

## **Societal gender stereotypes and their echo into the online world**

Technology has the power to connect and empower people with online platforms providing a mirror of our lives. For women and girls this mirror may too often reflect a world of misogyny, marginalisation and violence. Just as technology has the power to connect people it can also reinforce and normalise stereotypical gender roles and cultural customs. In fact, artificial intelligence systems and machine-learning algorithms have come under fire recently because they can pick up and reinforce existing biases in our society, depending on what data they are programmed with. In this context, women are often targeted, threatened and abused online mainly due to their gender.

In the tech world, cyber violence can include online hate speech, cyber harassment, cyber stalking, and non-consensual image-abuse. These forms of violence can occur on online platforms such as social media, discussion sites, search engines, messaging services, blogs, dating websites or apps, chat rooms and comment sections of online newspapers. In fact the study, *“Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence: A Literature Review of Empirical Research”* published in 2018 by Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell from two Australian Universities, indicated that forms of abuse are mainly based on gender, sexuality and age, with young women being the most targeted. Moreover, females with a public persona can also be targeted for being visible and vocal, whether as a politician, journalist or activist. Women politicians are targeted with extremely violent cyber abuse or with stereotypical comments.

The Council of Europe’s Recommendation on preventing and combating sexism defines sexism, whether online or offline, as the violation of the inherent dignity or rights of a person, resulting in physical, sexual, psychological or socio-economic harm or suffering to a person, creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment, constituting a barrier to the autonomy and full realisation of human rights by a person or maintaining and reinforcing gender stereotypes.

Digital life is thus a continuation of real life with unwanted sexual advances, sexist insults to life-threatening abuse. Cyber stalking and revenge porn for instance is an extension of intimate partner violence facilitated by technology. The Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) 2014’s survey on violence against women in the EU shows that 70% of women who have experienced cyber stalking have also experienced at least one form of physical or/and sexual violence from an intimate partner. Meanwhile 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. The study also shows that 11% of young women in the EU have experienced cyber harassment, while 5% of women in the EU have experienced one or more forms of cyber stalking since the age of 15. This goes to show how cyber harassment and cyber stalking can start in real-life and continue in the digital world.

Cyber violence can have short-term, immediate and long-term effects. The victims’ and their relatives’ safety, physical and psychological health, dignity and rights are impacted. It affects the reputation of women, which can damage their livelihoods and finances. The impact can also be societal as cyber violence may harm women’s fundamental rights, freedoms and

dignity. In effect, as a consequence of such violence, women can restrict or exclude themselves from the digital world.

It is on this basis that Commissioners, for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality Věra Jourová and for Digital Economy and Society Mariya Gabriel, this year launched a campaign called **#DigitalRespect4Her** to raise awareness on violence that women face online every day. The aim of this campaign is to promote an inclusive and respectful online culture. The European Commission is addressing online violence through various means such as legislation, funding, and promoting dialogues between all relevant parties - industry, civil society, policy-makers, academia, and others – seeking to make the online environment a better place for all.

The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) endorses this campaign and reiterates the importance of safeguarding equality both online and offline. Acknowledging that online violence disproportionately affects women and girls and that online abuse is difficult to erase in view of its possible wide dissemination and algorithmic propagation, it is crucial for users to be aware of the negative effects of cyber violence and to endorse respect and dignity for all online.

Member States should tackle the roots of such abuse by making sure that society does not reflect a world where women and girls have to exclude themselves to feel safe. As Jourová and Gabriel stated *“Dignity, respect and solidarity apply to all of us, also online. Yet, sadly, reality is far from this, especially for women and girls, who are 27 times more likely to be harassed online than men are... Women should feel free and comfortable to express their opinions online and to actively participate in public life without feeling intimidated”*.