



Submission to the Women and Equalities Committee

Sexual harassment of women and girls in public places

March 2018

Amnesty International UK is a national section of a global movement. Collectively, our vision is of a world in which every person enjoys all the human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments. Our mission is to undertake research and action focused on preventing and ending grave abuses of these rights. We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion.

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Introduction

1. Amnesty International has conducted research on online violence and abuse of women and girls. Online violence against women and girls is an extension of violence they experience offline and stems from persistent power imbalances in society between women and men. As our lives become more and more enmeshed with the digital world and access to the internet increasingly becomes vital to study and work we need to ensure women and girls are able to access the digital public space free from violence and abuse.
2. Amnesty International recommends the Select Committee considers online violence and abuse on the continuum of violence against women and girls in society and not separate from violence offline. For example, a study of cyberstalking in the UK found that in 54% of the cases cyberstalking followed an encounter in real life¹.

The scale and toll of online violence and abuse against women and girls in the UK

3. This submission from Amnesty International UK highlights the preliminary findings on online violence and abuse against women and girls online from a survey conducted in November 2017² in eight countries which found that 23% of women surveyed had experience online violence and abuse at least once.
4. Of the women surveyed in the UK one in five said they had experienced abuse or harassment through social media. Young women aged between 18 to 24 are particularly affected, with more than one in three (37%) saying they had experienced online violence or abuse. Of the women who said they had experienced some form of online violence or abuse:
 - more than a quarter (27%) had received direct or indirect threats of physical or sexual violence;
 - almost half (47%) had experienced sexist or misogynistic abuse;
 - and 59% said the perpetrator was a stranger, compared with 27% who personally knew the offender.
5. Amnesty's findings are consistent with figures from the European Institute for Gender Equality which has found that one in ten women have already experienced a form of online violence and abuse since the age of 15³.

¹ European Institute for Gender Equality, Cyber violence against women and girls, 2017, available at <http://eige.europa.eu/rdc/eige-publications/cyber-violence-against-women-and-girls>

² Amnesty International [commissioned an IPSOS MORI poll](#) which looked at the experiences of women between the ages of 18 and 55 in Denmark, Italy, New Zealand, Poland, Spain, Sweden, the UK and USA.

³ See note 1.

6. The findings also show the impact online violence and abuse is having on women's physical safety and psychological well-being. Of the women polled who have experienced online violence and abuse:
 - one-third (36%) felt their physical safety had been threatened;
 - more than half (55%) suffered stress, anxiety or panic attacks;
 - three out of five (61%) had trouble sleeping well;
 - two-thirds (67%) felt apprehensive when thinking about using social media;
 - and one in five (20%) felt the online abuse threatened their job prospects.
7. Amnesty stressed that online violence and abuse against women is not just an experience of gender. Women of colour, religious or ethnic minority women, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LBTI) women, women with disabilities, or non-binary individuals who don't conform to traditional gender norms of male and female, will often experience online abuse that targets these different identities. In Amnesty's poll, 14% of women who had experienced online abuse had received racist messages and 7% said transphobic or homophobic comments had been directed at them.
8. Amnesty International will publish further research on the impact of online violence and abuse on women by the end of March which will set out recommendations on how government and companies can tackle the issue.