



REMARKS OF

FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER SALONI SETHI
MAYOR'S OFFICE TO END DOMESTIC AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL
COMMITTEE ON WOMEN AND GENDER EQUITY AND COMMITTEE ON
TECHNOLOGY

on

**"Oversight - Online harassment against women, girls, and gender expansive
people"**

December 4, 2023

Good afternoon, Chair Cabán, Chair Gutiérrez, Members of the Committee on Women and Gender Equity, and Members of the Committee on Technology. I am Saloni Sethi, First Deputy Commissioner of the Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence (ENDGBV). I am joined by Jennifer DeCarli, ENDGBV's Deputy Commissioner for Family Justice Centers and Survivor Supports. ENDGBV operates the city's five family justice centers and directly manages a contract portfolio of prevention and intervention programming. Our office builds capacity for agency staff and community members to identify and respond to domestic and gender-based violence (DV/GBV) through outreach and training, and we develop policies and best practices to strengthen the City's approaches to these issues. We collaborate with City agencies, over 100 nonprofit providers, community stakeholders, and people with lived experience to reduce barriers and ensure access to inclusive services for survivors of DV/GBV.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you about online harassment against women, girls, and gender expansive people.

Online harassment is a troubling form of gender-based violence that can include threats to personal safety, stalking, doxing, cyber-exploitation, deep fakes, and nonconsensual distribution of intimate images. Online harassment can be perpetrated by strangers, friends, family, or intimate partners. As our world has shifted to more online engagement, we have seen technology increasingly used as a tool to facilitate and perpetuate harmful and abusive behavior.

Research studies indicate that women and gender expansive individuals are more likely to be targeted online and more likely to experience more severe forms of online harassment than cisgender men. A Plan International survey of over 14,000 young women and girls found that 58% of respondents have experienced online harassment, including abusive language and cyberbullying. Research by the Web Foundation and the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts found that 84% of young women think the problem of online abuse is getting worse. For LGBTQ+ youth, Black youth, and young women of color worldwide, the impact of gender-based harassment is compounded when they also experience harassment based on other marginalized identities they hold.

Online harassment can create significant obstacles for girls, women, and gender expansive individuals who use online spaces for education, employment,

entertainment, and community and civic engagement. The fear of harassment may lead individuals to limit or avoid digital spaces altogether, which can negatively impact their educational, professional, and social opportunities, and deter them from public life that occurs online. Online harassment can also affect individuals' mental health and overall well-being. Continuous threats, humiliation, and invasion of privacy online can result in anxiety, depression, and other psychological distress.

Many of the prevention and intervention tools we have for gender-based violence more broadly can be adapted to address online harassment. For example, early intervention programs like the city's ABCs of Healthy Relationships for elementary age students and Early Relationship Abuse Prevention Program for middle school age students teach young people about positive and consent-driven interpersonal relationships, conflict resolution, and gender equity. The middle school programming, in particular, includes conversations about how harmful gender dynamics play out online. Our Family Justice Centers partner with community-based organizations that have a wealth of experience in addressing gender-based violence, including online harassment. Our partners offer training on technology safety and can assist individuals to safety-plan around technology, identify spyware and other harmful tools that compromise digital safety, and

explore civil and criminal remedies that may be available to address online harassment if the survivor wishes to pursue such legal options.

These remedies include relief under New York City and New York State law which include the disclosure or threat to disclose intimate images as civil and criminal offenses. Under New York State law, judges can order offenders and websites that host or disseminate nonconsensual intimate images to remove the offensive content. When online harassment or nonconsensual intimate image disclosure is committed by an intimate partner or family member, survivors can file for orders of protection in New York State Family Court and/or file a police report. Survivors of nonconsensual intimate images disclosure may also be eligible for victim compensation from the state. ENDGBV and our partners have supported the implementation of these laws with training and service coordination.

We look forward to continued collaboration with the Council, our sister City agencies, and our community-based partners to support a safe online environment. Thank you for the opportunity to appear here today. We welcome any questions you may have.



JUMAANE D. WILLIAMS

**STATEMENT OF PUBLIC ADVOCATE JUMAANE D. WILLIAMS
TO THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON
WOMEN AND GENDER EQUITY AND COMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY
DECEMBER 4, 2023**

Good morning:

My name is Jumaane D. Williams and I am the Public Advocate for the City of New York. Thank you very much to Chair Cabán and Chair Gutiérrez and members of the Committee on Women and Gender Equity and the Committee on Technology for holding this hearing and allowing me the opportunity to provide a statement.

Throughout the past decade, the usage of the internet over time has increased rapidly among individuals globally. According to research done by the Pew Research Center, in 2021, 93% of U.S. adults use the internet.¹ Since 2000, the percentage of internet usage has increased by 41% over two decades.² The internet is a space that allows people to create social connections, learn about political and social movements around the world, and comprise an abundance of knowledge.

Despite this, there has also been an increase in hate and violence that individuals experience on the internet. Women, people of more color, and LGBTQIA+ individuals disproportionately encounter online harassment and violence; some of which include cyberstalking, cyberbullying, doxxing, deep fakes, and revenge porn. Based on a study done by the Pew Research Center, 33% of women under 35 have been sexually harassed online; 54% of Black or Hispanic individuals have been targeted due to their race or ethnicity; and 70% of LGBTQIA+ individuals have experienced any kind of harassment online.³

I would also be remiss if I did not acknowledge the online harassment my colleagues have faced while running for their positions, as well as while being a member of the Council. It is clear that anybody can become a victim of these forms of harassment and violence, but it is exacerbated even more for those with intersectional identities.

During today's hearing, I hope to hear updates from the administration on what they have been doing to ensure this issue is being addressed, along with providing support for victims and survivors. It is crucial that the administration steps up where companies have decided to back down. Some companies are expanding their trust and safety teams to support vulnerable groups but mostly the online industry is turning a blind eye to the vitriol spread on their online platforms while hiding behind Section 230.⁴ I also

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/?tabId=tab-d5edf003-5858-4269-89c5-f2889ecf7951>

² Ibid.

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/01/13/the-state-of-online-harassment/>

⁴ <https://www.justice.gov/archives/ag/department-justice-s-review-section-230-communications-decency-act-1996>



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want to hear from advocates and survivors about recommendations they have for the Council and what we can do better to address the issue.

Thank you.



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**Testimony of Anne Glatz, Senior Staff Attorney,
Courtroom Advocates Project
before The New York City Council
Committee on Women & Gender Equity and Committee on Technology
December 4, 2023**

Good morning. My name is Anne Glatz, and I am a civil legal attorney with Sanctuary for Families, New York State's largest non-profit organization dedicated exclusively to services and advocacy on behalf of victims of domestic violence and sex trafficking. We are so grateful for the opportunity to testify today on this critical subject.

With the ever-increasing pervasiveness of social media and other online platforms, mobile phones, smart devices, and other forms of interconnected technology, Sanctuary's attorneys, advocates, and counselors have seen the lives of survivors of intimate partner violence destroyed when abusers have engaged in relentless technology-facilitated abuse against them. Abusers are increasingly using online platforms or other digital technologies to abuse, exploit, harass, and threaten their victims. This type of abuse includes an array of harassment such as hacking, installation of spyware, stalking, spoofing (including faking images, or faking phone numbers or other identifying information), identity theft, impersonation, sexual extortion (colloquially known as sextortion), and cyber sexual abuse. Image-based or Cyber Sexual Abuse (CSA)—often known by the victim-blaming term “revenge porn”—is the dissemination or threat of dissemination of nude or sexually explicit images or video without the victim's consent. These images may be authentic images of the victim but may also include startlingly realistic photo-shopped or “deep fake” images. Images and videos may have been obtained consensually within the context of an intimate relationship or without consent (e.g., by using hidden cameras, hacking phones, or recording sexual assaults)—but in any case are disseminated without the victim's consent.

Cyber-sexual abuse is reaching epidemic proportions— a large 2019 study found a 400% increase in the number of victims of image-based abuse from 2016-2019.¹—and its victims are overwhelmingly women and girls. According to a Cyber Civil Rights Initiative survey, 90 percent of CSA victims are women; several recent studies also found that women are 1.5 times more

¹ Eaton & Ruvalcaba 2019.

likely to be victims of CSA and men are twice as likely to self-identify as perpetrators than women.² CSA also disproportionately impacts the LGBTQ community. LGBTQ individuals are roughly four times more likely to be victims of CSA than heterosexual individuals, according to a 2016 study by the Center for Innovative Public Health Research.

Technology-facilitated abuse is highly injurious to victims psychologically. Victims of CSA—the vast majority of whom have an intimate relationship with the perpetrator—experience heightened levels of PTSD³ and frequently experience suicidal ideations and acts.⁴ In one study, over half of victims (51%) contemplated committing suicide as a result of the image-based abuse.⁵ It is also a serious threat to their safety offline: studies have found that over 30% of victims of CSA were harassed or stalked outside of the Internet by users that have seen the material online.⁶

In addition to cyber-sexual abuse, Sanctuary has witnessed a disturbing increase in clients suffering all types of technology-facilitated abuse on since the pandemic. Attorneys and advocates have noted a sharp increase in reports from clients and the community, including sextortion, online stalking and threats, cyber sexual abuse, and more. Clients, trapped in their homes during the height of the public health crisis, reported hundreds of harassing text messages and social media messages, violent threats, spyware and stalkerware, and more.

With the ubiquitous use of social media platforms and growing ease of electronic communication, perpetrators of technology abuse are able to inflict major and lasting damage very quickly. The harms caused by these forms of abuse are pervasive and persistent and can bleed into every aspect of a victim's life, seriously impairing their physical, emotional, and economic well-being. Unfortunately, technology is advancing at a much faster pace than statutes and case law, and faster than judges, law enforcement, and other systems as well. It is critical that systems are provided with the tools and resources to effectively respond to cyber-sexual abuse, and other forms of technology-facilitated abuse, to protect survivors and empower them to move into lives of safety and security.

² Cyber Civil Rights Initiative 2017; accord Ruvalcaba, Y., & Eaton, A. A. 2020.

³ Holladay et al., 2021.

⁴ Chang et al., 2021.

⁵ Cyber Civil Rights Initiative 2017; accord Ruvalcaba, Y., & Eaton, A. A. 2020.

⁶ Cyber Civil Rights Initiative 2017; accord Ruvalcaba, Y., & Eaton, A. A. 2020.

With that in mind, Sanctuary has several proposals that we urge the City Council to join in to support survivors of intimate partner violence affected by technology-facilitated abuse. First, it is vital to implement mandatory trainings on tech abuse for professionals that routinely interact with abuse survivors, including law enforcement from DV/SVU officers to patrol and precinct officers; Supreme, Criminal and Family Court judges and staff; and DA's offices and their crime victim assistance units. These trainings must be regularly updated to include new and emerging issues in tech-facilitated abuse, including the use of AI and deep fake technology. Second, the City Council should support the establishment and funding of cybercrimes hotlines, such as the extremely successful Bronx District Attorney Cyber Crime Hotline.

Third, we urge the Council to earmark funding specifically to support tech-facilitated abuse victims: currently, there are virtually no victim service agencies providing comprehensive, ongoing services to these victims, even as the dangers of this abuse are becoming increasingly far-reaching, devastating, and deadly. Victims need both specialized legal assistance—from orders of protection, to filing take-down notices, to criminal prosecution for cyber-sexual abuse—and technology safety planning, to minimize the dangers of stalking and harassment through mobile phones and other smart devices, such as home-based devices that abusers can access remotely. Sanctuary's Legal Center is one of the few with deep expertise in this specialized safety planning and legal practice and is providing trainings to build capacity within the private bar and other legal service organizations to engage pro bono support.

Fourth, we urge City Council to modify the existing NYC Code 10-180—disclosure of an intimate image—to accord with the State unlawful dissemination statute by removing the problematic element of “covered recipient,” which requires that the defendant have received an intimate image directly from the victim or that the defendant has taken the image themselves. This element has proven to be extremely difficult to prosecute, as cases have borne out.⁷

Lastly, we urge the Council to support legislative changes to strengthen statutory language on cyber-sexual abuse to align with recent New York State legislation, which now includes “images created by digitization” or “deep fake” images. Whether the images were originally consensual or non-consensual, whether they are real or doctored, the result of their dissemination online can be equally devastating.

⁷ See, e.g., *People v. Ahmed*, 64 Misc.3d 601, 102 N.Y.S.3d 421 (Crim. Ct. Bronx Cnty. 2019); *People v. E.R.*, 65 Misc.3d 1201(A), 118 N.Y.S.3d 378 (Sup. Ct. N.Y. Cnty. 2019).

We are profoundly grateful to City Council Member Tiffany Cabán for her extraordinary leadership in support of survivors of domestic violence and related forms of gender-based violence, and her advocacy on this and many other critical issues as Chair of the Committee on Women & Gender Equity. We also thank Jennifer Gutiérrez and the Committee on Technology for recognizing that the miracles of 21st century technology advances are unfortunately accompanied by a host of dangerous new threats. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.



New York Cyber Abuse Task Force

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL'S COMMITTEE ON WOMEN AND GENDER EQUITY, JOINTLY WITH THE COMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY

Online harassment against women, girls, and gender expansive people

December 4, 2023

Good morning, Chairs Cabán, Gutiérrez, and members of the committees. Thank you for the opportunity to testify and for holding this important hearing. My name is Annie Seifullah. I am a civil attorney in private practice, and I also serve as co-chair of the New York Cyber Abuse Task Force. We are a coalition committed to fighting technology-facilitated abuse and intimate partner violence in all its forms, including cyber harassment, cyber stalking, online impersonation, sexual extortion (colloquially known as sextortion), and image-based sex abuse. All of these intentional harms fall under the umbrella Technology-Facilitated Abuse (or “Tech Abuse” for short). The Task Force includes representatives from Sanctuary for Families, Day One, Cornell Tech’s Clinic to End Tech Abuse, Urban Justice Center, Safe Horizon, Legal Momentum, Legal Information for Families Today (LIFT), NYLAG, Her Justice, Legal Services NYC, Cyber Civil Rights Initiative, and others.

Collectively, the New York Cyber Abuse Task Force member organizations represent hundreds of individuals, including low-income litigants, across New York City as well as other areas of New York State. Many of the litigants represented by the Task Force member organizations are low-income people of color, women and women-identifying, members of the LGBTQ community, and more. A vast majority of the litigants represented by the Task Force member organizations are victims of gender-based violence and intimate partner violence.

The Cyber Abuse Task Force has four areas of focus:

- 1) advocating for comprehensive laws and policies (at the state and city level) that appropriately and inclusively address technology-facilitated abuse and protect and support victims of such abuse;
- 2) supporting judges, attorneys and service providers working with victims of technology-facilitated abuse by providing trainings, resources, and best practices;
- 3) raising awareness about technology-facilitated abuse and victims’ rights through community and public outreach and education, including our annual “There is No Offline” conference; and
- 4) working with tech companies to support the design of humane products so that anti-violence safety measures are taken into account before tech products enter the stream of commerce.

Image based sex abuse, formerly known as “revenge porn,” is one of the most common forms of tech abuse that we encounter.¹ Perpetrators are able to inflict major and lasting damage very quickly. It can destroy victims’ reputations, get them fired from jobs, thrown out of schools, or lead them to have suicidal thoughts or self-harming behaviors. As many of my colleagues testifying today will tell you (or have told you), the vast majority of image-based sex abuse identify as female² and LGBTQ students are 4 times more likely to be victims of image-based sex abuse than their heterosexual peers.³

Legislation passed by the New York City Council has helped. Local Law 242 of 2017, sponsored by Council Member Rory Lancman, made image-based sex abuse a misdemeanor and – more importantly in many ways to those of us who are civil rights advocates – created a civil cause of action that enabled victims to file a lawsuit for injunctive relief or damages. The law also created a new family offense, meaning victims can seek a civil order of protection from their abusers through family courts when images are unlawfully disseminated. More recently, Local Law 31 of 2022, sponsored by Council Member Justin Brannan, added economic abuse to the definition of domestic violence.

While we celebrate and work to strengthen legislative achievements, there is policy work to do at the agency level. My remarks will focus on the New York City Department of Education, where targeted changes would immediately improve the safety of women, girls, and gender expansive people attending or working in K-12 schools who find themselves the target of cyber-based gender violence.

Imagine the devastation of having your nude or sexually explicit photos and videos leaked to your classmates. Members of the task force, myself included, have represented countless girls impacted by image based sex abuse perpetrated by a classmate—typically a boy whom they once dated. I can tell you as an attorney, former DOE principal, and survivor of image-based sex abuse myself – that all levels of the city’s school system fall short when dealing with this form of gender-violence. Officials are not equipped to properly investigate, respond to, or preserve evidence when dealing with image-based sex abuse.

Task Force members see three patterns:

1. Victims are blamed after their nude images are distributed without their consent, because even though the law has changed – it doesn’t mean that people’s mindset or language around image-based sex abuse has.
2. When the depicted victim of imaged based sex abuse is under 18, it constitutes child sex abuse material (CSAM), making it a federal crime for any adult, even a well-intentioned educator, to view, possess, or share it. As you can imagine, school-based staff who do not know how to handle this material may illegally view or possess the material during an investigation. This causes more privacy and dignity harms to the student victim, as well as bringing potential criminal and civil liability to educators and schools.

¹ Advocates have shifted away from using the term “revenge porn” for a variety of reasons. The term “revenge” inappropriately victim-blames by implying that a victim committed did something to warrant or deserve the abusive treatment.

² Cyber Civil Rights Initiative 2017; accord Ruvalcaba, Y., & Eaton, A. A. 2020.

³ According to a 2016 study by the Center for Innovative Public Health Research.

3. When victims are not supported by the adults in school and does not feel safe from further harassment, the only alternative offered is for the victim to transfer to a new school.

Some of you may be familiar with the current litigation against Brooklyn Tech, a lawsuit that my colleagues filed on behalf of a young Jane Doe while I was working as an attorney at the law firm founded by Carrie Goldberg, who is a legal pioneer in the area of gender-based cyber violence.

What happened to Jane Doe while she was attending Brooklyn Tech, one of the country's most celebrated public high schools, is a painful illustration of the damage done to girls who are first victims of heinous cyber sexual violence, then are blamed for the ensuing drama and distraction that her victimization creates in school, and finally – as is the case in Jane Doe v. Brooklyn Tech, when school became a living nightmare Jane Doe was told her the only option for keeping her safe was for her to transfer to a different school.

Anti-violence attorneys should not have to litigate the DOE over and over for these harms to stop occurring. The Chancellor could take these steps today:

First, the DOE needs to immediately implement policies and training regarding the proper handling of cyber abuse and image-based sex abuse in K-12 schools. This means from the moment that a staff member is made aware of the cyber abuse, to the initiation of an investigation, to the timeliness with which it must be reported to Title IX office, to how the evidence is handled, to how the students are interviewed, and how the victim is protected after severe cyber abuse, such as image-based sex abuse, is substantiated.

Second, the DOE needs to expand the reach of its Title IX office. In 2020, under immense pressure, the DOE added seven Title IX Coordinators, which at the time was a huge feat. But even with this improvement, there is only one Title IX coordinator for approximately every 80,000 female students. Considering the fact that 1 in 5 females under the age of 18 has reported being a victim of sexual violence – this is an abhorrent and obvious shortcoming that needs to be corrected.

Finally, like in the case of Jane Doe, the DOE must create more options for school-based leaders to properly handle the aftermath of a substantiated instance of gender-based violence and image-based sex abuse. Right now, if the victim feels unsafe continuing to attend school with the abusive classmate who cyber harassed her and disseminated her nudge images to the student body, her only option is to transfer to a new school. Away from her community of support, away from her friend group, her known and trusted adults and teachers. And into a totally new school where the cyber-based harassment may follow anyway because social media has no bounds.

I thank you for your time and note that the New York Cyber Abuse task force and its members remain available for further discussion on the recommendations that come out of today's hearing and encourage the council members to make use of our collective knowledge and advocacy power.

Thank you again.

Annie Seifullah
Co-Chair | New York Cyber Abuse Task Force
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Committee on Women & Gender Equity and the Committee on Technology Testimony 12/4/2023

Good afternoon, my name is Gabriela Mejia, I'm the Movement Building and Communications Manager at Right To Be, formerly known to many as Hollaback! My work at the organization includes connecting regularly with non-profit partners in the movement to end harassment, and reaching out to elected officials to discuss upticks in instances of hate. Emily May, Right To Be's President, Co-Founder, And Lead Executive Officer, sends her regrets for not attending today. I want to thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of Right To Be, formerly Hollaback!

Our work on this issue:

Right To Be is a people-powered movement working to build a world free of harassment and filled with humanity. We started as a blog to collect stories of street harassment in New York City in 2005. Our work has expanded globally to empower people to respond to, intervene in, and heal from harassment. We have trained over 2.6 million people on how to intervene when they see harassment happening.

We continue to collect stories of harassment on Right To Be's Storytelling platform, where people can share their experiences and get support from a community of vetted bystanders. People experiencing online harassment can receive support in the form of messages of support or with help documenting and reporting abuse on social media platforms. Recent studies have shown how our platform is an evidence-based promising practice for addressing harassment and transforming the way people deal with it.¹

¹ See our About our Storytelling Platform: <https://righttobe.org/about-our-storytelling-platform/>

Online harassment has emotional and psychological effects, including depression, stress, and anxiety. It is very difficult to have to deal with the burden of responding to harassment alone, which is why equipping others to become allies is very important. A program evaluation of our platform, conducted in June 2021², showed that 64% of users who have experienced online harassment reported that the platform was very helpful or somewhat helpful in making them feel connected to, and supported by, others. One participant said: "I was getting exhausted from this harassment. My harassers were like insects; they followed me like bees. This community helped me to alleviate that."

The study Hollaback!: The Role of Collective Storytelling Online in a Social Movement Organization³ revealed that by posting their story on our platform, people were able to see their experiences as part of a larger injustice. This research also showed that "labeling abusive behaviors as 'online harassment' enables bystanders to grasp the scope of this problem" and encourages them to give support.

Sharing a story on our platform has also been proven to reduce trauma for the person experiencing harassment, and it helps others too by letting them know they are not alone. We have collected 32,000+ stories of harassment and about 9,700+ actions have been taken to combat online abuse on the platform.

Research shows that online harassment has reached a record high in the U.S. since 2020, with 52% reported being harassed online in their lifetime⁴. Online harassment disproportionately targets women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ people. Women and gender-expansive journalists are also among the group of people who face online harassment the most. According to an International Women's Media Foundation report, 70% of women journalists have experienced more than one type of harassment, threat, or attack in the past. Many reporters

² Right To Be's Storytelling Platform Impact Report 2021:

https://righttobe.info/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/rtb_storytelling_impactreport.pdf

³ See the Hollaback!: The Role of Collective Storytelling Online in a Social Movement Organization

<https://blog.humancomputation.com/?p=4264>

⁴ Online Hate and Harassment: The American Experience 2023, by The Anti Defamation League.

<https://www.adl.org/resources/report/online-hate-and-harassment-american-experience-2023>

are forced to practice self-censorship, retreat from the public sphere, or even quit their jobs.

In 2020, Right To Be partnered with the International Women’s Media Foundation (IWME) to expand the platform to support women and gender-expansive journalists experiencing online threats. On our platform, journalists can create a

special “journalist account,” as well as tag their stories as journalist stories, allowing for more specific and attentive support. They could also access the Coalition Against Online Violence’s Online Violence Resources Hub⁵, to get step-by-step guidance on how to respond to online harassment and how to tighten their digital accounts.

We also partnered with PEN America to create a Bystander Intervention: How to be an Ally When You Witness Online Abuse Training⁶, using Right To Be’s 5Ds methodology: Distract, Delegate, Document, Delay, and Direct⁷. Bystander intervention is a proven way to stop harassment that can also help chip away at the culture of harassment and reinforce that hate shouldn’t be tolerated. According to our training surveys conducted in 2022, 80% of participants said that the 5Ds provided them with strategies to safely intervene when they witness online hate and abuse. We are currently working to turn this training into an e-learning that will be available within the next six months.

Right To Be recommends policy strategies that prioritize bystander intervention education, training on online abuse, and digital safety in schools and universities.

⁵ Online Violence Response Hub <https://onlineviolenceresponsehub.org/>

⁶ See more at:

<https://righttobe.org/trainings/bystander-intervention-how-to-be-an-ally-when-you-witness-online-abuse/>

⁷ 5Ds of Bystander Intervention <https://righttobe.org/guides/bystander-intervention-training/>

RIGHT TO BE _____

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Our recommendations:

- The Council should sponsor a study across middle and high schools in New York City on the prevalence of online harassment and the strategies in place that students would like to see to address it. The study should be followed up with a series of focus groups with students.
- We recommend digital safety training in all middle in high schools in NYC, that teaches students about the risks of online harassment, the importance of privacy, and walks them through the necessary steps to protect themselves and their families online.
- We recommend bystander intervention training in all middle in high schools in NYC, that includes how to intervene in situations of in-person and online harassment. Councilmember Hudson put forward this bill last year, but it never made it to the floor. The bill should be brought forward again.
- To the extent possible, the Council should require social media companies to be transparent in content moderation, reporting, complaint mechanisms, and anti-harassment and anti-hate policies. Greater control is needed against harmful practices that prioritize violent and hostile content designed to generate more engagement. Nonprofits should also be involved in the creation and updating of all these policies.

Committee on Women and Gender Equity
December 4, 2023 10am

Tiffany Caban, Chair

Members: James F. Gennaro, Jennifer Gutierrez, Kristin Richardson Jordan, Kevin C. Riley and Althea V. Stevens, Inna Vernikov

Oversight – Online harassment against women, girls, and gender expansive people.
Jointly with the committee on Technology

During the pandemic in person meetings moved to online platforms. I attended my first Brooklyn Community Board 1 meeting virtually on April 6, 2021. I thought that the Transportation Committee, who hosted Kyle Gorman of the DOT that night, would address the issues my neighbors and I were experiencing from conditions created by the presence of Open Streets. Such issues included non-ADA compliant barricades, signage and women being harassed and openly treated in a derogatory and dehumanizing way by Open Street users and volunteers. Kyle said to report to NYPD.

On April 26, 2021 I moved a barricade to allow access for senior and disabled neighbors. I positioned the barricade in front of a crosswalk, so it wasn't obstructing the pedestrian path and matched DOT online diagram. After moving it, I was approached from behind by two men claiming to have ties to Community Board 1. One of the men said his "girlfriend" was on the board over and over, and he kept telling me I'm not allowed to move the barriers. Then I was verbally assaulted-harassed with gender and racial slurs.

Within minutes after the men went away, Ryan Kuonen a CB1 board member arrived dressed in all black covered up head to toe with only her eyes exposed. She starts dragging the barriers into the middle of the street to block access. She has been on the board for over a decade. Police were called to file report for harassment at a barricade per the DOT's instruction. She then called her colleague Kevin LaCherra who was also in attendance at the CB1 meeting I had just attended. He arrived shortly thereafter. They began fabricating a story about me and the events that had unfolded that neither witnessed and attempted to get passer-byers to join in. Kevin kept following me as I tried to go home. I told him several times to go away and even said time is up and me too. He was not capable of backing off or respecting boundaries. My partner had to come and intervene in order for me to walk away safely.

After this event, she posted a still photo of my face with multiple variations of the events she didn't witness that happened with her boyfriend. People began to pile on with insults, dehumanizing comments, and sexist language etc. Then I began to receive "friend requests" and threatening DM's on my social media accounts. Ryan and her boyfriend (the man who approached me from behind) circulated my image to their followers. I was being bullied, harassed, and canceled online for something that didn't happen. I had to shut down all my social media. I had to obtain legal counsel in order to request a restraining order for Erick, Ryan and Kevin. I was pregnant and fearful they or their followers would physically harm me or possibly harm my unborn child. I was escorted for the remainder of my pregnancy when I need to be outside.

Kevin published my full name and a fabricated story online after this event to CB1 chat which is now archived. I was physically approached by Ryan and her boyfriend too in harassing, threatening and intimidating manner as they “live streamed.”

Before getting legal council, I filed police reports and I wrote an email asking for help from all elected officials and the current officials are aware of situation in North Brooklyn: Congress Nydia Velázquez, former Congress Carolyn Maloney, NYS Senator Kristen Gonzalez, Senator Julia Salazar, NYS Assembly Emily Gallagher, CM Lincoln Restler, Former CM Stephen Levin, CM Jennifer Gutierrez, former CM Antonio Reynoso (now Borough President), Borough President Eric Adams (now Mayor). I wrote the Community Board. I wrote the DOT.

Ironically, these politicians claim to support moving away from police enforcement or involvement in community affairs but left me no other recourse. Not one person in a position of power, privilege or authority responded to me, stood-up for me or addressed Ryan Kuonen, her boyfriend Erick Walden (the man who approached me from behind), or Kevin LaCherra. All three were strangers to me.

Ryan using her access to information given to CB1 posted a video on her twitter targeting another woman who spoke out about open streets by name and where she lived saying in it “she could suck a dick.” A slogan understood to be either sexist or homophobic. She has had many complaints lodged against her by constituents. All the politicians including Antonio Reynoso in his capacity as Borough President have protected her seat as a board member.

I started to be followed, to be filmed, stalked, approached in person. My address has been published. This is also called doxxing. Then my family was targeted including my now two-year-old son. **This has gone on for the last two years.** The last episode was July 30th by Jeffrey Hodsdon a member of Kevin LaCherra’s group North Brooklyn Open Streets Community Coalition. NYS Emily Gallagher celebrated Jeffrey and his dog recently despite his following me, filming me and my family with the intent to harass and intimidate. Jeffrey thought I was alone, but he was busted my partner who had our toddler and was walking behind me.

My full name, address, private info, image along with my partners full name and private info continue to be regularly published with fabricated allegations, slander, stereo-types projected onto me, hate speech, and directions to approach me on or around Berry Open Street and my home.

Q: Why has no one stood up for me, my family or spoken out against these people?

A: Because they are all politically connected and protected.

They campaign for these politicians, regularly hold events with the politicians, are members of lobby groups that fund these politicians.

Even politicians' staff like the Chief of Staff to NYS Emily Gallagher Andrew Epstein and Brand Lander's Staff Steve Fox (a total stranger to me) have cyber-bullied me publishing my name while engaging with an account online that is not mine or has anything to do with me, but they claimed it was me publicly. The privilege and reach these two men have over me was used to be abusive and encourage others to be abusive. When I brought this to NYS Assembly Emily Gallagher's attention she said "but they are Jewish." I asked her what that means and she couldn't tell me so her COS swooped in to take her away. What course do constituents have?

Noel Hidalgo, founder BetaNYC receives city funding, raises money for campaigns on behalf of Antonio Reynoso, Emily Gallagher and Lincoln Restler. He has gone on for days publishing private information (including doxing) about me and my partner. Twitter recommended after flagging his content about me to contact law enforcement. In the past he approached my personal space in a menacing way while I was holding my infant. I asked him to go away stating I do not feel safe around him and he refused to back off until two men heard what was going on and intervened so I could safely walk away with my baby. He had been online bullying me prior to approaching me in person. I have talked to another woman who is a neighbor of Noel's and had a harassing experience with him as well. As in my case, he took it from the physical world to online.

A person named Ben Jay and David Ruperti both men (again, total strangers to me - I never met) regularly publish my name with either hate-speech, my image, private information (such as my address) with fabricated assumptions, false allegations, insults, dehumanizing language and directing people to approach me.

The people mentioned in this testimony are a few of the more aggressive and hostile but there are more.

Mothering in North Brooklyn is not without constant fear of people approaching me, physically hurting me, following me, or filming me especially while with my toddler. I must avoid using Berry St as much as possible, always look around and over my shoulder.

It's bad enough that public spaces are not safe for women, but that social media is used by the politically connected and serving agents of the Congress, State and City of New York to be equally unsafe. I have had one on one conversations about this issue with Nydia's staff, Emily, Lincoln, Antonio, Julia and Jennifer. Politicians, like Emily and Lincoln, have gaslighted me and deceit me.

I am fighting for my right to be in public free of harassment, intimidation, stalking, and threats in a way no constituent should be made to in a legal landscape that doesn't do enough to stop online harassment and bullying. This stuff doesn't just live online it always manifests into the real world.

Sincerely,
Shannon Phipps

Good morning, thank you to the Committee Chairs, and their staff.

My name is Subha Wijesiriwardena, I am a Sri Lankan feminist researcher and activist, and I live in Hells' Kitchen. I have worked for about a decade towards gender justice and human rights at varying levels, from the national to the international. I gather evidence from across diverse global contexts, work closely with other movement-actors, provide contextual and policy analysis and advocate with United Nations member states, UN special representatives, working groups and agencies. For over five years I have worked at the intersection of technology, sexuality and gender.

I would like to focus my testimony today on gendered disinformation. You may already be familiar with semantic distinctions between the terms "misinformation" and "disinformation" - typically, it is understood that the former is unintentional and the latter carries intent to harm.

Misinformation can be easily 'debunked' and 'delegitimized' (Shah, 2021) – through source verification, fact-checking, human experience, and so on.

In contrast, disinformation cannot be easily fact-checked or identified – it must be understood as an act of manipulation where the authority and authorship of the information is not under suspicion (Shah, 2021). Disinformation cycles are often state or otherwise powerful machinery and contribute to systemic manipulation of information and information systems.

Disinformation campaigns rely on the exploitation of existing narratives that stem from historical discrimination.¹ The UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression points out in her 2023 report that it is a strategy used to silence women and gender-diverse people.

¹ Thakur, D., & Hankerson, D. L. (2021). *Facts and their Discontents: A Research Agenda for Online Disinformation, Race, and Gender*. Center for Democracy & Technology. <https://cdt.org/insights/facts-and-their-discontents-a-research-agenda-for-online-disinformation-race-and-gender/>

For example, deep-fake "pornography" targets women in the public eye. In a 2019 study, it was observed that deep-fake "porn" targets women 100% of the time, from the US to India.

In New Zealand, researchers observed earlier this year that following the "Let Women Speak" anti-trans event, anti-trans disinformation exploded across New Zealand social media circles, quickly becoming "genocidal" in intent. This same speaking tour visited us here in New York City, leaving in its wake a wave of anti-trans disinformation and hate.

As you will know well, we are currently seeing a marked increase of disinformation targeting women and gender-diverse people who are calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. Meta and other corporations are silencing information about the genocide while continuing to be passive when it comes to disinformation.

Tech corporations and their political allies avoid accountability and shield the privately-owned black-box technologies from independent review. This perpetuates the notion that we "don't understand" the tech. We urgently need greater transparency - and in exposing the human actors behind disinformation systems.

Technology corporations continue to gain credibility by promoting numerous policies and measures they employ to combat misinformation, but deny their role in knowingly creating and continuing to deploy algorithms which, for example, evidence shows increase body-image issues for girls and young women,² and drive more people to join extremist groups.³

State actors ignore the evidence and tend towards punitive laws and policies, exacerbating the criminalization of sexual and gender diverse persons, young persons and others, and curtailing freedom of expression.

² Read the Wall Street Journal report [here](#)

³ Read the report [here](#)

I urge you to hold accountable these corporations and powerful state and non-state actors who benefit from gendered disinformation campaigns. We need to demand that technologies are developed, maintained and governed through greater public ownership and participation.

I urge you to consider a rights-based approach, with protections for freedom of expression, including sexual expression, and protections for the necessary strategies employed by women and gender-diverse activists and rights defenders, and marginalized people, such as anonymity.

The powerful actors derive more power from this idea that they are the experts and we are not. The decisions they make on a daily basis affect every single one of us and billions more people outside this hearing. We are the experts. Not a homogeneous handful of billionaires.

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Testimony for joint session of the Women and Gender Equity Committee and Committee on Tech on Doxxing and Online Harassment of women and girls. Held on 12/4/2023

On November 14-15, 2023, nearly 25 faculty, staff and students at Hunter College were subjected to a public doxxing incident perpetrated by a shadowy right-wing propaganda outfit misleadingly called Accuracy in Media (AIM). Funded by ultra-conservative billionaires, including the Scaife Foundation, AIM's goal is to spread misinformation to justify and excuse Israeli human rights abuses by defaming anyone who defends Palestinian rights and liberation. It has trained its focus with particular viciousness against women, Arabs, Muslims and bipoc. In recent weeks, AIM has been waging a war against students, staff and faculty at many college and university campuses - including Hunter College and CUNY School of Law; as well as Columbia, Harvard, NYU, University of Pennsylvania and Yale. AIM is exploiting the unprecedented growth the Palestine solidarity movement has seen in the wake of Israel's current campaign of genocidal violence against Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, taking this as an opportunity to intensify their attacks on those calling for ceasefire; an end to Israel's brutal decades-long military occupation of Palestinian lands; and equality for all. In order to intimidate and silence opponents of Israeli aggression and domination, AIM is projecting the faces and names of targeted individuals onto giant, brightly-lit digital billboards mounted on a truck under the title "[University name]'s Leading Antisemites," while also creating similarly libelous websites about each person. With respect to your service as part of a committee addressing the problem of online harassment of women and girls, we would like you to consider the critical threat posed to our physical safety and livelihoods by AIM's attack not just on scholars, students, faculty and staff who are women, but on the intersecting matter of free expression – a constitutional right that has been fundamental to the advancement of women's rights and liberation in this country since its inception.

Some of us – including Dr. Terri Ginsberg and I – have experienced this type of defamatory harassment before, and while recognizing the harmful effects it can have on persons of all genders, we would like to emphasize the particularly gendered impacts it can have on us as women. In Dr. Ginsberg's case, similar defamatory campaigns contributed to her difficulty finding sustainable employment as an academic scholar of gender, sexuality, and the Middle East region. In my case, I have received online death threats, threats of violence and sexual violence in response to my statements on Israel/Palestine. AIM's female targets have also been harassed, or experienced loss of employment and income. The intention of AIM's campaign, as laid out by AIM president and far-right activist Adam Guillette, is to inflict serious

and indefinite reputational damage. It thus aims not only to intimidate us into silence, but to preemptively silence others who would dare to speak out on similar issues, without regard for the physical danger its unfounded charges might pose to its targets.

It should be noted that this intensified harassment campaign builds on a long-standing and well-documented repression movement targeting free speech by Palestine solidarity activists on college campuses. (See the excellent report from the civil-rights legal organization Palestine Legal - [The Palestine Exception to Free Speech: A Movement Under Attack in the US](#), as well as further [background and testimony on this matter here](#).)

In conclusion, AIM's actions represent a disturbing and dangerous escalation of an ongoing McCarthyite campaign to chill free speech and silence defenders of human rights, including women's rights, while posing particular threats to women involved in these movements, and should thus fall within the purview of your committee's work.

Dr. Irene Siegel, Adjunct Assistant Professor of Arabic, Hunter College

Dr. Terri Ginsburg, Adjunct Assistant Professor of Film, Hunter College

Deeadra Brown, Adjunct Lecturer of Arabic Literature, Hunter College

Reiko Tahara, Adjunct Assistant Professor of Film and Media, Hunter College

Dr. Rupal Oza, Professor, Department of Women and Gender Studies, Hunter College

Dr. Tanya Agathocleous, Associate Professor of English, Hunter College

Dr. Jessie Daniels, Professor of Sociology, Hunter College

Dr. Rosalind Petchesky, Distinguished Professor of Political Science, Emeritus, Hunter College

And allies:

Dr. Christopher Stone, Associate Professor of Arabic, Hunter College

Mohamed Alshami, Campus Peace Officer, Hunter College

Tim Cusack, Adjunct Lecturer in Theater, Hunter College

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