

CREATING A SAFER DIGITAL WORLD FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN

Presentation to the House Standing Committee on Status of Women

Study on Violence Against Young Women and Girls

YWCA Canada

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“I had to go to school every day with people calling me a snake and I just felt like if I didn't block her and just let her and her friends bully me it won't be as hard in real life.”

“Because when I was going through a case where I was being told to kill myself and slit my throat and things, the schools, family and police didn't do anything but shrug their shoulders at me, but my friends tried to help me to stop it from happening.”

Young women and girls in Canada experience deliberate violence because of their gender. Information and communications technologies and the spread of social media have presented new opportunities and enabled various efforts to address violence against women and girls. When girls and women are driven off the Internet, they lose the ability to be a part of the platforms where, more and more public debates take place. This is why YWCA embarked on an initiative to better understand and support young women.

Project Shift: Creating a Safer Digital World for Young Women is a national multi-year project, led by YWCA Canada and funded by the Status of Women Canada.

Even though I am talking about girls and young women, our work acknowledges and recognizes that cyberviolence greatly impacts trans and gender non-conforming young people.

We use the term "cyberviolence" to mean **any harmful act carried out through networked technology**. We've chosen to use this term because it **respects the serious harm that these behaviours can do**. This includes many of the behaviours often described as "cyberbullying" (such as spreading rumours about someone, impersonating them online, spreading intimate or embarrassing images, targeting them with threats or sexist language etc.) as well as stalking or monitoring them, and so on, and may be carried out by peers, friends, strangers, or romantic partners.

It's important to recognize that it is often connected to offline violence. Online harassment can easily move offline when harassers release their targets' personal information, or an abusive relationship plays out online.

Cyberviolence impacts the daily lives of young women and girls:

- Girls are significantly more likely than boys feel that the Internet is an unsafe space for them, and a lot more girls than boys fear they could be hurt if they talk to someone they don't know online.
- One-third of youth who experience violence online have symptoms of depression, and online harassment or abusive relationships can have effects that last for years or a lifetime.
- As well as the emotional impact, cyberviolence against women also **narrows their horizons** by forcing them out of spaces where they don't feel safe or welcome.

Project Shift establishes the need for a gender lens to understand violence online and makes recommendations for a range of public and private sectors, from educational institutions to parents, counsellors and police, and Information, Communication and Technology Sector – also known as ICT.

We convened leaders from over a dozen ICT organizations. The roundtable, as we call it, hopes to move forward on creating systemic change on the issue of cyberviolence against young women and girls.

Guided by YWCA's leadership and connection to the issues, this roundtable will:

1. Share knowledge and resources within the ICT Roundtable and across the sector with students, interns, employees and colleagues
2. Cultivate a Culture of Empathy across the sector
3. Provide leadership to advance sector on Accountability

To create systemic change to end cyberviolence against girls and young women, we recommend that the government:

- Support women-centered training and education for the legal community and law enforcement to work with those who have experienced cyberviolence in a supportive and non-judgemental way.
- Change the legal definition of Abuse and Harassment under the criminal code of Canada to include cyberviolence to better protect young women and girls
- Continue funding YWCA Canada's work with the ICT sector to create a safer digital world
- Fund the 1st National Cross-Sectoral Conference on Online Safety led by YWCA Canada

Finally, cyberviolence happens to many women and girls who quit social networks after being harassed. We are failing as a democracy if we allow harassment and other forms of cyberviolence to keep girls and women from being able to exercise their full rights. It is the government's responsibility to ensure that girls and women are safe everywhere; online and offline.

About YWCA Canada: YWCA Canada is the country's oldest and largest women's multi-service organization, with 32 Member Associations across the country serving women and girls in nine provinces and two territories. For more information visit www.ywccanada.ca, find us on Twitter [@YWCA_Canada](https://twitter.com/YWCA_Canada) or at www.facebook.com/ywccanada.