# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# CYBER VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

## A WORLDWIDE WAKE-UP CALL

**A DISCUSSION PAPER FROM THE UN BROADBAND COMMISSION FOR DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT WORKING GROUP ON BROADBAND AND GENDER**

**About the Commission**

The Broadband Commission for Digital Development was launched by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in response to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's call to step up efforts to meet the Millennium Development Goals. Established in May 2010, the Commission unites top industry executives with government leaders, thought leaders and policy pioneers and international agencies and organizations concerned with development.

The Broadband Commission embraces a range of different perspectives in a multi-stakeholder approach to promoting the roll-out of broadband, as well as providing a fresh approach to UN and business engagement. To date, the Commission has published a number of high-level policy reports, papers, best practices and case studies. More information about the Commission is available at www.broadbandcommission.org.

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*The main objective of this Discussion Paper is to call attention to emerging trends and to start discussions on the implications of these trends on efforts to advance gender equality and the empowerment of women in the digital age. This paper recognizes the wide array of issues related to 'cyber-violence' and does not present itself as a full compilation of those issues or of proposed solutions.*

Millions of women and girls around the world are subjected to deliberate violence because of their gender. Violence against women and girls (VAWG) knows no boundaries, cutting across borders, race, culture and income groups, profoundly harming victims, people around them, and society as a whole.[1]

The growing reach of the Internet, the rapid spread of mobile information and communications technologies (ICTs) and the wide diffusion of social media have presented new opportunities and enabled various efforts to address VAWG.[2] However, they are also being used as tools to inflict harm on women and girls. Cyber-VAWG is emerging as a global problem with serious implications for societies and economies around the world. The statistics pose risks to the peace and prosperity for all enshrined

in the Charter of the United Nations, and, in particular, to the goals of inclusive, sustainable development that puts gender equality and the empowerment of women as key to its achievement.

Writing this discussion paper has, in some sense, been a race to keep up with breaking news, as girl after girl and woman after woman, has come forward to expose physical and verbal attacks on them: teenage girls driven to suicide by *online trolling*; an airline passenger using her cell phone to record and report physical and sexual harassment from a male co-passenger; an actress publicly responding to targeted *online hate speech* against her; a former Major League Baseball pitcher using *doxing*[3] to identify people responsible for "Twitter troll" posts with obscene, sexually explicit comments about his teenage daughter.

A current Twitter hashtag[4] shows just how rough it is being a woman on the Internet in North America. Women of the Global South also experience various acts of cyber VAWG, but these are usually less well-publicized.

High profile incidences attract public attention and tort law responses: a Twitter troll was jailed[5] in September 2014 and a porn site operator sentenced to 18 years in in prison in February 2015[6]. One person was suspended from his community college, and another lost a part-time job with the New York Yankees when the *doxing* case involving a former Major League Baseball pitcher was made public.

Responses, however, have yet to fully address the many degrees and impact of violence, trauma and loss that women, girls and children are routinely exposed to and that go unreported. It is a problem of pandemic proportion when research asserts[7] that one in three women will have experienced a form of violence in her lifetime. Cyber VAWG could significantly increase this staggering number, as reports suggest that 57% of Americans experiencing harassment online are women.[8]

The sheer volume of cyber VAWG has severe social and economic implications for women and girls.[9] Threats of rape, death, and stalking put a premium on emotional bandwidth and put a stress on financial resources (in terms of legal fees, online protection services, and missed wages, among others). The direct and indirect costs to societies and economies are also significant, as needs for health care, judicial and social services rise and productivity goes down with the sense of peace and security required for business to thrive. Cyber VAWG can also have adverse impact on the exercise of and advocacy for free speech and other human rights.

Perpetrators of VAWG are rarely held accountable, in part due to the relatively low capacity to prosecute offenders. Societal barriers, the limitations of legal recourse and other factors hamper access to justice for many women, particularly for girls and women living in poverty. This situation exacerbates already low reporting levels and spiraling a vicious cycle.

While fewer women than men access the Internet today, Intel's 2013 report, *Women and the Web*, estimates 450 million new female Internet users could come online within the next three years. Given the ubiquity of the Internet and its wide-ranging impact, particularly on the younger generation, it becomes imperative to ensure it as a safe place for both current and future generations.

The respect for and security of girls and women must at all times be front and center of those in charge of producing and providing the content, technical backbone and enabling environment of our digital society. Failure to do so will clip the potential of the Internet as an engine for gender equality and women's empowerment.

The increasing spread of the Internet frames the urgency for effective legal and social controls on attitudes and criminal behavior online. In February 2015, Ellen Pao,

"There is one universal truth, applicable to all countries, cultures and communities: violence against women is never acceptable, never excusable, never tolerable."

*United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (2008)*

former CEO of the online forum Reddit expressed grave concerns about the tensions between balancing freedom of expression with privacy and protection of Internet users.[10] Rigorous oversight and enforcement of rules banning cyber VAWG on the Internet is going to be a *conditio sine qua non* if it is to become a safe, respectful and empowering space for women and girls, and by extension, for boys and men. Governments, regulators, businesses and everyday netizens alike need to demand and act on the basic principle that an unsafe Internet arena will mean that women will frequent the Internet less freely, with costly societal and economic implications for all.

## Sensitization, Safety and Sanctions: a way forward

The first imperative in eliminating cyber VAWG is prevention. Changing social attitudes and norms is the first step to shifting the way online abuse is understood as a serious challenge. Violence is not new, but cyber violence is, and the public needs to recognize this and address it as a priority issue. Sensitization to cyber VAWG must include educating the next generation of ICT users, both boys and girls, through their parents, teachers and wider communities, as well as police authorities and the justice systems.

The second imperative is to put in place and implement safeguards to secure safe online spaces. Over the years, traditional VAWG safety measures have evolved to include women's shelters, crisis centres, help lines and education.

> "Our work to eliminate violence against women is central to our commitment to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women, both of which are integral to sustainable development."
>
> *Helen Clark, UNDP Administrator, Statement on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (2014)*

In light of the new cyber VAWG challenge, the digital world also urgently requires safety measures to keep up with a rapidly evolving Internet. This will necessarily require resources, attention and active participation of industry (digital gatekeepers), civil society and governments.

Third in this multi-level approach to addressing cyber VAWG are sanctions, which address laws as well as the will and ability of the courts and legal systems to enforce compliance and punitive consequences for perpetrators. Establishing necessary legal principles is a starting point, before striving towards effective implementation. Sanctions however cannot on their own accord, define or set societal norms, or deter unlawful activity, or remedy injuries. The challenge requires a broad-based societal action, engaging all stakeholders. For this reason, while part of the solution, a mere legal reform agenda alone, centered on perpetrators or abusers, would be limited in both its reach and impact.

Free speech is a fundamental right, and its preservation requires vigilance by everyone, online and offline. Some suggest that the establishment of a Cyber Civil Rights Initiative (CCRI) through international collaboration is necessary to ensure a safe Internet. Others stress that international human rights principles already provide the underpinning for a safe Internet, with the Human Rights Council's recognition that human rights apply offline as well as online.[11]

> "… the landscape of gender-based violence has been transformed … [but] rather than there being a dramatic reduction in violence against women, … the challenges have become more complex, the resistance to change deeper, the backlash against the empowerment of women more blatant and the methods used to uphold the status quo more sophisticated and insidious."
>
> *UN Women (OSCE, 2009)*

International and national laws and trans-national collaborative alliances are slowly evolving to address common global concerns of cyber VAWG, but if not dealt with commensurate to the challenge, crimes committed are likely to continue to increase, as more of the world goes online and these technologies become more and more a part of everyday life.

Each of the imperatives of sensitization, safeguards and sanctions supports the others, and will need consistent, collaborative action at many levels. Failure to address and solve cyber VAWG could significantly impede the digital inclusion of women everywhere.[12]

Readers might broadly agree that society's failure to address gender-based violence and crimes is symptomatic of a wider social failure to respect and honor each other regardless of sex, age, creed or race. "Culture is the sphere where we socialize ourselves – and the Internet – global in its reach, is a dimension of that sphere".[13]

As the Internet evolves and social media and networking tools increasingly become an intrinsic part of people's lives around the globe, attitudes and norms that contribute to cyber VAWG must be addressed with urgency.

A collective global effort, led by the United Nations system, has put in place the pillars for a 21st century sustainable development paradigm.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), establishing the global development priorities for the next 15 years, include a goal on gender equality, which places women's access to technology for their empowerment as one of the core indicators for progress.

For this to be realized, all stakeholders must take accelerated actions to ensure a safer, more secure Internet for present and future generations – one without endemic VAWG.

# END NOTES

1    Please see http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs239/en/, http://www.un.org/en/women/endviolence/index.shtml and http://www.un.org/en/women/endviolence/factsheets.shtml

2    Please see in particular the various reports of the Broadband Commission at http://www.broadbandcommission.org/resources/Pages/default.aspx

3    Doxing is the Internet-based practice of researching and broadcasting personally identifiable information about an individual

4    http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/13/being-a-woman-online-really-sucks_n_7265418.html?ncid=fcbklnkushpmg00000063

5    http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/11127808/Twitter-troll-jailed-for-campaign-of-hatred-against-Stella-Creasy.html

6    http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3025196/San-Diego-revenge-porn-site-operator-sentenced-18-years.html

7    http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures

8    http://www.onlineharassmentdata.org/release.html

9    http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures

10    http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/online-feminists-increasingly-ask-are-the-psychic-costs-too-much-to-bear/2015/02/19/3dc4ca6c-b7dd-11e4-a200-c008a01a6692_story.html

11    http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Opinion/Communications/InternetPrinciplesAndRightsCoalition.pdf

12    Please see in particular the previous reports of the Broadband Commission Working Group on Gender at http://www.broadbandcommission.org/workinggroups/Pages/bbandgender.aspx

13    Rifkin, Jeremy. (2014). The Zero Marginal Cost Society: The Internet of Things, the Collaborative Commons, and the Eclipse of Capitalism, p.260

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