

This statement is delivered on behalf of Plan International Ireland's Youth Advisory Panel (YAP). The Youth Advisory Panel was established in 2016 and engages young people aged 16-24 as ambassadors and advisors to Plan International Ireland. Through advocacy and activism, the members stand in solidarity with young campaigners around the world and address issues that affect young women and girls.

Most recently, the Panel researched the issue of abuse and harassment online in Ireland as part of the 'Freedom Online' campaign. We found that 65% of girls and young women in Ireland have experienced harassment or abuse on social media. This online Gender-Based Violence holds the nation back from meaningful gender equality and achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5. With proper regulation and accountability, technology and social media can be used to empower women, but without such guidelines, it only serves to enhance the vulnerabilities of women and girls.

When girls and young women face online abuse and harassment, their right to participate in public and political life through online platforms is hindered. They are deterred from taking part in online debates and discussions about issues that affect their lives. With the frequent online abuse and harassment of women in politics, it is clear that there are increased barriers to the political participation of women.

Additionally, the education system was recently disrupted by school closures due to Covid-19 and the shift to virtual classrooms. When schools are moved online, girls are at a higher risk of harassment and abuse on educational platforms and social media networks. Ensuring the right to education to all young people at every level requires proactive consideration of barriers faced by vulnerable groups in all classrooms, including those online.

In Ireland, the issue of online abuse and harassment has received welcome political attention in recent years, resulting in the amendment and enactment of the 2017 Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Bill. Furthermore, the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill was approved by the government in 2020, aiming to establish a Digital Safety Commissioner but has not yet been enacted. This legislation is a positive first step in combating Online Gender Based-Violence. However, further oversight is needed to ensure compliance by technology companies.

The Youth Advisory Panel of Plan International Ireland recommends that the Republic of Ireland should take several important steps:

1. The Government should ensure that children are educated about the dangers associated with online spaces, as well as the benefits. Children, and particularly girls, should be equipped with an understanding of their rights, as well as information about how to protect their safety online, and how to report abuse, harassment or exploitation.

2. The Government should work with the technology industry to ensure better coordination to eliminate online abuse or exploitation and to limit the ways in which children can access these. Stronger punitive measures should be in place for sites that do not adhere to such restrictions.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to address you today. Please feel free to contact Plan International Ireland's Youth Advisory Panel if you would like to discuss the issue of online gender-based violence further.