

# FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION UNDER THREAT

PERSPECTIVES FROM MEDIA AND  
HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN ASIA



FORUM-ASIA

Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development

# Women in the Digital Age

By Chou Yi-Lan<sup>135</sup>

The Internet has provided a free space for all to exercise our freedom of opinion and expression. For many women across the world, who may not be able or even forbidden to do so offline due to restrictions related to social and cultural norms and gender stereotypes, this has changed their lives fundamentally. More so, certain topics, like sexuality and abortion, are easier discussed online.<sup>136</sup> Over the past decades, information and communications technologies (ICTs) have been used by women's rights organisations, activists and feminists to access and share critical information on their rights, and to engage in advocacy.<sup>137</sup>

The advantages of the Internet and digital tools, which are fast-paced, beyond boundaries and cost efficient, are used to make connection with like-minded communities. Women's access to the Internet and their engagement with online communities have at times resulted in movement building. The #MeToo campaign against sexual harassment and assaults, and the #MyStealthyFreedom movement opposed to mandatory headscarves for women, are examples where the Internet and social media are used to challenge the status-quo women struggle with.

## Disproportionate online abuse against women

While digital spaces bring about new opportunities, they also create new forms of threats and violence that have a disproportionate impact on women. Globally, it is estimated that women were 27 times more likely to be harassed online.<sup>138</sup> Women activists' increased engagement in digital spaces has also 'exposed them to further risk of online harassment, smear campaigns, intimidation and violence with clear gender dimensions aimed at delegitimising their work to defend human rights,' said the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition in a statement.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> <https://www.womankind.org.uk/docs/default-source/default-document-library/breaking-the-silence-policy-briefing.pdf>

<sup>137</sup> *ibid*

<sup>138</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/AR/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=23248&LangID=A>

<sup>139</sup> <https://www.ishr.ch/news/hrc38-online-violence-against-women-activists-continuum-offline-violence>

Politically active women, such as activists, journalists, and Parliamentarians, are directly targeted, and face unique challenges as a result of their gender identity and political participation. Across Asia, online harassment and cyber-attacks against human rights defenders, especially women human rights defenders and minority rights defenders, has become a serious concern.<sup>140</sup> Such online harassment, conducted by both state and non-state actors against politically active women, does not only create distress, but also restrains them from their activism, often leads to self-censorship, and thus reduces their presence online.<sup>141</sup>

'Ultimately, the online abuse against women journalists and women in the media are a direct attack on women's visibility and full participation in public life,' affirmed Dubravka Šimonović, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women.<sup>142</sup>

Though men also experience cyber violence, research indicates that comparatively, women are disproportionately targeted by certain forms of cyber violence that is gendered and includes sexist elements. The proportion of women experiencing sexual harassment and cyber stalking was higher than men, and the impacts of these forms of violence were more traumatic for the victims.<sup>143</sup>

Women and men are attacked differently, so is the way they respond. Women and men have different perceptions when it comes to online harassment, and they are affected differently when harassment occurs. According to a research conducted by Pew Research Center in 2017,<sup>144</sup> women tend to feel more upset about the experience than men. The same research pointed out that women often believe offensive content online is frequently excused as not a big deal, while most men say that people take this kind of content too seriously. These differences in perception explain why gender dimensions of online attack against women are often not recognised, and thus not addressed.

A similar pattern applies to women human rights defenders, journalists, and women activists when it comes to cyber violence, which is often sexist and misogynistic.

<sup>140</sup> <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=27874>

<sup>141</sup> <https://xyz.informationactivism.org/en/online-harassment-of-politically-active-women-overview>

<sup>142</sup> Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective, 2018

<sup>143</sup> <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/cyber-violence-against-women-and-girls#downloads-wrapper>

<sup>144</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/07/14/men-women-experience-and-view-online-harassment-differently/>

Recent findings from the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) revealed that two-thirds of female journalists suffered gender-based online attacks that include sexist insults, humiliation, and rape threats based on their gender and physical appearance. While male journalists do also suffer online abuse, it is not related to their gender and less often sexually tainted.<sup>145</sup>

The increase in online attacks against female journalists is more apparent among those who report on sensitive political or cultural issues. It is also evident for female journalists who cover topics that are traditionally covered by men, such as sports, gaming, crimes and politics. For many female journalists, being exposed to gender-based attacks is a daily part of their job, and is exacerbated by social media. This means they face risks both online and in real life.

### **Manifestations of online abuse against women**

Cyber violence against women is often highly personalised, and can be extremely harsh, particularly when women do not conform to societal expectations. The pattern of online abuse against women is very much contextualised depending on religion, political structure and other social and cultural norms of the local environment. In a patriarchal society, women are often attacked for the way they present themselves in addition to the issues they stand for.

In Malaysia, outspoken women, like Nalisa Alia Amin, are not unfamiliar with online attacks. Having high visibility on Twitter, Nalisa has faced online abuse whenever she has spoken out against sexism and homophobia on social media. Being a young plus-sized woman makes her more vulnerable to online abuse, which specifically targets her appearance. Attackers spread pictures of her body along with fat-shaming comments, such as ‘oh your face is small but you’re actually fat.’<sup>146</sup> They even created insulting nicknames for her on Twitter. ‘People who couldn’t stand my views have attacked my appearances, especially my body since I’m on the chubby side,’ said Nalisa in an interview.<sup>147</sup>

In Pakistan, many believe the Internet is not for women due to their conservative and religious point of view. This has led to many women feeling unsafe online. Women who are vocal or take part in political discussions are seen as breaking their gender role, which confines them to be at home doing household chores. ‘Young women activists are seen as women who don’t have any values or ethics,’ said Pakistani

<sup>145</sup> <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/ifj-survey-two-thirds-of-women-journalists-suffered-gender-based-online-attacks.html>

<sup>146</sup> [https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/EMPOWER\\_VVV\\_FINAL\\_Web.pdf](https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/EMPOWER_VVV_FINAL_Web.pdf)

<sup>147</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-40337326>



activist Gulalai Ismail.<sup>148</sup> Gulalai has faced online propaganda campaigns and false accusation of violating the Blasphemy law. A mob was mobilised to attack her, which seriously put her security at risk. In Pakistan, women activists and feminists are seen as ‘unethical western agents.’ The worst trolling is directed at female journalists.<sup>149</sup>

In other cases the harassment is systematic and tactical, aimed at silencing dissent and intimidating journalists for doing their work. In the Philippines, Maria Ressa, the founding Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and Executive Editor of online media Rappler, has experienced a massive campaign of online gendered harassment. The harassment included death and rape threats. ‘Anyone who was critical or asked questions about extrajudicial killings was attacked, brutally attacked. The women got it worst,’ said Maria.<sup>150</sup> Maria received an average of 90 hate messages an hour following Rappler report on ‘Propaganda War: weaponizing the Internet.’<sup>151</sup>

Not only women themselves are affected by gender-based cyber violence, so are their family and friends. For a woman living in a highly patriarchal society, accusations of sexual misconduct can be dangerous and societally detrimental. Such kind of accusations are not only directed at women though.

In India, the female journalist and writer Rana Ayyub was sent a pornographic video with her face photo-shopped on one of the actors. The video was shared online, and it went viral. Her father and friends were sent those images as well. The attack was in response to Rana Ayyub standing up for the Kathua rape victim. Fake Twitter accounts were created to share altered images of her. To make matters worse, her personal phone number and address were also added. ‘Online abusers assume that using threats of a sexual nature against female journalists would shame and subsequently silence them,’ explained Ayyub in an interview.<sup>152</sup>

## **When online violence goes offline**

Online forms of violence against women reflect the violence women face in real life. As affirmed by Dubravka Šimonović, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, online violence against women is ‘part of the continuum multiple, recurring and interrelated forms of gender-based violence against women,’ and should be taken seriously.<sup>153</sup>

<sup>148</sup> <https://www.awid.org/news-and-analysis/challenges-young-women-human-rights-defenders-pakistan>

<sup>149</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2016/01/online-harassment-in-pakistan-and-how-women-are-fighting-back/>

<sup>150</sup> <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000259399>

<sup>151</sup> *ibid*

<sup>152</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/perils-journalist-modis-india-180614103115577.html>

<sup>153</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/AR/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=23248&LangID=A>

Online harassment can go beyond the virtual world and cause physical harm to people targeted, ranging from physical violence to death threats. The murder of Gauri Lankesh, an Indian journalist and activist, who was an outspoken critic of right wings groups and the Government, came after she had received various threats online. Even after her death, many people on social media continued using abusive language against her.

'Now, the reason why I take these Facebook and Twitter threats seriously is because, you know, this is exactly what happened to Gauri. She faced social media threats, and she never used to take it seriously. But the fact is, she was killed,'<sup>154</sup> said Sagarika Ghose, consulting editor for the Times of India, who also received death threats after Gauri was murdered.

In Vietnam, the environmental activist Le My Hanh and blogger Trinh Dinh Hoa were brutally beaten, while they were live streaming about the environmental disaster caused by the Taiwanese Steel Plants on Facebook. A second attack against Le My Hanh was filmed and posted on Facebook.<sup>155</sup>

### **Impact of cyber violence on women and their freedom of expression**

The impact women experience as a result of cyber violence and hate speech is not different from what it would be if these attacks had happened offline. All forms of violence against women have serious effects on their physical and psychological well-being. Those effects do not only have immediate and long-term consequences to the targeted individual, but also on the community and society at large.

Research conducted by Amnesty International in 2017 revealed the alarming psychological impact that online abuse has on women and how it changes the way women use online platform, such as Twitter. Among 4,000 women surveyed across eight countries in Europe and the United States, 55 per cent of those who had experienced abuse or harassment online had panic attacks, anxiety or stress; 56 per cent felt less able to focus on everyday tasks; 61 per cent suffered a loss of self-esteem or lowered self-confidence; and 32 per cent said they had stopped posting content that expressed their opinion on certain issue.<sup>156</sup>

Cyber violence against women can have long-term effects on women's reputations and damage their livelihood. As women are pushed out of cyber space out of fear of

<sup>154</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/listeningpost/2018/10/trolls-threats-online-harassment-female-journalists-181006101141463.html>

<sup>155</sup> <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/beating-environmental-rights-defender-le-my-hanh>

<sup>156</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/11/amnesty-reveals-alarming-impact-of-online-abuse-against-women/>

being victimised or retaliation, cyber violence has direct economic costs for women who depend on the Internet for a living. In cases involving gender-based sexual abuse, the victim's employment status can be undermined by privacy attacks and personal information released online. It can cause consequences that demand long-term treatment, individual and public expenditure for medical protection, and judicial and social services.<sup>157</sup>

Different forms of harm caused by online abuse have a silencing effect on women. They prevent women from fully expressing their opinion or participating in discussions that they are interested in or need to engage in. This effect is more evident when it comes to women who speak about issues related to political or social change.

71 per cent of women right's activists and feminists surveyed in six countries in Asia and Africa said online violence and abuse affected their participation on social media, including being less willing to participate in public discourse online, and withdrawing from certain conversations on the Internet or social media.<sup>158</sup> One women's rights activist from Nepal responded to the survey by saying 'I tend to self-censor what I say, especially if [sending something] from an organizational aspect. It's kind of draining. I don't find the internet very comfortable now.'

Journalists nowadays rely a lot on online platforms and social media to gather information, disseminate their stories, and interact with their audiences. The disproportionate attacks against female journalists, both on and offline, have direct negative effects on their career development and cause trouble establishing rapport with their sources.

Nearly 30 per cent of female journalists indicated getting out of the profession after receiving threats and attacks. Early-career journalists are nearly twice as likely to have considered getting out of the profession compared to their older colleagues.<sup>159</sup> Seeing violence against other journalists also has a deterrent effect. Even journalists who have never been harassed may be dissuaded from covering sensitive subjects or from posting too often on social networks. Harassers send a message to all journalists, not just their victims.

<sup>157</sup> [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604979/IPOL\\_STU\(2018\)604979\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604979/IPOL_STU(2018)604979_EN.pdf)

<sup>158</sup> <https://www.womankind.org.uk/docs/default-source/default-document-library/breaking-the-silence-policy-briefing.pdf>

<sup>159</sup> <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/ifj-survey-two-thirds-of-women-journalists-suffered-gender-based-online-attacks.html>

## **Make violence against women visible**

Despite various forms of online attacks against women and the tremendous impact on women's health, safety, and their fundamental right to freedom of expression, the severity of gender-based online attacks is often underestimated or neglected. Lack of gender-responsive ICT services, laws and policies, means that those who commit or support online attacks against women are often not held accountable.

How others respond affects the way victims react to and handle online threats or harassment in the long term. When a support system is not available, the victims of online violence may keep silent or feel ashamed when they are attacked again; whereas victims are likely to feel more confident and safer to share their experiences and speak up against such violence if they know access to remedies is available.

In addition to the lack of a support system, the effect of online attacks needs to be recognised by relevant authorities and the victims themselves in order to find a solution. For many who work on defending rights of others, it may not be easy to admit they are affected by online violence, as they want to be seen as tough and resilient. A survey conducted in Norway revealed that journalists are not used to seeing themselves as victims, and it is perceived as an admission of failure to say that harassment has affected them.<sup>160</sup>

Due to impunity and lack of awareness, online attacks and violence against women are often not recognised, tolerated, normalised or even encouraged. The same happens offline. Online attacks against women are a continuum of violence offline, and reflect patriarchal norms that are rooted in society. They contribute to the reinforcement of the unequal power relationship between women and men. It stems from a reluctance to accept women's agency, and a fear of dishonour to the family and society attached to the mobility and sexuality of women.

Faced with such challenges, it is important to: work with media and social media companies to tackle online hate speech, harassment and attacks against women; establish gender-sensitive monitoring mechanism; organise online support group; and equip those targeted with digital security knowledge to protect themselves.<sup>161</sup>

Ultimately, the imposed gender roles are something we need to continue to fight back, 'so that both men and women are treated equally as human beings,' said Khin Ohmar, Chairperson of Progressive Voice.<sup>162</sup> Online violence against women cannot

<sup>160</sup> <https://www.osce.org/fom/220411?download=true>

<sup>161</sup> <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=27874>

<sup>162</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/FORUMASIA/photos/a.1880388291976680/1880388501976659/?type=3&heater>



be fully solved unless the social and cultural norms that are at the core of the power struggle which this violence stems from are addressed and challenged. As well explained by British activist and journalist Caroline Criado-Perez, 'We live in a world where successful masculinity has been historically defined as dominance, leadership, and the occupation of the public arena. Until we change the meaning of masculinity so that it no longer hinges on being the dominant sex, we are never going to truly tackle this problem.'<sup>163</sup>

<sup>163</sup> <https://www.osce.org/fom/220411?download=true>