

New Technology: Same Old Problems

Report of a roundtable on social media and
violence against women and girls



About the End Violence Against Women Coalition

The End Violence Against Women (EVAW) Coalition campaigns for governments at all levels around the UK to take urgent action to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls. We are the largest coalition of its kind in the UK representing over seven million individuals and organisations. A full list of members is on our website.

With thanks to:

Dr Maddy Coy

Ellie Cumbo

Holly Dustin

Jane Martinson

The Guardian and all participants at the roundtable on social media and violence against women and girls in July 2013

Our generous funder, Comic Relief

EVAW relies on the generous support of individuals and charitable trusts to fulfil our objectives to achieve a vision of a world without violence against women and girls. If you share our vision and would like to support our important work, then please make a donation by visiting: www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk

New Technology: Same Old Problems. Report of a roundtable on social media and violence against women and girls co-hosted by the End Violence Against Women Coalition and The Guardian July 2013

Published by the End Violence Against Women Coalition

Copyright © End Violence Against Women December 2013

ISBN 978-0-9558609-7-3

End Violence Against Women
17-25 New Inn Yard
London EC2A 3EA

www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk



Table of Contents

1 Introduction 4

2 What are we talking about? 5

 Social Media 5

 Violence Against Women and Girls 5

3 Why this, why now? 5

4 How has social media changed communication? 6

5 What connections are there between social media and violence against women and girls? 7

6 What are the barriers to tackling violence against women and girls on social media? 8

7 What other considerations are there in ensuring an effective, proportionate response to social media violence against women and girls? 9

8 Conclusions 10

 EVAW recommendations: 10

1 Introduction

On 16th July 2013, the End Violence Against Women (EVAW) Coalition and The Guardian held a roundtable discussion looking at the relationship between social media and violence against women and girls (VAWG) and specifically, the way that VAWG is perpetrated via social media. Participants included journalists, lawyers, women's groups, campaigners, civil servants, and academics. The purpose of the event was to explore the links between social media and abuse, and to produce real solutions to the problems discussed.

The event was held in response to numerous high-profile recent cases in which social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have played a role in either the direct or indirect abuse of women and girls, including where sexist and misogynistic images are created and shared between other users. At the same time there has been an explosion of feminist campaigning against violence against women that uses social media a key tool for disseminating positive messages widely.

Since the roundtable took place, harassment of women through social media has garnered considerable attention. When Caroline Criado-Perez spoke out about the rape threats and other abuse she received on Twitter - following her role in the campaign to secure a female face on the Bank of England's renewed note - other Twitter users who expressed their support for her were similarly targeted. Supporters included Labour MP Stella Creasy and several well-known female journalists, and the calls for Twitter to respond more assertively to misogynistic abuse escalated. Facing this criticism both among and beyond its users, Twitter eventually committed to introduce a new, easier mechanism for reporting abuse, which was launched in late August 2013, although the debate continues about the adequacy of its response to abuse. Also in August, Ask.fm was implicated in the suicide of teenager Hannah Smith, after she was subject to cyber-bullying from other users of the site. Ask.fm has since lost advertising and faced calls to introduce measures to protect users, with the Prime Minister calling for a boycott of sites which do not act to prevent bullying.

This has now deepened into a debate about the broader values and responsibilities of social media, with much debate, scrutiny and challenge taking place through the very forums of social media.

The purpose of the roundtable was to investigate questions about the causes and consequences of these forms of harassment and abuse, and to make recommendations to government, enforcement agencies, regulators and social media providers. From the outset, the aim of the discussion and this report was not to blame social media for either the existence of abuse or misogyny, or the determination of some people to engage in and promote it. Social media is not the cause of this social harm - but nor should it facilitate, tolerate or condone it.

In a society still blighted by violence against women and the attitudes that underpin it, what are the proportionate measures that should be taken to protect women and girls?

And by whom? This report by ERAW of the roundtable seeks to offer workable ways to balance freedom of expression with freedom from abuse, to reclaim the Internet for the women and girls, and to ensure that potential benefits of new technology are not held back by these very old problems.

2 What are we talking about?

Social media

Definitions of social media vary, but the core elements are mobile and web technology, user interaction and user-generated content. Key platforms in the UK include mobile messaging services such as BlackBerry Messenger (BBM) and WhatsApp, networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook, picture-sharing services like Instagram and Snapchat, video-sharing sites like YouTube, and community blogs and discussion forums like Mumsnet and Ask.fm.

Violence Against Women and Girls

We work to the UN definition of VAWG as “violence directed at a woman because she is a woman or acts of violence which are suffered disproportionately by women”¹.

3 Why this, why now?

As Chair Jane Martinson, Women’s Editor of the Guardian, and ERAW Director Holly Dustin outlined at the roundtable, social media has frequently crossed the line between spreading the news and *being* the news in the last year. Following a number of high-profile recent prosecutions involving social media communication, in June the Home Secretary chaired an Inter-Ministerial Group on VAWG and New Technology and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) finalised its guidelines to prosecutors on when to bring charges in such cases².

ERAW and other women’s groups had made submissions to the CPS that the guidelines should make explicit reference to discrimination against women, as well as its own excellent Violence Against Women and Girls strategy, but these recommendations were not incorporated. There were serious concerns raised at the roundtable that enforcement and prosecution authorities took a different, less effective, approach to violence and harassment perpetrated online compared with offline. There is little national steer to guide responses when women do make official reports of online abuse; several roundtable participants had experienced wholly inadequate police responses when reporting a crime perpetrated online, including threats of violence.

¹ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, *General Recommendation No. 19 (eleventh session, 1992)*.

² CPS, *Guidelines on prosecuting cases involving communications sent via social media*, 20th June 2013, available here.

Recent cases that have hit the headlines include:

- **April 2012:** Following the conviction of Ched Evans for raping a teenage girl, his victim was repeatedly named and abused on Twitter, in breach of the law granting rape complainants life-long anonymity. EAW and others complained to the police, leading to convictions of 10 people.
- **March 2013:** Two high-school footballers from the town of Steubenville in Ohio, US, were convicted of the rape of a teenage girl the previous August. They and others filmed and photographed the unconscious victim, and later used social media including Instagram and YouTube to share the videos and images. When a cover-up was later alleged by hacker collective Anonymous, the video and images were viewed globally as the story developed into a major scandal.
- **2013:** The #FBrape campaign was started by feminist campaigners in the US and the UK to highlight the weaknesses of Facebook's user guidelines in dealing with content depicting and endorsing violence against women. Facebook later pledged to change its policies and training.

4 How has social media changed communication?

Professor Sonia Livingstone noted in her presentation that social media has made a significant difference to the way in which we share information, and this is particularly true of young people. Some of these ways are obvious: the network within which we communicate online is no longer limited to five friends we first met in person, but could be 500, 5,000 or more. Many are likely to be strangers.

Social media is also highly visual: images have inevitably become as crucial a feature as written messages. This has influenced the way news cycles have developed, as images illustrating the biggest news stories circulate at speed around the world. But in other contexts, it's clear that this is not without its risks, such as when pornographic images or intimate photos of sexual partners are shared without either the viewer or the subject's consent³.

Social media offers a portal to place private and intimate details of everyday life into a public forum. The ability to be anonymous, and communicate instantly with apparently few consequences, may affect how people behave online⁴.

It is also important to recognise that online social spaces are an extension of physical reality and for many people, particularly young people, it is not possible to separate or differentiate between an online identity and interactions and 'going offline', as they are inextricably linked.

³ See Scottish Women's Aid's Stop Revenge Porn campaign <http://stoprevengepornscotland.wordpress.com/>

⁴ J Suler "The Online Disinhibition Effect" in *Cyberpsychology & Behavior* Volume 7, Number 3, 2004

5 What connections are there between social media and violence against women and girls?

There are several key connections between social media and VAWG. New communication technologies can facilitate direct threats and harassment: before the targeting of Criado-Perez turned this behaviour into a front page story, other high-profile writers and campaigners had talked of their own and others' experiences. Laura Bates of the Everyday Sexism Project⁵, and blogger Cath Elliott⁶, both spoke at the roundtable about their experiences of receiving misogynist insults and threats.

Social media can be used by perpetrators to facilitate and amplify violence against women and girls that occurs offline. Where there may be multiple perpetrators, for example in the cases of forced marriage, 'honour' based violence or peer-on-peer abuse, social media can be used to control movement, threaten, harass and stalk women and girls. They may also be used by perpetrators to communicate and plan violence.

Social media also lends itself to the widespread distribution of violent and misogynistic imagery, as well as messages which can constitute direct harassment and threats. As the #FBrape campaign sought to expose⁷, images that mock or trivialise VAWG have proliferated on Facebook; examples include pictures of injured women and girls with captions such as "next time don't get pregnant" and "domestic abuse - because a man shouldn't have to repeat himself". These images help to create a culture on the Internet that is hostile to women users, and clearly more damaging than photographs of women breastfeeding, which Facebook has been criticised for removing.

There is also increasing concern about the role of social media and the distribution of both user-generated and commercially produced pornography⁸. As Deputy Children's Commissioner Sue Berelowitz reported at the roundtable, young people are accessing pornography younger; this is linked to harmful attitudes towards girls and young women, and earlier and riskier sexual activity. Rape Crisis South London's campaign to criminalise possession of 'rape pornography' has highlighted how imagery portraying violence against women is widely available⁹ and representations of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) women and men in pornography reinforce and perpetuate harmful racial stereotypes. There is currently no obligation on schools to prepare young people to understand and question the portrayal of gender roles in pornography, since Sex and Relationships Education and Personal Social Health and Economic lessons are not compulsory¹⁰. This point was echoed by many other

5 <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/the-womens-blog-with-jane-martinson/2013/apr/16/everyday-sexism-project-shouting-back>

6 <http://toomuchtosayformyself.com/2011/11/07/women-speak-out-about-online-abuse/>

7 <http://www.womenactionmedia.org/facebookaction/open-letter-to-facebook/>

8 This includes apps, such as Draw Something 2 which contains pornographic drawings although children of any age can use it, therefore potentially involving criminal offences under the Prohibited Images of Children Act and the Sex Offences Act

9 http://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/data/files/Closing_the_loophole_on_rape_pornography.pdf

10 <http://www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk/news/103/experts-urge-mps-to-include-relationships-education-in-the-national-curriculum>

participants at the roundtable, including the Association of Teachers and Lecturers' Dr Wanda Wyporska. Furthermore, as Carlene Firmin of the MsUnderstood project pointed out, when government plans to introduce ISP filters are implemented¹¹, children who live in households where adults use pornography will not be protected. There was consensus that schools should be obliged to teach respectful and consensual relationships, whether offline or online, in an age-appropriate way from primary school. This should be clearly linked to lessons on media literacy and technology.

There has also been much focus on “sexting”: the sending of sexual messages and imagery between individual users. Although, as the name suggests, this was originally observed as a consequence of the spread of mobile technology, it now also involves the internet, especially given the facility with which it is now possible to use both simultaneously and to switch between them. A study by the NSPCC in 2012¹² explored the ways in which sexting is linked to harm, coercive behaviour - boys pressurising girls to send naked pictures of themselves – and abuse¹³. The death of Chevonea Kendall-Bryan is an extreme example of the problem¹⁴. Young men distributing sexually explicit images of girlfriends/friends without their consent reflects and mimics adult ‘revenge porn’ sites¹⁵. Websites and forums have sprung up specifically to publish explicit images of ex-partners, involving women and girls disproportionately (and on some sites exclusively).

6 What are the barriers to tackling violence against women and girls on social media?

The roundtable explored in some detail the reasons why addressing VAWG on social media is difficult, including the discourse that places ‘freedom of speech’ over women’s safety and equality. In fact, freedom of speech is critical for achieving women’s safety as women’s groups call for the media to expose the true nature and scale of violence and abuse. Moreover, there is often a lazy conflation of censorship with restriction and regulation, as can be seen by the debate around using filters to limit access to pornography online. Regulation is a well-established principle in relation to broadcast and print media, and the same principle of purpose can apply to images online. Indeed freedom of expression is a qualified right, as set out in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights¹⁶.

Social media companies should take action to stop abusive behaviour, as sites such as Mumsnet and Telegraph Wonder Women do. Indeed, as Jo Shaw of the Rosa Fund for Women pointed out, the police in each area should be asked what their policy is

11 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-23401076>

12 http://www.nspcc.org.uk/inform/resourcesforprofessionals/sexualabuse/sexting-research_wda89260.html

13 See also Coy, M., Kelly, L., Elvines, F., Garner, M. and Kanyeredzi, A. (2013). *“Sex without consent, I suppose that is rape”: How young people in England understand sexual consent*. London: Office of the Children’s Commissioner on how ‘sexting’ often occurs in contexts of coercion.

14 <http://forourdaughters.co.uk/index.php/chevonea-kendall-bryan/>

15 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/15/revenge-porn-laws_n_4280668.html

16 http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/humanrights/hrr_article_10.pdf

regarding tackling abuse and threats online if the social media providers do not take action themselves.

As many speakers pointed out, a culture that allows women to be silenced, either through direct attacks upon them or a general context in which VAWG is tolerated and even celebrated, is not one that promotes freedom of expression.

7 What other considerations are there in ensuring an effective, proportionate response to social media violence against women and girls?

The question of how to ensure that social media is a safe and equal space for all is not limited to different regulatory options, or what content social media sites should prohibit. For example, as well as ensuring they respect the rights of all users by taking action against abusive content, social media providers have a responsibility to support its users who experience harassment and abuse. In the wake of the recent revelations about Twitter threats, and the distress they have caused to the women involved, their policies invite particular scrutiny.

Whilst Twitter has been forced into taking some action as a result of high-profile abuse cases, it is continuing to receive criticism for its failure to understand the issue or respond adequately. Some may be receiving so many messages, for example after a “Twitterstorm”, that it is not realistic to report them all to police. Contact details are given for some e-safety campaign and research organisations, but only one that hosts a reporting facility, and none that can provide emotional or practical support, whether with generic abuse or gender-based harassment. Furthermore, Twitter and other social media providers fail to recognise how social media can facilitate abuse such as stalking which are repeated patterns of behaviour.¹⁷

Another important issue is the interests of young people, who are all too easy to exclude from these debates. As set out above, girls and young women may well be more likely to experience harassment and abuse on social media because they use it more intensively than adults; this should also alert us to the fact that any restriction will impact significantly upon them too. Lia Latchford and Ikamara Larasi¹⁸ of Imkaan spoke about the sexualisation of women in music videos, especially the representation of BME women and the impact of this on young people; it is unlikely however, that young people would want to be prevented from accessing music videos as a result. As Dr. Maddy Coy of the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit said, young people might worry that “the Internet will be switched off” if adults begin to see it as a problem; this may make them reluctant to tell anyone about abusive messages. Victim/survivors of abuse perpetrated via social media may not wish to disclose for the same complex reasons as victim/survivors of abuse perpetrated offline – feeling

¹⁷ See J Perry *Digital stalking: A guide to technology risks for victims* Women's Aid, Network for Surviving Stalking and Nominet Trust, 2012

¹⁸ <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/the-womens-blog-with-jane-martinson/2013/sep/02/music-video-black-women-sex-objects>

ashamed, that they might be blamed (especially if they have previously engaged in online chats with those that threaten or harass them), or fear of being disbelieved. Alternatively, for some survivors, there may be sources of support online that they would not access otherwise.

Furthermore, there are genuine concerns that ISP filters will not be sophisticated enough to filter out only pornographic sites and that they may filter out sexual health sites or women's support services. This is particularly important while Sex and Relationships Education is not compulsory in schools, since many young people may have minimal space to discuss these questions in schools.

The Everyday Sexism Project provides a platform for women and girls to share their experiences by contributing to the website, or tweeting to the account. This has helped to open up exactly the sort of debate about sexism and VAWG that is needed, including in the mainstream media. Likewise, Rewind&Reframe led by EVAW, Imkaan and Object provides a platform for young women to blog and share about their experiences of racism and sexism in music videos.

8 Conclusions

The Government, schools, criminal justice system and social media providers are too often on the backfoot when it comes to addressing abuse of women and girls via social media. There is an urgent task ahead for all these agencies to protect women and girls and prevent abuse in the first place.

- Government policies, police and prosecution should tackle abuse of women and girls online as robustly as it should offences that occur offline. A rape threat via Twitter should be treated as seriously as a rape threat in the street.
- Schools should be obliged to teach young people about respectful and consensual relationships, whether on social media or offline.
- Social media companies should ensure their terms and conditions adequately cover abuse and that robust action is taken against perpetrators.

EVAW recommendations:

Women's groups are calling on the Government, Regulators and Social media providers to step up their action to protect women and girls from violence, abuse and harassment perpetrated via social media.

Government

Policy:

- Technology and media, including new media, should be fully integrated into the Home Office led VAWG strategy.

- The Department for Culture, Media and Sport should establish an advisory group on sexism and the media, including new media.
- The Government should ensure that all survivors of violence and harassment, whether online or offline, have access to specialist support services in their community.
- There should be a legal obligation on all schools to teach respectful and consensual relationships, whether offline or online, in an age-appropriate way from primary school. This should be clearly linked to lessons on media literacy and technology.

Enforcement and Prosecution:

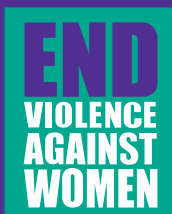
- Data should be published by the Home Office for each police force area on their rate of prosecutions and convictions for offences involving social media.
- Police and Crime Commissioners should include social media in local violence against women and girls strategies, including officer training and access to specialist support services in their area.
- The Government should review whether existing laws adequately address violence against women and girls that is carried out via social media.

Regulators

- There should be a consistent approach to regulation of violent, sexualised, sexist, racist and other harmful imagery across the media.
- Media regulators such as the Advertising Standards Authority and Ofcom should adopt the same framework and 'harm' based criteria as the British Board of Film Classification.

Social media providers

- Companies should consult their users and experts about how to respond to violence against women and girls.
- Companies should work with women's groups to review their terms and conditions to ensure that they explicitly prohibit abuse and harassment, particularly of women and other targeted groups. Imagery that promotes abuse and violence, even where not targeted at a specific person, should be removed.
- Companies should work with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to develop a best practice guide to tackling violence against women and girls on social media sites.
- Companies should commit to removing any intimate photograph from a site where the subject requests it, even where they are not underage and where the photo was taken with their consent.



Copyright © End Violence Against Women December 2013

ISBN 978-0-9558609-7-3

www.endviolenceagainstwomen.org.uk