

# Models of Feminist Helplines for people facing Gender-Based Violence in Digital Spaces

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## LEGAL NOTICE

This article was written by Alexandra Haché for the Digital Defenders Partnership within the framework of its Rapid Response Networks program and its Gender Inclusion and Cultural Diversity strategy. The excerpts included in this article come from the webinar series "Building feminist infrastructure: Feminist helplines for people facing gender-based violence in digital spaces" organized by the Digital Defenders Partnership. This article was written in Spanish and translated into English by Zenobia Translations.

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Alexandra Haché for the Digital Defenders Partnership within the framework of its Rapid Response Networks program and its Gender Inclusion and Cultural Diversity strategy.

### About the Digital Defenders Partnership

The mission of the Digital Defenders Partnership (DDP) is to provide a comprehensive response to digital threats and risks, building resilient and sustainable networks of support for human rights defenders. To this end, DDP provides funding to respond to emergencies and to offer sustainable protection. In addition, it contributes to strengthening immediate response and local protection networks, enhancing the capacities of facilitators through grassroots initiatives, and long-term organisational security through the Digital Security Accompaniment Programme. <https://www.digitaldefenders.org/>



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# Models of Feminist Helplines for People Facing Gender-Based Violence in Digital Spaces

This article analyzes feminist helplines that focus on supporting individuals and collectives that face gender-based violence in digital spaces. The analysis is based on an international mapping of initiatives, our review of existing resources and literature, as well as the qualitative analysis of three webinars with 12 feminist helpline projects organized by the Digital Defenders Partnership<sup>1</sup> between May and June 2021.

This article includes an introduction on how the evolution of the Internet into a centralized and commercialized space of surveillance has empowered gender-based online violence (GBOV) and given impetus to these new forms of violence in the historical war waged by the patriarchal, capitalist and colonial system against women, LGBTQI+ people and cultural minorities. We explain how this evolution of the Internet and digital spaces has impacted the ways in which feminist and cyberfeminist movements have articulated responses and devised diverse forms of feminist self-defence against GBOV. We see the creation and spread of feminist helplines as symbolizing the most contemporary example of the creation and innovation of "feminist infrastructure" to mitigate and counteract GBOV.

It includes a presentation of several helpline projects identified in the international mapping exercise, and detailed excerpts from the presentation of the 12 feminist helplines in the webinar series, focusing on their motivations, modes of operation, ways in which they are unique, and their challenges. We analyze four distinct models of GBOV-oriented helplines:

- The helpline for intermediaries
- The resource-creating helpline
- The large-scale helpline
- The local feminist helpline

It is important to note that these models are ideal-types and that the various projects included in this analysis may fall somewhere between two or more distinct models. We also want to underline that we refer to a set of projects and initiatives in this chapter that may be very different from each other in terms of how they operate and coordinate internally, their modes of funding and sustainability, the type of audiences they target, the activities they prioritize, how they refer to and work with other organizations, or even how they define themselves and/or how they interpret the support and attention they provide as feminist.

We believe this rich diversity in form and style reflects the fact that local contexts and networks devise tactical and contextualised responses to gender-based violence (GBV) and gender-based online violence (GBOV). Although these are global problems and no space is completely free of gender-based violence, the ways of addressing, mitigating and overcoming them always need to be seen in context and depend on the social, political, legal, cultural and technical characteristics of the environment. However, the aim of this article is to map existing services and helplines in order to learn from them, and to identify their diversity and richness, so we believe that it is better to keep a broad and open definition of what feminist helplines can be.

We understand them in essence to be initiatives that create and organize information and/or resources and/or support and accompaniment to make them available to individuals or groups facing GBOV. They can also facilitate referrals to other services or resources that they consider better positioned to support the person

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<sup>1</sup> Post in English: <https://www.digitaldefenders.org/es/lineasdeatencion/>  
Post in English: <https://www.digitaldefenders.org/feministhelplines/>

facing GBOV. By pursuing these objectives, the projects become visible points of reference, and the people and organizations that comprise them provide information and support remotely and sometimes face-to-face as well. This broad definition focuses on two essential elements, providing remote support on the one hand, and specifically working towards its objectives to provide tools to address GBOV - either directly to those facing it, or to support practitioners and/or activists accompanying people facing GBOV. These are the two common points shared by all the projects presented below.

Finally, we refer to digital spaces and/or Information, Communication and Relation Technologies (ICRT), and when we use the term "*online*" we refer to support services that use ICRT and/or take place in digital spaces. ICRTs include social networking platforms on the Internet.

## **A history of how the evolution of the Internet and social media platforms have empowered GBOV**

Spied on, harassed, criminalised; women, LGBTQI+ people, minorities, activists and human rights defenders pay a high price for digital surveillance. The Internet, social media and mobile phones have become tools to target them in a variety of ways. The potential of these technologies to express new identities, explore and empower sexualities, contribute to social transformation and the feminist agenda, has been diluted as companies understood how to develop business models based on trading data, and governments transformed these infrastructures into spaces from which to exercise new and old forms of control and surveillance.

How much digital information (or "data") exists about us? What kind of data has been created about our identity, social relationships and habits when we use commercial platforms, and digital devices, such as a mobile or computer? How does it relate to and reflect who we are and what we do when we are online or offline? All these questions imply that today's use of ICT and digital spaces generates personal traces and signs that can identify us and put us at risk in our material and physical lives.

However, in the early days of the Internet, perspectives on privacy and ways of presenting oneself and constructing a set of connected identities were very different. For example, a drawing<sup>2</sup> by Steiner published in 1993 in the New Yorker showed two dogs conversing about the fact that no one on the Internet knew they were dogs. The Internet was perceived as a new territory in which people could express themselves, communicate and relate to each other, freed from the weight of prejudices and stereotypes associated with gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. It was considered normal to use avatars or pseudonyms and to navigate the net while combining different identities. For all these reasons, several cyberfeminists in the 1990s saw the Internet as a place for new possibilities in terms of the empowerment of women, gender dissidents, and in general marginal or marginalized communities.

At the same time, a whirlwind of investments and start-ups were trying to see how to profit from the Internet. Although many did not survive the crash of the dotcom bubble<sup>3</sup> at the beginning of the millennium, some did understand that the success of their business model lay in the collection and sale of our data (and the tracking of our digital shadows), and thought that the best way to hook us up was to "give" us useful, accessible and innovative services. With the spread of this false notion of *free*, we traded our privacy, as well as the right to re-invent ourselves in multiple ways.

That change of course was evident in 2010, when Mark Zuckerberg declared that the age of privacy was over. This perspective signaled a new orientation of the neocon global agenda (seeking "radical transparency" for everyone but governments and corporations) as well as revealing that the new rules of the game were going to be driven by the use of our legal name and the multiplication of sensitive and/or identifiable monetizable personal information.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On\\_the\\_Internet\\_nobody\\_knows\\_you%27re\\_a\\_dog](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_the_Internet_nobody_knows_you%27re_a_dog)

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dot-com\\_bubble](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dot-com_bubble)

It is useful to think of all the digital data that exists about us as our digital traces. These make up a kind of "digital shadow" to which we add more data as we use digital tools and services. We know that companies collect it in to analyze our behavior and habits in order to sell us products and services. We also know that governments want to have access to as much information about us as possible so they can control, monitor and/or punish us. Finally, malicious people, trolls, Nazis, misogynists or anti-rights people may want that information to harass, blackmail, or spy on family members, or simply people whose lifestyle or opinions they dislike.

The moment that our data and browsing patterns became commodities upon which to entrench the power of the new oligopolies of the digital economy, is around when the conditions for a perfect storm of online misogyny and racism took hold. The majority of the world's population, institutions and economy became dependent between 2007 and 2014 on a few multinational companies created by men with often a proven track record of misogyny, and no agenda whatsoever related to the defense of human rights, let alone the rights of women or cultural minorities. These platforms are designed to facilitate virality, filter bubbles, polarization and pseudo-anonymity. Hate speech and gender-based violence can be monetized and its perpetrators can easily camouflage themselves. Their actions are practically unreportable, and these platforms basically wash their hands of what happens on them in terms of GBOV.

One of the first media episodes that exposed this storm of gender-based violence in digital spaces was #Gamergate, which took place in 2014 in the USA. At the time it was mainly perceived as a freak phenomenon related to the gaming community, but this episode showed the diversity of tactics that can mobilize groups and disperse networks of misogynists on the Internet, and how this violence impacts, with very real consequences, on the lives of the women attacked. Nonetheless GBOV already existed and international campaigns like the "16 days of activism of Take Back the Tech!" organised by the APC Women program since 2008 were created to raise awareness on this global phenomenon. We could say that around 2014 there is an increasing amount of feminist collectives and women human rights defenders around the world that begin to notice the effects of GBOV on their lives, and on their ability to continue using ICT, on the censorship of their voices and political opinions, on their mental health, on their professional and educational possibilities, on the amplification of new risks derived from the gender-based violence they were already facing. Women journalists are also beginning to call more the attention on the effects of this new type of attacks, as they are one of the first professional groups to increasingly use commercial social media platforms to promote their work and themselves. Between 2014 and 2018, we see a flourishing of international spaces and meetings that try to create an agenda around the need to organise feminist self-defence activities and create a feminist Internet. We are thinking of programs and networks such as: APC Women, GenderIT, Take Back the Tech, TransHackFeminist convergences, Feminist Internet meetings, the Gender and Technology Institutes, Femhack, etc.

These convergences make it possible to create spaces of trust and safety in which to develop a map of the situation on a global level, diagnose the problem and begin to articulate responses. Among these we find the creation of cyberfeminist spaces, collectives and networks that recognize each other and begin to interact, and jointly create events and resources, leading to the growth of spaces and resources for feminist self-defence including the digital perspective, the creation of conversations and research to create data and define GBOV, and the creation of an agenda to raise awareness of institutions and change laws on GBOV. Finally, we also see the emergence of cyberfeminist collectives that propose the creation of digital feminist infrastructure to respond to the communication needs of feminists and to promote, for example, feminist servers.

With this brief history we aim to emphasize that the explosion and multiplication of GBOV does not come out of nowhere but responds to the capitalist, patriarchal and colonialist agenda dedicated to the war against women and against any attempt to advance the rights of minorities. The centralization of the infrastructure of the Internet, and the companies that make and market the platforms have technically and politically empowered GBOV. In the face of this tidal wave of hate, misogyny and racism, feminist movements and their allies have been forced to create new ways to confront GBOV, and to create a new kind of feminist infrastructure. The historical origins of helplines targeting GBOV can be found in the context described above but also relate to previous feminist experiences of women sharing, creating and providing information about sexual and reproductive health, about safe routes and spaces to migrate out of a country or to find refuge when leaving an abusive relationship, or sharing information about abusers and dangerous men, etc.

With respect to these mechanisms of solidarity and support that can occur in groups or networks among equals, but also among people who are different and do not share common social characteristics, we also find the "sisterhood networks". Sisterhood is a "*neologism used to refer to solidarity among women in a context of sexual discrimination and patriarchal violence*".<sup>4</sup> This concept has been theorized in particular by the Mexican feminist researcher Marcela Lagarde, who defines sisterhood as a political pact among women. Faced with the daily experience of systematic and structural violence, many women and feminist collectives organise themselves to create networks of information, support and solidarity in order to break the sense of isolation, guilt or shame experienced by women who face gender-based violence. These initiatives create a technical and human infrastructure to support, inform and accompany women from a distance, with anonymity and confidentiality. The phone number, the email or the chat behind the helpline as a means to hold a conversation, all build an autonomous temporal space into which these mechanisms of sisterhood can be implemented. The versatility of sisterhood networks makes them another perfect example of feminist infrastructure. After all, the network of sisterhood is ultimately one of our earliest feminist technologies, perhaps the oldest and most pervasive.

Within the framework of this study, we understand feminist helplines to be part of the landscape of feminist infrastructure, which we define as follows: "*By feminist infrastructures we mean feminist struggles - everything that is sustained and shored up by more or less stable resources - so they can develop and move forward. By resources we mean techniques, technologies and processes (analogue, digital, and social). As examples of feminist infrastructure, we can mention the construction of safe spaces, women's shelters, libraries, trustworthy sisterhood networks, blacklists, servers, yellow pages, directories, bots, documentation and memory tools, encyclopedias, HerStories, spells, rituals, and techniques for life in the broadest sense, and so on. Feminist infrastructure also includes mobile, ephemeral, and transitory elements found in the temporary infrastructure of meetings, workshops, and parties that nurture the trust, affection, and well-being of fellow feminists. Feminist infrastructure is as old as feminist movements and collectives. It is one of the manifestations and results of the synergy that comes out of feminist activities and interactions, and sustains within it a systematization and circulation of good ideas, practices and support. Therefore, it also encompasses the wide array of feminist practices along with the techniques and technologies of information, communication, documentation and networking*".<sup>5</sup>

We will now go on to present the different models of feminist helplines identified for this chapter and introduce various projects that exemplify these models.

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4 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sisterhood\\_\(feminism\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sisterhood_(feminism))

5 Spideralex, Soutenir ce qui nous soutient : faire de l'infrastructure féministe, Revue Mouvements, 2021, [https://alexandria.anarchaserver.org/images/7/71/388-Texte\\_de\\_l%27article-891-1-10-20210702.pdf](https://alexandria.anarchaserver.org/images/7/71/388-Texte_de_l%27article-891-1-10-20210702.pdf)

## The helpline for intermediaries

These initiatives are not directly oriented to survivors; their main focus is on institutions and entities that respond to gender-based violence, especially women's shelters, as well as all professionals who work with people who face GBV.

## Safety Net Australia

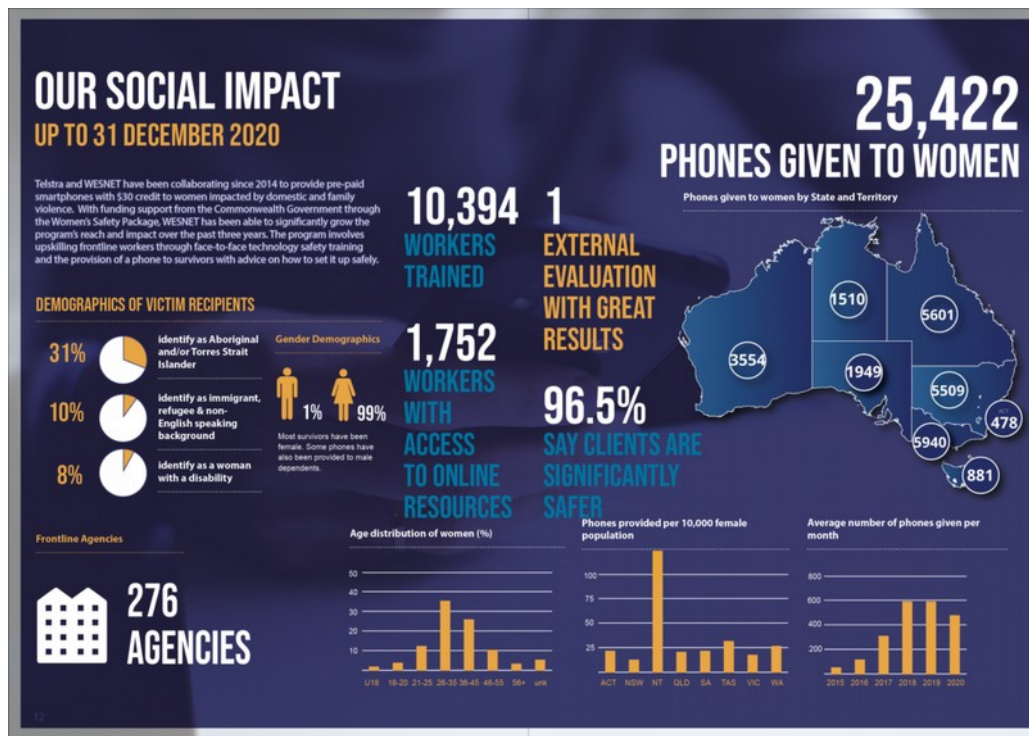


Figure 9: Safe Connections Snapshot December 2020

The longest established project we have been able to identify was set up in 1992 in Australia by the Women's Service Network (WESNET), a network of 320 organisations and individuals including women's shelters, refuges, safe houses and information and referral services. The project is called Safety Net Australia<sup>6</sup> and is maintained by WESNET's Safety Net Australia team. It is a website dedicated to technology, privacy and safety in the context of intimate partner violence, sexual assault and violence against women. They provide training and technical assistance to service providers, technologists and policy makers on issues related to gender-based violence in digital spaces. They also collaborate with Telstra's Safe Connections programme, which provides safe phones to women who experience gender-based violence enabled by ICT. Since their inception, they have trained thousands of frontline workers in GBV. They generally do not provide direct services to survivors but can provide information and resources to survivors and the workers who help them.

## Safety Net Project

Safety Net Australia was replicated in the USA in 2000 by the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV), a non-profit organization founded in 1990 and a network of over 2,000 organizations addressing GBV. The Safety Net Project<sup>7</sup> develops resources and information on the use of technology for agencies and survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking and trafficking. They also develop training for professionals within systems of support for GBV, as well as resources in many languages on how to implement safe use of technology for survivors of gender-based violence; resources on the use of technology to facilitate abuse (toolkit for survivors, agencies, app safety, confidentiality and legal systems); referrals to other helplines and organizations that can provide support; an app for documenting legal evidence (DocuSAFE- Documentation and

<sup>6</sup> <https://techsafety.org.au/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.techsafety.org/resources/>



Evidence Collection App) and Tech Safety App, an app that contains information to help someone identify stalking, harassment or abuse enabled by ICT.

It is interesting to note that these projects are often pioneers in creating data, diagnostics and research on GBOV, how ICRT and technologies are used to reproduce and amplify new forms of GBOV, and what their impacts are on women and survivors. Logically, this allows them to create diverse resources for practitioners and survivors on what they need to be aware of so that they are not digitally tracked, found, or re-victimized with technologies.

It is worth highlighting that these projects have relatively large salaried teams compared to local feminist helplines. We can also say that through their work, they have managed to highlight the issue of GBOV within GBV, along with how ICRTs and technologies in general are used to propagate new forms of GBOV, and how they can enable the creation of new forms of control. They have also managed to show how GBV support organisations must consider these risks, including them in their risk analyses and accompaniment plans, as well as in their own uses of ICT and digital spaces, as these may compromise their duty to maintain the confidentiality of survivors.

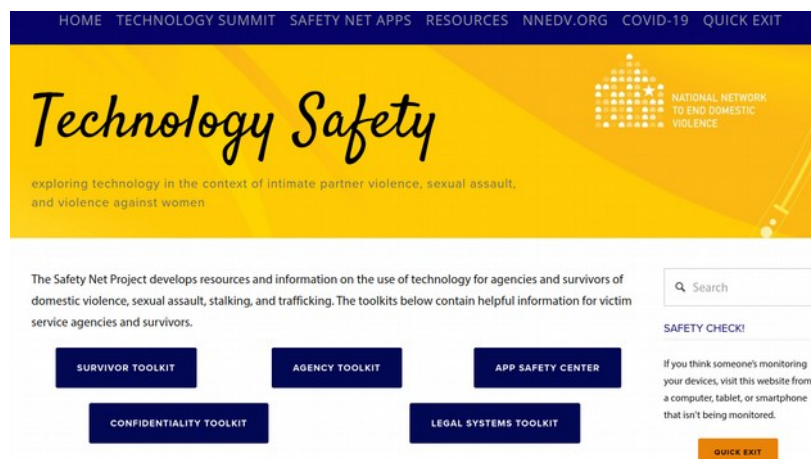


Figure 10: Home from <https://www.techsafety.org/resources/>

## ECHAP

Finally, we can point to another project that aims to replicate similar objectives and activities, which was created in France in 2020, The non-profit organization ECHAP<sup>8</sup> (Association de lutte contre l'utilisation de la technologie dans les violences faites aux femmes) aims to fight gender-based online violence. They define themselves as a feminist hacker collective composed of people with experience in analysis of malware and stalkerware. They aim to provide resources and support to associations that fight violence against women in the technological sphere. They focus their activity on the organization of workshops on the topic, the creation and updating of documentation, support in terms of analysis, and resolution of cases.

ECHAP shared the following in the feminist helpline webinar series: "So we try to explain to shelters what strategies a woman could use to disconnect from her ex-partner, so reset passwords, check to see if she still has access to her tax account from the government website, and so on. [...] There were nasty marketing campaigns like, 'You really want to know if your son is gay? Just spy on his smartphone'. 'You want to know if your wife is cheating on you? Just look at her smartphone'. For us this business is disgusting and should be totally illegal. And so we have tried to increase our understanding of how they work, how stalkerware works, how we can detect it" (ECHAP, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> <https://echap.eu.org/>

In general, we are struck by the fact that there are so few projects with these specific attributes and that most countries that have support systems for GBV do not have such projects or programs to support them with regard to GBOV. Two studies conducted in 2013 in Canada<sup>9</sup> and in 2018 in France<sup>10</sup> show how women's shelters and systems of support for GBV face challenges and dangers posed by the use of technologies which endanger survivors: *"Survivors and anti-violence agencies are now experiencing stalkers, abusers and rapists who hack computers and databases, threaten, impersonate, harass via email and social media, and steal confidential information via wireless networks and more. This is just a small sample of technology-enabled abuse, which makes it easier for perpetrators to carry out their often-sole mission, to track down and harm or kill his victim. This reality makes it crucial for GBV programs to have organizational technology practices that best protect the safety, privacy, identity and confidentiality of the women, youth, and children they serve".*<sup>11</sup>

Conversations with various actors in the field of GBV and GBOV support point to the lack of recognition of these issues, the lack of funding geared towards creating initiatives that can train and equip GBV support systems about all forms of technologies, from security, data protection, and the confidentiality of survivors, to the use of technologies to amplify GBV and how to implement safer practices with these technologies.

## **The resource-creating helpline**

We want to emphasize that all the helplines we have mapped produce resources. By resources we are referring to the creation of data and research on GBOV, its forms and impact, the development of guides, manuals, videos, infographics about GBOV, how to detect and mitigate it, the offer of workshops and training for professionals, intermediaries, feminist collectives and people facing GBOV, the referral to experts (lawyers, technicians, researchers, journalists, feminist activists, etc.) and/or other organizations that can give support about GBV or GBOV, and finally the development of apps, bots and platforms that facilitate access to information or support by third parties for people facing GBOV.

In this section we have included a selection of referral helplines whose main activities consist in producing resources. In general, because they become referral services and gain strong visibility in certain regions or with respect to addressing specific GBOV, they also tend to receive many requests for support from people facing GBOV. Although the mission or activity of some of these helplines is not to provide direct support and/or accompaniment to people facing GBOV, many are still contacted with requests to provide such support or to give referrals to other projects that can provide direct support.

Interestingly, the US is one of the countries in which we found the most helplines created before 2016. This is due to the fact that it is one of the countries with the most female internet users and online communities, has contributed significantly to the creation of the commercial internet as we know it today, and is also a country with a deep-rooted tradition of misogyny and racism. All of this has contributed to the early emergence of projects and initiatives dedicated to raising awareness and resources about GBOV.

## **Cyber civil rights initiative**

The Cyber Civil Rights Initiative<sup>12</sup> is a non-profit organization created in 2013, composed of academic researchers, lawyers and student volunteers dedicated to combating online harassment that threatens civil rights and civil liberties. CCRI specifically offers emotional support, technical advice and information to survivors of non-consensual pornography.

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<sup>9</sup> Organizational Technology Practices for Anti-Violence Programs, Protecting the Safety, Privacy & Confidentiality of Women, Youth & Children, Technology Safety, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> CYBER-VIOLENCES CONJUGALES RECHERCHE-ACTION MENÉE AUPRÈS DE FEMMES SURVIVORES DE VIOLENCES CONJUGALES ET DES PROFESSIONNEL-LE-S LES ACCOMPAGNANT, Centre Hubertine Auclert, 2018,

<sup>11</sup> Organizational Technology Practices for Anti-Violence Programs, Protecting the Safety, Privacy & Confidentiality of Women, Youth & Children, Technology Safety, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.cybercivilrights.org/welcome/about/>

Survivors can contact CCRI through the helpline or its website and receive support from a helpline counsellor or survivor support specialist. CCRI's Helpline provides access and communication to survivors 24 hours a day, seven days a week, providing the urgent support they need when the incident occurs. CCRI also provides individualized support via email and telephone. One-on-one support offers the survivor the opportunity for longer-term accompaniment than the Helpline can provide and also allows the survivor to speak to the same person each time. Giving someone the option of not talking to different counsellors each time mitigates the trauma of telling their story to new people several times and facilitates the building of trust between the survivor and the counsellor.

CCRI also develops partnerships with students and academic researchers who research GBOV, and creates resources for survivors, advocates, policy makers and legislators. They work on advocacy issues to change laws in different states across the U.S. and collaborate with attorneys who offer pro-bono services to represent survivors who want to speak out.

Another US project created in 2017 and dedicated exclusively to the production of resources is Online SOS<sup>13</sup>. It is a non-profit organization that connects people with information and tools to take action against online harassment. They especially focus on women journalists and lawyers, and do research and advocacy. They have an Online Stalking Legal Project<sup>14</sup>, which aims to provide a legal resource that can offer people more transparency about the process of getting civil restraining orders.



Figure 11: CCRI Crisis Helpline Home Page

## HeartMob

HeartMob<sup>15</sup> was created in 2016. This platform makes it easier for people experiencing bullying and GBOV to receive real-time support from allies. The platform also allows people to report and document bullying. The project was created by Hollaback! Foundation, a non-profit organization composed of an international network of activists dedicated to stopping harassment in the street. Their motivation for creating HeartMob has to do with their personal experiences as feminist anti-harassment activists. They point out that it is almost impossible to fight harassment without becoming the target of harassment, and it is their activism in Hollaback! that led them to experience the impact of online harassment first-hand and to consider creating a platform for peer-to-peer support. One of their participants has the following to say about the project:

*"We have also collected more than eighteen thousand stories of harassment in all its forms, and all that work allowed us to create this platform. I think the intervention of an ally in an online context has some specific opportunities, but it also has specific challenges. One of the opportunities is that, because it's the Internet, you*

<sup>13</sup> <https://onlinesos.org>

<sup>14</sup> <https://onlinesos.org/online-stalking-legal-project>

<sup>15</sup> <https://iheartmob.org/about>

can quickly call people for support. It's very easy to send that bat signal, if you will, through the organization or through the Internet to get help. But one of the challenges of online bystander intervention is that it makes you vulnerable to harassment, that the harasser can easily start attacking you if you come out publicly in defense of someone who is being harassed. We developed HeartMob with the intention of providing a safe community where allies could act without being detected by the bully" (Heartmob, 2021).

A fundamental element of the platform is security and concerns about the following: "As you can imagine, the number one risk of this platform is infiltration. We launched this project in 2016 and I'm proud to say that we have yet to suffer the consequences of infiltration, but part of that is because we have such high security on the platform, we want to make sure that the people on this platform are who they say they are and that they have the intentions they say they have. Once you connect, you can ask to be supported or you can seek to support others, what we find is that most people want to do both, and even people who want to be supported will often support others first. It's a way of acknowledging that you're not alone, that other people are going through this too. So part of our job is to share those stories and allow people to support each other through meaningful actions. Some of the actions that people can take include documenting and cataloguing the harassment. That information is what is stored in a folder in the backend. One of the things that we've learned is, of course, that documentation through screenshots, collecting hyperlinks, is a good practice but at the same time it can retraumatize people who experience online harassment. So if someone does it for you and puts it in a secure folder, you can have it. Then you decide whether you look at it, or you can decide to never look at that content. But if you need to because the situation is escalating, the documentation is there" (Heartmob, 2021).

Outside of the U.S., we found several projects dedicated to creating resources in Latin America. This is a diverse region marked by high rates of femicide and gender violence, laws that criminalize the sexual and reproductive rights of women and LGBTQI+ people, and a context of impunity in which authorities rarely act or investigate those crimes. This context gives rise to a particularly ebullient landscape of feminist and cyberfeminist collectives and networks that have been working for years, mainly on a voluntary and activist basis, in the self-organization of initiatives and the creation of local and regional strategies to mitigate GBV and GBOV in their territories.

## **Acoso.online**

Acoso.online<sup>16</sup> was born in Chile as an urgent, voluntary and much-needed response for women and LGBTQI+ people who suffer gender-based violence on a daily basis through the non-consensual publication of sexual or erotic images and videos. In the words of one of its members, the objective in 2017 "was to create a platform that would also break this idea that women are to blame, that women are to blame for using technologies, for exercising our sexuality freely or simply for being women" (Acoso.online, 2021).

It is the first website that provides information in Spanish about this type of gender violence facilitated by the Internet and ICRT. Acoso.online provides guidance to survivors in 17 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as in Spain<sup>17</sup>. Acoso.online is an independent project, with no institutional affiliation. However, the regional scale of this project is only possible thanks to the support of local organizations that input the legal and judicial content in each country.

Considering that the type of GBOV most reported across the world is the non-consensual publication of intimate images and videos, and because it disproportionately affects women and LGBTQI+ people and a need was felt for a place for listing the resources and strategies that can be put to work to resist and counteract this,

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<sup>16</sup> <https://acoso.online/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://acoso.online/es/>

Acoso.Online has become the portal of reference for Spanish-speaking countries to find updated information and resources about this type of GBOV.

The website offers 5 sections in which you can find various means of resisting the non-consensual sharing of intimate images and videos: 1) Reporting the case to Internet platforms; 2) Knowing the laws that can help you; 3) Reporting to judicial authorities; 4) Resisting and taking control of technology; 5) Opening a dialogue with your community. In addition, in 2021, they published an emergency repository containing useful resources for a variety of communities. In the words of one of its members: *"We have developed a series of materials in which we give recommendations on how to conduct these talks with the community. And well, we have a guide for educational institutions because we know that much of the dissemination of intimate content without consent and digital violence occurs in schools and we also know that there are no protocols to address them. Also, we have proposals for minimum standards for platforms to be able to work in ways which are respectful and take human rights into account. Last year we made a guide for journalistic coverage, because we have very often come across pieces of journalism in which people are stigmatized and revictimized, in which there is a lot of confusion about these terms that describe digital violence and refer to sexting when it has nothing to do with it. We also have a document where we make recommendations for public policy proposals, how to develop public policy tools to eradicate digital violence against women and the sexually diverse community"* (Acoso.online, 2021).



Figure 12: Flyer launching Spanish chapter of Acoso.online/en

Finally, they have developed other resources such as a board game and a bot on Telegram that makes it easier for people to be redirected to the online harassment resources they might need at that moment: *"You can log in through a Telegram bot and go to the chat and it will give you some advice on what to do if you're going through this. And it's also very friendly because it has GIFs of kittens and it has really cute things that just make people like calm and we can talk about it in a calm way. We also have a do-it-yourself board game, which is also to talk about it with the community. The idea of this is that the communities, specifically in schools or at work, know what the dissemination of intimate content without consent is and can work with their communities independently"* (Acoso.online, 2021).

Another project located in Latin America and created in 2017 is Ciberseguras<sup>18</sup>. They define themselves as follows: *"We are many, each with different powers, we come from different galaxies but we constellate together. Our shared space is the network and we unite to scare away the hidden forces that attack us. To confront them, we conspire in cyberfeminist covens. Ciberseguras is the fire that brings us together in a circle of joy, dance and connection. Here we learn together."* This informal collective functions as a network that coordinates the efforts of diverse cyberfeminist projects located in Latin America and is composed of the following collectives: Clandestina (Brazil), Ciberfeministas GT (Guatemala), Derechos Digitales (Chile-Mexico), Dominemos la tecnología - APC, Luchadoras (Mexico), Nodo Común (Bolivia) and SocialTIC (Mexico). Their website aims at mapping digital security resources with a feminist perspective and making them available in their search engine. They also work with a network to advocate on GBOV issues in the region.

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18 <https://ciberseguras.org>

## The large-scale helpline

In this category we will lay out different examples of helplines that have very different operating models but share the fact that they are oriented towards a large number of people. They are designed for international communities or on a national scale and this impacts the way they carry out the care and support work they provide.

### Coalition Against Online Violence

We will start with the Coalition Against Online Violence<sup>19</sup>, a coalition created in 2020, with more than 40 organizations offering collective support to journalists, strengthening their digital safety and empowering media outlets in general to keep their female employees safer online. The coalition targets people who identify as women journalists, journalists of color, and newsrooms in general. The coalition was founded by Craig Newmark Philanthropies and the International Women's Media Foundation. The IWMF provides gender-sensitive digital safety training and support to thousands of women journalists. The IWMF Board of Directors is a diverse group of veteran journalists, media personalities and business leaders working to strengthen the role of women in journalism.

As noted in the introduction, women journalists have been among the first to experience harassment and GBOV and to draw international attention to this situation by showing the impact that such violence has on their ability to perform their work, how GBOV can silence women's voices or lead to self-censorship, and how it damages their professional and economic opportunities. They have also highlighted the lack of understanding and support they received from their peers and editors regarding the harassment they were subjected to online. Resources and support helplines targeting this professional group in particular have been created because of this specific situation.

As one of the coalition members tells us: *"A report by the International Women's Media Foundation on online abuse and its effect on women found that 70 percent of women journalists have experienced some form of online harassment or attack in the past. And this had serious consequences for them in their daily work as journalists, with a third of them considering leaving the profession because of online attacks and threats. So for the IWMF, this was a really alarming statistic. The IWMF works globally to support women journalists around the world to report and carry out their work safely. They do this through a mix of assistance, support, grants and funding for certain stories."* (Coalition Against Online Violence, 2021).

Conversations and focus groups with women journalists have led them to launch several online courses on the Totem platform<sup>20</sup>. These have taken place in Spanish and Arabic:

*"The idea of the Know Your Trolls course is to introduce journalists to the idea of understanding who is attacking you and why they might be attacking you and who is behind them. Is it state-sponsored attacks? Is it far-right online groups or very religious or political groups attacking them? Because what we found through focus groups with the journalists is that they often only saw that they were being attacked online, but they were struggling to understand who was attacking them and why that might be"* (Coalition Against Online Violence, 2021).

*"The second course, Keep it Private. This one also grew out of the focus groups and speaking to experts, where we realized that women journalists tend to put a lot of content about themselves online. They've been encouraged to do that over the past 10 years with the growth of social media, and a lot of that data is now being used to harass and intimidate them. So this course is really designed to educate people about data privacy and what data is kept private and why and how to remove data from the Internet once it's online. These*

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.iwmf.org/coalition-against-online-violence/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://totem-project.org/>

two courses have been created for journalists, but they are equally applicable for human rights defenders, activists and others who are looking to learn more about online abuse and data privacy" (Coalition Against Online Violence, 2021).

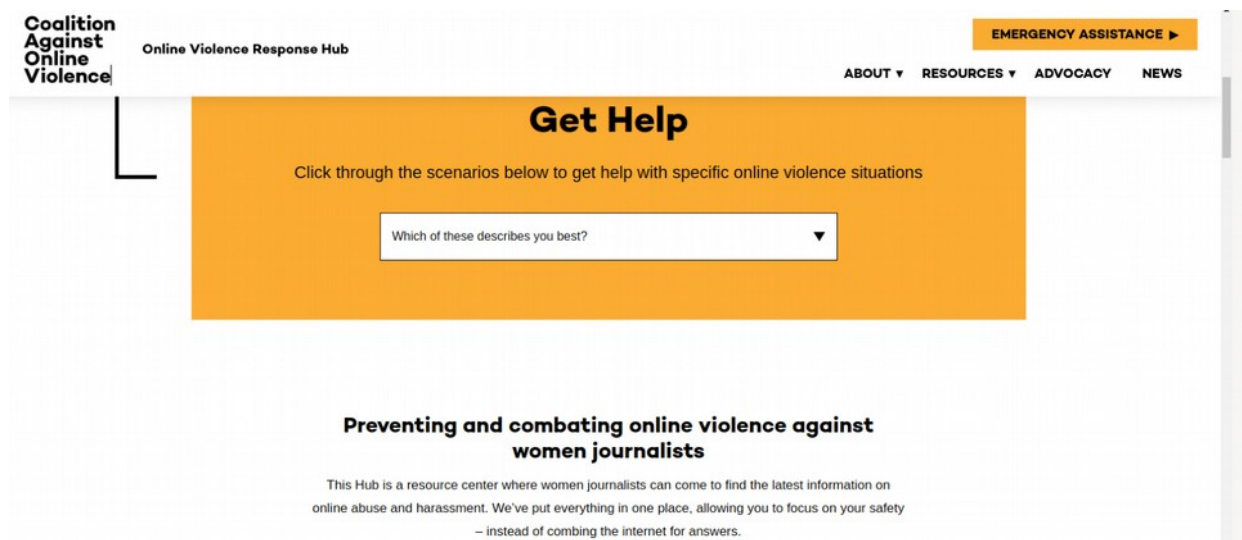


Figure 13: Online Violence Response Hub

In 2021, the Coalition Against Online Violence launched a resource hub after conducting a survey with all coalition member organisations in which they identified the difficulty in finding the right resources when you needed them and/or when you were under attack: *"This is a website where you can go to find everything related to online violence. It will be a place that will provide up-to-date information on research into online violence, for example. We will showcase the work of people and organisations working to support journalists and newsrooms. And if you're also an ally and you want to support someone, you can go here as well to find information about online violence. So you'll be able to look and search for different kinds of research. For example, if you want to support someone you can type: I want to support somebody. I'm interested in online violence and digital security support. And it will bring up all the resources that we currently have, both from IWMF and the coalition and other places"* (Coalition Against Online Violence, 2021).

## SaferNet

SaferNet is a non-profit organisation established in 2005 in Brazil. It provides anonymous and confidential guidance on Internet crimes and human rights violations. Its team is made up of specialists who provide guidance on how to prevent specific online violence, what to do to report it, and, when possible, to facilitate the identification of health and/or social assistance institutions that can provide a face-to-face service as close as possible to the person who contacts them. The project defines itself as a helpline<sup>21</sup> to support people facing cybercrimes and violations of their human rights on the Internet and in digital spaces, and also defines itself as a hotline<sup>22</sup> by being the space where GBOV and online crimes against human rights can be reported: *"We offer one-to-one conversations on how to prevent and report online violence, such as grooming, sextortion and non-consensual sharing of intimate images, cyberbullying and human rights related issues. It's a web-based service. So we will offer counselling through chats and email [...] We offer mainly psychological support to survivors in emotional distress, advice to families and educators on what to do if they know a survivor and we also provide legal information on how to access the protection and mental health system."* (Safernet, 2021).

<sup>21</sup> <https://new.safernet.org.br/helpline>

<sup>22</sup> <https://new.safernet.org.br/denuncie>



This helpline can also escalate cases directly to social media platforms, and are treated as trusted partners: "We report any non-consensual sharing to pilots that are set up by Facebook. We have a partnership in this issue with them, and we can escalate to some other platforms as trusted partners" (Safernet, 2021).



Figure 14: Display Helpline statistics

Messages are only accessed by a specialized team and can only be disclosed to the authorities in situations of suspected or confirmed serious violence against children and adolescents. They use cryptographic techniques to protect all information. As a channel for reporting, they are the official entity in Brazil responsible for compiling attacks on human rights, gender-based hate speech and LGBTQphobia on the Internet. They also compile data about the different GBOV and other cybercrimes and use data visualization to make them available on their website, which makes them an observatory of violence on the Internet<sup>23</sup>.

One of its participants shared an example about the data they collected during the confinement caused by the COVID-19 crisis: "We have noticed a significant increase in the complaints that are shared with us, and, for example, sexual abuse material. And if you can see that in hate speech against women, there's a seven to eight percent increase compared to 2018 [...] The main issue for 2020 is mental health. So the most common situation reported by survivors is related to non-consensual sharing and, of course, all situations involving exposure of intimate images. But pandemic mental health became number one, and we don't have a mental health helpline, only a suicide prevention crisis line" (Safernet, 2021).

Finally, it's worth noting that Safernet are members of the international network INSAFE and INHOPE created in 1999. These organisations collaborate with each other "through a network of Safer Internet Centres (SICs) in over 40 countries, which typically include an awareness centre, a helpline, a phone helpline and a youth panel. National awareness centres focus on raising awareness and understanding of issues of online safety and emerging trends. They run campaigns to equip children, young people, parents, carers and teachers with the skills, knowledge and strategies needed to stay safe online and take advantage of the opportunities offered by the Internet and mobile technology. The helplines provide information, advice and assistance to children, young people and parents on how to deal with harmful content, harmful contact (such as grooming) and harmful behaviour (cyberbullying or sexting)".<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> <https://indicadores.safernet.org.br/index.html>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.inhope.org/EN>

## Cyberharassment Helpline<sup>25</sup>

The Cyberharassment Helpline<sup>26</sup> was created in 2016 in Pakistan by the Digital Rights Foundation<sup>27</sup>. It is a helpline for survivors of online harassment and violence which provides a free, safe and confidential service. They offer legal advice, digital safety support, counselling and a referral system to survivors of online harassment. It is the first helpline of its kind in Pakistan, and certainly one of the first such helplines globally.

The idea is a longstanding one and its realization is the logical culmination of DRF's work on gender and technology, specifically the Hamara Internet (which translates as "our internet") project, where they conducted several digital safety and anti-harassment sessions in various colleges and universities in Pakistan between 2014 and 2015. They found that many young women had faced harassment online but had nowhere to turn for assistance. The idea became even more urgent after the brutal "honor" killing of Qandeel Baloch, a social media celebrity, when many feminists and activists faced online violence simply for defending her and opposing her murder.

The helpline was initially established with a small grant and was inspired by helplines in other countries that support people who are survivors of non-consensual dissemination of intimate content, but adapting the services to the needs of Pakistani women. In this specific context, one helpline member explains: *"There is a concept of honor here, attached to women, and there is a concept of women covering themselves in a certain way. If they are not covered or they're seen with men or hanging around with them, then they can be blackmailed on basis of that. And that's something that we observed in 2016. There were more than two hundred cases of honor killings in Pakistan"* (DRF, 2021).

The helpline is operational from Monday to Friday (9am to 5pm), although during the confinement caused by the COVID-19 crisis they expanded their working time to 24/7. Given the lack of internet access and the gender digital divide, the helpline can also be reached through a phone number which is toll-free when people call from landlines, and cost-sharing when calling from mobile phones. This channel also helps to ensure caller confidentiality as no account or email address is needed to contact them. In addition to the phone line, they also communicate by email ([helpdesk@digitalrightsfoundation.pk](mailto:helpdesk@digitalrightsfoundation.pk)), and they also receive inquiries on their Facebook page. However, in those cases they ask people to switch to a more secure mode of communication such as a phone line.

In terms of the people who staff the helpline, they work in the following way: *"The structure of the helpline is that there is a program manager and then we have three other specialized people working at the helpline. One is a legal expert, one is a mental health professional and there is a digital security expert. These people trained the helpline officers so that they can take the calls and counsel the complainants when they call. Because of the time-sensitive nature of such complaints, it's very important that whoever takes the call is familiar with all the preventive measures and strategies that are gender-sensitive. That is why it was decided that three experts have to be there and they need to screen the helpline staff. When a case comes in, if an expert opinion or some kind of legal advice is needed, the helpline officers reach out to the experts. Otherwise, they deal with the case on their own because they've been trained to do so"* (DRF, 2021).

Regarding the services they provide, *"the helpline acts as a referral and we escalate our cases with social media platforms because we have escalation channels with Facebook and their NCSI pilot. We also have the Internet Watch Foundation's online pilot for online child pornography. So we're able to escalate content and get that taken down. And we're also able to help complainants file a complaint with law enforcement in Pakistan. And there are also women, young girls wanting to get out of toxic families or abusive relationships. We also link*

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<sup>25</sup> This presentation is based on an interview conducted by email in 2019 with the Digital rights Foundation, it has been updated to include extracts of their presentation during the webinars organised by DDP.

<sup>26</sup> <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/cyber-harassment-helpline/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/>

with shelters in Pakistan. And then we can refer a complaint, and all of this goes beyond the digital security services and the legal assistance that the helpline provides" (DRF, 2021).

One helpline member says that it is "important for us, as people who manage the helpline, who work at the helpline, that we have certain security protocols in place and one major, essential protocol is that we have everyone who works on the helpline maintain a non-disclosure agreement so that confidentiality and privacy is ensured, and that any data we keep is not personally identifiable. So nobody can understand that data except the one who is handling or storing it" (DRF, 2021).<sup>28</sup>



Figure 15: Cyberharassment Helpline Banner

The call takers do not collect personally identifiable data and information. However, they do ask for demographic information that callers can voluntarily provide, such as their gender, age, geographic location, mental health indicators, nature of the complaint, etc. They also take notes on the calls, and encourage the callers to keep them informed about their cases to facilitate their longer-term accompaniment. All this enables them to publish annual reports<sup>29</sup> on the landscape of online violence in Pakistan and also to function as an observatory of GBOV. The helpline is a member of CiviCERT and twice a year shares analysis with the other members on the rapid response cases they accompany, and what are the attacks, digital threats and trends they can detect in Pakistan.

In terms of coverage, all major newspapers and news channels reported on the launch of the helpline. This provided a great opportunity to enhance its outreach and facilitate awareness of its role and necessity. In addition, DRF has communicated with other partners in Pakistan to encourage them to refer cases related to online violence against women to them. They have also run advertisements on social media, and developed adverts for Urdu-language newspapers and announcements on regional radio programs. Finally, "we organize sessions, conferences, and then we go to schools and universities to start a discourse around online harassment and also to educate people on children and university students so that they can take that message and spread it as well. And it's also very important for them to be aware of their legal rights so that they can help someone else who's experiencing that kind of problem. And because what we have seen is that the majority of the complainants lie in the 14-25 age bracket, so in order to protect them as a preventive measure, we reach out to them" (DRF, 2021).

The majority of the calls they receive are from women (55%) or are about cases where women are the survivors or the target of attacks and violence. However, they also receive a good number of calls from men. Often the

<sup>28</sup> Digital Rights Foundation Cyberharassment helpline Privacy Policy: [https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/DraftPolicy\\_1.8\\_02.06.2020.pdf](https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/DraftPolicy_1.8_02.06.2020.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Digital Rights Foundation Cyberharassment helpline Annual helpline Report 2020: <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Helpline-Report-2020.pdf>

men who approach them do not experience the same mental stress and trauma that women experience. In addition, because men do not face the same mobility issues, they can more easily refer their cases to law enforcement agencies.

In the first four months of operation (December 2016 to March 2017), the helpline received 535 calls: 406 individual cases and 116 follow-up calls. Between 2016 and 2020 they handled a total of 7790 cases, and in 2020 alone they handled 2551 calls, showing an increase in the number of calls from one year to the next. Furthermore, they experienced a huge increase during the confinement in 2020: *"We saw an increase in online harassment cases and there was a 500% increase in online defamation cases and a 1200% increase in hate speech cases compared to 2019"* (DRF, 2021).

The three most common cases of violence reported had to do with impersonation and fake profiles, non-consensual use of information (images/videos) and, finally, extortion and blackmail. According to the data they generated, online harassment occurs mostly on Facebook and WhatsApp.

The most difficult part of their work is dealing with law enforcement agencies, which are often understaffed, ill-equipped to deal with technology issues, and generally not gender-sensitive. In addition, cybercrime offices are only located in the provincial capitals of Pakistan, making it difficult for the rest of the country to access them. Their experience has helped them map the shortfalls within existing institutions in dealing with digital technologies and related gender-based violence issues, and they have conducted training sessions with government departments and law enforcement to sensitize them to the issues faced by callers.

Finally, in terms of challenges, they highlight the difficulty of escalating cases to platforms like Facebook that are not equipped to understand the cultural context of Pakistan: *"So it's important to be able to understand the context of the country and be able to build that with social media companies. And I think this is something that we still struggle with because sometimes we see women taking pictures of young girls smoking or doing something that their family doesn't approve of. And they get uploaded and they don't get taken down because they were taken in a public space. So it's something we're constantly struggling with and juggling with social media companies"* (DRF, 2021). Finally the issue of funding for the helpline presents a constant challenge: *"the challenges we've encountered so far are related to sustainability because the helpline is a funded project. So what if there's no funding, how do we maintain it, how do we manage it? And for that, we have created certain resources for people to access help. And one of them is a portal of lawyers and professionals who can offer free legal services to women who are experiencing online harassment, for example"* (DRF, 2021).

## **The local feminist helpline**

This type of helpline is usually made up of feminist peers who have themselves experienced and/or supported feminist peers facing GBOV. They are usually relatively small teams in which the participants have multidisciplinary knowledge, extensive experience and background with feminist self-defence and digital security issues. Sometimes they come from other areas of feminist accompaniment for people facing GBV (safe abortion accompaniment, survivors of sexual violence, etc.). They usually accompany the people who call them in the medium or long term rather than with a single intervention. They also tend to produce research and diagnoses about the situation regarding GBOV in their context, and develop processes of reflection about the feminist values and principles of their work. These projects are usually sustained with a mix of funding through grants and donations and volunteer work by participants. Their level of visibility and openness to receiving cases or calls often depends on internal capacities to support them.

## Crash Override Network

One of the first such helplines is the Crash Override Network<sup>30</sup>, a non-profit organization founded in the US in 2015 by Zoe Quinn and Alex Lifschitz after experiencing high-profile cases of online abuse and harassment in the wake of #Gamergate. Crash Override Network defines itself as a *“purely defensive organization, we use proven and humane methods to combat online abuse, putting the needs, privacy and consent of our clients above all else. ONLINE ABUSE is a very broad topic that can mean many things to many people, so it's important to know exactly what we can handle. We take a multi-pronged approach that involves working with individuals, technology partners, law enforcement agencies and legislatures.”*

In a different line of work, Anita Sarkasian, another leading American feminist activist who has also suffered torrents of harassment and GBOV, launched in 2019 an all-volunteer helpline aimed at supporting people who participate in gaming communities in the US, the Games and Online Harassment Helpline<sup>31</sup>. It is a free, confidential, text message-based emotional support line, created for gamers including women gamers, developers and streamers. As of today, there is little documentation about this helpline and we have not been able to contact them to get more information, but we think it is an important project because gamer communities are highly liable to be subjected to online harassment and GBOV. We hope that they will promote their project more so other communities can replicate their model in other regions of the world.

## Clinic to End Tech Abuse

Another project created in 2019 and located in the US, more specifically in New York City, proposes a very innovative approach to GBOV. The Clinic to End Tech Abuse<sup>32</sup> is composed of volunteer experts who work directly with survivors to determine whether someone is using technology to harm them, and what they can do to keep themselves safe. These meetings are usually taking place in face-to-face clinics in which a digital security expert, a survivor and a GBV professional accompanying the survivor meet to conduct an in-depth analysis of the survivor's situation with respect to their devices and digital spaces, in order to determine if they are compromised and what kind of actions should be taken to reconstruct safety in these spaces. The clinic volunteers are graduate students and professionals with experience in fields such as computer security, human-computer interaction, and computing for marginalized communities. They receive special training in detecting technology-related abuse and working with people who have survived trauma. The work with the clinics is done through a partnership with the New York Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence (ENDGBV). They also facilitate academic research<sup>33</sup> to understand how perpetrators may misuse technology (Computer security and privacy for survivors of intimate partner violence) in collaboration with Cornell University.

CETA regularly engages in legal and policy advocacy, proposing reforms based on their practical work in clinics and their academic research. They receive consultation from federal and state legislators to protect and empower survivors through regulation. They also advise technology companies on how to design policies and products which are characterized by empathy to survivors. Finally, they produce resources and guides on how to spot malware or what issues to consider when separating from one's partner.

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30 <http://www.crashoverridenetwork.com/about.html>

31 <https://gameshotline.org>

32 <https://www.ceta.tech.cornell.edu>

33 <https://www.ipvtechresearch.org/>

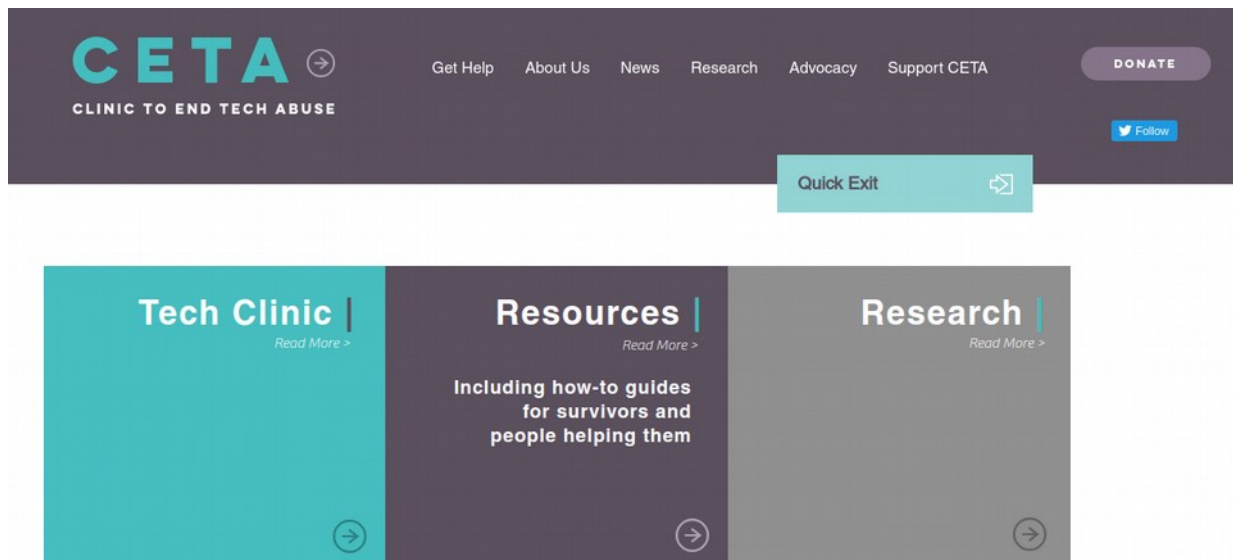


Figure 16: CETA Homepage

## Awaskbgo helpline

Awaskbgo helpline<sup>34</sup> was created in 2019 in Indonesia by the NGO Safenet. Initially started as a campaign during the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, it has been expanding into a unit dedicated to advocating for survivors in cases of gender-based online violence in Indonesia: *"From our observation throughout 2019, we mapped the situation in Indonesia and see a skyrocketing increase in cases of threats of sharing non-consensual intimate images. Survivors are afraid of the laws that could criminalize rather than protect them, such as the cyber law, and also the pornography law. And there is also a limited pool of organizations or communities that provide services focused on online gender-based violence in Asia"* (Awaskbgo, 2021).

This excerpt shows us that one of the motivations behind their creation is to fill a gap in the GBV landscape by offering a response to GBOV. This is a common element for several local feminist helplines described in this section: they are created to respond to GBOV, which is neglected or invisibilized by institutional responses to GBV. In addition, several seek to move from responding purely from precarious informal and voluntary spaces, to becoming a formal, visible and funded project in order to shore up their feminist activist work.

This helpline has built extensive networks and collaboration with agencies and civil society organizations that support people facing GBV. In the words of its coordinator: *"Since mid-2019, we have partnered with the National Commission on Violence Against Women on a referral basis. So we are their digital safety consultants, not for the institution, but for the survivors. So whenever they get reports of online gender-based violence they ask the survivors if they want to have a digital safety consultancy, and if they say yes, then the survivors will be referred to us"* (Awaskbgo helpline, 2021).

Finally, we should note that they are initiating work to provide content and a more accessible helpline for deaf and blind people facing GBOV: *"And soon we will be developing educational content for the blind and deaf communities with the support of the digital advocates program. We are also collaborating with UNICEF, Women Empowerment and the fight for child protection. Our focus right now is on collaboration and developing and distributing knowledge about gender-based violence in Indonesia in an inclusive way"* (Awaskbgo Helpline, 2021).

<sup>34</sup> <https://awaskbgo.id/>

## Vita activa

Vita Activa<sup>35</sup> is a helpline created in 2018 for women journalists and women human rights defenders who experience GBOV. They work in English and Spanish and their team is made up of Latin American colleagues. One of its founders recounts the evolution in the collective's internal learning about how to provide accompaniment from a feminist and holistic perspective to a person facing GBOV: *"I don't think that when we started we were able to understand the level of toll that this work has on mental health [...] How do we care for a person and support them in a time of need when time is of the essence, when there is harm both to themselves and to the community? And when the perception of what is happening to them is different for each person? [...] So what we did was we brought the concepts of emotional and empathic support into online bullying spaces. And the way we provide psychological first aid is based on three questions [...] So we work intensively on empathy. We work intensively on achievement. We work intensively on strategic solutions. [...] So the first question is simple: how are you doing with stress? When you ask a person how they are doing, what you are sharing is a deep concern for their well-being. Vita Activa people are not mental health professionals and we are not digital security professionals, we are peers, we are users, and we are also communicators, or journalists, or activists and/or feminists and there are non-binary people as well. So when a colleague asks you, how are you? The conversation is set around the virtual kitchen table where we are friends [...] The second question is can you explain the problem to me? And let a person control their own narrative and be able to explain in their own simple terms. We don't focus and we don't insist: this is called this, or this is called that. We allow the space, we hold the space open for a person to be able to set out their narrative [...] The third question is what do you want us to do for you? What is your desire? [...] And that's where we enter into a space of building solutions with the person who has come to us looking for the right support, directing them to another group or even doing it together"* (Vita Activa, 2021).

## Luchadoras Helpline

Luchadoras<sup>36</sup> is a Mexican feminist collective created in 2015 that has been operating a helpline since 2020: *"We are operating a helpline to attend mainly women who are experiencing digital violence in Mexico. This initiative arises from an increase in the need detected in the reception of requests received in our social networks. The main actions of the support line are: Providing comprehensive accompaniment; Psychological first aid; Detecting needs; Providing information: alternatives for action, forms of reporting, content on digital violence, digital security, contacts of possible support networks; Escalation of cases through the development and monitoring of reports on various platforms; Channeling to organizations / specialized institutions for optimal support and monitoring"* (Luchadoras HL, 2021).

As to why this project arose, one of its participants tells us the following: *"As a result of accompanying women who live with violence, we were working to create knowledge about how women were experiencing violence in Mexico, to be able to identify it and also to recognize it. And our work was to make violence visible on the public agenda, this made us a reference point and also opened up the possibility of having a support space for women who were facing this violence. Requests began to arrive and in March 2020 we decided to equip ourselves in order to provide support to women who were looking for us asking for support, accompaniment and information"* (Luchadoras HL, 2021).

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35 <https://vita-activa.org/>

36 <https://luchadoras.mx/>



Figure 17: Luchadoras Feminista Website

Regarding internal structure and processes, they highlight the following: *"How does it work? We assess the case. When the request comes to us, we look at what their needs are, together with the women, we provide orientation, information about alternatives or possible routes, we provide emergency accompaniment and emotional support, and we also accompany them in reports to social networks and other platforms, and we also link or channel them to organizations or institutions, depending on the need. We do not have a legal department, but we are in the process of incorporating a lawyer in our team. And we also accompany the incorporation of the Facebook pilot program: Never without your consent, which is to prevent the dissemination of intimate content [...] We have an email that is the support line. They also contact us through our networks, through our website, which is linked to our email. Also through links to other organizations that receive cases and ask us for support and through our telephone line and WhatsApp"* (Luchadoras, 2021).

Regarding this first year of helpline activity, they shared the following analysis of the people who call, the type of GBOV, the identification of the aggressors and the platforms in which the violence occurs: *"In 2020 we received 470 requests. Eighty-five percent are from Mexico and the rest from other countries. Also, ninety percent of the requests we received to our helpline were from women and 9 percent from men. However, of this 9 percent, 4 percent were men requesting support and information for other women, their partners or friends. [...] We also recorded what types of digital violence were occurring and we started from the typology of 13 forms of aggression against women through technologies that we built with Social ICT and APC. These forms of violence in most cases are intertwined [...] Last year in Mexico there were threats for disseminating intimate content, but we also recorded threats of physical harm to women, their family members, their children, even death threats. In second place, 28 percent of the cases we recorded were concerned with the dissemination of intimate content and in third place, harassment, whether sexual or not. We also made an analysis of the people who are generating violence and for most of the cases, 50 percent, were people who were not identified with certainty, because they used nicknames or had a fake profile. 36 percent were people who were known to them and who had a fake profile. Thirty-six percent were people who were known and fully identifiable. And in 13 percent, the person was identified but it was someone unknown. And, well for the people who were known to the survivor, in many of the cases we identified the ex-partner - in 32 percent. This is because they have access to content at some point in the relationship. They threatened them or it was just to exert control to continue in*



*the relationship. We also identified partners of ex-partners. And co-workers, students, teachers, friends, followers, clients, the government, organized crime, and telephone technicians. Finally, the platforms where we identified the attacks are Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, email, Telegram, pornographic sites, dating apps, and 87 percent were in applications that are affiliated with Facebook. Secondly, Twitter, and the rest on other platforms" (Luchadoras, 2021).*

## **Navegando Libres**

Navegando Libres<sup>37</sup> is a program created in Ecuador in 2020 by Taller Comunicacion Mujer to highlight, accompany and mitigate gender-based violence that occurs in the digital environment, and to promote the digital rights of women, girls and LGBTQI people. The project focuses on feminist accompaniment methodologies as well as training other colleagues to be able to provide this accompaniment. One of its participants defines it as follows: *"An accompaniment that is found and positioned from feminism. Therefore, for us, what the survivors want is what is at the center. And that's why we talk about the principle of asking what do you need? To be able to provide this security, care and agency to be able to think about the actions that we are going to take throughout the accompaniment and always trying to not be an assistentialist project"* (Navegando Libres, 2021).

And they also add how these processes prolong and reinforce political mechanisms in which women weave networks of sisterhood: *"And something that we have seen is that accompaniment, in addition to being so transformative, through the possibility of agency, the possibility of care and the possibility of security, means that a complicity is generated with the other person who, despite being on a screen on the other side, implies a complicity of trust between us"* (Navegando Libres, 2021).

Like many of the projects included in this analysis, their first steps led them to analyze the panorama of GBOV and establish a diagnosis of the situation and the existing laws in Ecuador: *"So our first challenge was to understand what was happening at the judicial, legal level, in the Organic Comprehensive Criminal Code in Ecuador, with respect to the violence that occurs in the digital environment. If there was some kind of unit working on cybercrimes. To the contrary, we found that 99% of cases go unpunished. Because there is no justice system that responds to these cases. So, what we asked ourselves was: this system does not really represent us. We know that it is important for certain victim survivors to be able to go to that system. However, what are we going to do from our position as feminist companions to be able to respond to this violence?"*.

This lack of laws and/or impunity is recurrent in the Latin American context and also represents one of the motivations for these feminist collectives to equip themselves with the means, knowledge and infrastructure to be able to fill this gap in order to provide support to people who face GBOV.

Finally, in terms of how they carry out the accompaniment process, they tell us the following: *"So we have a secure email address where they contact us and from there we ask some questions. We organize ourselves by having a virtual meeting with the survivor, there we define what we are going to do, what she wants, we work to fully understand the case. That would be our first step in the stages of accompaniment, which is the reception of the case and documentation. And then we have an internal meeting where we analyze not all the cases, but most of them. And where we can define what our proposals for action strategies are going to be. We also have a meeting with the women we accompany, where we do capacity building, there is a sharing of suggestions for digital security and physical security in some cases, with respect to their wellbeing, we have a referral system so that they can access some allied colleagues, lawyers from a center for the protection of rights, and also psychologists. Then, once we have defined the action, we start following up on how the action is going. Afterwards, there is a closure and an evaluation of each case. This allows us to use the documentation to*

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<sup>37</sup> <https://navegandolibres.org/>

*understand the mechanisms of violence, and how violence is interrelated [...] In this way the feedback and evaluation also allows us to evaluate ourselves and how we feel in the accompaniment and to understand ourselves as a team. This leads us to strategies and response actions. We have defined three main response actions, which are internal reporting on social media platforms, which is something we are constantly engaged in, even though it doesn't get as much response as we would like, but we keep doing it as a political commitment as well. Training in digital security, which is always the most effective, and alternative actions that sometimes mean making certain cases public. Massive reporting of certain accounts and other types of strategies that they want and that are obviously in line with the wishes of the person who is being accompanied" (Navegando Libres, 2021).*

## **Ciberbrigadistas + SOS Digital**

The cyberbrigadistas are Bolivian volunteers who work against digital violence and whose main function is to support in the prevention of and reaction against attacks and human rights violations that occur in virtual environments. SOS Digital is an accompaniment program to prevent and mitigate GBOV. Both programs are coordinated by the Internet Bolivia Foundation and have been in operation since 2019. They provide training and personal counselling services to high profile women (politicians, journalists, activists, etc.) in urban and rural areas, and also to women in general and LGBTQI+ people who are experiencing digital violence or want to improve their prevention capacities in this regard.

Regarding these very different profiles, they point out the following: *"We work with women all over the country. There is a problem of access and it is a problem of class and age. In general, younger and middle-class women don't write to us much because they manage to solve their own problems of gender violence enabled by ICT. Then there are older adults, children, adolescents from rural areas. They are basically people who are just starting their relationship with ICT. We also get people with a public profile writing to us because they are constantly being assaulted. And we also need more specific strategies for them. Journalists, women, politicians, public officials and activists. So, there is a difference between the way we are working and confronting this violence with these two populations" (SOS Digital, 2021).*

They also highlight the following regarding the perception of GBOV: *"People who have access to ICT are generally people who have normalized violence. Or perhaps in some way they have developed a higher level of tolerance towards this violence. So there is a group of people who are normalizing this violence because their perception of surveillance and hate material online has fuelled this normalization" (SOS Digital, 2021).*

Regarding the documentation of GBOV, they indicate the following: *"There is a need to document these things, but the burden on the women who are receiving these aggressions is significant, so documenting is a tiring process that takes a lot of energy. So, we are trying to support them so that the documentation processes are not so onerous and the whole process does not fall on the complainant alone" (SOS Digital, 2021).* It is interesting to note that after the first year of work, in collaboration with the collective Hackeando el Machismo, they have published a guide for cyberbrigadistas<sup>38</sup> detailing the actions of accompaniment in the face of gender-based violence in digital spaces.

Finally, they share an important reflection with us on encouraging reporting of GBOV to the helpline and its possible consequences: *"What we want to avoid is relying too much on people reporting, or on the helpline becoming our only source of information to study gender-based violence facilitated by technologies. We believe that reporting or making a complaint about these incidents is not a solution. No, because if we enter into that logic we're going to think that the more you report, the more data we're going to have, the better we're going*

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<sup>38</sup> [https://internetbolivia.org/file/2020/03/guia\\_vd-1.pdf](https://internetbolivia.org/file/2020/03/guia_vd-1.pdf)

*to be able to understand the situation and the better we're going to be able to confront and prevent violence. So the only reason that reporting is good is because it gives us more data. So we recognize that within the Foundation that reporting to us, to the State, to the company, consumes energy, consumes time. So reporting is not always a viable solution for the people who are assaulted, because reporting does not provide ideal solutions for those involved. And that is why we are also trying to develop monitoring methodologies in automated social networks, otherwise we are going to have to do it manually, we are going to get bogged down and lose the girls in the process. And so it's helped us a lot to understand how the Twitter API works. And we would have to see how that automatic monitoring is done in other spaces like Tik Tok and WhatsApp. We understand that it is very difficult and that it will be a very long process" (SOS Digital, 2021).*

To complement their understanding of the situation and evolution of GBOV they propose using other methods: *"So we are considering putting together mixed methodologies of focus groups, in-depth interviews to fill these information gaps and not to enter into the same logic of just consuming data. No, because otherwise we would be replicating the same logic that we hate so much from these technology companies. And also to maintain this space of self-care and prevention. And so yes, that has been a bit of the work, to rethink how to combat gender-based violence enabled by ICT from an intersectional perspective that includes these factors of discrimination and exclusion that are very present in the country" (SOS Digital, 2021).*



## **Tecnoresistencias**

Tecnoresistencias<sup>39</sup> is a program of the Peruvian digital rights organization Hiperderecho created in 2018 and was conceived as a space for women, dissidents, diverse people and activists who resist gender-based violence on the Internet. This program comes out of a previous program to raise awareness about the reality of GBOV, to investigate, name, and classify it: *"So the work that has been carried out by my predecessors in Hiperderecho was about starting to talk about online gender-based violence. Listening to people, it was like the first step in being able to identify these needs and being able to confirm what we already had in a more undefined way in our minds, the idea that "online gender violence exists, online gender violence is real". And that is a little bit of what we started to do with this project prior to Tecnoresistencias, which was "Knowing in order to resist" (Tecnoresistencias, 2021).*

The birth of this program is related to becoming a point of referral on issues of GBOV and starting to receive requests for help and support: *"There is no single way to achieve gender justice for cases of gender-based violence online, but it will depend on the claim that each person can make, and that is how Tecnoresistencias was born, this digital self-defense center that starts from the information, right? To be able to know that we have rights, to be able to understand them to be able to make a decision whether or not we want to make a*

<sup>39</sup> <https://hiperderecho.org/tecnoresistencias/>

*complaint. From that moment on, we started to receive many more cases from the main channel that is Tecnoresistencias and in many of our social networks, we started to receive cases of gender online violence" (Tecnoresistencias, 2021).*

Finally, the project places special emphasis on the processes of support and mitigation that have to be developed within the program: *"And self-care is a very important point that we work on with the communication team and with my colleagues at Hiperderecho. We are generating good practices for reception of and responses to cases of gender-based online violence that may arrive, such as, for example, beyond providing accompaniment, knowing how to refer. When to refer them to other specialized organizations? To colleagues or groups of lawyers who work directly with people from the LGBTQI community [...] So there are different good practices that we have been developing along the way. Starting with caring for people, for the wellbeing of the people who come to us, but also for the team, right? We all know that this can be exhausting. And we need to be well to be able to best accompany others" (Tecnoresistencias, 2021).*

## **Some conclusions on helplines for GBOV**

These are some of the helplines that have made their work public as spaces and collectives giving remote support to people facing GBOV. This analysis shows us that this is an area of activism in full development. In addition, in the course of our mapping we have been able to identify a dozen of other feminist projects that are also points of reference, providing support to people facing GBOV but have not formalized or publicized that objective within the aims of their organization or collective. We believe that there are more informal networks and collectives and feminist organizations that are doing this work in their own context and are motivated by building sisterhood networks. All of these projects are a form of feminist infrastructure with systematized processes on how to document, research, accompany and evaluate best ways to support, care and take care of each other; and how to discuss and share good practices in this kind of work with other projects.

We have seen that there are several models of helplines but that they generally share some common characteristics:

- Not all feminist helplines make their work public, some stay under the radar for protecting themselves against possible criminalization of their activities, or because they cannot attend all cases that would reach them if they were publicly known.
- The motivations behind their creation usually have to do with the need to fill a gap regarding the lack of initiatives that respond to and support people facing GBOV.
- They usually begin their work by creating data, doing research, a diagnosis on GBOV and the legal and support context.
- They all report to commercial Internet platforms and try to establish direct communication channels with the platforms, understanding that this relationship has advantages but also ethical and feminist challenges.
- They focus on survivors, and develop and implement support or accompaniment methodologies based on feminist and intersectional values.
- Their feminist accompaniment methodologies include actively questioning what data to record and in what ways, and in what ways this data will be used (informing internal functioning, helpline evaluation, research and advocacy, etc.).
- The projects are usually in quite precarious positions, and do not have all the human, economic and technical resources they need for optimal conditions in which to carry out their work, and they are often sustained by the voluntary work of their participants.

- The typologies of GBOV to which they respond are often quite similar, although the impact and mitigation strategies of these types of GBOV are essentially dependant on context and are directly related to the socio-economic and political situation of the people who face them.

We can say that this analysis reaffirms the introductory hypothesis that helplines are first and foremost a mechanism, a type of feminist infrastructure, created by self-organized civil society to fill the gaps and respond to the structural violence unleashed by the colonial, patriarchal and capitalist system.

This analysis also shows us that there are differences and unique characteristics specific to each type of model. It is striking that the model of helplines focused on intermediaries or professionals in GBV response services has been very seldom duplicated, even though the projects that embody that approach are among the oldest that we have identified in our mapping (1992 for Safety net Australia and 2000 for Safety net project). This is all the more striking because several studies have shown the need for professionals in GBV response services to learn how to better incorporate the opportunities and challenges brought about by technologies into the support they offer. This is a challenge that once again became pressing during the COVID-19 confinements, which forced a large part of the face-to-face support services to migrate to online environments.

We have come to regard resource-creating helplines as the most versatile model, as it can focus on the development of very diverse activities (production of guides, workshops, platforms, apps, etc.). These projects can include direct lines of communication with people who need support, but we have seen that even projects that cannot or do not want to provide direct attention to end users, still receive requests and demands for support in their emails or social media channels. This leads participants in these projects to direct these people to other projects or structures that could support them. This demonstrates that there are not enough projects and initiatives in the world to support people facing GBOV.

As for the third model, large-scale helplines, we still find very few examples with these characteristics. SafeNet, operating at the national scale of a country like Brazil, shows us how a project initially created to document and support people facing human rights violations on the Internet had to evolve to incorporate a more feminist and intersectional perspective into its models of support. This is due to the fact that some of the most recurrent types of violence they have to support with are GBOV, mostly non-consensual sharing of intimate images, sextortion and gender-based hate speech. This example is very different from the helplines created for women journalists and newsrooms by the IWMF and the Coalition Against Online Violence that arise from the early detection of how GBOV is impacting and significantly altering women's ability to operate as professional journalists. Finally, the case of the Cyberharassment helpline represents a paradigmatic example of learning within the feminist movement about how to provide a support that is adapted and tailored to the needs of women in Pakistan.

Finally, local feminist helplines that respond to GBOV often emerge from feminist or cyberfeminist projects and collectives that have a history of self-defense and digital security, and when they become points of reference in their context through supporting people facing GBOV, they decide to organize themselves to systematize their support in a helpline. This process often means that the collective must find the means, knowledge and resources to be able to expand, stabilize and sometimes professionalize their work.

In this active, combative and diverse landscape, we believe it is important to create networks of exchange and shared learning within existing feminist helplines. These exchanges should facilitate the sharing of common issues and challenges, exchanges on best practices on GBOV support and the use of technologies and

infrastructure to deliver and document support, as well as devising collective responses and approaches to, for example, presenting a common front when engaging in dialogue with commercial internet platforms. Therefore, DDP will facilitate in 2022 a new round of community building and capacity building activities oriented at existing feminist helplines so they can discuss and learn from each other.