

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PRESS RELEASE

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Amnesty reveals alarming impact of online abuse against women

New research by Amnesty International has revealed the alarming impact that abuse and harassment on social media are having on women, with women around the world reporting stress, anxiety, or panic attacks as a result of these harmful online experiences.

The organization commissioned an IPSOS MORI poll which looked at the experiences of women between the ages of 18 and 55 in Denmark, Italy, New Zealand, Poland, Spain, Sweden, the UK and USA.

Nearly a quarter (23%) of the women surveyed across these eight countries said they had experienced online abuse or harassment at least once, ranging from 16% in Italy to 33% in the US. Alarmingly, 41% of women who had experienced online abuse or harassment said that on at least one occasion, these online experiences made them feel that their physical safety was threatened.

“The internet can be a frightening and toxic place for women. It’s no secret that misogyny and abuse are thriving on social media platforms, but this poll shows just how damaging the consequences of online abuse are for the women who are targeted,” said Azmina Dhrodia, Amnesty International’s Researcher on Technology and Human Rights.

“This is not something that goes away when you log off. Imagine getting death threats or rape threats when you open an app, or living in fear of sexual and private photos being shared online without your consent. The particular danger of online abuse is how fast it can proliferate – one abusive tweet can become a barrage of targeted hate in a matter of minutes. Social media companies need to truly start taking this problem seriously.”

Stress, anxiety, panic attacks

Amnesty International polled women describing themselves as moderate to active internet users about their experiences of online abuse and harassment.

Across all countries, just under half (46%) of women responding to the survey who had experienced online abuse or harassment said it was misogynistic or sexist in nature.

Between one-fifth (19% in Italy) and one-quarter of women who had experienced abuse or harassment said it had included threats of physical or sexual assault.

58% of survey participants across all countries who had experienced abuse or harassment said it had included racism, sexism, homophobia or transphobia.

26% of women who'd experienced abuse or harassment across all countries surveyed said personal or identifying details of them had been shared online (also known as "doxing").

Over half (59%) of women who'd experienced abuse or harassment online said it came from complete strangers.

The psychological impact of online abuse can be devastating.

- Across all countries 61% of those who said they'd experienced online abuse or harassment said they'd experienced lower self-esteem or loss of self-confidence as a result.
- More than half (55%) said they had experienced stress, anxiety or panic attacks after experiencing online abuse or harassment.
- 63% said they had not been able to sleep well as a result of online abuse or harassment. Three-quarters (75%) in New Zealand reported this effect.
- Well over half (56%) said online abuse or harassment had meant that they had been unable to concentrate for long periods of time.

A silencing effect

Social media platforms, especially for women and marginalized groups, are a critical space for individuals to exercise the right to freedom of expression. Online violence and abuse are a direct threat to this freedom of expression.

Over three quarters (76%) of women who said that they had experienced abuse or harassment on a social media platform made changes to the way they use the platforms. This included restricting what they post about: 32% of women said they'd stopped posting content that expressed their opinion on certain issues.

"Social media has helped enhance freedom of expression, including access to information in many ways. But as offline discrimination and violence against women have migrated into the digital world, many women are stepping back from public conversations, or self-censoring out of fear for their privacy or safety," said Azmina Dhrodia.

Around a quarter (24%) of women surveyed who said that they had experienced abuse said that it had made them fear for their family's safety.

Social media companies not doing enough

All types of violence and abuse online require responses from governments, companies, or both, depending on their type and severity.

In all countries polled, significantly more women said government policies to respond to abuse were inadequate versus adequate, with 5 times as many women in Sweden stating the policies were inadequate (57%). Around 1/3 of women in the UK (33%), USA and New Zealand (32%), stated the police response to abuse online was inadequate.

The survey also indicates that women feel social media companies need to do more. Just 18% of women polled across all countries said that the responses of social media companies were very, fairly or completely adequate.

“Social media companies have a responsibility to respect human rights, including the right to freedom of expression. They need to ensure that women using their platforms are able to do so freely and without fear,” said Azmina Dhrodia.

Amnesty International notes that the right to freedom of expression protects expression which may be offensive, deeply disturbing, and sexist. However, freedom of expression does not include advocacy of hatred or violence. What’s more, the right to freedom of expression must be enjoyed equally by everyone, and includes the right for women to express themselves and live free from violence and abuse, both online and offline.

Social media platforms explicitly state that they do not tolerate targeted abuse on the basis of a person’s gender or other forms of identity, and they now need to enforce their own community standards. They should also enable and empower users to utilize individual security and privacy measures such as blocking, muting and content filtering. This will allow women, and users in general, to curate a less toxic and harmful online experience.

Social media companies must also ensure that moderators are trained in identifying gender and other identity-related threats and abuse on their platforms.

Amnesty International is also calling on governments to ensure that adequate laws, policies, practices and training are in place to prevent and end online violence and abuse against women. However, it is critical that no undue restrictions or penalties are placed on the legitimate exercise of freedom of expression. Tackling online violence and abuse must not be used as an excuse to reduce the enjoyment of freedom of expression.

Methodology

The research was carried out by Ipsos MORI, using an online quota survey of 500 women aged 18-55 in each country, via the Ipsos Online Panel system.

In each country, fieldwork quotas were set on the age, region and working status of the women surveyed according to known population proportions in each country.

Data were weighted using a RIM weighting method, to the same targets to correct for potential biases in the sample.

The survey sample in each country was designed to be nationally representative of women in that country. The margin of error for the total sample in each country varies between 3% and 4%.

Overall, 4,000 women were surveyed across 8 countries, 911 of whom said that they had experienced online abuse or harassment and 688 of whom said that they had experienced this on a social media site.

Country	Total number of women 18-55 surveyed	Total number of women who say they have experienced online abuse or harassment	Total number who say they have experienced online abuse or harassment on a social media platform
UK	n=504	n=106	n=85
US	n=500	n=167	n=139
New Zealand	n=500	n=142	n=116
Spain	n=500	n=94	n=68
Italy	n=501	n=81	n=62
Poland	n=501	n=86	n=56
Sweden	n=500	n=147	n=99
Denmark	n=503	n=88	n=63

For more information or to arrange an interview please contact **Amnesty's press office on 0044 (0) 20 7413 5566, or email ruby.stockham@amnesty.org**