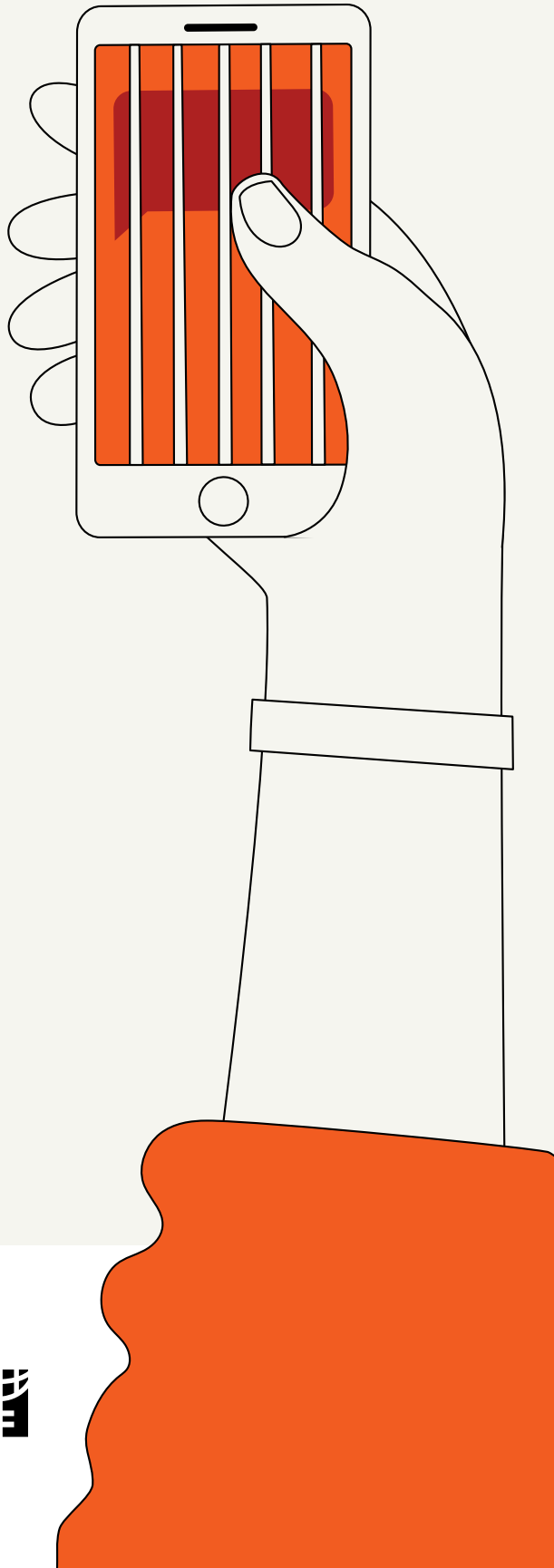
Online gender-based violence against women with a public voice.

Impact on freedom of expression

2022



alianzaregional
Por la Libre Expresión e Información

UN WOMEN

Online gender-based violence against women with a public voice. Impact on freedom of expression

Regional Alliance for Free Expression and Information UN Women

Study author: **Ingrid Beck**, **Florencia Alcaraz** and **Paula Rodríguez**.

General Direction: **María Noel Vaeza**, UN Women Regional Director for the Americas and the Caribbean and **Cecilia Alemany**, UN Women Deputy Regional Director for the Americas and the Caribbean.

This publication was produced within a joint working agreement between the Regional Alliance for Free Expression and Information and UN Women for the Americas and the Caribbean.

Editor and coordinator: **Daniela Urribarri** and **Agustina Arias** from the Regional Alliance for Free Expression and Information.

Layout and design: **Teresa López** and **Emicel Guillén** from the UN Women's Communication Team for the Americas and the Caribbean.

With thanks to Constanza Narancio, Communication Specialist, and Leah Tandeter, Policy Specialist for the Elimination of Violence against Women at UN Women for the Americas and the Caribbean.

Online gender-based violence against women with a public voice.

Impact on freedom of expression

2022

alianzaregional
Por la Libre Expresión e Información

UN WOMEN

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

In the last five years, online gender-based violence has grown exponentially, and how it manifests have multiplied. International agencies and human rights organizations have published papers on its dimensions and consequences. They are focused mainly on women with public voices: journalists, human rights defenders, activists, and politicians.

This report is the most extensive qualitative study conducted in Latin America and the Caribbean. It includes research on 15 cases, with in-depth and semi-structured interviews with women with public voice[1] based in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela. They have received severe online attacks because of their status as women due to their journalistic activity and activism. The organizations in the Regional Alliance[2] were responsible for the interviewees' selection process.

Similarities exist between this and other works:

- Online violence transcends virtuality; it has specific and visible consequences on the people who experience it, and often, it literally continues outside digital platforms. It is a mistake and a minimization of the problem to speak of online violence as something alien, separate, and distanced from structural gender-based violence.

- Women with a public voice, especially journalists, communicators, and human rights defenders[3], are the particular target of systematic online gender-based violence.

- Attacks impact the exercise of freedom of expression by individuals who experience them. In this way, they reduce voices in public debate and thus undermine the quality of democracies.

What are its main characteristics

In Latin America and the Caribbean particularly, the exponential growth of this kind of violence coincides in time with the rise and massive spread of the known fourth-wave feminism, which reinstated the debate on the decriminalization and legalization of abortion, achieved definite legislative advances and assertive actions for the political representation of women and diversities. In this context, online gender-based violence is silencing voices.

In addition, in the same period during which such violence has grown and multiplied, different countries are - or have been - framed within institutional political contexts with a growing closure of their public space, including restrictions on freedom of expression and the persecution of journalists and opponents. In these situations - although not exclusively - officials and opposition parties have made intensive use of practices such as the so-called troll farms or net centers, doxeo, and fake news.

Previous studies on online violence found that political positioning and gender issues are the main issues with which women assaulted link attacks. The two issues intersect in the region, and others, such as the socio-environmental, are added. The 15 cases analyzed in this study combine the variables in different proportions. Not all interviewees are feminists, not all of them explain their political position, but there is agreement on three points:

- Visibility exposes them to online violence just because they are women with a public voice.
- Attacks received are gender biased.
- Systematic online violence aims to silence them.

How it manifests

Trolls to direct attacks against someone in particular bots to quickly viralize a hashtag, dissemination of personal data, or publication of fake news are some of the visible strategies used in social media to damage a person's reputation, frighten them, and run them out of the debate. In the case of violence directed against women with a public voice, and more precisely in the cases analyzed, these strategies have some peculiarities:

- Attacks are systemic and not isolated events.
- Others are reactive attacks —to a post, coverage, note— and others are perceived as random, "just because", which may occur at any time, and which interviewees relate to persecution and attempts to remove them from public debate.
- Often, coordination is ascertained or suspected.

How it escalates

Certain generalisations and "degree" distinctions may be drawn on systematic aggression on social media.

1. **Permanent bullying and *trolling* from some accounts.**

All or the vast majority of interviewees reported:

- Being subject to hate speech, violent, sexist, misogynist and racist messages on social media.
- Experiencing surveillance of their profile and social media.
- Identifying public figures among their aggressors, primarily men.
- Recognizing both anonymous and non-anonymous accounts among their harassers.

2. **Massive harassment, with insults and *fake news*.**

- The vast majority of interviewees reported having experienced the dissemination of false information about them, especially inventions about being lovers of politicians, colleagues, officials, among others.
- Some experienced hacking or hacking attempts.
- Others experienced phishing.

3. **Disclosure of personal information (*doxing*).**

- Over half of the interviewees experienced doxeo situations.

4. **Specific threats via direct messages, WhatsApp, email, and hacks.**

- 12 of the 15 interviewees received physical aggression threats. Almost all are by private messages on social media.
- 8 of the 15 received violent messages on WhatsApp.
- Others received violent messages by email.

5. **Violence is replicated offline.**

Occurs through threats and groping during one of their journalistic coverages or when strangers take photos of the person in public places and upload them to social media, inviting them "to greet them."

- Half of the interviewees have gone through this type of situation.
- Two of them left the country, and one went into exile for some time.
- Two withdrew from their activity for a particular time.

The most extreme cases occurred in political contexts with multiple closures of public spaces in which all journalists were in danger and were affected by threats and attacks. Interviewees report gender biases in said forms of violence: more cruelty and disqualifications than their male colleagues and, fundamentally, the threats of rape directed towards them and their children.

Rape is the most frequent threat of physical harm; it is the disciplinary action par excellence. Enough has been stated on the spread of rape culture. The threat is based on the conviction of its possibility.

At different levels, the aggressors share feedback and form an "ecosystem" with different roles. Thus, while a "conversation" on "equal terms" is held from an identifiable account, on a different front, a virtual "mob" is formed, and at another one off the timeline, where severe threats and aggressions arise.

In most cases, synchronicity and the simultaneous appearance of specific hashtags allow us to think of coordination. In others, the stakeholders and/or colleagues traced and verified connections between them. All refer to troll farms and net centers related to influential people with a certain degree of power, officials, leaders, and people in business.

- Most of the interviewees received coordinated attacks.

Virtual threats, real effects

All of the women interviewed for this report state that online violence had **impacts on their participation in public discussions**:

- 80% limited their participation in social media: they omitted to express their opinion or express themselves on specific topics.

- 40% said they had self-censored by avoiding writing or talking about a topic of relevance in the medium or field in which they work.

- One-third changed jobs.

- A quarter of them experienced dismissal or non-renewal of their contract. Half are afraid of losing their contract.

- 80% feared or fear for their physical integrity and even for their lives.

Online gender-based violence has limiting effects on the freedom of expression of all those affected:

- The most significant impact it generates is self-censorship.

- A second, and not lesser, effect is the disciplining usually sought by a public lynching spectacle, even if it is called virtual lynching.

In all cases, the women interviewed report that threats and aggression are normalized and seen as "the rules of the game" in the world of journalism and politics. Raising one's voice is equivalent to the classic macho metaphor that blames victims of sexual violence: the skirt was too short.

The consequences are not exclusively individual but trickle down and generate more withdrawals: from colleagues and activists who shy away from visibility and from other women who do not want to be interviewed or participate in a public debate so as not to be harassed. For every woman silenced or attempted to be silenced, several withdraw or do not even reach public debate.

Finally, given that this issue requires a comprehensive approach that involves all stakeholders, the report includes recommendations for governments, social media platforms, the media, and civil society to develop preventive interventions on the denaturalization, accompaniment, and containment of such forms of violence.

I. Introduction.
A regional perspective on online gender-based violence

In the last five years, online gender-based violence has grown exponentially. How it manifests has multiplied: cyberbullying, identity theft, publication of personal data, discredit, defamation or disqualification, online extortion, threats of prosecution, xenophobic, racist, and sexist comments, in mass attacks, coordinated, sometimes with proven participation of relevant figures of the three powers of the States.

For journalists and communicators, human rights defenders, and politicians, this type of violence has an acute and particular impact. Women with public opinion experience persistent attacks that negatively affect freedom of expression, participation in public debate, and, consequently, the quality of democracy.

The central objectives of online gender-based violence are to silence voices, discipline, lecture, and generate fear. The consequences are personal (damage to mental health or risk or fear of losing one's job are just a couple of examples) and social: those attacked withdraw from public conversation and debate.

Online gender-based violence exists. Faced with this statement, one interviewee could not help but cry and respond: "Thank you for mentioning it." It is worth stressing, then, that this form of violence against women and diversity is real and has its uniqueness. It cannot be ignored, minimized or wrapped in generalizations regarding the "rules of the game" for public debate on digital platforms.

This report is the most extensive qualitative study conducted in Latin America and the Caribbean. Including research on 15 cases, with in-depth and semi-structured interviews with women with public voice[4] based in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela. These women have been heavily attacked online because of their journalistic activity and activism. The organizations of the Regional Alliance[5] were responsible for the interviewees' selection process.

All are human rights defenders, communicators and/or journalists. One anonymous interview was conducted per country. In addition to analyzing them qualitatively, they focused on systematizing results to quantify the types of violence, aggressors, responses, effects, impact on mental health, and freedom of expression that occur most frequently.

This paper **delves into the impact of digital violence from a perspective that considers particular contexts and dissimilar circumstances and, at the same time, identifies common continental characteristics.** A better understanding of the consequences of this phenomenon on the quality of democracy allows us to address advocacy recommendations for social organizations, journalistic companies, platforms, States, and international organizations to improve prevention and containment conditions in the region.

A study of the cases reveals similar patterns in how online gender-based violence is exercised against women with a public voice: repeated forms of harassment and bullying (from insult and disqualification to direct threats through the dissemination of personal data and false information), attacks are usually massive and coordinated and violence combines public messages (on social media, in comments for all eyes to see) with private messages (in online chats, direct messages and emails). The differences are of degree. However, with a common denominator: threats occur in the virtual world – **although frequently they move to the offline world –the effects are real, and, in all cases, freedom of expression is affected.**

The report consists of six sections: the introduction, which establishes the importance of the topic and the methodology used; the second section, which defines some fundamental notions as a glossary; the third, a conceptual approach and a systematization of the academic literature, the reports of organizations, networks, and specialized activists; the fourth and most extensive is an analysis of the cases studied; the fifth addresses conclusions and main findings and, finally, the sixth section includes recommendations.

II. Some key notions.
A *continuum* of violence

The Belém do Pará Convention defines violence against women as "any gender-based action or conduct that causes death, harm or physical, sexual or psychological suffering to women, both in the public and private spheres."

On online violence, specifically, this paper follows the definitions from the report Cyberviolence and Cyberharrasment Against Women and Girls in the Framework of the Belém do Pará Convention, prepared by the Follow-up Mechanism of the Belém do Pará Convention (MESECVI) of the OAS, and the United Nations (UN) Women, which compiles, systematizes and records the contributions made at the moment. **This paper defines online violence** as **"any action or conduct against women, based on their gender, that causes death or physical, sexual or psychological, economic or symbolic harm or suffering, in any area of their lives, which is committed, instigated or aggravated, in whole or in part, with the assistance of information and communication technologies."**

> ***Continuum:*** Online violence is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a social context in which discrimination and violence against women, girls, and diversity are systematically exercised. Violence is not limited to a physical or digital framework but flows in an "*online-offline* scenario" with no apparent limit. That is why there is talk of a *continuum* of violence.

This type of violence unfolds in different forms. The list is not exhaustive, and not all definitions are agreed upon; it is a recent phenomenon in which new forms constantly appear. Among them, we can list the following:

- ***Cyberbullying:*** encompasses different behaviors that occur constantly, reiteratively, by the same person to harass, intimidate, annoy, attack, humiliate, threaten, frighten, or offend. Exercised on social media, through private messages on those same platforms, online chats such as WhatsApp, and emails. Includes humiliating and/or obscene comments about the person's body, insults, threats, defamation, dissemination of false information, publication of private information, distribution of intimate photos and/or personal videos, sending images with sexual content without consent (usually called *cyber-flashing*), surveillance of the victim's physical

location and publication of their movements, among other actions—a behavioral pattern characterized mainly by repetition and systematicity.

- ***Cyberharrasment:*** it is one of the modalities of cyberbullying, and a single episode is enough to frame it as such, unlike bullying, which is defined by a pattern of repeated behaviors. Aside from the conduct previously described, it also includes direct threats of physical assault, rape and death, blackmail and extortion. The MESECVI and UN Women report mentions group and coordinated cyberharassment as a frequent attack on women with a public voice[6].

- ***Hate speech:*** is, according to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, that which constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, and violence[7]. Massive attacks on social media often become a sounding board for these discourses.

Regarding the forms and actors of massive and coordinated online violence against women with a public voice, this and other papers speak of:

- ***Bots:*** accounts created to generate messages automatically and repetitively and disseminate them quickly and massively.

- ***Trolling:*** the action of directing insulting, disqualifying, defamatory messages, hate speech, usually in a massive way.

- ***Trolls:*** unidentified users who direct violent and offensive messages, often organized in "armies", "farms" or net centers, to act simultaneously, creating a genuine virtual mob in coordination with regular social media users, anonymous or not. These coordinated attacks occur on a large scale and frequently include:

    - ***Doxing:*** Disseminating personal data of the victim, such as their telephone number, address, and current location.

- ***Hacking:*** Unauthorised access to a person's accounts and devices. Impersonation: hacking or creating false personal profiles to spread false news, personal information, attacks on other people, among others. Online monitoring, control, and surveillance: constant tracking of a person's online and offline activities.

III. Exponential growth

The main reports on gender-based violence online, and in particular against women with a public voice, carried out so far by international agencies and human rights organizations, were published in the last five years, a period in which this form of violence grew exponentially and how it manifests has multiplied.

They all agree on three points:

- Online violence transcends virtuality: it has specific and visible consequences for the people who experience it; often, it continues literally outside of digital platforms. It is a mistake and a minimization of the problem to speak of online violence as something alien, separate, and distanced from structural gender-based violence.

- Women with a public voice, especially journalists and communicators, human rights defenders, and politicians, are the particular targets of systematic online violence.

- Attacks have consequences on freedom of expression, undermine voices in public debate, and thus undermine the quality of democracies.

Beyond virtuality

"There's nothing virtual about online violence." Thus begins the UNESCO paper The Chilling: Global Trends in Online Violence Against Women Journalists (2021)[8], which presents the results of a survey, a qualitative study, and an extensive data analysis. Concluding that online violence is "increasingly spilling offline, sometimes with devastating consequences."

Chilling is the same adjective used by former UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Dubravka Šimonović - in her report Eradicating Violence against Journalists. Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against women, its causes and consequences (2020) addressed to the UN Human Rights Council - in describing how cyberbullying "is not always confined to the digital sphere."

All case studies describe how online violence has consequences on people's health, work, social, and family life, as well as a severe impact on the free exercise of freedom of expression. As for how such violence unfolds, the boundaries of virtuality are crossed when hostility, threats, and surveillance are replicated in the physical world. This regional report notes and describes below how this *continuum* of violence occurs.

Against women with a public voice

Most available studies are based on qualitative surveys and interviews and focused on digital violence directed towards journalists. Due to the specificity of their profession, it is inevitable for their voice to be public, and their social media —especially Twitter— is a working tool, making the group a target for this type of aggression. In 2017, the UN Secretary-General warned in the report The Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity that, while men and women journalists are affected by online attacks, those who receive them "are of greater gravity."

The results of various surveys conducted from the middle of the last decade until now show how online violence against them expanded and worsened[9] in a short time. Attacks and Harassment. The Impact on Female Journalists conducted by the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) and the Troll-Busters.com site reported in 2019 that 2 out of 3 respondents had been harassed and/or threatened online at least once. A paper presented by the IWMF five years earlier (Violence and Harassment Against Women in The New Media: A Global Picture) reported a much lower incidence — 1 in 5 — and the cases were of online surveillance and hacking.

Later, in 2021, the Journalism Tackling Sexism survey from Reporters Without Borders and the UNESCO relief cited above reported that three-quarters of women journalists worldwide are subjected to online violence.

UNESCO's work also informs, according to interviewees, that the journalistic topics most frequently related to the increase in aggression are gender in the first place, followed by politics and elections.

Šimonović warned about how this type of gender-based violence is part of the daily routine of media workers, with emphasis on those who report "on feminist issues"[10]. Irene Kahn, UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, underlined in the introduction to a series of testimonial essays Journalists too, Journalists take the floor (2021) that communicators are attacked because "they dare to raise their voices" and spoke of "gender censorship".[11] Communicators, politicians, and women human rights defenders are attacked because of their status as women with a public voice (in Latin America, moreover, the growing violence against socio-environmental activism should not be ignored[12]).

UNESCO also highlights that there is evidence of coordinated attacks against women journalists and the involvement of politicians and rulers in generating, instigating or, at the very least, encouraging and promoting them. A reality that also happens at the regional level: in Being a Journalist on Twitter (2020), a work carried out in seven Latin American countries by the communicators Lina Cuellar (Sentiido-Colombia) and Sandra Chaher (Comunicar Igualdad-Argentina), these evidences of coordinated attacks are mentioned and repeated during the interviews conducted for this report.

What these surveys show – necessarily recent and urgent due to the proximity and massiveness of the phenomenon – is the beginning of the threat to freedom of expression posed by this form of gender violence directed against women and diversity with public participation in general. The silencing of their voices appears, therefore, as a threat to democracies.

The aftermath

Online violence has become a global problem, with particular characteristics in each region or country. The geopolitical situation, the participation of political leaders and officials in the attacks, the role assumed by States, the support networks available to those affected, and the *offline* scope of violence that originates online, among other factors, mark differences in degree. Even so, **in all cases, qualitative and quantitative studies, international reports, and alerts from civil society organizations show a negative impact on freedom of expression and public debate and, consequently, on the quality of democracies[13].**

In 2018, the then Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), Edison Lanza, already warned in Women Journalists and Freedom of Expression that the **impact of discriminatory practices on women with a high public profile is, in Latin America and the Caribbean, "severe" and that online violence "leads to self-censorship"[14].**

In the Reporters Without Borders survey, interviewees mention self-censorship and a retreat into social media due to cyberattacks. Meanwhile, in Green Hearts (2019), by Amnesty International Argentina, women who played a leading role in the discussion for the legalization of abortion in that country told how, in the face of online violence, they decided to eliminate their social media participation. **Withdrawal and self-censorship are frequent effects among those interviewed for this study.**

Due to the magnitude of this violence and its impacts, the MESECVI and UN Women warn that "States are obliged to take effective measures to raise awareness about gender-based violence online." They also point out the "problems in the acting"[15] of companies and the opacity with which platforms handle content moderation and the operation of their algorithms[16].

The analysis is proposed as a tool to contribute to all actors in understanding and raising awareness about the characteristics of online violence against women with a public voice in Latin America and the Caribbean and its impacts on freedom of expression.

IV. Online violence silences voices

Online violence against women with a public voice does not develop equally in all countries or escalate in the same way in all cases. However, there are cross-cutting manifestations of age, socioeconomic origin, workplace, place of birth, and the socio-political context in which each works.

In Latin America and the Caribbean in particular, the exponential growth of this type of violence coincides with the rise and massive spread of the known fourth-wave feminism, which reinstated the debate on the decriminalization and legalization of abortion, achieved specific legislative advances and assertive actions of political representation of women and diversities. In this context, online gender-based violence is silencing voices.

Feminism in the region generally perceives that the intensity, systematicity, and virulence of online gender violence is one of the responses to said advances. Current feminism is characterized both by street mobilization and by the use of digital tools and platforms. Today, instruments central to organizing mass demonstrations, such as *Ni Una Menos*[17], have become a weapon against them and on the ground where activists are massively attacked.

Also, in the same period in which this type of violence grew and multiplied, different countries have gone through – or are still going through – political and institutional crises that have resulted in restrictions on freedom of expression and persecution of journalists and opponents. The so-called *troll* farms or *net centers*, *doxeo,* and *fake news* are also tools of officialism and opposition to attack adversaries.

Previous studies on online violence found that political positioning and gender issues are the main issues with which women assaulted link attacks. The two issues intersect in the region, and others, such as the socio-environmental, are added. The fifteen cases analyzed here combine the variables in different proportions. Not all interviewees are feminists; not all of them make their political positions public. Nevertheless, they all agree on three points:

- Visibility exposes them to online violence just because they are women with a public voice.
- Attacks received are gender biased.
- Systematic online violence aims to silence them.

There are, then, common characteristics —gender bias— and differences in socio-political context among the fifteen cases analyzed:

- Seven of them come from countries that are going through or have experienced recent political and institutional crises and/or from countries where freedom of expression is limited, with persecution of journalists and opponents. They attribute the attacks and the seriousness of their consequences to their coverage and positions linked to politics. Some cases also have more severe consequences: two even had to leave their country, and a third went into exile in a neighboring country for a while. They share a reality with colleagues, politicians, and activists, regardless of gender. In addition, they emphasize that there are particular characteristics of the violence to which they are subjected that have to do with their gender condition. This situation also reaches interviewees who work in this type of coverage, even in countries with no political crisis. Details on this specific violence will be provided below.

- Five of the women interviewed work and express themselves publicly on issues related to politics, including the debate on the decriminalization and legalization of abortion and other gender and diversity issues. In all cases, they receive violent responses. If the differences between some cases and others are fine-tuned, it could be said that the reaction ranges from professional disqualification in the first case (politics) to hate speech in the second (the gender issue).

- Two of the women interviewed perceive that the violence they are subjected to is directly and exclusively related to their coverage of gender and diversity issues and their feminist activism.

Digital platforms are, for all these women, the spaces for expressing and disseminating their professional activity. As with activism, the place where they have managed – individually and collectively – to build their public voice is also where they are systematically attacked.

One testimony stated: "I had no chance of appearing in an interview or an editorial. When I brought my voice to Twitter, the interviews started. Moreover, what is the backlash?[18]. First, in my case, massive attacks on social media lasting between a day and a week constantly."

This report coincides with previous qualitative and quantitative studies on the importance of underlining that "digital" and "virtual" are not synonymous: violence on digital platforms has specific effects outside the Internet that are not virtual at all. Moreover, even in cases where it does not transcend virtuality, the consequences on the personal lives and professional trajectories of women with public voices are tangible—generating clear effects on exercising freedom of expression, which is the study's focus.

In the cases analyzed, there is a withdrawal of the voices of communicators and journalists on social media —with the consequent absence of plurality and diversity of views and opinions that feed freedom of expression and democracy—directly related to digital gender-based violence.

The consequences are not exclusively individual – already severe – but trickle down to the entire ecosystem. The attacks, as we will see later, have disciplinary effects that generate more withdrawals: of other fellow communicators and activists who shy away from visibility and of other women who do not want to be interviewed or participate in a public debate so as not to suffer bullying.

> For every woman silenced or attempted to be silenced or limited, several will not even reach the public debate.

This study, and those that precede it, focus on women with a public voice and emphasize their condition as emergent, not isolated cases without connection. There is, in all of them, a typical pattern of operation. Let us start by breaking it down and then return to the consequences.

How online violence manifests

> *Trolls* to direct attacks against a person, bots to quickly viralise a hashtag, dissemination of data such as address or current location so that they feel threatened and/or monitored, and publication of false information by social media and online chats are some of the visible strategies used in social media to damage the reputation of a person, frighten her and remove her from the debate.

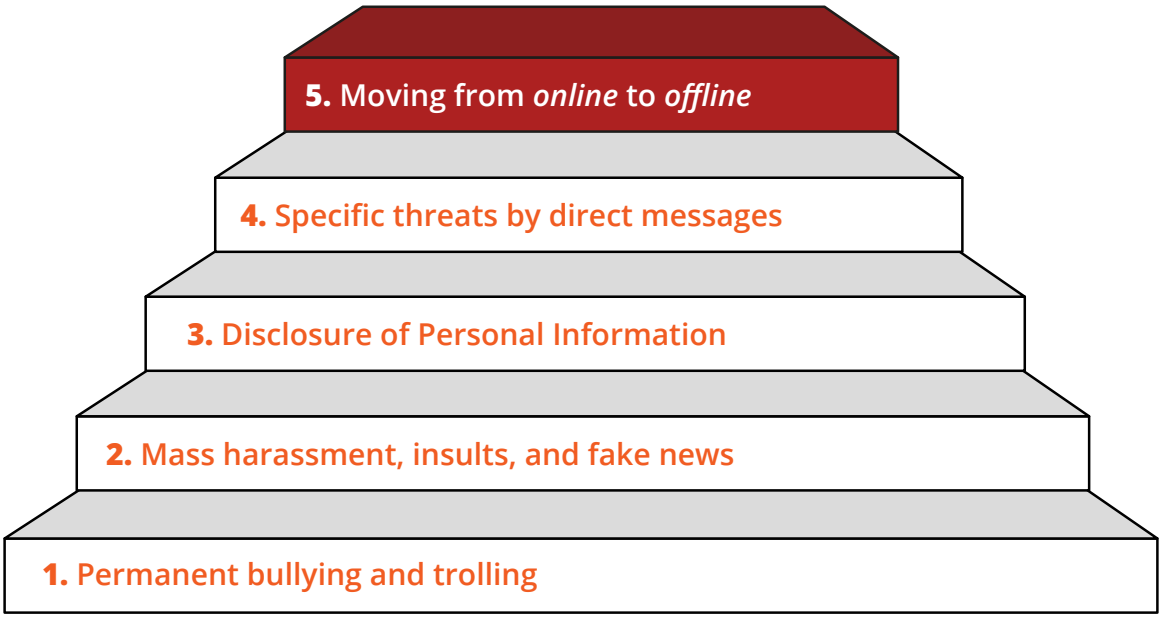
In the case of violence directed against women with a public voice, and more precisely in the cases analyzed, these strategies have some peculiarities:

- Attacks are systemic and not isolated events.
- Others are reactive attacks —to a post, coverage, note— and others are perceived as random, "just because," which may occur at any time, and which interviewees relate to persecution and attempts to remove them from public debate.
- Often, coordination is ascertained or suspected.

How online violence escalates

Some generalizations and "degree" distinctions can be made about systematic aggression in social media: firstly, permanent bullying and *trolling* by some accounts; secondly, mass harassment, with insults and fake news; thirdly, the disclosure of personal information in a threatening tone; fourthly, specific threats by direct

messages, WhatsApp and email and hacks; and finally, fifthly, when the blurred line between what happens *online* and the *offline* world is crossed.



1. Permanent hostility usually arises from non-anonymous users —often people with a public voice, primarily men, including officials and representatives of the three public powers or political leaders— and also anonymous accounts with a large volume of followers who install a conversation or a hashtag. They are usually disqualifying, aggressive messages, responses to old posts, and other manifestations of digital surveillance that add to the permanent threat that hostility can escalate: "Next week we will give information about you" or "Tomorrow you will be TT[19]". Although, in some cases, interviewees do not express an opinion on specific topics, sometimes their harassers tag them in their tweets or posts to direct hate messages. Also, they push hashtags where they are asked to give their opinion or speak (#DóndeEstánLasFeministas) in situations of social upheaval that are sometimes related to the feminist agenda and, at other times, not.

> The movement is paradoxical and dead-end: on the one hand, they silence them, and on the other, they demand that they participate in the conversation.

- All interviewees report having been subjected to hate speech, violent, sexist, misogynist, and racist messages on social media.
- 12 of the 15 interviewees report having been subject to surveillance of their profile and social media
- 13 of the 15 interviewees identified public persons among their aggressors, primarily men.
- 12 of the 15 interviewees identified other anonymous and non-anonymous accounts among their harassers.

2. From anonymous accounts — or non-anonymous, but with few followers — the attack escalates a "further degree" in violence and trolling and morphs into harassment. The messages identified by interviewees are manifested as hate speech, insults, offensive comments regarding physical appearance and the way of dressing, such as "fat" and "whore" and references to occupying this or that workspace for their sexual relationships with someone. False information is usually related to issues of this nature: alleged sentimental links with influential people or colleagues who "explain" their political positions—also, pornographic photomontages or intimate situations.

Mass harassment sometimes includes attempts — successful and unsuccessful — to hack into social media accounts and, to a lesser extent, email. There are also cases of identity theft, either via hacking or the creation of fake accounts to spread *fake news* and attacks on other people or multiply the "presence" of the person attacked in social media and involve them in greater public exposure.

- 12 of the 15 women interviewed report having experienced the spread of false information about them, especially fabrications about being lovers of politicians, colleagues, public officials, among others.
- 4 of the 15 interviewees went through *hacks* or hacking attempts.
- 3 of the 15 interviewees experienced identity theft.

3. Disclosure of personal information typically includes the person's home or phone number or real-time location. Almost always accompanied by veiled threats such as:

"If you want to say hello" or "In case someone passes and wants to say something." The diffuse warnings in social media are also multiplied in trolling: the insult is accompanied by phrases like "we will come and get you" when they are not as explicit as the threat of rape.

- 9 of the 15 interviewees experienced *doxeo situations*.

4. Specific and explicit physical threats, in general, are manifested through private messages from social media and WhatsApp. Including threats of rape, photos of blood, weapons, bodies of murdered women, specific information on the harassed person and their family – such as personal addresses, relatives' work locations, schools, and names of their children – private messages and WhatsApp video calls with photos and videos of male genitalia and/or men masturbating. **At this point, the situation starts to become dangerous. Some of the women interviewed denounced the specific threats in court. "At one point, I felt a line was crossed. I received photos of weapons, for example," stated one of the testimonies. Other interviewees said: "On Twitter, they started including photos of a gun on a paper where my @ was hand-written. It is tremendously intimidating since you do not know who it is; anyone can be against feminism."**

- 12 of the 15 interviewees received physical aggression threats.
- 11 of the 15 interviewees received this type of threat through private messages on social media.
- 8 of the 15 interviewees received violent messages on WhatsApp.
- 3 of the 15 interviewees received violent messages by email.

5. The continuum of online-offline violence is most evident when a person who is being harassed online and whose image has become public is approached to be insulted or even groped on the street or during one of their journalistic coverages.

Also, in any public place, an unknown person takes a picture of them and uploads it to social media, inviting them "to say hello." Half of the interviewees have gone through these two situations.

In more extreme cases, two interviewed in this report left the country, and one went into exile for a time. Two of them withdrew from activity for a period. These were decisions taken when online threats were *online* and later began to occur on the street, when leaving work, entering their homes or through relatives who were intercepted to transmit the message, or when the threat of harm moved to their entire workplace. In these cases, they were situations crossed by the social and political context of the countries where journalists are at risk. With one difference: specific threats against women always include rape.

The threat of rape is disciplinary

The most frequent threat of physical harm is rape. Also, physical aggression in the street is something that, according to interviewees, their male colleagues in similar situations of exposure and who also often receive physical aggression threats do not fear. Women know that they are more likely to be – effectively – assaulted. **To a greater or lesser degree, all interviewees perceive this as possible outside virtuality. The threat of rape is the quintessential disciplinary action.** Enough has already been written about rape culture to spread here. Suffice it to say that the danger operates on the conviction that it is possible.

"You fucking whore, we are going to rape you; five of us will go and rape you and see if you like it," they told one of the interviewees on social media, and the version is repeated with similar insults and specific details such as the name of a daughter or a sister, the river where the body is going to be thrown or the time and place – which is usually related to the routines of the threatened where the attacks are going to occur.

Threats of rape are something that all interviewees see as different from their male colleagues. For example: "They are delegitimized from work: 'Your research is bad, it has no depth, you lie, where did you get that, information is leaked to them because they want to make us look bad,' but everything is linked to work. They do not get told, 'We are going to rape you.'"

The circuit and dynamics of gender-based online violence are repeated. This movement is observed at the regional level. Some hashtags and memes are even replicated in several countries at once.

At different levels, aggressors feed on each other and form an "ecosystem" with different roles. Thus, while a "conversation" on "equal terms" occurs from identifiable accounts, on another plane, the virtual "mob" is armed, and on another outside the timeline, where severe threats arise, intimidation by WhatsApp and private messages, and sometimes attempts to hack the accounts.

It is the less visible and less publicized side of online violence. Common sense separates the facts framed in crimes and reportable from what happens online and identifies with "the rules of the game" of the digital conversation. **This violence is not usually seen as a *continuum*. And worse, its scope and effects are minimised.** The fact that all those interviewed in this report have requested anonymity indicates that they are women with a public voice. Still, they cannot speak publicly about the violence they receive without fear of feedback and escalation.

In most cases, synchronicity and the simultaneous appearance of specific *hashtags* allow us to think of coordination. In others, the stakeholders and/or colleagues traced and verified connections between them. All refer to *troll* farms and *net centers* related to influential people with some power, officials, leaders, and people in business.

- 9 of the 15 interviewees received coordinated attacks.

Political persecution and the short skirt

In cases of attacks framed in a specific political and social situation, in countries with massive persecution, physical risks, and exiles, this situation has its gender components. In addition to the harassment that interviewees share with men with a public voice, in their situations, there is a disqualification for reasons of gender, fake news that points them out as lovers of people from the opposition or the ruling party, and the discrediting of their professional trajectories that further deepen the inequality gap that already exists in the working environment.

One of the women consulted develops how the discrediting unfolds: "Then, suddenly, when I started giving political opinion or writing opinion pieces in the newspaper, these were always linked to supposed emotional relationships that I had with someone. That is, 'she writes that or has that program because she is the girlfriend of the vice president, the minister, the deputy...'" Along the same lines, another interviewee mentioned: "They always refer to me like someone's whore. My male colleagues who publish the same things I do, they do not see this happen."

In all cases, the women interviewed report that threats and aggression are normalized and seen as "the rules of the game" in the world of journalism and politics. "I have to assume that public humiliation, public mistreatment, political violence, digital violence, are part of my political life," says one of them.

> Raising one's voice is the equivalent of the classic macho metaphor that blames victims of sexual violence: the skirt was too short.

Social sanction has a significant impact on this issue. These women, like all women, are attributed to caregiving responsibilities. Interviewees who have suffered severe threats report that in their environments, they have been blamed for "putting their families at risk" for affecting their children's school performance or for "provoking" their marital separation, among other accusations. The above is another factor to consider when analyzing why online hostility has the effect of partially or totally withdrawing from public debate.

Sustained and frequent gender-based bullying has devastating effects on those who experience it.

The 15 interviewees point out that these consequences are sought; they are not "collateral damage" of "the rules of the game." **The attacks aim to reduce their participation or silence their voices. This statement is evident from the evidence of systematicity and coordination in all cases. There are executors: anonymous or non-anonymous accounts that trigger violence and suspicions or evidence of *troll* farms or *net centers*. There is also a virtual mob, a digital expression of a social context. However, it is essential to distinguish between the systematic and coordinated and the context with which they interact. Although the latter has to do with structural issues, there is, on the other hand, an intention in the former: to restrict, affect, and limit freedom of expression.**

Virtual threats, real effects

Impact on freedom of expression: women out of the conversation

All of the women interviewed for this report state that online violence had impacts on their participation in the public discussions:

- 80% limited their participation in social media: they omitted to express their opinion or express themselves on specific topics.
- A quarter limited their access to social media: they closed or stopped posting on one of their accounts and only kept Twitter active for professional reasons or their activism.
- 40% said they had self-censored: on at least one occasion, they avoided writing or talking about a topic of relevance in the environment or field in which they work.
- One-third changed jobs.
- A quarter experienced dismissal or non-renewal of their contract, while half feared losing it.
- 80% feared or still feared for their physical integrity and even their lives, which explains why they took measures ranging from withdrawal to pausing their social media presence.

In the cases of countries where massive persecutions of journalists and/or opponents have occurred or are currently taking place, the situation is as severe as the institutional crisis represents for all its colleagues. However, as already stated here, the variables intersect: on the one hand, the threat of rape is what usually triggers their decision to withdraw from the public scene, pause activity or migrate; on the other hand, they perceive there are greater degrees of violence, disqualification, humiliation, cruelty, and defamation than towards their male colleagues within the digital space. “The last research I did, which took me a year, I did not want to present it with my name. I gave all the information to a colleague so he could present it.”

As stated by one of the interviewees, "With a male colleague, we experimented with publishing the same thing in our social media. The reactions were very different, all very virulent, but they attacked me in a more personal way," says another.

While emphasizing this difference in scenarios, which poses serious and urgent situations for women who suffer persecution from the State and/or influential members of a government, it can be affirmed that, in the region, gender-based online violence has limiting effects on the freedom of expression of all those affected:

- The most significant effect it generates is self-censorship.
- A second, and not lesser, effect is the disciplining usually sought by a public lynching spectacle, even if it is called virtual lynching.

Self-censorship

Of the 15 interviewed in this study, 6 explicitly recognized self-censorship as the fact of limiting oneself in their professional activity or their activism as a direct consequence of online violence. Self-censorship involves:

- Stop writing or covering specific topics, or do it more spaced out.
- Do not make certain coverages in public spaces for fear of being attacked.
- Stop consulting some sources for fear of being rejected.
- Limit participation in opinion columns, panels, among others.

12 of the 15 interviewees acknowledged a withdrawal in their participation in social media. Although not all consider it self-censorship, limiting participation in social media implies renouncing, in part or totally, dissemination spaces, mainly the new agora, the virtual sphere, one of the main arenas of public political exchange.

To leave, to withdraw, is to remove their voice from the public debate. All the women interviewed restricted or canceled a more recreational or idle use of the networks, but the next step is to stop posting to limit their opinions and participation in public debates. “I avoid talking about current affairs on social media. I do so only when I am willing to put up with the response I know is coming,” says one of the women consulted for the report.

At the origin of self-censorship are, on the one hand, the effects on the mental health and personal lives of those affected and, on the other, social and work environments that minimize – if not deny – the existence of this type of violence and its consequences.

All interviewees had to interrupt their work dynamics when they were attacked online for a material issue: facing online violence (whether a complaint is made, psychological accompaniment is received, or it simply takes a few days to recover from bullying) takes time away from their work. They are exhausted. One of them explains it this way: “Now I am not writing as a columnist, as before, because I was exhausted. I do not want to talk anymore; I want to continue with activism, but talk less, without writing, without being so exposed.”

Self-censorship is also related to the lack of virtual and real support, especially for those whose coverage is linked to feminisms or genders, which are transformed into “nuisances” for their work environments, something that is perceived less among those who find the origin of hostility in their criticism of a government, and who have the support of their colleagues in their positions. Those who have suffered the most degradation in the attacks “for being a woman in a man’s world” are the ones who are most alone.

Those who manage their media or those of a group in which they participate say they are more accompanied and covered by their teams and are even more informed and supported by digital security. Paradoxically, those who work in large communication companies, which have material resources, have found it difficult to "make bosses and colleagues understand the problem," "to give it the magnitude it has, "and "to get support." One of them says: "Every time I wanted to talk to them, they feared that I wanted to sue them. And what I wanted was for them to support me, to defend me." Another described "the emptiness" that surrounds her in her work environment:

> "No one wants to support, endorse, or share with a person whose reputation is permanently attacked. Even if they agree with what you do, the constant attack makes them hesitant to agree."

Why focus on mental health

Virtually all (14) respondents report living with symptoms of stress as a result of repeated and massive online attacks; 13 expressed distress, and 14 expressed anxiety. In no case are these isolated episodes but a permanent state. Almost all interviewees are or were undergoing psychiatric/psychological treatment.

A third of respondents reported a loss of motivation to do their job or activity as a result of online violence; another third a loss of self-esteem.

This personal cost is, as they say, the reason for the withdrawal into social media and self-censorship. One interviewee describes: "There were even important academics and journalists trolling me. I was pregnant, and I realized that I could no longer take an anxiolytic to be on social media. That is when I got off Twitter."

The consequences of systematic online violence resemble what has been recognized and typified in legislation as psychological violence. Among its effects is restricting the free exercise of their rights to the person who is the object of this violence. In the field at hand, freedom of expression.

Discipline

Massive and systematic bullying and harassment against women with a public voice not only affects them but also expands. The cases work as a mirror and have a disciplining effect: many other women do not want to go through the same thing and retreat.

Those interviewed for this report stated that other women are harassed for intervening in a public conversation with them; they do not participate or express themselves because they fear that the same thing will happen to them or – a specific issue related to the profession of communicators and a worrying sign – they do not want to be sources or interviewed or invited to a debate. There is also another associated phenomenon that some interviewees report: the communicators themselves omit to contact some sources for fear that they have "bought" the discrediting narrative. There is a kind of "poisonous stain" (a game that consists of running to avoid being "stained" or "poisoned" since, immediately, the poison passes to the person tapped) in which the victim is the one who carries the poison.

Several journalists interviewed in this report stated that more often than before, they receive refusals to participate in stories – especially in audiovisual media – of women who do not want to expose themselves to what inevitably comes after their participation: trolling, insults, bullying on social media.

One of the testimonies tells another situation that is becoming frequent, illustrating how damage to reputation occurs: "It started happening to me from interviewing people and being asked about what was said about me in social media to discredit me. How many have denied me an interview because of what they read?"

Personal effects

Among other impacts on personal life, interviewees limited their social and family life, especially outings to public places.

Most interviewees reported living with a permanent sense of "alertness," awaiting a new attack or for the threat to extend beyond the digital realm. In several cases, this happened: someone who got too close to be insulting on the street, a person who took a photo in a public place on social media, among others. Violence is perceived as a continuum between the online and offline worlds. One of the women consulted graphs that feeling after a virtual attack that led to bullying on the physical plane: "It took me many hours to leave because I was terrified. Afraid to drive the car, afraid to talk, afraid for my children. I was very paralyzed."

One of the women consulted for the research summarised it: "I stopped going out on the street because wherever I went, someone took a photograph of me. I could not attend parties or socialize, so I greatly cared for myself. It did go from digital to physical and in an appalling way."

This sense of "alertness" is also sustained by the logic – or lack thereof – of escalation and repetition/regularity that online violence has and that causes uncertainty about when it will happen, why (it is independent of what has been said or published in the present; in fact, there may be a "rescue" of something that was published or noted in the past) and what the scope will be. **"Fear" is a sentiment that is repeated in interviews.**

In countries/contexts where mass persecutions of journalists, opponents, and opponents occur or have recently emerged, this entails other degrees of danger. Moreover, as a counterpart, it is a less denied reality.

The sustained attack also shakes one's beliefs, a phenomenon studied concerning more traditional sexist violence: when the victim is convinced of being at fault for receiving the attacks. One interviewee says:

"I began to fall for the story that the *trolls were spreading*. I started questioning myself, thinking, hey, maybe I am a bit crazy."

Some of the interviewees report separations and estrangements from families. One of them relates: "My mother could not understand many things; she did not understand that I voluntarily wanted to expose myself to do this work, and many times she asked me to resign. So, I gave up my mom."

The loneliness many refer to during the interviews materializes more specifically in those journalists and communicators who live far from urban centers. They are more unprotected and stigmatized because "everyone knows each other." They come face to face with those who attack them or make comments on social media about them.

Physical and mental health

All interviewees reported a substantial impact on their physical and mental health. They identify a before and after. Some of the consequences are sleep disorders, hair loss, weight gain or loss, and an increased frequency of diseases and physical discomforts.

One of them stated: "In general, I am a very healthy person, but I started to get very sick; every fortnight, I had a different illness." Phrases like this are repeated in all the testimonies: "In a week, I got diarrhea and vomiting, vertigo and lumbago that laid me in bed."

Strategies

After the attacks, almost all of the interviewees gave notice to colleagues, friends, or other activists. Most know that they have to capture the messages to have a record for future investigations or complaints. Some block aggressors on platforms. Only some answer when they discredit them because they learned from other colleagues who attacked that this reaction increases the attack.

Seven of the interviewees filed complaints in the courts. However, there is still a familiar feeling at the regional level: **women do not believe in institutional channels as a way of solution**. "I've been to the police once, but it has not had any effect," says one interviewee. Others believe that court filings may make their situation worse.

The options offered by platforms to report content are not seen as a comprehensive solution. They do not impact the ecosystem of violence in the systematic way in which it occurs. They allow acting on specific content, and in the manner of the "panic button," the attacked person has to take action to defend themselves. The platforms offer these tools but are opaque about the functioning of their algorithms and the dissemination and visibility of the most violent content.

Moreover, when some attacks - dissemination of false information, for example - are disseminated via Whatsapp or social messaging networks, the spread is unstoppable and the chances of denouncing the content, nil.

On the reactions and support networks that become active when they are attacked, some interviewees mentioned they serve as a shield to protect them in stopping the attacks, and it comforts them personally to feel accompanied. However, others warn that messages of public support sometimes serve to "feed the trend" and place them at the center of the digital conversation. So, they prefer messages of support and solidarity in the private sphere.

All perceive that in the digital environment, other women - acquaintances and colleagues - refrain from supporting them or simply replying to a post so as not to be harassed. To a lesser extent, men are only under specific political crises and persecution circumstances.

The majority perception is that since the gravity of the situation is not weighed in their social and professional circle—it is minimized, denied, or omitted—there is also no defense against attacks or the possibility of raising a strategy or an action other than an individual.

In two cases included in this study, after much insistence, legal support was obtained in the works. The response to online violence changes depending on the existence or non-existence of accompaniment networks and the quality of these networks. Those who manage their media, are part of an organization, or are part of activism have digital security protocols, listening spaces, and solidarity. The outreach of human rights NGOs is also an endorsement mentioned in the interviews. Those who reported going through these situations alone also manage their legal and psychological support alone.

There are no common strategies or manuals on how to intervene in this type of violence; each one is solving the way forward according to their geopolitical, social, personal, and work circumstances. From the judicial complaint to the overexposure in networks to "cover themselves," interviewees refer to different "action plans" to defend themselves from online violence**. Defense is usually self-defense; strategies are built on the fly, and, except after a first attack, none of them is prepared for the dimension and consequences of what will happen.** As in all types of gender-based violence, digital violence is circular: after the attack there is a period of calm until there is another peak, unfailing, according to the interviewees, unless there is a forced digital withdrawal and a call for silence.

V. Conclusions

In recent years, the voices of feminists, women and diversities, human rights defenders, and journalists from Latin America and the Caribbean have gained space in the digital territory and social media.

Their participation, in addition to opening conversations on different issues of the gender and human rights agenda, accompanied processes of social movements, parties, and political organizations that achieved specific legislative advances and/or stopped attempts at regression. At the same time, this occupation of the digital space was reflected in the traditional media that usually replicated the conversations in agora, the Internet, and platforms.

However, occupying those spaces and opening specific public conversations and debates generated a *backlash* that should not be normalized or overlooked: online gender-based violence.

"Freedom of expression is fundamental for the empowerment of women, equality, the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights, as well as civil and political rights, and full participation in public life," stated rapporteurs who address freedom of expression issues in different regions of the world (UN, OAS, ACHPR, OSCE) in the Joint Declaration issued in 2022. In the same document, they recognize "the importance of the Internet and digital technology in strengthening freedom of expression and access to information around the world" and, at the same time, express their concern "about the proliferation of online gender-based violence, gender-based hate speech and disinformation, that cause serious psychological damage and can lead to physical violence, with the aim of intimidating and silencing women, including politicians, journalists and women human rights defenders."

As mentioned, online gender-based violence encompasses both hate speech and threats of physical or sexual violence, online harassment and stalking, *doxing*, targeted electronic surveillance, coercion, non-consensual exposure of intimate images, and *fake news*.

In this context, the study allows us to observe closely that the impact of online gender-based violence is expansive and has an effect that goes far beyond the virtual sphere and the victims themselves who are subject to these attacks.

The women interviewed here report how the most frequent impacts on freedom of expression are social media withdrawal and self-censorship.

Silencing women with a public voice in the digital territory, particularly in social media, results in their withdrawal from the central agora of current political discussion and formation of public agenda, with the consequent reduction of views, impoverishment of social debate, and quality of democracy.

The public debate is also impoverished by the increasing difficulty of assaulted women to obtain statements and testimonies from other women (protagonists or with relevant roles in matters of public interest) who fear that violence against those who consult them will be transferred to them. **Online aggression, then, also has a disciplining effect on third parties.**

To this are added the personal impacts on the psycho-physical health of the people attacked, their families, and work reality.

From the 15 cases studied**, a process of naturalizing attacks is observed with concern**. Most of the interviewees resigned themselves to the fact that violence is part of the work routine or the activity with which they have to live on social media.

As the last century has witnessed the conception, creation, issue-raising, and dissemination of various responses to the more traditional forms of gender-based violence, it is now time to address the issue, raise awareness of its existence, and create responses for its prevention.

VI. Recommendations

Online gender-based violence must be addressed holistically and requires the activation of different actors. One of the findings of this study is that security measures and digital care are usually not enough and, in general, are taken when the damage has already been caused. In addition to the personal, family, work, and social impacts produced by said violence, the interviewees reported that although they changed habits, denounced, mobilized, and activated networks, the attacks continued. In this sense, it is essential to work on prevention and sustained accompaniment over time to mitigate damage.

International human rights instruments and constitutional mandates themselves establish obligations for States aimed at respecting, protecting, and guaranteeing women's rights, as well as eradicating gender-based violence. Below are a series of recommendations involving the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches aimed at preventing, addressing, punishing, and remedying gender-based online violence.

Platforms and the media are also central actors responsible for preventing, curbing, and punishing this violence. That is why it is also recommended to promote specific actions.

For the Executive Branch

- Design and implement public policies aimed at educating, sensitizing, and dismantling social tolerance to violence in general and online aggression in particular. Contribute to constructing a cultural and behavioral change in social media and digital media, not through censorship but through promoting coexistence as a State policy. These policies may have communication components to make visible the impacts of material and virtual violence on women, girls, and adolescents in general, and in particular on activists, communicators, and human rights defenders. Therefore, it is a matter of incorporating the culture of peace and coexistence in education, but also in campaigns and communication and dissemination actions in different areas such as social media, actions on public roads, agreements with traditional media, as well as work in educational policies,

influencing school content, traditional educational spaces and alternative meeting places for young people such as social and sports clubs.

- Design and implement care and accompaniment services for women and other people directly affected by online violence, which are timely, accessible, effective, and sustained over time, in which they receive clear communication, multidisciplinary technical advice, such as legal accompaniment, psychosocial care, access to networks and support groups, among others. It is essential that victims do not feel alone in the process of restitution of rights and that they have access to the complete and most specific information possible about the options to be taken (the different legal mechanisms of claim, sanction, and reparation).

- Provoke instances of negotiation and joint agreements with the platforms to contain and limit some of their data protection and opacity policies that may obstruct a judicial investigation.

- Sensitize and train employees, employees and judicial decision-makers, public officials, security forces, health center personnel, and other related agencies, who must take complaints and/or guide consultations on gender issues and online violence.

For the Judiciary

- Break down geographical, economic, cultural, and other barriers that prevent or hinder women affected by online violence from filing complaints and obtaining adequate and timely protection measures. The recommendation is to activate electronic and free services for receiving complaints and implement expeditious mechanisms for granting protection measures that ensure the cessation of aggressions and non-repetition.

- Implement strategies to strengthen the judicial service so that the processes follow their ordinary course and are conducted without bias (impartial) and reach sentences that punish the aggressors and provide reparations to the victims, as well as to achieve sentences that punish the aggressors and compensate the victims.

- Strengthen the capacities of gender justice operators aimed at avoiding the normalization and tolerance of online violence against women so that it is sanctioned and does not go unpunished.

- Incorporate the gender approach in judicial proceedings, in civil and criminal matters, in the investigation phase, in the trial stage, and in the filing of appeals.

- Promote that prosecutor's offices specialized in cybercrimes work together with prosecutor's offices specialized in gender-based violence and can have interventions with a gender perspective that cover all forms of violence against women and diversity.

For the Legislative Branch

- Update the national legal framework to incorporate and recognize gender-based violence online or facilitated by new technologies in its various forms, following international human rights standards and considering all the constituent elements of these forms of violence. The standards shall contain a catalog of specific protective measures.

- Ensure that the legal framework protects women's human rights online, including their rights to privacy, freedom of expression, assembly, association, free development of personality, and political rights.

- Promote or update specific criminal, civil, administrative, and other laws that correspond so that they typify and describe the processes of investigation, punishment, and reparation of cases of online gender-based violence against women.

Platforms are also central actors responsible for preventing, curbing, and punishing this violence. Therefore, it is recommended to promote:

- Awareness-raising campaigns and zero tolerance for gender-based online violence; and on the importance of a respectful exchange of ideas and opinions, without fear of direct and indirect reprisals or threats. Such actions will highlight the impact of online gender-based violence against individuals and communities.

- The transparency and accessibility of its internal policies related to gender equality, safety against online violence and smear campaigns, and the decision-making processes, both by individuals and automated, intended for detecting and managing violence cases. We suggest reviewing and strengthening these policies in consultation with the agencies and specialized agencies in this area, both in the Inter-American System and the United Nations System.

- Transparency and accessibility to the principles, practices, and management around the actions of "troll farms" that carry out coordinated attacks, as well as the algorithms used to identify and manage them. These should be presented in simple formats and versions that are easy to understand for users.

- Calls for experts and activists to discuss seriously and responsibly the dilemma of preventing organized aggression and limiting the possibilities of expression of its holders, respecting the tripartite test of legality, legitimate objective, necessity, and proportionality.

- Visibility and easy access to existing toolkits to act against aggressions (on the platforms and other areas).

- Provided that due process and human rights safeguards against arbitrary censorship have been ensured, platforms should implement appropriate measures to end gender-based violence.

Other actions to consider

- Implementation of specific commitments to the visibility and participation of women in decision-making positions and spheres.

- Conducting campaigns to denaturalize violence in conversations, raising awareness about the importance of a respectful exchange of opinions without direct or indirect threats, and making visible the impact of online gender-based violence on people and communities. Work on solidarity, accompaniment, and containment among peers.

- Creation of accompaniment mechanisms in journalistic enterprises that are simple and accessible to those who go through this type of violence.

- Promotion in training careers linked to journalism and communication of training instances and inclusion in the curricula of online gender-based violence and its impact on freedom of expression is a serious and structural problem to be addressed.

- Generation of containment and support protocols for women victims, including promoting containment policies and accompanying the organization and its peers. It is recommended that media outlets such as news companies, journalists' networks, and press unions formulate steps to report digital attacks and/or ask for help.

- Promotion and activation of broad networks of accompaniment and support, which bring together women with a public voice, as women politicians, human rights defenders, activists or journalists, and victims of gender-based violence. The objective of these networks – which can go beyond national boundaries and be thought of as transnational – is that the victims of this type of attack can feel protected and legitimized. From private meetings to public events promoted by international agencies and/or civil society organizations, support could be activities to develop in this framework, which consolidates spaces for exchange and advocacy to promote and support policy proposals.

Notes

1 The study's reflections and conclusions do not analyse the situation of women participating in party politics and public service.

2 The Regional Alliance is a network of 18 non-governmental, independent, non-partisan, non-profit organizations from 15 countries in the Americas. Created to strengthen the capacity of its member organizations in promoting best practices and legislation on access to information and freedom of expression in their countries and regions. The organizations part of it and which participated in this study are Acción Ciudadana (Guatemala), Asociación Civil por la Igualdad y la Justicia (ACIJ, Argentina), Asociación Nacional de la Prensa (ANP, Bolivia), Artículo 19 (Brasil), C-Libre (Honduras), Centro de Archivo y Acceso a la Información Pública (Cainfo, Uruguay), Colectivo Más Voces (Cuba), Espacio Público (Venezuela), Fundación Ciudadanía y Desarrollo (FCD, Ecuador), Fundación por la Libertad de Expresión y Democracia (FLED, Nicaragua), FUNDAR – Centro de Análisis e Investigación (Mexico), Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social (FUSADES, El Salvador), Instituto de Derecho y Economía Ambiental (IDEA, Paraguay), Instituto de Prensa y Libertad de Expresión (IPLEX, Costa Rica), Observatorio Cubano de Derechos Humanos (OCDH, Cuba), Transparencia por Colombia (Colombia), Transparencia Venezuela (Venezuela).

3 As are women politicians, especially those in public office, but this profile was not part of the present study.

4 The study, its reflections and conclusions do not analyse the situation of women participating in party politics and public service.

5 The Regional Alliance is a network of 18 non-governmental, independent, non-partisan, non-profit organisations from 15 countries in the Americas. Created to strengthen the capacity of its member organisations in promoting best practices and legislation on access to information and freedom of expression in their countries and the region. The organisations part of it and which participated in this study are: Acción Ciudadana (Guatemala), Asociación Civil por la Igualdad y la Justicia (ACIJ, Argentina), Asociación Nacional de la Prensa (ANP, Bolivia), Articulo 19 (Brazil), C-Libre (Honduras), Centro de Archivo y Acceso a la Información Pública (Cainfo, Uruguay), Colectivo Más Voces (Cuba), Espacio Público (Venezuela), Fundación Ciudadanía y Desarrollo (FCD, Ecuador), Fundación por la Libertad de Expresión y Democracia (FLED, Nicaragua), FUNDAR – Centro de Análisis e Investigación (Mexico), Fundación Salvadoreña para el Desarrollo Económico y Social

(FUSADES, El Salvador), Instituto de Derecho y Economía Ambiental (IDEA, Paraguay), Instituto de Prensa y Libertad de Expresión (IPLEX, Costa Rica), Observatorio Cubano de Derechos Humanos (OCDH, Cuba), Transparencia por Colombia (Colombia), Transparencia Venezuela (Venezuela).

6 "Cyber harassment can also target a woman as part of a group, massive (often cross-border) and anonymous attack with the aim of humiliating or distressing her through coordinated campaigns or strategies. As has been proven in the American region, this type of 'targeted harassment' or coordinated mainly affects women journalists, human rights defenders, women politicians, or those with active participation in the digital debate, and functions as a device of disqualification, censorship, and discipline in cyberspace, seeking to reduce their channels of expression and their presence in digital spaces. MESECVI and UN Women, 2022.

7 The six-parameter test recommended in the Rabat Action Plan is often used to identify hate speech, which, while explicitly targeting religious hate speech, is the most comprehensive tool developed so far by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

8 The title could be translated as *Chilling: Global Trends in Online Violence Against Women Journalists*.

9 "Respondents say that in the last five years, online attacks have become more visible and coordinated," "more sophisticated," "more harmful", and "more dangerous," states Attacks and *Harassment. The Impact on Female Journalists and Their Reporting.* At the same time: "This hostile environment is a direct attack on freedom of expression around the world and an attempt to silence women's voices and their stories."

10 "They are threatened because of the kind of stories they cover, as they have often contributed to a change in attitudes that has in turn translated into a public rejection of gender-based violence as a violation of human rights." Šimonović, 2020.

11 "In my report on gender justice and freedom of expression (UN Doc A/76/258), I call acts and threats of physical, sexual, and psychological violence to silence women the most pervasive and pernicious form of gender censorship. Women journalists are targeted

not only for the content of their reporting but for being women who dare to speak out. These attacks are intended to intimidate, silence, and expel them from the public space. They constitute a flagrant violation of freedom of expression and the right to participate in public affairs. Threatening society's right to be informed through various media erodes pluralism and undermines democratic debate." Irene Kahn, 2021.

12 The NGO Global Witness reported in its 2022 annual report that 68% of murders of environmental activists occur in Latin America.

13 "Online violence against journalists not only violates women's right to lead lives free of violence and to participate online but also undermines the exercise of democracy and good governance and thus creates a democratic deficit." Šimonović, 2020.

14 "Online attacks that target women journalists take on gender-specific characteristics and are generally misogynistic and sexualized in nature. This type of violence leads to self-censorship and is a direct attack on women's visibility and full participation in public life." Lanza, 2018.

15 "Based on a report analysis from civil society organizations, the following problems have been observed in the actions of some Internet intermediary companies concerning gender-based violence against women: a lack of recognition of the violence experienced by women in Latin America and the Caribbean, usually concentrating their policies on the situation of women living in North America or Europe; inadequate control of violent content against women; an absence of adequate channels for women to report abusive content and request its removal (with confusing report forms that are not very visible and are not adapted to regional needs or local languages); a lack of timely responses to complaints filed, which are not addressed promptly or are dismissed because they do not violate community norms; a lack of transparency regarding the content moderation system; and weak standards for protecting users' digital privacy and security." MESECVI and UN Women, 2022.

16 "Likewise, as the RELE (Office of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression) refers, there is no 'clear information about who makes these decisions, which makes it impossible to determine whether algorithms or moderators are used to resolve these complaints and, in the latter case, whether the persons in charge of moderation are properly trained

in women's rights and if they adequately understand the contexts in which violence occurs'. This response has undoubtedly harmed women's freedom of expression and has contributed to the general impunity that prevails in cases of digital gender-based violence." MESECVI and UN Women, 2022.

17 The first Ni Una Menos mobilization—demanding responses to gender-based violence and femicide—was held on June 3, 2015, in Argentina.

18 The English word "*backlash*" literally means reaction or response and is often used to define the violent and negative response to social change.

19 Trending Topic: the topic of the moment on Twitter.

Bibliography

Amnistía Argentina (2019). Corazones verdes. Violencia online contra las mujeres durante el debate por la legalización del aborto en la Argentina.

Amnistía Internacional (2020). Tabla de puntuación de Twitter. Seguimiento de los progresos de Twitter para abordar la violencia y los abusos contra las mujeres en Internet.

Asociación Civil por la Igualdad y la Justicia (ACIJ), para la Alianza Regional por la Libre Expresión e Información (2022). Libertad de expresión en línea. Desafíos, oportunidades y tendencias en América Latina.

Chaher, Sandra - Cuellar, Lina (2020). Ser periodista en Twitter. Violencia de género digital en América Latina.

— (2022). Declaración Conjunta sobre libertad de expresión y justicia de género.

International Women's Media Foundation y Troll-Busters.com (2018). Attacks and harassment. The impact on female journalists and their reporting.

International Women's Media Foundation y International News Safety Institute (2014). Violence and Harassment Against Women in the News Media: a Global Picture.

Kahn, Irene (2021). #JournalistsToo. Las periodistas toman la palabra.

Lanza, Edison (2018). Mujeres periodistas y libertad de expresión, Relatoría Especial para la Libertad de Expresión de la Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, OEA.

La seguridad de los periodistas y la cuestión de la impunidad (2017). Informe del Secretario General, Asamblea General de la Organización de las Naciones Unidas.

Mecanismo de Seguimiento de la Convención Belém do Pará (MESECVI) y ONU Mujeres, (2022). Ciberviolencia y ciberacoso contra las mujeres y niñas en el marco de la Convención Belém do Pará.

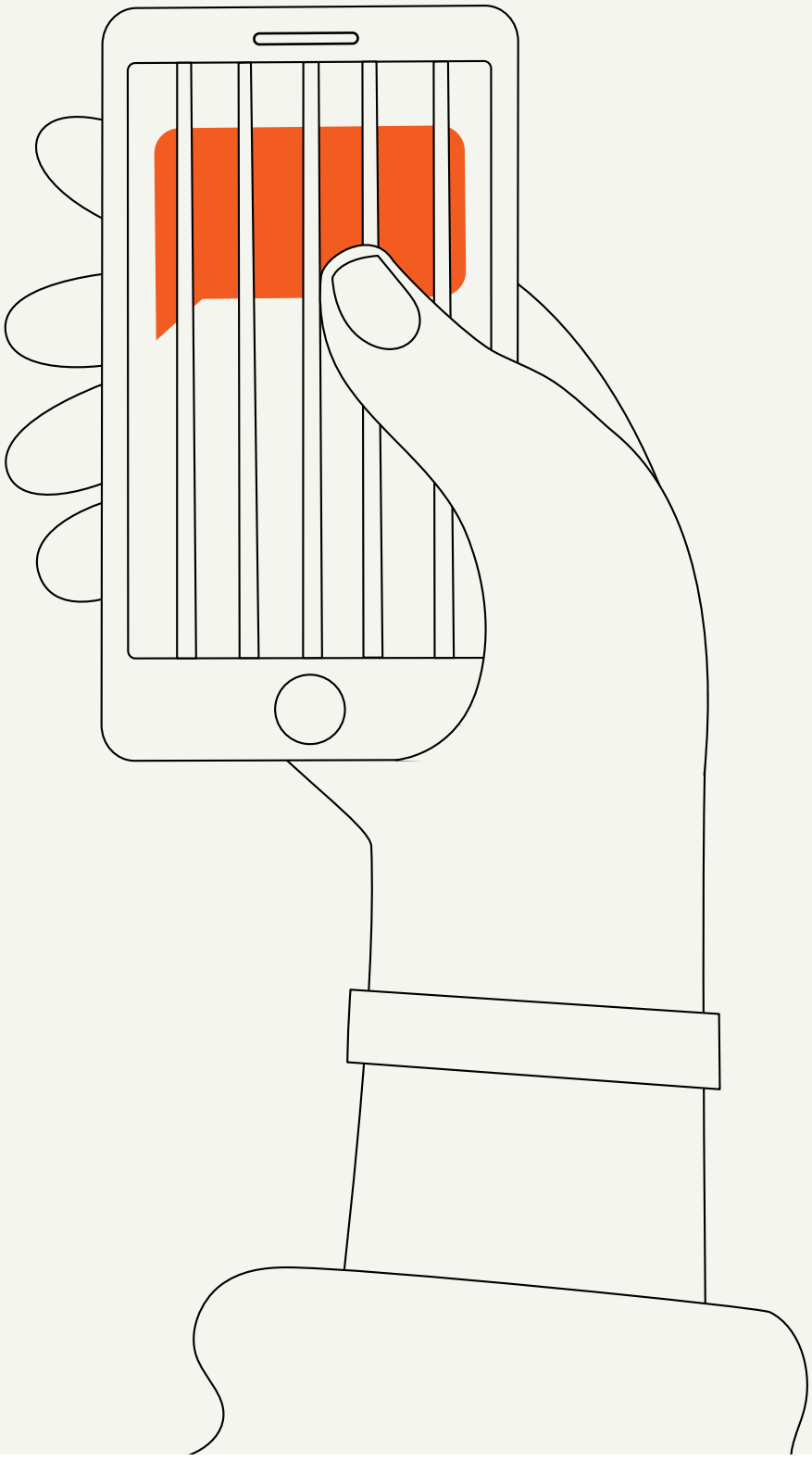
Šimonović, Dubravka (2018). Informe de la relatora especial sobre la violencia contra la mujer, sus causas y consecuencias acerca de la violencia en línea contra las mujeres y las niñas desde la perspectiva de los derechos humanos (A/HRC/38/47), Asamblea General de las Naciones Unidas.

Šimonović, Dubravka (2020). Erradicación de la violencia contra las periodistas. Informe de la Relatora Especial sobre la violencia contra la mujer, sus causas y consecuencias. (A/HRC/44/52), Organización de Naciones Unidas.

Posetti, Julie *et al* (2020). Violencia en línea contra las mujeres periodistas: instantánea mundial de la incidencia y las repercusiones, UNESCO.

Posetti, Julie *et al* (2021). The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists, UNESCO.

Reporteros Sin Fronteras (2021). El periodismo frente al sexismo.



alianzaregional
Por la Libre Expresión e Información

UN WOMEN