

Building safe digital spaces for women and girls – Click off cyber violence!

EIGE's Director Carlien Scheele delivered this speech at an event organised by the 2021 Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union on 25 November 2021.

Good morning everybody,

Every day, millions of people do things online that have a big impact on their lives. They rent apartments, take part in job interviews and invest in stocks and shares.

Cyberspace is clearly a real place.

Yet somehow we still have a hard time accepting that online violence is as real as offline violence.

Some people believe that when violence is online, it can simply be ignored or shrugged off. Women who are harassed or stalked online are frequently told to change their privacy settings, or to 'go offline' for a while.

This is despite the fact that research from the European Institute for Gender Equality, the EU's knowledge centre on gender equality, has found that the online and offline spheres are not separate spaces at all.

For one, women and girls who have experienced sexual harassment, stalking or violence from an intimate partner in the physical world are also often victims of 'online' violence from the same person.

On the flipside, violence that begins online, in particular stalking, can often bleed into the real world.

Abusive partners can also use digital tools to control their victims and make it impossible for them to escape. This became an even bigger concern during the Covid pandemic, when so much of our communication went online.

Second, we see the same patterns in the online space as we do offline. For example, we see the same groups of people singled out for hostility, discrimination and violence. This includes women, as well as people from ethnic minorities and the LGBTI community.

Just like the so-called real world, the cybersphere is not a neutral space.

Last, what goes on in cyberspace has real consequences. Cyber violence has psychological, social and financial repercussions for victims. An act of violence against a victim, whether it's verbal abuse or the sharing of an intimate video, can end up being seen by millions of people as a result of a few malicious clicks.

No wonder then that the psychological impact of cyber violence most commonly includes anxiety, distress, social withdrawal, paranoia and depression. All this can lead to victims underperforming at work, university or school, and subsequently losing their job or study place.

The impact on victims also has wider ramifications on society, with the European Parliament recently estimating that gender-based cyber violence costs the European Union up to 89 billion euros each year.

Just to be clear, 89 billion euros is equivalent to the GDP of the country where the European Institute for Gender Equality is based, Lithuania, added to that of neighbouring Estonia.

Thankfully, even though cyber violence is still a relatively new phenomenon, almost every EU country has some form of legislation against it.

However, the definitions of cyber violence vary greatly across countries, and the majority do not have specific provisions on cyber violence against women and girls.

There are some notable exceptions. Last year, Romania became the first EU country to adopt a stand-alone cyber violence law. The prevalence of cyber violence makes this a positive step in itself. But the law also recognises the gendered nature of much online violence classing cyber harassment as a form of domestic violence.

This misses the gendered nature of cyber violence. Indeed, both women and men, and girls and boys experience cyber violence. But the violence faced by women and girls is different. It includes digital voyeurism and non-consensual pornography, or revenge porn as it's commonly called.

Cyber violence against women and girls also tends to be more severe.

Ignoring gender in cyber violence laws also results in a lack of evidence on which to build effective responses to cyber violence. Currently, we have very little sex-disaggregated data which would shed more light on who in particular is targeted, using what tools and by whom.

This is why we at the European Institute for Gender Equality are collecting all data and evidence on cyber violence that is available across the EU Member States. We are analysing the concepts, definitions and terminology each country uses when referring to different forms of cyber violence, such as cyber bullying, cyber stalking and cyber harassment

We focus on cyber violence against all women and girls over the age of 13, which is the minimum legal age to open a profile on most social media platforms. This is particularly important because young girls tend to be very active users, and at the same time, very vulnerable ones.

Based on this unprecedented mapping exercise, we will propose new definitions of cyber violence against women and girls to help EU countries map the many different forms of this violence.

All this will lay the ground for EIGE to develop a set of indicators that will enable the collection of rich and comparable data across the EU. This data will give governments the information they need to pass evidence-based policies and laws to properly tackle cyber violence.

This work is urgent. The current body of evidence on cyber violence is weak, and victims are being let down. Many victims don't report cyber violence crimes because they feel justice will not be served. We are not stopping perpetrators, nor successfully supporting those who face violence.

And the problem goes beyond individual victims, and indeed individual perpetrators. Online, we have growing communities of people who advocate hate and violence against women using systematic and effective tools.

You may have heard of the manosphere, a network of online men's communities that spread misogynistic myths and misinformation and openly oppose women's rights. Often they are behind vicious cyber harassment campaigns against women who speak up for gender equality.

Clearly, cyber violence isn't 'just words'. It has the capacity to cause pain and suffering, to spread sexism, and to entrench discrimination.

We are currently finalising a study for the Slovenian presidency of the Council of the European Union, which finds that sexism and sexual harassment are being replicated across online spaces, which suffer from less regulation than the physical world.

As more and more of our lives move online, this has a serious impact on how people are able to live their lives. Violence pushes victims out of the digital sphere, disempowering them and violating their human rights.

And it has only intensified during the pandemic, with cases of cyber harassment and non-consensual pornography spiking during lockdowns.

That is why I am glad to see a burst of new EU legislation to make cyberspace a safer place.

The European Commission has put forward a Digital Services Act to protect people's fundamental rights online. And already next month the Commission will put forward a proposal to include hate crimes and hate speech, including misogynist ones, in the list of eurocrimes.

The internet has no borders, which is why EU-wide action is so important. Thank you for organising today's event so we can speak about how the EU can become the world's leader on making cyberspace a safe space for all.

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TYPE: Director's Speech