Online Abuse and Harassment Survey – Results

Note to the Home Affairs Select Committee enquiry into hate crime and its violent consequences

March 2017

About us

1. The Fawcett Society is the UK’s leading charity campaigning for gender equality and women’s rights at work, at home, and in public life.

2. Our vision is a society in which the choices you can make and the control you have over your own life are no longer determined by your gender.

3. We publish authoritative research to educate, inform and lead the debate; we bring together politicians, academics, grassroots activists and wider civil society to develop innovative, practical policy solutions and we campaign with women and men to make change happen.

The survey

4. In order to hear from women that use social media about their experiences of online harassment and abuse, Fawcett put an open-access survey out online with support in questionnaire drafting from Reclaim the Internet.

5. Respondents were reached through our social media channels and therefore we would emphasize that they are not a representative sample of women’s experiences across the whole population. However, the survey gives us an opportunity to hear from women who chose to respond. Between the 23rd February 2017 and the 9th March 2017 we heard from 182 people, 97% of whom were women. We are keeping the survey open over the coming months to hear a greater range of views and experiences, and plan to report on it in the future.

6. Our survey asked which platforms respondents used; which they had received abuse or harassment on (and what type); whether they reported it to the social media platform, or the police, and if so what action was taken; and for their views on what needs to be done to make the internet a safer place for women.

Respondents

7. The survey was open to people aged 16+, with the limit set for safeguarding purposes and in line with market research best practice. 4% of respondents were aged 19-24, 23% were aged 25-34, 32% aged 35-44, and 37% aged 45-64. 3% were aged over 65. The ethnicity of 77% of respondents was White British, 3% White Irish, 10% White Other, and 10% BAME. 27% identified as having a disability. In terms of sexuality, 13% said they were bisexual, and 5% lesbian.

Social media use, and harassment or abuse
8. Facebook was the most commonly used platform, with 87% reporting using it, followed by Twitter (69%), WhatsApp (54%), Instagram (40%). Less than 15% used Snapchat, Tumblr, or Reddit. 30% used a range of moderated discussion forums, of which Mumsnet was the most common.

9. Of those using each platform, our respondents saw the most abuse on Facebook or Twitter. 66% of Twitter users reported experiencing abuse or harassment, almost all of them from a stranger or both stranglers and people they know in real life (66% of respondents). 64% reported abuse or harassment on Facebook, where women who answered our survey were more likely to have experienced abuse from people they know (29% of Facebook users). Abuse on other platforms was rarer, with Snapchat (90%), Instagram (88%), and WhatsApp (93%) receiving little, while 42% of Tumblr respondents received abuse and 51% of moderated discussion forum users did, in both cases mostly from strangers.

10. On Facebook and Twitter, sexist messages were the most common type of harassment or abuse experienced, with 64% of those receiving abuse on Facebook and 70% of those receiving abuse on Twitter saying that was the type they had seen. Around a third of women had experienced each of politically extremist hate messages, unwanted sexual messages or images, stalking, and threats of violence. Twitter users had experienced people organising abuse against them in similar proportions.

11. We gave women space to tell us more about the type of abuse they had received, and 45 did so. Almost half described experiencing online abuse and harassment, including threats of violence, from trans activists as a result of the views that the respondents hold on gender. While Fawcett may hold a differing view than that expressed by some of the women in our survey, we entirely condemn the threats of violence they have received. None who reported this abuse on Facebook said action had been taken, whilst action was taken some of the time by Twitter and moderated discussion boards. As this survey was not representative we do not claim that this represents a cross-section of women’s experiences.

12. Aside from this issue, a number of women reported the impact that online harassment had on their ability to speak out. One woman said:

“I used to post regularly about my opinion on the news and suchlike. This occasionally attracted the odd unwelcome comment but was largely OK. However, Brexit and the debate around that (I am a remainer) led to some nasty comments that I really did not deserve. I don't write about politics and current affairs much now on Facebook.”

Another said that:

“I never post anything online under my real name. I consider it too dangerous to do so if expressing any actual opinion about anything. I have seen too many other people get doxxed or stalked, including my sister, who has to use twitter under her real name as part of her job. Also, when choosing pseudonyms, outside of Mumsnet I choose one that is not obviously female. This cuts down on the sexist abuse and unwanted sexual messages and images, somewhat.”

13. Five of the women responding in more depth identified that online abusers, often strangers, had either impersonated them online, or contacted people they know in the real world to attack them.
“Abuse... consisted of a poster changing her username to be almost exactly the same as mine and posting vile posts to make people think it was me”.

**Reporting abuse on social media**

14. Half of Facebook users who experienced abuse said they did not report it to the platform, and nor did 43% of Twitter users. When they did, few reported the platform taking action. 44% of women who used Facebook who had experienced abuse reported it, but saw no action taken, and only 3% said their concerns were acted on. Slightly more women said Twitter took action based on their reports (9%), but 44% said they reported it and no action was taken. Relatively few women used moderated discussion forums, but of those who had experienced harassment or abuse on them, 48% said they had reported it and action had been taken.

15. In the further responses to this question, most women said that the social media platforms had deleted comments. Two women drew comparisons, commenting that “Mumsnet were great - they deleted messages the breached their guidelines, and emailed me personally. Facebook were appalling and ignored my reports that I had been sent death threats”; and that “Twitter removed obvious troll accounts created to specifically target me [but] Tumblr said it was "free speech" and they wouldn't do anything without a court request from the USA, I'm in the UK.”

**What action should social media platforms take?**

16. We asked women responding to the survey which, from a range of options provided based on some of the potential protections that have been discussed in media reports in the past, they wanted to see social media platforms do to stop online abuse and harassment.

17. The option which was most supported was ‘Add a 'panic button' if users are experiencing abuse from a number of accounts’, which 85% of respondents agreed with and only 6% disagreed with, followed by ‘Stop people who have been banned in the past from setting up new accounts’ with 80% agreeing and 10% disagreeing.

18. The options of ‘blocking abusive accounts so their posts can only be seen by their own followers’, ‘using an algorithm to identify accounts or profiles which are likely to be abusive’, and ‘covering up potentially offensive images or posts’ were supported by 71% 61%, and 52% of women, but disagreed with by a larger proportion (19%, 15%, and 22%). Requiring users to use their real name or identity was more disagreed with (45%) than agreed with (42%) – suggesting that a slight plurality of the women who responded values the anonymity the internet allows over the impact they think the measure might have on reducing harassment.

19. 43 women provided longer responses to this question. Many appreciated that tackling this is a real challenge for social media platforms, and one woman identified a situation where feminist groups have been shut down on Facebook through complaints by men’s rights activists.

20. Many women questioned the impact of automated or algorithmic moderators, which they felt often made questionable decisions, and felt platforms could afford to invest in human moderation. A number of women also questioned the quality of moderation staff, and whether they received training that reflected the intersectional identities (i.e. BME, disabled, LGBTQ+) of the people whose posts they were moderating.

21. One woman said that ‘Having more regulation to remove defamatory posts’ could have an impact, citing that “The criteria for removal only seems to apply to extreme posts not false
ones”. A number of responses felt that the definition on Facebook in particular of what was ‘offensive’, often citing the ban on pictures of nipples, was defined from a white male perspective.

22. Other ideas women put forward included requiring people to give real names when signing up to sites, but enabling them to use a moniker online; and a focus on prompting better behaviour, either through messages reminding users about their responsibilities, or through plain-English terms and conditions.

Reporting abuse to the police

23. Few of the women who had experienced abuse on social media had reported it to the police: only 3% of Facebook users and 10% of Twitter users had done so. 4% of Twitter users said the police had taken some action following their reports, although this represents only 3 cases.

24. Few women commented further about contacting the police – neither of the two who had had seen their case go to prosecution, as they were told it did not meet the threshold.

What action should the police take?

25. We asked women responding to our survey whether they agreed with a set of statements about the action the police should take, after presenting them with some basic information on the current legal situation and police activity in this area (copy in Appendix 1). A net 92% agreed that "The police should do more to prosecute people who stalk or continuously harass others online", and a net 88% agreed that "The police should do more to prosecute people who post threatening messages on social media". Agreement was lower but still net 51% that "The police should do more to prosecute people who post grossly offensive messages on social media".

26. When giving further comments as to what the police should do, women primarily asked that the government give online abuse parity with offline abuse, as it ‘can have as big an effect on people as real life’, as well as making further calls for misogyny to be considered a hate crime.

What action should the government take?

27. We also asked what action women wanted to see the government take. Net 79% agreed that "The Government should increase the penalties for people who send threatening messages online", and net 53% agreed that "The Government should increase the penalties for people who send grossly offensive messages online". There was overwhelming support of net 87% agreement that "The Government should require police forces to record misogyny as a hate crime", in line with the status of crimes against each of the other protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010.

28. As with the police, the further comments on this question were predominantly focussed on taking online misogyny seriously; they also called for more work on educating young people about what the boundaries are in online communication to curtail abuse, and on gender more widely.
Appendix 1: Information given to survey respondents on police activity

At present it is illegal to send a social media message to another person which is indecent or grossly offensive, or conveys a threat or false information, with the purpose of causing distress or anxiety.

‘Grossly offensive’ means a message which is beyond the pale. A message has to be more than ordinarily offensive, shocking, or disturbing, or satirical and rude. Most online communications do not pass this test.

Almost 2,000 people were convicted of these offences last year, and a further 1,125 were cautioned. Of these, 228 were given prison sentences. The maximum penalty is up to 2 years imprisonment, and the average sentence is 2.2 months.

Stalking – repeatedly contacting an individual in a way that could cause distress or fear – is illegal online as it is in person or over the phone. The maximum sentence is 6 months’ imprisonment, or five years if there is a reasonable fear of violence.

Misogyny is defined as the hatred of women. A ‘hate incident’ is a term used for an incident which is based on prejudice due to something about a person that they cannot change, like their race or sexual orientation.

At present, only one police force in the UK chooses to record misogyny as a hate crime in the way that racist hate crime or disability hate crime is recorded.