



“DON’T SEND ME THAT PIC.”

**Australian young women and girls report
online abuse and harassment are endemic**

March 2016

Plan International Australia and Our Watch survey



1. KEY FINDINGS

- Seven out of ten young women surveyed agreed that girls are often bullied or harassed online
- 58 percent agreed that girls often receive uninvited or unwanted indecent or sexually explicit material such as texts, video clips, and pornography
- 51 percent agreed that girls are often pressured to take ‘sexy’ photos of themselves and share them
- 82 percent believe it is unacceptable for a boyfriend to ask their girlfriend to share naked photos of themselves
- 44 percent do not feel comfortable reporting incidents of abusive online behaviour

2. INTRODUCTION

Plan International Australia and Our Watch commissioned Ipsos to conduct a survey of 600 Australian girls and young women aged 15–19 about personal safety and gender equality, including online safety. Responses to questions about online safety indicate that girls and young women in Australia report endemic levels of abuse and harassment online.

This Australian survey builds on previous surveys conducted by Plan International in a range of countries around the world to provide girls and young women with an opportunity to share their experiences relating to gender inequality and to make suggestions about the changes and solutions they would like to see. This is the first survey to be conducted in partnership with Our Watch, Australia’s national foundation to prevent violence against women and their children.

3. WHAT IS ‘CYBERBULLYING’ AND ‘ONLINE HARASSMENT AND ABUSE’?

While online harassment and abuse can be experienced by anyone, there are gendered patterns that show that young women are particularly susceptible to harassment and abuse directly related to their gender and age. This online harassment and abuse is increasingly being used as an instrument of gender-based violence in Australia¹ – violence or threats inflicted on someone because of their gender intended to harm them or control how they behave, speak or think.

‘Cyberbullying’ or ‘online harassment and abuse’ can be defined as “when an individual or group use the internet, mobile phones or other communication technology to intentionally and sometimes repeatedly hurt another person or group of people.”²

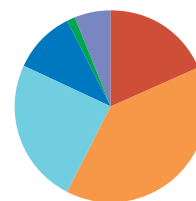
Cyberbullying or online harassment and abuse can include behaviours ranging from “name-calling, social embarrassment and targeted offensive language, through to sexual harassment, unwanted sexual behaviours, exploitation or abuse (such as by taking or distributing intimate or sexually explicit images without permission), as well as threats and cyberstalking.”³ Online harassment also includes repeated and unwanted requests for photos of a sexual nature.

¹ Powell, A., & Henry, N. (2015). *Digital Harassment and Abuse of Adult Australians: A Summary Report*. RMIT University and La Trobe University, 1.

² Dooley, J. J., Gradinger, P., Strohmeier, D., Cross, D., & Spiel, C. (2010). Cyber-Victimisation: The Association Between Help-Seeking Behaviours and Self-Reported Emotional Symptoms in Australia and Austria. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 20(02), 194-209, 196.

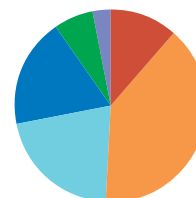
³ Powell, A., & Henry, N. (2015). *Digital Harassment and Abuse of Adult Australians: A Summary Report*. RMIT University and La Trobe University, 1.

Girls often receive uninvited or unwanted indecent or sexually explicit material



Strongly agree: **18.5%**
 Agree: **39%**
 Neither agree nor disagree: **24.5%**
 Disagree: **10.5%**
 Strongly disagree: **1.5%**
 Don't know: **6%**

Girls are often pressured to take sexy photos of themselves and share them



Strongly agree: **11.5%**
 Agree: **39.5%**
 Neither agree nor disagree: **21%**
 Disagree: **18.5%**
 Strongly disagree: **6.5%**
 Don't know: **3%**

4. THE IMPACTS OF ONLINE BULLYING, HARASSMENT AND ABUSE

Cyberbullying and online harassment and abuse of adolescents has been linked to lower self-esteem, poor school attendance and performance and in some cases increased depressive symptoms.⁴ Kids Helpline data suggests that younger victims of online abuse may also be more likely to consider suicide or self-harm in response to cyberbullying than those who experience more “traditional” forms of bullying.⁵ The impact of cyberbullying or harassment may be more severe than bullying ‘in real life’ because of the typically “wider audience in which public humiliation or embarrassment can occur, and the increased level of invasiveness that is possible, in particular the ability to penetrate a victim’s home and/or bedroom.”⁶

5. SURVEY METHODOLOGY

This Plan International Australia/Our Watch survey was conducted by Ipsos online and surveyed 600 young women and girls aged 15 to 19 from across Australia between December 2015 and February 2016. Participants, who were drawn from all states and territories of Australia and evenly spread across all age cohorts, completed the survey by using an ISO 26362 and 20252 accredited online sampling system. The random sample of size 600 gives a margin of error at a 95% confidence level (meaning there’s a 95% likelihood that the sample accurately reflects the attitudes of the population), of 0.98/24.49 or 0.04 - 4%.

6. SURVEY FINDINGS

6.1 Perceptions of online bullying, harassment and abuse

Seven out of ten young women surveyed agreed girls are often bullied or harassed online – only seven percent disagreed. Over half of those surveyed (58 percent) also agreed that girls often received uninvited or unwanted indecent or sexually explicit material such as texts, video clips and pornography.

Over half of those surveyed (51 percent) agreed that girls are often pressured to take ‘sexy’ photos of themselves and share them. These requests for photos were almost always unwanted and uninvited; only six percent of girls surveyed thought this behaviour was acceptable – 81 percent of girls surveyed disagreed that it was acceptable for a boyfriend to ask for a naked photo.

6.2 Comfort in reporting abuse

Despite a perception among survey participants that online abuse is common, 44 percent of respondents disagreed with the statement that “girls feel comfortable reporting incidents of abusive online behaviour” with only 28 percent agreeing with this proposition. Academic research suggests students who are cyberbullied are less likely to seek help than students who were victimised in more traditional ways.⁷

6.3 Young women offer their solutions

When asked what could improve girls’ and young women’s safety and intimate relationships, more than one third of young women called for more comprehensive education on sexuality and respectful relationships – several suggested this education should extend to the critique and discussion of pornography recognition and how violent and degrading pornography was negatively impacting on young Australians’ relationships and boys’ and young men’s attitudes towards sex in general.

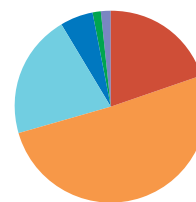
⁴ Perren, S., Dooley, J., Shaw, T., & Cross, D. (2010). Bullying in school and cyberspace: Associations with depressive symptoms in Swiss and Australian adolescents. *Child and adolescent psychiatry and mental health*, 4(28), 1-10.

⁵ Price, M. and Dalgleish, J. (2009). Cyberbullying Experiences, impacts and coping strategies, Boystown, 2.

⁶ Price, M., & Dalgleish, J. (2010). Cyberbullying: Experiences, impacts and coping strategies as described by Australian young people. *Youth Studies Australia*, 29(2), 51, 52.

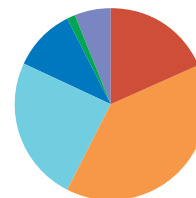
⁷ Dooley et al. (2010), above n 2, 194.

Girls are often bullied online



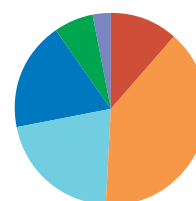
Strongly agree: **20%**
 Agree: **51%**
 Neither agree nor disagree: **21%**
 Disagree: **5.5%**
 Strongly disagree: **1.5%**
 Don't know: **1.5%**

Girls often receive uninvited or unwanted indecent or sexually explicit material



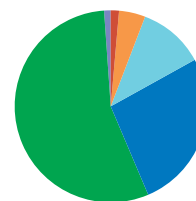
Strongly agree: **18.5%**
 Agree: **39%**
 Neither agree nor disagree: **24.5%**
 Disagree: **10.5%**
 Strongly disagree: **1.5%**
 Don't know: **6%**

Girls are often pressured to take sexy photos of themselves and share them



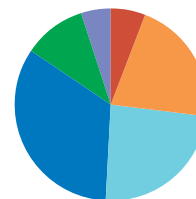
Strongly agree: **11.5%**
 Agree: **39.5%**
 Neither agree nor disagree: **21%**
 Disagree: **18.5%**
 Strongly disagree: **6.5%**
 Don't know: **3%**

It is acceptable for a boyfriend to ask you to share photos of yourself naked



Strongly agree: **1.5%**
 Agree: **4.5%**
 Neither agree nor disagree: **11%**
 Disagree: **26.5%**
 Strongly disagree: **55%**
 Don't know: **1%**

Girls feel comfortable reporting incidents of abusive online behaviour



Strongly agree: **6%**
 Agree: **21%**
 Neither agree nor disagree: **24%**
 Disagree: **33.5%**
 Strongly disagree: **10.5%**
 Don't know: **5%**

What young Australian women and girls said about building healthy intimate relationships for young people

“[I want] Better education regarding sex for both boys and girls [and] information about pornography, and the way it influences harmful sexual practices.” – Young woman, aged 15 years.

“[Schools should] introduce [discussion of] pornography as part of the education as young boys are accessing it and thinking this is normal in relationships.” – Young woman, aged 15 years.

“We need some sort of crack down on the violent pornography that is currently accessible to boys and men. This violent pornography should be illegal to make or view in Australia as we clearly have a problem with violence and boys are watching a lot of pornography which can be very violent ... This is influencing men’s attitude towards women and what they think is acceptable. Violent pornography is infiltrating Australian relationships.” – Young woman, aged 18 years.

Young women also called for better education around online safety and combating cyberbullying through better policing, monitoring, and legislation.

What young Australian women and girls said about building a safer and more respectful online environment

“[I want] better understanding of girls today, better communication especially with online bullying and stuff, we need to be better taught too that if we are respectful and have better attitudes we can feel safer and have better relationships, and less pressure about us growing up.” – Young woman, aged 16 years.

“[[I want] More training at an earlier age within schools to explain the dangers of online predators and safety by actually having people who have experienced it talking to them so they know it is real and can happen.” – Young woman, aged 16 years.

“[I want] more online and social media monitoring with the right authority and to offer protection for all girls” – Young woman, aged 15 years.

7. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 The impacts of online pornography on relationships

The increased accessibility of pornography and its impacts on young Australians’ attitudes about sex, relationships and gender roles and gender-based violence is poorly understood. However, some international studies have found that boys exposed to pornography in early adolescence are more likely to engage in sexual harassment in middle adolescence.⁸ A 2011 US study found that “adolescents who are intentionally exposed to violent sexually explicit material were six times more likely to be sexually aggressive than those who were not exposed.”⁹ Adolescents’ and young adults’ exposure to media which sexualises girls and women is also “associated with greater acceptance of stereotyped and sexist notions about gender and sexual roles, including notions of women as sexual objects.”¹⁰

7.2 Stopping cyberbullying at school

Schools play an important and critical role in the safety and wellbeing of their students, naturally this extends to outside the classroom and school grounds into the wider community and online digital world. The recent revised Australian Curriculum directs schools to look at how they promote respectful relationships and gender equality. Respectful Relationships Education offers a systematic and evidence based approach to the primary prevention of gender-based violence such as online harassment and bullying. For more information see [Our Watch Evidence Paper Respectful Relationships Education](#).

It is understood that cyberbullying is more likely to take place with frequency in school environments where students share the belief that bullying is acceptable and where there is “a negative school climate, and perceived lack of peer social support.”¹¹

⁸ Owens, E. W., Behun, R. J., Manning, J. C., & Reid, R. C. (2012). The impact of Internet pornography on adolescents: A review of the research. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*, 19(1-2), 99-122, 108.

⁹ Ibid, 109.

¹⁰ Flood, M. (2009). The harms of pornography exposure among children and young people. *Child abuse review*, 18(6), 384-400, 390.

¹¹ Hemphill, S. A., Kotevski, A., Tollit, M., Smith, R., Herrenkohl, T. I., Toumbourou, J. W., & Catalano, R. F. (2012). Longitudinal predictors of cyber and traditional bullying perpetration in Australian secondary school students. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 51(1), 59-65, 1., 3.

Evidence suggests the best way for schools to address and prevent all forms of bullying (including cyberbullying and harassment) is through a systematic whole school approach¹² which is supported by:

- “professional learning for staff, curriculum learning for students, and education sessions for families to enhance how the whole-school community (staff, students, parents and families) can respond effectively to incidences of cyberbullying.”¹³
- “quality school policies and procedures addressing safe and responsible use of cyber technologies”¹⁴ which send a clear message that bullying will not be tolerated;¹⁵
- fostering a positive school culture where students feel comfortable seeking help and reporting bullying;¹⁶ and
- building partnerships between schools, families and relevant local community sector organisations which recognise that stopping bullying is both the responsibility of school and its surrounding community.¹⁷

Based on the latest international and national evidence on the effectiveness of Respectful Relationships Education and drawing on the suggested solutions put forward by the young women who took part in this survey, Our Watch and Plan International Australia is calling for governments around Australia to further fund comprehensive approaches to Respectful Relationships Education inclusive of online bullying, harassment and the impact of pornography.

In particular, Australian governments should look to how they are addressing the seven core elements required for good practice Respectful Relationships Education:

1. Address the drivers of gender-based violence
2. Have a long term vision, approach and funding
3. Take a whole school approach
4. Establish and include mechanisms for collaboration and coordination
5. Ensure integrated evaluation and continual improvement
6. Provide resources and support for teachers
7. Use age-appropriate, interactive and participatory curriculum¹⁸

8. PLAN INTERNATIONAL AUSTRALIA AND OUR WATCH

Plan International is one of the world’s oldest and largest child rights development agencies. We work in over 70 countries around the world to tackle the root causes of poverty, inequality and injustice. Plan’s flagship ‘Because I am a Girl’ campaign is working to create a world that values girls, promotes their rights and ends injustice.

Our Watch is a national, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to preventing violence against women before it starts, through challenging its primary drivers – gender inequality and restrictive gender stereotypes. The organisation works to increase gender equality and respect in all aspects of everyday life, such as in schools; workplaces; media; sporting organisations; and through social marketing, and developing and influencing public policy.

9. NEXT STEPS

A full report on the Australian survey findings, which include young women’s perspectives on gender equality and their sense of safety in a range of environments will be released later this year. Our Watch and Plan International Australia look forward to offering further insight into the level of empowerment and aspirations of young Australian women.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Pearce, N., Cross, D., Monks, H., Waters, S., & Falconer, S. (2011). Current Evidence of Best Practice in Whole-School Bullying Intervention and Its Potential to Inform Cyberbullying Interventions. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 21(01), 1-21, 13.

¹⁴ Ibid, 13.

¹⁵ Ibid, 7.

¹⁶ Ibid, 13; and Dooley (2010), above n 1.

¹⁷ Pearce et al (2011), above n 13, 7. See also: Campbell, M. A. (2005). Cyber Bullying: An Old Problem in a New Guise?. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 15(01), 68-76.

¹⁸ Our Watch (2015) *Evidence Paper Respectful Relationships Education in Schools*, Melbourne, Australia.