TIPPING POINT: THE CHILLING ESCALATION OF ONLINE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

New York, December 2025

Julie Posetti (Phd), Lea Hellmueller (Phd), Kaylee Williams, Pauline Renaud (Phd), Nermine Aboulez, and Nabeelah Shabbir

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UN WOMEN
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EVIDENCE BRIEF 1

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IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:

ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ACT	UN Women's ACT to End Violence against Women and Girls Programme
N	Sample Size / Number of Respondents
TFGBV	Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence
TF VAWG	Technology-Facilitated Violence Against Women and Girls
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

Introduction

Online violence[1] is an escalating threat to women's participation in public life and democratic deliberation in the AI Age, especially in the context of rising authoritarianism, increased repression of women's rights organizations, and networked misogyny. It is designed to stymie women's freedom of expression and part of a burgeoning strategy to roll back their hard-won right to gender equality and empowerment.

New data from a UN Women-comissioned survey of women in the public sphere, focused on women human rights defenders, activists and journalists, demonstrates the scale of the problem and the function of artificial intelligence technologies in its manifestations. It also highlights an alarming trend in the trajectory of online violence to offline attacks, abuse and harassment, proving that there is nothing virtual about online violence.

640
women respondents
FROM
119
countries

The global survey, fielded in late 2025 in five languages[2], was modelled on a 2020 survey which underpinned a landmark study, an excerpt from which was published by UNESCO in 2021 titled *The Chilling: Trends in Online Violence Against Women Journalists*.

This report analyzes the responses of over 640[3] women-identifying survey participants from 119 countries and delivers the following key findings:

70%
of women human rights defenders, activists, journalists and media workers surveyed have experienced online violence in the course of their work

24%
said that they had experienced AI-assisted online violence

41%
experienced offline attacks, abuse or harassment that they linked with online violence

42%
of women journalists and media workers surveyed said that they had experienced offline harm triggered by online violence — more than double the incidence rate recorded in 2020[4]

DEFINING ONLINE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Technology-facilitated violence against women is any act that is committed, assisted, aggravated or amplified by the use of information communication technologies or other digital tools which results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological, social, political or economic harm, or other infringements of rights and freedoms. These are forms of violence that are directed against women because they are women and/or that affect women disproportionately[5]. They include online harassment, abuse, targeted surveillance, image- and video-based abuse, doxxing[6], gendered hate speech, gendered disinformation, and/or threats which are delivered via information communications technologies, such as social media, chat apps, generative AI tools, text messages and email.

1 Alternatively referred to as digital violence, technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), or technology-facilitated violence against women and girls (TF VAWG).

2 Arabic, English, French, Portuguese and Spanish.

3 A total of 1,588 respondents answered the first survey question, while 874 respondents completed 50 questions. The survey samples analyzed here equate to the number of women respondents who answered the questions being reported. For further details about our methodology, see the relevant section at the end of this report.

4 The Chilling survey conducted in 2020 focused only on journalists, so the comparison between 2020 and 2025 cohorts can only be made for the respondents identifying as women journalists and media workers.

5 UN Women (2022) Technology-facilitated Violence against Women: Towards a common definition. Report of the meeting of the Expert Group. 15-16 November 2022, New York, USA, available at: https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/03/expert-group-meeting-report-technology-facilitated-violence-against-women

6 Publicly sharing personal details or home addresses as part of an online attack. (see A/HRC/44/52)

What does the data tell us about the scale of the problem?

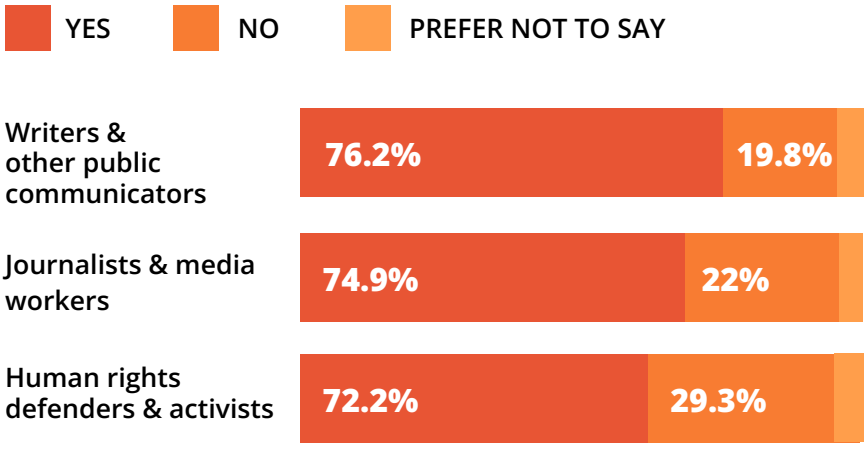
According to our survey, 70 per cent of women participants who work in the fields of human rights, activism and/or journalism said that they had experienced online violence in the course of their work.[7]

And when we examine the different professional orientations, we see that the incidence is highest among those who identified as "writers or other public communicators who focus on human rights issues" (e.g., social media content creators and influencers). Seventy six (76) per cent of these respondents said that they had experienced online violence in the context of their work, compared to 72 per cent of human rights defenders and activists.

Three-quarters (75 per cent) of women journalists and media workers said that they had experienced online violence in the course of their work in 2025, compared to 73 per cent in 2020, reflecting a two-point increase in exposure for this group over the past five years.[8]

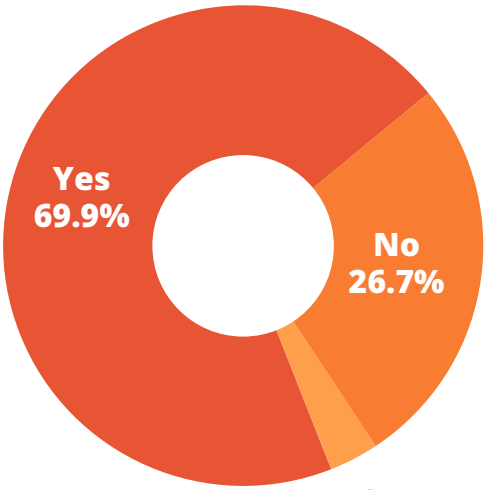
Online violence targeting women, by profession

Question: Have you personally experienced online violence in the course of your work?



For women journalists & media workers, n=354. For women writer and other public communicators, n=126. For women human rights defenders & activists, n=349.

Have you personally experienced online violence in the course of your work?*



**Expressed as a percentage of the 641 women respondents to this question*

7 Respondents were allowed to select more than one profession (e.g. identify as both a journalist and an activist) to recognise increasingly common hybrid roles. For this reason, the percentages of women in each professional category who reported experiencing online violence are slightly higher than that of the overall group.

8 The difference between the two samples is not statistically significant. Note that the question in 2025 had an additional answer category: 'Prefer not to say'.

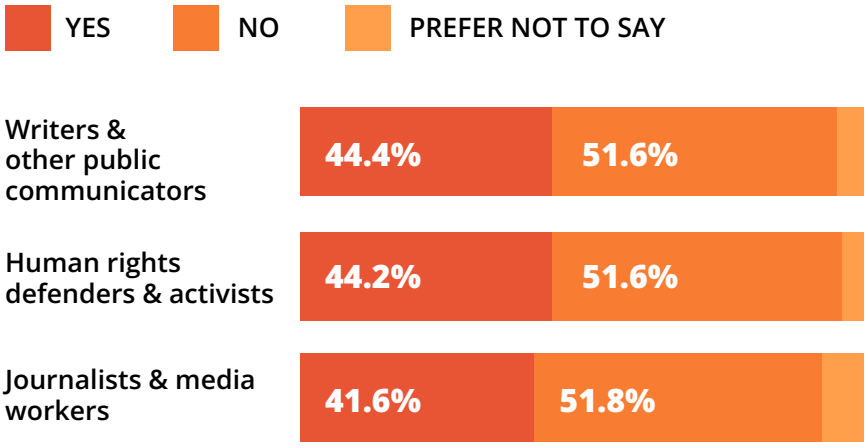
What does the data tell us about the trajectory of online violence to offline harm?

Alarmingly, 41 per cent of the respondents overall reported experiencing offline harm linked to violence that started online. Examples included physical assault, stalking, swatting[9] and verbal harassment. This highlights the need for responsive measures to address the very real risk of physical harm caused by online violence.

But the picture gets even more serious when we disaggregate this data for professional groups. Forty-four per cent of human rights defenders and activists, along with those identifying as writers and other public communicators, reported experiences of offline harm linked to online violence. Similarly, 42 per cent of women journalists and media workers connected offline harm with the online violence that they had experienced.

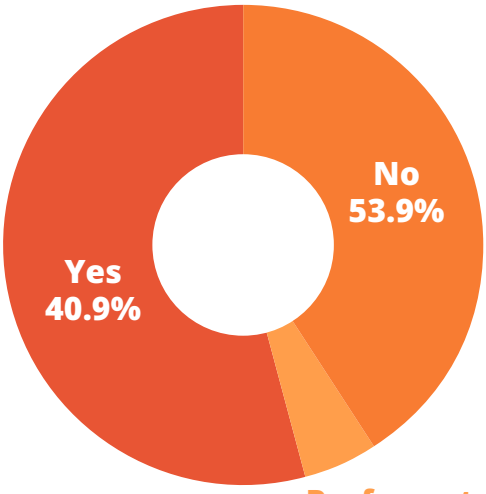
The trajectory of online violence to offline harm

Statement: I have experienced offline abuse, harassment or attacks (e.g., physical assault, stalking, verbal harassment, etc.) in connection with online violence.



For women journalists & media workers, n=353. For women public communicators, n=124. For women human rights defenders & activists, n=342.

Have you personally experienced offline abuse, harassment or attacks in connection with online violence?*



**Expressed as a percentage of the 633 women respondents to this question*

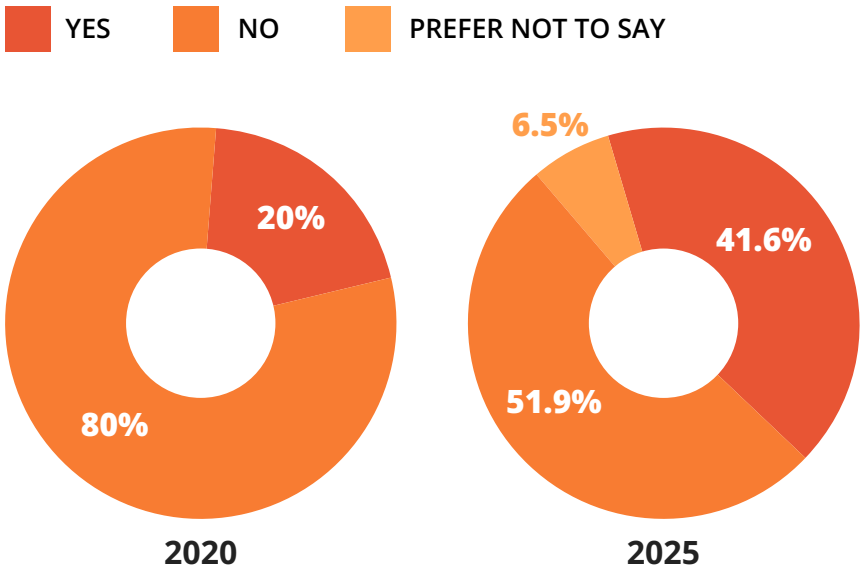
9 "Swatting is a malicious act that can involve placing false emergency calls to emergency responders, often reporting a (false) severe, ongoing crisis at a specific location. The goal of swatting is to provoke a significant law enforcement response, creating chaos and potentially resulting in violence." https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2025-04/25_0325_fps_swatting.pdf

The escalating threat trajectory experienced by women journalists and media workers

More alarming still, is the dangerously sharp increase in the measure of connection (perceived as either correlation or causation) between online violence and offline harm experienced by women journalists and media workers over the past five years. In the 2020 survey, 20 per cent of respondents in this group associated the offline attacks, abuse or harassment they had experienced with online violence. But by 2025, that figure had more than doubled to 42 per cent for women journalists and media workers[10].

Since 2020, the proportion of women journalists and media workers who report having experienced offline harm in connection with online violence has more than doubled

Statement: I have experienced offline abuse, harassment or attacks (e.g., physical assault, stalking, verbal harassment, etc.) in connection with online violence.



Note: The same question was fielded first in 2020, and then again in 2025, to two different samples of women journalists and media workers. Results are expressed as a percentage of the women journalists who responded to the corresponding question in each survey.

10 The difference between 2020 and 2025 for women journalists and media workers is statistically significant according to our sample testing. In 2020, we had n=596 respondents answering the question about the connection between online and offline violence. In 2025 we had n=353 respondents answering this question. To account for the difference in sample size and proportion, we ran a 'z-test' for sample comparison to determine if there was a significant difference between the two samples. The results confirmed that there was.

What role does AI play in women human rights defenders', activists', and journalists' experience of online violence?

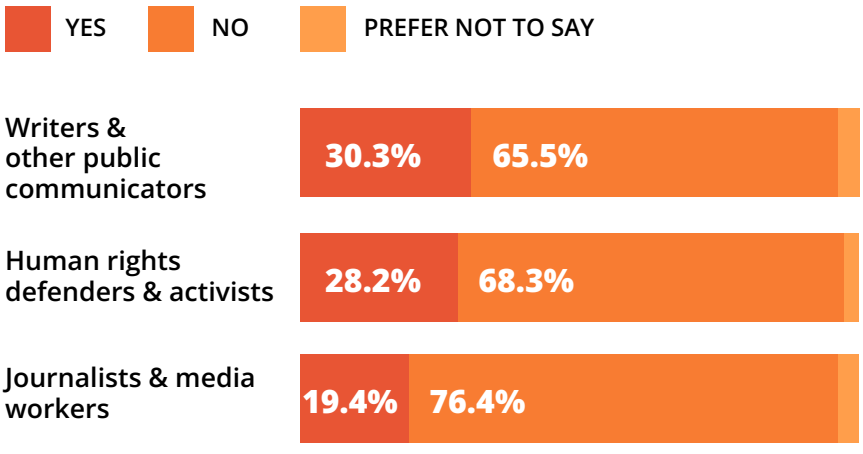
The mainstreaming of generative AI tools following the release of ChatGPT 3 in late 2022 threatened to supercharge the risks associated with online violence experienced by women in public life. This was because it had suddenly become much easier and cheaper to produce much more believable abusive content, such as deepfakes, which could be distributed much more quickly by algorithms tuned to amplify hate, anger and division to maximize Big Tech companies' profits.

So, how has the proliferation of generative AI tools affected the manifestations of online violence? According to our survey, nearly a quarter (23.8 per cent) of the women respondents said that they had experienced AI-assisted online violence.

When we look at the women's professional identities, we see that 30 per cent of women writers and other public communicators had experienced online violence that they indicated involved artificial intelligence technologies, compared to 28 per cent of women human rights defenders and activists, and 19 per cent of women journalists and media workers.

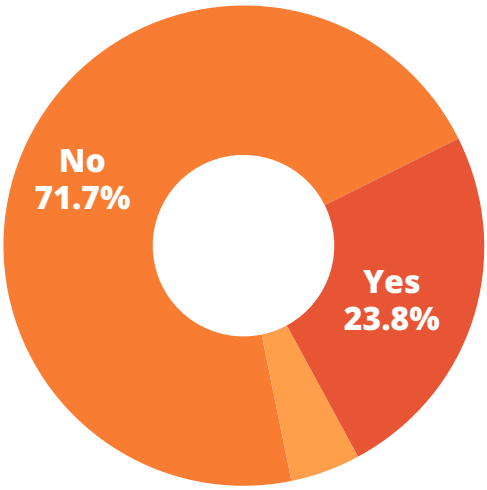
AI-assisted online violence targeting women, by profession

Question: To the best of your knowledge, has any online violence or abuse you have experienced involved the use of artificial intelligence technologies?



For women journalists & media workers, n=314. For women public communicators, n=119. For women human rights defenders & activists, n=309.

Has any online violence you have experienced involved the use of artificial intelligence technologies?*



**Expressed as a percentage of the 558 women respondents to this question*

This means that there is strong evidence that AI technologies already play a significant role in online violence directed at women human rights defenders and activists, journalists and media workers, writers and other public communicators. This presents an urgent two-fold challenge: the need to develop tools to better identify, monitor, report and repel AI-assisted online violence; and the need to develop legal and regulatory mechanisms

designed to require Big Tech companies to prevent their technologies being deployed against women in the public sphere in ways which undermine their rights to gender equality, democratic participation, and freedom of expression.

What's next?

This is the first in a series of reports to be published from our survey over the next year. In future reports, we will measure the intersectional exposure and impacts of online violence directed at women human rights defenders, activists, journalists, writers and other public communicators who experience multilayered attacks targeting other aspects of their identity such as race, religion, and sexual orientation. We will also assess the survey respondents' attitudes towards, and experiences of, responsive mechanisms designed to address online violence against women, including legal and judicial remedies.

Our methodology

This survey was fielded between 27 August and 13 November 2025 — in Arabic, English, French, Portuguese and Spanish. The method adopted was 'purposive sampling', with 'snowballing' techniques used to generate responses within the international fields of human rights defence, activism and journalism. The results, therefore, are not generalizable, although it is legitimate to extrapolate many patterns that may well have wider applicability. To avoid illegitimate or inauthentic responses and ensure data integrity, the survey was distributed digitally via the trusted networks of UN Women, UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), their research partners, civil society organizations focused on gender equality, media development, journalism safety and groups of professional representative organizations. These parameters reflect the conditions of the original 2020 survey.

After the removal of invalid responses, the 2025 survey generated 1,588 responses for analysis. For the purpose of this report, statistics were calculated based on an analysis of the responses from participants who answered all key questions, generating a sample of n=874 respondents who identify as women (641), men (210), non-binary (9), self-described or who selected 'prefer not to say' (14). Ethical considerations resulted in most questions being made optional. Some questions also allowed the selection of multiple responses to enable the capture of a multiplicity of experiences. As a result, the number of responses varies between questions, and the proportions will not necessarily add up to 100 per cent (see specific footnotes for such instances in the report).

The survey was overseen by academic researchers affiliated with City St George's, University of London, which granted ethics clearance for the project. It was refined and tested in consultation with an international advisory board of 22 practitioners, academics, representatives of intergovernmental organizations, civil society entities, and policy-makers.

About the authors

Julie Posetti (PhD) is the Director of the Information Integrity Initiative, a project of TheNerve, a digital forensics lab established by Nobel Laureate Maria Ressa. She is also Professor of Journalism and Chair of the Centre for Journalism and Democracy at City St George's, University of London. She has led several major UN-commissioned studies focused on information integrity, the safety of journalists, gender and media viability, including The Chilling: A Global Study of Online Violence Against Women Journalists (UNESCO, 2019-2022) and Protecting Journalism Sources in the Digital Age (UNESCO 2017). She is also the lead author of the OSCE's Guidelines for Monitoring Online Violence Against Female Journalists (2023), and she co-authored Journalism, Fake News and Disinformation (UNESCO, 2018). Additionally, Professor Posetti is a Research Associate at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford, and she serves on the board of the International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM). Previously, she was Global Director of Research at ICFJ.

Lea Hellmueller (PhD) is Associate Dean for Research and Innovation at City St George's, University of London. She is an Associate Professor in the Journalism Department and an Affiliate Researcher with the Violence & Society Centre specialising on global threats to journalism, working on projects investigating gender-based violence against journalists, politicians and human rights defenders.

Kaylee Williams is a senior researcher with the Information Integrity Initiative, a project of TheNerve. She is also PhD candidate at Columbia Journalism School, studying technology-facilitated gender-based violence, with a particular emphasis on generative AI and nonconsensual intimate imagery. She holds a Master of Arts in political science from Columbia University.

Pauline Renaud (PhD) is a lecturer in the Department of Journalism at City St George's, University of London, with a focus on financial journalism, international journalism and ethics. She completed her PhD in 2023, investigating journalistic authority in the face of disinformation, and recently co-wrote a book, *Femmes journalistes : entre passion et (dés)illusion*, on women journalists in France.

Nermine Aboulez is a Research Associate with the Information Integrity Initiative, a project of TheNerve. She previously worked on the UNESCO-ICFJ online violence project, where she was the lead researcher in the Arab region. She is pursuing a Ph.D at the University of Oregon, where she studies news virality and violence against women in Egypt. She holds a M.A. in media studies from the American University in Cairo.

Nabeelah Shabbir is the Deputy Director of the Information Integrity Initiative, a project of TheNerve. A British-Pakistani journalist and researcher, she co-authored The Chilling: A Global Study of Online Violence Against Women Journalists (ICFJ-UNESCO: 2O22) and the OSCE Guidelines for Monitoring Online Violence against Women Journalists (2023). She also co-authored a series of reports for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford. At *The Guardian*, she shared a British Journalism Prize with the 'Keep it in the Ground' team in 2015.

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