

An online survey here in January found that three in 10 respondents have been personally affected by or witnessed gender-based online harm such as friend requests from fake identities, cyberstalking and being sent unwelcome and unwanted images.
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ILLUSTRATION



Online harm is an urgent issue for women

Three in 10 Singaporeans have been personally affected by gender-based harm online, a recent survey found. Acts of aggression and harassment are encouraged by the veil of anonymity of the online world.

Lim Sun Sun and Chew Han Ei

For *The Straits Times*

Much work remains unfinished to do with women's rights and needs, despite this week's celebration of International Women's Day. Take the online space. More must be done to safeguard the interests of women – urgently.

When the Internet first emerged, it was hailed for the potential to overturn existing power hierarchies by democratising online participation. It was believed that online, everyone has a pulpit, including the most oppressed and

marginalised of communities.

However, over time the grim realisation has dawned that existing socio-economic inequalities around class, gender and ethnicity are reproduced, and even magnified, online.

Women, especially, have encountered online content that is grossly sexist, misogynistic and laced with toxic masculinity that they are far less likely to encounter offline.

This can appear in social media platforms such as Instagram or Snapchat, over discussion forums such as Quora or Reddit, within games such as *World of Warcraft*, or via video sharing apps such as YouTube or TikTok.

Behind the veil of anonymity of the online world, social norms and legal sanctions fade into the

background, and perpetrators commit acts of aggression and harassment towards women. They may intimidate and threaten their victims by sharing explicit texts of a sexual nature or revenge porn images, disseminating videos of sexual brutality, engaging in online chats or producing memes denigrating women.

As such harmful content proliferates, women will find the Internet a less welcoming, secure and edifying space, whether they are using it for education, work or recreation.

Women in Singapore have not been spared. In 2019, four men were arrested for their involvement in Telegram chat group SG Nasi Lemak, numbering more than 44,000 members who shared obscene videos and pictures mostly screen-grabbed from Singaporean women's social media accounts.

In May last year, a poll appeared on social media platform MeWe to rate the attractiveness of 12 ustazah, or female Islamic religious teachers, by asking which of them should be "gang banged".

Another disconcerting finding from the survey was that more than half of the respondents, especially women and girls, were unaware of help-seeking avenues. This lack of awareness of where to turn for help and the perception that reporting the perpetrators is ineffectual were the most cited reasons for not reporting the incidents.

The rise in such incidents has motivated the formation of the Alliance for Action (Afa) to tackle online harm against women and girls, led by Senior Minister of State Sim Ann and Parliamentary Secretary Rahayu Mahzam. Ms Sim observed that women and girls in Singapore may not enjoy the same degree of freedom and confidence online as they do in real life, and that this safety gap needs to be bridged.

Comprising 48 members across the people, public and private sectors, the alliance is working to address the issue through initiatives such as public education, research, victim support, youth engagement and volunteerism.

EXPERIENCING ONLINE HARM

To better ensure effective strategies, the Afa commissioned an online survey in January this year to understand the scale of the problem as experienced and perceived by Singaporeans. Responses from 1,049 Singaporeans were collected and

weighted by gender, race and age group.

Three in 10 respondents reported that they have been personally affected by or witnessed gender-based online harm such as friend requests from fake identities, cyberstalking and being sent unwelcome and unwanted images.

Given their extended screen times, young Singaporeans under 35 years old are especially susceptible and half of them have personally experienced or witnessed gender-based online harm. The perpetrators are overwhelmingly strangers, and victims reported anxieties and fears for their own safety.

There is much work to be done by the Afa. Stranger danger may be an age-old adage, but younger respondents are less likely to shun strangers who approach them online.

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This lack of avenues for redress is critical, as survey respondents also thought that having reporting systems for complaints would be the most effective measure that would encourage them to act.

Notably, the Ministry of Communications and Information recently announced that new codes of practice for online safety will be introduced. One of the proposed codes would require digital platforms to set up easy-to-access mechanisms for users to report harmful content, and to provide timely responses.

The Afa will also look into how to provide holistic support to help victims cope with the psychological impact of online harm and how to equip individuals, including parents and youth, with the knowledge and tools to stay safe online.

This week, as we mark International Women's Day, we should certainly applaud the significant strides that women have made in society, but must also reflect on how women are still held back by particular norms, institutions or structures. We must, therefore, ensure that our online infrastructure – that determines our information consumption, online transactions and social interaction – is inclusive, empowering and secure for women and girls.

The growing scourge of sexist harm and threats women face online is a reminder of the need to take action and take control to build a safer virtual environment for everyone. This blueprint for action is a step in that direction.

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