BPF ONLINE ABUSE AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

SUMMARY

The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) best practice forum (BPF) on Online Abuse and Gender-Based Violence Against Women has published a comprehensive third draft aimed at taking a step towards addressing online abuse and gender-based violence. It also invited input and comment on this document, both at IGF 2015 and via email.

The BPF’s third draft (‘Draft JP’) explores the nature and potential definitions of this multidimensional problem; the various contexts that have an impact on enabling and the problem for both current and future Internet users; the diversity of rights that need to be carefully balanced in addressing the problem; and the responses and strategies adopted by public and private sectors, multistakeholder groups, and communities and users to address the problem.

The BPF’s work, which took place over a period of nine months, illustrates the benefits of having a neutral platform where multiple stakeholders can contribute to address the issue in an open, transparent and inclusive manner using a mixed methodology that enables a diversity of rich responses and input at various different stages of the BPF’s work. The BPF’s major findings, along with related recommendations for further research, are summarised below.

Towards a more comprehensive understanding of the problem

The BPF’s work showed that online abuse of women and gender-based violence are not only interpreted and approached differently in diverse regions, but also that the terminology used for it is inconsistent. The BPF’s findings therefore highlight the need for more work to be done towards finding a comprehensive yet flexible definition of the issue that can receive wider global recognition.

Various underlying factors play a role in enabling online abuse and gender-based violence and compounding the impact of such abuse and violence; as well as the allocation and effectiveness of resources to ensure women gain access to justice and redress. The BPF found that both definitions and initiatives have to address specificities in contexts and relevant circumstances; and should aim to address underlying enabling factors rather than just the symptoms of the problem.

The BPF also found that online abuse and gender-based violence can only be studied whilst keeping offline/physical environments, and potential repercussions in offline/physical environments, in mind.

Towards a more careful balancing of all the rights and interests involved

Although great strides have been made to improve connectivity and Internet access around the world, growing access has also resulted in the increased use of technology to infringe human rights online. And while it is now widely recognised that ‘offline’ human rights apply equally online, the BPF results indicate a need to consider, include and
balance multiple rights, and to take into account existing inequalities and discrimination that may affect how rights are protected and recognised. In addition, tensions that arise when issues related to competing rights and interests are involved (including freedom of expression, privacy and anonymity) also need further study.

Considerations in developing responses

The BPF found that efforts to develop, encourage and implement practices to counter online abuse and gender-based violence vary significantly around the world. Whilst the BPF did not have the scope to investigate all relevant strategies and approaches to the issue, it highlights many examples of responses taken in the public and private sector, as well as by multistakeholder and community-driven communities. It also extracted various lessons that may be learnt from such approaches and ideas that can be explored in further work.

The BPF found that it is critical that all responses and approaches to the issue be developed transparently in due consultation with current users (including victims and survivors of online abuse and/or violence) and civil society organizations, and to also consider the needs of future users as Internet access and adoption expand globally.

The BPF’s work also reinforced the importance of awareness and literacy programmes to encourage a better understanding of the problem, along with substantial investment in research and statistics on the incidence of the issue. There are also other areas that compel further study and research, including the specific challenges that women with disabilities face, as well as how online abuse and gender-based violence affect girls (below 18 years of age) and prevent them from benefit from the opportunities that the Internet offers for their future development.

First steps

The work of this BPF is both timely and instructive in the increasing effort by different stakeholders at national and global levels to understand and address the issue of online abuse and gender-based violence. It has showed that there are no one-size-fits all solution, and that greater study is needed to further investigate the range of acts, underlying causes, diversity and breadth of impact, and potential responses that can be developed for the issue.

The BPF’s work has facilitated diverse stakeholder engagement on the issue, and as such, benefitted from different views and perspectives. This is, however, only a first step towards a more comprehensive understanding and response. It is hoped that some of the findings and areas for further exploration can inform continued discussion and efforts: both at the IGF as a critical platform for multistakeholder engagement on key internet policy, governance and human rights issues, and in other policy discussion spaces.