



## ACTION BRIEF



# ELIMINATING ONLINE HATE SPEECH TO SECURE WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Photo: UN Women/Ploy Phutpheng

In Asia and the Pacific, women experience significant barriers to participating in public and political life. Due to economic, social and cultural factors, women's political representation in the region remains comparatively low, and the COVID-19 pandemic is aggravating pre-existing obstacles for women's public engagement. A direct threat to women's political participation is online hate speech and misogyny, which has increased dramatically since the outbreak of the pandemic and has a chilling effect on women's ambition and opportunity to be politically active. In building back better, women's safety in the online sphere needs to be guaranteed to support democratic progress and improve gender equality in public life, during COVID-19 and beyond.

The effects of the pandemic are disproportionately impacting women in multiple ways. Women are at greater risk of ending up in poverty, carrying the burden of household duties, and becoming victims of gender-based violence<sup>i</sup>. Additionally, as COVID-19 lockdowns and other movement restrictions push more people online, digital platforms and online spaces are being increasingly used to spread sexist, inaccurate, and dangerous rhetoric about women, inciting hatred and potentially provoking violence – online and offline.

Research conducted by Mythos Labs for UN Women Asia Pacific from March to June 2020 in South and Southeast Asia, found that online hate speech and misogyny intensified during the pandemic. Both the volume of misogynistic Facebook posts and tweets, as well as individuals' engagement with them (including likes, comments and shares) spiked during COVID-related lockdowns in that period. The results showed a 168-percent increase from the same period in 2019. Tweets from **India**, **Indonesia** and the **Philippines** containing misogynistic language doubled week over week in May<sup>ii</sup>.

Women's access to and safety on online platforms are key to enabling gender equal participation in public life. However, women have comparatively limited access to the Internet. In South Asia, nearly 35 percent fewer women than men have Internet access<sup>iii</sup>, resulting in a digital gender gap that impedes democratic progress and prevents women from participating on equal terms as men. The perception that online platforms provide a forum where violence can proliferate with impunity further emboldens perpetrators and raises women's sense of insecurity online. Much more anonymous than the offline realm, the online sphere can be particularly dangerous to women who are insufficiently protected from gender-based harassment.

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**Online attacks on women risk spilling into the 'real world', threatening women's safety both online and offline.**

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The fear of being confronted with online violence and harassment may force women to waive opportunities to take on certain careers, express themselves and use the full possibilities of the Internet. When women at large restrain

their freedom of expression and public engagement, society as a whole loses a diversity of voices, which widens the democratic gap. The Internet is increasingly a unique and useful tool for political engagement, which is why it is now more important than ever to ensure women's safe and equal engagement on digital platforms.

### WOMEN POLITICIANS ARE SPECIFICALLY TARGETED BY ONLINE HATE SPEECH

All women can be the targets of online attacks, but those involved in politics are particularly susceptible as a result of being in the public eye, and especially if they are advocating for women's human rights. Online violence against women cuts across all sectors of politics - civil society, political parties, elections, and governance - posing one of the main challenges to women's full and equal participation in public life. Data reveals that women politicians are more likely than men to receive online threats, often in the form of sexist and misogynistic remarks, humiliating images, mobbing, intimidation and threats<sup>iv</sup>.

Across **Asia and the Pacific**, women elected to parliament are being targeted with online hate speech, sexual harassment and fake news stories. For example, **Thai** opposition member Pannika Wanich has experienced "all kinds of harassment", from online attacks to body shaming and hate speech. In the **Philippines**, opposition Senator Leila de Lima has been vilified and harassed on social media platforms, and thirty-year-old Sarah Elago, one of the youngest lawmakers in the Philippines, became subject of a fake sex video that circulated on several websites in 2019<sup>v</sup>.

Research conducted by Amnesty International<sup>vi</sup> found that women politicians in **India** receive on average 113 hostile or abusive tweets per day, which equals 1 in every 7 tweets about women politicians, with a fifth being sexist or misogynistic. In total, this amounted to 1 million problematic or abusive mentions of 95 women politicians between March and May 2019, or over 10,000 hostile or abusive tweets every day across all women in the study sample<sup>vii</sup>.



**Women politicians are three times more likely than their male counterparts to experience sexual abuse online (IFES, 2019).**

Similar studies have been made in other countries across the region, such as in **Indonesia**, where research

conducted by National Democratic Institute (NDI) finds that women engaging in politics online often experience different types of violence, including insults, hate speech, humiliation and reputational risks, physical threats, and sexualized misrepresentations<sup>viii</sup>.

When women politicians are targeted with online harassment, it undermines their ability to fulfill their mandates and freely express their opinions. It also creates additional workloads that male counterparts do not experience to the same extent as women politicians have to devote significant time to measures such as improving their security, blocking or reporting abusive users, or combating disinformation.

On a societal level, online violence against women politicians is a direct threat to democracy. Targeted women might reduce their online presence – and therefore their political engagement – or potentially even leave politics entirely. This could negatively impact the next generation of women leaders, who might be dissuaded from entering politics.

### CYBER POLICIES NEED WOMEN'S EXPERTISE

While modern technology is quickly developing in Asia and the Pacific, policy implementation on digital security struggles to keep the same pace, which particularly impacts women who are more at risk on digital platforms.

Having more women in politics is the first defense against online violence directed at women politicians. With more women lawmakers, there is greater potential for more gender-sensitive laws and practices, more just societies, and less violence, both online and offline. Policymakers who understand the barriers to women's internet access and safety are better equipped to address the root causes of online hate speech against women, and to help governments to create policies that specifically target marginalized groups at risk in the digital sphere. When women politicians are underrepresented in decision-making bodies, it reduces the likelihood of laws and policies on online safety to incorporating gendered dimensions that address the specific needs and concerns of women.

### THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES

While gender-sensitive policies and laws relating to the digital world are essential in tackling online hate speech against women, technology companies also need to develop strategies that ensure that their online spaces are safe for its users. This requires a substantive presence of women in the technology industry to inform and influence strategies aimed at improving online safety for women. However, across **Asia and the Pacific**, the technology industry continues to be male dominated. Regionally,

women only account for 32 percent of the workforce in the technology sector, even though research shows that gender diversity makes technology companies more innovative, agile and gender responsive<sup>x</sup>. Development of online security software is likewise male dominated and often pioneered in western countries. These tools to help women protect themselves online – such as password managers, programs to safeguard sensitive files, and virtual private networks (VPNs) – are often too expensive or require fluency in English to use them. Such products are out of reach for many people in the Asia Pacific region, especially women and marginalized groups.

An effective way of involving more women in technology and cyber safety is collaborating with women's organizations and women human right's defenders. In **Indonesia**, Google and women's organizations are jointly implementing a programme where women can flag violent and misogynistic online content, which Google then reviews and removes if deemed inappropriate<sup>x</sup>.

When women are meaningfully involved in improving digital safety, and represented throughout the entire technology sector, the opportunities for protecting and promoting women's online safety increase. Gender balanced workforces are better equipped to account for a diversity of views and ideas, and women employees and partners can better understand and represent the specific needs and concerns of fellow women.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Commission on the Status of Women, at its 65<sup>th</sup> session in 2021, adopted Agreed Conclusions connected to women's safety and political participation. The Agreed Conclusions recognize the growing impact of violence against women in public life, especially in digital contexts, and underline the need for action by Member States in partnership with other stakeholders. They also call on states to protect and promote women's equal rights to engage in political activities and to meaningfully participate at all levels of decision-making, free from violence and threats<sup>xi</sup>.

The realization of women's safe and meaningful political participation requires the elimination of online hate speech. It is essential to view online threats toward women as a broader democratic problem, rather than just a women-specific one, as it negatively affects women who are pushing for positive change, and therefore impedes the prospects for democratic progress.

As online hate speech against women is a greater societal problem with a silencing and excluding effect on women's free speech and public life, the responsibility to adequately protect and empower women in politics should be shared

among stakeholders. The following recommendations are therefore directed to governments, civil society organizations (CSOs), technology companies and researchers in Asia and the Pacific:

1. Advance women's safe, equal and meaningful participation in public and political life, online and offline, including by addressing persistent obstacles that prevent women from engaging in public debates online, such as the threat of online misogyny and hate speech.
2. Implement gender-responsive policies and legislation that criminalizes cyber harassment, including online hate speech against women.
3. Work with diverse grassroots women and women-led organizations to collect information about their experiences of online hate speech, and work collaboratively with them to identify, flag, report and dismantle online barriers to women's political participation.
4. Develop strategies to attract women to the technology sector, such as by creating enabling environments for women to climb the career ladder and take on senior positions. Also encourage young women and girls to study and engage with STEM subjects as a pathway towards such careers.

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