

TIPPING POINT: ONLINE VIOLENCE IMPACTS, MANIFESTATIONS AND REDRESS IN THE AI AGE

New York, April 2026

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

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UN WOMEN
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EVIDENCE BRIEF 2

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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

641
women respondents
FROM
119
countries

Targeted online violence[1] against women in public life is increasingly technologically sophisticated and damaging, triggering alarming rates of mental health diagnosis, heightened self-censorship, and more frequent escalation to law enforcement.

For women human rights defenders and activists, journalists and media workers, and writers and other public communicators, online violence is often deliberate and coordinated, aiming to silence them while undermining their professional credibility and personal reputations.

It also serves to fuel the reversal of hard-won rights[2] in a climate of rising authoritarianism, democratic backsliding and networked misogyny. Gender rights rollback is both enabled and exacerbated by technologies which — by design — amplify misogynistic hate speech for profit.

Generative AI apps are the latest manifestation of this form of subjugation. They do not just 'nudify' women and girls instantaneously without their consent, they simulate them being sexually assaulted.

AI-assisted 'virtual rape' is now at the fingertips of perpetrators.

This phenomenon deepens and accelerates the harm inflicted on women in public life who are increasingly targeted in online violence campaigns with an escalation in associated offline attacks, abuse and harassment, as our previous research has shown.

In this publication — the second installment in the Tipping Point series that examines how online violence is constraining women's participation in public life in the AI Age — we focus primarily on manifestations of image-based abuse and what happens after exposure to such online violence. How are survivors affected personally and professionally? What coping mechanisms do they deploy? And how do they seek legal redress?

Our data is derived from a UN-Women commissioned global survey[3] which was distributed in late 2025 in five languages[4], in partnership with UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists[5].

1 We define this as 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 that affect women disproportionately. They include online harassment, abuse, targeted surveillance, image- and video-based abuse, doxxing, swatting, gendered hate speech, gendered disinformation, and threats which are delivered via information communications technologies, such as social media, chat apps, generative AI tools, text messages and email.

2 A 2025 report from the UN Secretary General to the UN General Assembly notes that nearly a quarter (24 per cent) of UN Member States pointed to backlash on gender equality as a factor undermining implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action https://docs.un.org/en/E/CN.6/2025/3

3 The survey was closely modelled on a 2020 survey which underpinned the landmark study titled *The Chilling: Global Trends in Online Violence Against Women Journalists* (UNESCO: 2021) and it targeted an overlapping cohort of journalists.

4 Arabic, English, French, Portuguese and Spanish.

5 See the methodology section at the end of this report.

After analyzing the responses of 641 women-identifying survey participants from 119 countries, we identified the following key findings:

12% **of respondents experienced the non-consensual sharing of personal images (including those of a sexual or intimate nature) while six per cent had been 'deepfaked'**

24% **reported being diagnosed with, or treated for, anxiety or depression linked to online violence, while 13 per cent had experienced Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

41% **said they self-censor on social media to avoid being abused**

25% **had reported online violence to the police**

15% **per cent had taken legal action**

As our 2025 survey was based on a UNESCO-published global survey of women journalists and media workers (fielded in 2020) involving an overlapping cohort of respondents, we are also able to identify the following trends in self-censorship and legal redress among women journalists specifically[6]:

- **Women journalists and media workers are self-censoring at a rate of 45 per cent, which is 50 per cent higher than reported in 2020 (30 per cent)**
- **In 2025, women journalists were twice as likely (22 per cent) to report online violence incidents to the police than they were in 2020 (11 per cent)**
- **Women journalists are now significantly more likely (14 per cent) to take legal action against perpetrators and facilitators of online violence compared to 2020 (eight per cent)**

6 Comparative data is only available for the category of 'women journalists and media workers' because the original 2020 survey underpinning *The Chilling* focused only on women journalists.

The growing prevalence of AI-enabled image-based abuse

As we concluded in the first report in the Tipping Point series, one in four women who responded to our 2025 survey had experienced AI-assisted abuse. One particularly pernicious manifestation of this trend is the explosion of generative AI-enabled image-based forms of online violence, which add a new and especially invasive dimension to the risks faced by women in the public sphere.

These attacks range from the deployment of 'nudification' apps to strip naked, disempower and shame women by manipulating their images, through to deepfake videos which simulate their rape.

A particularly dangerous phenomenon is the seamless integration of generative-AI apps primed for 'nudification' with social media platforms used for distribution, allowing for frictionless creation and publication of material designed to violate women and girls in the most extreme ways.

According to an analysis conducted by the Center for Countering Digital Hate, a single app had reportedly generated over three million 'nudified' images by January 2026, with 6,700 produced per hour at one point.

Our survey findings indicate that these forms of abuse, which were considered relatively rare just a few years ago, are now a significant portion of the broader ecosystem of online violence. Overall, 12 per cent of the women surveyed reported experiencing the non-consensual sharing of personal images, including sexually explicit or intimate image-based material, and six per cent reported being targeted by deepfakes or other manipulated imagery.

12%

of women respondents have experienced the non-consensual sharing of personal images (including those of a sexual or intimate nature)

6%

have been targeted through deepfakes or manipulated images/video

27%

have been targeted with unwanted / unsolicited sexual advances received via direct / private message (e.g., unwanted intimate images / cyberflashing, sexual innuendos, non-consensual sexting, etc.)

When disaggregated to account for different professional identities, the data shows higher levels of exposure among some groups.[7] The non-consensual sharing of personal images was reported by nine per cent of women journalists and media workers, compared with 15 per cent of human rights defenders and activists, and 15 per cent of writers and other public communicators.

A similar pattern appears in relation to deepfakes. Nearly 10 per cent of women writers and other public communicators, eight per cent of human rights defenders and activists, and five per cent of journalists said they had been subjected to deepfake-related abuse.

While the public distribution of 'nudification' content is a notable new phenomenon, much image-based abuse still arrives via direct messages, on social media apps in the form of unwanted sexual advances featuring sexual imagery, sometimes referred to as cyberflashing. Forty per cent of women writers and other public communicators, one-third

7 Respondents were allowed to select more than one professional category (e.g. identify as both a journalist and an activist) to recognize increasingly common hybrid roles.

of human rights defenders and activists, and nearly one-quarter of journalists and media workers reported experiencing such abuse.

AI and image-based manifestations of online violence, broken down by profession

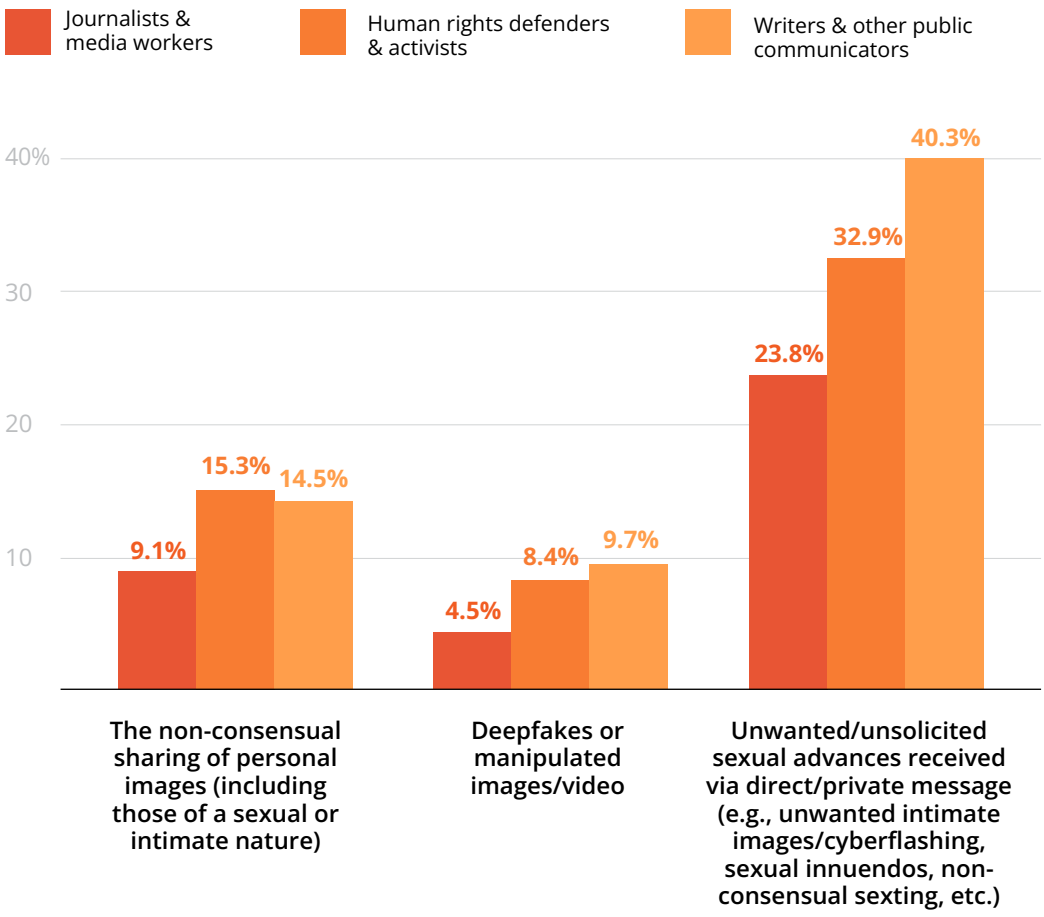


Figure 1: Percentage of women surveyed who responded to the statement: "I have personally been subjected to the following online (Please select all that apply):"

For women journalists & media workers, n=353. For women human rights defenders & activists, n=347. For women public communicators, n=124.

Severe mental health impacts

Our survey findings indicate that online violence produces lasting personal harms for many women, with the most frequently reported consequences relating to their mental health and wellbeing. Nearly one-quarter of the women surveyed reported being diagnosed with, or treated for, anxiety and/or depression in connection with their experience of online violence, while 13 per cent had been diagnosed with PTSD.

Mental health impacts among survivors of online violence

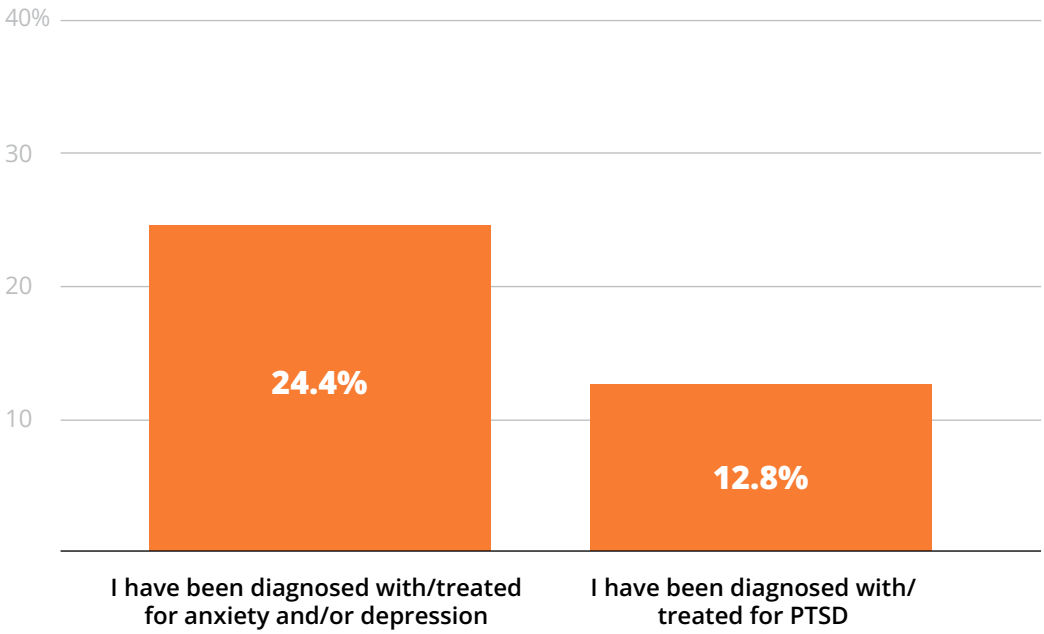


Figure 2: Percentage of women surveyed who responded to the statement: "I have experienced the following personal impacts associated with online violence (Please select all that apply)".

Expressed as a percentage of the 626 women respondents to this question.

When this data is broken down according to professional orientation, it is clear that those identifying as writers and other public communicators experienced the highest rates of mental illness diagnosis, with 39 per cent saying they had been diagnosed with anxiety and/or depression and 22 per cent with PTSD in connection with online violence exposure. The rate is 26 per cent and 15 per cent respectively for human rights defenders and activists, with 25 per cent of women journalists and media workers reporting diagnosis with depression and anxiety, and 13 per cent saying they had been diagnosed with PTSD.

Mental health impacts of online violence, by profession

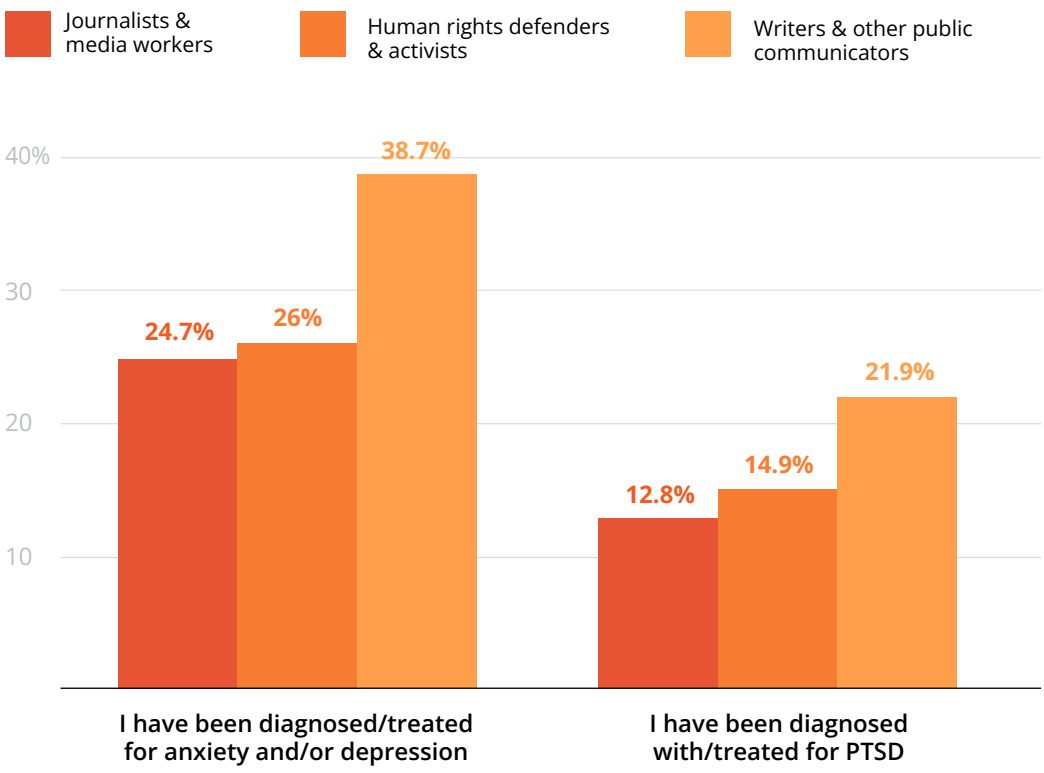


Figure 3. Percentage of women who responded to the statement: "I have experienced the following personal impacts associated with online violence (Please select all that apply)".

For women journalists & media workers, n=344. For women human rights defenders & activists, n=335. For women public communicators, n=119.

The escalating chilling effect

Women's exposure to online violence is increasingly stifling their voices, with alarming rates of self-censorship reported by our survey respondents.

41%

of women surveyed said online violence had caused them to self-censor on social media

19%

of women surveyed said online violence had caused them to self-censor at work

Shockingly, 50 per cent of the women identifying as writers and other public communicators said they self-censor on social media in response to online violence, while over a quarter (26 per cent) said they self-censor at work. The picture is not much better for journalists and media workers with approximately 45 per cent of this group — whose work depends on robust freedom of expression protections — saying that they self-censor online, and over one-fifth (22 per cent) indicating that they self-censor in the workplace. For human rights defenders and activists, the statistics are similar: 43 per cent silence themselves on social media while 20 per cent self-censor at work.

Reported prevalence of self-censorship as a result of online violence, by profession

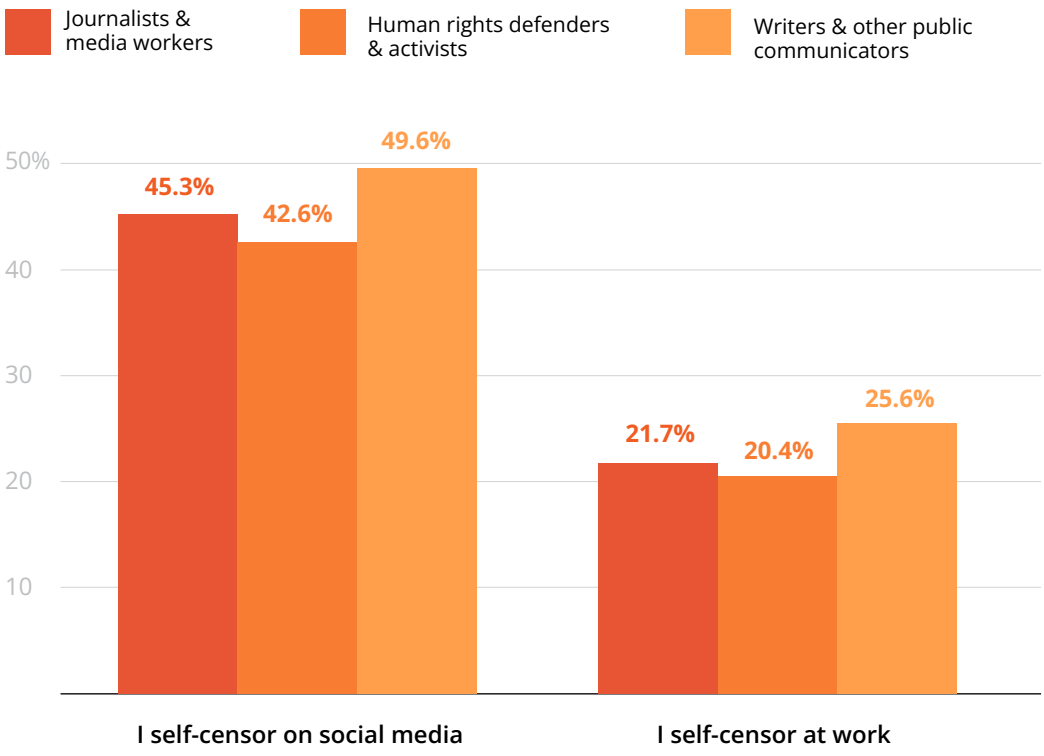


Figure 4. Percentage of women who responded to the statement: "I have reacted in the following ways to the online violence I experience (Please select all that apply)".

For women journalists & media workers, n=351. For women human rights defenders & activists, n=329. For women public communicators, n=121.

Women journalists and media workers are facing a significant further chilling of their freedom of expression as evidenced by our 2025 survey. While in 2020, 30 per cent of respondents in this group reported self-censoring in response to online violence, by the end of 2025, that rate had risen to 45 per cent, representing a 50 per cent increase.[8]

A journalist and community organizer elaborated on her survey responses with this powerful testimony, which demonstrates the ways in which the mental health impacts of online violence are linked with self-censorship, exclusion from democratic deliberation and financial hardship:

> *When we speak aloud about democracy, there is no 'feel' of democracy—only a 'demo of craziness'. Unable to cope with the relentless pressure, I resigned from my job in December 2023. I am now sitting at home, focused solely on restoring my mental wellness. This necessary retreat has caused severe financial problems; I am currently subsisting on rice porridge, a direct consequence of being forced into silence and out of work.*

There is a

50%

increase in women journalists and media workers reporting self-censorship in response to online attacks from 2020 (30%) to 2025 (45%)

8 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=714 respondents answering the question about self-censoring on social media. In 2025 we had n=351 respondents answering this question. To assess whether the difference between the two samples was statistically significant, we ran a two-proportion z-test. The results confirmed that it was ($z=-4.93$, $p < .001$).

Surging efforts to seek legal redress

According to our survey, one-quarter of women who experienced online violence said that they had reported their experiences to police, while 15 per cent said they had taken legal action against their abusers, a facilitator of online violence (such as a Big Tech company), or their employer in order to seek justice.

25%

of women had reported online violence incidents to the police

15%

of women had initiated legal action in an effort to seek justice

When the data is disaggregated according to professional identities, women human rights defenders — a group which includes lawyers — emerge as the most likely group to turn to law enforcement and the courts after an attack, with 30 per cent referring incidents to the police and 19 per cent initiating legal action. In the case of writers and other public communicators, 26 per cent went to the police and 16 per cent started legal proceedings, while journalists and media workers sought such redress at the rates of 22 per cent and 14 per cent respectively.

Reported prevalence of pathways to redress for online violence, by profession

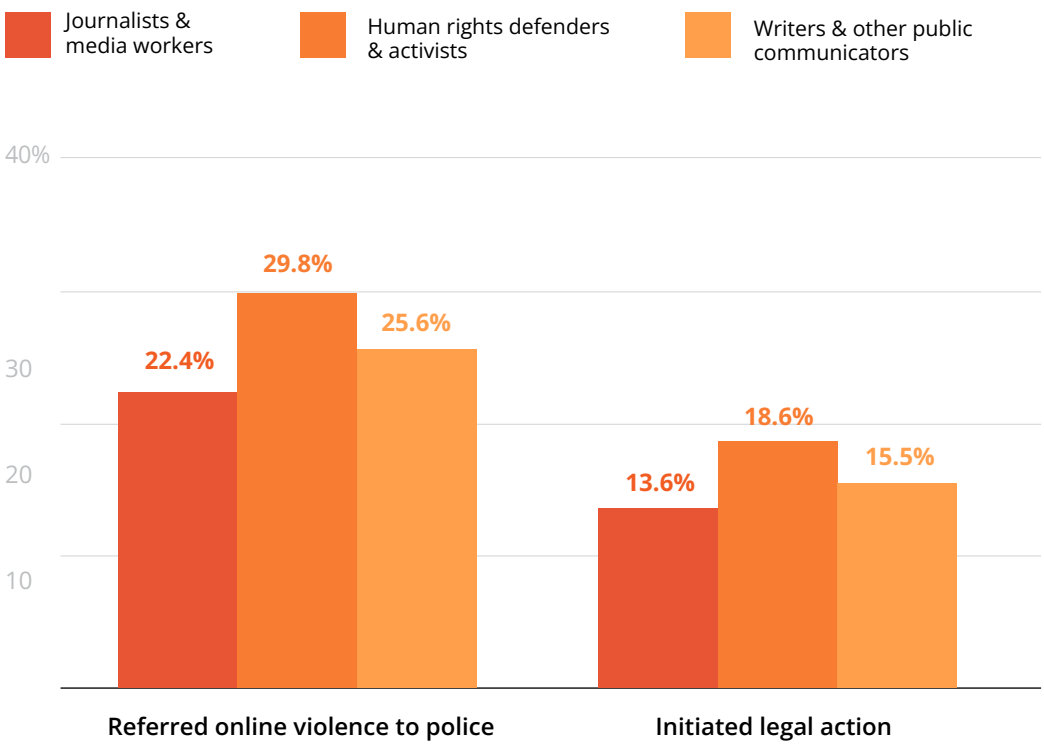
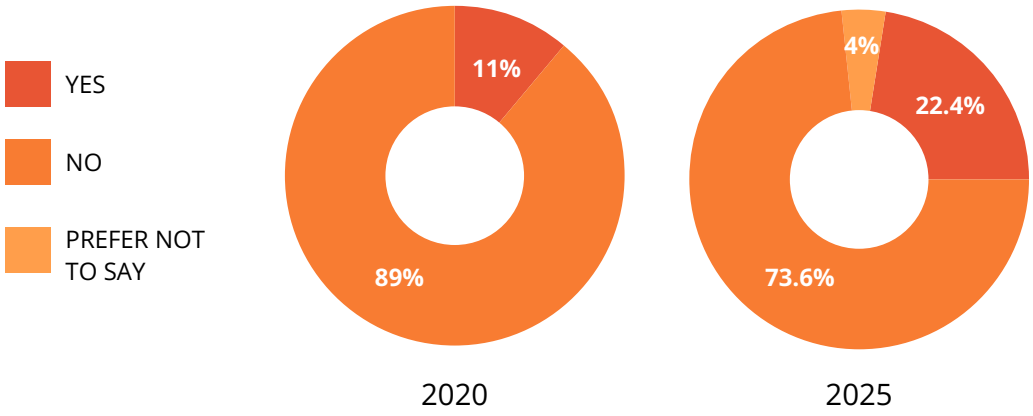


Figure 5. Percentage of women who responded to two statements. Statement 1: "I have referred an instance / instances of online violence to the police." Statement 2: "I have initiated legal action against a perpetrator, an enabler (e.g., a platform where the violence took place), or my employer or organization."

Statement 1: For women journalists & media workers, n=348. For women human rights defenders & activists, n=342. For women public communicators, n=125. Statement 2: For women journalists & media workers, n=345. For women human rights defenders & activists, n=345. For women public communicators, n=123.

Once again, our data demonstrates that women journalists and media workers are experiencing an escalating online violence crisis compared to their situation in 2020. There has been a significant increase in the rate of women journalists and media workers reporting cases of online violence to the police, with the respondents in 2025 more than twice as likely (22.4 per cent) to make a police complaint than they were in 2020 (11 per cent). Similarly, this group is now more likely to initiate legal action, with 14 per cent of 2025 respondents commencing proceedings, compared to eight per cent in 2020.

Since 2020, the proportion of women journalists & media workers who say they have reported an instance of online violence to police has more than doubled

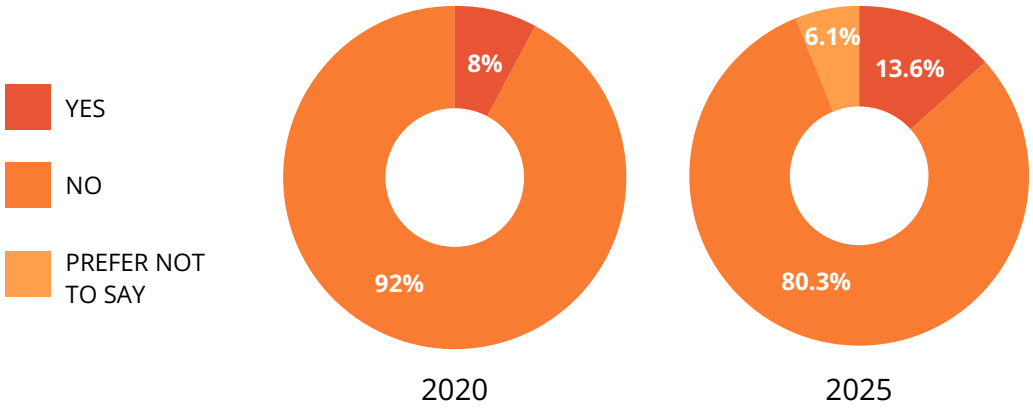


Note: the same question was fielded first in 2020, and then again in 2025, to two different samples of women journalists. Results are expressed as a percentage of the women-identifying journalists who responded to the corresponding question in each survey. In 2020, n=714. In 2025, n=348. A two-proportion z-test showed that the difference was statistically significant (z=4.89, p < .001)

Figure 6. Percentage of women who responded to the statement: "I have referred an instance / instances of online violence to the police." These respondents were women-identifying "Journalists / Media Workers", in 2020 and 2025.

These findings may reflect the increasing incidence of online violence against women in the public sphere, in combination with rising impunity for such attacks from Big Tech companies, and growing awareness of the problem. However, it should be acknowledged that going to the police or taking legal action may not necessarily lead to justice for survivors.

Since 2020, the proportion of women journalists & media workers who say they initiated legal action after being targeted for online violence has significantly increased



Note: the same question was fielded first in 2020, and then again in 2025, to two different samples of women journalists. Results are expressed as a percentage of the women-identifying journalists who responded to the corresponding question in each survey. In 2020, n=714. In 2025, n=345. A two-proportion z-test showed that the difference was statistically significant (z=3.87, p < .001)

Figure 7. Percentage of women who responded to the statement: "I have initiated legal action against a perpetrator, an enabler (e.g., a platform where the violence took place), or my employer or organization." The respondents were women-identifying "Journalists / Media Workers", in 2020 and 2025.

Patterns of victim-blaming and reluctance persist

24%

of women who reported online violence to the police experienced treatment they perceived as *victim blaming*

While one-quarter (25 per cent) of the women respondents had reported their experiences of online violence to law enforcement agencies, only ten per cent of those who had done so said that charges were successfully brought against their abuser/s. This low rate of charges being filed may be the result of a variety of challenges with investigating online violence, including low technical literacy within police departments, and a lack of cooperation from the Big Tech companies facilitating online violence, as well as personal biases and misinformed assumptions about the perceived triviality of "virtual" violence. This hypothesis is supported by our finding that 27 per cent of respondents who reported to law enforcement agencies said they faced reluctance or refusal from police to investigate their cases.

Additionally, 24 per cent reported experiencing treatment from law enforcement that they perceived as victim blaming. This includes being subjected to pointed questions such as "What did you do/say to trigger the abuse?".

Linked to this is the problem of law enforcement outsourcing responsibility for protection to the survivor. The same number of respondents (24 per cent) said they were made to feel responsible for shielding themselves against further victimization, by: removing themselves from social media; avoiding speaking publicly about controversial issues; moving into less visible roles at work; or taking leave from their respective careers.

Such approaches further entrench efforts to silence women in public life and render them less visible. They also highlight the need for more effective education and training of law enforcement and judicial actors to support action in cases of technology-facilitated violence against women and girls. But such capacity building needs to be matched by political will to effectively regulate Big Tech companies that propagate this violence and use their outsized financial and political power to undermine progress in this area.

When asked to elaborate on the existence and effectiveness of legal and regulatory avenues for redress in their countries, the respondents demonstrated a general level of awareness about relevant laws and processes, but they also highlighted implementation gaps and the need for reform.

In the words of an activist based in France:

> *I've already been subjected to such a severe cyberbullying campaign from the far-right sphere that the Minister for Women's Rights (with whom I've previously disagreed) wrote to me to express her support and tell me she had reported it to the prosecutor. I filed a complaint, compiling a solid case documenting the cyberbullying, but my complaint was dismissed without investigation.*

Others suggested that seeking redress via cyber laws was an option only for those with the resources, and these laws could be abused by those in power.

> *As an Indian environmental journalist, I face constant attacks. When right-wing groups online brand me a 'traitor,' and thousands of WhatsApp forwards spread these false allegations, simply living in my own country becomes terrifying. We have begun to self-censor, withdrawing from investigative reporting. This is because local right-wing operatives, fueled by these posts, have confronted my relatives and spoken rudely to them. It is not easy to live freely; we are forced into silence.*

Up next

This is the second in a series of UN Women reports to be published from our global survey. Next, UN Women will publish a comprehensive report addressing a broad spectrum of issues associated with online violence towards women in public life. This will include an analysis of perpetrators' characteristics and behaviours, and an examination of Big Tech companies' role as vectors of online violence. Additionally, we will examine intersectional exposure to, and impacts of, online violence for women who experience multilayered attacks targeting other aspects of their identity such as race, religion, and sexual orientation. And we will delve more deeply into the experiences of women human rights defenders, activists, journalists, writers and other public communicators who are exposed to various forms of AI-assisted online violence. Finally, we will deliver comprehensive recommendations for action to improve responses to online violence from States, intergovernmental organisations, civil society, industry, and legal and judicial actors.

Our preliminary findings call for cohesive coalitions of key stakeholders to co-design tailored interdisciplinary interventions — from the development of secure, open-source technology to support collaboration and advocacy, through to model legislation and regulation.

They also demand responses which recognize the networked nature of technology-enabled threats, and the acceleration of AI-infused hate and violence. This requires a combination of trauma-informed psychosocial assistance, digitally literate law enforcement and judicial responses, and industry commitment to the Ruggie Principles on business and human rights. Finally, there is a need to address the prevailing socio-cultural conditions which fuel online violence.

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 and participants in that survey who opted to contribute to future research were also invited to respond to the 2025 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 policymakers.

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), The World Economic Forum's Global Future Council on Information Integrity, and the Advisory Board of the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harrassment and Abuse. Previously, she was Global Director of Research at ICFJ.

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

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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.

Nabeelah Shabbir is the Deputy Director of the Information Integrity Initiative at 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.

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

UN WOMEN EXISTS TO ADVANCE WOMEN'S RIGHTS, GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS.

As the lead UN entity on gender equality and secretariat of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, we shift laws, institutions, social behaviours and services to close the gender gap and build an equal world for all women and girls. Our partnerships with governments, women's movements and the private sector coupled with our coordination of the broader United Nations translate progress into lasting changes. We make strides forward for women and girls in four areas: leadership, economic empowerment, freedom from violence, and women, peace and security as well as humanitarian action.

UN Women keeps the rights of women and girls at the centre of global progress – always, everywhere. Because gender equality is not just what we do. It is who we are.

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