Online sexism and measures for improvement

"Cyberviolence is a growing problem with significant impact on an increasing number of individuals".[1] This is the reality that has been enabled by the existing easy access to the internet and social media platforms.

However, the cyberviolence experience of women and men is quite different. While online attacks on men are more frequently based on their professional opinions or competence, "women are more likely to be subject to sexist and sexualised abuse and invective, the extremity of which may be magnified by the anonymity offered by the internet."[2]

Research shows that women are 27 times more likely to be harassed online than men.**Error! Bookmark not defined.** Moreover, some groups of women are notably targeted for online sexism; particularly women in the media and female politicians. In fact, around 46.9% of female politicians from 45 European countries have received threats of death, rape and violence during their parliamentary term.**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Age is also a factor. More young women (9%) than young men (6%) have been victims of online harassment, including but not limited to cyberbullying, blackmailing, and other offences. Similarly, research shows 12% of 15-year-old girls had been cyberbullied by messages compared to 7% of boys[3].

In effect, online sexism can take different forms, such as online attacks, sexist hate speech, sexist misuse of social media and sexist scrutiny on appearance, speech and activism.[4] Online attacks do not only affect women's dignity but may also prevent women from expressing their opinions. This may result in pushing them out of online spaces, undermining the right to freedom of speech in a democratic society. Indeed, almost a third of women reduced their online presence after experiencing online violence such as threats, stalking and intimidation, according to international statistics.[5]

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[1]https://www.coe.int/en/web/cybercrime/cyberviolence#{%2250020850%22:[2]}
[2]https://rm.coe.int/prems-055519-gbr-2573-cmrec-2019-1-web-a5/168093e08c
[3] https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-and-youth-opportunities-and-risks-digitalisation
[4] https://rm.coe.int/cm-rec-2019-1-on-preventing-and-combating-sexism/168094d894
[5]https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/blogposts/digitalrespect4her-campaign-highlights-online-risks-women

Societal gender stereotypes, gender imbalances in the tech industry and the specific architecture of digital platforms are the root causes of cyber violence and hate speech against women[6]. Moreover, the use of algorithms can spread and strengthen existing gender stereotypes leading to the perpetuation of online sexism.

Online sexism objectifies and humiliates women, undervalues their opinions and skills, destroys their reputation and makes them feel vulnerable and fearful. Not only does online sexism have an effect of silencing women and girls, but its emotional, psychological, and physical impacts are severe.[7]

In this context in 2019, the European Commission launched the #DigitalRespect4Her campaign to raise awareness on online violence against women. The aim of this campaign was to promote an inclusive and respectful online culture in which individuals feel safe and respected and participate confidently in online public life without any fear.

Furthermore, according to [8] the Council of Europe, sexist hate speech needs to be addressed by all stakeholders, including the public and private sectors and relevant authorities. In doing this, a balance must be found in providing a platform for free speech without tolerating sexist hate speech.

The Council of Europe delineates various measures to eliminate sexist hate speech which may include the tackling of gaps in legislation and monitoring their implementation against sexist hate speech. Regulatory powers can also be used with respect to the media to combat the use of sexist hate speech whilst encouraging the media to strengthen self-regulatory mechanisms to combat sexist hate-speech. The integration of a gender equality perspective in all aspects of education and media policies should be ensured. Moreover, research needs to be undertaken on the phenomenon of sexist hate speech and the different forms it takes. Furthermore, support and legal remedies need to be provided for victims, especially women and girls, in cases of sexist and harmful content.

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[6] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604979/IPOL_STU(2018)604979_EN.pdf
[7] https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680651592
[8] https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680651592

Online sexism is a form of violence against women and girls that perpetuates and exacerbates gender inequality. In this regard, the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) reiterates the importance of safeguarding equality both online and offline. Online technologies can make people's lives better and easier, however, such technologies must not serve as a platform for hate and fear neither for women nor for men. Indeed, NCPE deems that the internet and new technologies must embrace diversity and promote mutual respect for the benefit of everyone**.**

Access to the internet is becoming a necessity for economic well-being and is increasingly being considered as a fundamental human right. Hence, it is vital to ensure that this digital public space is a safe and secure place for everyone, including women and girls.

The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) can be contacted on: 2295 7850 or equality@gov.mt or our Facebook page.