

The impact of online violence on women human rights defenders and women's organisations

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Statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein

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Distinguished panellists,
Excellencies,
Colleagues and Friends

The Internet, in its youth, seemed to promise new freedom for millions of people. I remain convinced that premise can yet be borne out. But despite the immense benefits digital connectivity has delivered – its tremendous tools for greater information, education, expression, mobilisation and participation – digital media have also opened the door for new forms of oppression and violence.

Our discussion today focuses on the kinds of violence and oppression which are inflicted on women human rights defenders and activists online. These new forms of harassment, intimidation and defamation are shockingly frequent, frequently terrifying, and often spill over into the real world. Death threats, threats of sexual and gender-based violence, and online defamation and disinformation campaigns – often of a sexualized nature, and often including the victim's real-life addresses – are used to torment and terrorize women who speak out. The vast and transnational connectivity of the Internet enables rapid and massive dissemination of slander, mobilising very large groups of hostile individuals across broad distances, hiding behind anonymous profiles. It also makes removing the false or violent content extremely challenging.

Several of this Council's own Rapporteurs have been the victim of online threats of violence and sexual violence; one, for example, was sent a graphic video of a person being decapitated. Mexican activists involved in sexual and reproductive rights have reportedly been targeted by death threats, harassment in public spaces, and acts of intimidation, including against their children. In Vietnam, following a series of online attacks, environmental activist Le My Hanh was physically attacked last year, with the video of the attack further disseminated on social media. In India, Gauri Lankesh, a journalist who published criticism of Hindu extremism, was killed last year following widespread online calls for violence against her; and her colleague Rana Ayyub has been subjected to thousands of hate-filled messages, including calls for her to be gang-raped and murdered, with dissemination of her phone number and home address.

In Italy, the speaker of Parliament, Laura Boldrini, has bravely faced down innumerable death threats and threats of sexual torture; the mayor of one town suggested on Facebook that a convicted rapist should be sent to her house "to put a smile on her face". In what has been termed GamerGate, thousands of anonymous online threats of murder and rape have targeted women who protested misogyny in video game culture. In Canada, a murderous rampage in April which killed 10 people and wounded 14 – most of them women – was reportedly motivated in part by the alleged perpetrator's radicalisation through so-called "incel" hate groups online. And in Iraq, several women candidates for parliament have reportedly faced online defamation campaigns, including the spread of faked photos and videos intended to intimidate and discredit them.

The purpose of these sadistic attacks is to silence women, as Swedish broadcaster Alexandra Pascalidou told a European Commission panel in 2016. "They keep telling me to ... kill myself or they will shoot me, cut my tongue off, break my fingers one by one. They keep threatening me with gang rapes and sexual torture."

Online campaigns against women human rights defenders and organisations aim to damage their credibility as advocates, to diminish or obliterate the power of their voices, and to restrict the already limited public space in which women's activists can mobilise and make a difference.

The impact can be profound. The anxiety and fear suffered by the victims are compounded by a very real possibility of physical harm, as well as damage to livelihoods generated by the dissemination of false and sexually explicit images or other malicious lies. In a survey of eight countries last year, Amnesty International found at least 41% of women who had been abused online feared for their physical safety, and 24% feared for their family's safety, since online mobs who attack women often issue detailed and graphic threats against their children. Moreover, these attacks are extremely frequent and widespread. In 2014, the EU Fundamental Rights Agency found nearly a quarter of women surveyed had experienced online harassment.

The damage to victims' right to privacy, to freedom of expression, and to full participation in economic, social, cultural and political affairs is evident. These forms of intimidation and violence may also cripple the work of women's networks, which often use online platforms as their key form of communication and mobilization. These effects are compounded by the near-total impunity enjoyed by perpetrators.

As Zarizana Abdul Aziz, director of the Due Diligence Project, has put it, "The internet, once a liberating space, is also, increasingly, a space of violence". If trends continue, instead of empowering women, online spaces may actually widen sex and gender-based discrimination and violence – creating situations in which women and girls no longer feel safe online or offline.

Clarity about this situation, and much greater human rights-based action by all stakeholders, are essential. The extent to which these intimidation campaigns are organised may be disputed, but clearly, specific forums encourage them and specific social media are utilised for their dissemination. States and corporate actors must work much more effectively to bring perpetrators to justice and prevent these forms of online violence. States have a legal obligation to protect all their people from violence, and it is not acceptable for law enforcement to dismiss these phenomena as trivial. Companies also have obligations to prevent and address human rights violations and abuses linked to their activities.

To date, websites such as Twitter and Facebook have mostly attempted to regulate online violence against women using varying and privately established standards which are inconsistently deployed, and rarely made public. However, as the Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of expression has recently pointed out, "human rights standards, if implemented transparently and consistently, with meaningful user and civil society input, provide a framework for holding both States and companies accountable to users across national borders." In fact, I would go so far as to say that *only* international human rights law can provide the firm ground of universally accepted norms which can enable truly effective, consistent and principled action in this context.

My Office has begun working with technology companies to address online threats and violence, and to fully implement the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. We hope to expand that work in the coming months. As part of our effort to develop indicators to measure implementation of the SDGs, we have also begun more systematic data compilation regarding violence against human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders.

I therefore welcome this very timely discussion, and look forward to your thoughts on what concrete steps must be taken to identify and prevent human rights abuses against women online – as well as to dismantle the harmful gender stereotypes which are the root cause of these vicious abuses.

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