

# Online violence just as destructive as offline violence

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

While the digital age helps facilitate spaces for women to be heard with

movements and campaigns such as #OrangeTheWorld #MeToo #TimesUp #NotOneMore, conversely, it also presents further opportunities to inflict harm on women.

Kicking off 25 November, the annual International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women will feature 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence' campaign.

## **What is online violence?**

Dr. Emma A. Jane, a UNSW Senior Lecturer in the School of the Arts & Media, says online [violence](#) can refer to a range of dialogs and acts that occur at the gender, technology and violence nexus.

"Examples of online violence include hate speech, sexually violent dialog, plausible rape and death threats, stalking, large groups attacking individuals, the malicious circulation of targets' personal details online (known as "doxing"), and the uploading of sexually explicit material without the consent of the pictured subject ("revenge porn")," Dr. Jane says.

Dr. Jane says contrary to claims that cyberhate is mostly innocuous because it is virtual rather than "real," the widespread suffering caused to women is significant, tangible and embodied.

Gendered cyberhate causes women significant social, psychological, reputational, economic and political harm. It's understood as constituting a new form of workplace harassment as well as an emerging, economic dimension of existing, gender-related digital divides.

## **Response to online versus offline violence**

Dr. Jane says victims of online violence should be provided with similar, if not the same protections as victims of offline violence.

"To understand why this is important, imagine you're confronted in broad daylight by a menacing stranger who calls you a 'stuck up c\*\*t' and threatens to rape you with a combat knife unless you quit your job," Dr. Jane says. "Or a serial harasser, hanging posters with your photo, [phone number](#) and home address up on street poles around your neighborhood, alongside a graphic suggestion that people who dislike your professional work show up at your door and teach you a lesson. Or your work colleagues tell you to 'shut the f\*\*k up' and stop being such an 'attention whore' when you complain about the mountain of rape threats and transphobic letters piled up on your desk each morning."

These examples of gendered violence are actually based on the real-life online violence experienced by American games designer Brianna Wu.

"She received a large number of graphic rape and [death threats](#) during the global attacks on women in 2014 known as "Gamergate." They show the double standards that exist around what is considered unacceptable conduct offline by comparison to online," Dr. Jane says.

Had these acts taken place offline—which included breaches of privacy, reputational attacks, incitements to violence, coordinated bullying and vilification campaigns, economic vandalism, workplace harassment and institutional inaction—they would not be tolerated.

Dr. Jane says in addition to social norms rebuking such acts, police, courts, and various types of regulation exist—at least in principle—to protect victims and apprehend perpetrators. She says similar measures should be adopted in online environments.

## **Cyberhate on an international scale**

A 2015 UN (United Nations) report, *Cyber violence against women and girls: A world-wide wake-up call* described violence against women in Europe as a pandemic, reaching disturbing levels in some countries.

Data in the UN report reveals eight out of 10 women in some parts of the world are reported to suffer some kind of violence including sexual, physical and psychological violence. In particular, cyber harassment and abuse is increasingly being observed as a dimension of domestic violence scenarios. There are documented cases where online violence has escalated into offline violence.

Dr. Jane says gendered cyberhate should be contextualized within a broader pandemic of gendered violence.

"Consider, for instance, the increase in men publishing faux online advertisements claiming their ex-wives or former girlfriends are soliciting sex in order to incite strangers to assault these women in offline contexts. One example involves a man who posted an ad titled "Rape Me and My Daughters," which included his ex-wife's home address, and prompted more than 50 strangers to arrive at her home.

"Another infamous example is the 28-year-old American man Jebidiah Stipe, who impersonated his former female partner on the internet site Craigslist in 2009. He published a photo of her alongside text saying she was seeking "a real aggressive man with no concern for women." More than 160 people responded to the ad, including a man who—after Stipe divulged his ex-partner's address—arrived at the woman's home, bound and blindfolded her, and raped her at knifepoint. Both Stipe and the rapist were subsequently jailed for 60 years to life in prison," Dr. Jane says.

## **How can we address online violence?**

While forms of cyberabuse in Australia are covered under the Commonwealth Criminal Act 1995, Dr. Jane recommends the formulation of new categories of criminal offenses. She says provisions could be made to levy fines for recognized offenses, on par with what already occurs concerning parking and speeding violations, obscene or threatening conduct on public transport and in public spaces.

"Civil remedies could also be useful in forms such as protection orders and litigation against individual offenders, as well as class-action lawsuits against software designers and platform operators who create and maintain unsafe environments. Platform operators and technology designers could also be encouraged to implement measures such as a ban on 'disposable' and/or anonymous accounts.

"Software designers and platform managers who do not take responsibility for designing safer spaces—like the safety built into offline environments—could also face potential fines, liability, and even criminal sanctions if their users are harmed. To design the right technological solutions, ethics could also be taught to engineering and [design students](#) as a way of 'baking in' ethical functionality into software and platforms," explains Dr. Jane.

She says learning to build ethical functionality into artifacts and environments—an approach known as 'value-sensitive design' – could be an integral part of training designers and engineers. This concept allows for the consideration of human values and responsible innovations.

"Another option would be to expand existing cybersafety programs in schools to include a greater focus on cyberethics and cybercivility.

"Ultimately, however, it is difficult to imagine even the most comprehensive and multifaceted response to gendered cyberhate succeeding without an accompanying shift in the inequitable treatment

of women and girls in the broader culture," Dr. Jane says.

**More information:** Readers seeking support and information about bullying can contact Bullying No Way on 1800 55 1800 or Beyond Blue on 1300 22 4636.

Provided by University of New South Wales

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