The World Wide Web Foundation is working with Social Finance and members and affiliates of the Women's Rights Online Network to address online gender-based violence and develop responses that lead to lasting and systemic change. This regional summary is part of a research project aiming to develop a global landscape of the responses to online gender-based violence (OGBV) from civil society, tech, and governments. It has a particular focus on the Global Majority.

Executive Summary

The vast majority of the population in Latin America has access to the internet; however, the quality of access varies across different regions and there continues to be a digital gender gap in terms of digital access and skills. Official government statistics on OGBV are lacking, but available data and research from civil society indicates that OGBV is highly prevalent across Latin America. Experiences of OGBV in this region are shaped by an overall lack of recognition of misogyny as a social problem; this is reflected in the lack of prioritization given to the issue by governments and in the often outright hostile campaigns undermining the work of many activists and other stakeholders. Addressing OGBV in Latin America requires balancing concerns about freedom of expression with the need to better protect vulnerable groups online. Tech companies in Latin America are driving a number of initiatives around online violence, but many of their regulations and standards are still perceived to hold Western or Northern American biases. While some specific OGBV legislation does exist in Latin America, policy makers are often working with incomplete definitions of OGBV.

Regional partners

- Sula Batsu, Costa Rica
- TEDIC, Paraguay
- Hiperderecho, Peru
- Fundación Karisma, Colombia
- Internetlab, Brazil
Context

- Across Latin America, the most popular online platforms used by women are WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube. Other apps such as Twitter and Instagram are also used frequently, however, given many data plans on the market charge an extra cost for some of these apps, they tend to be used less often.

- With around 533 million internet users in 2021, Latin America and the Caribbean is the fourth largest regional online market in terms of users worldwide, behind Asia, Europe, and Africa.

- In terms of access, more men than women have Internet access in over half of the region’s countries according to a study by the Inter American Development Bank. There is also a higher share of men with mobile connectivity in 70% of Latin American and Caribbean countries. The study also indicates that women have less training on digital technologies and are less confident in their digital technology skills, which leads them to use these technologies less.

- It is also important to consider the quality of access. Most of the Brazilian population, for example, only has access to the Internet through cell phones and cell phone plans that only grant access to certain applications, free of charge. This is one of the main reasons why WhatsApp is the most used application: most operators offer WhatsApp at zero additional fees.

OGBV prevalence and data

- As in other parts of the world, there is a real lack of official government statistics on OGBV and the data which does exist is mostly collected by researchers and civil society organizations as part of their service delivery. For example,
  - In Brazil, Helpline, an anonymous and confidential guidance service on crimes and human rights violations on the internet collects and regularly publishes its data. In 2018, for example, 16,717 reports of virtual crimes against women were received, an increase of 1,640% compared to 2017. Women were the main targets with the majority of cases relating to exposure of intimate images (66%), as well as cyberbullying and offenses (68%).
  - In 2018, Hiperderecho conducted qualitative and quantitative research and surveyed about 200 people in Peru, predominantly women. The survey included 26 questions including a question on which platform survey respondents feel most vulnerable to online violence (see figure 1).
  - In 2020 in Paraguay, qualitative research was conducted at the national level (rural and urban) and the result was significant because at the end of the focus group all the participants only recently recognized the types of digital violence as a form of violence.

Figure 1. On what platform do you feel most vulnerable to online violence? Research by Hiperderecho, Peru
Tech company initiatives

- Tech companies are driving a number of different initiatives on online violence across Latin America and are taking on different roles with their receptiveness being generally perceived as positive. However, while they are engaging in the region and consulting local stakeholders, many of their regulations and standards are still perceived to hold Western or U.S. biases, for example with regard to the cultural understanding of OGBV.
  - Examples of civil society collaborations with tech companies range from signing commitment terms guaranteeing the improvement of company policies to consulting processes and accessing and sharing data and information for denouncing violations, and developing technologies, research and advocacy actions within the public and private sectors.
  - While both small and large tech companies are willing to collaborate with civil society organizations on OGBV in this region, it has been noted that large companies - despite having a greater public reach and more resources - sometimes claim to run into bureaucratic obstacles that means they require more time to implement new policies and tools.

- Some of the tech companies’ key activities with regards to OGBV across Latin America include:
  - Funding of research conducted by local research organizations and academic researchers
    - In 2021, Meta financed, along other funders, a quantitative analysis of political violence against women based on gender in Mexico
  - Publishing guidelines on OGBV and working in partnership with civil society organizations
    - Meta is developing guidelines on "addressing political violence against women" in specific countries. For example, in the region, there are
already guides for Costa Rica and Colombia. Currently, Peru's guide is still being worked on, and Hiperderecho is part of this process.

- TikTok is working on making its platform a safe space for women in Mexico. In Peru, TikTok is engaging with local NGOs to train them on the most efficient use of their platform and to gain a better understanding of their work on digital rights and OGBV and how they can promote their work.
- Meta’s Community Standards Network meets bi-monthly for Meta to present progress against standards and policies on its platforms (Instagram and Facebook), while allowing organizations to give feedback from their own local context.
- Meta’s Trusted Partners Channel allows civil society organizations to make reports if they see, identify or are alerted to violence despite agreed community standards, including OGBV.

- **Advocating to influence legislative and electoral processes by having dedicated teams across Latin America that follow the legislative and regulatory agenda.**
  - As part of the Monitor A observatory, InternetLab has been monitoring the influence of big tech companies in the Brazilian election process. Tech companies affect democratic processes through their content moderation practices and the way they deal and highlight fake news.
  - As part of their democracy and technology programme, TEDIC has been developing a methodology to monitor speech towards women candidates and journalists in the upcoming 2023 presidential elections in Paraguay.

- **In the absence of a strong regulatory or legislative system on OGBV, tech companies have little incentive to address cases of OGBV on their platforms or share specific data on OGBV.**
  - In Colombia, there was a case of gender and racial violence against the now vice president of Colombia by a famous singer with no action taken by tech companies.

- **Even where civil society organizations have strong relationships with tech companies in their region, they are not receiving transparent information or data on cases of OGBV.**
  - Feedback from civil society organizations across Latin America suggests that even where they hold strong relationships with tech companies, they have not obtained feedback on what has been done when they have reported cases of OGBV on their platforms. Companies also don’t provide transparency over the internal processes in response to complaints, the number of days for resolution, etc.

**Government initiatives**

- **Across Latin America, many of the legislation efforts that could address OGBV either focus on violence against women and girls more generally with no reference to the online dimension, or focus on cyber violence with no reference to gender. When existing legislation is not sensitive to the crimes to which women are vulnerable due to their gender, it does not respond to the needs of this particular group. Where there is specific OGBV legislation, policy makers are often working with incomplete definitions of OGBV.**
  - All Central American countries have at least one law against violence against
women and some establish public policies that address the problem (Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua), but these make little or no reference to online violence.

- In Paraguay, the definition of cyber violence against women only focuses on the dissemination of non-consensual images and exposure by the media. It leaves aside online harassment, threats, monitoring and access, discriminatory expressions, discrediting, unauthorized access, impersonation/identity theft, abuse and sexual exploitation related to technologies and affecting the channels of expression.

- A number of legislative initiatives have been shelved or delayed due to concerns they will restrict freedom of experience and allow for greater control or authority by the state.
  - For example, the law for prevention against cybercrime in Guatemala and the special law on cybercrimes in Nicaragua are both currently on hold.

- The lack of recognition of misogyny as a social problem and no thorough understanding of what is needed to tackle OGBV by governments creates significant barriers and challenges and means OGBV is not a priority on the political agenda and is often undermined by hostile campaigns.
  - In most Latin American countries, violence against women is not recognized as a social phenomenon beyond the domestic context and misogyny is therefore not considered a relevant factor in legislation.
  - Across the region, very few studies, digital violence observatories or OGBV initiatives are spearheaded by governments. All of these efforts are led instead by feminist civil society organizations and it falls on those organizations to name the violence, classify it, analyze it and look for efficient responses.
  - Attention within institutional spaces on cases of OGBV is limited due to a lack of knowledge about the phenomenon and the dynamics of harassment and violence in digital spaces being normalized.
  - Research conducted by InternetLab in Brazil identified that cases of misogynistic speech online did not reach Brazilian courts. The cases were interpreted as domestic violence cases because in most cases the perpetrators were current or former partners. The specifics of online violence were not considered important factors by the judges.

- Many of the existing legislation and regulatory frameworks in the region have a strong focus on using criminalization to address OGBV.
  - Criminalization strategies reinforce structural inequalities of race and class, and prove to be ineffective in promoting structural changes in inequalities. It is therefore necessary that confronting OGBV involves public policy strategies beyond criminalization.
  - A study by TEDIC in Paraguay concludes that the legal responses offered by the judicial system to victims of non-consensual image sharing are not sufficient to curb the causes and consequences of the crime.

- Even where legislation exists, researchers report low judicialization and enforcement of laws in cases of OGBV, as well as low reporting rates overall.
  - In August 2022, the Constitutional Court in Colombia heard the case of a woman who found out that videos of her going to the bathroom were circulating on WhatsApp. The court signaled that this constitutes a violation of rights and ordered the government to develop legislation on digital gender violence. However, the court did not condemn the company.
  - The norm across many Latin American countries seems to be to not report
these crimes and therefore they go unpunished. Law enforcement bodies trivialize online violence against women and blame the victims (rather than the aggressors), which has resulted in a culture of silence in which survivors prefer not to report acts of violence to the authorities at the risk of being ignored or revictimized during the process.

**Civil society initiatives**

- **Civil society and organized feminist groups** have been at the forefront of driving the most progressive bills regarding OGBV in Latin America and run advocacy campaigns to influence tech companies. For example:
  - Karisma is currently engaging in advocacy efforts to lobby Google into opening up its certification process for abortion clinics to Latin American countries. Colombia has recognized the right to abortion up to 24 weeks of pregnancy. However, at Karisma researchers we have seen that due to the lack of Google verification, it has been very difficult for authorized clinics to publicize advertisements on Google and provide direct guidance to women.

- **Civil society stakeholders** also play a crucial role in monitoring and evaluating government and tech company initiatives, leading to greater accountability on OGBV. For example:
  - Monitor A is an observatory of political and electoral violence against women candidates on social networks in Brazil. In 2020, analysis of observatory data demonstrated that in a group of selected female profiles, women received on average 40 offensive comments per day. Most of the time, comments related to candidates’ bodies, intellect, mental health or the moral aspects of their lives.
  - In 2022, InternetLab launched achearegra, an observatory that gathers and organizes content moderation rules, policies, terms of use, public commitments and general procedures for content regarding the Brazilian 2022 elections. On the site you can find information about Kwai, Linkedin, Meta (Facebook and Instagram), Telegram, TikTok, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Youtube.

- **Civil society organizations** are often also the first ones that survivors turn to seeking support upon experiencing OGBV. Their services across Latin America range from help with navigating tech platforms, strengthening media literacy and providing capacity building, to the provision of trauma support.

  See [here](#) for an extensive list of civil society organizations working on OGBV in the region.

**Case studies**

- Acoso.Online is a comprehensive resource for victims of online harassment, including dissemination of nonconsensual pornography. It is the first site to provide Latin American women and gender-nonconforming individuals with a feminist, Spanish-language resource that provides a community of support and empowers rather than blames victims.

- SaferNet Brasil offers anonymous and confidential counseling for vulnerable groups
who are facing OGBV. Counseling and advice is available via both chat and email services.

- **Belén Whittingslow’s case** of being sexually harassed through digital means by her professor demonstrates the lack of access to justice in Paraguay and highlights the importance of addressing OGBV.

- **Maria’s story** (Costa Rica) highlights how activists are particularly vulnerable to OGBV, especially when they threaten profits and challenge corporate greed. Maria’s story shows the potential for what can be achieved when women feel empowered to use digital technology to advocate for their communities, and are able to overcome the threats that they face.

- **Isabella’s story** (Peru) demonstrates that OGBV is of an intimate nature, and can take the form of “revenge porn” or other sexual attacks. This story also shows that it is often very difficult for survivors to come forward, out of a sense of embarrassment or shame, but that, with courage, survivors can come forward to educate others about their experiences. Isabella’s story highlights how solutions need to place the blame on the perpetrators and deal with their actions.

- **Maria’s story** (Peru) shows that all too often, OGBV is perpetuated by those one knows intimately. Maria’s story illustrates the impact of this, and gives insight into measures that can be taken to protect women from their abusers, and the power of women working together to achieve change.

**Selected reports**

Below are some selected reports on OGBV in Latin America. For an extensive list of reports, see here.

- Facebook, alongside others, financed a **quantitative analysis of political violence against women based on gender in Mexico** *(UNDP, 2021)*

- **Fairwork research by TEDIC Paraguay** evidences the lack of fair management and quick responses to violence against female users or drivers of car sharing apps. It also showcases a lack of effective response by platforms when dealing with discrimination to LGTQBI+ groups *(TEDIC, 2022)*.

- A collaboration of Latin American organizations have come together to develop a **guide to enable women in politics to identify harassment and political violence online** and to strengthen their defense capacities against digital attacks *(Asuntos del Sur and partners, 2021)*.

- A **study of political violence against women on social networks in Ecuador** which analyzes data from Facebook and Twitter *(ONU Mujeres, 2022)*.

- A **policy paper for Latin America and the Caribbean** on political violence online *(Alsur, 2021)*.

- **Initial observations by InternetLab** on the relationship between violence against women online and the judicial system in Brazil *(InternetLab, 2020)*.
This regional report written by 9 expert organizations provides an overview of OGBV in the context of Latin America and the Caribbeans, and covers: the foundations of gender violence in the region, cases of OGBV and jurisprudence, critical analysis of the legal frameworks, and recommendations (Alsur, 2017).