



Gender-Based Cyberviolence

WHAT

According to the UN, globally, approximately one in three women endure violence at least once in their life. The most prevalent form of violence against women globally is intimate partner violence. However, this problem goes beyond interpersonal relationships and reaches into diverse environments, including online platforms. Online violence against women and girls has escalated rapidly in recent years, posing major threats to safety and well-being. According to an EU Directive adopted in 2024, gender-based violence online refers to non-consensual sharing of intimate or manipulated material, cyber-stalking, cyber harassment, cyberflashing and misogynistic hate speech.

Women are the main targets of online hate

The **2023 Fundamental Rights Agency report on online content moderation** reveals that—across all researched platforms and countries—women are the main targets of online hate. Posts targeting women tend to be more violent than those aimed at other groups, often involving strong and explicit language to threaten women with sexual violence. Women also face higher levels of dehumanising language (comparing people to objects or animals). The phenomenon is exacerbated by the presumed anonymity on the internet and a sense of impunity, which lowers people's inhibitions against engaging in such speech. A direct consequence of this type of hate speech is the silencing of women online. Digital spaces can foster radicalisation among men and boys, often blending anti-gender or anti-women narratives with broader forms of violent extremism. Online hate speech and misogynistic content can escalate into real-world violence, blurring the line between digital and offline harm.

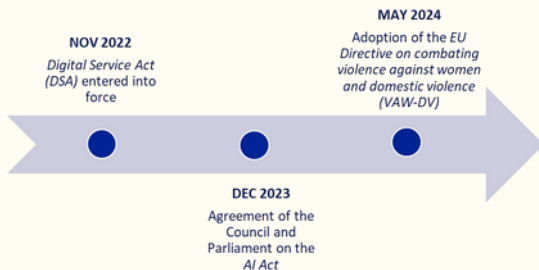
Two-thirds (67%) of all hateful posts targeted at women were found to be harassment

EU ON CYBERSECURITY AND GENDER

Over the past year, the European Commission has as taken important steps to tackle gender-based abuse online. Since November 2022, the Digital Service Act (DSA) has been rolled out, meeting all its 2023 goals and is becoming fully enforceable in February 2024. In 2023, the EU agreed on the proposal on harmonised rules on artificial intelligence (AI)—known as the **AI Act**—to ensure AI systems placed on the European market and used in the EU are safe and respect fundamental rights and EU values. One urgent concern is the rise of deepfakes: research shows that 90% of explicit deepfake content targets women, making this a rapidly growing and harmful form of online violence against women.

In 2024, the European Council adopted a new EU Directive to combat violence against women and domestic violence. This Directive builds on existing laws like the AI Act and the Digital Services Act (DSA) by introducing specific protections. It makes certain forms of violence against women a crime across the EU—including offline acts like female genital mutilation and forced marriage, as well as online abuse such as the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, cyberstalking, cyberharassment, and gender-based hate speech.

It also provides targeted measures of protection, support and access to justice for victims of any form of violence against women and domestic violence where criminalised under national or Union law[3]. Whereas the AI Act deals with deepfakes in general, the VAW-DV Directive explicitly criminalises the non-consensual sharing of material that makes it appear someone is engaged in sexually explicit activities.



THE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda provides a framework for addressing international security threats and their gendered dimensions, as well as for ensuring women are part of peace and security decision-making. As the agenda enters its third decade, new security issues are emerging, such as cyberthreats and their gendered implications. To stay relevant, the WPS agenda needs to expand its focus beyond traditional conflict zones to include cyberspace.

In conflict-affected areas, both men and women are exposed to cyberviolence, targeted by recruitment efforts from conflict parties, and are more vulnerable to cybercrime. However, women in these fragile settings face a double burden: online abuse rooted in gender discrimination and offline violence driven by instability. In places where violence is already common and accepted, online hate and disinformation can more easily escalate into real-world attacks—including sexual and gender-based violence.

By the end of 2024, six EU member states included references to cyber threats or online violence in their National Action Plans (NAPs) on WPS: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Italy, and the Netherlands. Denmark and Ireland highlight the importance of involving women in cybersecurity and informational technology. Italy's plan includes monitoring of online hate speech targeting women refugees and asylum seekers, as part of a broader efforts to track hate crimes. Finland takes a more comprehensive approach, with a dedicated section and an outcome aimed at tackling online gender-based violence. Estonia and the Netherlands acknowledge the issue but do not outline any concrete actions or outcomes.

SOURCES

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