

Are we there yet? Assessing progress, inspiring action – the Council of Europe Gender Equality strategy 2014-2017, Tallinn, 30 June to 1 July 2016

Panel 2 – Sharing knowledge and information to advance the gender equality agenda and implement the Council of Europe Strategy: the impact of social media

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Speaking notes are divided into the following three parts:

1. Positive social media
2. Negative social media
3. Conclusion and recommendations

1. POSITIVE SOCIAL MEDIA

- Women's rights activists across the world use social media to boost women's rights issues that are often unreported by mainstream media at low cost. For example, hash tag BringBackOur Girls launched in 2014 after the abduction of more than 300 schoolgirls in Chibok, Nigeria, resulted in over 4.5 million tweets globally, and UN Women's successful and high-profile hash tag HeForShe campaign.
- Conversations about feminism on Twitter increased 300% in three years¹.
- There has been a surge of younger women bloggers, attracting younger generation activists who break established stereotypes and help advance gender equality².

2. NEGATIVE SOCIAL MEDIA

- The extent that social media engagement results in policy change or practical action is unclear. However, following the 2012 gang rape of a young woman in Delhi, the hash tag DelhiGangRape campaign encouraged public street mobilisation, and the government's introduction of anti-rape provisions in the Criminal code³.
- Women's blogs and online engagement can be met with sexual harassment, death threats, and rape threats. Comments from men can be misogynistic and serve to reinforce negative gender stereotypes of women's role in society, thus silencing

¹ <http://time.com/3319081/whyistayed-hashtag-feminism-activism/>

² https://www.oecd.org/dev/development-gender/DEV_socialmedia-issuespaper-March2015.pdf page

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³ https://www.oecd.org/dev/development-gender/DEV_socialmedia-issuespaper-March2015.pdf page

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women's online voices. Some men use social websites to assert dominance, and to humiliate women. Escalating cyber violence against women and girls indicates unequal power relations between men and women online and offline⁴.

- Perpetrators of abusive material online are rarely held accountable due to low capacity to prosecute, limited legal recourse, and unclear laws. As a result perpetrators are immune from repercussions.
- Pew Research Centre 2014⁵ found that young women aged 18-24 surveyed experienced severe types of harassment: 26% of these young women have been stalked online, and 25% were the target of online sexual harassment.
- As a guardian columnist once said, "misogynistic hate speech on the internet directed towards women is debilitating, demobilising, often emotionally exhausting, always time-consuming and if the chemicals in a brand of paint or type of varnish provoked the same physical effects in a worker, it would be banned"⁶.
- If the abuse aimed at women online were said to women in workplaces, abusers would be fired, arrested, or socially excluded. Yet there appears to be unwritten immunity when said online.

3. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **47 Council of Europe Member States should ratify the Istanbul Convention.** The Convention requires parties to criminalise sanction sexual harassment and stalking online and offline. This would ensure consistency and continuity in legal approaches designed to combat cyber violence across Member States.
2. **Police forces across the 47 Council of Europe Member States need to be trained to:**
 - a. Reach out to victims/survivors;
 - b. Cooperate with law enforcement officers across geographical borders; and
 - c. Ensure the police are proactive with prosecutions.
3. **Hold media and content providers to account.**

⁴ See <http://www.broadbandcommission.org/Documents/reports/bb-wg-gender-discussionpaper2015-executive-summary.pdf>

⁵ See <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/10/22/online-harassment/>

⁶ See <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/02/a-man-lost-his-job-for-harassing-a-woman-online-good>

Safeguards are required to secure safe online spaces for women and girls. Online content providers do not always respond to requests to remove abusive and harmful content. Three steps from content providers are required:

- a. Cooperate with law enforcement officers;
- b. Introduce take down procedures to remove abusive and harmful material; and
- c. Terminate abusive accounts.

4. Establish Helplines for victims/survivors in Council of Europe Member States.

The Government Equalities Office supports the Revenge Porn Helpline⁷, which was set up after revenge porn was criminalised. The helpline has received over 4,000 calls since it opened in February 2015, and it offers support and advice to victims while encouraging them to report incidents to the police. The Helpline has a strong working relationship with social media and specific revenge porn website, which assists in getting illegal content removed, in contrast, social media websites are often reluctant to engage with the Government.

Furthermore, the Safer Internet Centre⁸ UK has been co-funded by the European Commission to provide a helpline for professionals working with children and young people in the UK with any online safety issues they may face themselves or with children in their care.

5. Education in schools across the Council of Europe Member States raising awareness of the positive and negative use of social media in advancing gender equality. Lessons can be learned from the UK Government Equalities Office, which works closely with the Department for Education, focusing on online abuse among school children to develop health relationships, character, and resilience.

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⁷ <http://www.revengepornhelpline.org.uk>

⁸ <http://www.saferinternet.org.uk>