

Supporting Safer Digital Spaces

Highlights

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Full report available at:
www.cigionline.org/safer-internet



About the Project

Supporting a Safer Internet is a research project led by the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) in partnership with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The project explores the prevalence and impacts of technology-facilitated gender-based violence experienced by women and transgender, gender non-conforming and gender-diverse people, as well as technology-facilitated violence against LGBTQ+ individuals, through country surveys, papers and reports.

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Context

Digital technologies are being used to inflict significant harms online, in particular with regard to technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) and technology-facilitated violence (TFV) against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQ+) people. This modern form of violence perpetuates inequality and has significant impacts on its targets, including silencing the voices of women and LGBTQ+ people online.

Urgent attention is needed to address this form of violence and make digital spaces safer for all.

In our technologically saturated world, modern tools such as social media platforms, digital cameras and instant messaging have been weaponized and misused by abusers, causing significant systemic and individual harms. Women, girls and LGBTQ+ people are disproportionately harmed by TFV and they are more likely to be targeted because of their gender identity, gender expression or sexual orientation.

Hate speech, image-based sexual abuse, threats, doxing and cyberstalking are some of the forms of TFV that have become commonplace in digital spaces. The harms caused by TFV impact people in their everyday digital and physical lives, which are inseparable. Those targeted by TFV often experience increased mental distress, heightened feelings of fear, economic losses, reduced ability to engage online safely and, in some cases, physical attacks, which sometimes even result in death.

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Project Overview

When the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) agreed to partner on the project Supporting a Safer Internet, there was an understanding that the research would be groundbreaking.

This is one of the first large-scale quantitative international surveys of women and LGBTQ+ people's experiences with online harms that predominantly focused on countries in the Global South. This project aimed to remedy that data gap and to provide concrete evidence of those experiences to both inform and, ultimately, influence policy.

Data was collected from 18,149 people of all genders in 18 countries (Algeria, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Ecuador, France, Germany, India, Jordan, Kenya, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates [UAE] and the United States).¹

Previous research has identified various methods of TFGBV and TFV commonly experienced by LGBTQ+ people. This prior research informed the types of harms surveyed for this study, which focused on the influence of gender and sexual orientation on people's experiences with online harms. Additionally, this survey is limited to online gender-based violence (OGBV) and violence against LGBTQ+ people online, rather than the broader TFGBV, which includes non-internet-connected digital technologies. The following figure outlines the 13 forms of online harm selected for the survey.

¹ Participants in Algeria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and the UAE were not asked to report their sexual orientation or gender identity due to safety and legal limitations in those countries.

Forms of Online Harm



- 1** Physically threatened online (e.g., a death threat, rape threat, threat of physical harm)
- 2** Blackmailed online (e.g., someone threatening to post private information about them unless they did something in return, including sextortion)
- 3** Monitored, tracked or spied on online (e.g., by GPS location, or someone keeping track of what they say or do online)
- 4** Someone accessing devices or social media accounts belonging to them without permission
- 5** Called discriminatory names or derogatory cultural terms (e.g., sexist or racist names)
- 6** Personal nude or sexual images of them shared or shown to someone else or posted online without permission (non-consensual use of intimate images)
- 7** Unwanted sexual images sent to them
- 8** Having personal contact information or address posted online without permission (doxing)
- 9** Lies posted online about them (defamation)
- 10** Online impersonation (e.g., someone makes a fake account of them)
- 11** Repeatedly contacted by someone they do not want to be contacted by
- 12** Networked harassment (e.g., a group of people organized online attacks against them)
- 13** Experienced harassment online because of their gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, gender expression or other marginalizing factors (gendered harassment)

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- | | |
|-----------|---------------|
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| Chile | Saudi Arabia |
| China | South Africa |
| Colombia | Tunisia |
| Ecuador | UAE |
| France | United States |

Results

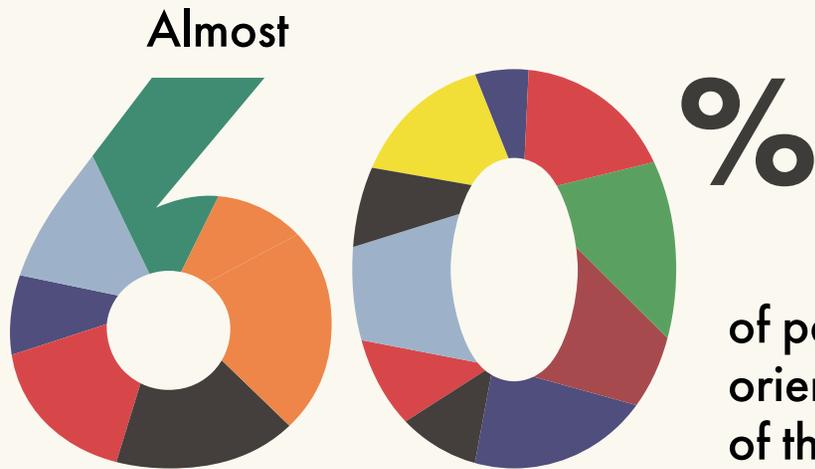
The data demonstrates the widespread nature of online harms and the greater negative impact of online harms on LGBTQ+ people and women.

- Almost 60 percent (59.7 percent) of all participants of all genders and sexual orientations had experienced at least one of the 13 forms of online harm surveyed.
- Transgender and gender-diverse people reported the highest proportion of incidents experienced, with cis women reporting slightly higher proportions of incidents of online harm compared to cis men.
- Although men and women reported relatively similar numbers of incidents of online harm in several categories, women were much more likely to report a negative impact from online harms compared to men.
- LGBTQ+ people were much more likely to report a serious impact from online harms compared to heterosexual and cisgendered people.
- Women were much more likely to rate the various forms of online harm as harmful compared to men.

Women were much more likely to report a negative impact from online harms compared to men.

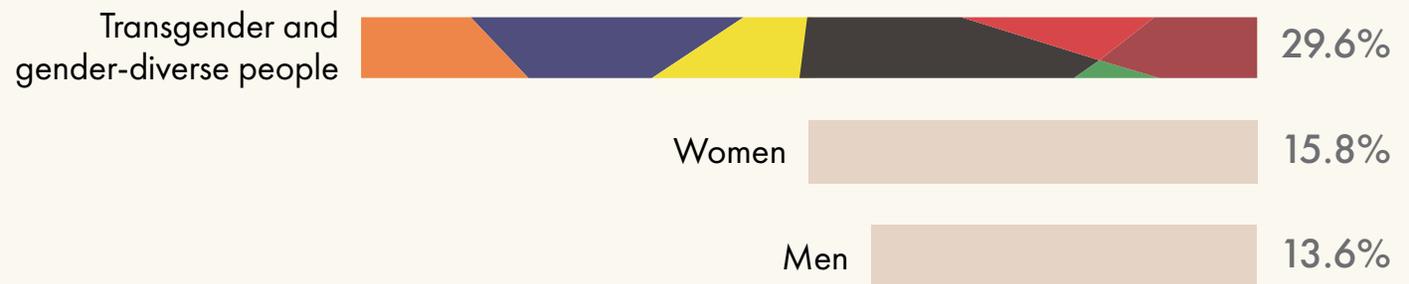
The data also emphasized the serious implications for participants' mental health.

- More than one-quarter (27.7 percent) of all participants reported a very negative impact on their mental health.
- People identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual and other sexualities (LGB+) reported some of the most negative effects on their mental health (35.8 percent) (compared to heterosexual people); higher proportions of transgender and gender-diverse people (29.8 percent) and women (29.4 percent) reported very negative impacts on their mental health than men (21.8 percent).
- A higher proportion of transgender and gender-diverse people reported that being targeted online very negatively impacted their desire to live (29.6 percent) compared to women (15.8 percent) and men (13.6 percent).



of participants of all genders and sexual orientations have experienced at least one of the 13 forms of online harm surveyed.

A higher proportion of transgender and gender-diverse people reported that being targeted online very negatively impacted their desire to live.



Survey participants showed an awareness of the disproportionate challenges that women and LGBTQ+ people face in digital spaces.

A significantly higher proportion of participants recognized that OGBV was a serious issue for women and LGBTQ+ people compared to men. When participants were asked who OGBV was a big problem for:

- 46.5 percent reported that it was a very big problem for LGBTQ+ people;
- 44.3 percent reported that it was a very big problem for women; and
- 22.7 percent reported that it was a very big problem for men.

People identifying as LGB+ reported some of the most negative effects on their mental health.

Gender differences were also apparent in who perpetrated the various forms of online harm.

The data showed that men's behaviour in digital spaces contributes to much of the most harmful forms of online harm, including OGBV and online violence against LGBTQ+ people. A high proportion of participants reported that men were the perpetrators of the most serious incidents of online harm they experienced:

- Close to half of all participants (49.7 percent) — the highest proportion of all categories — reported that a man perpetrated the most serious digital attack they personally experienced.
- More than half of women (57.7 percent) and transgender and gender-diverse people (51.6 percent) reported that it was a man who targeted them, compared to 42.9 percent of men.
- Almost one-quarter of participants (24.8 percent) could not identify the gender of the person (for example, when the person used an anonymous user profile that did not indicate their gender).
- A smaller percentage, 18.9 percent, reported that a woman was the person who targeted them.
- A very small percentage, 1.1 percent, of participants reported a person of an “other” gender was the person who targeted them.

Data showed that men's behaviour in digital spaces contributes to much of the most harmful forms of online harm.

The identity of an individual played an important role in why they were targeted.

Of the most serious incidents of online harm experienced, most participants reported that they were targeted because of their gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, religion or disability:

- Transgender and gender-diverse people (31.8 percent) and women (29.8 percent) were more likely to report they were targeted because of their gender identity than men (16.0 percent).
- Transgender and gender-diverse people (24.0 percent) were more likely to report they were targeted because of their gender expression than men (8.6 percent) and women (8.2 percent), as were LGB+ people (17.8 percent) compared to heterosexual people (7.8 percent).

- LGB+ people (42.7 percent) were more likely to report they were targeted because of their sexual orientation than heterosexual people (6.6 percent).
- Of all participants, 14.5 percent reported being targeted because of their race/ethnicity; 13.5 percent because of their age; 12.1 percent because of their religion; and 3.5 percent because of their disability.

The data showed that participants often did not speak to others about experiencing online harms and had difficulties accessing effective support and resources.

A large number of participants did not speak to anyone about their experience. Of those who did reach out for help, few formal mechanisms were rated as “very effective,” showing that there is a long way to go in creating and improving supports for victims/survivors of online harms. This issue is particularly relevant in the Global South, where there are often fewer laws related to TFV in place, there may be challenges with the rule of law and there are fewer resources available for victims/survivors of TFV. Among the most serious incidents of online harm:

- Almost 40 percent (39.6 percent) of the participants who had experienced a serious incident of online harm did not reach out to anyone for help, not even friends or family.

- Very few (10.1 percent or less) sought formal support from online platforms (i.e., social media companies), government services, the police or civil society organizations.

In response to incidents of online harm, people most commonly blocked or muted someone (51.7 percent), changed their privacy settings (37.6 percent), took a break from social media (26.7 percent), or deleted or deactivated their social media account (25.2 percent).

The data demonstrates that online harms are a rampant and serious issue that needs more attention, and that particular attention must be paid to the experiences of women and LGBTQ+ people, who are more significantly impacted by online harms.

Furthermore, participants identified police (23.0 percent), governments (19.4 percent) and policy makers (17.8 percent) as the organizations with the most responsibility to address OGBV, demonstrating that there is a desire for legal and governmental intervention into these issues.

Almost 40 percent of the participants who had experienced a serious incident of online harm did not reach out to anyone for help.

Recommendations

Specific selected recommendations, drawn from the project's special report, *Supporting Safer Digital Spaces*, are targeted toward governments, technology companies and civil society organizations, researchers, academics and think tanks. For all of these recommendations, stakeholders should take a human rights-based, equity-focused, trauma-informed, survivor-centric and intersectional feminist approach.

Governments

- When addressing TFV through laws, policies and resource distribution, engage with specialists in TFV, including civil society organizations, victims/survivors and academics who specialize in working with equity-seeking groups impacted by TFV to ensure the approaches and remedies governments propose fully address the real needs of those who have been harmed by TFV. Ensure that there are independent civil society organizations that are properly resourced to provide direct supports to victims/survivors of TFV.
- Take a clear public stance against TFV, in particular, forms that are disproportionately harmful to equity-seeking groups, such as women, girls, LGBTQ+ people, people with disabilities, Indigenous people, and members of racial, ethnic and religious groups who are discriminated against.
- Ensure concepts of freedom of expression, sexual autonomy and privacy rights use a human rights-based approach. Take into consideration the silencing effect of TFV and the rights of equity-seeking groups to express themselves safely and authentically in digital spaces.
- Review existing laws that could apply to TFV to ensure that the language of those laws is able to capture TFV. Avoid an overreliance on criminal law solutions and ensure that there are non-criminal legal options available to victims/survivors, such as civil laws, privacy/data protection laws, human rights laws, administrative options or government-funded community-based solutions, that address TFV.
- Provide adequate and appropriate training to all actors in the justice system — from police to judges — to ensure they have the skills and knowledge to properly address TFV using a human rights-based approach, including knowledge on various technologies, digital evidence, human rights, racial bias, gender-based violence and violence against LGBTQ+ people.

Technology Companies

- Avoid business practices that prioritize content views and user engagement over ensuring platforms and products are compliant with human rights and safe for users.
- Continue to develop and improve technical tools that users can use to protect themselves from TFV and provide clear information on how to use them. Provide adequate investment in these tools and education. Ensure that any algorithmic tools used do not amplify discriminatory content or discriminate against equity-seeking groups.
- Ensure that content moderation policies effectively address TFV using a human rights-based, equity-focused, trauma-informed, survivor-centric and intersectional feminist approach.
- Meaningfully engage with civil society organizations, researchers and academics with expertise on TFV, as well as victims/survivors, to improve policies and responses to TFV. Ensure that content moderation policies are transparent and easy to use. Rules should be clear, and users should be able to determine what content is harmful according to those companies' policies. This should include clear appeal processes to challenge decisions.
- Work collaboratively with civil society organizations that support victims/survivors of TFV to help facilitate fast-track channels related to incidents of TFV reported to those organizations.

Ensure that content moderation policies are transparent and easy to use.

Civil Society Organizations, Researchers, Academics and Think Tanks

- Engage with community members and victims/survivors to create culturally relevant education campaigns and supports with a human rights focus aimed at preventing and addressing TFV, including the root causes of TFV (such as sexism, homophobia, transphobia, racism, ableism, religious discrimination and colonialism).
- Develop and expand on human rights-based, equity-focused, trauma-informed, survivor-centric, and intersectional feminist research and supports. Provide information on best practices for staying safe in digital spaces, and where to report and how best to manage incidents of TFV.
- Prioritize research agendas that examine the impact of TFV on equity-seeking groups, as well as the effectiveness of educational campaigns, policies, regulations, laws and supports available to victims/survivors of TFV.
- Work with governments and technology companies to develop policies, regulations and laws to address TFV, but also hold governments, technology companies and other stakeholders accountable for promises and actions to end TFV and mobilize actions where necessary.
- Participate in global meetings with multilaterals and the private sector to push the agenda to end TFV and business models that benefit from or fail to address TFV and develop networks with other civil society organizations and academics to share research and support a global effort to end TFV.

Prioritize research agendas that examine the impact of TFV on equity-seeking groups.

Centre for International Governance Innovation

About CIGI

The Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) is an independent, non-partisan think tank whose peer-reviewed research and trusted analysis influence policy makers to innovate. Our global network of multidisciplinary researchers and strategic partnerships provide policy solutions for the digital era with one goal: to improve people's lives everywhere. Headquartered in Waterloo, Canada, CIGI has received support from the Government of Canada, the Government of Ontario and founder Jim Balsillie.

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