



Nature and Prevalence of Cyber Violence against Women and Girls

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Query: Please map (and summarise the literature on) the nature and prevalence of cyber violence against women and girls (cyber VAWG) in developing countries:

- What risks does the use of digital tech present in terms of potentially increasing VAWG (e.g. how can use of digital reinforce or reproduce gender norms, increase levels of harassment/bullying, online sexual exploitation/pornography)?
- What (gender disaggregated) data is available to understand these issues and where are there gaps in the data?
- Please summarise any existing literature on the continuum of violence in online and offline spaces and how they relate to each other

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1. Overview

The term 'cyber VAWG' is used to capture the different ways that the internet and information and communication technologies exacerbate and magnify acts of violence against women and girls. This document presents findings from a rapid review of available literature on the nature and prevalence of cyber violence against women and girls. It is accompanied by a parallel query (Q212) on what has worked to help to prevent cyber violence against women and girls, including digital technology-based solutions.

Key findings include:

- **There is limited data on the nature and prevalence of cyber VAWG**, partly due to this being a relatively new phenomenon. Although there is some prevalence data from North America, Europe, Egypt, Pakistan and South Africa, most studies in middle and low income countries do not disaggregate data by gender (see Section 2). Despite the lack of prevalence data, cyber VAWG is a growing global concern, as reflected in the Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women (Human Rights Council, 2018).

- **Gaps in evidence include:** prevalence data for all types of cyber VAWG in low and middle-income countries; need for consistent definitions and research methodologies to allow comparability; research on how cyber VAWG changes over women's life course (most studies focus on adolescents and younger women aged 18-24); understanding which groups are most at risk; the links between offline and online VAWG; and the particular risks of cyber VAWG in humanitarian emergencies and conflict settings (no studies found on the latter) (see Section 2).
- **There are various forms of cyber VAWG**, including hacking, impersonation, surveillance/tracking, harassment/spamming, recruitment into violent situations (e.g. trafficking), and malicious distribution of defamatory and illegal materials (e.g. revenge pornography whereby explicit images (taken with or without consent) are shared online). A useful conceptual framework has been produced by ICRW to better understand technology-facilitated gender-based violence and the relationship between online and offline violence (see Section 3).
- **Online abuse and harassment stem from, reinforce and reproduce the same structural inequalities and discrimination as other forms of VAWG.** However, cyber VAWG presents additional risks in terms of potentially increasing VAWG due to its anonymity, ability to be perpetrated at a distance, use of automated technologies, accessibility to perpetrators as well as potentially millions of others (exacerbating the public humiliation), interactive nature (e.g. thousands of people viewing, commenting and reposting a humiliating picture or abusive message), and ability to rapidly multiply and exist for a long time (see Section 3).
- **Several studies have found that women are more likely to experience cyber violence than men**, including insults, threats, revenge porn, and cyber stalking (UN HRC, 2018; UN Broadband Commission, 2015; Henry and Powell, 2018; Citron, 2014; Staude-Müller et al, 2012) (see Section 4.1).
- **Reported prevalence rates for women and girls vary by type of violence or harassment from 23% to 53%.** Studies use different research methodologies, questions and target demographics, making it difficult to compare prevalence levels (see Section 4.1).
- **Some groups are particularly at risk of cyber violence and harassment**, including younger women and adolescent girls, women who experience VAWG 'offline' (particularly intimate partner violence), racial and ethnic minorities, people of diverse sexualities and gender identities, gender and sexual rights activists, and 'public' women who are prominent in online and offline environments. There is conflicting evidence on whether women with disabilities are more at risk and whether urban/rural location can exacerbate vulnerabilities (see Section 4.2).
- **There is a continuum or 'merging' of violence in online and offline spaces**, including individual instances of abuse which can begin offline and be taken online, or vice-versa, or simultaneously. Research has also found strong associations between digitally perpetrated cyber abuse and dating violence (offline), particularly in adolescence. Related to this, online harassment can contribute to a culture of violence in which violence is seen as normal and inevitable, and thus more easily perpetrated and tolerated, both online and offline (see Section 5).
- **Acts of VAWG committed online also have significant offline ramifications**, causing physical, psychological, social and economic harm. Cyber violence against women and girls also has the potential to deter women and girls from online and offline public spaces (see Section 5).
- **Another disturbing way in which online and offline violence is related is through sexual abuse of children and women, including through webcam sex shows and violent pornography.** As well as the women and children directly affected as victims, it can have indirect impacts on the sexual partners of men who use violent pornography, with research finding that these men are more likely to report increasingly aggressive behavioural tendencies and increased

interest in coercing partners into unwanted sex acts. Further research is needed on this issue, in particular whether men with personal characteristics that are associated with sexual aggression (e.g. impersonal orientation toward sex, a hostile approach to gender relations, and a disagreeable personality) are more likely to access violent pornography online in the first place (Wright et al, 2015) (see Section 5).

- **Finally, the continuum between online and offline is often blurred because response frameworks and services that support survivors are the same**, regardless of whether the abuse or harassment happened online or off (see Section 5).

2. Evidence Base and Methodology

Overall, the evidence base on the nature and prevalence of cyber VAWG is limited, partly reflecting that this is a new phenomenon, as well as the challenge of both researching and mitigating¹ cyber VAWG within a dynamic technology environment (e.g. new social media platforms) and the ‘shifting goalposts’ that this represents. This rapid research query has been conducted as systematically as possible, under tight time constraints (six days). It assesses that the evidence is limited, according to DFID’s (2014) How to Note on Assessing the Strength of Evidence, i.e. moderate to low quality studies, medium size evidence body, low levels of consistency, studies may or may not be contextually relevant. Searches were conducted in PubMed, Google Scholar and Google using search terms such as ‘cyber bullying’, ‘cyber violence’, ‘cyber violence against women and girls’, ‘online harassment’, and iterations thereof. Annex 1 provides a detailed mapping of the literature.

Particular gaps in the evidence and therefore priorities for future research include:

- **Prevalence data on all types of cyber violence against women and girls in low and middle-income countries.** Most studies have been conducted in North America and Europe, with three studies from Egypt, Pakistan and South Africa, leaving wide geographical gaps in knowledge. Even in Europe, evidence is limited; there has been no gender-disaggregated EU-wide survey on the prevalence and harms of cyber VAWG, and limited national-level research in EU member states (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2017). Other studies have been conducted (e.g. in India, Kenya and Thailand) but data is not disaggregated by sex.
- **Need for consistency** between definitions of violence, questions asked, and research methodologies used in order to allow comparisons across time and location. As part of this and due to different definitions, there are gaps in our understanding of particular types of cyber VAWG. For example, a systematic review on sexting highlighted the need for further research on non-consensual sexting (particularly sharing a sext without permission) (Madigan et al, 2018).
- **Understanding how cyber violence changes over the life course, and beyond adolescence and young adults.** The majority of studies focus on a limited demographic group - either adolescents or young women aged 18-24 - and cover a short period of time.
- **The influence of specific vulnerability factors and how they intersect**, including for example the harassment and misogynoir² faced by women of colour online (Madden et al, 2018; Lawson, 2018). There are particular gaps in our understanding of disability and rural/urban (Henry and Powell, 2018; IGF, 2015), but also by age, gender, education, race, sexuality and other factors.
- **Further evidence on the links between offline and online violence.** Although there have been some studies exploring these links (see Section 5), these have been relatively small-scale studies, often in high-income countries.

¹ See parallel Q212 on the challenges of developing interventions to help to prevent cyber VAWG

² Misogynoir describes “the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience” (Bailey and Trudy, 2018)

- **Understanding the particular risks of cyber VAWG in humanitarian emergencies and conflict settings** and how best to respond to needs and vulnerabilities. No research was found on this issue as part of this query.

3. The Nature of Cyber Violence against Women and Girls

3.1. What is Cyber VAWG?

The United Nations defines violence against women as: “Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”³ This includes harassment, physical assault, sexual assault, dowry-related violence, early child and forced marriage, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, forced sterilization, trafficking, forced prostitution and femicide. The term ‘cyber VAWG’ is used to capture the different ways that the internet and information and communication technologies exacerbate and magnify acts of violence against women and girls.

3.2 What are the different forms of cyber VAWG?

There are various forms of cyber violence against women and girls. According to the VAW learning network (2013)⁴, there are six broad categories that encompass the different forms of cyber VAWG:

1. **Hacking**: the use of technology to gain unauthorised or illegal access to systems with the view to acquiring personal information, altering or modifying information, or slandering and denigrating the victim and/or VAWG organisations, e.g. violation of passwords and accessing information such as contact lists, text messages, and call histories.
2. **Impersonation**: the use of technology to assume the identity of the victim or someone else in order to access private information, embarrass or shame the victim, or create fraudulent identity documents, e.g. impersonating someone in instant messaging applications, impersonating the victim/survivor while sending emails from their account, and/or creating a fake profile for social networking sites.
3. **Surveillance / Tracking**: the use of technology to stalk and monitor a victim’s activities and behaviours either in real-time or historically, e.g. keeping track of web browsing, tracking email programme and chat activity, and GPS tracking via a mobile phone.
4. **Harassment / Spamming**: the use of technology to continuously contact, annoy, threaten, and/or scare the victim. This is ongoing behaviour and not one isolated incident. Examples might include persistent mobile calls/texts/voicemails.
5. **Recruitment**: the use of technology to lure potential victims into violent situations, e.g. traffickers using chat rooms, message boards, and websites to communicate or advertise with each other and with customers, or using the internet to recruit victims of human trafficking.
6. **Malicious Distribution, including ‘doxing’⁵ and ‘revenge pornography’**: the use of technology to manipulate and distribute defamatory and illegal materials related to the victim and/or VAWG organisation; e.g. blackmail by threatening to distribute intimate photos or videos, and manipulating photographic images and distributing them.

³ <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/vaw/v-overview.htm>

⁴ The European Institute for Gender Equality (2017) have also noted the various forms of cyber VAWG, including, but not limited to, cyber stalking, non-consensual pornography inappropriate or offensive advances on social networking, unsolicited pornography, ‘sextortion’, rape and death threats, ‘doxing’, and electronically enabled trafficking.

⁵ Doxing involves researching and broadcasting private or identifiable information (especially personally identifiable information) about an individual or organization

3.3 What risks does the use of digital tech present in terms of potentially increasing VAWG?

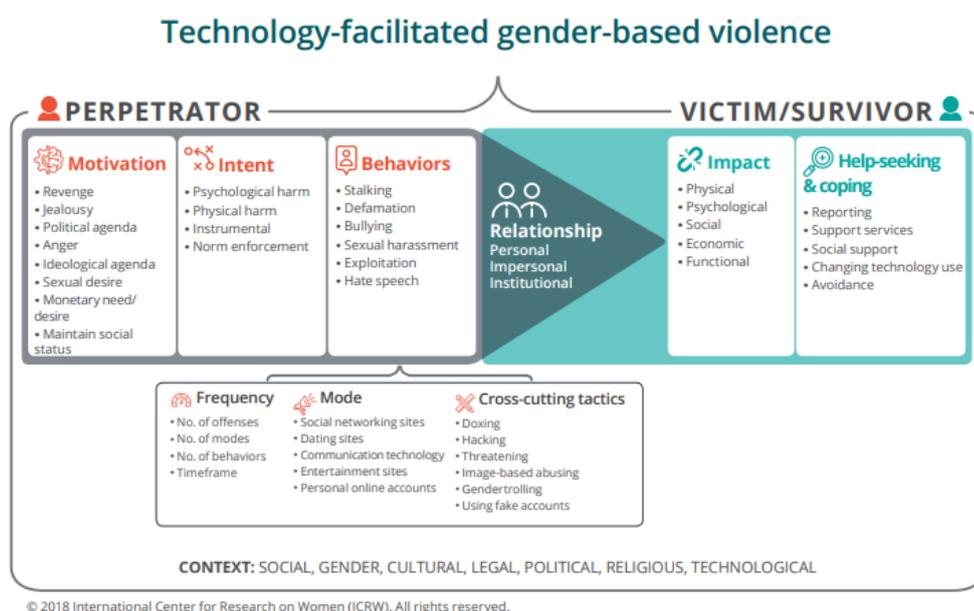
As access to Internet-enabled devices, such as computers, laptops, mobile phones, and tablets, and online communication services, such as social media networks and social applications, increases in lower and middle-income countries,⁶ these tools are being used to facilitate acts of cyber violence against women and girls. **Online abuse and harassment stem from, reinforce and reproduce the same structural inequalities and discrimination as other forms of VAWG**, compounded with gender disparity in access to ICTs (IGF, 2015). Section 5 discusses in further detail how cyber VAWG forms part of a continuum of violence in online and offline spaces.

However, **cyber VAWG presents additional risks which can potentially increase VAWG** (Fascendini and Fialová, 2011):

1. **Anonymity** – The abusive person can remain unknown to the victim/survivor.
2. **Action-At-A-Distance** – The abuse can be done without physical contact and from anywhere.
3. **Automation** – Abusive actions using technologies require less time and effort.
4. **Accessibility** – The variety and affordability of many technologies make them readily accessible to perpetrators, as well as potentially thousands of other people who can also interact with a humiliating or abusive message or image - viewing, commenting, reposting - thereby escalating the impact.
5. **Propagation and Perpetuity** – Texts and images multiply and exist for a long time or indefinitely.

In their research on cyber VAWG in Kenya, the African Development Bank (2016) note that the perceived anonymity of online posting and cyber norms that suggest that misogyny that is acceptable online may together contribute to the proliferation and acceptance of gender-based cyber violence.

The International Centre for Research on Women has developed a conceptual framework for understanding technology-facilitated gender-based violence, including what motivates perpetrators to commit acts of cyber VAWG and the potential impact such acts have on victims (Hinson et al, 2018) (see diagram below).



⁶ Latest statistics (June 2018) reveal world internet usage ranges from 36% (Africa), 29% (Asia), 65% (Middle East), 67% (Latin America and the Caribbean), 69% (Oceania/Australia), 85% (Europe), and 95% (North America). (Source: <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>)

This conceptual framework helps us to better **understand the relationship between online and offline violence against women and girls**. Though acts of violence may be committed online, the motivation for these acts is rooted in the offline world, in the emotional, psychological, cultural and ideological drivers behind the perpetrator's behavior. Likewise, though acts of violence may be committed online, the impact of these acts is felt by victims/survivors offline, in the real world, where they experience physical, psychological, social and economic harm. The risks represented by digital technologies are also illustrated in Section 4 that reveals the extent and nature of cyber VAWG, and Section 5 that explores the links between online and offline violence.

4. The prevalence of cyber violence against women and girls

4.1 Existing research and data

Data on prevalence of cyber VAWG varies considerably by methodological approaches, including the multiple and varied ways in which cyber violence is defined, measured and reported by both researchers and respondents across studies, as well as actual differences in violence. As with other types of VAWG, reported rates of violence are strongly affected by: definitions of violence used; the types of questions asked during surveys and interviews (general versus behaviour specific); the age range and other available demographic data of individuals included in a given study; sociocultural beliefs and norms affecting disclosure of sensitive information; and the specific research methods used by a study (for example anonymous online survey versus face-to-face survey or interview) (Fulu and Heise, 2015).

According to reliable high-quality data sources, **women are more likely to experience cyber violence than men**, including insults, threats, revenge porn, and cyber stalking (UN HRC, 2018; Henry and Powell, 2018; Citron, 2014; Staude-Müller et al, 2012). However, there are also a few studies that find men are as or more likely to experience some forms of cyber harassment (e.g. 'flaming',⁷ being stalked online, or a dating partner monitoring their use of technology, also known as 'snooping'), but the consequences in terms of psychological and physical harm are more severe for women (Reed, 2016; Staude-Müller, 2012).

Reported prevalence rates vary by type of violence or harassment from 23% to 53%. Examples of prevalence data include:

- **United States: Women are twice as likely to experience cyber sexual harassment as men - 37% of women** and 18% of men had experienced online sexual harassment. A survey of 2,000 people (1,000 women and 1,000 men, ages 18 and up) found that 25% of women and 11% of men had experienced sexual harassment online (e.g. over email or social media platforms), and 28% of women and 13% of men by phone (e.g. texting) (Stop Street Harassment, 2018). In another study by Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel⁸ found that men are more likely than women to encounter name-calling, embarrassment, and physical threats. **Young women are more likely to be stalked online** (26% of young women vs. 7% of young men) **or be the target of online sexual harassment** (25% of young women vs. 13% of young men) (Duggan, 2014).
- **South Africa:** A survey of 1,726 young people aged 12-24 found that more **girls (33.1%) reported experiences of cyber victimisation** over the 12-month period prior to the study than boys (29.3%) (Burton and Mutongwizo, 2009).

⁷ Flaming is the online act of posting insults, often using offensive language on social networking sites.

⁸ A probability-based, nationally representative panel conducted May 30 – June 30 2014 and self-administered via the internet by 2,849 web users, with a margin of error of plus or minus 2.4 percentage points.

- **Egypt:** A survey of 6,740 students in Beni-Suef University found that female students were much more likely and more frequently to be cyberbullied - **39.1% of male and 52.9% of female respondents had been a victim of cyberbullying** in the past 6 months. Harassment was the main type stated by females (79.8%) while flaming was excessively reported by males (51.8%) (Arafa and Senosy, 2017).
- **Pakistan:** A survey of 1,400 young women students and their female teachers found that **34% of women surveyed had experienced online harassment and abuse** by men. 40% had been stalked and harassed via messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Viber. 69% had received unwanted messages from strangers against their will (Digital Rights Foundation, 2017).
- **Multi-country study:** Amnesty International (2018) commissioned an online poll with Ipsos MORI about women's experiences (n = 4,009) of abuse and harassment on social media platforms across eight countries.⁹ The findings showed that **23% of the women surveyed across the eight countries said they had experienced online abuse or harassment at least once**. 10% of female respondents in the USA and 8% in the UK said that intimate images had been posted of them online without their consent.

There are **noticeable gaps in our understanding of different forms of cyber VAWG, due to lack of gender-disaggregated data in several studies**. Examples of relevant studies which do not disaggregate data by gender include:

- **India:** A study of cyberviolence via WhatsApp in India found that 10.7% of survey respondents had received harassing messages, 7.6% received violent images, and 11.5% had received sexually explicit or obscene images via WhatsApp. However, data was not disaggregated by gender (or any other type of category) (Halder et al, 2015).
- **Kenya:** A study by the African Development Bank Group (2016) revealed more than a third of the respondents interviewed indicated that they had experienced harassment online. Another third had been contacted by imposters online, experienced personal hate speech, cyber bullying and trolling while online. 7% of the respondents had experienced revenge porn are distributed without consent. Although the study notes that the majority of these victims are women, no gender-disaggregated statistics are available or details on methodology.
- **Thailand:** A survey of students and out-of-school youth aged 15-24 (n=1,234) showed that 49.3% had been victimised online and 43.2% had perpetrated violence online in past year. 9.5% had experienced repeated online harassment (7+ incidents in past year). The study reports that all correlations remain significant for different genders; however, data is not disaggregated by gender (Ojanen et al, 2015).

4.2 Who is most at risk?

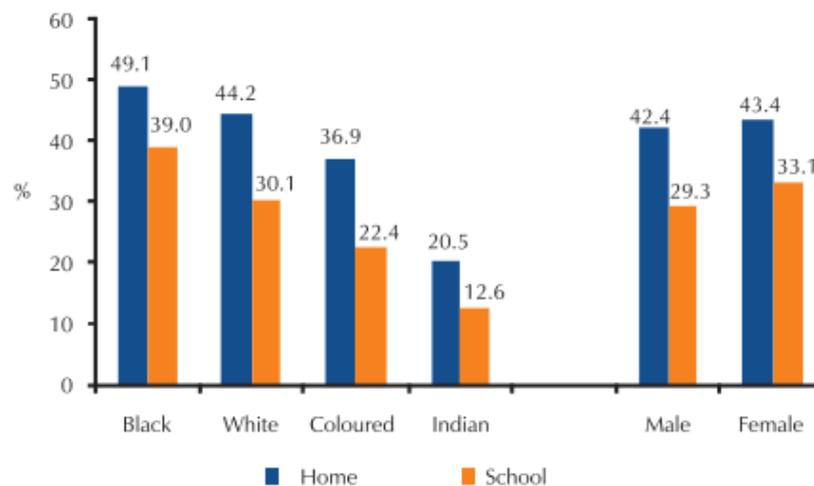
Research suggests the following groups of women are most at risk of cyber violence:

- **Younger women and adolescent girls:** A 2014 survey by the Pew Research Centre in the United States found that young women aged 18-24 disproportionately experience severe types of cyber harassment, namely cyber stalking and online sexual harassment. Despite growing recognition of the particular risks of online abuse that girls and young women experience, the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) (2015) have observed that most "programmes and research into child online protection is not gender-specific" (p.15).

⁹ Women aged 18-55 in the UK, USA, Spain, Denmark, Italy, Sweden, Poland and New Zealand.

- **Women who experience VAWG ‘offline’, particularly intimate partner violence:** As will be discussed later in Section 5, there is a continuum of violence in online and offline spaces, whereby women who experience intimate partner violence are particularly at risk of cyber VAWG. In the UK, a survey of 307 women survivors of domestic violence by Women’s Aid found that 45% reported experiencing some form of abuse online during their relationship, including through social networking sites or over email. 48% reported experiencing harassment or abuse online from their ex-partner once they’d left the relationship and 38% reported online stalking once they had left the relationship (Laxton, 2014). In France, 77% of women who have experienced cyber harassment have also experienced at least one form of sexual or/and physical violence from an intimate partner (EIGE, 2017). In Australia, 78% of domestic violence survivors had received abusive text/phone messages from their partner / ex-partner (Woodlock, 2017).
- **Racial and ethnic minorities:** A survey in the US found that women of colour were significantly more at risk of cyber violence than white women in the US. Online harassment was significantly less likely to occur among white women relative to those of the other racial/ethnic groups (33% vs 41% to 46%) (Stop Street Harassment, 2018). In South Africa, research with 1,726 young people aged between 12 and 24 years found that “race appears to be more significant than gender” (Burton and Mutongwizo, 2009: 6), with black children and youth reporting the highest incidence of cyber aggression, followed by white youths, coloured youths and finally Indian/Asian youths who report the lowest incidence (see diagram below)

Experiences of cyber violence by race and gender among young people aged 12-24 years in South Africa, in both the home and school setting (Burton and Mutongwizo, 2009: 6)



- **People of diverse sexualities and gender identities** tend to face more threats and intimidation online, although to date most of the research has focused on gay and bisexual men (Wang et al, 2018) with little rigorous research on transgender, intersexed, bisexual and lesbian women (Malhotra, 2015). In Taiwan, a survey of 500 gay or bisexual men (age 20-25 years) found that 38% of participants reported traditional homophobic bullying and 40% reported cyber homophobic bullying in childhood. Similarly, a survey of 2,000 people (ages 18 and up) in the United States found that gay and bisexual men were at greater risk of online harassment, relative to straight men (Stop Street Harassment, 2018).
- **Gender and sexual rights activists** are also at risk, particularly in more conservative environments. A global survey found that 51% of sexual rights advocates had received violent threats while working online, and 45% indicated serious concerns that their private information online can be accessed without their knowledge or consent. About one third of the sample

mentioned intimidation (34%); blocking and filtering (33%); or censorship (29%). Sexual rights activists from Africa and the Middle East who had been warned, arrested, prosecuted, convicted, detained or questioned by government authorities because of [their] online activities (12%) was double the global total average (6%) (Sivori and Zilli, 2013).

- **‘Public’ women (who are prominent in online and offline environments)** tend to be subjected to more cyber abuse and harassment (IGF, 2015; Human Rights Council, 2018). Examples include human rights defenders, women journalists (including citizen journalists and bloggers), women leaders/politicians, and women who are active in technology industries. Research in India found that women who wrote about LGBT issues or who criticised the current government, ruling party, or prime minister often received cyber abuse and mass trolling that can continue for several days (Pasricha, 2016). See parallel Q210 on digital harassment of women leaders and activists.

There is **conflicting evidence on the following types of vulnerabilities**:

- **People with disabilities** are identified as a gap where further research on their vulnerability to cyber violence is required (IGF, 2015). One national school-based survey of adolescents (n = 6,749, mean age = 15.41) from Switzerland found that girls with disabilities were more likely to face cyber sexual violence than boys with disabilities, but that physical disability was a significant predictor of cyber sexual violence for boys, but not for girls (no suggested explanation was provided). The lifetime prevalence of cyber sexual-victimisation was 29.2% of females with disabilities vs 27.5% for females without (not statistically significant). However, there was a difference for male respondents: 17.3% for males with disabilities vs. 9.1% for males without (Mueller-Johnson et al, 2014). No further studies were found as part of this query.
- **Rural/urban**: Some studies have found that women living in urban areas are at higher risk for online harassment, for example a study in Egypt found higher levels of experiencing cyberbullying amongst students residing in urban areas. The authors speculate that due to the more closed nature of rural communities in Egypt, perpetrators may not be able to keep their anonymity for long (Arafa and Senosy, 2017). However, the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) (2015) has observed that women in rural contexts can be vulnerable where greater social and cultural surveillance results in increased impact and harm in incidences of online abuse and violence. For example, they note that in Pakistan women were reportedly sentenced to death by a tribal assembly after they were filmed with a mobile phone dancing and singing with men at a wedding ceremony. The video was shared without their knowledge or consent.

5. The continuum of violence in online and offline spaces

Several studies observe that there is a continuum or ‘merging’ of violence in online and offline spaces, with various ways in which they relate to each other (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2017; Association for Progressive Communications, 2015). This merging including **individual instances of abuse**, which begin offline and can be taken online or vice-versa, or simultaneously, is particularly true for women experiencing intimate partner violence (see Section 4.2 above). A study in the UK reported that 50% of victims of revenge pornography (n = 64) said it was a part of a wider pattern of harassment, with many reporting it was perpetrated at the end of an abusive relationship (Short et al, 2017).

Research has also found strong associations between digitally perpetrated cyber abuse and dating violence (offline), particularly in adolescence. For example, a survey of 5,647 youth aged 12-18 in the United States found that youth who reported perpetrating cyber bullying were approximately

twice as likely to also report perpetrating dating violence or abuse. Similarly, youth who reported experiences of cyber bullying victimisation were almost twice as likely to also report dating violence victimisation. The authors conclude that “It may be that once youth realise the ease and relative anonymity with which cyber abuse can be perpetrated, they accept it as an appropriate tool for such perpetration across different social relations” (Yahner et al, 2015: 1086). Another study in the United States with 5,647 youth¹⁰ found that victims of sexual cyber dating abuse were seven times more likely to have also experienced offline sexual coercion (55%) than were non-victims (8%), and perpetrators of sexual cyber dating abuse were 17 times more likely to have also perpetrated sexual coercion (34%) than were non-perpetrators (2%) (Zweig et al, 2013).

Online harassment can contribute to a culture of violence in which violence is seen as normal and inevitable, and thus more easily perpetrated and tolerated, both online and offline. A survey of 1,234 students and out-of-school aged 15-24 years in Thailand revealed that online harassment and offline violence are interlinked among Thai youth. Victims were over 10 times as likely to also be perpetrators within the same context (online or offline); and that those who perpetrated or were victimised in one context were 2.6-2.7 times as likely to also have the same role in the other context. The research concludes that interventions to reduce either online or offline violence should address both together (Ojanen et al, 2015).

Acts of VAWG committed online also have significant offline ramifications, causing physical, social, economic and particularly psychological harm (Hinson et al, 2018; Ojanen et al, 2015; Yahner et al, 2015; Zweig et al, 2013; Safaria, 2016; Dreßing et al, 2014; Reed et al, 2016). There are a number of high-profile cases, whereby women and girls have committed suicide as a result of cyber violence. For example, Tiziana Cantone, an Italian woman, committed suicide in 2016 when she was dismissed by her employer following the circulation of pornography.¹¹ Amanda Todd, a 15 year old from Canada, likewise committed suicide in 2012 when a man circulated pornographic images of her without her consent.¹² Julia Rebecca, a 17 year old from Brazil, also committed suicide when sexually graphic footage of herself and her partner were posted online without her consent.¹³

Cyber violence against women and girls also has the potential to deter women and girls from going online (Sobieraj, S. 2018). This limits their access to the opportunities the internet and mobile information and communications technologies bring and their ability to use these platforms to share their voice and participate in public spaces and debate (UN HRC, 2018; Jane, 2014b; Lumsden and Morgan, 2017). High-profile cases of abuse and violence can also lead to women withdrawing from online and offline public spheres. In particular, the digital harassment and abuse of women in the public eye, including politicians, activists, celebrities and journalists, can lead to a “silencing” or self-censoring, discrediting of women’s voices and harm to their reputations, which can happen at both individual and collective levels, online and offline (Amnesty International, 2018; Stevens and Fraser, 2018, Sobieraj, 2018).

Another disturbing link is the increase in online sexual abuse of children and women, including through webcam sex shows and violent pornography. For example, research in the Philippines found that webcam sex shows are often aired from children’s homes, internet cafes, or from what are referred to as “dens” (buildings where a number of women and children are employed or kept against their will) often in windowless, dungeon-like settings. This type of abuse ranges from children showing genitalia, and masturbating to having sexual intercourse with other children or

¹⁰ Not able to access full-article. The abstract does not say what age the students are.

¹¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37377286>

¹² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/19960162/amanda-todd-memorial-for-teenage-cyberbullying-victim>

¹³ <https://www.bustle.com/articles/9485-revenge-porn-legislation-called-for-in-brazil-following-17-year-olds-suicide>

adults, using objects or being tortured, which is then streamed live to people around the world who often pay to view this (Terre des Hommes, 2013). Research also reveals that 88% of top rated porn scenes contain aggressive acts and 94% of the time the act is directed towards a woman (UN Broadband Commission, 2015). In this way, live online sexual abuse enables sex predators to sexually abuse children and women in other countries with ease and frequency using their Internet-connected personal devices (Davy, 2017). There is some evidence that it can also have offline implications for other women and girls, as studies show that after viewing violent pornography, men are more likely to: report decreased empathy for rape victims; have increasingly aggressive behavioural tendencies; report believing that a woman who dresses provocatively deserves to be raped; and report increased interest in coercing partners into unwanted sex acts (UN Broadband Commission, 2015). As Wright et al (2015) note in their meta-analysis of the literature on pornography consumption and acts of sexual aggression, there is considerable evidence to show that individuals who consume pornography more frequently are more likely to hold attitudes conducive to sexual aggression and engage in sexual aggressive acts than individuals who do not consume pornography or who consume pornography less frequently. However, further research is needed to explore the reasons why, and whether men who are more sexually aggressive due to personal characteristics (e.g. hostile gender attitudes, disagreeable personality, and impersonal attitudes to sex) are more likely to view violent pornography in the first place.

Blurring of the line between online and offline also occurs because the response frameworks and support services occur locally, regardless of whether the crime happened online or off. As UNICEF (2016) have noted in their situation assessment of child sexual exploitation (CSE) in South Asia, 'victims are not virtual': "Local response to online CSE relies on the strength of the existing child protection system, locating treatment of abuse incidents regardless of where they occur, within an existing framework" (p. 55). Although online abuse, harassment and exploitation can be transnational crimes, which require a global response that includes online solutions from digital service providers, people who are abused either offline or online will require support and response services from the same local providers (UNICEF, 2016).

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VAWG Helpdesk services are provided by a consortium of leading organisations and individual experts on VAWG, including Social Development Direct, International Rescue Committee, ActionAid, Womankind, and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). Expert advice may be sought from this Group, as well as from the wider academic and practitioner community, and those able to provide input within the short time-frame are acknowledged. Any views or opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of DFID, the VAWG Helpdesk or any of the contributing organisations/experts.

For any further request or enquiry, contact enquiries@vawghelpdesk.org.

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