



PLAN
INTERNATIONAL

GIRLS ONLINE: EXPERIENCES AND IMPACTS IN IRELAND

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the girls who contributed to this research by taking part in our survey and interviews. We are grateful for their time, insight, and stories which serve to shine a light on abuse faced by girls across the world.

This research was carried out by the Plan International Ireland Youth Advisory Panel and the report was drafted by the Development Education Officer, Ashley Westpheling. Our Youth Advisory Panel (YAP) engages young people aged 16-24 as ambassadors and advisors to Plan International Ireland.

Through advocacy and activism, our YAP members stand in solidarity with young campaigners around the world to make change happen both in Ireland and internationally.

Established in 2003, Plan International Ireland is part of the Plan International Federation which is one of the largest international child focused NGOs in the world, active in over 70 countries.

Plan International Ireland focuses on child-centred community development, which puts children who are in need at the core of programming.



INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the prevalence of gender-based violence in communities around the world has been exposed. From the Beijing Platform for Action to the inclusion of Gender Equality as a Sustainable Development Goal there have been strong international commitments made to support girl's and women's rights.

The stuff they say doesn't have any meaning behind it, they're just saying random words [...] Just to annoy you and harass you until you leave. Until it's an unsafe space and then you leave.

I think that social media just in its current form isn't safe for women [...] young girls in general on social media can be targeted for absolutely anything.

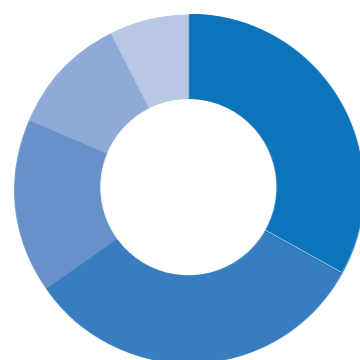
However, these commitments have not always translated into action nor have they adapted to combat the new forms of violence that women face. Not only do girls face gender-based violence in their relationships, workplaces, schools, and communities, but now they're facing an epidemic of violence and harassment on online platforms.

The Plan International Ireland Youth Advisory Panel (YAP) researched how this issue affects their peers. The survey supplements the larger research by Plan International in 22 other countries while demonstrating the Irish context.

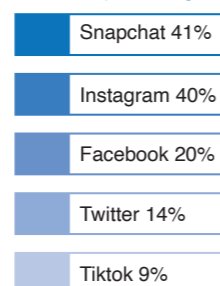
The YAP surveyed over 500 young people in Ireland aged 15-24 on the topic of online harassment. They also conducted five long-form interviews to obtain qualitative data. This report summarises their findings, linking them to the global context.

I feel very helpless I think because I know you can report to Twitter... but you can't get an immediate response and it could be something as simple as being like this is so clearly in violation of the standards but they have to obviously approve of it and look through and investigate [...] in my case I had maybe about like 6 or 7 fully grown men like going after a 14 year old girl and at that point I was like would it probably just be better in my own interest to just leave social media?

KEY FINDINGS



Platforms where girls and young women report being harassed



Our survey found that **67% of girls and young women in Ireland have experienced harassment or abuse on social media**. Several participants in our qualitative interviews initially said they had never experienced online harassment, only to later describe a personal scenario fitting the exact definition of online abuse. This suggests that the actual rates of online abuse might be even higher, because of a tendency to downplay the issue or the prevalence of the idea that online abuse 'isn't real'. However, our data and the broader research conducted by Plan International demonstrates that online harassment and abuse is very real, with detrimental consequences to girls in Ireland and across the world.

I think I'm a lot more careful about what I post and you know I've had to become a lot more liberal with the block button and the report button. I don't think really a week goes by on Twitter where I'm not reporting someone.

Amongst our respondents, **the average age when girls first experience harassment online is 13**, while the youngest age reported was 8. The social media channels where online abuse is most prevalent in Ireland are Snapchat and Instagram with 41 and 40% (respectively) of respondents reporting at least one incident of harassment on these platforms. 24% of respondents identified Facebook as a source of harassment, and 14% identified Twitter. Despite the lower levels of harassment reported on Twitter, it was consistently noted during qualitative interviews as a source of particularly vicious and unrelenting abuse with ineffective reporting mechanisms

Even if girls aren't facing harassment themselves, the abuse they see on social media serves to silence their voices. One girl highlighted the stress that online abuse causes her, despite never being targeted by it:

You can see the comments and stuff and you're just thinking "God if that was me what the hell would I do?" You kind of have those moments where you're like is this worth it? Like if I get a comment or if I get a nasty message how the hell would I react to it? So it's definitely very nerve wracking.

Multiple girls reported feeling targeted if they posted content that expressed their views, with 15% of respondents reporting that they decided to 'stop posting content that expressed myself'. As one girl described:

I'm trying to shrink myself a little bit on social media... so I want to say what I really feel but it's like ok am I opening myself up to like get hurt here?



Gender was highlighted in both quantitative and qualitative data as an impetus for abuse with 54% of girls identifying gender identity and 86% citing appearance as reasons they believe harassers target them. This was further illustrated in interviews with two girls:

Once people see your gender on your social media they might automatically have a reaction and they'll use that. They might already have a dislike to you because they're like "Oh this is a girl being outspoken on social media I'm going to react to this person," and they're nearly waiting for something that they can latch onto.

You get kind of frustrated because you know at the time as well that they're attacking me because I'm a girl, a young girl and it's easy to attack me. You wonder if I was a massive muscley man would people come at me with this kind of harassment. So it's frustrating that a lot of it is just inequality.

The survey further backs up the research produced by Plan International, finding that abuse is worse for girls with intersecting identities based on sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, and disability.

Who I was as a person and who I identified as and how I expressed myself really fuelled their reason to harass me and bully me.

Street harassment is widely seen as socially unacceptable in Ireland, however many fear the misogyny associated with cat-calling has not necessarily been eradicated but rather re-directed to spaces frequented most by girls and young women: social media.

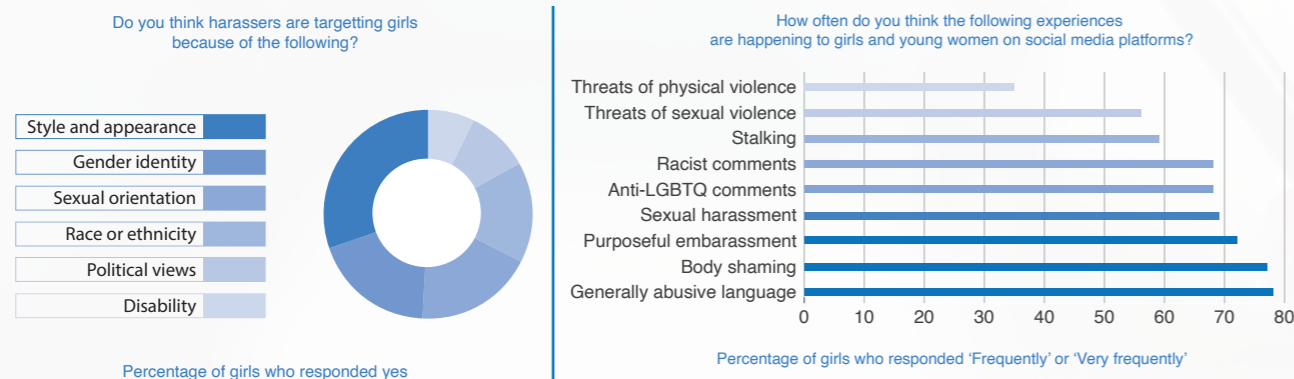
What's different to harassment online is that you can completely cover your identity. You can point fun at people and nobody will ever know who you are by creating a fake account.

Amongst the respondents, only **9% said they think girls face more harassment in public spaces as opposed to online**, while 46% said the level of harassment was the same.

Several girls stated in interviews that there is a level of accountability harassers must face on the street, while no such standard exists online:

If you were to call someone out on the street for saying that you have other people around you [...] When you're online it's like well that person is using a fake name and a fake image and they can just disappear out of it [...] that person's 100% getting away with it- you can call them out and people can see that they've done it but nothing can be done.

TYPES OF HARASSMENT



Like other forms of gender-based violence, the types of harassment girls face online vary widely. While some forms of abuse seemed to be expected by our interviewees, even one incident of harassment can have significant effects on a girls' self-esteem and confidence. Generally abusive and insulting language was the most widely reported type of harassment by our respondents, closely followed by body shaming. As described by one girl, this language is often misogynistic and can be a near-daily occurrence:

Yesterday this lad tried to text me and then he asked me for pics and I was like, "No thanks" and then he called me a slut because I wouldn't send pics

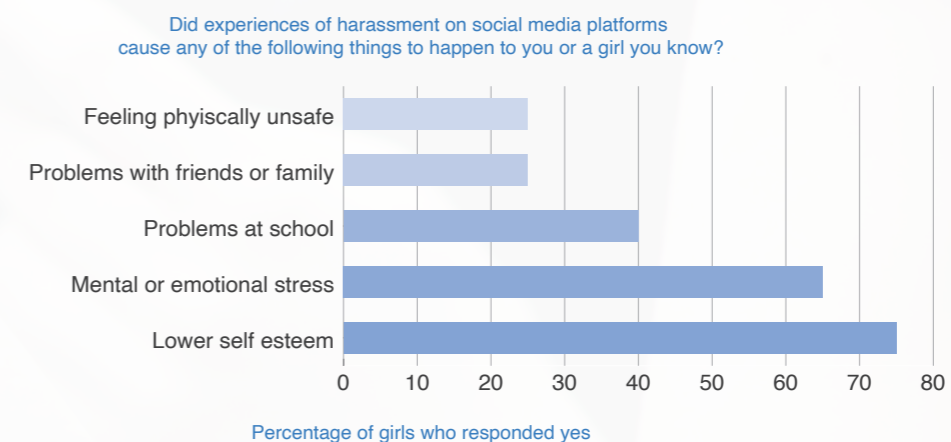
The abuse faced by girls doesn't end when they log off. When girls are threatened with physical or sexual violence, they have no way of knowing if their abuser will find them in-person.

This fear is often not misplaced as there have been cases of online abusers progressing into physical violence.

He was a man in his early 30's and he took my profile picture which was a picture of me at 13 -very obviously a child [...] and photoshopped it to look bloody and was like "This is what you're going to look like after if you keep tweeting stuff like this." and I was terrified.

I remember one time I think I was in first year this guy texted me on Facebook and was like [...] "Will you go out with me?" and I said "No" and then he was like "I'm going to kill myself if you don't go out with me". I was [...] 12 and scared and so ever since then I put everything on private just because I don't want to deal with that.

THE EFFECT OF HARASSMENT



Based on our survey, 1 in 4 girls reported that they or someone they know have felt physically unsafe as a result of online harassment. Problems with friends or family (26%) and problems at school (40%) were also common. The most prevalent effects of online harassment were mental or emotional stress (65%) and lower self-esteem or loss of self-confidence (75%). The recent increase in online schooling could lead to a rise in these numbers, as girls have no way to 'turn off'. Online harassment affects girls and young women in profoundly negative ways, at a time in their life when they should be safe and able to express themselves freely.

It completely knocked my confidence in myself. I felt like my identity was attacked and that I was scared to post because I didn't want to give them fuel to feed their fire against me you know, so I just kind of pulled back a lot and kind of started thinking well maybe they're right, maybe I am annoying, maybe I am- you know- I started believing maybe what they were saying about my posts and what I was sharing.

It can be easy to dismiss claims of online harassment by saying "just block them", but as demonstrated by our respondents, that is often the first thing they do.

When asked "How do you react when you face online harassment?" 53% said they report the harasser, followed by increasing security settings (44%) or simply ignoring the harassment (37%). However, these measures don't always stop the harassment or prevent the harm it causes.

There were a group of individuals who I have known from secondary school [...] I blocked them from things they had said about me not online, but outside in actual life so I'm not even sure how they got access to my Instagram.



I do have my account on private but say sometimes it's a weird person I'd just assume is somebody I knew would follow me and then he'd start acting really weird and I'd have to end up blocking him.

Reporting mechanisms are often faulty or take a significant amount of time. Multiple girls brought up the issue of fake accounts- where abusers will make an account specifically for the purpose of harassment, with no ties to their personal life. This can lead to a real sense of unease amongst girls as they have no idea if their abuser is a classmate or a complete stranger. The anonymous abuser faces no consequences because if the fake account gets blocked by the social media company, they can just delete it and make a new one.

The amount of people that do make fake accounts is mad and then they'll get caught out so they'll delete the app page and they'll make up a new one so it's this constant cycle.

I think it's typically strangers [...] people who would harass me online are people who could hide behind a veil of anonymity on social media.

There are several organisations in Ireland dedicated to helping young people use the internet or social media safely. However, education about internet safety seems to have reached a saturation point with 87% of girls reporting hearing 'a lot' or 'some' about the issue of online harassment on social media platforms.

Education can help young people learn what is appropriate behaviour or what to do if they encounter abuse, but it does not prevent damage from being inflicted

THE GLOBAL LINK

As a Development and Humanitarian organisation, Plan International Ireland is committed to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals all over the world. This research project undertaken by our Youth Advisory Panel is meant to demonstrate solidarity with girls across the globe who are facing gender-based violence in their communities. In keeping with Ireland's commitments to the SDGs, two goals have been highlighted for their links to the issue of online gender-based violence.



Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Target 4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations

Ireland has a strong record of ensuring gender balance in school enrolment and achievement levels. However, our current education system has been uprooted by recent school closures due to Covid-19 and the change to virtual classrooms. When schools are moved online, girls are at a higher risk of harassment and abuse on educational platforms and social media networks. Ensuring 'equal access to all levels of education' requires proactive consideration of barriers faced by vulnerable groups in all classrooms, including those online.



Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

Target 5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation

5.b Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women

Violence against women is an insidious and pervasive crime across the world that holds back nations from achieving meaningful equality. While Ireland might not be afflicted by the same degrees of severity and types of abuse and exploitation that affect other countries, online gender-based violence must be considered in the same hierarchy of misogyny that harms women. When perpetrators harass girls online with threats of violence without facing consequences, a building block has been created which can lead to stalking, physical violence, and worse. Even without further progression, abuse enacted online needs to be taken as seriously as if it were in public spaces, by both social media companies and the government. The UN has highlighted technology specifically as a tool to enable gender equality in goal 5.b. With proper regulation and accountability, technology and social media can be used to empower women, but without such guidelines, it only serves to enhance the vulnerabilities of women and girls.

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted in Spring and Summer 2020, following consultation with Plan International Global Hub.

Quantitative data was collected using a closed question survey with 16 questions that asked girls about their social media use, their experience of online harassment, the consequences of online harassment and possible solutions to it. The survey was administered online and shared with the Youth Advisory Panel's schools, peers, and other youth networks.

There were 517 respondents in total, 511 of whom were aged 15-24. 458 (89%) of the respondents self-identified as female. The data used for this report was from the female respondents aged 15-24. From those respondents, 25 identified themselves as from an ethnic minority, 57 as LGBTQI, and 21 as having difficulties in daily living. All respondents live in Ireland, with 35% from Leinster, 33% from Munster, 25% from Connaught, and 7% from Ulster.

The qualitative data came from Key Informant Interviews which were conducted by members of our Youth Advisory Panel following training on research and interview methods. Five interviews took place over Zoom audio and were recorded and later transcribed. The calls were structured around the same questions that formed the qualitative interviews carried out by the State of the World's Girls research by Plan International. All interviews were informal, with open-ended questions meant to facilitate conversation. All interviewees were over 18, from Ireland, but for protection purposes, no further demographic information was collected.

In line with ethics and safeguarding procedures, information sheets were provided ahead of time, and informed consent was obtained before the interviews; verbal consent was also given to record the interviews. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the data collection, analysis and write up process.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that we must do more to protect girls and young women from gender-based violence both on- and offline. The Coronavirus pandemic has meant that our schools, workplaces, and social spaces have moved online.

Just because this abuse is not always visible, does not mean it should be ignored. Online harassment is a barrier to girls' human rights and gender equality in Ireland and globally.

For more information on how online harassment affects girls across the world and recommendations for governments and social media companies, see the 2020 State of the World's Girls Report produced by Plan International.

For more information on our Youth Advisory Panel and the work carried out by Plan International Ireland visit plan.ie





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