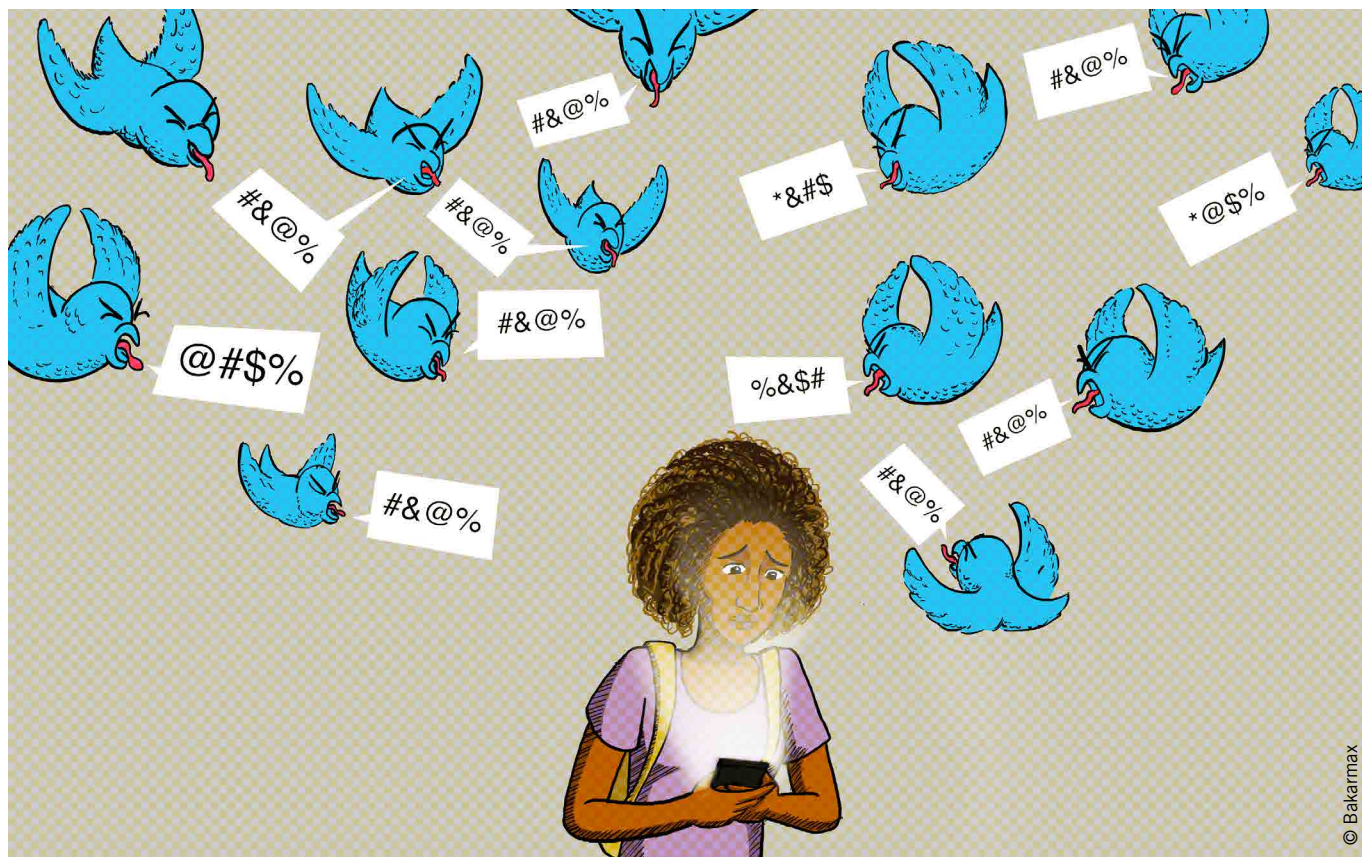


# ONLINE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGE 14-16



Violence and abuse against women online is widespread in the UK, turning the internet into a hateful and unsafe place, and stifling freedom of expression. It takes many forms – from violent threats and doxing to sharing of intimate images without consent. It can be compounded by different factors such as race, age, sexual orientation, disability and job.

This session explores the issue and the impact it has on the right to freely express yourselves. It looks at how we can all help make online spaces safer and empowering for everyone. We are inspired by women's rights activist and campaigner Seyi Akiwoowo who, after her own experience of online abuse, wants platforms to prioritise the safety of women and girls.

This is part of our Women's Rights and Gender Equality resource materials.

## **Aims**

- To understand online gender-based violence
- To recognise the impact online abuse has particularly on people whose gender intersects with other discriminated identities
- To discuss ways to make online spaces safer

## You will need

Computers with internet and video playback capabilities

**Handouts:** Keywords and definitions match up  
 Universal Declaration of Human Rights – Summary  
 Case study Seyi Akiwowo

## Content warning

Discussing issues of online gender-based violence may trigger personal issues and cause distress. Use your professional judgement for what is acceptable in your class. Please speak to your school's pastoral and safeguarding teams before you begin this session if you feel that students may need additional support. It may lead students to make disclosures about their treatment online. Inform students of support available (such as a school counsellor) if they need someone to talk to after the session.

## INTRODUCTION 10 minutes

Ask students for their definition of gender-based violence – violence directed against a girl or woman primarily because of her gender.

What about online gender-based violence? Can they name different types of online abuse? For instance, have they heard of 'doxing'?

Using the *Keywords and definitions match-up sheet*, ask students to match the different terms with their meaning or definition. Discuss the matches to ensure they understand the key terminology for this lesson.

Emphasise that both women and men experience online gender-based violence but the majority of victims are women and girls. Why?

In pairs, ask them to discuss their own online behaviour. Have they ever written or seen anything hurtful that they know wouldn't have been said face-to-face? How did this make them feel? What did they do when they saw it? Why did they write it? What are the effects of being on the receiving end of trolling, harassment or cyber bullying? Has it made them or anyone they know change the way they use social media platforms or the internet?

## TASK 1 20 minutes

### Who gets hurt by online violence

Share the following statistics.

Every **30 seconds**  
 women are abused on Twitter

Out of 14.5 million tweets  
 Over **1 million** were abusive and problematic towards women

Around **two-thirds** of women  
 who experienced abuse or harassment online in the UK felt apprehensive when thinking about using social media

Black women were **84%**  
 more likely to receive abusive tweets than white women in the UK

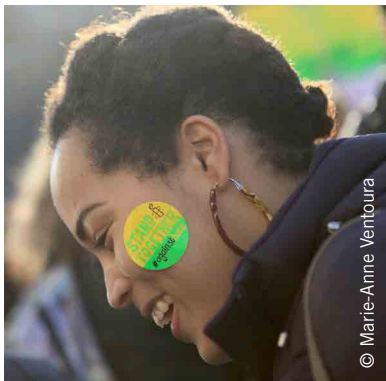
**Source:** Amnesty International's Troll Patrol project, 2018, and an Ipsos MORI survey for Amnesty International, 2017

What does this make them think? Are they surprised by these numbers? What questions do they have? What actions could they take to make the online space safer for all people to use?

Explain that Amnesty International's research shows that online gender-based violence has a particularly severe impact on women with intersecting identities, for instance if you're a woman from a minority racial, ethnic or religious background, a woman with disabilities, or if you're an LGBTIQ+ woman – or any combination of these.

Had students thought about the intersectional nature of abuse online before? What impact do they think this has on people?

Explain that although violence and abuse against women are certainly not limited to any one social media platform, Twitter is one of the most problematic.



## TASK 2 20 minutes

### How online gender-based violence is a human rights violation

Next, provide students with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights – Summary*. Remind the class that these rights belong to everyone.

Ask students to highlight the human rights affected by online gender-based violence, for example the right to freedom of expression, the right to privacy, the right to safety.

How do they feel now they know that online abuse is a human rights violation? Does it change the way they plan to behave online?

Explain that the internet is a critical space for people to make their voices heard. However, instead of strengthening women's voices, online abuse leads many women to self-censor what they post, it limits their access to information and participation in public debates and even drives women offline completely. Whichever way you look at it, girls and women are being silenced because they are afraid or fed up of being abused online.

Discuss the consequences of this. Had they thought about the impact on human rights of this type of violence? How does it make them feel?

Discuss with older students or ask them to write about their response to the following statement: **Online violence reinforces existing gender inequalities, and is just one more way that women are denied their human rights.**

Do they agree or disagree with it and why?

### How online gender-based violence breaks the law

Online abuse is not just a human rights violation either, in many cases it is also a crime. Did they know this? For example:

The **Malicious Communication Act 1988** makes it an offence to send messages with the intent to cause distress or anxiety.

The **Equality Act 2010** says it is unlawful to discriminate against anyone related to protected characteristics such as age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion, sex and sexual orientation. This includes harassment which violates someone's dignity, or creates a hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.

Are they surprised that some online behaviour is a crime? Why?

Who would they talk to if they were a victim of online abuse?

What should they do if they see other people being the victim of online abuse?

### TASK 3 A full lesson if necessary

#### Exploring case studies

Many female social media users who speak out on issues are much more likely to be targeted online, for example journalists, activists, politicians. And if they belong to other marginalised groups the criticism is compounded. Online spaces are often used to silence and discredit them and their work. Young women in particular are harassed, spammed with pornography and are even sent death threats.

Can they think of any examples?

- Climate activist Greta Thunberg has received threats of violence: some said she should be 'burnt at the stake', and sent doctored photos.
- Trans model and activist Munroe Bergdorf left Twitter in 2021 claiming it was not safe for transgender people. She has called for social media companies to act faster to tackle racism and transphobia on their platforms.
- Diane Abbott MP says trolls talk about her physical appearance, and send threats against her safety and other abuse that has no political content.

#### Read out the following quote

'I get a double whammy. I am abused as a female politician and I'm abused as a Black politician and also the volume of abuse is much greater. It damages your confidence, it is corrosive of your self-esteem and it can make you second guess yourself as to what you talk about and write about.'



Seyi Akiwowo © Carmen Valino

It is not free speech – it's actually limiting everyone else's free speech because in my experience there are many women and many women of colour who don't participate online in the way that they would want to, because they're really repelled by the level of abuse you get.'

**Diane Abbott MP**

#### Follow-up

Why is using social media platforms important for these women?

What price are they paying?

Discuss what Diane Abbott describes at the 'double whammy' of online abuse.

Why is that allowed on the platforms?

Next, share the case study handout on activist Seyi Akiwowo. She defends the rights of women and girls to express their views freely on social media, without fear of threats and abuse. After receiving a wave of online abuse herself, she set up a charity, Glitch, to end online abuse.

Watch the clip *Seyi's fight against online abuse* (YouTube, search title, 2:16 mins).

**Content warning:** This video mentions suicide after experiencing online abuse. Please watch before showing to your class to make sure you are comfortable with the content, and give a trigger warning before playing it.

Ask students to discuss with a partner

- How would you feel if this happened to you?
- How would you support someone facing online abuse?
- Twitter is touted as a 'safe place for free expression', where everyone has an equal opportunity to make their voices heard. What should online social media platforms do to stop the kind of abuse shown in the video?

- What do you think about how Seyi is helping to fight online abuse and protect women's rights?
- What actions could you commit to, that would help to make the online space safer for women and girls?
- What punishment should trolls receive? Why?

### Optional activity

Women politicians in India have also faced a shocking scale of online abuse online, not just for their opinions but also for various identities, such as gender, religion, caste, and marital status.

A study by Amnesty International India in 2019 revealed the level of abuse these women face; many deactivated their social media profiles.

'Almost every time I have reported abuse to Twitter or Facebook, the reply has been this anodyne template answer saying this does not violate our norms.' **Kavita Krishnan, Communist Party of India**

**Source:** Troll Patrol India: Exposing Online Abuse Faced by Women Politicians in India, Amnesty International, 2019

Have you ever reported comments to social media platforms?  
Do you feel that the reporting mechanisms on Facebook and Twitter work? Why, why not?  
What needs to change to make reporting more effective?

### TASK 4 10 minutes

#### Make a start

Ask the students what needs to change to make online spaces a better and safer place.

Watch the following film clips for ideas.

Amnesty International's *How to stay safe on social media* (YouTube, search title, 5:54 mins) includes tips on what you can do if you experience abuse or see someone else experiencing it.

As you watch, list the top tips that come up to be safer online. Create an image to share with other people about the ways you can do this.

Seyi Akiwowo suggests actions people can do when faced with online gender-based violence, at [twitter.com/AmnestyUK/status/1069577474152022017](https://twitter.com/AmnestyUK/status/1069577474152022017) (45 seconds).

**Ideas:** Spread kindness and positive messages online; report online harassment cases; mute or block abusive accounts on Twitter and Facebook; get counselling and training for teachers; write to social media companies; support groups tackling online violence; ensure schools send strong messages that online violence is unacceptable; create codes of conduct.

Based on the clip the class watched, what solutions do students think would work or have put into practice? Ask students to share their thinking with a partner. Discuss how their ideas are similar or different.

Take feedback from the students and write up suggestions on the board. Ask everyone to agree on a class online charter and display it.

Talk about the steps that students can take if they or anyone they know are a victim of online gender-based violence.

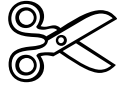
### **FINALLY... 5 minutes**

- Did you know that abuse and hateful conduct directed at women is actually prohibited on Twitter? Work in pairs to create a tweet calling on Parag Agrawal, the Chief Executive Officer of Twitter, to make Twitter safer for women and girls. If appropriate, send to @paraga
- Choose one action to do after today to make online spaces safer for everyone, and feedback what you did in the next lesson.

### **EXTENSION**

Host a conversation about online gender-based violence against Black women and how it can be overcome using the Fix the Glitch Toolkit 2.0

## KEYWORDS AND DEFINITIONS MATCH-UP



Cut up the keywords and definitions and ask students to match them up

### Online abuse

Malicious behaviours online to embarrass, humiliate, scare, threaten, silence, blackmail or, in some case, encourage mob attacks on people

### Online gender-based violence

A harmful action online directed at someone based on their sexual or gender identity

### Trolling

The practice of deliberately provoking others by posting upsetting messages and content online. Sometimes the abuse comes from complete strangers

### Doxing

Revealing personal or identifying documents or details online about someone often by hacking (eg, real names, addresses, phone numbers and email address) to cause fear, stress and panic

### Cyber-bullying

A repeated barrage of electronic communication (eg, sending or posting mean messages and images) to frighten, undermine and damage someone's self-esteem and reputation

### Cyber-harassment

One or more people working together to repeatedly target a person using abusive comments or images over a short or coordinated period of time to humiliate and cause distress

### Non-consensual photography

The sharing of private and sexual photos without the consent of the person in the images to distress, humiliate or blackmail

### Multi-intersecting identities

Social factors such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, class or disability that influence how different women experience online gender-based violence

### Online hate speech

Material, action and images of hatred that take place online, generally on social media or the internet, attacking a person or group on the basis of their race, religion, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, gender, disability or other traits

## CASE STUDY SEYI AKIWOWO



Seyi Akiwowo © Carmen Valino

### In her own words

'Online abuse is not about robust debate. It's about the intentional harassment of women to force them to leave the internet.'

In 2017, a video of Seyi Akiwowo speaking at the European Parliament went viral. She then received a barrage of racist and misogynist online abuse.

Seyi Akiwowo actively defends the right of women to express their views freely on social media without fear of threats and abuse.

In May 2014, she became one of the youngest Black women to be elected councillor. Three years later, after a video of her speaking at the European Parliament went viral, she received a wave of abuse – most of which was misogynistic (strongly prejudiced against women) and racist.

Seyi reported over 70 comments on both YouTube and Twitter – and received no reply or acknowledgement. Twitter did nothing until Seyi appeared on ITV's London Tonight and was interviewed by BuzzFeed and the BBC. Eventually, Twitter suspended some of the accounts targeting her.

The experience led her to set up Glitch, an organisation devoted to ending online abuse which Seyi believes is misunderstood by social media companies and its consequences severely underestimated. 'Digital spaces like social media platforms have become unfriendly, unsafe and toxic, particularly for people of colour, women, and historically under-represented groups,' she says. Seyi has also seen the rise in cyberbullying affecting young people.

Glitch trains people in the UK and Europe in Digital Citizenship, helping them navigate the online world in a positive, critical and respectful way. Glitch also trains women entering public life, boosting their skills and confidence so they can engage in digital spaces without fear or intimidation.

The aim is to help fix the glitch: to make the online space safe for all to use, particularly women and girls; to challenge the current tolerance of online abuse; and to equip online users to be online leaders.

More information: [glitchcharity.co.uk](http://glitchcharity.co.uk)

### Discuss with a partner

- How would you feel if this happened to you?
- How would you support someone facing online abuse?
- Twitter is touted as a 'safe place for free expression', where everyone has an equal opportunity to make their voices heard. What should online social media platforms do to stop this kind of behaviour?
- What do you think about how Seyi is helping to fight online abuse and protect women's rights?
- What actions could you commit to that would help to make the online space safer for women and girls?
- What punishment should trolls receive? Why?