

**Women and girls' freedom of expression, voice, agency and participation in digital spaces and specific groups of women targeted online (WHRDs and activists, politicians and women in the public eye, journalists, etc.)**

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**Summary of text:**

The role of Internet intermediaries in governing and regulating the Internet is being increasingly scrutinized. Poor responses to incidents of online gender-based violence are resulting in platform-based censorship and women's self-censorship, rather than recourse or redress for victims of harassment, particularly for those in non-English speaking countries. Feminist activists who denounce rights violations or engage in educational and advocacy work, especially regarding sexual rights, have their communications channels regularly targeted through social network reporting mechanisms, resulting in temporary or permanent account closure. In contrast, in cases women have reported threatening comments, they have been informed that such content does not contravene community standards. This suggests an inherent sexist bias among support staff and company policies.

States have responded to calls for action on gender-based violence with conservative, often moralistic, protectionist measures which bring tension around multiple rights. In many countries, the use of legislation to regulate social media has been used to stifle dissent and become a tool for intimidation which forces critical voices to be silent to avoid prosecution. In considering any restriction on these rights, States must consider the importance, nature and extent of any limitation proposed and opt for the least restrictive means to achieve that purpose.

Displays of women's naked bodies are frequently interpreted, both in company terms of service and by other users, from a moralist point of view which automatically sexualises the female body for the male heterosexual gaze. The censorship of women's representations of their own bodies denies their right to political, creative, sexual and other expression.

**Key recommendations:**

- Elaborate on and further develop a comprehensive definition of online gender-based violence which reflects both the continuum of violence and the common root causes, as well as the particular experiences of victims based on the unique specificities of digital technologies.
- States should adopt legislation which protects women's right to freedom from violence and offers means of swift redress for victims. Legislation must foreground rights to bodily autonomy, self-determination, freedom of expression and rights to participate in public debate, and should be designed through consultative processes.
- The Human Rights Council, in collaboration with the special procedure mandate holders and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, should initiate a multi-stakeholder consultative process to develop guidelines on gendered hate speech and disinformation, along the lines of the Rabat Plan of Action. As part of this, sex and gender should be recognized as protected characteristics.