



FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ASSOCIATION

Everyone has a right to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association online.



The right to free expression and association underpins the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information, and to associate freely for social, political, cultural, or other purposes. It is also related to rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.

Online activities are considered expression, and so are protected under existing rights to free expression and association. However, this right is frequently infringed upon – both by governments and by private companies – for purported national security reasons and/or through unevenly applied online content moderation policies and practices.

Some forms of online expression are indeed harmful – harassment or stalking; the incitement of violence against others based on their race, religion, or gender; the generation or distribution of hate speech and mis/disinformation. But ill-defined and unchecked infringement of the right to free expression has created a culture of censorship in which political dissent can be suppressed, and the voices of victims and survivors can be silenced.

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These complexities mean that mechanisms must be put into place to ensure intersectional, feminist-informed application of the right to free expression and association within the digital realm, and that any limitation of this right is necessary, proportionate, and justifiable.

The right to digital freedom of expression is of particular relevance to women and girls, who frequently face gender-based violence and harassment online, including via intimate image sexual abuse intended to silence, shame, and oppress. This includes politicians, journalists, and other communication workers contributing to public debate on the internet. Without adequate protection, all women risk being excluded from full and equal participation online.

THE DIGITAL PRINCIPLES

- Everyone has the right to hold opinions without interference, regardless of frontiers.
- Everyone has the right to seek, receive, and impart non-harmful and non-exploitative information freely, through any medium, including on the internet, without censorship or other arbitrary interference by the State, non-State actors, and private actors.
- Everyone has the right to associate freely, including through and on the internet, for social, political, cultural, or other purposes.
- The internet and digital technologies must be protected from all attempts to silence women, girls, and other people from discriminated-against groups.
- Any restriction to the right to freedom of expression and association must be provided by law and must be necessary, proportionate, and justifiable in a democratic society.