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## **An overview on cyber violence against women and girls**

Existing data and evidence taken from sources such as Council of Europe, GREVIO, EDVAW Platform, EIGE, UN Women, UNESCO, CSW67.

### **1. Introduction**

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) in the digital context is not a new phenomenon, however it has dramatically escalated in the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic, global crises and the rapidly expanding digitalization in a world of anonymity and impunity.

Both women and men can be victims of cyber violence.

However, evidence shows that women and girls are disproportionately effected with serious impact on their lives and wellbeing and that gender-based cyber violence has taken on a global dimension, making it one of the most prevalent and widespread form of violence against women.

One global research estimates that 73% of women have already been exposed to or have experienced some form of online violence.

The absence of internationally agreed definition of violence against women and girls in digital context, also known as “online violence”, “technology-facilitated violence”, “digital violence” or “cyber violence” make it difficult to compare available data and to understand the true extent of the problem globally.

This paper covers existing data and evidence so far, different patterns and forms, challenges and gaps and the role of the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention in the field of Cyber Violence against Women and Girls (CVAWG).

### **2. Definition of cyber violence against women and girls**

The digital space with the increasing reach of the internet, the rapid spread of mobile information, and the widespread use of social media and communication technology coupled with the existing pandemic of violence against women and girls, has led to the emergence of cyber violence against them. It has developed into a growing global problem with potentially significant economic and societal consequences.

It is estimated that one in ten women has already experienced a form of cyber violence since the age of 15. The risk is highest among women 18 to 24 years old.

There are many different forms of cyber violence, some of which can be seen as online extensions of forms of violence perpetrated in the physical world, like *cyber* harassment, *cyber* stalking or *cyber* bullying, with around 66% the most common forms of digital violence. However, the cyber space also leads to different and unique forms of violence, such as forms around the *non-consensual intimate image abuse (incl. deepfake)* and such as *doxing, trolling and online gendered hate speech*. Cyber violence can amplify and exacerbate the scale of harm, with even more serious consequences like induced suicide (femicide). Cyber VAWG is not a separate phenomenon to the real-world forms of violence, but a continuum of offline manifestation of gender-based violence rooted in the inequality between women and men that is perpetuated through new technologies. The anonymity in the cyber sphere foster the perpetrators, either being related to the victim or being unacquainted.

### **3. How is “online” violence connected to “offline” violence and vice versa?**

Online violence seems to become a driving force to offline violence.

We see in reality that digital and physical spaces are more and more integrated and experienced as one single reality. CVAWG often reflects forms of abuse and victimization in the physical world, carried out and/or amplified through digital means. Online violence against women and girls intensify in times of crisis as it is the fact with offline violence. Evidence shows that the lockdown and social distancing measures during the pandemic crisis has also led to a spike in digital forms of violence affecting women and girls specifically, such as cyber harassment and non-consensual intimate image abuse.

A survey found that 38% of respondents experienced online abuse in the months preceding Covid-19. Of these, 27% reported increased online abuse during the pandemic.

The violent acts taking place through technology are an integral part of the same violence that women and girls experience in the physical world, for reasons related to their gender.

### **4. Which groups of women and girls are particularly vulnerable to CVAWG?**

CVAWG is an intersectional form of violence with different patterns and levels of vulnerability and risk for specific groups of women and girls such as women with disabilities, women migrants, LGBTIQ+, women of ethnic and religious minorities.

Women in public life including women’s rights activists, women human rights defenders, women in politics and women journalists are particular exposed to forms of online violence, including threats of physical and sexual violence.

E.g. 73% of women journalists have experienced online violence in the course of their work, 58% of women parliamentarians in Europe had been subject to online attacks; in an EU survey, 34% of the respondents with disability had experienced physical, sexual or psychological violence or threats of violence (including online), compared to 19% of women who did not have a disability.

Girls and boys seem to represent a primary group of victims of cyber violence, in particular with respect to online sexual violence.

51% of adolescent girls have experienced cyberbullying in their life time.

Traffickers use technology to profile, recruit, control and exploit their victims, a trend which has increased during the pandemic.

## **5. The impact of online and technology facilitated CVAWG**

CVAWG impacts many different aspects of women's and girls' lives - health, wellbeing and safety with political, societal and economic consequences. They can be just as harmful and serious as any physical violence. Online VAWG can isolate women and reaffirms patriarchal norms and stereotypes that tend to suppress them and limit their freedoms.

*Health, wellbeing and psychological impacts* can cause lowered self- esteem and -confidence, depression, post-traumatic stress reactions, even suicide.

*Political and societal impacts* restrict women's participation in public life and their on-line activities thus increasing the “gender digital divide”. Online abuse is a serious phenomenon undermining democracy, especially as it is often targeted at female politicians, - activists, - gender- equality defenders or - journalists in the intent to silence them.

*Economic impacts* of online CVAWG mean financial losses not only to individuals due to work consequences, but to the whole society as women's capacity and innovations are, thus, not used to the fullest. Apart from the quantified economic cost of gender-based cyber violence (Euro 49.0 to 89.3 billion), there is a dramatic loss of quality of life for each affected individual.

## **6. Key challenges and approaches to tackle CVAWG**

As digital online spaces are closely integrated with offline spaces in everyday life, it is necessary to tackle CVAWG specifically. There is, however, little knowledge of the harmfulness of CVAWG and realization of its vastness. Current law has not kept pace with technological development and the various forms of CVAWG.

To tackle CVAWG we need statistics, data and reporting of CVAWG, common definitions and terminologies and participation, responsibility and accountability of the IT Technology in this process. Gender mainstreaming is key in the development of digital policies, programs and budgets.

It is necessary to strengthen cooperation in all fields, i.e. between states, IT technology enterprises and civil societies, especially with those active in securing women's rights. Agreed ways of measuring the amount of CVAWG, terminologies, rules and responses shall be developed including criminalization of all acts of CVAWG. The perpetrators shall be punished and impunity not tolerated. International Conventions on Cybercrime should be drawn up as has been initiated already. More women should be engaged in the technology field, in decision-making and in developing and strengthening reporting, accountability and transparency concerning CVAWG.

## **7. The role of the CoE Istanbul Convention in the field of CVAWG**

Cyber violence against women is not by definition addressed in the Istanbul Convention.

However, digital dimension of violence against women encompasses a wide range of behaviors

that falls under the definition of violence against women set out in Art. 3 of the Istanbul Convention. Also Art.33 (psychological violence), 34 (stalking) and 40 (sexual harassment) cover a great number of forms of violence perpetrated online. Art. 11, b demands research in the field of all forms of violence in order to study its root causes and effects, incidences and conviction rates.

In 2021 GREVIO, the independent expert body responsible for the monitoring mechanism of the Istanbul Convention, published its General Recommendation No.1 on the digital dimension of violence against women: GREVIO recognizes that gender-based violence against women perpetrated in the digital sphere has a serious impact on women's and girls' lives, including psychological and physical health, their livelihoods, their physical safety and their reputation. With that GREVIO positions manifestations of violence against women and girls in the digital sphere as expressions of gender-based violence against women covered by the Istanbul Convention.

#### **8. The role of the CoE Budapest Convention in the field of CVAWG**

The Convention on Cybercrime (2001) is the most relevant international legally binding treaty focusing on cybercrime and electronic evidence and applies to any offence being made through computer or other digital devices, one of them the production, distribution or possession of child sexual abuse material. Once ratified, the Budapest Convention requests data and information from the Member States - thus a prerequisite to tackle online violations.

The two Council of Europe treaties, the Istanbul Convention and the Budapest Convention, offer complementarity and can help address online and technology-facilitated violence against women and girls through policy, prevention, protection and prosecution and international co-operation.

#### **9. Sources**

Council of Europe: Istanbul Convention

<https://rm.coe.int/168008482e>

Council of Europe: Budapest Convention

<https://rm.coe.int/1680081561>

Council of Europe GREVIO: Recommendation No.1 on the digital dimension of violence against women

<https://rm.coe.int/grevio-rec-no-on-digital-violence-against-women/1680a49147>

Council of Europe: The digital dimension of violence against women as addressed by the seven mechanisms of the EDVAW Platform

<https://rm.coe.int/thematic-report-on-the-digital-dimension-of-violence-against-women-as-/1680a933ae>

EIGE European Institute for Gender Equality: Cyber Violence against Women and Girls – Key Terms and Concepts

[https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/cyber\\_violence\\_against\\_women\\_and\\_girls\\_key\\_terms\\_and\\_concepts.pdf](https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/cyber_violence_against_women_and_girls_key_terms_and_concepts.pdf)

UN Women: Accelerating Efforts to Tackle Online & technology-Facilitated Violence Against Women & Girls

[https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/Accelerating-efforts-to-tackle-online-and-technology-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-en\\_0.pdf](https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/Accelerating-efforts-to-tackle-online-and-technology-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-en_0.pdf)

UNESCO: Online violence against women journalists: a global snapshot of incidence and impacts

<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375136>

CSW67: Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls (Agreed conclusions)

[https://unwomen.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/CSW67\\_agreed-conclusions\\_18-March-2023-3.20am.pdf](https://unwomen.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/CSW67_agreed-conclusions_18-March-2023-3.20am.pdf)

**For more information or questions, please turn to the ZI Council of Europe Committee:**

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