risks amplify as children's access to the internet increases, particularly in lower income countries that have limited resources and capacities to tackle complex issues, such as online sexual abuse and cyberbullying. Online safety is a particular concern in the Pacific which has seen a rapid expansion of mobile phone technology over the last decade. This expansion is set to speed up further under Australian government infrastructure projects, such as the Coral Sea Cable System linking Australia, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. With cable internet systems rolling out across the Pacific, access to affordable and fast digital connectivity in the region will open up unprecedented opportunities for children in countries like Solomon Islands, Kiribati, and Papua New Guinea, but also potentially expose them to new risks of harm.

"We can prevent risks, but if it goes beyond our capabilities as children, we can't then prevent it."

Girl, 16, Kiribati

It is clear from the research that the fear of online harm for girls is much higher than for boys and the parents' common response to this is to block girls' access because they themselves do not have the knowledge and skills to apply online safety measures. Learning these skills is crucial for all members of the community. And the project will work with both adults and children to make sure that online access, and the opportunities it offers, is safe and equally available to young people in all their diversity.

"My parents do not allow me to use a mobile phone because it is too dangerous."

Girl, 14, Solomon Islands

Key objectives for the project include:

- enabling young people, via the delivery of youth led online safety literacy training, to reap the benefits of digital literacy whilst minimising the risks;
- equipping caregivers with the knowledge and skills to support online safety through the delivery of an intergenerational training curriculum;
- engaging key community entities in developing policy and procedural standards to establish safe online environments for young people;
- facilitating young people's collaboration with police, government, and the Australian Federal Police's Cyber-Safety Pasfika awareness programme to enhance cross-sectorial collaboration for safe environments online.

3. Women of Uganda Network:[31] Promoting the use of technology and protecting human rights

Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) is a Non-Governmental Organisation whose mission is to promote and support the use of ICTs by women and women's organisations in Uganda. While our primary aim is to promote the use of technology – access and usage of the internet by women and girls – we also work to ensure that the law protects their digital human rights. Several studies indicate that one of the barriers to women's and girls' access and use of the internet has been online violence and therefore it is an organisational priority to combat this abuse.

In 2018, WOUGNET carried out research on Technology Related Violence Against Women which informed our campaign – carried out in high schools, universities and other organisations in Uganda – to create public awareness of online violence against women and girls. As a result of this study, we realised that Non-Consensual Intimate Imagery (NCII), a form of gender-based violence commonly known as "revenge porn", is on the increase. WOUGNET is currently running a campaign, with the hashtag #AskforConsent, to create awareness of NCII and advocate for change in the Anti-pornography Act 2014 to change the policy environment of the NCII in Uganda.

Additionally, WOUGNET is also running a "Women Rights Online Media Campaign in Uganda" funded by Take Back Tech. The organisation has made a submission on domestic violence in the context of COVID-19 to the UN special rapporteur on Violence Against Women, with an emphasis on Online VAWG; has taken part in the Web Foundation 2016 research on women's rights online; is analysing ICT or internet policies to make sure there is an integrated gender perspective; and is writing extensively about online violence. When undertaking research, we adopt a Gender Evaluation Methodology approach to ensure that a gender perspective is integrated.

WOUGNET has embraced different social media platforms to share information and advocate for women's rights online and managed to open up information centres in Eastern and Northern Uganda for women and young people to be able to access relevant information. We conduct ICT and digital security training with communities where we operate to ensure that young people, who use ICT the most, and are more vulnerable to online threats and harassment, learn how to protect themselves.

Plan International also acknowledges the crucial work of the many women's and girls' rights organisations working to end online gender based violence, including:

Association for Progressive Communication (APC) – www.apc.org; Internet Society – www.internetsociety.org ; Glitch – https://fixtheglitch.org/; Luchadoras – https://luchadoras.mx/; Pen America – https://pen.org/; Internews – https://internews.org/; European Women's Lobby – https://womenlobby.org/; Minas Programme – https://minasprogramam.com/ ;African Feminism – https://africanfeminism.com/; Digital Society of Africa – www.digitalsociety.africa ; Feminist Internet – https://feministinternet.org/

CONCLUSION

The research demonstrates that harassment online occurs just "because I am a girl". Young girls are targeted more, because they are perceived as more vulnerable and they are often less confident and less knowledgeable. If you are Black, from an ethnic or religious minority, have a disability, identify as LGBTIQ+ or are outspoken, particularly about anything to do with feminism or equal rights, you will be harassed even more. Online harassment is a continuation in a different space of what happens to girls and young women in many places. Society's inability to value people equally is the root cause of harassment and gender-based violence wherever it occurs. Girls and young women are very aware of the links between online harassment and what happens to them on the streets, at home, at school and at work.

'It's better if there is no sexual violence in public or online, because I think women have the right to feel free and to be free from any violence online or public."

Young woman, 19, Indonesia

They are amazingly resilient, passionate about the causes they fight for and determined not to have their freedom online limited by abuse: by being stalked, put down and threatened for who they are, what they wear and what they say. But sometimes, for some girls and young women, it is all too much.

In our survey, of the girls who have been harassed online one in five (19 percent) have either left or significantly reduced use of a social media platform after being harassed.

Online harassment is less immediately visible than street harassment so parents and those in authority often neither see nor understand what is happening. It is an issue that is not taken seriously enough and one that girls and young women have been left to deal with alone. Abuse on social media is an attack on girls' rights, it has a detrimental impact on their mental health and unless it is tackled gender equality will remain a distant dream. Social media is not a separate virtual world where harassment is just words and easily dismissed. It has become for too many girls and young women a place of abuse and frightening vulnerability.

Girls and young women are demanding action from social media companies, governments, civil society organisations and other social media users. They need to be listened to. They are not a homogenous group and across the different countries, societies and online spaces many diverse strategies are needed to enable them to be online safely and freely.

In the 21st century social media is an integral part of everyday life and increased online access and digital spaces provide unprecedented opportunities for engagement, interaction and information. These spaces need to be safe and accessible for everybody but it is evident from this research that they are not. Online harassers, unrestrained by governments or the technology companies, are driving away the most vulnerable, limiting girls' rights and, in many cases, terrifying them.

Perpetrators of online harassment, and the platforms that host them, should not be beyond the law and yet another barrier to girls' rights and gender equality.

As this report was being written, the fight against anti-Black racism has rightfully gained profile and attention in the US and around the globe. The movement for Black lives is calling on all of us to recognise and take action against the systemic and often violent anti-Black racism that characterises the institutions and behaviour of many, if not all, societies.

Throughout the report research we have been made more aware of the many intersecting characteristics and identities that, online and offline, make young women subject to harassment and violence. In the report girls and young women talk about the different and combined reasons they are harassed; as well as being young and female, young Black women are objectified and vilified for their race.

One young woman commented that: “People don’t want to talk about race,” and another explained how she is stereotyped: “Afro-Peruvian women are seen as hyper-sexual, I don’t upload many personal photos anymore.”

Racism manifests itself in different ways in different places but it is always there and must be acknowledged and fought against. We stand in solidarity with Black Lives Matter, Black girl and women protestors in all their diversity, and allies who are organising and taking action against racial violence and injustice. Racial justice is a critical and crucial component of justice for girls: **we cannot achieve equality for girls, without achieving equality for Black girls.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

Everyone has a part to play in recognising and tackling online harassment and violence against all girls and young women, however it manifests itself. The recommendations that follow are based on what girls and young women have told us and involve us all.

SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES

Social media companies must:

- **Create stronger, more effective and accessible reporting mechanisms** specific to online gender-based violence, that hold perpetrators to account and are responsive to all girls' needs and experiences, taking into account intersecting identities (including race and LGBTIQ+ youth).
- **Implement** their corporate responsibility to respect human rights in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.
- **Work with** girls and young women globally in all their diversity to co-create policy and technical solutions to address and prevent gender-based harassment and violence on social media platforms.
- **Strengthen and improve** content moderation to identify and remove gender-based violence in a timely fashion, also ensuring that there is parity, proportionality and transparency in their approach to content moderation across the globe.
- **Hold perpetrators** of gender-based online harassment to account, including by timely sanctioning of perpetrators, consistent with other platform violations.
- **Take responsibility** for creating a safe online environment for girls and young women in all of their diversity by initiating discussions on the topic of gender-based online harassment amongst social media users; providing reliable information on the topic to increase awareness, and providing digital citizenship education for all users.
- **Collect and publish** gender and age disaggregated data, in partnership with private entities and civil society, that provide insight into the scale, reach, measurement and nature of online harassment and violence against women and girls and the digital gender divide.

"I feel like there has to be more investment… 'Cause the company doesn't invest money into things, and I feel like they should invest more money into having people actively watch comments."

Girl, 17, Canada

INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LEGISLATORS AND OTHER INTER-GOVERNMENTAL INITIATIVES

The international community must:

- **Call on** the Committee on the Rights of the Child to ensure that the draft General Comment No. 25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment pays further attention to online harassment and ensures a gender, age and diversity approach.
- **Work with** the United Nations and other international entities to collect and harmonise laws and standards for online violence against any user, including women and children, in order to prevent impunity due to international borders and jurisdictional issues and promote mutual legal assistance.

NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS

Must adopt laws and policies that:

- **Ensure** government policies on internet access are inclusive and actively ensure gender equality in accessing online spaces. This would include creating enabling environments for mobile network operators to enable increased connectivity and mobile internet access.
- **Update** and reform legislative frameworks to deal with online harassment and violence against all girls and young women, bearing in mind specific intersectional characteristics: including, amongst others, race, age, disability, ethnicity, LGBTIQ+.
- **Enact** innovative laws addressing violence against women and girls, holding social media platforms and other third-party internet platforms to account.
- **Enable** the effective implementation, by all relevant government departments – such as the police, the judiciary, and the prosecution services – of laws and policies addressing online harassment of and online violence against all women and girls.
- **Ensure** access to justice for girls and young women who are targeted with online harassment and violence: including promoting awareness of reporting mechanisms, training law enforcement and judicial officers and establishing helplines.
- **Consult** girls and young women in order to understand what their specific requirements are and how to enact the appropriate laws and policies.

Ensure appropriate education and awareness raising that:

- **Requires** education departments to develop and deliver digital curricula on how to be safe online; giving students the skills to recognise, avoid and prevent online harassment and violence against women and girls, including the ability to use reporting mechanisms.
- **Trains** government officials on the risks of online violence for girls and how to manage reports of online harassment, including the investigation and prosecution of related crimes.

Establish a public health campaign that:

- **Reaches out** to the wider community with information about the impact of online harassment on mental and physical health, including collecting and publishing disaggregated data on online gender-based violence, with a focus on intersectionality.
- **Operates as** a public-private partnership to create awareness and deliver a broad range of support services, including helplines, primarily to girls, but also to their families and communities, with a focus on mental health and self-care.

"And one thing that I really, want to request is that if you can support us…to really come up with the law."

Young woman, 23, South Sudan

COMMUNITIES, FAMILIES, CIVIL SOCIETY, FAITH-BASED ORGANISATIONS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

- **Communities and families** must take steps to engage with girls so that they feel secure in talking about online harassment and know that they are supported.
- **Civil society** should develop and deliver digital citizenship education and awareness raising initiatives, so that communities, families and civil society are better informed on the opportunities as well as risks of being online, with a focus on online abuse.
- **NGOs** must facilitate broader discussions on the issue of online harassment and violence, aimed at eliminating gender inequality, harmful gender norms and violence against women and girls.
- **Mobile network operators** must take measures to make mobile internet access more inclusive, with a particular focus on making educational and health-related information and content freely accessible as well as increasing data allowances and lowering costs.
- **All members of society** should recognise the harm caused by online harassment and violence against women and girls, stand in solidarity with them and become active bystanders reporting abuse and amplifying girls' voices.

"And who should do that? I think everyone. Start from our self, and then people who use social media and also the social media itself."

Young woman, 19, Indonesia

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ABOUT PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We strive for a just world, working together with children, young people, supporters and partners. Using our reach, experience and knowledge, Plan International drives changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels. We are independent of governments, religions and political parties. For over 80 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children and we are active in more than 75 countries.

Girls Get Equal: Plan International has been campaigning for girls' rights for over a decade. The Girls Get Equal campaign, created with youth activists around the world, aims to ensure girls and young women have equal power over their own lives and can shape the world around them. Promoting leadership and amplifying girls' voices is central to the campaign. They have a right to speak up and take part in public life, but online abuse is disempowering girls: shutting them out of a space which plays a huge part in young people's lives, is limiting their potential to thrive and become leaders. In order to achieve gender equality in an increasingly digital world, online spaces must be made safe, accessible and affordable for everyone. Girls and young women, in all their diversity, must be free to be themselves: to campaign, debate and make decisions about the issues that affect their lives without fear of harassment and violence, wherever they are.

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