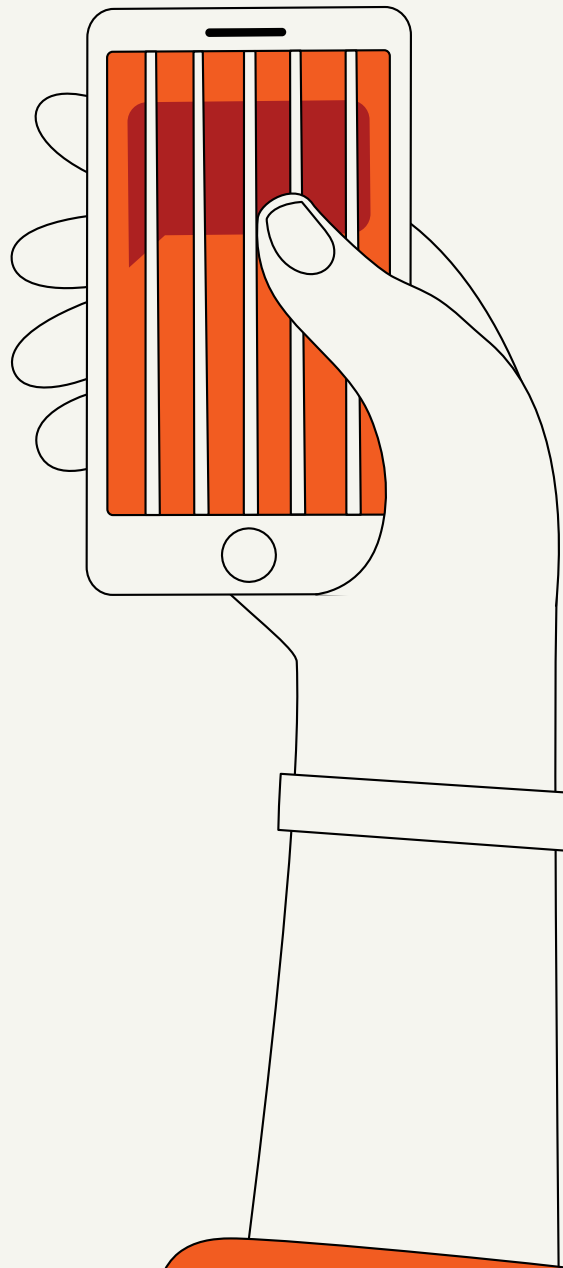


# Online Gender Violence Against Women with Public Voices. Impact on Freedom of Expression

2022



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Regional Alliance for Free Expression and Information (Alianza Regional por la Libre Expresión e Información)  
UN Women

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# Executive Summary

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Over the last five years, online gender violence has grown exponentially and the ways in which it manifests have multiplied. International organisms and human rights organizations have published studies on its dimensions and consequences and have especially focused on women with public voices: journalists, human rights defenders, activists and politicians.

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The current report is the most extensive qualitative study to date in Latin America and the Caribbean. It is comprised of 15 cases with in-depth and semi-structured interviews of women with public voices<sup>1</sup> living in Argentina, Bolivia, Brasil, Colombia, Cuba, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, México, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela. All of them have received strong online attacks due to their condition as women, their journalistic activities and their activism. The selection of interviewees was carried out by the Regional Alliance's member organizations<sup>2</sup>.

There are coincidences between this study and others:

- Online violence exceeds the virtual world. It has concrete and visible consequences on the people who suffer it, and it frequently continues literally beyond digital platforms. It's a mistake and a minimization to speak of *online* violence as something distant, different and separated from structural gender violence.
- Women with public voices, especially journalists, communicators and human rights defenders<sup>3</sup> are the specific objective of a systematic online gender violence.
- The attacks have an impact on the exercise of freedom of expression of those who suffer them. They therefore subtract voices in the public debate and consequently undermine the quality of democracies.

## What Are Their Main Characteristics

In Latin America and the Caribbean in particular, the exponential growth of this type of violence coincides temporally with the rise of what is referred to as fourth-wave feminism, which re-installed the debate about the de-penalization and legalization of abortion. It also achieved concrete legislative victories and affirmative actions in terms of the political representations of women and LGBTQ+ identities. It's in this context that online gender violence is silencing voices.

In the same period in which this type of violence grew and multiplied, different countries are —or were— in institutional political contexts of an increasing public space closure. This implies restrictions on freedom of expression, persecution of journalists and political dissidents. In these situations —though not exclusively— there's an intensive use by governments and oppositions of troll farms or netcenters, doxing and fake news.

In previous studies about online violence, it was highlighted that political positions and gender were the main issues with which victims link attacks. In the region, these aspects intersect with each other and with others like the socio-environmental dimension. In the 15 analyzed cases the variables are combined in different proportions. Not all the interviewed women are feminists, they don't all state their political positions explicitly, but they coincide on three points:

- Their visibility exposes them to online violence just because they are women with public voices.
- There are gender biases in the attacks they receive.
- This systematic online violence has the objective of silencing them.

## How it Manifests

Trolls to direct their attacks against someone in particular, bots to quickly viralize a hashtag, spreading of personal information or fake news. These are some of the visible strategies used on social media to harm the reputation of a person, intimidate them and remove them from the public debate. In the case of violence toward women with public voices, and, more specifically, in the analyzed cases, these strategies have some specificities.

- They're systematic attacks, not isolated incidents.
- There are reactive attacks —to a post, coverage or an article— and others that are perceived as random, “just because”, which can happen at any moment and that the interviewees connect with viciousness and the intention to remove them from the public debate.
- Frequently, coordination is proven or suspected.

## How it Escalates

Some generalizations and distinctions in “grade” can be made about systematic aggression on social media.

### **1. Permanent harassment and trolling by some accounts.**

All or most of the interviewees recounted:

- Having been the object of hate speech, violent, sexist, misogynistic and racist messages on social media.
- Suffering surveillance of their profile and social media.
- Identifying public persons among their aggressors, most of them men.
- Recognizing both anonymous and non-anonymous accounts among their harassers.

## 2. Massive Harassment, with Insults and Fake News.

- The vast majority of interviewees recounted having suffered the spreading of fake information about them, especially fabrications about them being the lovers of politicians, colleagues, government officials, etc.
- Some of them were either hacked or suffered attempted hackings.
- Others experienced identity theft.

## 3. The Publishing of Personal Information (Doxing).

- More than half of the interviewees suffered cases of doxing.

## 4. Concrete Threats Through Direct Messages, WhatsApp and E-mail, and Hacking.

- 12 of the 15 interviewees received threats of physical violence. Nearly all were through direct messages on social media.
- 8 of the 15 received violent messages on Whatsapp.
- Some of them received violent messages through e-mail.

## 5. Violence is Replicated Offline.

This happens through threats and groping during one of their journalistic coverages: or when unknown people photograph them in public spaces and upload the picture to social media, inviting people to “say hi”.

- Half of the interviewees have experienced this type of situation.
- Two of them left the country, and one of them went into exile for some time.
- Two retired from their activities for some time.



The most extreme cases occurred in political contexts of increasing public space closure in which all journalists were —or are— in danger and suffer threats and aggressions. The interviewees highlight gender biases in these acts of violence: increased viciousness and more disqualifications than their male colleagues, and, fundamentally, threats of rape directed at them and their children.

**The most frequent threat of physical violence is rape.** It's the **quintessential disciplining action.** There has been enough written about rape culture already for us to need to extend about it here. Suffice it to say, the threat operates within the certainty that it is possible.

On different levels, the aggressors feed off each other and form an “ecosystem” with different roles. While a “conversation” on “equal terms” happens with identifiable accounts, the online melee happens on another level and on yet another, outside of the timeline is where serious threats and aggressions happen.

In most cases, synchronicity and the simultaneous appearance of specific hashtags suggest coordination. In others, the victims themselves and/or colleagues tracked and proved the connections. They all point to troll farms and netcenters related to people with a certain power, government officials, leaders and influential businessmen.

- Most interviewees received coordinated attacks.

## Virtual Threats, Real Effects

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

- 80% of them limited their participation on social media: declining to opine or make statements about certain issues.
- 40% manifested having self-censored by avoiding writing or talking about an issue of their competence in the media outlet or environment in which they work.
- One third changed jobs.

- One quarter were fired from their jobs or didn't have their contracts renewed. Half fear losing it.
- 80% feared or fear for their physical integrity and even for their life.

**Online gender violence has limiting effects on the freedom of expression of all the affected women:**

- The main effect it generates is self-censorship.
- The second effect, which isn't minor, is the disciplining sought by public lynching, even if it's called virtual.

**In all these cases, the interviewed women recounted that threats and aggressions are naturalized and seen as “the rules of the game” in the world of journalism and politics. Raising their voice is the equivalent of the classic sexist metaphor to blame victims of sexual violence: *their skirt was too short*.**

The consequences aren't exclusively individual, they spill out and generate more withdrawals: colleagues and activists that avoid visibility, and other women who don't want to be interviewed or participate in public debates so as not to be harassed. **For each woman who is silenced or attempted to keep quiet, there are many that retire or don't even reach the public debate.**

Finally, considering that the approach to this problem must be comprehensive and should involve the different actors implicated, this report presents recommendations for governments, social network platforms, mass media and civil society, to develop preventive interventions that de-naturalize, monitor and contain this type of violence.

# Endnotes

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- 1 The study, its reflections and conclusions don't analyze the situation of women who participate in partisan politics or who hold office.
- 2 The Regional Alliance is a network of 18 non-governmental, independent non-partisan and non-profit organizations from 15 Latin-American countries. It was created to strengthen the capacity of its member organizations in the promotion of best practices and legislation with access to information and freedom of expressions in their countries and the region. The organizations that comprise and 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 (México), 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 Also, women politicians, and especially those who hold public office, but that profile wasn't a part of this study.

