

UN experts call for sensitive and timely response to online gender-based abuse

8 March 2017 – Urgent attention, creativity and cooperation are needed to address online gender-based abuse, but authorities should be careful to avoid curtailing freedom of expression in doing so, two United Nations human rights experts said today.

“Online gender-based abuse and violence are undeniably a scourge, and governments and companies should be taking action against it”, David Kaye, the Special Rapporteur on the promotion of freedom of expression, said in a news releases that coincides with worldwide commemoration of International Women’s Day.

However, Mr Kaye added that poorly formulated laws prohibiting nudity or obscenity could have an adverse impact on conversations about gender, sexuality and reproductive health. “Censorship and undue restrictions on content could end up undermining the rights of the very women for whom governments and corporate actors may seek to provide redress.”

Significant numbers of women have experienced gender-based abuse online, according to surveys and reports. These attacks include blackmail, intimidation, stalking and dissemination of private content without consent.

The Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Dubravka Simonovic said: “Women victims and survivors need transparent and fast responses and effective remedies which can only be achieved if both States and private actors work together and exercise due diligence to eliminate online violence against women.”

The experts called on governments and private actors to provide training on the problems related to online abuse and violence, in addition to greater transparency in the private sector in regards to reports of abuse and the steps taken to address them.

Research into the scope, manifestations and impact of the abuse, as well as a strengthened emphasis on protection of privacy by online platforms, is also required.

“Ensuring an internet free from gender-based violence enhances freedom of expression,” Ms. Simonovic said, “as it allows women to fully participate in all areas of life and is integral to women’s empowerment.”

Special Rapporteurs and independent experts are appointed by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.