



The Intersection of Technology with Violence Against Women and Girls

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While information and communications technologies (ICT) have many benefits for connecting women globally, they are also used to harass, intimidate, control, and facilitate violence against women. Online violence has advantages for abusers because it is easy to access, inflict frequently, and perpetrate anonymously from a distance. It is especially damaging to victims of intimate partner violence because it erodes any sense of a safe space or a safe distance from an abuser. Girls and young women are particularly vulnerable to online violence because they are frequent consumers of online content, especially social media. Other vulnerable groups include female politicians, journalists, and human rights defenders, especially those from minority groups, where online violence and harassment are attempts to intimidate women into leaving their positions of power and influence.

Examples of online violence against women include

- cyberstalking or persistent online harassment and threats
- electronic monitoring of an intimate partner's movements and communications
- hacking or unauthorized entry into personal sites to snatch passwords, retrieve messages, or create malicious changes
- manipulating online photographic images to insert objectionable sexual content

Online technologies facilitate and amplify the crime of sex trafficking that affects women disproportionately. Traffickers post fake job ads online and lure victims into dangerous situations through anonymous chat rooms and other social media sites. Traffickers can track and monitor victims continuously through GPS on their phones, enforcing control and inducing feelings of entrapment and despair. Traffickers and customers can connect anonymously online, reducing the risk of detection and creating more demand in the commercial sex market. Traffickers use online payment systems with false names that thwart attempts by law enforcement to prevent or prosecute trafficking.

Fast Facts

- Survivors of technology-based stalking are more likely than survivors of non-technological abuse to take time off from work, change their email address, change or quit their job or school, and avoid relatives, friends, or holiday celebrations. They also experience greater fear over time.¹
- A survey of female survivors of domestic violence found that 45% experienced online abuse during their relationship through social media or e-mail, and 48% experienced online abuse or harassment after they had left the relationship. 75% were concerned that police did not know how to respond to online abuse or harassment, including 12% who reported abuse to the police and had not been helped.²
- A study found that 41% of US adults had personally experienced harassing behavior online, and 18% had suffered severe forms of harassment online such as personal threats, harassment over a sustained period, sexual harassment, or stalking. 70% of US adult women said that online harassment is a major problem.³
- In a survey of 22 countries, 58% of girls reported that they had experienced online harassment on social media platforms. Most experience social media harassment for the first time between the ages of 14 and 16 and saw Facebook as particularly unsafe. Harassment was often sexual in nature.⁴

- A global survey of female journalists found that 73% had experienced online violence. 20% had been attacked or abused in person in connection with violence previously experienced online.⁵

Recommendations

- A) Enact legislation to hold technology companies, especially social media firms, responsible for gender-based malicious abuse and harassment perpetrated on their platforms, including collecting and publishing data disaggregated by gender, age and race, as recommended by Plan International.⁶
- B) Prohibit and criminalize online violence against women, especially the non-consensual distribution of intimate images, online harassment, and stalking, including subsequent re-sharing, as recommended by the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women.⁷
- C) Adopt and implement legislation to prohibit and criminalize violence against women in politics, including ICT-facilitated violence, as recommended by the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women.⁸
- D) Develop awareness-raising campaigns and specialized training for law enforcement and criminal justice practitioners on the use of the internet by traffickers, especially to recruit children, as recommended by the Working Group on Trafficking in Persons.⁹
- E) Publish reports on the incidence, prosecution, and conviction of violence against women in the digital sphere to increase victim confidence in the criminal justice system, as recommended by the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO).¹⁰
- F) Equip women's support services with the funding and training to deal with the digital dimensions of violence against women including advice on the removal of harmful online content as recommended by GREVIO.¹¹

Suggested Readings

- Baker, L., Campbell, M., Barreto, E. 2013. *Understanding Technology-Related Violence Against Women*.
- UN Women 2020. *Online and ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls during COVID-19*.
- OSCE Parliamentary Assembly 2021. *Violence against Women Journalists and Politicians*.
- UN Office on Drugs and Crime 2021. *Good Use and Abuse: The Role of Technology in Human Trafficking*

¹ YWCA 2017. *Technology and Gender-Based Violence Fact Sheet*.

² Women's Aid 2014. *Virtual World Real Fear*. Pg. 8.

³ Pew Research Center 2017. *Online harassment*.

⁴ Plan International 2020. *Free to Be Online? Girls' and young women's experiences of online harassment. The State of the World's Girls 2020*. Pg. 16-18.

⁵ Organization of Security Cooperation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly 2021. *Violence Against Women Journalists and Politicians: A Growing Crisis*. Pp. 11-12.

⁶ Plan International 2020. *Free to be online? Girls' and young women's experiences of online harassment*. Pg. 51.

⁷ Human Rights Council 2018. *Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective*. Pg. 19, para. 101.

⁸ General Assembly 2018. *Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on violence against women in politics*. Pg. 18, para. 83(a).

⁹ Working Group on Trafficking in Persons 2021. *Successful strategies for addressing the use of technology to facilitate trafficking in persons*. Pg. 16, para. 56(c).

¹⁰ Group of Experts on Action against Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence 2021. *GREVIO General Recommendation No. 1 on the digital dimension of violence against women*. Pg. 26, para. 55(c).

¹¹ Ibid., pg. 25, para. 53(c).