



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
14 December 2022

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-seventh session

6–17 March 2023

**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to
the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and
peace for the twenty-first century”**

Statement submitted by Liberal International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Ending Online Violence against Women in Politics

Liberal International is concerned with the increasing and disproportionate incidence of online abuse against politically active women, and with the lack of resources and education to document incidents of hate speech and to address disinformation. This is an emerging technological threat to female leadership and the empowerment of women and girls.

Reaffirming the findings of the expert paper on “Online Threats to Women’s Political Participation and The Need for a Multi-Stakeholder, Cohesive Approach to Address Them” presented at the 65th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, we identify a greater need to address the antidemocratic impacts of online abuse disenfranchising women and girls from political participation and expression.

Women politicians are more frequently targeted by online incivility than their male counterparts. The Center for International Governance and Innovation describes the gendered threats that civically active women face online as including harassment, impersonation, stalking, disinformation, sexual slurs and images, doxxing, threats of rape, deepfakes and surveillance.

A global survey by the National Democratic Institute found that of 14,000 girls in 22 countries, 98 per cent use social media, and half reported being attacked for their opinions before they were old enough to vote.

Women who are part of minority groups are targeted more severely. A 2017 study by Amnesty International UK found that women from Black and minority ethnic groups were 84 per cent more likely to be the target of abusive tweets.

For those women who have entered the political sphere, cyberbullying is often used to discredit them and to perpetuate the myth that women are unfit for office.

A 2021 study by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems of online violence against politically and civically engaged women in Bangladesh found that perpetrators often engage in character assassination and defamation, with the effect of deterring women from entering or staying in politics and causing lasting damage to their reputations.

Perpetrators also often perpetuate gender stereotypes that women are not intelligent enough for politics, which reverberates to discredit women and girls in broader social contexts.

An EU study found that right-wing actors were spreading disinformation about women online to frame them as incapable of prioritising relevant policies. In the Philippines and Poland, state-aligned actors were found to spread gendered disinformation online to shame, humiliate, and devalue women in politics. In Belarus, Russian smear campaigns attempted to discredit Belarussian opposition leader Svetlana Tsikhanoukaya as having an IQ “slightly higher than that of an orangutan” and calling her a puppet of external actors.

Digital violence is not limited to cyberspace; it can pose tangible harms to politically active women’s lives outside of the web by damaging public image, sharing private information, targeting private life, and impacting personal relationships and networks.

Private footage of Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin at a party prompted widespread media criticism that resulted in her taking a drug test and issuing a public apology.

Laurie Penny, a British political journalist, received direct threats to her and her family for criticizing neo-liberal economic policymaking.

California Congresswoman Katie Hill's nude photos were leaked and published by right-wing press.

Congresswoman Katherine Clark, Republican Representative Marjorie Taylor Green, and former Gubernatorial candidate Kandiss Taylor were victims of swatting, where hoax calls were made to lure police to their houses.

This unregulated sphere thus poses a serious threat to democracy as women, especially those of racial and ethnic minorities, are shamed, harassed, discouraged, and intimidated from participating in public life and political expression.

A study by the National Democratic Institute observed that this abuse produces a 'chilling effect,' in which online violence decreases politically active women's willingness to continue engaging in social media. Following cyber abuse women would post less, pause their activity, or leave social media altogether.

This decreases women's visibility and ability to engage with their electorates, harming women's political participation and ability to be elected for office.

While organisations, countries, and regional groupings have enacted legislation and programs that prohibit and punish online defamation, revenge pornography, and hate crimes, such as Kenya's cybercrimes law or United Kingdom's online safety bill, the existing body of legislation is insufficient.

The first issue is that these documents are applicable within national or regional borders, while online violence occurs on borderless virtual platforms. It is thus imperative to coordinate a collective response to protect women online.

A second criticism is that poorly defined legislation governing internet use can be used to suppress freedom of expression and dissent. It is thus important to develop clear definitions of gendered online violence, outline clear consequences for specific forms of online harassment that consider gender and marginalised minorities, and to promote education about online abuse.

If we are to have governments that advocate for gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, we need to embed cross-border accountability in the use of technology and digital space so that it becomes a tool for women politicians to partake in political progress, not a threat to their political success.

Recommendations

Liberal International urges the Commission on the Status of Women to:

- Promote the impact of digital violence as a threat to democracy;
- Support the enactment of enforceable cross-border agreements on data protection and hate speech, with fair and equal application regardless of gender and minority group;
- Support the enactment and enforcement of cyber laws and consequences for gendered online violence and harassment and the strengthening of cybersecurity, without hindering freedom of expression;
- Encourage all parliaments and political parties to adopt policies and enforceable mechanisms on gendered digital abuse and violence;
- Promote anti-online abuse campaigns for all genders, monitoring and reporting of cyber abuse, enforcement of cyber protection laws, digital hygiene training

for women, cybersecurity resources, and mental health support for victims of online violence;

- Work with civil society to address the root causes of cyber abuse and monitor and document instances of online violence;
 - Consult with large online social media platforms and media partners to develop best practices on combating false political advertising and gendered hate speech and to develop information-sharing practices to better address hate speech; and
 - Address the disproportionate and intersectional impacts of ethnicity, minority status, sexuality, and economic class and online violence.
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