



Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

Topic A. Measures to protect human rights defenders against online harassment and censorship

Introduction:

Human rights defenders (HRDs) are essential in promoting justice, equality, and the protection of fundamental freedoms around the world. They work tirelessly, often in challenging environments, to expose human rights violations, advocate for marginalized communities, and hold governments and institutions accountable. However, nowadays, in the digital age, online platforms have become both tools for advocacy and battlegrounds for harassment and censorship. In this regard, the threats against them have expanded significantly.¹

On the one hand, the increasing reliance on digital technologies has provided HRDs with unprecedented opportunities to amplify their voices, reach global audiences, and mobilize support for their causes. Social media, blogs, and other online tools have revolutionized the way HRDs communicate and organize. On the other hand, HRDs now face targeted harassment campaigns, disinformation, surveillance, and the misuse of content moderation policies to silence their work.

As a matter of fact, online harassment, including cyberbullying, hate speech and doxing, has become a pervasive issue, particularly for women and LGBTQ+ defenders, who are often subjected to gendered and intersectional attacks. Additionally, censorship has also evolved in the digital space, with governments and private companies increasingly using opaque content moderation practices and restrictive laws to suppress dissent. In some cases, legitimate human rights advocacy is wrongly classified as harmful content, leading to unjust removal of critical information. Simultaneously, repressive regimes exploit

¹ DanChurchAid. *Report on Online Harassment and Censorship of Women Human Rights Defenders*. DanChurchAid, Copenhagen, "no update date." In: <https://www.danchurchaid.org/report-online-harassment-and-censorship-of-women-human-rights-defenders> (18/11/2024)





surveillance technologies to monitor and intimidate HRDs, often resulting in severe consequences such as detention or physical harm.

This issue is further compounded by the lack of robust international frameworks to safeguard HRDs in the digital space. While there are efforts at national and international levels to address the existing challenges, gaps remain present in enforcement, transparency, and accountability. Moreover, the absence of gender-sensitive and inclusive strategies has edged defenders who are women, members of the LGBTQ+ community or from other marginalized groups, disproportionately exposing them to harm.

Therefore, protecting HRDs against online harassment and censorship is not just a matter of safeguarding individual lives, but a fundamental step in ensuring the continued advancement of human rights globally. The threats they face undermine their ability to operate freely, diminish public trust in advocacy, and perpetuate a culture of impunity for those seeking to silence defender voices. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated global action, including stronger legal protections, enhanced digital security measures, and greater accountability for both State and non-State actors.

In an era where the digital space is a powerful arena for both advocacy and conflict, ensuring the safety and freedom of HRDs online is crucial. The international community must explore the existing challenges, evaluate joint efforts, and propose concrete measures to protect those who dedicate their lives to defending human rights online. Through collective dialogue and action, it is possible to work towards a digital environment that empowers HRDs rather than one which unjustly silences them.²

Concepts and definitions:

- **Cyberbullying:** persistent behavior carried out through digital platforms, aimed at a specific person or group, which includes hate speech and threatening messages, scaring, angering, shaming or trolling those who are targeted.³

² Amnesty International. *Technology and Online Violence*. Amnesty International, London, "no update date." In: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/technology/online-violence/> (18/11/2024).

³ UNICEF. *Cyberbullying: What is it and how to stop it*. United Nations. "No update date". In: <https://www.unicef.org/end-violence/how-to-stop-cyberbullying> (25/11/2024).





- **Digital Space and Human Rights:** concept that refers to the intersection between the digital environment and fundamental human rights. It emphasizes the need to safeguard rights such as privacy, freedom of speech, and access to information in an increasingly technology-driven world.⁴
- **Disinformation strategy:** deliberate spread of false or inaccurate information intended to mislead or deceive people, either for profit or to cause public harm against someone or something.⁵
- **Doxing:** malicious publication of private or identifying information, such as home addresses or phone numbers, which can lead to real-world threats and violence.⁶
- **Gendered disinformation:** growing phenomenon involving the spread of false or manipulated information to discredit, stigmatize, or incite hostility against women and non-binary HRDs. This kind of disinformation reinforces gender stereotypes and fosters an environment of online violence.⁷
- **Hate speech:** offensive discourse targeting a group or an individual based on inherent characteristics. It involves any kind of communication in speech, writing or behavior that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to someone based on any identity factor, such as their nationality, ethnicity, descent, race, religion, gender, etc.⁸
- **Human Rights Defenders (HRDs):** individuals, groups, or organizations who peacefully promote or protect internationally recognized human rights. They are

⁴ OHCHR. *Information Note on Women Human Rights Defenders*. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva, "no update date." In: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/SexualHealth/INFO_WHRD_WEB.pdf (18/11/2024).

⁵ Deutsche Welle. *Disinformation: current definitions and examples*. DW, Germany, 2024. In: <https://akademie.dw.com/en/disinformation-current-definitions-and-examples/a-67786912> (25/11/2024).

⁶ Cambridge Dictionary. *Doxing*. Cambridge University. "No update date." In: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/doxing> (25/11/2024).

⁷ Internet Governance Forum. *Best Practice Forum on Gender and Digital Rights*. United Nations, Poland, 2021. (25/11/2024).

⁸ United Nations. *Hate speech*. "No update date." In <https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/what-is-hate-speech> (25/11/2024).





critical in advancing justice, equality, and human dignity. However, their work often exposes them to significant risks, both in physical and digital spaces.⁹

- **Online censorship:** practice that entails restricting or suppressing access to content on digital platforms. It can be imposed by governments through repressive laws or by private platforms via opaque content moderation policies, affecting not only freedom of speech in general but also hindering the ability of HRDs to advocate for change and expose injustices.¹⁰
- **Online harassment:** aggressive and persistent behavior targeting an individual through digital platforms with the aim of intimidating, silencing, or delegitimizing their contributions. This includes practices such as doxing, cyberbullying, hate speech dissemination, and coordinated disinformation campaigns.¹¹

Current issue:

Human rights defenders face a growing array of threats in the digital space, which has become a double-edged sword regarding their work. While digital platforms have revolutionized advocacy by enabling HRDs to amplify their voices and connect with global audiences, they have also introduced new risks. The rise of online harassment, censorship, and surveillance has created a hostile environment for HRDs, particularly women, LGBTQ+ community and those from marginalized groups. Moreover, these attacks have resulted in an undermining of their safety, credibility, and ability to operate effectively.

Online harassment

One of the most pervasive challenges is the increasing prevalence of online harassment. HRDs are often targeted by coordinated campaigns designed to intimidate, discredit, or silence them. These include cyberbullying, doxing and gendered disinformation. In this

⁹ OHCHR. *About human rights defenders*. United Nations. “No update date”. In: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-human-rights-defenders/about-human-rights-defenders> (25/11/2024).

¹⁰ OHCHR. *Moderating online content: fighting harm or silencing dissent?* United Nations. 23/07/2021. In: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2021/07/moderating-online-content-fighting-harm-or-silencing-dissent> (25/11/2024).

¹¹ Front Line Defenders. *Global Analysis 2022*. Front Line Defenders, Finland, 2022. (25/11/2024).





regard, a report published by Amnesty International reveals that three out of five young activists globally have faced online harassment related to their human rights advocacy.¹² These digital attacks not only jeopardize the safety of HRDs but also discourage other people from engaging in activism due to fear of experiencing similar attacks.

Censorship and content moderation

Censorship, both State-imposed and platform-driven, remains a significant barrier for HRDs. Governments, often under the pretext of maintaining public order or combating misinformation, have increasingly resorted to online censorship to suppress dissenting voices. Examples of such practices include arbitrary removal of content, internet shutdowns, and surveillance technologies.

Specifically, repressive regimes use internet blackouts as a tool to stifle communications and prevent mobilization. Moreover, the misuse of spyware and other surveillance tools by States to monitor the activities and communications of HRDs has been on the rise. This not only breaches their privacy but also exposes them to further risks, such as arrests and physical harm. On this matter, the United Nations has expressed concern over the misuse of content moderation, emphasizing that efforts to remove harmful content must not infringe on freedom of speech.

Likewise, platforms frequently take down human rights related content based on vague or inconsistently applied policies, silencing critical advocacy efforts. The opacity of platform policies further compounds this issue, leaving HRDs vulnerable to disproportionate censorship.

Gendered and intersectional challenges

Women defenders face unique and compounded challenges in the digital space, as they are often subjected to gender-based violence and discrimination. The OHCHR has documented the severe impacts of persistent online attacks and targeted abuse. As a result, it has

¹² Amnesty International. *Three out five young activists face online harassment globally for posting human rights content.* Amnesty International. 01/07/2024. In: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/three-out-five-young-activists-face-online-harassment-globally-for-posting-human-rights-content/> (25/11/2024).





become clear that gendered disinformation campaigns aim to delegitimize their advocacy by attacking their credibility, morality, and even physical appearance. Women HRDs report experiencing significant mental health challenges, including stress, anxiety, and burnout.

Also, these tactics are often amplified against LGBTQ+ defenders, as well as defenders from other marginalized groups, creating an even more hostile digital environment. Furthermore, many of these attacks escalate into offline consequences, such as threats to personal safety and professional livelihoods.¹³

Legal and policy gaps

Despite ongoing international efforts, significant challenges persist in aiming to safeguard HRDs from online threats. Legal frameworks are often inconsistent or poorly enforced, leaving HRDs without adequate protection. Additionally, existing laws frequently fail to address the specific dynamics of online abuse, such as the rapid spread of disinformation or the international nature of digital platforms. Moreover, content moderation practices by tech companies remain largely opaque, with little accountability for the harm caused by their algorithms. Their lack of timely responses to flagged content, as well as the absence of meaningful support from platform operators is baffling. Meanwhile, repressive regimes exploit the lack of global standards to enact broad censorship measures under the guise of combating cybercrime or extremism.

Intersection with broader trends

The issues faced by HRDs are part of a broader global trend of shrinking civic space, where governments and non-State actors increasingly target individuals advocating for accountability and justice. The digital realm, once seen as a democratizing force, is now being weaponized to suppress these voices. Some examples of this silencing techniques encompass the spread of disinformation campaigns undermining public trust in HRDs and their causes, or automated tools, such as bots and troll armies, used to flood social media platforms with abusive or misleading content. As a result, the digital divide created further

¹³ OHCHR. *Digital Space and Human Rights*. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva, "no update date." In: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/topic/digital-space-and-human-rights> (18/11/2024).





aggravates disadvantages for HRDs, specially in low-income regions, where they may lack access to secure technologies and legal protections.

The urgent need for action

To protect human rights defenders against online harassment and censorship, a comprehensive and multi-character approach is required. Governments, international organizations, civil society, and technology companies must cooperate to address this multifaceted issue; strengthen international legal protections for HRDs; ensure transparency and accountability in content moderation practices; provide HRDs with access to digital security tools and training; and implement gender-sensitive policies that alleviate the specific challenges faced by women, LGBTQ+ and marginalized HRDs.

Initiatives taken by the international community:

To combat the hostile environment created online against HRDs, multiple international initiatives have taken place. The following stand out...

United Nations-led efforts

- **Safety of Journalists Program:** the United Nations emphasizes that the safety of journalists must be a priority to the international community, so it fosters campaigns and resources that also benefit HRDs, acknowledging the overlapping risks that these groups face. This program advocates for structural changes to reduce impunity for attacks, both online and offline.¹⁴
- **Policy and frameworks:** the OHCHR has developed and disseminated guidelines to promote digital security and combat online harassment. These publications emphasize the importance of a human-rights-centered approach to digital governance, urging States and companies to uphold international standards in their policies and practices.¹⁵

¹⁴ United Nations. *Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity*. United Nations, New York, "no update date." In: <https://www.un.org/en/safety-journalists> (18/11/2024).

¹⁵ OHCHR. *Gendered Disinformation and CSO Responses: Access Now Submission*. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva, "no update date." In:





- **Transparency and accountability:** the United Nations, in alliance with several non-governmental organizations, often urge governments to enforce transparency in platform moderation policies and hold companies accountable for failing to protect users. This includes pushing for the adoption of human rights due diligence frameworks in tech industries.
- **Global standards:** the United Nations constantly address discrepancies in how nations tackle online harassment and censorship; therefore, it pursues the harmonization of policies across borders and calls for binding international agreements towards the universal protection of HRDs.
- **Awareness campaigns:** the United Nations has launched worldwide campaigns that highlight the pivotal role HRDs have and the risks they face in the digital era.¹⁶ The intention is to raise awareness about the rights of HRDs and the challenges they are exposed to, mobilizing public and institutional support.
- **Training programs:** the OHCHR and UNWOMEN conduct workshops and online training sessions on digital security and human rights. These programs educate the public and teach HRDs how to identify risks, counteract online harassment, and use secure communication tools.
- **Gender-specific interventions:** UNWOMEN recognizes the disproportionate impact of online violence on women HRDs, so it collaborates with civil society organizations to address gender-specific challenges. Their research highlights how gendered disinformation is weaponized to undermine defenders who are women, calling for stronger protections and inclusive policies.¹⁷

<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/expression/cfis/gender-justice/subm-a78288-gendered-disinformation-cso-accessnow.pdf> (18/11/2024).

¹⁶ OHCHR. *Moderating Online Content: Fighting Harm or Silencing Dissent?* Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva, July 2021. In: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2021/07/moderating-online-content-fighting-harm-or-silencing-dissent> (18/11/2024).

¹⁷ UN Women. *Online Harassment and Censorship: The Experiences of Women Human Rights Defenders*. UN Women, New York, December 2022. In: [https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/EP.14 Jan%20Moolman.pdf](https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/EP.14%20Moolman.pdf) (18/11/2024).





Contributions from civil society and non-governmental organizations

- **Research and awareness:** there are organizations, like Access Now and DanChurchAid, that call for policy reforms and greater accountability from governments and corporations alike, so they publish reports focusing on online harassment trends and the systemic nature of these issues to raise awareness about how severe they are.

In like manner, one of the main goals of the International Service for Human Rights, an independent non-profit organization founded in 1984, is to advocate for the strengthening of national legal frameworks to protect HRDs worldwide, as well as their work. Therefore, it created an interactive map to analyze the countries where there has been progress regarding the adoption of legal instruments intended to keep HRDs safe.

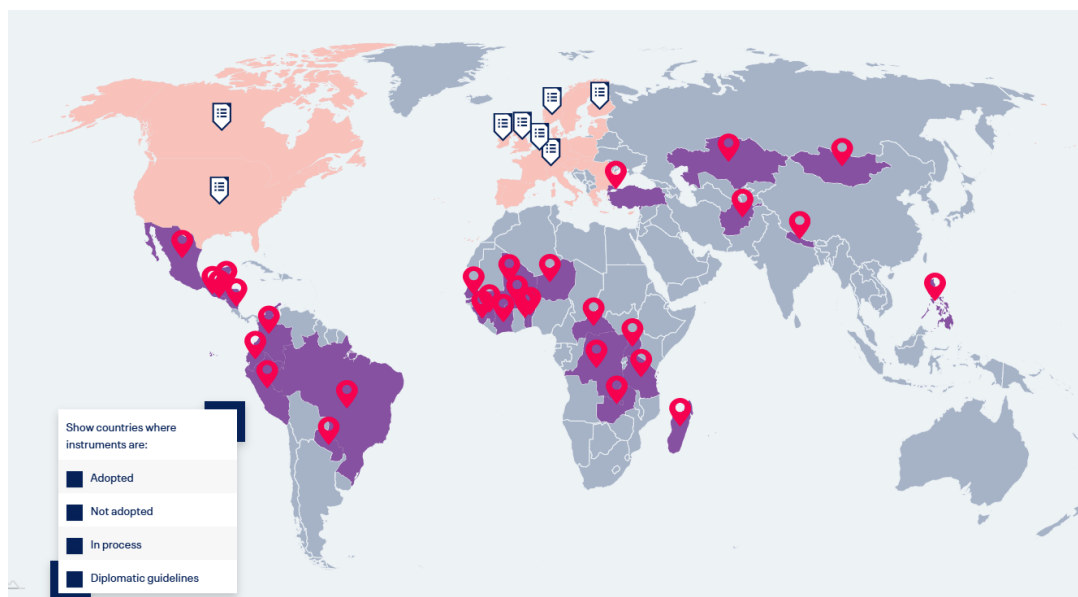


Figure 1. Countries where there have been developments in legal instruments regarding human rights defenders.¹⁸

- **Legal and psychological support:** other organizations, such as Amnesty International and Front-Line Defenders, offer vital resources to HRDs who find

¹⁸ ISHR. *Protection Instruments*. International Service for Human Rights. 2024. In: <https://ishr.ch/defenders-toolbox/national-protection/> (18/11/2024).





themselves under threat, including legal aid, mental health support, and tools for documenting and reporting harassment.

- **Gender-sensitive advocacy:** many non-governmental organizations have prioritized the addressing of the unique challenges faced by women HRDs. For instance, DanChurchAid's detailed report advocates for gender-responsive measures to counter online harassment and promote equity in protective frameworks.

Collaborations with technology platforms

- **Algorithmic accountability:** advocacy organizations like Amnesty International have pushed major tech companies to evaluate the participation of their algorithms in amplifying hate speech and disinformation. As a result, some platforms have begun revising their algorithms to reduce the spread of harmful content.
- **Improved reporting mechanisms:** Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have collaborated with HRD-focused organizations to create reporting tools specifically designed to support HRDs facing online threats. These tools allow for faster responses and the removal of detrimental content.
- **Capacity-building tools:** some technology companies have partnered with non-governmental organizations to develop and distribute digital security utensils for defenders. These tools, such as encryption software and VPNs, help HRDs safeguard their communications and maintain anonymity when necessary.

Public and private sector initiatives

- **National and regional-level policies:** countries like Norway and the Netherlands have supported initiatives aimed at improving the safety of HRDs in digital spaces. Some have passed laws to criminalize online harassment, including doxing and cyberstalking, in addition to providing legal resources for HRDs.

Similarly, the United States and the European Union have acknowledged the difficulties HRDs face on this matter, issuing joint guidance for online platforms to





better protect them. However, these efforts are still insufficient, and the lack of global consensus on regulations leaves HRDs in vulnerable positions.¹⁹

- **Private sector engagement:** multinational corporations, especially those specialized in technology, have increasingly been brought into discussions regarding online protection of HRDs. This includes initiatives to provide pro bono access to tools like secure email servers and legal support.

Guiding questions:

1. In your delegation, are HRDs often subjected to online harassment and censorship and, if so, is it State-imposed, platform-driven or both?
2. Has your delegation implemented any measures to protect HRDs online and what have been the results?
3. Has your delegation made any efforts to hold corporations accountable for enabling online harassment and censorship of HRDs?
4. How could your delegation collaborate with social media companies to safeguard HRDs from online threats or attacks?
5. What resources are available in your delegation for HRDs to stay safe and counter online harassment, censorship, and even surveillance?
6. Would your delegation be interested in fostering partnerships between tech developers and HRDs to make digital spaces more secure?
7. Has your delegation promoted any programs regarding education and digital literacy to prevent online harassment and censorship?
8. In which ways could your delegation collaborate with organizations for both parties to be better equipped to support HRDs under online threats or attacks?
9. How could your delegation contribute to addressing more effectively the gender-specific and intersectional challenges that HRDs face online?

¹⁹ U.S. Department of State. *United States and European Union Release Joint Guidance for Online Platforms on Protecting Human Rights Defenders Online*. United States of America Department of State, United States, “no update date.” In: <https://www.state.gov/united-states-and-european-union-release-joint-guidance-for-online-platforms-on-protecting-human-rights-defenders-online/> (24/11/2024).





10. Has your delegation identified any best practices, implemented at national or regional levels, that could be scaled up internationally to protect HRDs online?
11. Has your delegation participated in any international initiative to protect HRDs from online harassment and censorship?
12. Would your delegation be willing to fully support the establishment of global standards on the matter?
13. What are the most critical gaps in current frameworks regarding the protection of HRDs in the digital space and how can they be addressed?
14. How can international laws to protect HRDs from online harassment and censorship be strengthened without infringing on privacy, freedom of speech, and access to information?

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