

Combating Cyber Violence Against Women and Girls: Toward Unified Definitions and Legal Frameworks in the EU

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The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the integration of digital technologies into everyday life, highlighting internet access as a fundamental right. While digital platforms facilitate equality in public self-expression, they have also become hotspots for exclusionary and violent behavior, especially against women and girls. Research indicates that women and girls are disproportionately affected by cyber violence, experiencing more severe physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harm. This often leads to their withdrawal from online spaces, resulting in lost opportunities for education and career advancement.

Cyber violence against women and girls (CVAWG) is frequently underestimated as a minor issue. However, as online and offline environments increasingly intersect, CVAWG can escalate into physical violence. This form of violence is closely related to broader patterns of gender-based violence and reflects persistent societal inequalities. Furthermore, CVAWG is intersectional, with heightened risks for women of diverse racial, ethnic, and sexual identities.

This study, conducted by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) from 2021 to 2022 and coordinated by Project Manager Eleonora Esposito, investigates CVAWG using a multimethod research approach at the EU, international, and national levels. Desk research was carried out to map institutional, academic, and grey literature on the topic, complemented by a large number of consultations with various stakeholders, including government ministries and civil society organizations.

The findings reveal significant fragmentation and inconsistency in how EU Member States address CVAWG, with varying definitions and legal frameworks that impede effective data collection and policy development. In response, we propose standardized definitions of CVAWG for statistical purposes, identifying five primary forms: cyber stalking, cyber harassment, cyberbullying, online gender-based hate speech, and non-consensual intimate image abuse. Clear and comprehensive definitions are essential for reliable and comparable data collection, which can inform more effective policymaking and improve responses from law enforcement and victim support services.

The study includes recommendations for EU institutions and Member States to adopt comprehensive frameworks to address all forms of violence against women, with a particular emphasis on CVAWG. This involves developing harmonized definitions and enhancing data collection mechanisms. Recognizing CVAWG as a distinct form of gender-based violence is crucial, and the study advocates for targeted measures to prevent and address this urgent issue.