

Women and Online Abuse in India
Submission to Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women

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In the Indian context, the internet has played a critical role in opening up rights for women on one side of the digital divide, giving them access to vital (at times, life altering) information and an opportunity to exercise (some for the first time) their right to free speech and expression through platforms such as blogs, micro blogs and social media.

However, as in their lives offline, in the online medium too they face harassment, violence and abuse. This can take the form of hacking, morphing of images, fake profiles on social networking sites or circulation of images without their consent - not just from strangers but from those known to them. Or it can take the form of gendered hate mail, sexualised slurs, uncomfortable references to body, nudity, sex life, and rape threats, which are sometimes explicit and graphic.

This harassment draws invisible but tangible boundaries for women within which to exercise their freedom of speech and expression. The boundary shrinks each time they experience harassment. It is vital to strike back at online harassment and preserve women's right to free speech.

There are continuities between the violences that women face online and offline. Women say they experience the internet as a street and the attendant forms of online violence as equivalent to harassment and abuse faced on the street. The issue then is how to make the spaces of the internet safe for women to freely access and use.

Women themselves adopt numerous strategies to deal with abuse online. These include: ignoring it, moderating comments on forums that allow this, blocking persistent or vicious abusers, reporting abusers, looking for and finding support, naming and shaming, taking abusers head-on, and self-censorship. Women refuse victimhood in these situations, instead turning to their own resources or to online communities of support.

Women's responses to online violence often mirror their responses to offline violence. Women are reluctant to turn to the law even in extreme cases of online abuse. Women don't want to tell their families about this, since the response may be denial of access to the internet or questions about their own online behaviour or discouragement to report or make it public.

We are convinced that online violence in India must be seen within the context of the misogyny, sexism and circumstances of violence against women in India that exists 'offline' that is, in the broader society, and too much cannot be made of the distinction between the online and the offline when it comes to violence against women.

It is vital to ensure that women can freely continue to inhabit online spaces. To do so, we must ensure that laws framed ostensibly to 'protect' women in these situations do not frame women as victims or take away women's agency. Such laws must take as their starting point women's rights, not obscenity or morality. Such laws must also not restrict women's rights to free speech and expression that they exercise online; instead, they must empower women to freely exercise this right.