



## **Opinion: COVID-19 has fuelled an epidemic of gender-based and intersectional abuse online**

Seyi Akiwowo\*

Founder and Executive Director, Glitch!

*COVID-19 lockdowns have created an epidemic of gender-based and intersectional abuse online. It is time tech companies, governments and employers took action while exploring a public health approach.*

In mid-March 2020, hospitalised COVID-19 patient Tara Jane Langston filmed a video on her phone in the UK warning of the danger of under-estimating the threat of the virus<sup>1</sup>. The video of the young woman struggling to breathe was shared with a group of friends on WhatsApp, before making its way to Twitter, where it went viral. Within minutes, Tara's family was flooded with abusive messages from around the world. A few days later, a global Muslim network of civil society organisations held a Zoom call about maintaining spirituality during coronavirus, when abusive messages and racial slurs started appearing on screen<sup>2</sup>.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused severe disruption to everyday lives across the world, leading to long-called-for lifestyle changes, including a widespread shift to remote working. Living rooms, kitchen tables and gardens turned into improvised workplaces, while social activities previously held offline have moved into the online space. In the early days of the pandemic, countries in lockdown across the world saw an increase in Internet usage of between 12 and 15%<sup>3</sup>. This increased time spent online has led to an under-reported epidemic of gender-based and intersectional abuse online.

### **Glitch! survey: COVID-19 and the increase in abuse targeting women and people with intersecting identities**

In June 2020, Glitch!, a UK-based charity working to end gender-based and intersectional abuse, launched a nation-wide survey in partnership with End Violence Against Women (EVAW) - a coalition of organisations fighting all forms of violence against women - to document the online

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\* Corresponding author: [sevi@fixtheglitch.org](mailto:sevi@fixtheglitch.org)



experiences of women and non-binary people during the COVID-19 lockdown. We gathered 484 responses, the largest dataset on online abuse targeting women and non-binary people in the UK since the beginning of the pandemic. The findings of the survey led to the publication of our report ‘The Ripple Effect: COVID-19 and the Epidemic of Online Abuse’ in September 2020, the most ambitious attempt to date at documenting the impact of the pandemic on gender-based and intersectional online abuse in the country<sup>4</sup>.

The aim of the survey was to capture women and minoritised people’s broad experiences of online abuse, understood by Glitch! as an umbrella term encompassing a broad range of tactics and harmful acts including, but not limited to, offensive or discriminatory comments and insults, threats of physical or sexual violence, stalking, harassment, bullying, impersonation, dead-naming, “doxing” (posting private details online such as a person’s address or phone number with the aim to cause distress) or sharing intimate and private images of a person online without their consent.

Our survey highlighted the scale of gender-based and intersectional<sup>5</sup> online abuse since the beginning of the pandemic. We found that 46% of respondents reported experiencing online abuse during lockdown. This figure increased to 50% for Black and minoritised women and non-binary people. Of the respondents who had experienced online abuse in the 12 months preceding the survey, 29% reported it being worse during lockdown, with the figure increasing to 38% for Black and minoritised people.

The majority of the abuse took place on mainstream social media platforms, namely Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, despite tech companies’ commitment to making their platforms safe and inclusive for all. Eighty-three per cent of respondents who reported one or several incidents of online abuse during COVID-19 felt their complaint had not been properly addressed. This proportion increased to 94% for Black and minoritised women and non-binary people.

Before COVID-19, we, alongside other activists and researchers, documented how the Internet became a toxic place for women and marginalised communities. One in five women has suffered from online abuse in the UK<sup>6</sup>, according to a study by Amnesty International, while an investigation by BBC Newsnight last year uncovered widespread abuse against female activists, politicians, and journalists across Europe<sup>7</sup>. Black female MPs are also 84% more likely to experience online abuse in comparison to white women<sup>8</sup>.

## **New manifestations of online abuse**

COVID-19 has led to a new crisis of online abuse targeting women and Black and minoritised people. We need crisis responses that take into account the heightened risk of abuse faced by women and marginalised communities. COVID-19 has shown how tech vulnerabilities can be



easily exploited by ill-intentioned actors to abuse and harass vulnerable groups. Platforms whose user base has grown as a result of the pandemic - including videoconferencing applications such as Zoom or Google Hangouts - have become hubs for new forms of online abuse.

“Zoom Bombing”, the publication of violent, graphic, racist or otherwise abusive content on Zoom, has been one of the unforeseen consequences of the pandemic. Employers have failed to respond adequately to the problem. Our survey has shown that only 9% of respondents received updated guidance and training from their employers on how to stay safe online while working from home. While employers have a statutory duty of care towards their employees under UK law, many do not have the resources to provide appropriate training.

### **Tech companies’ shortcomings in addressing gender-based and intersectional abuse online**

While employers have been taken off guard by the pandemic, tech companies are several steps behind in their response, despite years of scrutiny for their failure to address the proliferation of hate. Platforms which have grown exponentially in recent months have provided hubs for new forms of abuse. In early April, the Zoom Chief Executive Officer (CEO) issued an apology<sup>9</sup> for the platform’s security lapses and announced new measures after the company’s shares fell. When the pandemic started, tech companies vowed to do more to tackle the online harms created by COVID-19 and cracked down on health-related disinformation, but the proliferation of online abuse continues. Our survey shows a majority of complaints about online abuse go unaddressed. Participants reported frequent absences of responses to complaints or prolonged response times.

As human content moderation resources have been axed for health reasons, and tech companies have come to rely more on Artificial Intelligence (AI), there is potential for abusers and malign actors to exploit the platforms’ vulnerabilities. Tech companies need to be transparent about their investment in and resourcing of content moderation, and must invest more resources in human content moderation. Content moderators should be provided with comprehensive training about different tactics of online abuse and how abuse specifically targets women, Black and minoritised communities and users with intersecting identities.

### **Digital education and the need for a whole-of society approach**

Education to digital safety remains under-funded and needs increased resources, as different professional sectors adapt to the realities of doing business online. As recent reports of sexual harassment by students on their fellow classmates have shown<sup>10</sup>, UK schools and universities are struggling to cope with the new risks posed by online teaching. Employers who have had to negotiate transitions to remote working, are ill-prepared to protect employees from online harms.



Sixty-four per cent of survey participants who did not receive updated training on digital safety from their employers thought such training would have been helpful.

Nine per cent of respondents to our survey reported suffering abuse from colleagues or superiors at work - showing that employees can be perpetrators too. Employers have a statutory duty of care for people's health and safety at work under UK law and should provide appropriate guidance to staff working from home, including on digital safety. In the absence of national guidance on digital safety and wellbeing best practices, employers should make any reasonable effort to provide updated training to employees.

The implementation of robust workplace policies on gender-based violence and harassment, in consultation with employees and their representatives where possible, is a key step in making employees safe. Employers should conduct a robust risk assessment in relation to online abuse and harassment at work. They should also cooperate with civil society organisations working to end abuse against women and marginalised communities to reflect the growing risk of online abuse targeting employees who identify as female or who have intersecting identities.

Beyond individual sectors, we need a broader whole-of-society, public health approach to tackling online abuse, involving the government, private companies and civil society. The government has a key role to play and needs to implement a comprehensive public health approach to tackling online abuse. The government has a responsibility to provide guidance to employers on how to keep employees safe while working from home, and adopt legislation that enhances employee safety, including the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 190. Employers and employees' obligations should be codified in legislation. The government should also ensure that law enforcement officials and frontline workers receive updated training and appropriate resourcing to handle cases of online violence.

## **The need for further research**

Glitch!'s report represents the most ambitious attempt to-date at documenting the impact of the pandemic on abuse targeting women and minoritised communities in the UK. This research, however, does not cover the full spectrum of online abuse. In particular, the sample of non-binary respondents was too small to allow us to draw statistical conclusions. This limitation has highlighted the difficulty in obtaining significant datasets about particular minoritised communities. We need more targeted research to document the online experiences of these communities. Similarly, for safeguarding reasons, our research was limited to adults aged over 18 and therefore does not capture the abuse that minors may have suffered during the UK lockdown.



The majority of abuse recorded in our research took place on mainstream social media platforms and we identified few instances of abuse on platforms widely used in the workplace. However, media reports of cases of Zoom Bombing have documented the risk of abuse on emerging and growing platforms<sup>11</sup>. Academic and peer-reviewed research needs to explore these threats in more detail to understand the role these platforms play in facilitating abuse. Funding from government and private foundations for this type of research, while existent, remains too limited to understand the full scope of the problem.

COVID-19 has created unprecedented challenges for the online safety of all. Women and Black and minoritised communities are particularly at risk of facing online abuse and the pandemic risks exacerbating existing inequalities. With remote work and activities fast becoming the new normal, we will continue to rely on social media and the Internet more for everyday activities for months to come. Online safety can no longer be an afterthought.

## Acknowledgements

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<sup>1</sup> Aamna Mohdin, 'Woman who filmed coronavirus warning receives online abuse', The Guardian, 20 March 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/20/dont-take-any-chances-warning-of-woman-with-covid-19-shared-online>

<sup>2</sup> Taylor Lorenz and Davey Alba, 'Zoombombing' Becomes a Dangerous Organized Effort', The New York Times, 3 April 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/technology/zoom-harassment-abuse-racism-fbi-warning.html>

<sup>3</sup> Matt Burgess, 'No, coronavirus isn't going to break the internet', Wired, 21 March 2020 <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/coronavirus-internet-speed-shut-down>

<sup>4</sup> 'The Ripple Effect: COVID-19 and the Epidemic of Online Abuse', Glitch!, September 2020 <https://fixtheglitch.org/covid19/>

<sup>5</sup> According to Lisa Bowleg, "intersectionality is a theoretical framework for understanding how multiple social identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, SES, and disability intersect at the micro level of individual experience to reflect interlocking systems of privilege and oppression (i.e., racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism) at the macro social-structural level. Lisa Bowleg, 'The problem with the phrase women and minorities: Intersectionality—an important theoretical framework for public health', American Journal of Public Health, 102(7), 1267-1273, 2012 doi:10.2105/ajph.2012.300750

<sup>6</sup> Online abuse of women widespread in UK, Amnesty International <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/online-abuse-women-widespread>

<sup>7</sup> Mariana Spring and Lucy Webster, 'A web of abuse: How the far right disproportionately targets female politicians', BBC, 14 July 2019 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-48871400>

<sup>8</sup> UK: online abuse against black women MPs 'chilling', Amnesty International

<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/uk-online-abuse-against-black-women-mps-chilling>

<sup>9</sup> Todd Haselton, Zoom falls 11% after CEO apologizes for security lapses, says daily users spiked to 200 million in March, CNBC, 2 April 2020

<https://www.cnbc.com/2020/04/02/zoom-ceo-apologizes-for-security-issues-users-spike-to-200-million.html>



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<sup>10</sup> David Batty, 'Harassment fears as students post extreme pornography in online lectures', The Guardian, 22 April 2020

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/apr/22/students-zoombomb-online-lectures-with-extreme-pornography>

<sup>11</sup> Taylor Lorenz and Davey Alba, 'Zoombombing' Becomes a Dangerous Organized Effort, The New York Times, 3 April 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/technology/zoom-harassment-abuse-racism-fbi-warning.html>