Gender and Hate Speech

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Women encounter forms of violence that are unique to their gender, in the workplace, in public spaces and on the internet. To take the example of women journalists, they are bullied, cyber stalked, publicly shamed and subjected to hate speech for being women, for being journalists, and sometimes, for being women journalists.

This conclusion was reached by WACC's partner the Association of Women in Media in Kenya following media monitoring research on tweets and comments by online audiences. The media content studied spanned a continuum of violence from harassment of individual women, to hate or attacks of women as a group.

Communication is characterized as 'hate' when it attacks an entire group just because the members share a common characteristic, in this case, gender, and the communication call for acts of violence against the group. Hate speech is public expression that attacks a group based on a common identity such as gender, ethnic origin, religion, race, disability and sexuality. This definition indicates the line between hate speech and abusive speech. Hate speech is any form of expression through which speakers intend to vilify, humiliate, or incite hatred against a group.

The problem of hate speech is not new but is a growing concern around the world. According to Article 19 in a report[1] issued last year comparing six EU countries (Austria, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland and the UK), the increase in incidences of hate speech in Europe has been accompanied by a rise in hate crimes. Their analysis attributes the rise of hate speech in Europe to the global economic crisis compounded by the increase in migrants and refugees and Eurosceptic rhetoric.

In February this year Microsoft released its 3rd digital civility index report[2] covering 22 countries including Belgium, France, Germany, Italy and the UK. 17% of respondents reported having experienced online hate. In the first wave of the digital civility study[3] three years ago, 16% of respondents had experienced online hate.

Gendered hate speech occurs when women and gender minorities are targeted in sexist and misogynist comments. Particular groups of women are more likely to be targeted especially when they are also part of racial, ethnic, sexual, religious and other minorities.

Results and impact of sexist hate speech:

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[1] ARTICLE 19, '*Responding to 'hate speech': Comparative overview of six EU countries*' (2018). http://europeanjournalists.org/mediaagainsthate/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Final-compilation-off-regional-research-digital.pdf
[2] Microsoft. Digital Civility Index report, Year three. https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/digital-skills/digital-civility?activetab=dci_reports%3aprimaryr6
[3] Microsoft. Digital Civility Index report, Year one, https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/digital-skills/digital-civility?activetab=dci_reports%3aprimaryr8

- The silencing effect of gendered hate speech is profoundly disempowering.[4]
- By spreading and reinforcing views of women as legitimate objects of hostility, hate speech also contributes to other forms of gender-based harm. [5]
- Hate speech can be seen as reinforcing strict gender norms, particularly when women step outside traditional roles and enter male-dominated spaces[6], such as the world of journalism, which the GMMP has found, is still predominantly male.

Research indicates that the reality of hate speech is gendered:
- In North America research shows that women, girls, sexual and gender minorities are disproportionately targeted by online hate.[7]
- Sexist hate speech is also rampant in Europe. A 2015 survey of youth found that women are one of the top three target groups of hate speech.[8]

Yet while hate speech laws exist in many jurisdictions, gendered hate speech is not covered despite the harm it causes. "Legal responses are generally gender neutral, often missing the severe implications that the harsh reality of misogyny and digital gendered violence and abuse can have on women's participation in the democratic discourse taking place online".[9]

Revisions to the methodology and data collection instruments for the 2020 edition of the Global Media Monitoring Project will consider introducing a new indicator to measure the incidence of sexist online hate speech and to compare prevalence across regions. The evidence will be important to support advocacy for the integration of the gender dimension in hate speech policy and legislation.

[4] Solnit, Rebecca. Silence and powerlessness go hand in hand – women's voices must be heard. Opinion piece in The Guardian (UK) online news published March 8, 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/mar/08/silence-powerlessness-womens-voices-rebecca-solnit
[5] Griffin, Laura and Nichole Shackleton. The gender gap in Australia's hate speech laws. The Conversation. 20 August, 2018. https://theconversation.com/the-gender-gap-in-australias-hate-speech-laws-100158
[6] Ibid.
[7] Duggan et al, 2014. Online harassment. Pew Research Centre. https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2014/10/PI_OnlineHarassment_72815.pdf; CBC News. Premier Kathleen Wynne bombarded on social media by homophobic, sexist abuse. 25 January 2017. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/kathleen-wynne-twitter-abuse-1.3949657
[8] Council of Europe. Combating Sexist Hate Speech seminar report. 10-12 February, 2016. https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016806cc316
[9] Ibid.