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# Strengthening Accountability for Online Gender-Based Violence - one year later

In 2021, the World Wide Web Foundation hosted a first-of-its-kind Technology Policy Design Lab, a series of human centred policy design workshops for diverse stakeholders to co-create solutions to online gender-based violence (OGBV)<sup>1</sup>.

Following the workshops, Facebook (now Meta), Google, TikTok and Twitter made public commitments to tackle gender abuse on their platforms, announced at the UN Generation Equality Forum, with a specific focus on building better ways for women to curate their safety online and implementing improvements to reporting systems.

One year later, the World Wide Web Foundation, together with Glitch, Social Finance, and in collaboration with feminist technology and data rights organizations around the world, reviewed progress made by the tech companies and Web Foundation, and re-convened to discuss experiences and ambitions for the sector's collective work in building a web free from OGBV.

Through interviews and workshops with 70+ stakeholders across 30+ countries, as well as desk research, the collaboration identifies progress made but also demonstrates key barriers and diagnoses the need for a global accountability mechanism to stop OGBV that centers the voices and experiences of marginalized communities and minoritized genders who are most impacted. We advocate for the establishment of an infrastructure for regular, ongoing engagement between tech platforms and civil society organizations (CSOs) to co-create policy and product changes and increase accountability for change, initiated by the Web Foundation.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://webfoundation.org/2021/04/tech-policy-design-lab-pilot-building-solutions-to-tackle-online-abuse-of-women/>

## Status of progress

Facebook, Google, TikTok and Twitter made unprecedented commitments in 2021 to tackle the abuse of women on their platforms. They committed to building better ways for women to curate their safety online and improving their reporting systems<sup>2</sup>.

Based on publicly available information, all four companies are working on product innovations and prototypes that are aligned to the commitments.

**Twitter** made progress both on curation (introducing Safety Mode, testing Twitter Circle and Unmentioning) and reporting (reviewing the reporting process using human-first design). Beyond those two areas, other initiatives that were highlighted as relevant to this work include: prompts to reconsider harmful tweets, publication of a safety playbook, work on hate speech lexicons. Twitter is unique among this cohort of tech companies as its open API allows entrepreneurs to build their own solutions to all manner of platform needs, including countering OGBV. Innovations in this space are available to the public beyond those produced by Twitter's own product team.



**Meta's** progress against commitments seem to relate mostly to curation on Instagram, with the launch of Hidden Words and Limits. Civil society also highlighted that user agency to use filters on graphic content has notably improved, particularly through a Sensitive Content Control policy from Instagram. On reporting, Meta communicated on changes to make existing reporting features more prominent on Messenger, but details on this have not been shared publicly. Outside of the commitments but linked to OGBV, Meta has been working closely with the UK Revenge Porn Helpline - alongside 50 other civil society organizations - on the launch of [stopNCII.org](https://stopNCII.org) to support victims of Non-Consensual Intimate Image (NCII) abuse. Finally, Meta's Oversight Board is seen by civil society stakeholders as a potentially important development for transparency.



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<sup>2</sup> **Commitments on curation:** 1. Offering more granular settings (e.g. who can see, share, comment or reply to posts), 2. Using more simple and accessible language throughout the user experience, 3. Providing easy navigation and access to safety tools, 4. Reducing the burden on women by proactively reducing the amount of abuse they see  
**Commitments on reporting:** 1. Offering users the ability to track and manage their reports, 2. Enabling greater capacity to address context and/or language, 3. Providing more policy and product guidance when reporting abuse, 4. Establish additional ways for women to access help and support during the reporting process

**TikTok** has not publicly announced any specific changes to reporting, but several changes to curation: testing a “safety reminder” on curation options when users appear to be receiving a high proportion of negative comments, and testing a “dislike button” aiming to encourage community feedback on comments they believe to be irrelevant or inappropriate. Beyond the commitments, but related to OGBV, we should note the update of TikTok’s community guidelines - banning misogyny, deadnaming<sup>3</sup>, and misgendering - and awareness raising initiatives including a temporary [in-app information hub](#) as part of the 16 Days of Activism against gender-based violence campaign. Tiktok also recently set up its first Trust and Safety advisory council for the Middle East, North Africa, and Turkey (MENAT) region.



**Google’s** progress against the commitments is more difficult to assess based on public information, given the variety of entities within the company. Regarding YouTube, we have not seen any announcements suggesting positive steps on curation or reporting in relation to OGBV. Very recently, YouTube announced its [YouTube Research Program](#), providing access to its data and tools to external researchers - which could potentially support OGBV-related research in the future. Jigsaw - a Google entity - developed the [Harassment Manager](#) tool in collaboration with Twitter and civil society - the Thomson Reuters Foundation is the first organization to test its use in practice.



### **Barriers to progress**

However, barriers remain which have prevented tech innovations from having meaningful impact on OGBV:

#### **Lack of transparency**

Progress is not clear to civil society, including who is setting the agenda internally within tech companies, how changes are decided or designed, who has been involved or consulted, and what measurable changes have taken place<sup>4</sup>. Platform whistleblowers have demonstrated further the lack of transparency of companies, particularly in the case of Meta<sup>5</sup>.

#### **Lack of representation from Global South**

<sup>3</sup> act of referring to a transgender or non-binary person by a name they used prior to transitioning, such as they birth name.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/transparency-is-key-to-curbing-the-power-of-big-tech/>

<sup>5</sup> See for example Facebook Files released in 2021 by Frances Haugen.

The majority of policy and product changes tend to be decided on, and designed, in the Global North, particularly within the USA, to be applied to a global context with little consideration for local context requirements, including language and usage. For example Facebook offers its services in approximately 110 countries but only has moderators in 50 languages<sup>6</sup>.

### Limited specialist OGBV expertise

Products and policies often lack apparent guidance from external specialist expertise throughout the development and iteration process. Particularly absent are marginalized and minoritized communities, who experience the most abuse and more severe impacts from it, including a lack of consideration of victims-survivors of tech-assisted violence. The language emphasis by tech platforms on women alone omits the experience of others targeted by gender based violence.

### Tackling OGBV not seen as a business priority

The work that is happening on tackling OGBV within platforms is often impacted, or even halted, by personnel changes or priority changes. This reflects a lack of commitment to tackling OGBV at the leadership level, as it is still not treated as a fundamental business need or priority<sup>7</sup>.

### Lack of community engagement

Platforms are not investing in OGBV work in communities to improve digital literacy, awareness, and support. As community work is vital to combating violence, the lack of community engagement is reducing the effectiveness of existing tech responses.

### Closed platforms limiting innovation and research

Few tech platforms (only Twitter among these four) have an open API to allow for innovators and entrepreneurs to create their own solutions to problems affecting their communities. Instead all

<sup>6</sup>

<https://www.wired.com/story/facebooks-global-reach-exceeds-linguistic-grasp/#:~:text=A%20company%20spokesperson%20said%20it,a%20language%20other%20than%20English>

<sup>7</sup> Social Development Direct (2020) Addressing Gender-Based Violence and Harassment: Emerging Good Practice for the Private Sector

changes require civil society to work directly with platforms on projects set by companies, within a intransparent product development cycle to improve their work. Despite civil society calls, only through legislative levers such as the Digital Services Act in the EU are companies being pushed to open APIs for research<sup>8</sup>.

### **A number of important trends are increasing the pressure for tech companies to tackle OGBV:**

- a. Duty of companies** - in line with companies' duties and responsibilities to prevent human rights abuses, tech companies have a duty and responsibility to protect the physical and psychological safety of their communities<sup>9,10</sup>.
- b. Impact of OGBV on engagement and revenue** - behaviours such as self-censorship or taking oneself offline after experiencing abuse<sup>11</sup> negatively impact the engagement with and revenue of tech companies.
- c. Women and people in the Global South are the most active users of social media platforms** - globally, social media users who identify as female spend more time on social platforms than those who identify as male<sup>12</sup>. In recent years, the number of users from countries in the Global South has risen considerably with India being the country with most Facebook users in the world<sup>13</sup>.
- d. Increasing regulatory pressures** - across the globe, there are increasing efforts to place more regulatory duties on tech platforms to protect their users online. This will require tech companies to demonstrate they are actively working to reduce and prevent harm on their platforms<sup>14</sup>.

### **Developing a global accountability mechanism for OGBV**

**The multi-dimensional nature of OGBV requires a global multi-stakeholder solution** - gender-based violence is not a problem unique to technology platforms; however, it is exacerbated on platforms by the combination of lack of transparency, capacity to spread

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.protocol.com/bulletins/tiktok-data-research-eu>

<sup>9</sup> Association for Progressive Communications (2018) Providing a gender lens in the digital age: APC Submission to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' Working Group on Business and Human Rights

<sup>10</sup> Suzor N. (2018) Human Rights by Design: The Responsibilities of Social Media Platforms to Address Gender-Based Violence Online

<sup>11</sup>

[https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-02/WITS-Womens-experiences-with-online-abuse-in-their-working-lives\\_0.pdf](https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-02/WITS-Womens-experiences-with-online-abuse-in-their-working-lives_0.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.hootsuite.com/resources/digital-trends>

<sup>13</sup> <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/facebook-users-by-country>

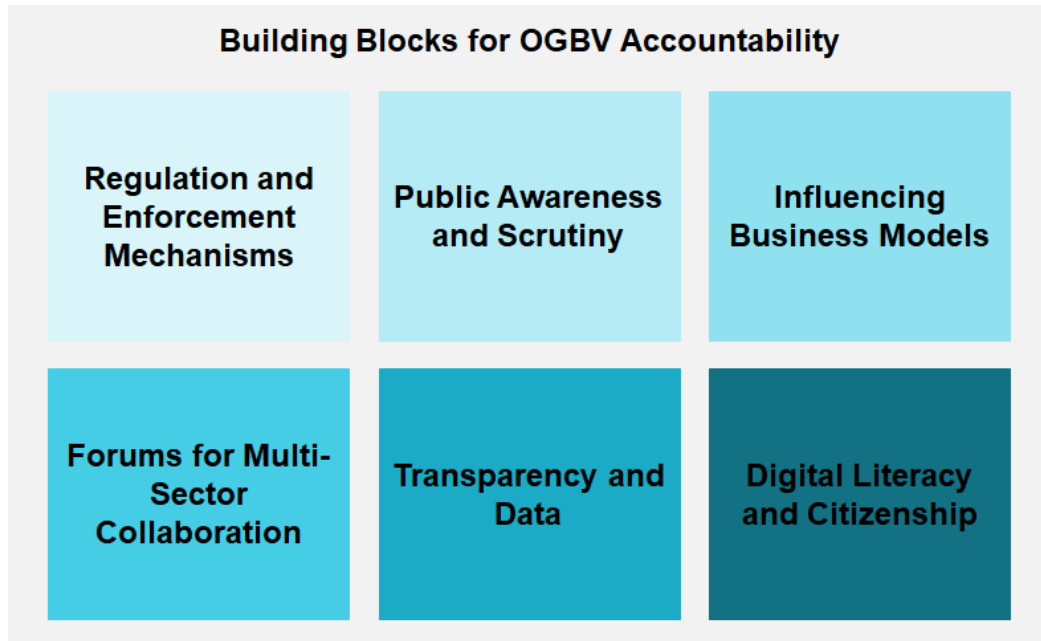
<sup>14</sup> <https://www.herbertsmithfreehills.com/insight/online-harms-what-is-the-global-state-of-play#Map>

communication quickly, limited support and response systems for survivors, immaturity of regulatory systems, and low societal awareness of the real world harms of online violence. A multitude of stakeholders have a key role to play in ending OGBV— with committed technology companies and platforms, strong regulation and enforcement from governments, and an engaged and empowered civil society.

**Tech platforms require capacity and expertise from civil society organizations (CSOs) to tackle OGBV and must find meaningful ways to collaborate:**

<b>Expertise</b>	CSOs understand <b>local and regional issues</b> and bring <b>specialist OGBV expertise</b> to support tech companies to respond in more effective ways.
<b>Independence</b>	CSOs are accountable to the needs of the public/ their community and pursue activities in line with their <b>values and principles</b> , independent from tech companies or governments.
<b>Trust among the public</b>	CSOs hold a high level of trust among the public and play many <b>important roles in communities</b> in order to prevent, reduce and mitigate harm experienced in online spaces.
<b>Ability to work at all levels</b>	CSOs influence change and build networks across multiple spheres of influence ( <b>grassroots, local, regional, national and global</b> ).
<b>Capacity to mobilise</b>	Given their strong networks across different stakeholder groups, CSOs can <b>quickly mobilise to drive change</b> , e.g. launching campaigns or crowdsourcing local research.

**Six core building blocks are needed for greater OGBV accountability with all complementing and reinforcing each other.**



- a. **Regulation and Enforcement Mechanisms** - regulatory bodies play a crucial role in placing clearer duties on tech companies and broader internet intermediaries to increase transparency and protect women and gender diverse people online.
- b. **Public Awareness and Scrutiny** - public awareness is critical to shaping online spaces that are safe and trust-worthy, leveraging the power of the people to act as a watchdog through campaigning or investigative journalism.
- c. **Influencing Business Models** - tech companies are incentivised by market dynamics. These can be influenced to increase accountability through for example incorporating a gender-lens into due diligence or investment criteria or increasing peer competition between companies.
- d. **Forums for Multi-Sector Collaboration** - establishing or strengthening forums for collaboration that focus on action-oriented and measurable change lead to increased trust and understanding among stakeholders and allows a coalition of organizations to drive towards change and hold each other to account.
- e. **Transparency and Data** - lack of data sharing and transparency from tech companies is a huge barrier to accountability and progress on OGBV. Common standards and principles for transparency and data sharing need to be established across national and regional levels, including for example data on the effectiveness of different safety features.
- f. **Digital Literacy and Citizenship** - increasing accountability on OGBV also requires individual users to have an increased level of digital literacy and behave as digital citizens, holding each other to account on their online behaviours and interactions.

### Principles to inform greater accountability and progress on OGBV

To ensure any accountability framework and progress on OGBV is sustainable, representative, person-centred, and informed by those most affected, the following principles need to be implemented:

### Principle 1 - Prevention centred theory of change

- The theory of change for OGBV accountability must be based on preventing harm rather than responding to it. This work must acknowledge the social context of gender inequality that drives OGBV, making it pervasive.

### Principle 2 - Equity for Global South

- A global OGBV accountability mechanism needs to correct the current inequity of representation between Global North and Global South<sup>15</sup>.
- Tech companies should also improve diverse internal representation to facilitate better understanding and prevention of OGBV, especially in positions of power.

### Principle 3 - Localization

- Localization works to address unique contexts, cultural dynamics and circumstances of OGBV.
- A global coalition is needed to consistently engage frontline organizations and communities in this work, to learn from different contexts and build more locally nuanced responses to OGBV.

### Principle 4 - Focus on most impacted communities

- OGBV work must be accountable to the groups most impacted by this form of violence. This will create responses that are nuanced, holistic, and flexible to different communities' needs.
- Intersectionality of harm must be central to this approach, to ensure solutions respond to the impact of compounding harms on specific communities<sup>16</sup>.

### Principle 5 - Action-oriented, multi-stakeholder collaboration

- A path forward must include tangible, measurable change.
- This work requires a convening partner with responsibility for keeping momentum, engaging partners globally, and sharing learning, feedback and progress<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://fairplayforkids.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/design-discriminations.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/news-centre/2022/ofcom-urges-tech-firms-to-keep-women-safer-online>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.apc.org/en/news/kictanet-online-gender-based-violence-times-covid-19>



## Principle 6 - Genuine collaboration and co-creation

- Improving trust and transparency between tech companies and civil society through co-creation of solutions, and not limiting interactions to communications via press releases and asking civil society to test features once they've been developed<sup>18</sup>.

## Principle 7 - Resource support for civil society

- Any accountability OGBV mechanism requires a transparent, and representative civil society network to support and drive the work.
- CSOs will require resource support including funding, access to data, and capacity for translation and work in multiple languages<sup>19</sup>.

## Principle 8 - Awareness and digital literacy in communities

- All stakeholders - including CSOs, tech, media and governments - have a role in directly engaging communities to raise awareness of what gender based violence is and improve understanding of the offline harms of online violence<sup>20</sup>.
- This requires investment into gender and harm prevention training for product managers, designers, and developers, as well as community digital literacy programs on how to prevent harm and use safety tools<sup>21</sup>.

## Principle 9 - Engage policy makers

- Regulation is required to achieve change. Policymakers must work with CSOs to understand the space and legislate to end OGBV, including defining minimum requirements for technology companies and how they must operate to be responsive to the public<sup>22</sup>.

### **Web Foundation's role**

**Web Foundation is in a unique position to take the learnings from this report forward to help initiate multi-sector OGBV accountability globally. In the long term, this work should be led by OGBV specialist organizations. To support this, Web Foundation should focus on strengthening two of the accountability building blocks:**

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<sup>18</sup> <https://institute.global/policy/ten-point-strategy-towards-ending-technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence-africa>  
<sup>19</sup>

<https://glitchcharity.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Glitch-The-Ripple-Effect-Report-COVID-19-online-abuse.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> eSafety (2020) Children and technology-facilitated abuse in domestic and family violence situations

<sup>21</sup> <https://rm.coe.int/online-and-ict-facilitated-vawg-during-covid-brief/16809e5e7a>

<sup>22</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/662621/EPRS\\_STU\(2021\)662621\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/662621/EPRS_STU(2021)662621_EN.pdf)

**Forums for Multi-Sector  
Collaboration****Forums for Multi-Sector Collaboration**

Due to Web Foundation's global reach and relationships across sectors, the organization is well positioned to play the initial convenor role to establish an infrastructure for the ongoing collaboration between tech companies and civil society as well as other relevant stakeholders.

**Transparency and  
Data****Transparency and Data**

Web Foundation should work to improve the OGBV data gap by collating existing data or exploring a grassroots approach to collecting this data through its global network. An open data platform on OGBV will put tech platforms under greater pressure to share their data in a more transparent way, as well as inform policy decisions.

**Beyond that, Web Foundation should make sure to engage and coordinate with other existing initiatives and continue to strengthen the ecosystem of civil society stakeholders working in this space. This should include:**

- a. support civil society organizations with resources and access to its networks
- b. establish principles for greater transparency and accountability
- c. continue public awareness raising as part of its broader communications strategy
- d. leverage the UN Women and Generation Equality Forum partnership to bring in more tech companies and agree new commitments
- e. map different stakeholders and initiatives working on OGBV