



Online and ICT* facilitated violence against women and girls during COVID-19

Photo: UN Women/Emad Karim

INTRODUCTION

The brief highlights emerging trends and impacts of COVID-19 on online and ICT¹ facilitated violence against women and girls (VAWG). It provides examples of strategies put in place to prevent and respond to online/ ICT facilitated VAWG and makes recommendations on how different actors can best address this issue. It is a living document that draws upon the knowledge and experience of a wide range of experts who support solutions to end online VAWG and violence facilitated by ICTs.

*Information and Communication Technology

WHEN WOMEN AND
GIRLS DO HAVE ACCESS TO
THE INTERNET, THEY FACE
ONLINE VIOLENCE MORE OFTEN
THAN MEN



TRENDS AND ISSUES

Violence against women (VAW) is a human rights violation, a universal issue, with severe impact on victims/survivors, their families, and communities. As the COVID-19 pandemic deepens economic and social stress coupled with restricted movement and social isolation measures, gender-based violence is increasing exponentially². During COVID19, violence against women is manifested in different forms, including domestic violence and online and ICT-facilitated violence³. These forms of violence and abuse take place in a context of widespread systemic gender-based discrimination.



Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

While there is still a lack of comprehensive global definition and data on online and ICT facilitated violence, research suggests that women are both disproportionately targeted and suffer serious consequences as a result⁴. When women and girls do have access to the Internet, they face online violence more often than men through a continuum of multiple, recurring and interrelated forms of gender-based violence⁵.

Moreover, some groups of women, including human rights defenders, women in politics, journalists, bloggers, women belonging to ethnic minorities, indigenous women, lesbian, bisexual and transgender women, and women with disabilities are particularly targeted by ICT-facilitated violence⁶. In Europe, the risk of online violence is highest among young women between 18 and 29 years of age⁷.

Women and girls are using internet with greater frequency during the pandemic while there is a gender digital divide⁸. COVID-19 is being described as the first major pandemic of the social media age⁹. More than half of the world's population was under lockdown conditions by early April.¹⁰ Quarantine measures and self-isolation policies have increased internet usage between 50% to 70%¹¹, as women and men



In the U.S., **two out of every ten** young women, aged 18-29, have been sexually harassed online and **one in two** say they were sent unwarranted explicit images.

- In Canada, **ONE IN FIVE** women reported that they had experienced online harassment in 2018.ⁱ
- In France, **15 %** of women said they experienced some form of cyber harassment.ⁱⁱ
- In the United States, according to the Pew report 2017, women are about **TWICE** as likely as men to say they have been targeted as a result of their gender.ⁱⁱⁱ
- In the European Union, **1 in 10** women report having experienced cyber-harassment since the age of 15.^{iv}
- In Pakistan, the Hamara Internet study revealed that **40%** of women had faced various forms of harassment on the internet.^v

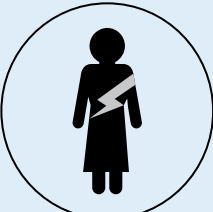



turn to the internet for work, school, and social activities. During this period, users with limited digital skills are more at risk of cyberviolence¹². Concerningly, given the digital gender divide¹³, women and girls are at a higher risk for these forms of violence.

In this context, ICT facilitated violence has spread under the shadow pandemic of violence against women. Women and girls are subject to online violence in the form of physical threats, sexual harassment, stalking, zoombombing and sex trolling. Specific cases have been documented by media and women’s rights organizations of unsolicited pornographic videos displayed while women were participating in online social events¹⁴, threats of violence and harmful sexist content¹⁵, and “zoombombing” during video calls showing racially charged and sexually explicit material to the unexpected participants.¹⁶

The office of the eSafety Commissioner in Australia reports that online abuse and bullying have increased in the past month by 50%¹⁷. According to Europol, online activity by those seeking child abuse material in Europe is increasing¹⁸. In the Philippines, peer-to-peer online violence against women and girls has intensified amid the quarantine according to the Commission on Human Rights. Pornographic traffic has had also dramatic spikes during quarantine period compared to an average day¹⁹ increasing the risk of sextortion worldwide²⁰.

Furthermore, the number of justice officers specialized on cyberviolence will be reduced during 2020, increasing the risk of ICT facilitated violence²¹. In this context, the cases of online and ICT violence against women and girls are likely to increase even after the emergency phase due to weakening enforcement and the percentage of individuals using the internet is sustained.

IMPACTS

 <p>Online and off-line violence</p>	 <p>Access to online services</p>	 <p>Education and employment</p>	 <p>Digital citizenship</p>
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Online forms of violence against women and girls are associated with psychological, social, and reproductive health impacts, and often with offline physical and sexual violence for victims/survivors²². Online violence is committed in a continuum between online and offline; it is often difficult to distinguish the consequences of actions that are initiated in digital environments from offline realities, and vice versa. Research previous to COVID-19²³ reveals several consequences of online VAWG including women’s experiences of higher levels of anxiety, stress disorders,

depression, trauma, panic attacks, loss of self-esteem and a sense of powerlessness in their ability to respond to the abuse. These feelings may be heightened in a context of quarantine and isolation throughout different waves of the pandemic as women are confined to their households with additional elements of economic, social and political stress and heightened domestic violence.

Online violence against women may restrict women’s access to online services during COVID-19. Research suggests that women tend to restrict

their access online as a result of violence committed online²⁴. During COVID-19, many cities are providing diverse services online, including school classes, groceries, neighborhood markets, health and legal support and essential services among others²⁵. Increasing online and ICT violence may restrict or alter women's use of internet and access to services online. On the other hand, safe, affordable and inclusive internet and digital tools at large scale has the potential to increase the participation of women online and reduce the gender digital divide²⁶.

Women's voices and participation as active digital citizens may be censured by increasing harassment and violence online during COVID-19. The inclusive participation of diverse

ONLINE FORMS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIAL, AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH IMPACTS,

women, particularly of those who are usually left behind, is critical during the response to, mitigation of, and recovery from the crisis. However, evidence suggests that women with multiple identities (i.e. LGBTQI community, ethnic minority, indigenous) are often targeted online through discrimination and hate speech. As a result, they tend to self-censor and withdraw from debates and online discussions. During COVID, as more women use the internet and social media to advocate for their rights in open links and public debates there is a higher risk to be targeted. On the other hand, there has been a renewed interest in using the Internet and social media to connect with local communities, providing great opportunities for bystander support, and continuing to foster social cohesion, when access to public spaces is limited.

The economic cost of online violence might also skyrocket in times where the use of the Internet is increasing. For example, online abuse and trolling in Australia already costs economy up to 3.7 billion²⁷.



Photo: UN Women/Johis Alarcón

PROMISING PRACTICES/STRATEGIES

SERVICES:

- **Access Now Digital Security Helpline** supports women at risk to improve their digital security practices and provides rapid-response emergency assistance for women already under attack. The service, which is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week in eight languages is monitoring and drawing attention to digital rights during the humanitarian crisis.
- **Net Tech Project** at the National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV), discusses technology, privacy, and safety in the context of intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and violence against women during COVID-19.
- **El Alto, Bolivia** under UN Women's Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces global initiative is developing communications material in a simple and user-friendly format to demonstrate the harmful impact of online violence on women and girls and how to report it during COVID-19.
- **The Action Coalition** focused on Technology and Innovation under Generation Equality is addressing data collection, prevention and response of online/ ICT facilitated violence against women as a priority.

AWARENESS-RAISING AND TRAINING:

- **Take Back the Tech!** campaign around online GBV awareness-raising, documentation, digital safety that has accompanied women, queer and gender diverse people who have experienced online GBV since 2006.
- **#SheTransformsTech**, is a crowdsourced campaign and global poll that will synthesize stories and input from grassroots women from 100+ countries into a recommendations report for global policy-makers, technology companies.
- **Call to men** have initiated a group online and call to action for men to stop the CORONA VIRUS period spike in online pornography and practicing positive masculinities.
- **Tactical Tech Training Curriculum** on gender and technology brings a holistic and feminist perspective to privacy and digital security trainings, including over 20 topics and workshops models.
- **Onlineharassmentfieldmanual.pen.org/**, is a digital manual including effective strategies and resources that journalists and advocates can use to address online abuse.
- **Internetlab.org.br/en/** is an independent research center that aims to foster academic debate around issues involving law and technology, especially internet policy.
- **GenderIT.org** provides gender and ICT analysis informed by African feminists from 18 countries.
- **EQUALS Digital Skills Fund** is a grassroots fund aimed at supporting digital skills of women and girls across Africa, Asia and Latin America.

PRIVACY AND SAFETY OF USERS:

- **Instagram** recently launched a Restrict tool that allow users to block accounts and manage comments.
- **Feminist Safety Reboot** creates safe online spaces and promotes understanding online GBV
- **Heartmob** provides an online support group for affected individuals.
- **Jigsaw** is undertaking research and technology developments to address violence and harassment online against women in public life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is critical to address the increase of online and ICT violence against women during COVID-19²⁸ through concerted efforts of governments, civil society organizations and internet intermediaries.



GOVERNMENTS

- Include evidence-based measures to address online and ICT facilitated violence in COVID-19 response and action plans aimed at addressing violence against women.
- Strengthen specialized, clear, and efficient internal and external protocols and codes of conduct for law enforcement officials addressing online violence against women during the emergency.
- Continue to invest on justice officers specialized in addressing online violence with a human rights and gender approach.
- Inform Internet users about the protocols, where to report cases of online and ICT facilitated VAWG, and how to access essential services online during COVID-19.
- Strengthen existing directives on addressing sexual exploitation of children online and child pornography.
- Share examples of promising and good practices that effectively address online and technology facilitated VAWG to inform a range of stakeholders (grassroots women, women's organizations, UN agencies, authorities, NGO technology providers, developers)
- Actively engage women's rights organizations to develop guidance and good practices on safe and inclusive ICTs for women and girls.



WOMEN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS, AND OTHER CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

- Maintain and extend specialized helplines to providing support to women and girls who have been subjected to online and offline gender-based violence during COVID.
- Strengthen the awareness and capacity of women advocates, educators, and Internet users to identify and report violence facilitated online and by other forms of ICTs.
- Provide tips, tools and resources on how to identify, document and report on-line harassment and other forms of ICT facilitated violence against women and girls.
- Promote bystander approaches online by coworkers, family members, and internet users during COVID restrictions.
- Produce communications material in a simple and user-friendly formats that demonstrates the harmful impact of high-risk groups of women and girls, such as those who are in public and political life.
- Advocate for data collection on the issue of online VAWG, disaggregated by sex, age, ethnicity, and race where possible in existing surveys and rapid assessments conducted during COVID.
- Promote an intersectional understanding and approach to communities who experience multiple forms of oppressions and harassment online, as part of the continuum of violence.
- Monitor initiatives to prevent and respond to VAWG online, to understand how they are working (or may be not working) to inform practice.



INTERNET INTERMEDIARIES

- Set high-level and clear commitments to upholding women's safety in online spaces during the pandemic.
- Share online safety advice for women, youth and children.
- Provide accessible and transparent reporting and complaints procedures for online and ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls including social media sites, GPS, phones, etc.
- Provide access to cost-free helplines and age-appropriate services in local languages.
- Strengthen the capacity of their employees on online and ICT facilitated violence as internet usage increases.
- Invest on education campaigns on preventing ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls, and promoting human rights and digital security for all.
- Continue to invest and collaborate with feminist tech companies and civil society organizations in the development of solutions in the short, medium, and long- term.



Photo: UN Women/Susan Markisz

**SET HIGH-LEVEL AND CLEAR COMMITMENTS TO UPHOLDING
WOMEN'S SAFETY IN ONLINE SPACES DURING THE PANDEMIC.**

ENDNOTES

- 1 The definition of online violence against women extends to any act of gender-based violence against women that is committed, assisted or aggravated in part or fully by the use of ICT, such as mobile phones and smartphones, the Internet, social media platforms or email, against a woman because she is a woman, or affects women disproportionately
- 2 United Nations (April 2020). Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-10 on Women. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406>
- 3 See UN Women (2020). Corporate Brief on Covid-19 and Ending violence against Women and Girls.
- 4 OHCHR (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. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Women/SRWomen/Pages/SRWomenIndex.aspx>
- 5 Ibid
- 6 Ibid
- 7 European Union (2018). Cyber violence and hate speech online against women. Available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604979/IPOL_STU\(2018\)604979_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604979/IPOL_STU(2018)604979_EN.pdf)
- 8 <https://itu.foleon.com/itu/measuring-digital-development/gender-gap/>
- 9 <https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/3/12/21175570/coronavirus-covid-19-social-media-twitter-facebook-google>
- 10 Endnote 3
- 11 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markbeech/2020/03/25/covid-19-pushes-up-internet-use-70-streaming-more-than-12-first-figures-reveal/#73bc35303104>
- 12 UNODC (2020). Cibercrimo y COVID-19: Riesgos y Respuestas. UNODC Cybercrime and Anti- Money Laundering Section
- 13 Worldwide roughly 327 million fewer women than men have a smartphone and can access mobile Internet. Women are on average 26% less likely than men to have a smartphone. In South Asia and Africa these proportions stand at 70% and 34%, respectively. OECD (2018). Bridging the digital gender divide. Available at <http://www.oecd.org/internet/bridging-the-digital-gender-divide.pdf>
- 14 <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/security/video-chats-familiar-forms-online-harassment-make-comeback-n1168806>
- 15 <https://theconversation.com/as-use-of-digital-platforms-surges-well-need-stronger-global-efforts-to-protect-human-rights-online-135678>. UN Women (2020). Violence against women and COVID in the Arab States. See also <https://theconversation.com/as-use-of-digital-platforms-surges-well-need-stronger-global-efforts-to-protect-human-rights-online-135678>.
- 16 <http://www.svri.org/blog/online-safety-changing-world%E2%80%933-covid-19-and-cyber-violence>. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-women-rights-cyberflashing-trfn-idUSKBN2153HG>
- 17 https://www.skynews.com.au/details/_6148739344001
- 18 www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/catching-virus-cybercrime-disinformation-and-covid-19-pandemic
- 19 <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/corona-virus>
- 20 UNODC (2020). Cibercrimo y COVID-19: Riesgos y Respuestas. UNODC Cybercrime and Anti- Money Laundering Section
- 21 Ibid
- 22 Backe EL, Lilleston P, McCleary-Sills J (2018) Networked individuals, gendered violence: a literature review of cyber violence. *Violence Gender* 5(3):135–145.
- 23 Amnesty International/ IPSOS/ Mori Poll
- 24 See Japleen Pasricha, “‘Violence’ Online in India: Cybercrimes Against Women & Minorities on Social Media”, *Feminism in India*, 2016.
- 25 <https://www.citiesforglobalhealth.org/>
- 26 OECD (2018). Bridging the digital gender divide. Available at <http://www.oecd.org/internet/bridging-the-digital-gender-divide.pdf> (p. 13)
- 27 https://www.tai.org.au/sites/default/files/P530%20Trolls%20and%20polls%20%20surveying%20economic%20costs%20of%20cyberhate%20%255bWEB%255d_1.pdf
- 28 For long-term recommendations on policy and legislative frameworks to address online and ICT violence, please refer to the OHCHR (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. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Women/SRWomen/Pages/SRWomenIndex.aspx>

REFERENCES

- i. Gender based violence and unwanted sexual behavior in Canada, 2018. Available at <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/191205/dq191205b-eng.htm>
- ii. European Union (2018). Cyber violence and hate speech online against women. Available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604979/IPOL_STU\(2018\)604979_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604979/IPOL_STU(2018)604979_EN.pdf)
- iii. Pew Research Center (2017). Online Harassment 2017. Available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/07/11/online-harassment-2017/>
- iv. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014). Violence against women: an EU-wide survey. Available at https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2014-vaw-survey-main-results-apr14_en.pdf
- v. Digital Rights Foundation (2017). Measuring Pakistan Women’s Experiences of Online Violence. Available at <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Hamara-Internet-Online-Harassment-Report.pdf>