



SOCIAL MEDIA CAN BE A DANGEROUS PLACE FOR UK WOMEN

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This briefing includes data from a global survey into online abuse against women by Ipsos MORI, commissioned by Amnesty International and conducted across eight countries.

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One in five women in the UK have suffered online abuse on social media platforms, according to a recent poll conducted by Ipsos MORI on behalf of Amnesty International. A disturbing 27 per cent of this abuse threatens sexual or physical assault.

Introduction

Social media can be an empowering and inspiring force, enabling access to information, facilitating new connections, opportunities and support. Yet for many women who are active on social media platforms in the UK, online violence and abuse are all too common and can have a negative impact on their day-to-day lives.

Online violence and abuse is a worldwide phenomenon, and while it's obviously not limited to women alone, women in the UK – especially young women – face an extraordinary amount of abuse on social media. A global online survey indicates that in the UK, one in five women aged 18 to 55 have experienced some form of abuse or harassment online. For women aged 18 to 24, this number rises to one in three.

Online violence and abuse is widespread because discrimination against women doesn't disappear when we move into the digital world. Deep rooted patriarchy and negative gender stereotypes influence the way some individuals communicate online.

Consequently, online violence and abuse are often sexist and misogynistic in nature, targeting women's multiple identities such as their race, religion or sexual orientation, and can include threats of physical and sexual violence.

About this new research

Amnesty International has been investigating the impact of online abuse and harassment on women. Working with global market and opinion research specialists Ipsos MORI, we conducted an online poll in eight countries: UK, USA, New Zealand, Spain, Italy, Poland, Sweden and Denmark. This survey sought to identify women's experience of online harassment and abuse, the impact of this experience on them, actions they have taken as a result, and their views on the response and support mechanisms available from social media companies, governments and the police.

Findings from our poll demonstrate how social media platforms have emerged as the latest site of discrimination and abuse against women – where perpetrators hidden behind the safety of their screens are posting often violent, sexist and misogynistic content, which can be shared and repeated across digital platforms almost instantly.

The psychological impact of online abuse includes stress, anxiety or panic attacks, loss of self-esteem and feelings of powerlessness.

Alarming, governments, social media companies and the police have failed to take adequate action to deal with this emerging violation of women's human rights. It is time for action and time for change.

Online violence against women

Violence against women online is part of a continuum of gender-based violence and discrimination against women offline. It can include online abuse intended to shame, intimidate or degrade women, but does not necessarily include violent physical or sexual threats. It also includes online harassment: sustained or repeated communications to an individual with the intention to cause alarm or distress.

Violence against women online includes online abuse and harassment, but not all categories of online abuse and harassment constitute violence. In our poll we asked women about their experiences of online abuse and harassment, the broader category. All online abuse and harassment requires states and companies to respond, but not all of them require prohibition and application of criminal remedies, as is the case for violence.

Methodology and key findings

The research poll was commissioned by Amnesty International and carried out by Ipsos MORI in June 2017 using an online quota survey of 500 women aged 18 to 55 in each of eight countries (UK, USA, New Zealand, Spain, Italy, Poland, Sweden and Denmark) via the Ipsos Online Panel system. In each country, fieldwork quotas were set on the age, region and working status of the women surveyed and according to known population proportions in each country. Data were weighted using a RIM weighting method to the same targets to correct for potential biases in the sample. The survey sample in each country was designed to be nationally representative and the margin of error for the total sample in each country varies between 3 and 4 per cent.

This briefing explores the findings of the UK poll. To complement the poll findings we have also conducted a number of individual interviews with women who experienced online harassment and abuse. To highlight the findings of the poll in greater depth, and to show the impact of online abuse and harassment on women with multiple intersecting identities, this briefing quotes extensively from two of these interviews. We also drew on some of the conclusions from the Expert Discussion on Online Abuse organised by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence in February 2017.

The results of this research were striking. Our write up of the multi-country findings is available [here](#).

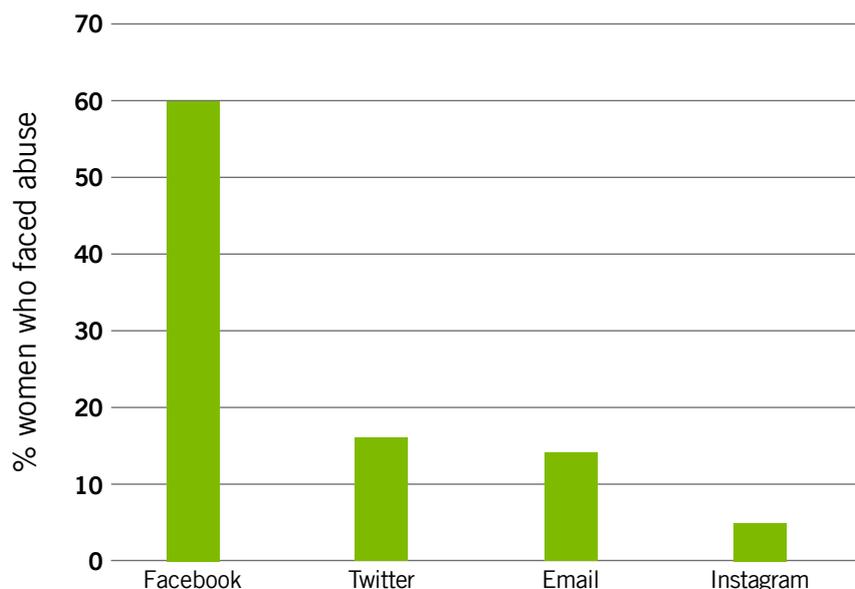
The analysis of the UK poll revealed the following:

1. **One in five women (21 per cent) experienced some form of online harassment or abuse – this was more than one in three of those aged between 18 and 24 (37 per cent).**
2. **Nearly half of women who experienced online abuse or harassment received sexist or misogynistic comments (47 per cent) and more than a quarter (27 per cent) received some form of threat (direct or indirect) of physical or sexual assault.**
3. **One in three women (36 per cent) who experienced online abuse or harassment felt that their physical safety was threatened because of this harassment and abuse.**
4. **More than half of women (55 per cent) who experienced abuse or harassment experienced stress, anxiety or panic attacks as a result.**
5. **47 per cent of women who experienced some form of online abuse or harassment on social media said they have not changed the amount they use social media. But almost a quarter reported having stopped posting their opinions on certain issues.**
6. **20 per cent of women who experienced online harassment or abuse did not take any action in response.**

1. Online harassment and abuse is common in the UK and affects young women disproportionately

Women in the UK are very active on social media platforms, especially Facebook and Twitter. Yet our poll showed that many women's experiences of social media includes damaging instances of abuse or harassment, including violent threats. One in five women (21 per cent) who participated in our poll have experienced some form of abuse or harassment online, and as many as one in 10 (10 per cent) on more than on occasion.

Q. On which platform were you abused?



We also found that **young women between 18 and 24 were much more likely to experience online abuse or harassment than women in all other age groups, with more than one in three (37 per cent) had such an experience, compared to 15 per cent of those aged 35 to 55.** Women between 18 and 24 were also the most active group on social media: 89 per cent had a Facebook account and 59 per cent had an account on Twitter.

Laura Bates, founder of the Everyday Sexism Project - a collection of more than 80,000 women's daily experiences of gender inequality - talked to us about how young women and girls are targeted by an unprecedented volume of online harassment and abuse:

'We are seeing young women and teenage girls experiencing online harassment as a normal part of their existence online.'

Laura also shared with us her own experience of online abuse that she receives daily for speaking out against sexism and for women's rights. She said:

'It's become a normal state feeling permanently under siege. You think about these things all the time until it becomes a normal kind of living situation, where you're constantly looking over your shoulder and worried about the safety risks.'

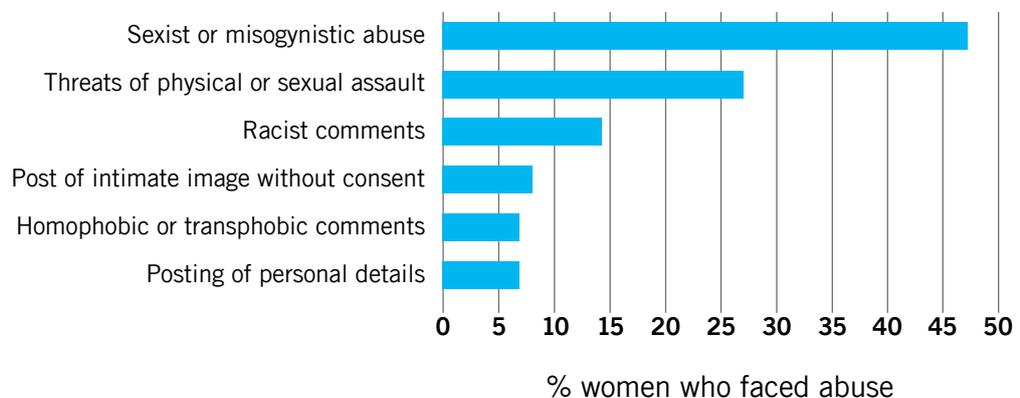
Our research into online abuse against women MPs on Twitter in the six months before the UK 2017 general election showed that social media can be a very scary place for them. Yet online abuse is not only targeted at high-profile women who actively participate in politics – it is something all women can experience in their everyday life.

Of the women who participated in our poll 60 per cent agree that abuse and harassment of women online was common nowadays and crucially 90 per cent agreed it was harmful. 59 per cent of women in our poll who experienced some form of online abuse or harassment said it was perpetrated by complete strangers; 27 per cent knew the perpetrator personally.

2. Gender, race, sexual orientation and other identities determine the nature of abuse

As a part of the continuum of gender-based violence and discrimination, online violence and abuse are often sexist and misogynist in nature, and often include specific references to women’s bodies. Nearly half of women in our poll (47 per cent) who experienced online abuse or harassment received sexist or misogynistic comments. More than a quarter (27 per cent) received some form of direct or indirect threat of physical or sexual assault.

Q. What kind of abuse did you receive?



An analysis of online abuse against women should not be limited to a gender lens only.

For a woman with multiple or intersecting identities, the experience of the world is not limited to gender. Your race, disability, or sexual orientation, for example, can have as much effect as your gender—if not more—on how you are treated in both the physical and digital world.

In the case of online abuse, 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 abuse that targets these different identities.

In our poll 14 per cent of women who had experienced online abuse or harassment reported receiving racist abuse and 7 per cent said they received homophobic or transphobic comments. This includes abuse directed at women who don’t identify as being within these groups.

Seyi Akiwowo – a London councillor and founder of Glitch!UK – faced a wave of online abuse and harassment after a video of her speaking on the refugee crisis at the European Parliament went viral earlier this year. It was an acute example of how intersectional discrimination works in practice.

She told us:

‘One day the video was shared positively on Twitter and in just a few hours I received floods of abuse from strangers. I was caught up in a storm of abusive comments and mob-style harassment on two social media platforms. I was called several variations of the N word, N*gga, Negros, N*ggeress. They referred to me as a: “Monkey”, “Chimp”, “Ape” and “Harambe’s

cousin”. They told me to: “eat shit”, “All Africans live in Mudhuts”, “f**k off back to Africa and die there you useless parasite” and... “Lol kill yourself” They also asked me: “Which STD will end your miserable life?” and “what a giant gas chamber! When will it be commissioned?” They hoped for: “the next Ebola outbreak”, that I “get lynched you stupid n*g” and that “if all whites agreed that the best course of action would be to exterminate blacks, we could do it in a week.

‘The worst comment was on YouTube: “Are you a bitter b***h because your clit was sliced off with a rusty razor”? It was an obvious reference to Female Genital Mutilation.

‘Throughout this experience I learned a new word – ‘misogynoir’. It is racialised misogyny that many black women face. This word perfectly captured my horrible experience.’

3. Women feel their safety is threatened

Some people may think that online abuse is less real than offline abuse, or that women can simply ‘turn off’ these platforms—and by extension choose to stop receiving abuse.

As many as one in three women (36 per cent) who had experienced harassment or abuse in our poll felt that their physical safety was threatened because of it. Fifteen per cent felt that online abuse threatened their physical safety on more than one occasion.

Shocking as they are, these results are not surprising given that more than a quarter of women (27 per cent) who reported abuse or harassment received some form of threat of physical or sexual assault.

Laura Bates explained the impact such threats have had on her own safety:

‘I found it difficult not to be scared about my safety initially. When people were talking about how they would track me down using the IP address of the Everyday Sexism Project, my partner and I actually moved out of our flat for a short time. I also received a number of [threatening] messages about snipers and found it difficult to walk around the city with tall buildings without looking over my shoulder.’

4. Online abuse can have negative psychological impacts

Online abuse is no less real than offline abuse; nor can it be ignored.

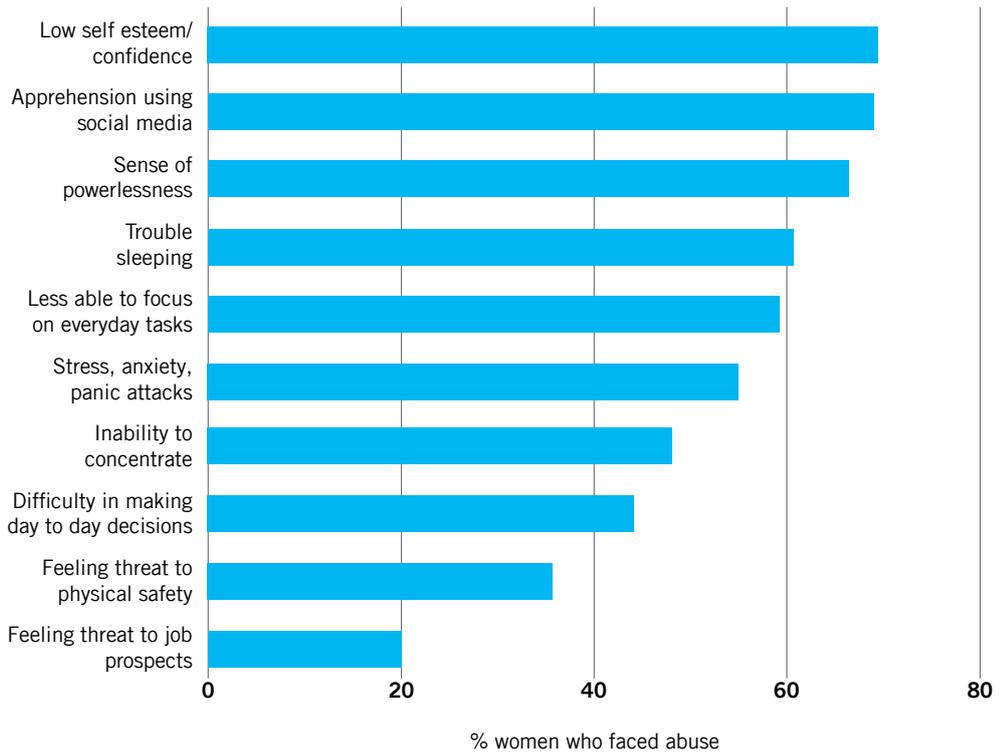
More than half of the women (55 per cent) who had experienced abuse or harassment experienced stress, anxiety or panic attacks as a direct result, 68 per cent felt a loss of self-esteem or self-confidence and 66 per cent felt powerless to respond to abuse or harassment online.

Laura Bates voiced her concern that the psychological impact of online abuse continues to be downplayed and unacknowledged. She said:

‘The psychological impact of reading through someone’s really graphic thoughts about raping and murdering you is not necessarily acknowledged. You could be sitting at home in your living room, outside of working hours, and suddenly someone is able to send you an incredibly graphic rape threat right into the palm of your hand.’

Our poll findings clearly demonstrate the toll that online abuse takes on different aspects of women’s lives. For example, of the women in our poll who experienced abuse, one in five (20 per cent) felt that their job or job prospects might be threatened and three in five (61 per cent) had trouble sleeping as a direct result of the online harassment they received. Moreover, two in three (67 per cent) felt apprehensive when thinking about using the internet or social media.

Q. What was the psychological impact of the abuse?

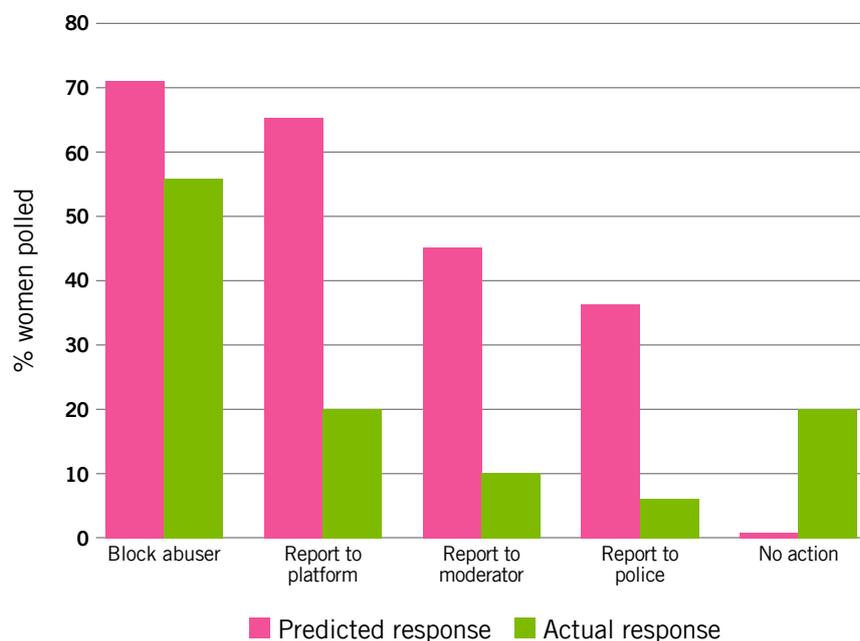


5. Women stay on social media despite the abuse but change the way they engage with online platforms

Despite violence and abuse online, women in the UK do not always disengage from social media platforms, and some women were found to even use them more. This continued engagement proves the profound role social media have in our lives today: they can't be easily 'turned off'.

47 per cent of women in our poll who experienced some form of online abuse or harassment on social media, said that they have not changed the amount they use social media, and 12 per cent said they used social media more.

Q. How do women respond to online abuse?



On a positive note, social media can be an empowering space for support. Seyi Akiwowo told us how she received encouraging messages after the waves of abuse that followed her speech at the European Parliament:

'Even though I was receiving floods of abuse, I was receiving so much love , support and encouragement from kindest of strangers. Even people who did not agree with what I said in the video agreed that I should not have been treated like that and you can respectfully disagree with someone without abusing them.'

But she also told us how she feels about using social media after experiencing the abuse.

'I feel torn. I love Twitter. I love engaging with my residents, keeping them up to date with what I am doing whether that is attending meetings or campaigning. I love engaging with other users too, there's a real online community on Twitter. It's become part of my daily routine to check out what is happening on Twitter, to have respectful debates, join online and international campaigns and to express opinions on current affairs. I have connected with incredible people around the world I would probably never have met and probably will meet. However, I feel like I'm being held back, silenced and bullied and I hate it. I am a kind of person that loves talking about EastEnders, commenting on political events and current affairs, calling out discrimination, racism and sexism, celebrating diversity and black achievement, tweeting my location when I'm at Council meeting or out campaigning. Up until February my Twitter account used to reflect all of me and I now I have to moderate my expression and be 100 per cent mentally and emotionally prepared for online harassment. This experience taught me that no matter what the opinion is there are many trolls out there ready to attack women in attempt to silence us.'

Women have a right to exercise their freedom of expression online, and should be able to do so without fear. However, our poll showed that online abuse and harassment are having a profound and chilling impact on women's freedom to express themselves online.

24 per cent of women in our poll who experienced some form of online harassment and abuse reported they stopped posting content that expressed their opinion on certain issues.

Laura Bates expressed concern about the chilling and silencing impact online abuse and harassment may have on the political expression of young women, who are much more likely to be targeted than women in other age groups.

'Girls who dare to express opinions about politics or current events often experience a very swift, misogynistic backlash. This might be rape threats or comments telling them to get back in the kitchen. It's an invisible issue right now, but it might be having a major impact on the future political participation of those girls and young women. We won't necessarily see the outcome of that before it's too late.'

6. Most online harassment and abuse goes unreported

One in five women – rising to over one in three for those aged between 18 and 24 – say that they have experienced some form of abuse or harassment online. Yet shockingly, most of it goes unreported, revealing that women have limited trust in social media companies and law enforcement agencies to respond adequately.

Our poll revealed that:

- **20 per cent of women who experienced online harassment and abuse on social media took no action.**
- **20 per cent of women who experienced abuse or harassment on social media reported**

the abuse to the company running the website or social media platforms.

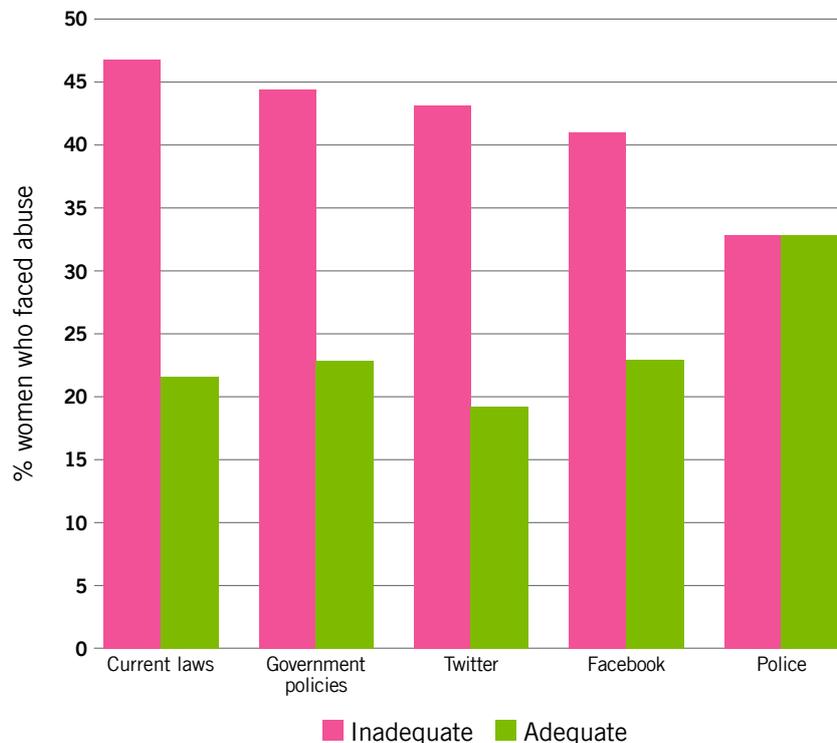
- Just 6 per cent of women who experienced online abuse reported it to the police.
- 56 per cent of women in our poll who experienced abuse blocked the abusive accounts.

7. Response by social media companies, the UK government and the police is considered to be largely inadequate

Responding to online harassment and abuse requires decisive and coordinated action from social media companies, government and in some cases the police. Yet the results of our poll reveal that women in the UK have very little confidence in the response mechanisms available to them. This, at least partially, could explain why online abuse is not reported regularly.

Only 23 per cent of Facebook users and 19 per cent of Twitter users thought that the response of those platforms in addressing online abuse and harassment has been adequate, compared with 41 per cent and 43 per cent, respectively, who considered it inadequate.

Q. How do you rate the response from these institutions?



On her own experience of reporting abuse to social media companies, Laura Bates said:

‘Social media companies aren’t stepping up and being held accountable for protecting the safety of their users. They talk a good game when something comes up in the press, but they’re not taking that action. In my experience of reporting accounts to Twitter, there’s a safety gap in terms of how their terms and conditions — which are quite vaguely worded — are interpreted. When I reported things to Twitter, it very rarely resulted in anybody being suspended. But when I was put in touch with someone who was higher up in the company, they took action and removed the harassment.’

‘It’s really problematic that social media companies are only taking action when they’re under pressure, because that amplifies already privileged voices and continues to push marginalized voices off these platforms.’

Women's trust in government responses is no better. **Almost twice as many women think that the UK government's policies and laws addressing online abuse and harassment have been inadequate (44 per cent) as adequate (23 per cent).**

The response from the police is considered the most adequate – but opinions are divided. **Based on what they have seen, heard or read, an equal number of women who participated in our poll found police responses both inadequate and adequate (33 per cent for both).**

Police officers themselves have shared their own concerns about the lack of a clear and effective legislative framework. They also said they lacked the necessary skills, training, tools and resources to enforce the law effectively.

Speaking at the All Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence Expert Discussion on Online Abuse, Chief Constable of Essex Police Stephen Kavanagh said:

'No police chief would claim the way we deliver police services has sufficiently adapted to the new threat and harms that the internet brings. The levels of abuse that now takes place within the internet are on a level we never really expected.'¹

What should be done?

Online abuse against women on this scale should not and does not need to exist on social media platforms.

Social media companies such as Facebook and Twitter have a responsibility to respect human rights, which means ensuring that women using their platforms can express themselves freely and without fear. Social media companies must enable and empower users to apply individual security and privacy measures such as blocking, muting and content filtering, so that women can easily curate a less toxic and harmful online experience.

Moreover, social media companies must do more to enforce their own policies on hate-filled conduct and abuse. They should also invest more resources to enforce adequate and transparent reporting mechanisms that users have confidence in using. Training about the various ways online abuse occurs on the platforms, including specific attention to gender and other identity-based abuse, should be mandatory for all staff, including developers, researchers, and especially moderators. Finally, social media companies should record and publish disaggregated data about the levels of abuse and their response. They must be transparent about the resources they are investing into tackling online abuse.

The UK government has an obligation to act with due diligence to prevent and respond to violence and abuse against women. These obligations exist whether the abuse takes place online or offline.

We welcome the UK government's commitment to addressing online abuse in the Ending Violence Against Women Strategy 2016-2020 and we acknowledge the various laws and policy guidance in place, including the [CPS Guidelines for Prosecuting Cases Involving Communications on Social Media](#) which specifically refer to violence and abuse against women online. Above all, it is crucial that online violence and abuse are fully recognised as a manifestation of the discrimination and abuse that women and girls face offline.

The UK government must also exercise caution. Introducing legal sanctions on companies that fail to remove content is dangerous and unnecessary.

1 All Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence, *Tackling domestic abuse in a digital age*. P.18

Instead, the UK government must commit to tackling the source of the problem, and ensure that adequate laws, policies, and training programmes are in place. It must also invest in challenging harmful gender stereotypes of women in society through. For example, comprehensive sex and relationship education can address issues related to online manifestations of offline violence and abuse.

On the importance of education, Laura Bates told us:

‘The complete lack of sex and relationship information around issues like consent, respect, and gender stereotyping really feeds into this online problem.’

Seyi Akiwowo emphasised to us the urgent need for action to address abuse on social media platforms:

‘I reported around 75 comments on both YouTube and Twitter and did not receive feedback or acknowledgment. It took around two hours to go through the comments and it was really upsetting.

‘Twitter never actually contacted me when I reported it – they only started suspending those accounts and deleting those tweets after I appeared on the ITV’s London Tonight and did media interviews with BuzzFeed and BBC. So if I didn’t go into fighter mode and make media appearances, gain public support I very much doubt there would be any action from Twitter.

‘YouTube engaged with me after my MP contacted them and the increasing public support. Not everyone is in this privileged position. It shouldn’t take going on live TV or starting a campaign to get Twitter and YouTube to consistently enforce their own rules.

‘Twitter is one of the best tech innovations of our generation. Twitter has shaped how we live, work, learn and connect with the world. Sadly, those that know society would deem their racist and sexist behaviour unacceptable hide behind a screen to commit these offences online. The same way we have a zero-tolerance to such behaviour offline we need to enact the zero tolerance to online violence against women.’

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