

Gender Equality Index 2020: Digitalisation and the future of work

When gender-based violence goes digital

The emergence of digital technologies has had far-reaching impacts on women's and girls' exposure to gender-based violence.

Firstly, in providing abusers with access to more varied and powerful tools of control and coercion over the women in their lives, digital technologies can aggravate traditional forms of intimate partner violence (EIGE, 2017b). Secondly, digital technologies have enabled the emergence of new forms of gender-based violence, which are likely to affect women differently depending on their personal characteristics.

Online abuse towards women and girls is now understood as an iteration or extension of gender-based violence experienced offline (Lewis et al., 2017). This section focuses on some of the forms of violence that have emerged from digital technological development and their impact on women's online and offline lives.

As shown in **Figure 25**, 5 % of adult women in the EU have experienced some form of online harassment in the 12 months preceding the survey. This percentage reaches 12 % in Austria, 11 % in Germany and 9 % in France.

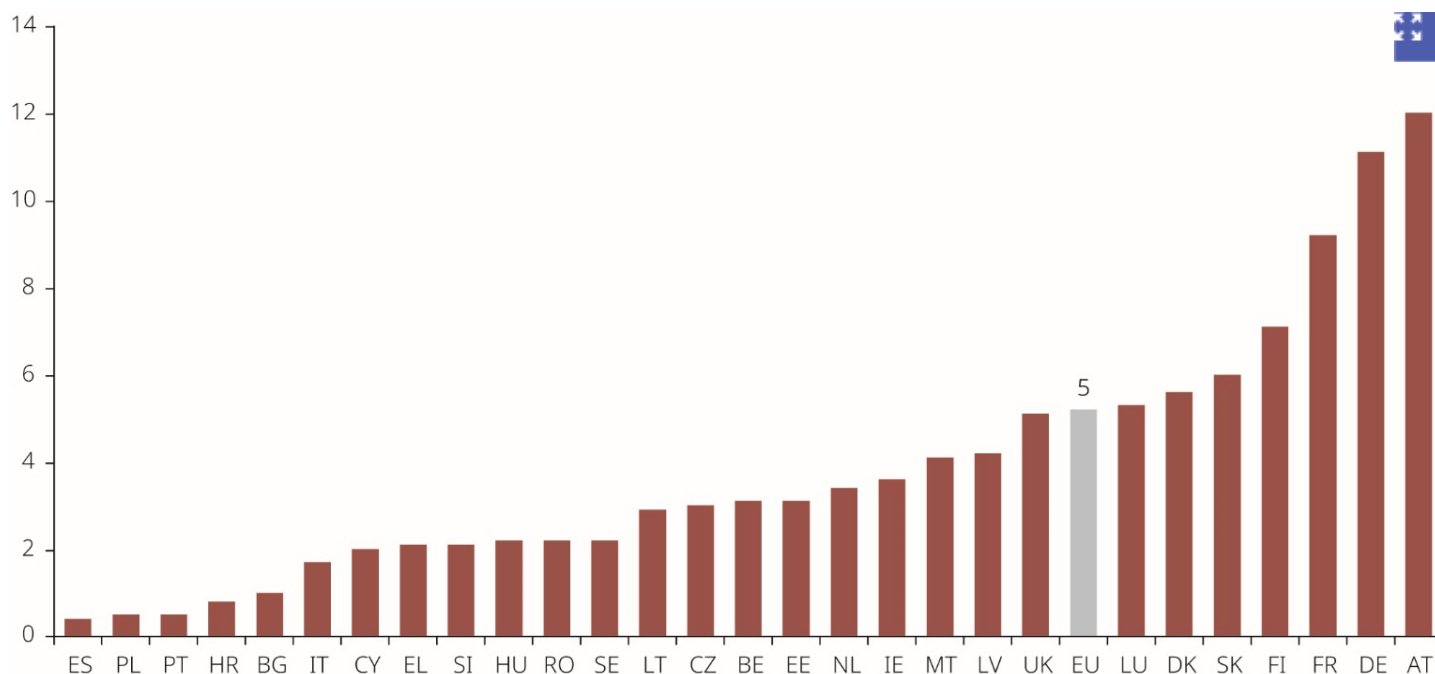


Figure 25. Percentages of women aged 18 or older who experienced online harassment in the 12 months prior to the survey, by country, 2016

As discussed in EIGE (2019a), adolescent girls and young women are very active internet users, especially on social networking sites, and commonly face unwanted and inappropriate advances online in that context. This is reflected in the higher prevalence of cyber-harassment among young women, with 20 % of 18–29-year-old women living in the EU having experienced sexual harassment online since the age of 15 (FRA, 2014b).

Abuse on social media and other networking sites is so ubiquitous that it is often characterised as routine for young people (Bryce and Fraser, 2013). When asked if they had witnessed or experienced cases where abuse, hate speech or threats were directed at journalists, bloggers and people active on social media, 57 % of young women and 62 % of young men aged 16–19 responded that they had^[1].

If gender and age are strong predictors of exposure to abuse on social networks, so too are sexual orientation and gender identity. Young women belonging to the LGBTI community are at particular risk of cyber-harassment, with 15 % of lesbian young women and 12 % of bisexual young women aged 15–17 having experienced cyber-harassment in the previous 12 months (**Figure 26**).

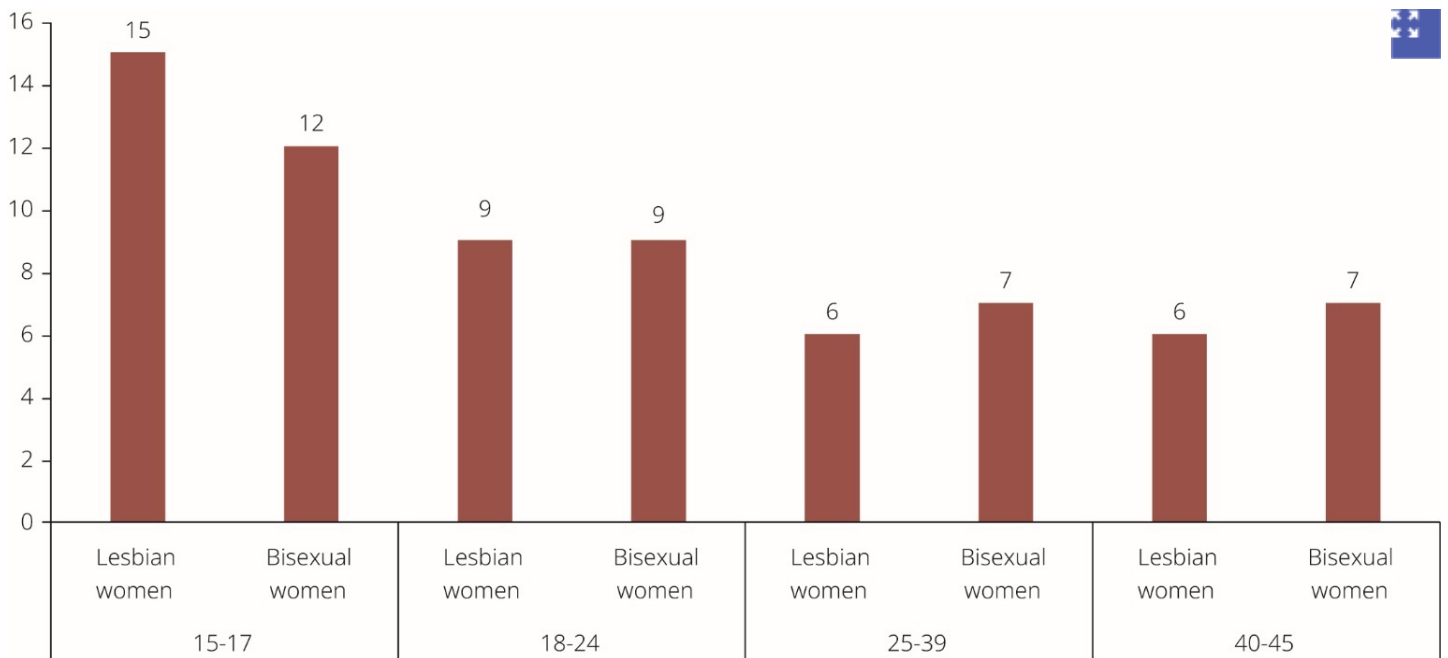


Figure 26. Percentages of respondents who experienced cyber-harassment as a result of being LGBTI in the past 12 months, by age and orientation, EU, 2020

In addition to cyber-harassment, several emerging forms of cyber-violence revolve around sexual images shared without consent, with the intention of shaming women for their sexuality, such as the dissemination of intimate pictures and videos without consent and the creation of social media accounts dedicated to publicly shaming and humiliating individual young women and girls by exposing intimate (real or fabricated) images of them (McGlynn et al., 2017).

Another alarming development is ‘upskirting’, where boys or men use their phones to stealthily take pictures up women’s skirts or dresses to post on social media (McGlynn and Rackley, 2017). Some functionalities of mobile devices are used to harass women and girls, such as in cyber-flashing, where Bluetooth or Airdrop functions are used to send unsolicited sexual pictures or messages, particularly to very young women and often in public places or on public transport (Milner and Donald, 2019; Thompson, 2016).

As for other forms of gender-based violence, evidence suggests that the lockdowns and social distancing measures mandated to reduce the spread of COVID-19 have been associated with a spike in digital forms of violence affecting women, such as online harassment and non-consensual pornography, in part as a result of increased internet usage (CNews, 2020; Davies, 2020; EIGE, 2020b; Euronews, 2020; UN Women, 2020).

Similarly, Europol has pointed to the pandemic being associated with an increased number of attempts to access illegal websites featuring child sexual exploitation material (Europol, 2020).

Footnotes

