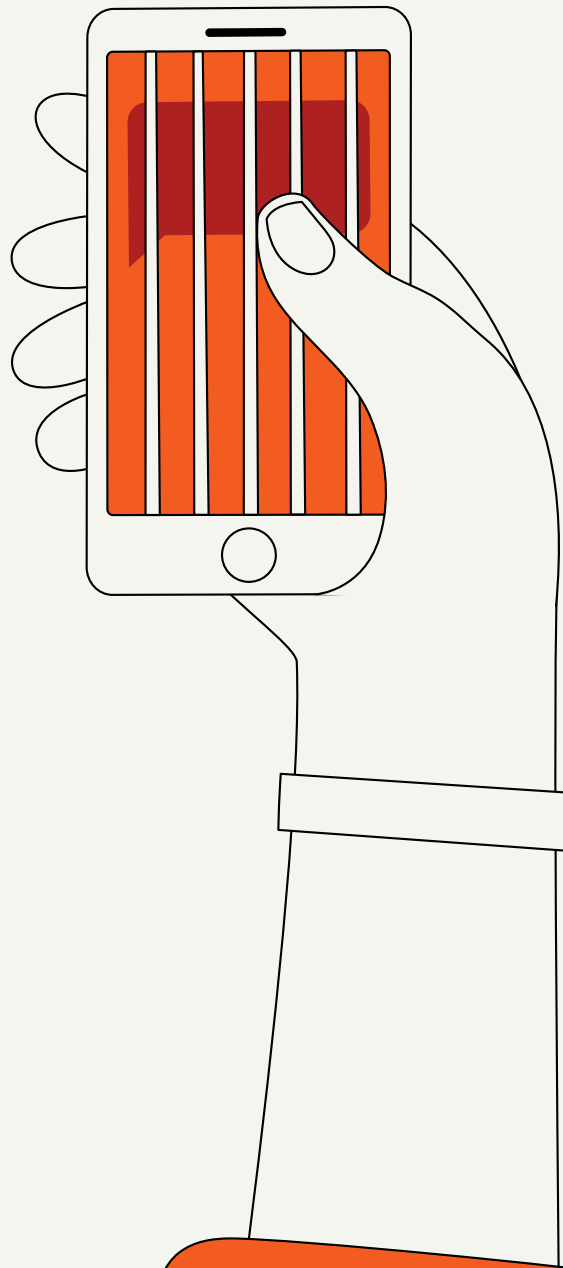


Online gender-based violence against women with a public voice.

Impact on freedom of expression

2022



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Regional Alliance for Free Expression and Information UN Women

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Executive Summary

In the last five years, online gender-based violence has grown exponentially, and how it manifests have multiplied. International agencies and human rights organizations have published papers on its dimensions and consequences. They are focused mainly on women with public voices: journalists, human rights defenders, activists, and politicians.

This report is the most extensive qualitative study conducted in Latin America and the Caribbean. It includes research on 15 cases, with in-depth and semi-structured interviews with women with public voice¹ based in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela. They have received severe online attacks because of their status as women due to their journalistic activity and activism. The organizations in the Regional Alliance² were responsible for the interviewees' selection process.

Similarities exist between this and other works:

- Online violence transcends virtuality; it has specific and visible consequences on the people who experience it, and often, it literally continues outside digital platforms. It is a mistake and a minimization of the problem to speak of online violence as something alien, separate, and distanced from structural gender-based violence.
- Women with a public voice, especially journalists, communicators, and human rights defenders³, are the particular target of systematic online gender-based violence.
- Attacks impact the exercise of freedom of expression by individuals who experience them. In this way, they reduce voices in public debate and thus undermine the quality of democracies.

What are its main characteristics

In Latin America and the Caribbean particularly, the exponential growth of this kind of violence coincides in time with the rise and massive spread of the known fourth-wave feminism, which reinstated the debate on the decriminalization and legalization of abortion, achieved definite legislative advances and assertive actions for the political representation of women and diversities. In this context, online gender-based violence is silencing voices.

In addition, in the same period during which such violence has grown and multiplied, different countries are - or have been - framed within institutional political contexts with a growing closure of their public space, including restrictions on freedom of expression and the persecution of journalists and opponents. In these situations - although not exclusively - officials and opposition parties have made intensive use of practices such as the so-called troll farms or net centers, doxex, and fake news.

Previous studies on online violence found that political positioning and gender issues are the main issues with which women assaulted link attacks. The two issues intersect in the region, and others, such as the socio-environmental, are added. The 15 cases analyzed in this study combine the variables in different proportions. Not all interviewees are feminists, not all of them explain their political position, but there is agreement on three points:

- Visibility exposes them to online violence just because they are women with a public voice.
- Attacks received are gender biased.
- Systematic online violence aims to silence them.

How it manifests

Trolls to direct attacks against someone in particular bots to quickly viralize a hashtag, dissemination of personal data, or publication of fake news are some of the visible strategies used in social media to damage a person's reputation, frighten them, and run them out of the debate. In the case of violence directed against women with a public voice, and more precisely in the cases analyzed, these strategies have some peculiarities:

- Attacks are systemic and not isolated events.
- Others are reactive attacks —to a post, coverage, note— and others are perceived as random, “just because”, which may occur at any time, and which interviewees relate to persecution and attempts to remove them from public debate.
- Often, coordination is ascertained or suspected.

How it escalates

Certain generalisations and “degree” distinctions may be drawn on systematic aggression on social media.

1. Permanent bullying and *trolling* from some accounts.

All or the vast majority of interviewees reported:

- Being subject to hate speech, violent, sexist, misogynist and racist messages on social media.
- Experiencing surveillance of their profile and social media.
- Identifying public figures among their aggressors, primarily men.
- Recognizing both anonymous and non-anonymous accounts among their harassers.

2. Massive harassment, with insults and *fake news*.

- The vast majority of interviewees reported having experienced the dissemination of false information about them, especially inventions about being lovers of politicians, colleagues, officials, among others.
- Some experienced hacking or hacking attempts.
- Others experienced phishing.

3. Disclosure of personal information (*doxing*).

- Over half of the interviewees experienced doxéo situations.

4. Specific threats via direct messages, WhatsApp, email, and hacks.

- 12 of the 15 interviewees received physical aggression threats. Almost all are by private messages on social media.
- 8 of the 15 received violent messages on WhatsApp.
- Others received violent messages by email.

5. Violence is replicated offline.

Occurs through threats and groping during one of their journalistic coverages or when strangers take photos of the person in public places and upload them to social media, inviting them “to greet them.”

- Half of the interviewees have gone through this type of situation.
- Two of them left the country, and one went into exile for some time.
- Two withdrew from their activity for a particular time.

The most extreme cases occurred in political contexts with multiple closures of public spaces in which all journalists were in danger and were affected by threats and attacks. Interviewees report gender biases in said forms of violence: more cruelty and disqualifications than their male colleagues and, fundamentally, the threats of rape directed towards them and their children.

Rape is the most frequent threat of physical harm; it is the disciplinary action par excellence. Enough has been stated on the spread of rape culture. The threat is based on the conviction of its possibility.

At different levels, the aggressors share feedback and form an “ecosystem” with different roles. Thus, while a “conversation” on “equal terms” is held from an identifiable account, on a different front, a virtual “mob” is formed, and at another one off the timeline, where severe threats and aggressions arise.

In most cases, synchronicity and the simultaneous appearance of specific hashtags allow us to think of coordination. In others, the stakeholders and/or colleagues traced and verified connections between them. All refer to troll farms and net centers related to influential people with a certain degree of power, officials, leaders, and people in business.

- Most of the interviewees received coordinated attacks.

Virtual threats, real effects

All of the women interviewed for this report state that online violence had **impacts on their participation in public discussions:**

- 80% limited their participation in social media: they omitted to express their opinion or express themselves on specific topics.
- 40% said they had self-censored by avoiding writing or talking about a topic of relevance in the medium or field in which they work.
- One-third changed jobs.

- A quarter of them experienced dismissal or non-renewal of their contract. Half are afraid of losing their contract.
- 80% feared or fear for their physical integrity and even for their lives.

Online gender-based violence has limiting effects on the freedom of expression of all those affected:

- The most significant impact it generates is self-censorship.
- A second, and not lesser, effect is the disciplining usually sought by a public lynching spectacle, even if it is called virtual lynching.

In all cases, the women interviewed report that threats and aggression are normalized and seen as “the rules of the game” in the world of journalism and politics. Raising one’s voice is equivalent to the classic macho metaphor that blames victims of sexual violence: the skirt was too short.

The consequences are not exclusively individual but trickle down and generate more withdrawals: from colleagues and activists who shy away from visibility and from other women who do not want to be interviewed or participate in a public debate so as not to be harassed. For every woman silenced or attempted to be silenced, several withdraw or do not even reach public debate.

Finally, given that this issue requires a comprehensive approach that involves all stakeholders, the report includes recommendations for governments, social media platforms, the media, and civil society to develop preventive interventions on the denaturalization, accompaniment, and containment of such forms of violence.

Endnotes

- 1 The study's reflections and conclusions do not analyse the situation of women participating in party politics and public service.

- 2 The Regional Alliance is a network of 18 non-governmental, independent, non-partisan, non-profit organizations from 15 countries in the Americas. Created to strengthen the capacity of its member organizations in promoting best practices and legislation on access to information and freedom of expression in their countries and regions. The organizations part of it and which participated in this study are Acción Ciudadana (Guatemala), Asociación Civil por la Igualdad y la Justicia (ACIJ, Argentina), Asociación Nacional de la Prensa (ANP, Bolivia), Artículo 19 (Brasil), C-Libre (Honduras), Centro de Archivo y Acceso a la Información Pública (Cainfo, Uruguay), Colectivo Más Voces (Cuba), Espacio Público (Venezuela), Fundación Ciudadanía y Desarrollo (FCD, Ecuador), Fundación por la Libertad de Expresión y Democracia (FLED, Nicaragua), FUNDAR – Centro de Análisis e Investigación (Mexico), Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social (FUSADES, El Salvador), Instituto de Derecho y Economía Ambiental (IDEA, Paraguay), Instituto de Prensa y Libertad de Expresión (IPLEX, Costa Rica), Observatorio Cubano de Derechos Humanos (OCDH, Cuba), Transparencia por Colombia (Colombia), Transparencia Venezuela (Venezuela).

- 3 As are women politicians, especially those in public office, but this profile was not part of the present study.

