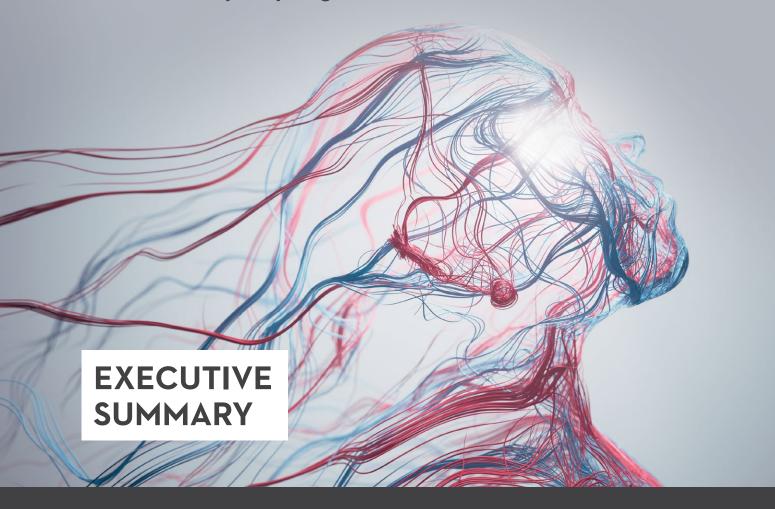# CHALLENGING GENDERED DIGITAL HARM

Research Report on Impacts and Solutions to Digital Harm Facing Women, Gender-Diverse People, and Gender Equality Organizations

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CANADIAN WOMEN'S FOUNDATION

About The Canadian Women's Foundation

The Canadian Women's Foundation is Canada's public foundation for gender justice and equality. The Foundation builds a gender equal Canada by transforming lives with programs that help women, girls, and gender-diverse people move out of violence, out of poverty, and into confidence and leadership; improving communities by strengthening the organizations and the groups that help those who need it most; and changing systems by challenging biases, building awareness, and advocating for policies and practices that make life better for everyone impacted by gender injustice.

This publication was created as part of the Canadian Women's Foundation **Challenging Gendered Digital Harm Project**. The Project filled intersectional research gaps on gendered digital harm; developed an online curriculum to build skills, knowledge, and provide resources to engage safely in digital spaces and help end gender-based digital harm; and convened civil society and decision makers to work together to create safer digital spaces for all.

Acknowledgements

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Canadian Women's Foundation aimed to understand how women and gender-diverse people in Canada experience digital harm, especially underserved communities. The purpose was to identify the impacts of gendered digital harm and recommend solutions to create safer digital spaces and promote systemic change. This research also explored public perceptions, and gaps in resources to support survivors and organizations facing digital harm.

Key Findings

Digital Harm is Widespread:

- 61% of women and gender-diverse people in Canada have experienced gendered digital harm, compared to 53% of the general population.

- Over 70% of gendered digital harm incidents have occurred within the past three years, showing an alarming trend.

Underserved Groups Face Greater Harm:

- Black, Indigenous, racialized, 2SLGBTQIA+, youth (18-25), and people with disabilities are targeted most frequently.

  + Indigenous women and gender-diverse people identified their Indigenous identity as a top reason for being targeted.

  + Black women often face harassment linked to their race, gender, and skin tone.

  + Women and gender-diverse people with disabilities were twice as likely to have misleading information posted about them.

Common Types of Digital Harm:

- Harassment (unwanted contact), hate speech, sharing of unwanted sexual images, stalking, and unauthorized access to accounts are most frequently reported.

- 55% of perpetrators were identified as men and in 23% of cases, the survivors didn't know the gender.

Severe Psychological and Emotional Impacts:

- 43% of survivors reported serious impacts on mental health, including stress, anxiety, and depression.

- Women and gender-diverse people who are Black, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQIA+, or have disabilities face higher rates of trauma and isolation.

- Youth (18-25) and underserved groups are twice as likely to think about or engage in self-harm or suicidal behaviors due to digital harm.

Silencing and Disengagement:

- Over 50% of women and gender-diverse people reported reducing their online presence or self-censoring to avoid harassment.

- Many survivors leave platforms altogether, particularly in conversations about gender, race, or social justice issues.

Gender Equality Organizations Under Pressure:

- 88% of gender equality organizations surveyed reported experiencing digital threats, including hacking, doxxing, and harassment.

- 82% of organizations focus on addressing gender-based violence but over 60% lack resources to address gendered digital harm.

- More than half reported that their employees or volunteers have been directly targeted, impacting their safety and ability to carry out their work.

Platform and Legal Gaps:

- 48% of women and gender-diverse people experienced digital harm on social media. However, reporting harmful content often results in little or no action.

- Law enforcement is seen as ineffective by 60% of racialized women and gender-diverse people.

- 71% of women and gender-diverse people believe social media spaces should be treated as public spaces, requiring stronger protections and accountability.

Recommendations

Gendered digital harm affects the majority of people in Canada. Addressing gendered digital harm requires cross-cutting priorities:

Public Accountability:

Recognize that 70% of Canadians see addressing gendered digital harm as a shared responsibility and want to see collaboration across government agencies, education institutions, healthcare, technology companies, community groups, and non-profit organizations to better address gendered digital harm.

Mental Health and Safety:

Prioritize resources and interventions that address the profound mental health impacts of gendered digital harm, particularly for Black women, 2SLGBTQIA+ people, people with disabilities, and other people with intersecting marginalized identities, who report significant impacts on their mental health when targeted by digital harm.

Intersectional Focus:

Develop targeted interventions that reflect the diverse experiences of gendered digital harm, from linguistic differences to racialized, transphobic, and sexualized harassment.

Increased Resources:

Government and private companies should provide increased funding and human resources to support efforts to address gendered digital harm.

Ultimately, we are calling for increased gendered digital safety in Canada, and a safer digital public sphere for all.

Digital harm is a serious issue that affects women, girls, and gender-diverse people across Canada, particularly those with intersecting marginalized identities. It limits their safety, mental health, and ability to engage fully online. Collaborative action and accountability from governments, technology companies, educational institutions, non-profit organizations, and communities are essential to meaningfully address gendered digital harm and make digital spaces safer for everyone.

> " [Feeling safe] would mean completely being able to be yourself, to post about your feelings, to talk about political views without people threatening you. Basically, just being able to speak as if you were in a coffee shop with a friend and not have to feel that you were in danger because of what you've posted."
>
> – Woman with a visible disability

Help End Gender-Based Digital Harm

For more information:
canadianwomen.org/help-end-gender-based-digital-harm