

Fighting online abuse shouldn't be up to the victims

November 27 2017, by Stine Eckert



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The fight against online abuse has put increasing pressure on social media corporations to take responsibility for the content that appears on their platforms. As a result, Twitter, Facebook and other sites have created buttons for [reporting harassment](#) and blocking unwanted contact – and they [occasionally ban](#) particularly egregious offenders. Facebook's

latest effort has the company asking its users in Australia to [send in nude photographs](#) of themselves.

This, Facebook says, would help [build a database of images](#) the company could analyze to teach its computer systems how to detect when a person posts a nude image. The goal, the company says, is to [prevent people from posting](#) nude photos of others online without consent – a practice sometimes called "[revenge porn](#)." The Australian government has joined Facebook for the pilot project, which according to USA Today is also [available in the U.S., U.K. and Canada](#).

Several fundamental problems with this idea are readily apparent. The most obvious is that putting anything online – especially nude photos of oneself – in any format risks exposure to hackers. Then it could be redistributed in any number of ways, including formats and forums not yet invented.

Though Facebook says its aim is to help control online [abuse](#), anyone who submits photos to this effort will surrender any control they might have of the images they send. Facebook's request for nude images unfairly puts the burden of work and risk on women in the name of protecting themselves from harassment and abuse. There are other layers of protection that could keep women safer, while helping police online communications.

Online abuse

Posting nude photographs online without their subjects' consent is perhaps the most clear example of the role of gender in online abuse: Anything relating to something remotely sexual is [far more likely to target women](#) than men.

A 2016 survey found that [at least 4 percent of Americans](#) online had

experienced someone sharing "sensitive images" without consent or threatening to do so. That number [climbed to 10 percent](#) among women under age 30.

Multiple studies, [including my own](#), have documented that women face great risks of [online harassment](#), especially when they challenge the political status quo. When I interviewed 109 women bloggers in the U.S., U.K., Germany and Switzerland, 80 said they were harassed – online or offline – due to their blogging. This included not just receiving insults, sexually charged comments and trolling responses, but extended to rape threats, death threats, stalking, doxing, plagiarism and identity theft. Of those 80, 73.8 percent identified their writing as feminist; of the 29 who had not been harassed, only 44.8 percent said so.

Online platforms do give women, ethnic and cultural minorities and others typically muted in public discourse opportunities to speak out. But that visibility also make them more vulnerable, continuing a pattern of women getting attacked for publicly speaking that's [as old as ancient Greece](#).

The bigger picture

Currently [just over half of the global population is online](#). Without action, the problems of today's internet will only expand as more people join the online community.

Social media companies are key to the solutions, but laws and law enforcement can assist, as can guidelines for software development and cultural changes.

At present, laws about online abuse are mostly anchored in state or national laws: [The U.K. and Germany](#) have relatively new regulations about online harassment. In the U.S., a California "[revenge porn](#)" law

helped prosecute a woman who [secretly took a nude picture of another woman](#) and posted it online. Yet in Ohio a law that currently [strengthens the legal understanding](#) of online abuse [has been contested](#) on the grounds that it would curtail free speech.

To be effective, laws would have to [go beyond state and national borders](#) because of the international nature of the internet.

Help with enforcement

Laws are only as good as their enforcement. Studies that look at how police react to victims' reports of online abuse indicate that [officers aren't aware of the nature of the problem](#) or trained to investigate it. For example, in Germany a meager two percent of cyberstalking cases brought to the police [led to convictions](#). This leaves women unprotected. In my study, of the [80 women who had been harassed](#), nine went to the police. Four women said police helped or took their cases seriously; five said police did not respond or help.

Software companies could help too, but they are not required to protect their users, even though that is mandatory in other industries that provide basic elements of societal interaction, like [banking](#), [car manufacturing](#) and [airline travel](#). Even the most basic standards of cybersecurity defenses are inconsistent and incomplete: Organizations as diverse as the [Ashley Madison](#) dating site, the [Target](#) retail chain and even the U.S. [National Security Agency](#) have been breached.

Broader social action

Perhaps the most important element to addressing online harassment is behaving like it is happening in the "real world." Abuse is abuse. Online spaces are created, shaped and used by real humans, with real bodies and

real feelings.

Harassment in online spaces is just as real and harmful as when it happens on the street, in schools and in workplaces.

[Targets of online abuse suffer](#) emotionally, psychologically, [economically and professionally](#). An [Amnesty International study](#) of [women](#) across eight countries found 55 percent said they had suffered from stress, anxiety or panic attacks after experiencing online abuse.

Facebook's attempt to battle the problem of online abuse by putting the burden on users suggests the company may feel relatively helpless to act on its own. Governments and society as a whole must step up to figure out how to better protect members of communities, both online and offline, from harassment and abuse.

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