Irish Consortium
on Gender Based
Violence

MOVING
BEYOND

# Technology
# and
# Gender Based Violence:

# Risks and Opportunities

## 2023

# Acknowledgements

# The Irish Consortium on Gender Based Violence

The Irish Consortium on Gender Based Violence (ICGBV) believes in a world without fear of violence against women and girls. A world where women and girls can reach their full potential in societies that respect people's rights and dignity. The Consortium is made up of 14 members: two government partners and twelve International Non-Governmental Organisations [1].

The priority theme for the 67th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 67) is, Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.

This provides an opportunity to focus on and highlight key issues affecting the rights of women and girls to be safe and secure in the digital age and to be able to secure the benefits of this global technological revolution. The ICGBV works to highlight and share knowledge on all forms of gender based violence and this paper is a contribution to the emerging debate on technology facilitated gender based violence.

[1] ActionAid Ireland, Aidlink Ireland, Christian Aid Ireland, Concern International, GOAL Global, Irish Aid, Irish Defence Forces, Ifrah Foundation, Irish Red Cross, Oxfam Ireland, Plan Ireland, Self Help Africa, Trócaire, World Vision Ireland.

# Executive Summary

Technology brings many benefits to the lives of women and girls globally: learning, connecting, and participating in economic, social, and political life. In low- and middle-income countries, 83% of women have mobile phones and 58% have access to the internet, numbers which will only increase over time. However, technology does not only represent an opportunity, it also presents risks, including the risk of technology-facilitated gender based violence. Data from 2021 has shown that up to 38% of women have experienced some form of online gender based violence in their lifetimes, and 85% of women have witnessed it. [i] This evidence and policy brief considers the intersection of technology and gender based violence, identifying both risks of technology facilitated gender based violence and opportunities that technology presents for survivors and  practitioners. Case studies are included throughout the report, highlighting how Consortium members are seeing technology facilitated gender based violence manifest across the contexts where they work, as well as innovations they are proposing to address it.

Technology facilitated gender based violence is any violence that takes place on the basis of gender and that is facilitated by technology, including but not limited to the internet. While the root cause of technology facilitated gender based violence—gender inequality—is the same for any other form of gender based violence, there are unique characteristics. Technology facilitated gender based violence can occur across multiple legal and regulatory jurisdictions making it particularly difficult to challenge. The abuse and violence can be perpetrated anonymously and at a distance, it can permeate spaces where a survivor may have formerly felt safe and some forms including image-based abuse may continue to exist permanently in digital spaces.  Some women and girls face additional risks based on their age, colour of their skin, sexuality, disability. Women who are active in public life as politicians, activists or human rights defenders are explicit targets of technology facilitated abuse and harassment. The consequences can be as severe as other forms of gender based violence and because legislation has not kept pace with technology, reporting technology facilitated gender based violence or achieving access to justice is extremely challenging for survivors.

At the same time, technology has long played a role in gender based violence prevention and response initiatives, in ways that are often taken for granted—including hotlines, information management systems, and access to help-seeking materials online. In addition to historically common uses of technology for gender based violence interventions, technology innovations in the humanitarian and development sector are on the rise. This has been met with caution by gender based violence practitioners, who have highlighted that the essential principles of do no harm and the survivor-centred approach have not always been key priorities of the technology industry. Survivors of gender based violence, specialist practitioners and women's rights organisations must be involved in the development of technology programmes seeking to address gender based violence. In addition, technology specific principles particularly safety by design and data minimisation must guide new innovations. Key Recommendations of the paper include the need for legislation to engage with a continuously evolving technology sector; the importance of increased research on technology facilitated gender based violence, particularly in low-income and conflict-affected contexts; and the need for increased accountability from technology providers.

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# Introduction

Technology permeates every aspect of our lives, and the Sustainable Development Goals have rightly named universal internet access as an important step in addressing gender inequality.[ii] It is only more recently, however, that there is growing recognition of the risks that technology poses to the achievement of gender equality, including through technology facilitated gender based violence, which up to 38% of women have experienced.

In 2017, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) adopted a General Recommendation recognising that gender based violence can happen in all spaces of human interaction, including 'technology-mediated environments'[iii] . A 2018 report from the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women reminded the UN and all States that, "Even though the core international human rights instruments, including those on women's rights, were drafted before the advent of ICT, they provide a global and dynamic set of rights and obligations with transformative potential, and have a key role to play in the promotion and protection of fundamental human rights, including a woman's rights to live a life free from violence, to freedom of expression, to privacy, to have access to information shared through ICT, and other rights"[iv].

In that same year the UN Human Rights Council adopted the resolution that all States should be "Accelerating efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls - preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in digital contexts"[v]. Following the 2019 review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform by UN Women, States were urged to close the gender digital divide and called on to ensure women's equal participation in the design of technology and the development and implementation of laws, policies, and regulations to combat new risks, including online harassment and other forms of technology facilitated violence.

However, the international community remains at early stages of responding to both these challenges and opportunities. This ICGBV policy brief looks at both the risks and opportunities of technology regarding gender based violence in development and humanitarian settings, with the first section reviewing what technology facilitated gender based violence and its consequences are, taking an intersectional lens to better understand how women and girls in all of their diversity are impacted by this issue. The second section considers the opportunities that technology provides in relation to gender based violence prevention and response, highlighting innovative initiatives to date and outlining key principles to ensure women and girls' safety and to develop survivor centred responses and accountability.

While technology-facilitated gender based violence is on the rise, researchers and policymakers have struggled to keep pace with the evolution of new technologies. The intersection of technology and gender based violence is one that is essential to understand, for governments, international and national actors—including feminist civil society—as well as technology service providers.

In preparation for the sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 67) 'Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls', the UN CSW67 Expert Group's recommended that States, "Develop a comprehensive definition of online and technology-facilitated gender-based violence which reflects both the continuum of violence and the common root causes, and which is victim and survivor-centred"[vi]. The NGO Commission on the Status of Women Advocacy and Research Group has called for the development of "international standards and guidelines to address and eliminate all risks to the digital privacy and safety, autonomy, and dignity of women and girls in all their diversity"[vii].

To be accountable to women and girls, we must develop survivor-centred ways of addressing technology-facilitated gender based violence and – more broadly - ensure that the risks of technology are minimised so that women and girls' human rights are protected and that the opportunities presented by technology contribute to, rather than detract from, the achievement of gender equality globally.

# How does technology create risks of gender-based violence?

## What is tech-facilitated gender based violence?

Key concept: There is a common misconception that technology facilitated gender based violence always takes place online. However, this is not the case. Violence that takes place offline but is facilitated by technology in some way also constitutes technology facilitated gender based violence. Consider the following forms of technology facilitated gender based violence:

- Gender based violence via SMS
- The threat to share sexually explicit images of someone online if they do not agree to do what the perpetrator says
- Technology used to groom someone, even if abuse takes place offline
- Perpetrator to perpetrator use of technology for trafficking that takes place offline
- Withholding use of technology (phone, controlling passwords)

In line with latest guidance from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), this paper uses the term technology-facilitated gender based violence. This term is understood as "acts of violence perpetrated by one or more individuals that is committed, assisted, aggravated and amplified in part or fully by the use of information and communication technologies or digital media, against a person on the basis of their gender".[viii] Broader than the term "online violence", this definition encompasses gender based violence that happens online as well as gender based violence that might take place offline, while still being facilitated by or with the use of technology. Just as gender based violence should be assumed to be occurring in every context [ix], we must also assume that technology-facilitated gender based violence is occurring and will increase alongside increased access to technology and and exposure to digital platforms.

Technology-facilitated gender based violence is a type of gender based violence and should not be seen as separate from other forms of gender based violence within society. The root cause of both forms is the same, persistent, and pervasive gender inequality. Technology permeates our lives, and there is a continuum between gender based violence that is technology-facilitated, and gender based violence that is not.

Within technology-facilitated gender based violence there are many specific abuses with multiple descriptors and terms. The following are some of the most common terms, some of which have overlapping meanings. A full list of terms can be seen in the Glossary of UNFPA's 2021 "Making All Spaces Safe: Technology-facilitated Gender Based Violence".[x]

# Forms of technology facilitated gender based violence

| | |
|---|---|
| **Cyberstalking** | Using technology to stalk someone, including in real time |
| **Image based abuse**<br>• **Deepfakes**<br>• **Upskirting**<br>• **Cyberflashing** | Based on the use of taking/posting images without consent, including:<br>• Deepfakes – non-consensual imagery, usually developed with Artificial Intelligence (AI), that depicts the person in a sexual way.<br>• Upskirting – taking a photo up someone's skirt, without consent.<br>• Cyberflashing– sending someone sexually explicit imagery of themselves (or others), without consent. |
| **Image Based Sexual Abuse [2]** | Posting sexually explicit images or video content without consent. |
| **Doxxing** | Revealing detailed personal information—for example the address, phone number, or photos of family or children—in public spaces online, with the purpose of making the victim/survivor and potentially their family vulnerable to attack or intimidation in the offline world. |
| **Grooming and online trafficking** | Use of technology to lure women and girls into sexual abuse or trafficking schemes. |
| **Limiting or controlling the use of and access to technology** | Limiting or controlling the use of technology as a form of control, manipulation, and abuse; this can be an extension of coercive control in a romantic or familial relationship. |

[2] Some forms of image based abuse are referred to as "revenge porn".In line with other survivor centred organisations ICGBV rejects this term as minimising and victim blaming.

| Gendered disinformation / gendered defamation | Creation and dissemination of content & false information which attacks or undermines people based on their gender and weaponises gendered narratives to promote political, social or economic objectives and often using sexualised imagery as a deliberate tactic. [xi] [xii] |
|---|---|
| Production of hardware and software giving rise to gender based violence | Intentional development and/or modification of hardware or software that can be utilised for technology facilitated gender based violence, including surveillance, harassment, and viruses[xiii] |

# Who perpetrates technology-facilitated gender based violence?

Perpetrators of technology-facilitated gender based violence include family members, intimate partners, ex-partners, friends/non-romantic acquaintances, strangers, anonymous accounts, technology companies/corporate actors, and state actors. One of the factors that makes technology-facilitated gender based violence different from other forms of gender based violence is that perpetrators can be completely anonymous, and they can commit abuse and violence at any time, and at a distance.

However, at the same time as much technology-facilitated gender based violence is happening anonymously online, there is a growing recognition of technology facilitated gender based violence perpetrated by "coordinated groups, among them men's rights activists, incel-involuntary celibates), and other groups engaging in the 'manosphere', with growing evidence of association with extremist groups"[xiv]. High profile misogynists have been highlighted in the media as perpetrating

**Key concept:** All gender based violence is both a cause and consequence of gender inequality. But what sets technology facilitated gender based apart from other forms of gender based violence?

- Perpetrators can remain anonymous
- It can be committed at a distance, with automation
- Because of the above, it is more accessible for perpetrators to commit
- There can be increased impunity
- Perpetuity – it can be difficult, if not impossible, to stop certain content from existing on the internet
- Increased normalisation

technology-facilitated gender based violence openly – indicating that it is becoming ubiquitous and in danger of becoming normalised [xv]. The manipulation of automated social media algorithms has been shown to drive highly misogynistic content to global audiences. The perpetration of a continuum of online and in person violence, as seen in cases that have come to light in the media, demonstrates the deep interconnection of all forms of gender based violence and the interconnection of online and offline abuse and violence.[xvi]

# How many women and girls are impacted, and who is most at risk? ?

Whilst research on the prevalence of technology facilitated gender based violence is steadily emerging, there is a need to resource and develop international collection of qualitative and quantitative data.  The most comprehensive global study to date on technology-facilitated gender based violence to date is from the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU)[xvii] looking at levels of online violence experienced by women in 51 countries with the highest penetration of internet rates. According to this study:

- 38% of women surveyed had experienced online gender based violence
- 63% of women said they know someone else who has experienced online violence
- 85% of women had witnessed online gender based violence against another woman[3]

Regional disaggregation from this research is available, showing that many contexts where the members of the Irish Consortium on Gender Based Violence  work have higher rates of online gender based violence. The Middle East has the highest prevalence rate [4] of online gender based violence (98%), followed by Latin American/the Caribbean (91%), Africa (90%), Asia Pacific (80%), North America (76%), and Europe (74%).[xviii]

The EIU study has measured "online violence/online gender based violence", not the broader and more encompassing "technology-facilitated gender based", meaning that prevalence rates could be even higher if numbers included women who have experienced violence that is facilitated by technology but does not take place online. In addition, there is a gap in the understanding of  the unique experiences  of women   without  access, or without frequent access to the internet and online spaces, predominantly women living in low-income settings. There is a need for harmonisation of terminology as well as increased research on technology facilitated gender based violence in low-income and conflict-affected contexts.

[3] This figure is an aggregate of individual, community (known someone who has experienced), and witnessed (which includes individual and community).
[4] Ibid

## Who is most at risk?

Although technology-facilitated gender based violence is happening across the globe, there is a diversity of experience and impact for women and girls. It is important to take an intersectional approach so that we might better understand who is at higher risk of experiencing technology-facilitated gender based violence. To see a full mapping of studies regarding prevalence rates of technology-facilitated GBV across various groups of women and girls, see the annex of UNFPA's 2021 report "Making all spaces safe".

- Girls and young women: According to research by Plan International, 58% of girls and women aged 15-25 have experienced online harassment xxi. Regional differences were captured, with the highest rates of online violence found in Europe (63%), followed by Latin American (60%), Asia-Pacific (58%), Africa (54%), and North America (52%).[xx]
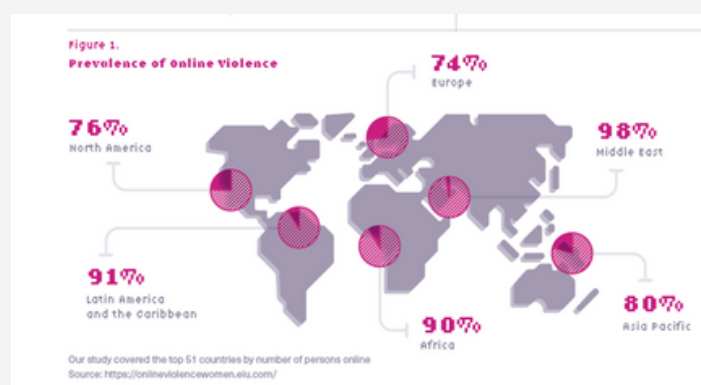


Image credit: UNFPA, 2021. Making all spaces safe: Technology facilitated gender based violence

According to the study, most girls have their first experience of social media harassment between the ages of 14-16, suggesting that this violence starts at a shockingly young age. Furthermore, the study found that awareness of online harassment is lower among 15-year-olds as compared to 24-year-olds, likely indicating that younger girls do not possess the same psychosocial tools for dealing with technology-facilitated gender based violence when it does occur.

- Women of colour, LGBTQI+ persons, and disabled women and girls: Women and girls who are racialised, identify as LGBTQI+, or live with a disability can experience higher risks of technology-facilitated gender based violence, as well as technology-facilitated gender based violence that targets them due to their gender and their racial/ethnic identify, sexuality or disability[xii]. For example, Plan International found that 42% of the girls in the study who identified as LGBTQI+ and had experienced online harassment said that they are additionally harassed due to their sexual orientation. The same was true for 37% of girls from a minority ethnic group in the study. In these instances, sexism and misogyny were compounded and exacerbated by racism, ablism, and homophobia and transphobia.

- <u>Women in public life (<u>women human rights defenders, politicians, journalists, and feminist activists</u>):</u> Women in public life are often at increased risk of experiencing technology-facilitated gender based violence not only due to their gender, but because of their public work, activism or campaigning. It is not only high-profile women who are targeted, but also women and girls who speak out on political issues. Research conducted by The National Democracy Institute (NDI) across Colombia, Indonesia, and Kenya found that online violence targeted toward college-aged women active in politics has a "chilling effect", leading to decreased participation on Twitter and important organising and public engagement forum.[xxii] NDI has also found that a range of actors, including state actors, perpetuate gendered disinformation online, to discourage women from continuing in public life. The Inter-Parliamentary Union, a partner of Irish Aid, has called attention to violence against women in politics (see addition information in the case study on page 9)

**Examples of technology-facilitated gender based violence against women activists and human rights defenders:**

- In contexts with authoritarian leaders, and where there is a crackdown on feminist activists and human rights defenders, doxxing is a common and dangerous form of technology facilitated gender based violence which can lead to the identification and arrest of women by state actors.
- The Afghan Witness found that online abuse and disinformation against women in Afghanistan on Twitter increased significantly following the change in authorities in August 2021.

# Online violence against women in politics: Evidence and solutions from the Inter-Parliamentary Union

Ireland is a long standing supporter of the Inter-Parliamentary Union's (IPU) gender programme to support women in politics and their work to combat violence against women politicians. Three studies[1] produced by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) showed that women in politics, as candidates in elections and as office holders, are particularly targeted by online gender-based violence. Such attacks were highly prevalent: 58 per cent of women MPs respondents to IPU's surveys had experienced such attacks in Europe, 46 per cent in Africa and 42 per cent globally.
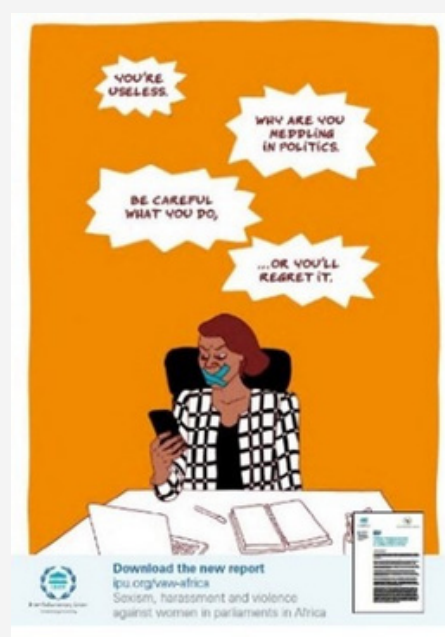
Malicious content can spread rapidly, and it can be reproduced and made visible on social networks. In this way, technology can make gender-based violence into something that can be perpetrated at distance, without physical contact. It can extend beyond borders including through the use of anonymous profiles to amplify the harm to victims.[2]

The main tactics used against women politicians online include: spreading false information, making threats, using hate speech, and attacking their image, their body, sexuality or reputation. The purpose or effect is to silence women, both online and offline, and ultimately to make them withdraw from political life.

According to a woman parliamentarian from Asia: "Members of conservative parties accuse me of not being a true Muslim, of making false statements, particularly when I speak about women's rights. They disseminate messages through social media such as 'go ahead, kill her'"

"They have threatened me on social media saying that they have a sex tape of mine. They insult me and say they'll harass me until I commit suicide", another woman parliamentarian, from Africa, recounted.

These attacks have often gone unpunished. The IPU is calling on parliaments to strengthen laws on violence against women in politics and online. Parliaments can also improve the regulatory frameworks of companies that own online platforms, so that such companies must ensure online accountability, fulfil duty-of-care and transparency requirements, set up safeguards to protect women from online-violence, and provide mechanisms for reporting and punishing abuse. Solutions also include tips and prevention tools on how female politicians can safeguard their data and privacy online.



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against women in parliaments in Africa

The IPU published guidelines [3] in seven languages to offer advice and practical information to parliaments on how to devise and implement policies to end sexism and gender based- violence in the parliamentary workplace. It also provides tailored support to parliaments in developing and implementing such policies.

[1] IPU. Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians, 2016.
Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe, 2018,and in Africa, 2021.
[2] Šimonović, Dubravka. Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, 2018.
[3] IPU. Guidelines for the elimination of sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliament, 2019.

# Plan International Ireland

In recent years, there have been strong international commitments made to support girls' and women's rights. However, these have not always adapted to combat the new forms of violence that girls and women face. Not only do girls face gender-based violence in their relationships, workplaces, schools, and communities, but now they face an epidemic of violence and harassment on online platforms.

While Plan International carried out research with 14,000 girls across 31 countries – research which is cited in this policy report - the Youth Advisory Panel of Plan International Ireland carried out similar research here with 457 girls and young women to complement and supplement the global findings and raise awareness of the issue.

The majority of respondents had experienced online harassment – this figure was 67% in Ireland, compared to 58% at the global level. The repercussions of this are clear in the findings: one quarter of respondents in both Ireland and globally felt physically unsafe. In Ireland, 75% lost self-esteem or self-confidence, a figure much higher than the global one of 42%. Similarly, 65% of Irish respondents experienced mental or emotional stress due to online harassment, higher than the 42% who said they did across 22 countries.
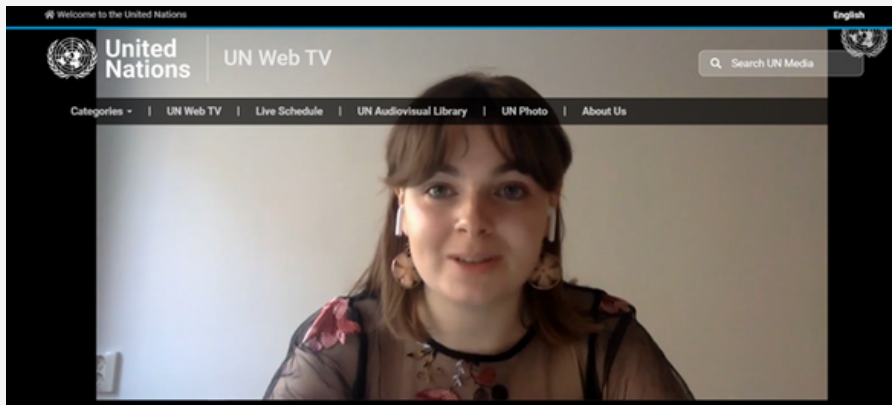
YAP member Jessica addresses the UN Human Rights Council at Ireland's adoption of the Universal Periodic Review in 2022

At the global level, 37% of those harassed who identified as being from an ethnic minority said they were abused because of their ethnicity or race. 56% of those harassed who identified as being LGBTQIA+ said they were harassed because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. Girls with disabilities were also targeted, with 14% of girls who identified as having a disability harassed for this reason. These figures show the importance of taking an intersectional approach to our understanding of online violence.

The effects of online harassment and abuse are far-reaching, impacting girls' mental health, confidence, self-esteem, and relationships. It's driving some girls offline and causing others to change how they express themselves.

To further highlight the effects of online gender-based violence, Plan International Ireland's Youth Advisory Panel took part in media interviews, meetings with Government Ministers, and made a submission to Ireland's United Nations Universal Periodic Review where they were subsequently invited to address the Human Rights Council.

# What are the consequences of technology-facilitated gender based violence?

The consequences of technology-facilitated gender based technology can be as severe as other forms of gender based violence. Risk of harm arises from both online content (sexist, misogynistic, degrading, and stereotyped portrayals of women) and behaviours (bullying, stalking, harassment, intimidation facilitated and perpetrated via social media, tracking applications, and profiling technology). The virtual nature of some technology-facilitated gender based violence means that violence can happen anywhere, at any time, and invade personal and/ or domestic spaces—such as the home and bedroom – making it next to impossible to escape if it is occurring.

Online threats of gender based violence, hate speech, incitement to hatred, digital stalking and doxxing can lead to and enable psychological, physical, sexual or economic harm or suffering to women. The threat of offline harm contributes to building a hostile, aggressive and ultimately abusive community and society, deliberately focused on driving women and girls out of public life.

A common impact is profound social isolation, whereby victims or survivors withdraw from public life, including with family and friends, and limited mobility, when they lose their freedom to move around safely. They can cause a high degree of psychological harm due to the scale and repeated occurrence of such acts. Victims and survivors experience depression, anxiety and fear, and in some cases may also develop suicidal tendencies. [xxiii]

Where the violence remains online, it can lead women and girls to take a step back from using technology or online spaces such as social media, which may protect them in some ways, but decreases their online freedom and ability to participate in crucial public spaces and to become digital leaders. In Plan's report, 17% of girls who had faced very frequent harassment stopped posting content that expressed their opinion. Abuse experienced by politically active women on Twitter in NDI's study in Colombia, Indonesia and Kenya led women to decrease, pause or stop using the social network entirely. The EIU study noted that 92% women reported online violence harms their wellbeing, with 43% being left feeling unsafe.

Gendered disinformation campaigns shift the discourse from policy issues to the personal and create barriers for women in politics to succeed. Indeed, the intention of technology facilitated gender based violence against women in public life is to force them to reconsider their ambitions and exit public life, therefore posing a significant threat to the limited gains made by women and girls in political and other forms of leadership in recent decades and undermining inclusive and diverse democracies at community, national and global level.[xxiv].

# What are the challenges with reporting and access to justice?

Reporting gender based violence in any form is challenging. UN Women have documented that fewer than 40% of the women who experience any form of violence seek help and that women who do seek help, most look to family and friends and very few look to formal institutions, such as police and health services. Less than 10% of those seeking help appealed to the policing authorities with fear of punitive action from individuals, community and legal authorities impeding survivor-victims further[xxv].

These challenges can be even greater when it comes to reporting or accessing justice for technology-facilitated gender based violence, which is often met with indifference or lack of action. The scale and impact of technology facilitated gender based violence is not well understood and legislation, regulatory frameworks and national policies have not kept pace with the digital revolution. Many of the gender based abuses named earlier are not yet criminalised in many countries with conflicting perspectives on regulatory functions and responsibilities. Unique elements in technology facilitated gender based violence exacerbate these issues, including that survivors and perpetrators may live in different jurisdictions, and that the technology platform on which the violence has taken place is distributed across multiple countries. Overall, this results in an extremely low level of accountability to those who experience technology facilitated gender based violence.

Speaking to the invisibility of technology-facilitated gender based violence in Malawi within legislation, a research participant in "Tackling gender-based cyber violence against women and girls in Malawi amidst the COVID-19 pandemic" shared that, "In Malawi, cyber violence is a new form of gender based violence. As a result, it is not recognised as important. In fact, you can see even in our National Gender Policy and National Action Plan to Combat Gender-Based Violence, there is nowhere in these documents where you find gender-based cyber violence is mentioned."[xxvi]

Reporting technology-facilitated gender based violence to private technology companies—ranging from social media to website hosts and app creators - can be ineffective. According to data from the EIU, only 25% of women reported the violence they experienced to the platforms(s) on which it occurred. Even fewer (14%) reported to an offline agency.

Many companies do not have protective policies in place, or, where they do, they implement them in ways that are inconsistent and are not survivor centred or accountable.[xxvii] In addition, automated algorithm processes are open to manipulation, driven by extreme and deliberately outraging content and monetised to the benefit of individuals and companies. There are competing discourses privileging what is described as free speech over women and girls' safety online that undermine a consensus on safeguarding responsibilities.

# How are governments currently responding to technology-facilitated gender based violence?

Recognition of technology facilitated gender based violence is growing in high-level policy spaces. For example, in 2022, the African Commission passed a Resolution on the Protection of Women against Digital Violence in Africa, calling on African governments to review or adopt legislation addressing technology facilitated gender based violence.[xxviii] This is a positive development in light of the prevalence rates of technology facilitated gender based violence and that few women can seek legal recourse.

There is also an increasing number of international coalitions working to build political commitment to address the issue. The UN has developed Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights which provides a voluntary framework for how corporations, including technology companies could meet their obligations and responsibilities to respect and protect human rights, and to provide remedy for abuses that are technology facilitated and/or occurring in online spaces[xxix]. In addition, the UN Generation Equality Forum outcome document—the Global Acceleration Plan—includes an Action on preventing and eliminating online and technology facilitated gender based violence and discrimination,[5] "By 2026 a majority of countries and tech companies (will) demonstrate accountability by implementing policies and solutions against online and technology facilitated gender based violence and discrimination". [xxx]

In 2021 the Copenhagen Pledge on Tech for Democracy—of which Ireland is a signatory—was launched for the purpose of building political commitment to "make technology work for human rights and democracy". One of its action coalitions, the Global Partnership for Action on Gender based Online Harassment and Abuse, aims to bring together a wide variety of stakeholders—governments, international organisations, civil society, and the private sector to better prioritise, understand, prevent, and address growing levels of technology facilitated gender based violence.

There are a number of state initiatives which highlight the possibilities for addressing online abuses and ending impunity for perpetrators of technology facilitated gender based violence. For example, Germany has passed the "Act to Improve Enforcement of the Law in Social Networks", or NetzDG Law in 2017. This law requires social media platforms to remove hate speech or offensive content (including technology-facilitated gender based violence) within 24 hours, or risk fines of up to €50 million.

[5] Government members of this Action Coalition included Rwanda, Tunisia, Chile, Armenia, and Finland.

Australia's eSafety Commissioner has developed the concept of "Safety by Design", discussed in the subsequent section of this paper. The eSafety Commissioner has legal powers to help people get harmful content removed from online, including working with online platforms, or fining or taking legal action against them. Australia has just launched the Global Online Safety Regulators Network with Fiji, Ireland, and the UK.

While it is outside the scope of this paper to do a comprehensive review of legislation and initiatives working to address technology facilitated gender based violence, the following spotlights recent laws and initiatives whose impact can be monitored in the years to come:

- In 2021, Ireland introduced Coco's Law, the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act[xxxi], creating two new offences dealing with the non-consensual distribution of intimate images.

- In 2021, Brazil passed legislation criminalising online stalking, within broader anti-gender based violence legislation (Law 14.132).[xxxii]

- In 2022, Mexico passed the "Ley Olimpia" / Digital Violence Act, enshrining a definition of digital violence into law and modifying a number of articles in the criminal code to enable prosecution of digital violence.[xxxiii]

- The Thailand Safe Internet Coalition is a public-private partnership between the Royal Thai Government and internet service providers, launched in 2022, and focusing primarily on child protection through its five pillars of action. [xxxiv]

# ActionAid Nepal: Raising awareness of online gender based violence and collaboration with authorities for prevention and response

ActionAid Nepal conducted an online survey to better understand how safe the internet is for young women and girls in Nepal, and to identify the risk of abuse, harassment or violence against young women and girls on the internet and social media. The survey was conducted during the Covid-19 lockdowns in Nepal, when many girls' and young women's phone usage increased. In total, 128 girls and young women aged 15 – 30, who use internet and social media, participated in the survey across 13 working districts (Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Bhaktapur, Bardia, Bajura, Doti, Palpa, Siraha, Parsa, Chitwan, Makwanpur, Tehrathum and Shankhuwasava).



Police representative facilitating session on online violence to girls in Makwanpur district

The survey results revealed that 34.5% had experienced violence online during the lockdown period. According to the survey, the large majority of the violence had been perpetrated by a stranger. In response to these survey results, and because phone usage is increasing in many parts of Nepal, Action Aid Nepal decided to act. They have since worked with authorities and women's networks across various districts to raise awareness of tech-facilitated GBV and empower girls and young women to know what to do if they experience such violence

In Chitwan District, the Chitwan Sakriya Women's Foundation (CSWF) together with representatives of police have conducted an awareness program for both adolescent girls and adolescent girls across two schools. During the program, the pros and cons of social media platforms were discussed, as well as safe ways of using them, reporting options, security settings, and free hotline numbers. CSWF also works closely with survivors and the police when cases are reported. In Makwanpur, the girls and young women in who attended an awareness-raising session, hosted in collaboration with the Makwanpur Women's Group, had never previously discussed online violence, and yet almost all were users of social networks, particularly Facebook and Tik Tok.

Through these initiatives, Action Aid Nepal, in collaboration with women's groups, has reached over 250 young women and adolescent girls and boys to prevent and respond to forms of tech-facilitated gender based violence.

# How does technology help prevent and respond to gender based violence?

Technology enables women and girls and women's rights organisations to speak out, conduct large scale research on gender equality topics, protect themselves from gender based violence, seek help if they have experienced gender based violence, and build survivor centred alliances and campaigns. Technology helps practitioners prevent and respond to gender based violence in many fully mainstreamed ways, such as through hotlines/helplines, e-learning for capacity strengthening among gender based violence practitioners, and more efficient monitoring and evaluation. The Gender Based Violence Area of Responsibility (GBV AoR) Community of Practice connects hundreds of practitioners virtually, supporting the implementation of global standards.[xxxv] With the rise of AI chatbots, we may see AI directing survivors and their communities to service providers.

83% of women in low- and middle-income contexts have access to a mobile phone and 58% have access to internet so technology is a useful tool, but it should not be seen as a complete strategy for reaching women, girls, and survivors. This section spotlights ways that technology plays a role in addressing gender based violence, while also pointing out essential ethical considerations to be made and practices to be incorporated as the use of technology increases.

# Technology's role in ending FGM/C in Somalia: Ifrah Foundation's 'Dear Daughter' Campaign

Recently published data from the Somalia Health and Demographic Survey (SHDS)8 stated that 98% of women and girls still undergo female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C). A radically different approach is required if we are to successfully shift the needle meaningfully and bring about an end to FGM/C in Somalia as mandated by the United Nations SDG number 5 by 2030.

The Ifrah Foundation's 'Dear Daughter' campaign takes a holistic approach to the elimination of FGM/C, combining three pillars of action: Advocacy, Media Awareness and Community Empowerment. While the campaign is rooted in the fundamental principle of personal empowerment, the idea of making a public pledge exists due to the power to provide community support to maintain that promise.

This is vital, given that the decision to practice FGM/C in Somalia is more of a community-based rather than individual-based decision, driven by a belief that everyone in the community is practicing it and that there is a religious obligation to cut.

Technology plays an integral role in the success of these pillars, and the Ifrah Foundation mediatises all its work from advocacy and awareness raising to direct community work.



Photo provided by Ifrah Foundation, captured by Tobin Jones videography

The 'Dear Daughter' campaign website and video are available in both Somali and English, and pledges can be made directly online. Some pledges have been videoed and made public with the consent of individuals, serving as a compelling form of awareness raising and advocacy

Radio broadcasting is another important technological tool for social and behavioural change. Because an estimated 85% of people have access to a radio in Somalia, the Ifrah Foundation focuses significantly on radio programming to shift behaviours on FGM/C. This begins with conducting media training for individuals, including learning to produce radio content, as well as receiving media training for broadcast on local, regional, or national television.

The Ifrah Foundation donates radios in Somalia and within internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, to increase access to information. Social media—including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram—is also essential for influencer advocacy as well as wider media awareness. As internet access and phone access increase in Somalia, Ifrah Foundation plans to expand its use of technology as a tool for social and behaviour change. When individuals make the pledge to not cut their daughters, they leave their email and phone numbers (if they have one). In the future, Ifrah Foundation plans to use this information to follow up with individuals regarding their pledge. The Foundation is also scoping developing a simple mobile phone app for individual and household usage, to increase education on FGM/C.

The number of pledges made is reaching 60,000 and counting, since its launch in September 2021. The Foundation intends to continue growing this number of pledges, to increase community awareness and commitment, and keep high-level momentum on the issue globally.

# How does technology play a role in gender based violence interventions?

At the heart of gender based violence prevention is social norm change. Online spaces and social media create opportunities for women and girls to have their say, challenge gender norms, sexism, homophobia, and racism, and reach a larger audience while they speak truth to power. There are risks associated with speaking out, but online spaces must be acknowledged as a key tool of women human rights defenders, women journalists, and feminist activists. The hashtags #MeToo and #NiUnaMenos went global and became a massive collective of women and girls speaking out online about the ubiquity of violence experienced in their lives. The power of online spaces also resonates across diverse groups of women: The project EroTICS (An Exploratory Research on Sexuality and the Internet), for example, found that whilst feminist schools and sexual rights activists working on LGBTQI+ subjects sometimes felt unsafe on the internet, especially on Facebook, they simultaneously placed high value on social networks and instant messaging, especially WhatsApp, as tools for their work. [xxxvi]

Other forms of technology such as radio have long been used for gender based violence prevention, in terms of reaching community members and awareness raising. The use of technology for gender based violence prevention became even more important during Covid-19 when services addressing gender based violence had to go fully remote. For example Trócaire Zimbabwe significantly increased their use of technology during the pandemic, using video, WhatsApp, text messages, video-recorded dramas, and radio to ensure that gender based violence prevention programmes could continue.[xxxvii]

In gender based violence response work, phones have long played a role in hotlines/helplines for gender based violence response all around the world. For SAWA in Palestine, for example, information communication technology (ICT) developments improved the functioning of their Call Centre, allowing them to go from receiving around 2,500 calls per year in 2000 to 27,428 calls per year in 2011.[xxxviii] There are also a number of newer technologies being used for gender based violence response and mitigation, whether by survivors and practitioners. The table below offers a short compilation of examples given in the literature to date. While many of these are exciting, it is important to note that most of the newer technologies for addressing gender based violence have not yet been robustly tested or scaled up, pointing to the need for additional evaluations on their alignment with survivor centred values, as well as their effectiveness and scalability.[xxxix].

**Online campaigns challenging technology facilitated gender based violence:**

UNFPA's "The Virtual is Real" campaign brings awareness to the real-life consequences of technology facilitated gender based violence.

UNFPA's "Bodyright" Campaign calls out tech companies for placing "greater value on protecting copyright than calling out misogyny and violence", encouraging viewers to sign a petition or join the "Bodyright photo gallery", where they can upload a photo of themselves stamped with "b" for bodyright".

# Technological Innovations

| Technology | Organisation | Function |
|---|---|---|
| Spryng.io – Sensemaking software | Queen's University Kingston and IOM | Gender based violence assessments: This application, administered via a tablet, was designed to capture the experiences of Venezuelan women refugees. Secure information was transferred to practitioners in relevant areas so they could learn whether gender based violence risks could be better identified and mitigated, and how the needs of survivors could be better met. [xl] |
| Medicapt | Physicians for Human Rights | Gender based violence Response: MediCapt is a smartphone application being tested in DRC and Kenya that allows medical practitioners to fill in a standardised forensics form, take photographic evidence, and send data to police and judicial authorities remotely. This app aims to increase access to justice for survivors in conflict settings where capacity for evidence collection is low and impunity is high. [xli] |
| Safetipin | Safetipin | Gender based violence risk mitigation and advocacy: Safetipin consists of three applications – My Saftipin, Safetipin Nite, and Safetipin Site – which collect data from users, creates a score for users to evaluate the safety of a location themselves, and uses data for advocacy, including government stakeholders. Founded by a feminist organisation in India, Safetipin is used across 16 countries and 67 cities.[xlii] |

| Technology | Organisation | Function |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Nokaneng app | Nokaneng app | **Gender based violence prevention and response:** Nokaneng is an app used in Lesotho which provides information on forms and consequences of gender based violence in written, video, and audio formats. Other similar informational apps exist, including Toranj in Iran (which also includes the possibility to connect directly to contacts for help) and myPlan app in the USA. [xliii] |
| Remote Offered Skills Building Application - ROSA | International Rescue Committee | **Gender based violence capacity building:** ROSA is a low-connectivity application for capacity strengthening of practitioners, including case workers and community focal points. [xliv] |
| Callisto | Callisto | **Gender based violence response and access to justice:** Callisto includes an Encrypted Record Form, which allows survivors to document their experience and story. Callisto also offers a Matching System, whereby survivors can input identifying characteristics about perpetrators (such as a social media handle); if the system finds that the perpetrator is a repeat offender, the system will inform the survivor and inform her of her legal options. [xlv] |

# Remote Case Management: Concern Lebanon's modality changes during Covid-19

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, Concern's case management team in Lebanon was forced to adapt their services quickly. By March 2020, the government of Lebanon had closed public institutions, schools, nurseries, and many other services, including those of NGOs such as Concern. Technology played a key role in continuing to provide services to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence as well as intimate partner violence.

Prior to lockdowns, case management included in-person assessment, case planning, case implementation, referral and follow up of complex cases including those related to child protection and sexual and gender-based violence for vulnerable Syrian, Palestinian and Lebanese in Akkar North Lebanon. However due to the restricted working environment the team began relying on the hotline number not only as a point of contact but also to provide continuous support to the targeted individuals.



Image description: Caseworker conducting remote gender based violence assessment

There were several challenges with shifting to fully remote services that the case management team identified and acted on quickly. Given that case workers were working from home for the first time, the case management team conducted a training for the case workers using Teams and WhatsApp to workshop adapting activities. Because many of the beneficiaries Concern is working with in Lebanon do not have WiFi, Concern provided charged mobile data cards to ensure that women and families could still access services.

Even with these measures in place, it was still difficult to reach all survivors safely, as in the most difficult cases, survivors were living with a perpetrator of violence. Case workers worked with beneficiaries to identify safety issues, and for some of the most challenging cases, code words or symbols via text message were established and used to know when it was safe to speak or not.

As part of the Covid 19 response, Concern also worked with community focal points—who play a key role in building trust in communities—to distribute information through WhatsApp to raise awareness about the hotline number.

Since March 2022, Concern has shifted back to in-person safe spaces and case management for the individuals they serve. While women and girls prefer in-person safe spaces and case management, the adaptations during Covid-19—relying on increased use of technology—were essential in ensuring continuity of services during that time.

# What are the limits and risk of using technology to address gender based violence, and what ethical solutions are in place to mitigate these risks?

There are key principles that must always be taken into account in any interventions addressing gender based violence, including the principle of do no harm and taking a survivor-centred approach. While the use of technology in addressing gender based violence is exciting and innovative, it also poses several limitations and risks which must be taken into account and mitigated to ensure adherence to key gender based violence principles outlined above. Because the technology sector is male-dominated and has not historically prioritised gender perspectives or focused on safety[xlvi], these risks are not always properly identified or disclosed, and it can be a challenging for gender based violence practitioners to feel empowered to enter and influence conversations with technology providers.

When new technologies to address gender based violence are being developed, it is essential to use participatory or human centred design approaches and to have the voices, perspectives and expertise of survivors and gender based violence specialists in the room. Additionally, human-centred design principles are invaluable in capturing contextual factors. The use of technology in low-income settings, and particularly humanitarian contexts, must be considered carefully due to factors such as: lower proportion of women and girls who have their own phone or access to the internet; the need for low-tech solutions; the need for applications that can go offline and online smoothly; and high costs of data for users.

Confidentiality and privacy are other crucial and central factors when working with survivors, as data breaches can create risks to personal safety by family members, the community, or institutional agencies. A central understanding must be that "No data is safe", and careful consideration must be made into how data is collected, disseminated, stored, and disposed of [xlvii]. Data minimalism should be a core principle when developing new technologies, with no data being collected that is not necessary.

An emerging term that encapsulates safety principles for technology providers is "Safety by Design", developed by Australia's eSafety Commissioner. Safety by Design has three guiding principles: 1 - Service provider responsibility, meaning that the burden of responsibility of safety should not fall on the user; 2 – User empowerment and autonomy, meaning that the dignity of the user should be central to the service; and 3 – Transparency and accountability, with technology providers publishing information on how they implement their policies and keep data safe. Although these principles are not specific to technologies addressing gender based violence, they should be used when developing new technologies to prevent, respond to, or mitigate gender based violence. Safety by design would contribute to a safer environment for women and girls online.

**Key resource:** UNFPA's forthcoming "Guidance on the Safe and Ethical Use of Technology to Address Gender based Violence and Harmful Practices" is filling a longstanding gap in the need for best practice guidance regarding how to ethically use technology for gender based violence interventions.

In addition to core principles for any gender based violence interventions, the guidelines propose ten additional data-specific principles. collated across existing best practice.

1. Safety by Design;
2. Purpose limitation;
3. Data minimisation;
4. Proper use of data;
5. Fairness;
6. Informed consent, transparency, and ownership;
7. Accuracy and data quality;
8. Security: integrity, confidentiality, and availability;
9. Accountability;
10. Unconditional service

The Guidance is also accompanied by a number of toolkits, including 17 practical steps for practitioners and tech professionals to jointly use while developing technology innovations together.

These resources can be viewed here.

# Conclusions and Policy recommendations

Technology facilitated gender based violence is becoming a common experience of women and girls across the globe, particularly for women politicians, activists and human rights defenders, as well as women with intersecting identities, who experience sexism and racism, ableism, or homophobia . We must develop a comprehensive definition of online and technology-facilitated gender-based violence which reflects both the continuum of violence and the common root causes, and is survivor and victim centred.

All women and girls should benefit equally from technological advancements including the right to live free from technology facilitated gender based violence. Governments, donors, UN Agencies, NGOs and private entities must be accountable to women and girls when it comes to addressing this form of violence against women and girls and recognise that the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is fully applicable to all technology environments and technology facilitated processes.

Consequences are high, and yet protections for women and girls have not kept pace. There is a need to resource and develop international collection of qualitative and quantitative data, with a harmonisation of terminology as well as increased research on technology facilitated gender based violence in low-income and conflict-affected contexts. International standards and guidelines must be developed to address and eliminate all risks to the digital privacy and safety, autonomy, and dignity of women and girls in all their diversity and we must end the invisibility of technology-facilitated gender based violence in legislation, and the impunity with which many perpetrators act.

Governments should address as a matter of urgency the technology facilitated targeting of women and girls in public life, politicians, activists and human rights defenders, given its enormously detrimental impact on democracy and the fragile gains made in global gender equality.

At the same time, technology is increasingly being used in innovations to address gender based violence, but there needs to be strong adherence to common principles to ensure survivor safety. Technology must be used to transform social and cultural stereotypes about women, improve responsiveness to harm and violence and to ensure effectiveness and efficiency for women and girls in their obtaining of justice. Technology should be a tool for accelerating the achievement of gender equality, the empowerment of women and the elimination of discrimination and violence against women and girls.

An awareness of technology-facilitated gender based violence must be incorporated and accounted for in all humanitarian, development and human rights work and policies. In addition, we must also ensure that humanitarian and development work does not give rise to technology-facilitated gender based violence itself as an unintended side effect, for example using hardware or software which includes automated surveillance capacities.

# Policy recommendations

## Policy recommendations for governments

Develop and continuously update legislation to protect women and girls from technology-facilitated gender based violence;

Develop criminal and civil laws specific to technology facilitated harms and ensure that perpetrators can be held to account and sanctions are proportionate to injury;

Develop international agreements to fight multi-jurisdictional technology-facilitated gender based violence;

Develop collaborative structures with women's rights organisations, the technology sector and civil society, in the first instance to conduct a review of all measures and policies in relation to gender based violence, and update these in order to ensure they effectively address technology-facilitated gender based violence;

Establish a statutory agency with authority and resources to address technology-facilitated gender based violence (or include new powers in an existing agency) including regulatory powers over private technology companies to proactively develop safeguarding processes and immediately remove harmful content;

Provide funding to research institutions and INGOs to carry out studies on technology facilitated gender based violence, with a focus on the most marginalised women and girls;

Utilise technology to tackle gender based violence including national digital awareness and education programmes, particularly prevention programmes that include engagement with men and boys to address harmful online behaviours.

# Policy recommendations

## Policy recommendations for Non-Governmental Organisations

NGOs must ensure that needs assessments and gender based violence programmes identify the risk and address technology-facilitated gender based violence;

Technology created to prevent and respond to gender based violence must adhere to the do no harm principle, follow the ethical collection and use of survivor data as outlined in the Minimum Standards, and utilise the principle of safety by design;

NGOs working to increase access to technology and digital literacy should ensure a gender perspective, to increase awareness on the risks of technology; gender based violence focused agencies should grow their technology literacy and capabilities in response to the continued rise of technology innovations in aid;

NGOs should take a collaborative approach and endeavour to share openly and transparently their successes on various forms of technology with other NGOs whilst adhering to data privacy and ethics standards;

## Policy recommendations for technology providers

Technology providers must increase their accountability to women and girls, by establishing and enforcing strict codes of conduct for users, developing robust and consistent standards for content moderation that detect and respond to all forms of gender based violence, applying effective sanctions to perpetrators and reporting transparently to the public on the impact of these initiatives;

Technology providers should strengthen or adopt positive measures, such as Safety by Design, through the development, design, and use of digital technologies to prevent technology facilitated gender based violence.

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# Technology and gender-based violence: risks and opportunities

## 2023