

THE STOCKHOLM FORUM ON GENDER EQUALITY

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE ONLINE: FROM EXPERIENCES TO STRATEGIES

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OVERVIEW

Violence online is often used to silence women who raise their voices, threatening their freedom of expression. The result is that women journalists, politicians and rights activists withdraw from online discussions. Threats online often translate into threats and violence offline. This is having a devastating impact on the possibilities of women, girls and other marginalised groups to exercise their human rights. This session aims to increase the understanding and to bring stakeholders together to engage in a dialogue and find ways forward by identifying potential synergies.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Where are we?

The root causes of gender-based violence online are the same as for gender-based violence offline. The issue of women facing violence online is not a new issue, and Sida, together with partners such as APC, have been working on it for a long time.

A negative trend that we are facing is shrinking space through legislation against and criminalisation of human rights work, power abuse and limitations in freedom of expression. Women and women's rights organisations are particularly affected on the very bases of being women and fighting for women's rights. A fundamental precondition for increased gender equality is a strong feminist movement. Therefore, it is worrying that the support to women's rights organisations is decreasing globally.

Women are harassed and receive threats online, which often is transformed into violence offline. At the same time, internet and access to information and communication technology (ICT) are a key enabler for the right to organise and for freedom of expression.

We are now at a critical moment in time, where the online and offline cease to exist in separate spheres. In this digital age, it is vital to be able to understand the structures of gender-based violence online. There is a need for creating tools and methods, and for forming collaborations, to hold people and states accountable.

Human rights shall always be respected, online as well as offline. Gender-based violence online threatens fundamental human rights. Women and women's rights organisations are particularly affected, as are female journalists.

One form of violence, which blurs the boundaries between offline and online, is the form of harassment commonly referred to as doxing. Doxing is an Internet-based practice of researching and publishing private or identifiable information about an individual. This may endanger individuals' or organisations' physical safety, and the purpose of doxing may be harassment or extortion.

Where do we go from here?

- It is crucial that women's rights stand at the centre of all solutions. Sometimes protectionist solutions are being put forward, often entailing that women should withdraw from the internet or restrict their use of technology. This is not a rights-respecting way forward. Instead, it is necessary to tackle gender-based violence online as a structural problem, just as we do gender-based violence offline. A way of increasing the understanding of gender-based violence as a structural problem is documenting online harassment the way Luchadoras has done in Mexico, creating a typology of forms of gender-based violence online.
- APC, together with Sweden and like-minded actors, has worked extensively to push for changes in the normative framework. As a result, we are now seeing a policy shift, which provides concrete tools to the work against violence against women:
 - The next report from the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Dubravka Šimonović, will focus on gender-based violence online. This is expected to have a crucial influence on the normative space.
 - The next Human Rights Commission Resolution on violence against women will include online dimensions.
 - The CEDAW general recommendation No. 35 on gender-based violence against women references technology-mediated violence against women extensively. It provides a framework that can be used practically through CEDAW national reporting and shadow reports, to hold states accountable to their duty to end violence against women.
- An active feminist government is necessary to build resilience against gender-based violence online. In the negative trajectory of support to women's rights decreasing, Sweden is choosing a different path, increasing support to gender equality.
- It is also important to look at solutions outside of government, such as newsrooms, journalists' unions and to use a holistic approach and innovative strategies in dealing with this issue. This is being done in the OSCEs initiative project on Safety of Female Journalists Online.
- Witness is working to make tech companies recognise the human rights effects of the decisions made by designers, developers, and policy people at companies. A strong human rights perspective, including a gender perspective, is needed in the design and development phase of technology and their platforms. ■

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