



**YWCA**  
CANADA

A TURNING POINT  
FOR WOMEN  
UN POINT TOURNANT  
POUR LES FEMMES

## **Addressing Online Hate: Applying an Intersectional Gender Lens**

**Submission to Standing Committee on Justice and Human  
Rights**

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### **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 9 provinces and 2 territories. Every year, we work in over 300 communities and support over 330, 000 women, girls and their families.

## **Addressing Online Hate: Applying an Intersectional Gender Lens**

### **Background and Context Setting**

YWCA Canada welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the study on *Online Hate* by the House Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights. We applaud the Government of Canada's efforts and initiatives to date that have focused on addressing hate in Canada such as the 'Taking Action Against Systemic Racism and Religious Discrimination including Islamophobia' report<sup>1</sup> by the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, Public Safety Canada's Security Infrastructure Program<sup>2</sup>, the forthcoming *National Anti-Racism Strategy*<sup>3</sup> and as well as this current consultation on studying online hate in Canada.

Online hate is a threat to the health and wellbeing of our communities and our democracy. Recent estimates show that online hate speech in Canada has increased by as much as 600 percent.<sup>4</sup> A study conducted by Leger Marketing for the Association of Canadian Studies found that 60 percent of Canadians have reported seeing hate speech on social media.<sup>5</sup>

At the YWCA Canada, we are concerned with the troubling rise of online hate because we have seen the direct and indirect impacts it has had on our service users, volunteers and staff. With 32 Member Associations across the country, our organization is uniquely positioned to provide a pan-Canadian perspective how online hate plays out in various communities across Canada and how it is shaped by our nation's geographic, economic, linguistic, cultural, religious and racial diversity.

Furthermore, as Canada's largest and oldest multi-service women's organization, we can provide an intersectional gender equity analysis of how online hate manifests for different communities. Due to overt and covert instances of sexism and misogyny, women, girls and non-binary people are particularly vulnerable to distinct forms of online hate that are sometimes more severe and aggressive. We are keen to share the lessons we've learned in providing gender-sensitive services and programs as well as promising practices our Member Associations are spearheading across the country.

Ultimately, we need to address online hate head on to create a safer digital world not just for women, girls and their families, but for all of us. Policy solutions, funding and legislative action are especially urgent in our current context. Given the increasing number of terrorist attacks that have been inspired by online hate across the globe such as the recent shootings in New Zealand, United States of America as well as here in Canada with the Quebec City mosque shooting, we have no time to lose and every reason to act today to create inclusive communities for all.

### **Gendered Perspectives on Online Hate**

Since 2014, we have been engaged in addressing online hate through our Project Shift initiative. Project Shift was a 30-month project funded by Status of Women Canada to conduct a needs assessment, engage stakeholders and facilitate knowledge exchange on cyberviolence against women and girls.<sup>6</sup> A gender-based analysis was completed when interpreting research findings and community needs. Several stakeholders were engaged in the project including young women and girls who access our services at YWCA Member Associations.

They identified key challenges, barriers and impacts when it came to online hate:

- Women's appearance and sexualization
- Online and offline safety
- Double standards
- Gender differences in experiences of cyberviolence
- Sexual exploitation and blackmailing
- Doxxing
- Unaware or distrustful of reporting mechanisms
- Feeling threatened or unsafe enough to leave online platforms
- Mental health implications

Another finding from our Project Shift work was the need for systems solutions and an ecological approach to addressing online hate and safety for young women and girls. These findings would translate to the broader concern of online hate and we would recommend that interventions and initiatives be taken on the following levels:

- Legislation, regulations and policies governing society at large
- Legislation, regulations and policies governing social media platforms
- Changes in policies, practices, and processes in institutions, schools, and community organizations
- Individual and community level interventions focused on prevention, education, awareness building and skills training

In our work with Project Shift, we have seen how instances of cyberviolence and online hate operate in the context of an endemic 'rape culture' that normalizes misogyny, victim blaming and gender-based violence. When online hate against diverse communities intersects with gender, it situates itself on the spectrum of gender-based violence. For example, perpetrators use social media platforms to harass and hurt Muslim women.<sup>7,8,9</sup> Online hate is simply an extension of gender-based violence and manifestations of other types of hate such as Islamophobia in intimate partner violence.

## **Intersectional Gender Lens in Action - Understanding Gendered Islamophobia**

We need to analyze the impacts of online hate from an intersectional gender lens because online hate impacts different communities in unique ways. When you layer on different identities with gendered perspectives, the experience of online hate becomes more nuanced and complex.

For example, in the instance of Islamophobic instances of online hate, it looks very different for Canadian Muslims who identify as women. We saw this recently with the outpouring of hate and rage against young Canadian Muslim women who recently participated in democracy engagement experiential learning trip in Ottawa, in Spring 2019.<sup>10, 11</sup>

Gendered Islamophobia is defined as the ‘specific kinds of stereotypes and discrimination that Muslim women face’, which can include the false idea that ‘Muslim women are weak, oppressed, repressed, or victims’.<sup>12</sup>

Toolkits that provide resources, support and community for survivors of Islamophobic violence, such as the Rivers of Hope Toolkit understand and respond to the unique challenges experienced by Canadian Muslim women, especially people who wear head coverings such as hijabs and niqabs.<sup>13</sup> Spearheaded by researcher and advocate Sidrah Ahmad based on her Master’s Research Project at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto, the Rives of Hope Toolkit provides definitions of Islamophobia, gendered Islamophobia and anti-Black racism, and a list of the different forms of online Islamophobia including online comments, posts, images and videos that attack Muslims. It also includes strategies for bystander intervention, how to support survivors and resources for reporting options.

### **YWCA Programs, Services and Projects**

Across the country, our YWCA Member Associations as well as the National Office deliver programs, services and projects to advance gender equity and empower women and girls. Some of the work we do that addresses online hate include:

- Project Shift: Promoting a Safer Digital World for Young Women - YWCA Canada National Office
- Week Without Violence Awareness Campaign – World YWCA and YWCA Canada National Office
- Think Big! Lead Now! Leadership Program – YWCA Canada National Office
- Rights Guide for Girls, Young Women and Gender Non-Conforming Youth – YWCA Canada National Office
- Power of Being a Girl and Power of Being Us leadership conferences – YWCA Member Associations across the country

## **Recommendations**

1. Integrate an intersectional gender equity lens and consider the gendered impacts of anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and Xenophobia in any definitions of 'hate' and 'online hate'.
2. Establish a Moderation Standards Council analogous to the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council to enable social media companies, civil society and other relevant stakeholders to meet public expectations and government requirements on content moderation.
3. Create a made-in-Canada national strategy to track online hate using an intersectional gender lens using the model of Tech against Terrorism (TaT), a UN-mandated initiative as an example.
4. Fund collaborations between community-based organizations and online platforms to develop innovative reporting tools that are informed and grounded by affected community members' experiences and needs as well as tools to filter, remove and prevent online hate from spreading
5. Fund community-based organizations that promote prevention of online hate through awareness raising, empathy building and the creation of counternarratives.
6. Fund community-based organizations and educational institutions to develop and deliver curriculum to equip affected communities with increased understanding of their rights online, as well as the skills and tools they need to report instances of online hate effectively in a way that centres their experiences.

## **Conclusion**

2019 has been an especially difficult year for diverse communities in Canada with the rising rate of online hate. We are keen to see the study conducted on online hate by the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights be a springboard for action and impact. We encourage that an intersectional gender lens be applied during the analysis of the study. This is because discrimination and violence, especially in the form of online hate, impacts women, girls and non-binary people in unique and nuanced ways that must be considered and addressed through targeted interventions.

YWCA Canada welcomes the opportunity to support the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights in its study on this issue and stands ready to marshal our expertise and networks to promote policy solutions; design and deliver targeted programming, services and interventions; and facilitate knowledge exchange. We look forward to collaborating with the Government of Canada and other stakeholders to promote a just, safe and equitable online world for all of us across the country and globally.

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