

# FREE TO BE ONLINE?

Girls' and young women's experiences  
of online harassment

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This year, Plan International's annual **State of the World's Girls** report is based on research – conducted across 31 countries with over 14,000 girls and young women – aimed at uncovering and understanding their experiences of being online on social media platforms.



More than half of girls surveyed, from around the world, have been harassed and abused online.

One in four girls abused online feels physically unsafe as a result.



Online abuse is silencing girls' voices.

“Social media can be a really amazing place to, for example, speak out and share information... but also, can be a horrible place where, I don't know, crazy people can have an anonymous place to throw shade and hate...So, it's very difficult because of that, because you can be anonymous and just like do horrible things.”

Young woman, 22, Chile

Perpetrators who threaten rape and physical violence, use abusive and sexist language, post manipulated photos and send pornographic pictures are able to remain anonymous and unconstrained; girls are often afraid, begin to restrict what they post and are forced to try and protect themselves.

“And in the worst situations, I just felt really unsafe because it confuses me how this one specific guy could find so many details about my life and it made me concerned that he could find my address and come to my house.”

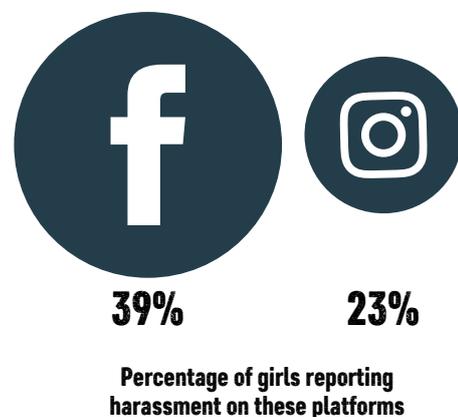
Young woman, 23, USA

## FREE TO BE ONLINE? WHAT GIRLS ARE SAYING

Girls are targeted online just because they are young and female, and if they are politically outspoken, disabled, Black or identify as LGBTIQ+, it gets worse. Harassment ranges from being put down for your opinions, to being threatened with violence, to being besieged by unwanted pornographic images. Like street harassment it is unremitting, often psychologically damaging and can lead to actual physical harm.

- 58 per cent of girls surveyed have experienced online harassment.
- 24 per cent, about one in four girls, who have been harassed are left feeling physically unsafe, 42 per cent lose self-esteem or self-confidence, 42 per cent feel mentally or emotionally stressed, and 18 per cent have problems at school.
- 50 per cent of girls said they face more online harassment than street harassment.
- 37 per cent of the girls who identified themselves to be from an ethnic minority and have faced harassment said they get harassed because of it.
- 42 per cent of girls who identified themselves as LGBTIQ+ and have faced harassment, said that they get harassed because of it.
- The platform it happens most on is Facebook (39 per cent), followed by Instagram (23 per cent).
- Online harassment starts for girls from the age of 8 and the majority of girls get harassed for the first time between the age of 14-16.

**19 per cent of girls who were harassed very frequently said they use the social media platform less and 12 per cent just stopped using it.**



“My friends who experienced harassment online became less active on social media platforms.”

Girl, 17, Philippines

“I often face harassment online or in public, and it makes me feel unsafe, because every time, whatever I’m doing on social media, people keep commenting...I just feel I cannot express myself freely.”

Young woman, 19, Indonesia

Online harassment is depriving girls and young women of their right to information and education and of the ability to express themselves freely or engage in activism. And this at a time when COVID-19 is driving ever increasing online use.

“But for cyber bullying, mostly it’s getting worse and it’s hard to control, it’s hard to handle. Once it spreads, it’s everywhere, and everyone can see it, and you know, maybe they can make fun of it, they will troll you...I think psychologically, emotionally, it’s really depressing and it has more effect than in real life.”

Young woman, 21, Myanmar

It is very clear that at the moment very little is being done to protect girls and young women online. The treatment they receive is unacceptable, frightening and must be stopped. Someone must take responsibility.

In the survey of 14,000 girls, they were asked who – choosing from the police, social media companies, the government, other social media users or civil society organisations – should do more to fight against online harassment. Social media companies topped the list followed by governments.

### RACIAL JUSTICE ONLINE

In the report girls and young women talk about the many different and combined reasons they are harassed; as well as being young and female, young Black women are objectified and vilified for their race. We stand in solidarity with Black Lives Matter, Black girl and women protestors in all their diversity, and allies who are organising and taking action. Racial justice is a critical and crucial component of justice for girls: **we cannot achieve equality for girls, without achieving equality for Black girls.**



# WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

Governments and society as a whole need to monitor this abuse rigorously and social media companies must use their technological skills and financial resources to put freedom online for girls and young women at the heart of their agenda.

- Create effective and accessible reporting mechanisms that target gender-based violence
- Hold perpetrators to account
- Collect disaggregated data that acknowledges girls' intersecting identities and tracks the scale and size of the problem
- Take this issue seriously

## Social media companies must:

- **Create** stronger, more effective and accessible reporting mechanisms specific to online gender-based violence, that hold perpetrators to account, and are responsive to all girls' needs and experiences, taking into account intersecting identities.
- **Collect and publish** disaggregated data on online gender-based violence that tracks the scale and size of the problem and provides insight into the nature of the harassment and violence against girls and young women in all their diversity.

"I feel like there has to be more investment... 'cause the company doesn't invest money into things, and I feel like they should invest more money into having people actively watch comments."

Girl, 17, Canada

## National governments must:

- **Ensure** their policies on internet access are inclusive and actively ensure gender equality in accessing online spaces. This would include encouraging mobile network operators to enable increased connectivity and mobile internet access.
- **Update** and reform legislative frameworks to deal with online harassment and violence against all girls and young women, bearing in mind specific intersectional characteristics, including: race, ethnicity, age, disability, LGBTIQ+.
- **Enact** laws addressing violence against women and girls, holding social media platforms and other third-party internet platforms to account.
- **Enable** the effective implementation, by all relevant government departments – such as the police, the judiciary, and the prosecution services – of laws and policies addressing online harassment of and online violence against all women and girls.

## Communities, families, civil society, faith-based organisations and other stakeholders must all take this issue seriously:

- **Communities and families** must take steps to engage with girls so that they feel secure in talking about online harassment and know that they are supported.
- **Civil society** should develop and deliver digital citizenship education and awareness raising initiatives on the opportunities as well as risks of being online, with a focus on online abuse.
- **All members of society** should recognise the harm caused by online harassment and violence against women and girls, and become active bystanders reporting abuse and amplifying girls' voices.

"And who should do that? I think everyone. Start from our self, and then people who use social media and also the social media itself."

Young woman, 19, Indonesia