



**”NOTHING
ABOUT US
WITHOUT US”**
Amplifying the voice
of grassroots women



Staying Safe when Speaking out Online

Nothing About Us Without Us – Amplifying the voice of grassroots women to be Visible, Vocal, and Valued

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How can we be Visible, Vocal and Valued?

There are different spheres in which women can be visible, vocal, and valued. For example: when advocating for ourselves regarding our health, when speaking out about issues within our own community, and on regional or global matters through contacting our relevant MLA or MP.

Other examples include different types of activism such as: signing a petition, attending or organising a march or vigil, joining a Union-led strike, canvassing or running for a political party, and boycotting organisations that don't align with your personal values.

Activism (being visible and vocal) will look different for everyone, but the foundational motive is the same – attempting to influence the world around us, on matters that are important to us.

This resource aims to focus specifically on women being vocal online. We will consider the benefits of using the internet and social media alongside ways in which to stay safe when speaking out because unfortunately, women are often the targets of abuse when using their voice to advocate for change. This can be particularly problematic online which is a relatively ungoverned space.

NB: please see the 'Glossary' for descriptions of any unfamiliar words or phrases.



Local Women's Experiences:

Women are often victims of online abuse when voicing their opinions. Let's look at the experiences that some local women have had...

Women in Politics

Sorcha Eastwood is the Alliance MP for Lagan valley. In 2021 Sorcha highlighted the online abuse she had received, "Just getting a constant slew of sectarian, misogynistic & generally nasty comments... Not going to lie; it isn't nice to wake up to this (and worse). But I'll keep going because when others go low, we go high." ¹

In 2024, Sorcha brought the issue of online abuse to the Houses of Parliament stating, "NI is considered one of the most dangerous places in Europe to be a woman. In the last four years, 24 women have been killed but one of the most dangerous places for women and girls is online...so, what is this government doing to keep women and girls safe online?" ²

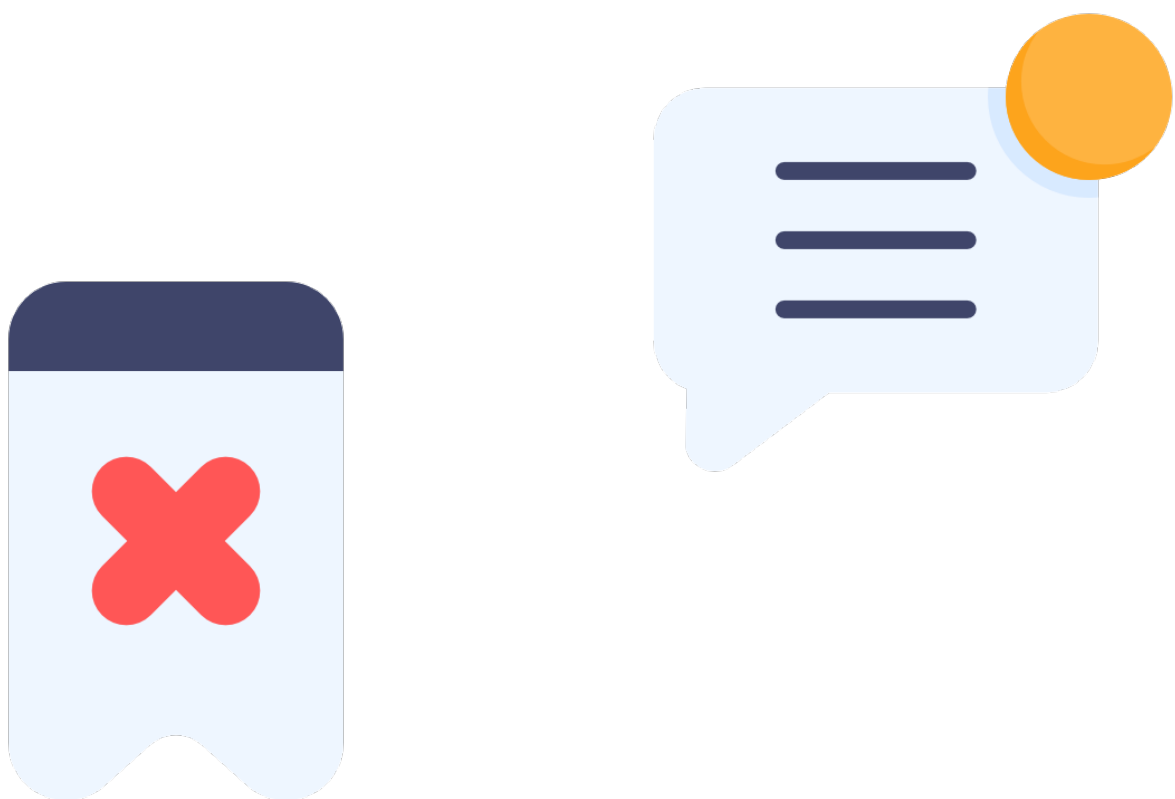
Lilian Seenoi-Barr is Northern Ireland's first Black mayor and an SDLP councillor for Derry City and Strabane District Council. Following selection by her party to be the Mayor, Lilian received abuse online, including death threats. The perpetrator of said death threats was released on bail. Lilian has said, "The death threats have been extremely hurtful to my family and to myself too, but I'm more focused on the positives. I have had enormous support across the island, community organisations, politicians who have reached out and stood in solidarity." ³

Grassroots women

In 2022, Belfast-based freelance journalist, **Amanda Ferguson**, wrote an article about women being silenced because of the patriarchy, specifically regarding Brexit and the Northern Irish Protocol⁴.

In this article, **Louise Coyle** (Director for NI Rural Women's Network, and member of the Nothing About Us Without Us co-design panel), stated that, ***"Women don't feel safe to be visible on this stuff"***.


Eileen Weir (cross-community activist who has recently retired from her role as Greater North Belfast Network Coordinator based at the Shankill Women's Centre) was targeted online for speaking out regarding the Protocol and ***'forced underground'***. She said, ***"Women are telling me that in-person and online they are being intimidated if they speak out against the agreed narrative of a minority of men"***.



The benefits and risks to being vocal online

Whether it is creating or sharing a post, promoting an event, starting/sharing an e-petition, or simply voicing your opinion; the internet and social media can be a source of good however, it does not come without risk.

Below are some of the benefits and risks to being vocal online:

Benefits	Risks
Social media provides the opportunity to circulate whichever information we want, far and wide.	Posting in a private/closed group or to a set number of followers can still come with the risk of someone sharing your content without permission. This can be done by taking a screenshot and potentially distributing the image or video further afield than what you had initially intended. So, any attempts to limit who can see your content are often far from full proof.
Online spaces are available for everyone wanting to tell their story or speak out on matters that are important to them. This contrasts with regular media outlets such as TV and newspapers which may be harder to access.	As with the mainstream media, once any content or a news piece is made live, it will often be available online indefinitely. This isn't necessarily a disadvantage however, something to consider.
Posting online comes with the potential of getting increased coverage through tagging relevant organisations, who may in turn reshare the content that you are hoping to promote.	Being vocal and visible online can come with the risk of burnout. Engaging in conversations and debates, as well as bombarding ourselves with imagery and information about issues close to our heart, can be overwhelming.
Some women choose to voice their opinion of a particular subject by writing a blog post. This can be done by setting up a personal web address or by contributing to an existing blog. For example, the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA) invite feminist opinion pieces to be submitted for their online blog.	 WRDA Blog

Benefits	Risks
<p>Women may also choose to use their lived experience* of a subject to write a blog or provide a case study for a charity or an organisation that fits with their goals. The organisation may be able to use details of their experience when advocating for change to policy or legislation. This can be done anonymously if preferred.</p>	<p>Being targeted with online abuse (covered in the next section) is a risk when speaking out online, especially for women.</p>
<p>Social media can be used to better your cause more locally. There is the option of setting up a private/closed group on different social media platforms that provide the opportunity of getting others involved to work collectively; creating a safe space for discussion and planning. For example, someone from a local community may set up a group for people living in the area to share relevant information with each other.</p>	<p>Experiencing online abuse can have severely negative impacts on a person's mental health. 'Get Safe Online' ⁽⁵⁾ outlines the risks to an individual on the receiving end of online abuse. Notably, victims also frequently withdraw from using the internet, losing not only access to all of its benefits but their sense of empowerment and access to basic human rights.'</p>
<p>Closed groups can be created for a community of people not necessarily based in the same geographical area, for example, support groups for unpaid carers or groups for climate activists to network.</p>	<p>There is the risk of online abuse moving 'offline', especially in a region as small as NI.</p>
<p>A further benefit of closed groups is reducing the input of audiences who are unfamiliar with the issue or topic you are focused on. However, this may be hard to screen.</p>	

NB: The following resource, created by Women's Aid England, includes considerations that may be applicable to survivors of domestic abuse that may be interested in sharing their lived experience.

Amongst other important considerations, the resource includes risks around defamation and why some women may choose to tell their story anonymously.



Scan for Resource

Types of online abuse

Online abuse can be a one-off incident or a persistent attack. It can be perpetrated by one individual or by a group of individuals working alone or together. The perpetrators may be known or unknown to the victim.

The backlash a person receives may be testament to the truth they are speaking however, this way of thinking doesn't help remedy the situation for the person – the abuse needs to be taken seriously and acted upon. There is a big difference between a few negative comments (which can also take a toll on a person), and behaviour that needs reported to the police.

For the purposes of this resource; Cyberbullying, Trolling, Cyberstalking, and Doxing have been highlighted. However, there are many other forms of online behaviours that may cause harm and should be reported if you are feeling threatened or concerned. These include catfishing/impersonation, sharing intimate photographs (or threats to share), hate speech, threats of violence, grooming, misinformation being spread about an individual, and receiving unwanted 'sexts' or images.

(Please see the 'Glossary' for descriptions of any unfamiliar words or phrases)

NB: There can be a blurred line between someone using their freedom of expression compared to someone inciting hate on the grounds of race, religion, age, disability, gender or gender orientation. For more information on hate crime please access the following website



Visit Website

Cyberbullying

This is when a person experiences bullying online, receiving nasty and sometimes threatening messages possibly commenting on their appearance, their mannerisms, their beliefs, or political opinions etc.⁶

The bully, or bullies, may be known or unknown to the person. As with all forms of online abuse, bullying is unacceptable and there is never a valid reason to enter into such activity.

Trolling

Often overlapping with cyberbullying is 'trolling' – a virtual form of harassment. A 'troll' tends to remain anonymous and will often cause offence by voicing discriminatory and controversial views, with the aim of upsetting individuals and starting arguments for no apparent reason.

Trolls thrive when they provoke a response, so it is best to avoid engagement.⁷

Cyberstalking

Whilst bullies and trolls tend to spread their abuse far and wide – not being ‘too picky’ when it comes to choosing a person to abuse – perpetrators of cyberstalking direct their energy towards a specific individual. Again, the perpetrator may be known or unknown to the victim.

Cyberstalking is **persistent** and may involve⁸:

- Obsessive harassment
- Threats of violence
- Threats of sharing private information, photographs, or copies of messages
- Cyber flashing
- Monitoring of a person’s whereabouts and/or internet use
- Hacking into a person’s email and social media accounts
- Spamming and sending viruses
- Impersonation/stealing someone’s identity



Doxing

Doxing/doxing is when someone shares personal information about a person online, without their consent.



This may include a person’s real name, address, other identifiable material, and financial information. Often, this information is retrieved through hacking.

Doxing may not be considered as a standalone offence; however, it could contribute to other offences such as harassment and stalking.⁹

NB: Some of the behaviours listed under cyberstalking and doxing can be tactics used by perpetrators of domestic abuse to further control a partner, ex-partner, or family member.

These tactics may include: stealing a partner's identity, purchasing items in someone's name, and monitoring electronic communications such as email.¹⁰

Please consider reaching out to your local Women's Aid branch if anything listed feels familiar to you.



Advice and Support Available

Legal ramifications

Under harassment and stalking laws, there is the possibility of legal consequences for perpetrators of cyberbullying, trolling, cyberstalking, and doxing. However, each individual case will differ. Therefore, we recommend consulting with a legal representative. The Law Centre offers free, independent legal advice and can be contacted via their Advice Line on 028 9024 4401.


If you are feeling scared, intimidated, or threatened, please contact the police by calling 101 in a non-emergency and 999 in an emergency.

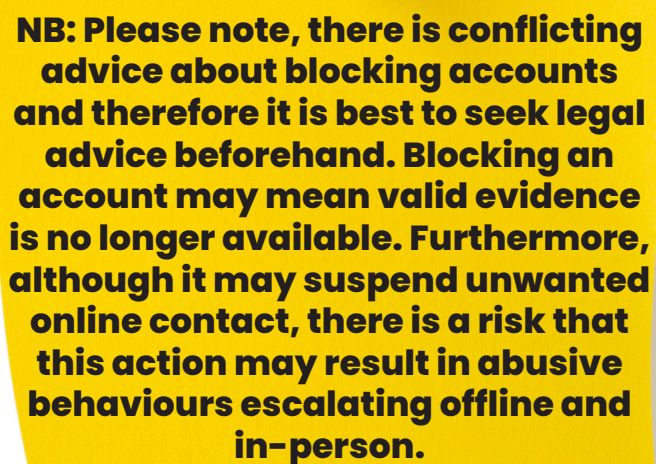


Please refer to the 'Tips' section which includes information on how to prevent online abuse, as well as suggestions on what to do if you are experiencing online abuse, including retaining evidence of any concerning messages received.

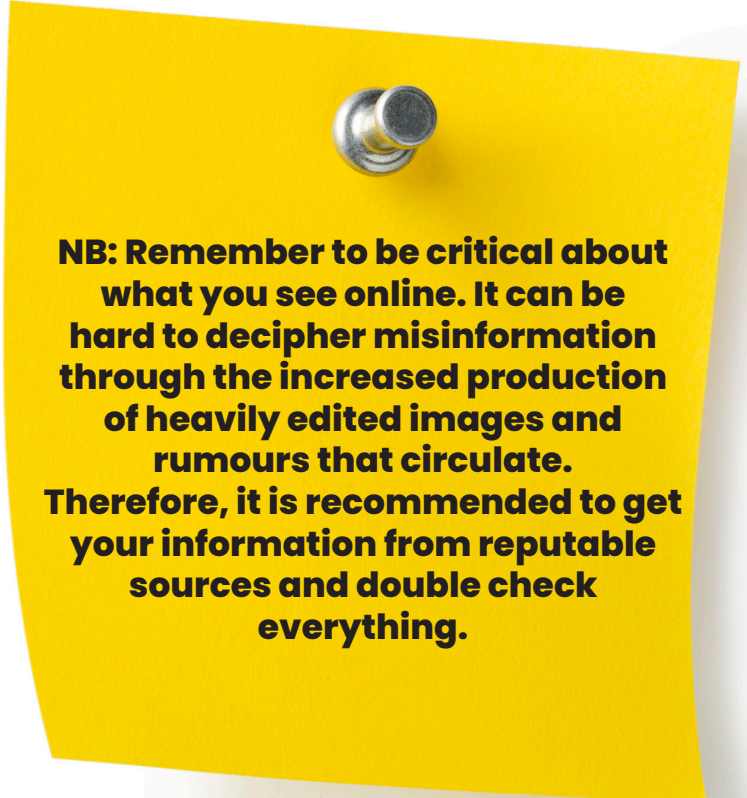
Tips on helping prevent and deal with online abuse

Dealing with online abuse	Prevention
<p>Contact the police: As mentioned previously, if you are feeling scared, intimidated, or threatened, please contact the police by calling 101 in a non-emergency and 999 in an emergency.</p>	<p>Do not engage with perpetrators of online abuse – they thrive when they get a reaction.</p>
	<p>Keep the personal information that you provide about yourself to a minimum.</p>
<p>Document the abuse: Even if you don't have initial plans to report messages to the police, it is still recommended to document any unwanted attention before blocking the harasser. You can do this by using the 'print screen' button on your computer or taking 'screenshots' on your phone. A record of messages will no longer be available if you decide to block an account, so it is important to document the evidence beforehand.</p>	<p>Avoid posting in real time or giving away current location.</p>
	<p>Ensure that your computer and mobile device have up-to-date internet security software installed and turned on.</p>
<p>Report and block accounts: After documenting any inappropriate messages, you can report and block the account that has been engaging with you. If it's via social media, the specific social media platform will take you through some options as to why you are reporting. The platform will then review the report and take action where they feel appropriate. Once a report has been lodged, some platforms will automatically block the account on your behalf whereas for others, you may have to block the account manually yourself to avoid future unwanted communication.</p>	<p>Keep passwords safe: consider changing them often and having different passwords for different accounts. Your password should be difficult to guess so avoid using information such as your name or your birthday etc.</p>
	<p>'Two-factor authentication' is available on most platforms and is when an account requires two forms of identification for access. For example, your password and mobile phone verification.</p>
<p>Disable comments: A benefit to posting content online is the opportunity to encourage discussion and healthy debate around the topic you are being vocal about. However, if the comment section becomes increasingly nasty, there is the option of 'disabling comments' if it gets too much. Remember though: the aim is not to control the narrative but stop messaging that is offensive, disrespectful, and unnecessary.</p>	<p>Excessive phone use and the experience of cyber abuse can have a negative impact on a person's mental health. Therefore, it is healthy to take regular breaks from social media by turning off notifications and possibly deleting the app for a set amount of time i.e. for a 24-hour period to allow yourself time to reset.</p>
	<p>Check your privacy settings often, these can change and although social media platforms are required to make users aware, notifications of this can sometimes be easily overlooked.</p>

Dealing with online abuse	Prevention
<p>Reach out for support: Consider speaking to someone that you trust and talking about how you are feeling. This could be a friend, family member, or fellow activist. The National Bullying Helpline is also available Monday-Friday from 9-5pm on 0300 323 0169.</p>	<p>You have the option to set particular posts to 'share' while allowing other posts to remain 'private' to a specific set of followers. However, this does not come without risk, i.e. by accidentally sharing private content to a wider audience and/or by someone taking a screenshot of your private post and sharing it without your permission. Therefore, you may want to consider having multiple accounts: a personal account and another where you plan to be 'vocal' about your cause or issue. There is also the option of remaining anonymous.</p>
	<p>Consider the consequences: Depending on your content or subject matter of your posts, they can go viral. This may be a good thing in raising awareness about the cause you are speaking about. However, you will inevitably be opened potential trolling and online abuse the more people that see it.</p>
	<p>Another potential consequence to consider is if you plan to use your platform to 'call-out' an individual person or group. Think about your physical safety and if there is a risk of retaliation. Furthermore, to avoid being accused of defamation, check and double check the sources of your information, as well as considering getting legal advice beforehand.</p>



NB: Please note, there is conflicting advice about blocking accounts and therefore it is best to seek legal advice beforehand. Blocking an account may mean valid evidence is no longer available. Furthermore, although it may suspend unwanted online contact, there is a risk that this action may result in abusive behaviours escalating offline and in-person.



NB: Remember to be critical about what you see online. It can be hard to decipher misinformation through the increased production of heavily edited images and rumours that circulate. Therefore, it is recommended to get your information from reputable sources and double check everything.



Remember: it is a privilege to have a voice and be in a position to share it, influencing the world around us in our own individual way. You have the right to be **Visible, Vocal, and Valued**, and no one should victimise you as a result.

We hope that this resource is helpful for you as you explore ways to be vocal online.



Glossary

Blocking:

This is when you can restrict specific accounts from following your account, engaging with your posts, and sending you direct messages.

Blog:

A blog is a website that is regularly updated with conversational-type content. Blog posts can be opinion-based and informal, often focusing on a subject area that is of particular interest to the author.

Catfishing:

Catfishing is when a person creates a fictitious online persona or fake identity, with the intent of deception.

Content/post:

Social media users 'post' (upload) all sorts of content including writing, images, videos, and live broadcasts.

Cyber flashing:

This is when an internet-user sends obscene images or video footage to another person without their consent. The flashing usually entails images of a sexual nature and commonly involves males sending unwanted images of their penises ('dick pics').

Defamation:

Defamation is a false statement about a person, with the intention of causing harm to their reputation. 'Libel' is written defamation. Both may have legal repercussions.

Followers:

Followers are individuals who subscribe to a different social media account. For example, following the content of an account on Instagram, Bluesky, or Twitter ('X').

Online grooming:

This is when someone uses technology or the internet to build a relationship with a person, often through deceptive means such as catfishing (e.g. the person lies about their age or gender) in order to build trust with the person. The intentions of this are usually for personal gain and at the expense of the victim. Online grooming is also commonly associated with child abuse and exploitation.

Private/closed group:

Closed groups can be searched for but the content posted within the group cannot be viewed until a user becomes a member of the group. To become a member, individual accounts need approval by a group administrator.

Screenshot/Print screen:

A screenshot is a digital image or video of a phone screen or computer display. Each phone and computer will have a different process to capture the display.

Sexting:

Sexting involves sending or receiving sexualised messages or photographs, usually between phones, but may also be sent via email or social media platforms. Both parties engaging in the sexting may be consenting however, sexts may be unwanted and therefore could be considered as online abuse.

Social media platform:

There are many social media platforms. These are spaces on the internet which allow users to share and view content.

Tagging:

Social media users can 'tag' an account or person in content. This can be used for drawing the person's attention to a certain post, or to give them credit if being mentioned or referred to. The user that has been tagged will receive a notification so that they can view the relevant content.

Troll:

A troll is someone who deliberately tries to start arguments and upset other online users. They are usually anonymous.

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Notes



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Notes



The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland and the Nothing About Us Without Us co-design panel which includes Northern Ireland Women's Network (NIRWN), Falls Women's Centre, Reclaim the Agenda, Building Communities Resource Centre, The Carson Project, and The Focus Project created this resource together to help keep you safe while speaking out online.

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