

Questionnaire from the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression

1. a) What barriers, challenges and threats do women in the public sphere face in exercising their freedom of opinion and expression online and offline?

Diverse women, and people of diverse gender identities and expressions in the public sphere face a number of barriers in exercising their freedom of opinion and expression both online and offline. One key concern is hate and harassment which is abusive, can be violent and transcends online and offline environments with devastating impacts on individual's freedom of opinion and expression, as well as on families, communities and democracy itself.

To address these barriers, Canada is taking action on combatting hate groups and online hate and harassment, ideologically motivated violent extremism and terrorist organizations. Canada is also addressing technology-facilitated hate and harassment to ensure that everyone can live a life free of violence, in all its forms, while protecting and supporting democracy and social cohesion. Budget 2021 invested \$601.3 million over five years, starting in 2021-22, to advance towards a new National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence, including, but not limited to funding to support capacity of Indigenous women and LGBTQ2 organizations and newcomers to Canada, crisis hotlines, research for frontline initiatives and programming that prevent and counter radicalization to violence, including violent misogyny and increased data collection.

The Canadian Commission on Democratic Expression, funded by the Government of Canada, recently released its report, *Harms Reduction: A Six-Step Program to Protect Democratic Expression Online* with six scaffolding recommendations to enable citizens, governments and platforms to deal with the matter of harmful speech in a free and democratic, rights-based society like Canada.

b) What are the distinct challenges faces by those who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination?

Those who experience multiple intersecting forms of discrimination in the public sphere experience challenges of systemic racism, lack of representation, visibility, and leadership and decision-making opportunities. Many also face hate, harassment and expressions of unconscious bias both online and offline. A real limitation is research and publicly available data of diverse women and people of diverse gender identities and expressions in the public sphere to support concrete actions.

In the 2020 Fall Economic Statement, the federal government announced a series of policies and programs to fight against systemic racism and empower racialized communities which are further expanded on in Canada's federal Budget 2021. Canada is also developing and implementing an action plan to increase the representation of women, Black and racialized Canadians, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples and LGBTQ2 Canadians in hiring, appointments and leadership development within the Public Service.

c) How have the pandemic, economic crisis and recent political unrests affected women's ability to communicate, protest and access information online and offline?

COVID-19 highlighted and exacerbated the long-standing inequities within Canadian society, particularly for diverse women. Women have experienced economic hardship during the pandemic which may have impacted their ability to communicate, protest, and access information online and offline. Canada prioritized a feminist, intersectional response to the pandemic and recovery, and created the Task Force on Women in the Economy to advise the

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government on priorities for gender equality. Canada also launched a Feminist Response and Recovery Fund to provide \$100 million for projects helping those in greatest need during the pandemic, including Indigenous women, Black women, women of colour, women who are members of LGBTQ2 communities, and women living with disabilities or in rural or remote communities. The Fund's three priority areas include encouraging women and girls in leadership and decision-making positions; improving women's and girls' economic security and prosperity; and ending gender-based violence, so that women and girls can fully participate in the economic, social, democratic and political life of Canada.