

# Gender Hate Online

Debbie Ging • Eugenia Siapera  
Editors

# Gender Hate Online

Understanding the New Anti-Feminism

Foreword by Soraya Chemaly

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*Editors*

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*We dedicate this book to all women who have suffered and suffer  
from digital and physical violence and its effects*

## FOREWORD BY SORAYA CHEMALY

The internet and social media are seamlessly woven into our day-to-day lives. We work, play, explore study, plan, celebrate and mourn online as we do offline. This “virtual” world opens doors to information, education, markets, jobs and communities that, in the past, would have been completely inaccessible to most people, particularly girls and women.

Social media, information and communication technologies are vital tools for women. Being able to tap into the web gives women unparalleled opportunities to express themselves and engage in civic and public life. Simply by virtue that women are the people doing the expressing, however, their online participation alone represents challenges to traditions, norms and conventional obstacles to equality. Then, almost inevitably, the mansphere, fueled by threatened masculinity and framed neatly by words like “innovation”, “community”, “revolutionary” and “free speech”, intrudes to remind women that, after all, these activities are not for them.

Just as the internet has become a critical avenue for opportunities and exploration, so, too, is it a space, male-dominated, of heightened hostility to women and gender non-conforming people. Online, women encounter the same hostility, threat and abuse that they do offline when they exercise their rights and use their voices. The amplification and scope of the medium, however, creates new risks and variations on threats.

Anti-feminism online is an infinitely elastic variant on age-old resistance to women who speak out loud, engage in public life, share their thoughts, compete for jobs, make political demands and express their sexuality freely. A woman, speaking, is sufficient to garner anti-feminist attention.

First, being online expands women's social reach and exposure, taking them squarely outside of traditional roles and spaces to engage in public ways usually reserved for men. In virtually any sector you may think of—science, technology, finance, politics, sports, health care, literature, teaching—women writers, activists, scientists, gamers, economists, filmmakers and so on are making their work visible and available. They are confronting glass ceilings and navigating glass cliffs. They are sharing, with the use of catalytic hashtags, their experiences with harassment, violence and discrimination of all kinds and demanding accountability.

Second, the profusion of content that women produce, regardless of its nature, in and of itself often refutes stereotypes about gender and knowledge, gender and authority, gender and political ambition and power. It is feminist in that women are engaging out loud and with less and less of the shame that scaffolds our silencing and inequality. In some parts of the world, just being online or using a cell phone, for girls and women, is seen as a subversive transgression. All of this is happening online, in spaces that are pervasively dominated by masculine values, speech dynamics and experiences.

Third, the web enables women to find others with whom they share sentiments, political beliefs, sexual and gender identity expression and creative affinities. When women organize, engage in activism and politics, and create communities that support their goals and objectives, anti-feminist resistance can be acute. A recent study revealed that 80% of women who report engaging in feminist discourse on Twitter, for example, have experienced related harassment.<sup>1</sup>

In the spring of 2016, the *Guardian* newspaper undertook a large-scale analysis of reader comments in order to determine what types of content, or which of its journalists, encountered the highest levels of reader hostility and harassment in comments sections. An in-depth study of more than 70 million comments on the site found that eight of the ten regular writers who received the most abuse were women (four white and four non-white); the other two were black men. Three of the top ten were gay, one was Jewish and one was Muslim. Notably, despite the fact that they make up the majority of bylines, the ten least harassed writers were men, mostly white.<sup>2</sup> Not only were the majority of targets women, often at double or

<sup>1</sup><https://academic.oup.com/bjc/article/57/6/1462/2623986>.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/12/the-dark-side-of-guardian-comments>.

triple jeopardy, but the subjects that generated the most vicious commentary explicitly challenged male entitlements and questioned traditional masculine prerogatives: feminism and anti-rape coverage topped the list. The wage gap was close behind.

This analysis was focused on a relatively privileged elite, in the global north, media makers with access to resources and media. However, the study reflects the experiences of women online every day, evident in trends documented in multiple global studies. Reports from civil society, freedom of expression and technology equity advocates in Pakistan, Kenya, Poland, India, Australia, the Philippines, Columbia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mexico and multiple other countries reveal similar (intersectional) anti-feminist backlash.

Women who are harassed online are frequently told that the harassment they receive is “real”, that the best course of action is “don’t feed the trolls” and that men are also targeted for abuse. Studies reveal that men and women *are* targeted online in near equal numbers. However, while a large proportion of people report either being harassed online or witnessing harassment, the mechanisms of abuse differ and in substantive ways. In fact, men and women, broadly speaking, experience very different internets. Within this framework, sexual, ethnic and gender identity minority women are targeted with more frequency and for overlapping reasons tied to their identities.

Women’s abuse is more frequently sexualized and sustained. One study of online comments conducted in 2000, in the UK, revealed that 41% of women had been stalked, sexually harassed or been sent unwanted pornography.<sup>3</sup> A 2014 survey in the US buttressed these findings, revealing that women 18–24 encounter the most vitriolic harassment at disproportionately high numbers, reporting high rates of physical threats and sustained abuse.<sup>4</sup> In 2016, in Pakistan (where 40% of women report online harassment), the Digital Rights Foundation launched a national cyber harassment helpline where women can seek support in cases of harassment, “revenge” porn, cyberstalking, blackmail, defamation and more. Anti-feminism also employs socially tolerated gendered slurs, traditionally gendered shaming and normalized levels of violence against women

<sup>3</sup> LaFortune, G. (2015). *A Qualitative Study of Anti-Feminist Discursive Strategies in Online Comment Sections*. Retrieved from YorkSpace Institutional Repository. <http://hdl.handle.net/10315/30709>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/10/22/online-harassment/>.

offline. Women are also more likely to be targeted by mob campaigns that turn into trending hashtags.

Common harassment tactics include doxing (sharing private information with malice); impersonation; hateful speech; extortion and intimidation; rape, lynching and death threats; photo manipulation (memes, non-consensual pornification and deep fakes); “revenge porn”; and non-consensual distribution of sexualized images. In extreme cases, videos of rapes in progress and other forms of violence are shared across private networks for the purpose of “warning” women not to speak or protest their treatment. In others, women are sent graphic rape depictions. All of these methods leverage offline threats, such as stalking, shaming, rape and intimate partner violence, and derive power from powerful and enduring legacies of historic discrimination, safety gaps and double standards.

Anti-feminism is a global phenomenon: traditional, cheap, easily understood and networked. In recent years, media coverage of anti-feminist movements has shed light on specific communities, hashtags and activities such as men’s rights activists, incels, “pick-up artists”, “Meninism”, “the Red Pill”, #YourSlipisShowing, #gamergate and “Men Going Their Own Way” (MGTOW), all of which reflect deeply misogynistic, anti-feminist philosophies. These overlap with global white supremacist, authoritarian and populist movements involved, it is increasingly evident, in transnationally destabilizing online propaganda campaigns. These communities, driven by aggrieved entitlement and the powerlessness that some men feel despite institutional male dominance, employ a wide range of strategies to harass and silence women online as they cross borders, language and nationality. A woman politician or writer in Pakistan, for example, might find that she is being harassed not by anti-feminists in her own locality but, for example, by those in a Midwest US state. A teenage girl in Ireland might be virally publically shamed by anti-feminist mobs whose members can come from virtually anywhere in the world.

While anonymity is implicated in anti-feminist abuse, women, online and off, are often, and in some cases, primarily, threatened and silenced by people they know: intimates, classmates, neighbours, family members or co-workers. Additionally, as activists, journalists, politicians and dissidents, they are more likely to encounter threats of surveillance, sextortion, public shaming and harassment that might come from their own governments or members of their own places of work or their protest, party or political communities.

Anodyne terms like “online harassment” and “trolling” contribute to the unhelpful tendency to trivialize what is happening to women online and to ignore what it represents in terms of degradations to free speech or the proper functioning of democracy. Catchall terms like these mask the full scope of tactics that are employed by bad actors and erase their impacts on women’s financial well-being, psychological health and civil and human rights.

Online harassment and abuse are more emotionally resonant for women. Women are, studies reveal, almost two times more likely to say that online harassment makes them worry and almost three times as likely as men to say that online harassment is frightening. When harassed, women report feeling angrier and are significantly more likely to silence themselves. Younger women, those who report the highest rates of online abuse, are the most likely to change their online behaviour and expression in an effort to avoid harassment. A 2016 study completed by the Data and Society Research Institute and the Center for Innovative Public Health Research found that 41% of women ages 15–29 self-censor, compared with 33% of their same-age male peers and 24% of all internet users older than 30.

Online harassment is not more meaningful to women because they are wilting violets but because their offline concerns are informing their risk assessment of negative online interactions. A 2018 research study conducted by Promundo, whose work focuses on masculinity and violence, revealed that one in five young men in Mexico and nearly one in three young men in the US and the UK admitted to making sexually harassing comments to girls and women in (offline) public place *during the previous month*. One in five Mexican men and one in three young men in the US and the UK confessed to sharing photographs and/or messages intended to shame, harass or embarrass someone online. In other words, Promundo concluded, harassment is “routinely carried out every day by young men in all three countries”. Online or off, women are constantly assessing risks and the threat of violence that underlie them.

Much of what is waved off as “harmless” is behaviour that is, offline, recognized as defamation, impersonation, extortion, intentional infliction of emotional harm, violations of copyright or civil rights, or, in some cases, legitimate threat. It is rarely the case, however, that the person targeted is the one deciding what a “legitimate” concern is, however. Law enforcement agencies, globally, are hopelessly ill-equipped to address online abuse, and getting authorities, or corporate entities such as social media companies, to recognize the seriousness of these harms remains exceedingly difficult.

Risk assessment is a critical aspect of confronting online anti-feminism and its effects. The question of who decides what constitutes “threat”, “abuse”, “harassment”, “danger” and “violence”, in other words, who perceives risk and what to do about it, highlights the way in which structural discrimination contributes to anti-feminism. Our most popular technologies, social media, products—as well as policies developed to regulate speech and address hostility—continue to centre men and masculinity. This can be seen in law, technology and epistemology.

Structural gender binaries continue to influence how problems are framed and solutions are envisioned. What happens to women is personal, what happens to men is political. Women’s harassment is a matter of staying safe and of personal behaviour, but men’s is conceived as a matter of free speech and autonomy. Some of this androcentrism is cultural, but some of it is a direct result of a lack of diversity in tech (where men make up, e.g., more than 90% of software engineers and receive more than 90% of venture capital). A persistently sex-segregated labour force in tech (e.g., men in sales and programming, women in safety and trust) also affects the trajectory of responses to anti-feminism online.

Globally, men continue to dominate the tech world, an imbalance that, in computing, for example, was not so extreme in the earliest days of innovation. In the US, gender and racial divides, coupled with a sex-segregated labour force, mean that white women and people of colour are scant in engineering, product development, computer programming and other key areas where product design occurs. This lack of inclusivity generates serious risk, and risk that, almost inevitably, affects the traditionally marginalized the most. Digital security expert Steven Cobb links the industry’s poor record in digital security and privacy to its homogeneity. Social science shows, for example, that in the US the people most likely to hold low outlier risk assessments are confident, white men with individualistic tendencies. In other words, a profile of people most likely to be building the products we use online. According to theorists, status, identity and social organization orientations (i.e., hierarchical vs. communal) directly affect the ways in which people perceive and assess risk. The fact that programmers overwhelmingly fit the profile of individuals with the lowest risk assessments means that security and privacy functionalities most valuable to women and other marginalized people are often missing as basic features.

Risk perception is important not only to individuals but in institutional terms. When women enter spaces—schools, offices, science labs, c-suites—those spaces become exposed, often in ways that are unrecognized, to

vulnerabilities that women are more likely to encounter. Today's most pressing political and civic concerns, for example, privacy breaches, surveillance, threats, extortion, are familiar to women, but women are not deciding how institutions assess risk and how technology companies guild products that reduce them.

Most people in the world are accessing the internet through private platforms, pseudo-public spaces, that while nominally dedicated to "free speech" often reproduce, at scale, Western, patriarchal and deeply white supremacist social norms. If what I have said is applicable to women in Western "liberal democracies", where English is the lingua franca, it is exponentially truer for women in the global south, even further removed from decision-making and product development and often isolated by language.

The anti-feminist weaponization of speech that we see online relies on a commitment to ignoring offline dynamics and the patriarchal neo-imperialism they reflect. Global social media companies have largely proven unable to address women's concerns, in their own cultures and languages, putting women at greater risk. Additionally, and perhaps even more consequentially, providing liberating online spaces and technologies to women threatens global expansion into emerging markets where women's rights are strictly curtailed. Anti-feminism, in this context, is also profitable, allowing, as it does, men's immediate access to like-minded communities that buttress, transnationally, beliefs in traditional gender norms. The internet's great potential is significantly degraded by this hostility.

Anti-feminism is a clear indicator of political instability and a profound threat to democratic principles. Today, there are 200 million fewer women than men accessing the internet. In order for women to live freely and as equals, we have to be able to speak, freely and equally. This is true both offline and online. It is also true that we are not, in fact, able to do either. To understand online anti-feminism, it is necessary to appreciate it as a powerful extension of offline gender relations marked by masculine insecurities and violence against girls and women. This collection is a valuable resource for those who realize why this matters.

New York, NY

Soraya Chemaly

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