



Call for input from industry and the tech community, as well as other relevant stakeholders, to a report on “ways to bridge the gender digital divide from a human rights perspective”

Who We Are:

[Tech Ladies](#) is a community of ~10,000 women-identified technologists around the world, with most of our members hailing from the United States and Canada. The goal of our community is to connect women with the best opportunities in tech and connect companies with women techmakers.

Our website (www.hiretechladies.com) provides a job board for members of our community (membership is free to women who work in tech). We also host networking events all over the United States and Canada for women technologists, as well as provide [visibility to the work women are doing](#) in the technology sector.

We are open to all women who work in tech (reminder: trans women are women) and nonbinary people.

Our Take on the Gender Digital Divide — How Online Harassment Still Silences Women and Nonbinary People in Digital Spaces:

The term “gender digital divide” refers to the parts of the world where women and girls do not have access to technology or the internet, or the education required to use them. Our community is made up of professional women from the United States and Canada. We have access to education, with many of us holding degrees in Computer Science. Generally speaking, we also have access to personal computers, smartphones, and reliable internet access.

Yet even with all this privilege, women and nonbinary people like us are still targets for experiencing a darker side of the gender digital divide— online harassment. This harassment can be triggered by doing nothing more than existing online or stating an opinion that the harassers don't like. The threats experienced by many women, girls, and nonbinary people online can target people by name and address, and may include detailed fantasies of rape, reputation-ruining lies, and sexually explicit or violent photographs. Often these are not just one-on-one attacks, but mobs of people who organize themselves against everyday citizens, and women, girls, and nonbinary folks are disproportionately impacted.

A [Pew Research Center report from 2014](#) says that “young women, those 18-24, experience certain severe types of harassment at disproportionately high levels: 26% of these young women have been stalked online, and 25% were the target of online sexual harassment. In addition, they do not escape the heightened rates of physical threats and sustained harassment common to their male peers and young people in general.”

This [study](#) also found that while men are more likely than women to experience online harassment in general, they were experiencing “less severe forms of harassment like name-calling and being made to feel embarrassed. Women are significantly more likely than men to report being stalked or sexually harassed on the internet.”

Things are not getting better on their own. One recent study found that online harassment of women is [at risk of becoming the 'established norm'](#).

The more active and visible women, girls, and nonbinary people are online, the more likely we are to encounter harassment which often has the consequence of temporarily or permanently silencing or removing us from digital spaces.

Examples of Harassment in Digital Spaces:

Many women and other marginalized people have been forced off sites like Twitter permanently, or temporarily silenced due to harassment online. Here are two examples:

From [Why Women Aren't Welcome on the Internet](#) by Amanda Hess:

“Threats of rape, death, and stalking can overpower our emotional bandwidth, take up our time, and cost us money through legal fees, online protection services, and missed wages. I've spent countless hours over the past four years

logging the online activity of one particularly committed cyberstalker, just in case. And as the Internet becomes increasingly central to the human experience, the ability of women to live and work freely online will be shaped, and too often limited, by the technology companies that host these threats, the constellation of local and federal law enforcement officers who investigate them, and the popular commentators who dismiss them — all arenas that remain dominated by men, many of whom have little personal understanding of what women face online every day.”

From The Guardian: [“I’ve left Twitter. It is unusable for anyone but trolls, robots and dictators”](#) by Lindy West.

“Twitter, for the past five years, has been a machine where I put in unpaid work and tension headaches come out. I write jokes there for free. I post political commentary for free. I answer questions for free. I teach feminism 101 for free. Off Twitter, these are all things by which I make my living – in fact, they comprise the totality of my income. But on Twitter, I do them pro bono and, in return, I am micromanaged in real time by strangers; neo-Nazis mine my personal life for vulnerabilities to exploit; and men enjoy unfettered, direct access to my brain so they can inform me, for the thousandth time, that they would gladly rape me if I weren’t so fat.

I talk back and I am “feeding the trolls”. I say nothing and the harassment escalates. I report threats and I am a “censor”. I use mass-blocking tools to curb abuse and I am abused further for blocking “unfairly”. I have to conclude, after half a decade of troubleshooting, that it may simply be impossible to make this platform usable for anyone but trolls, robots and dictators.”

This harassment silences women and can leave us no choice but to refrain from the internet or the platforms from where we are being harassed for a particular amount of time, sometimes permanently.

Future Platforms: AR, VR, and more.

We are concerned that the same problems of harassment and targeting that exist on social media today are expanding to up-and-coming technologies. For example, Virtual Reality (VR) brings up many disturbing behaviors. Examples include: [“My first virtual reality groping”](#) and [“Sexual harassment in Virtual Reality feels all too real”](#).

As new platforms emerge, including augmented reality and virtual reality, we need stronger systems in place to protect all people, including women, girls, and nonbinary people, in order for all of us to be able to experience the full value of what future digital platforms have to offer.

We can't assume the creators of new platforms and products will build in protections for people using their products.

Possible Solutions for Bridging the Gender Digital Divide from a Human Rights Perspective:

The technology industry needs to embrace safety for all when creating products and platforms. This means that at every stage of development, engineering, product, and design teams need to discuss the ethics of protecting vulnerable users of products and platforms.

From computer science classes in college, to bootcamps, online tutorials, and everything in between, future product and engineering leads should be taught how to build in safety to the core user experience of their products.

Investors and venture capital firms should ask when considering an investment how users (including women, girls, and nonbinary people) are going to be protected from bad actors of the product as early as the minimum viable product stage.

As users of products, we should all act to help others with blocking and reporting when we learn someone is being targeted in a malicious way.

The technology industry can also use technology to solve these problems. For example, Facebook and Twitter currently strip metadata (which includes location details) when a user uploads a photo, to protect the privacy of the user. Other examples of technological solutions include letting users block the IP addresses associated with harassing accounts rather than the accounts themselves. The technology industry should push itself to find many more ways like this to protect citizens and disempower bad actors.

The legal community should take every action necessary to prosecute acts of online

harassment. Danielle Citron, expert on cyber harassment and Professor of Law at the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law wrote this for [Time Magazine](#):

“Such abuse should be understood for what it is: a civil rights violation. Our civil rights laws and tradition protect an individual’s right to pursue life’s crucial endeavors free from unjust discrimination. Those endeavors include the ability to make a living, to obtain an education, to engage in civic activities, and to express oneself—without the fear of bias-motivated threats, harassment, privacy invasions, and intimidation.”

The law enforcement community should continue to educate their police officers and other law enforcement officials about how to investigate online harassment and recognize the scale of the problem.

In Conclusion:

In conclusion, the Tech Ladies community is here to support any effort the UN would consider to help taking steps to protect women, girls, and nonbinary people’s right to an internet free of harassment, physical threats, and sexual violence. Any effort to make a more equitable and safe use of digital space will also help protect men and boys from harassment and bullying. A better future would be one where all people are able to enjoy the wonderful tools, learning, and connection the internet brings without having to fear for their offline safety.