



Gender Equity Victoria

Submission to the Inquiry into Social
Media and Online Safety



Introduction

Gender Equity Victoria welcomes the select committee inquiry into social media and online safety. This inquiry is a timely reminder of the ways in which social and digital media are folded into the fabric of everyday life. Our experience and expertise in addressing gendered online abuse makes us well-positioned to provide evidence to the inquiry about online safety based on our work and research.

We have been vocal advocates of the need for greater oversight and regulation of social media companies. Our research has consistently shown that many women do not feel safe online and this lack of safety is intimately connected to offline harms, social attitudes towards women and mental health and wellbeing.

This submission is structured as follows:

- A brief introduction to GEN VIC
- A description of our work to date into online gendered cyberhate
- Our responses to the Terms of Reference of the inquiry
- A brief conclusion

We thank the committee for their time in reading our submission and would be happy to be called to provide further evidence if required.

About GEN VIC

Gender Equity Victoria is the peak body for gender equality in Victoria and we have a vision for gender equity across all places, organisations and industries in Victoria. GEN VIC leads, advocates and enables gender equity. We do this by listening to and supporting Victorian women and organisations across a growing gender equity industry.

We believe that gender inequity is the primary cause and key driver of gendered violence, especially violence against women. We believe that poor attitudes and behaviours towards women, such as sexist jokes, language, and the objectification of women, as well as the application of rigid gender roles and stereotypes at home, in the workplace and in community, creates the foundation for threats, abuse, harassment and violence. We believe that gender inequity leads to poor health consequences for all Victorians, but especially women and gender diverse people, who face sex and gender discrimination at

work, at home and in community. Health consequences include both physical and mental health impacts of inequity. We believe that gender inequity leads to a persistent gender pay and superannuation gap as well as a higher risk of poverty for women, who face lifelong economic barriers because of unequal, gendered beliefs and attitudes towards paid and unpaid work and the sharing of parental responsibilities. We believe that gender inequity drains the wealth and productivity of women and, in turn, the wealth and productivity of the State of Victoria.

GEN VIC is an independent peak body for a growing gender equity industry with leaders across the Victorian community working for equality and change. We have over 50 organisational members and 100 individual members committed to feminist principles who strive for gender equity.

Enhancing online safety for women

Since 2018 GEN VIC has been leading work to address the online abuse of women. This started with addressing violence through an active online bystander approach, creating a community which comes around and supports those being abused online and calls out violence and abusive behaviour. GEN VIC released two animated videos, the first “Together We’re Stronger” is designed for those who are likely to respond to abusive comments online but do not know how to. The second is “Your Voice Matters!” an animated video targeting young men aged between 16-24 showing them their responsibilities to say something online when they witness harassment of women, and how gendered online abuse harms them too. The “Your Voice Matters” video has been viewed over 16,000 times. The third part of our active online bystander work is a social media toolkit, which details a range of behaviours people can take when they witness abuse online, which has been taken up by some educators. The online active bystander project resulted in GEN VIC developing and delivering training for young people aged between 16-24.

Through promoting and discussing our active bystander work, we spoke to journalists who told us they were particularly vulnerable to online attacks. The nature of journalism means that they often have public profiles and may be seen as ‘outspoken’ by people who prefer that women remain silent. An active online presence is a critical part of the job for many journalists, and they cannot simply disconnect from the internet to avoid harassment. This was backed by evidence that two thirds of women journalists experiencing gendered hate and violence online and multiple studies worldwide. GEN VIC released “*Don’t Read the Comments: Enhancing online safety for women working in the media*” in

2019. The report was launched in partnership with the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) and was the result of research into the impact of and solutions to violence against women in media. This report made several recommendations to create greater safety for women journalists. The recommendations included: a whole-of-organisation approach to addressing online violence; training on implicit bias and bystander intervention; treating gender-based abuse against women journalists on social media and websites as an issue of workplace health and safety; moderation guidelines and training that explicitly address gendered and other identity-based abuse as a subset of abuse; a comprehension quiz; requiring media organisations to provide specific support for freelance journalists.

In 2019 GEN VIC was funded again to implement the recommendations of the *Don't Read the Comments* report and has collaborated with the MEAA and Australian Community Managers (ACM) to develop and implement moderation guidelines that explicitly address gender and identity, which have become the best practice example for the sector. In consultation with journalists, we also developed support guidelines for media organisations, which are also considered best-practice by MEAA and ACM. The final recommendation we have implemented is specific media training about online abuse and implicit bias. This package of resources was launched in March 2021 with partners MEAA and ACM.

While GEN VIC was conducting research into the experiences of women in the media, we heard from journalists and other stakeholders that they were unsure of their legal options for when they were harassed online. We applied for a small grant from the Victorian Women's Trust to work with law firms Maurice Blackburn and Doogue and George to develop a set of guidelines for what women can do when they experience online harassment. The guide, called *Cybersmart Women*, sets out step-by-step instructions for what legal steps women can take. The publication has resulted in Victoria Police developing a visual reference guide for officers about the responses police can employ when women come forward with experiences of online harassment.

GEN VIC has subsequently identified two other critical cohorts of women who experience significant levels of abuse and was funded to complete projects with these cohorts by the Victorian Government. The two cohorts we identified are women in sport and women in politics. GEN VIC developed and is currently implementing a project addressing the online abuse of women in politics, modelled off *Don't Read the Comments*, which sets out a number of recommendations for addressing online abuse. It features interviews with women from all levels of government and on all sides of politics. We spoke to current and former politicians, current and former staffers and local Councillors about their experiences

of online abuse. We found that online abuse is rife in politics, it is not limited to one faction or side, and it is based in gender inequity and misogyny. This report will be launched in 2022.

Our responses to the inquiry's terms of reference are set out below. We have based these responses on our publicly available work including the *Active Online Bystander Project*, *Don't Read the Comments*, *Enhancing Online Safety of Women in the Media* and *Cybersmart Women*. We have also drawn on recent interviews with women in politics, which have not yet been published. Our research investigating the mental health impacts of the pandemic on Victorian women, as well as our ongoing commitment to advocacy and gender equity have also informed our responses. All our resources are hyperlinked at the end of this document.

Terms of Reference

(a) the range of online harms that may be faced by Australians on social media and other online platforms, including harmful content or harmful conduct;

Social media has created enormous opportunities for Australians to connect, build communities and conduct their work and social lives. At the same time, these opportunities have, particularly for women and other marginalised communities, been fraught with risk of online abuse and discrimination. As discussed above, GEN VIC's work in this area has primarily investigated the prevalence and impacts of online abuse against women in positions of authority such as journalists, politicians and sportspeople. We have consistently found:

- Women in positions of authority or community leaders experience at-times overwhelming amounts of online abuse
- Online abuse is dissuading and preventing women from pursuing career opportunities
- Workplaces are sometimes unwilling or unable to assist or provide support, citing a lack of resources
- The structure of online space is designed to facilitate abuse
- Moderation is often ineffective
- Efforts to engage the police are sometimes only effective when the target is in a relatively powerful position (e.g., a current MP)
- Online abuse reflects social attitudes towards women and broader social issues of gender inequity

- Online abuse is designed to intimidate and belittle the target, sometimes with the intention of attempting to coerce or force them to act in a particular way

Despite all these impacts and harms, women continue to rely on social media for their professional and social lives. Women are often less concerned with purely punitive measures in response to abusive behaviour online; women frequently suggest accountability as an effective response through a mechanism like mediation or through intervention from a social media platform.

(b) evidence of:

- (i) the potential impacts of online harms on the mental health and wellbeing of Australians;

The mental health impacts of online abuse against women are enormous. Women have told us that online abuse makes them: feel frightened for their own and their family's safety; less likely to want to pursue a career path that might make them more visible to the public; consider self-harm and experience suicidal ideation; and remove themselves from public online spaces for fear of being repeatedly targeted, which can then have an impact on their professional opportunities. These harms do not exist in isolation and are often overlapping and non-linear, meaning they can be re-experienced as a result of triggers.

- (ii) the extent to which algorithms used by social media platforms permit, increase or reduce online harms to Australians;

Social media algorithms are challenging to critique because they are considered commercially sensitive and therefore are unknowable to the public. However, research shows us that a huge range of women, especially those from marginalised communities including sex workers, LGBTIQ+ people, fat women and women of colour, experience "shadow-banning" where their content is not displayed in their follower's feeds. "Shadow-banning" can be considered an online harm because it reduces the diversity of voices on social media platforms and can impact women's ability to work and be self-sustaining if they rely on social media for their professional life. Social media algorithms or the ways in which audiences are aggregated should be accessible and understandable to the public so social media users know how their attention is being manipulated.

(iii) existing identity verification and age assurance policies and practices and the extent to which they are being enforced;

Our research has shown that many questions around anonymity and online abuse are misguided. Interviewees have told us that the people who have harassed them online are quite willing to use their personal and public social media profiles to do so. The question as we see it is less about identity verification and age assurance policies and more about terms of use policies and addressing underlying social inequities. Social media terms of use policies could be strengthened to encourage pro-social behaviour online. For instance, social media companies could require users to regularly revisit the terms of use policies, and social media users could be prohibited from creating multiple accounts using the same IP address. Section (b)(iii) of the terms of reference for this inquiry should consider the role of social and cultural attitudes towards women, minoritised and marginalised social groups that create the conditions for online abuse and harassment to be targeted towards them. In other words, how might we address the fundamental problems including (but not limited to) misogyny, racism, ableism, fatphobia, transphobia and homophobia that propel so much online abuse and harassment?

(c) the effectiveness, take-up and impact of industry measures, including safety features, controls, protections and settings, to keep Australians, particularly children, safe online;

When approaching online safety measures, features, controls, protections and settings it is important to consider how to balance the importance of anonymity and pseudonymity online with the need for users to be safe from harm. Digital anonymity and pseudonymity can be particularly useful for women dealing with violence from a partner. Efforts to eradicate online anonymity and pseudonymity are misguided because, as we stated earlier, many people are quite comfortable to have their real name and place of work attached to their abusive comments online.

At present, the measures currently in place to keep Australians safe online put the onus on the social media user to protect themselves from the harms others might seek to do to them. What may be more beneficial in the long-term is strengthening online safety education in schools by equipping teachers with the necessary knowledge and tools to talk to their students about online harms. The legislative and regulatory landscape is rapidly changing, and with so many young Australians online it is important that

they know the impact their online behaviour can have. It is imperative that the link between offline attitudes and online behaviour is made explicit.

(d) the effectiveness and impact of industry measures to give parents the tools they need to make meaningful decisions to keep their children safe online;

Pursuant to section (c) of the terms of reference for this inquiry, the buy-in of parents and teachers is essential to ensure children are safe online. Our active bystander training with young people showed us that they often do not feel equipped to respond when they witness or experience online abuse. As so much communication is now mediated through a private device like a smartphone, the need for private communications must be preserved when addressing the potential for online harms to children. It is also important to ensure protecting children from harm does not come at the expense of putting all Australians in harm's way through, for example, facial recognition software.

(e) the transparency and accountability required of social media platforms and online technology companies regarding online harms experienced by their Australian users;

Based on our interviews and research into online abuse and harassment, it is not clear whether social media companies are being transparent and accountable to Australian users. Interviewees have told us that they have reported online abuse to social media platforms, who have decided it does not violate their terms of use. Context is extremely important when it comes to online communication and it is certainly difficult to regulate online speech in such a way that covers all modes and contexts. However, at present, social media companies do not seem to be appropriately moderating the content enough to be able to take down egregious threats of violence, let alone the more complex, nuanced speech acts. The need for transparency in these instances is paramount as users need to understand why content has been removed and have the opportunity to appeal the decision.

(f) the collection and use of relevant data by industry in a safe, private and secure manner;

The lack of transparency of social media companies is a persistent barrier to users understanding whether their data is safe, private and secure. The assurances of social media companies are not adequate to reassure users. Instead, regulatory bodies should require social media companies to provide consumers with clear and comprehensive information about how exactly their data is being stored and used. Our research has suggested that users do not have confidence in social media and

digital media companies to keep their data and personal information safe. Furthermore, while some people find targeted advertising useful, there are many others who do not. Social media companies should be required to let users easily opt in and out of targeted advertising. It would also be beneficial to ask social media companies to define what they think “safe, private and secure” mean because these terms can be contingent and variable, especially for corporations who profit from the transfer and sale of user data to third parties.

(g) actions being pursued by the Government to keep Australians safe online;

The Government has announced several actions that attempt to keep Australians safe online including the Second National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children, and the Online Safety Act. The Draft National Plan identified online spaces as a critical area where action to prevent violence is needed. The Draft National Plan also proposed several strategies to develop skills in young people and adults, including as bystanders, and in educating young people about consent and appropriate online conduct. In our submission to the Second National Plan, GEN VIC noted that we are experts in active bystander approaches to promoting online safety. In addition to the eSafety Commissioner, GEN VIC should also be funded to continue our work in improving young people and adults’ awareness of how to be active bystanders online. GEN VIC should also be funded to continue developing innovative strategies for preventing online violence, including education programs.

The Online Safety Act came into effect very recently. It is still too early to tell whether the Act will be effective at keeping adult Australians safe online. This legislation should be reviewed every year to ensure it is achieving its aims. The calls for regulation of social media companies need to be considered in the context of toxic and marginalising discourses in Australia—how can social media be regulated without addressing the cultural causes of online harm? The recommendations from the ongoing ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry should be implemented, along with *all* the recommendations from the Safety and Respect at Work report. Without these measures, Australian women will continue to face online harms at unmanageable levels.

Conclusion

In our submission to this inquiry, GEN VIC has hoped to emphasise some of the complexity and nuance involved in addressing online harms. Our research into online abuse in the last four years has shown us that online abuse can make using social media almost unbearable for some people. While this might not

seem like a substantial impact, the effect is to essentially cut some people off from their social and community ties. Online safety means many different things to many different people; the meanings of safety, privacy and security can also be in flux. Therefore, in addition to the recommendations we make in our responses to the terms of reference, we also suggest this inquiry be conducted each year to review the current state of digital safety in Australia and to see how we can continue to improve.

Links to GEN VIC resources

Together We're Stronger: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMTxeQV3YvI>

Your Voice Matters: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWB-8FrTNQE>

Social media toolkit: https://www.genvic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/FINAL-GV_OABP_Toolkit_A3_V4_WEB.pdf

Don't Read the Comments: https://www.genvic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/GV_MEAA_PolicyDoc_V5_WEB.pdf

Media moderation guidelines: https://www.genvic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/GV_MEAA_AUMediaModGuidelines.pdf

Workplace support guidelines: https://www.genvic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/GV_MEAA_RespondingToTheComments.pdf

Cybersmart Women: <https://www.genvic.org.au/resources/cybersmart-women/>

Victorian Women's Mental Health during COVID-19: <https://www.genvic.org.au/focus-areas/genderequalhealth/this-conversation-is-not-over-womens-mental-health-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>