

Sexting among teenage girls and boys

Recent incidents of online violence and abuse against young women on local media made individuals mull over today's online world, which has led to a complete transformation in communication and social interaction.

Smartphones, tablets, and constant connectivity allow teenagers to share and exchange content of sexual nature, among others. This has become another form of intimate sexual communication attuned to today's technology-driven society.

[Sexting](#) can be defined as *"the exchange of sexual messages or images"* and *"the creating, sharing and forwarding of sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images"* through digital technologies such as social media platforms. [Research](#) shows that girls are far more likely than boys to be victims of negative, degrading and stereotyped portrayal, cyber-harassment, unwanted sexting and sextortion, hate speech, personal data misuse, and cyberbullying. Indeed, around 12% of 15-year-old girls have been cyberbullied by messages at least once compared to 7% of boys.

Moreover, *"[researchers](#) have found that boys forward and request sexual photos and messages to a greater degree than girls, and that girls acknowledge that content of this type is more frequently asked of them."* This all boils down to peer pressure, whereby both girls and boys choose to act in order to be accepted by others. [Girls with low self-esteem](#) are more likely to give in to peer pressure as they will not find it easy to resist and stand their ground.

Additionally, the [consequences](#) for young men are generally *"less serious for them than they are for young women, who suffer substantial prejudice and damage to their reputation due to sexist double standards."* This is because the posting or distributing of sexually graphic images or videos online will remain on the internet forever.

Needless to say, education plays an essential role in this regard. Children who are hooked to portable technology and social media should be educated about online behaviour from a very young age. Even though young children originally send an image of themselves consensually, they have no control of how others may use it.

Gender-sensitive awareness on healthy relationships, consent, setting safe boundaries and the risks of the online world is key. Girls must learn to respect themselves and their dignity, never share compromising materials and report any abusive online behaviour, while boys should understand the adverse effects of online abuse. All in all, both girls and boys must recognize that sexting can be very harmful and must learn to challenge negative peer pressure in this regard

On the other hand, parents or guardians should also be wary of what is happening in the digital world so that they can talk to their children about online safety and safe behaviours. This way, they will be better able to watch over their children and support them in case of abuse.

Youth is a critical period where one is moving from childhood to adulthood. During this stage, teenagers try to adjust to the issues surrounding them. The norms they are exposed to through digital technologies in terms of behaviour and physical appearance will affect their perceptions and beliefs. Such experiences can either exacerbate or mitigate the effect of inequalities encountered in the offline world.

Communication studies should be given due importance in the school curriculum to ensure that young women and men benefit from all the opportunities offered by digitalisation whilst being aware of the potential risks of new technologies.

The [National Commission for the Promotion of Equality \(NCPE\)](#) raises awareness through training sessions about gender equality issues to both public and private entities/organisations, including schools. Requests for training are discussed with the organisation concerned in order to deliver the best training possible in the context of the NCPE's remit and the needs of the organisation.

The [National Commission for the Promotion of Equality \(NCPE\)](#) can be contacted on: 2276 8200 or equality@gov.mt or our Facebook page.

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