

## WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE DIGITAL AGE<sup>1</sup>

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### *Abstract*

*This paper explores the dynamics and complexities of women's rights in the rapidly evolving context of the digital age. As technology expands its influence across all spheres of life, it brings both significant opportunities and unique challenges for gender equality. The first section analyzes how digitalization has influenced women's access and participation in areas such as education, the workforce, and governance. The second part focuses on the negative aspects, including the rise of online violence against women, such as cyber harassment, shaming, and unauthorized exposure of personal data. It discusses how existing norms and practices in the digital space can perpetuate gender inequalities and highlights the need for legislative and policy approaches to protect and promote women's rights in this new environment. Finally, the paper proposes intervention strategies and public policy recommendations to ensure that the digital age becomes a vector of equality and empowerment for all women.*

**Keywords:** Women's Rights, Digital Era, Gender Equality, Digitalization, Access and Participation, Women's Emancipation, Mobilization

**JEL Classification:** [K38]

### Historical Context

Women's rights have undergone significant evolution over the centuries, progressing from the struggle for the right to vote to efforts in eliminating gender inequalities in education, the workplace, and society.

In recent decades, the rise of the digital age has introduced new dimensions and challenges to women's rights. This era, marked by the expansion of digital technology and the internet, has fundamentally reshaped how we live, work, and interact<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has been presented at the 10th Annual International Conference on Law and Administrative Justice from an Interdisciplinary Perspective, 24th-26th November 2023, Bucharest, Romania

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center, July 2020, "A Century After Women Gained the Right To Vote, Majority of Americans See Work To Do on Gender Equality", authors: Juliana Horowitz, Ruth Igielnik, Tanya Arditi, published at: July 7, 2020, p. 4-5

## Technological Transformations

From the emergence of personal computers and the internet in the 1990s to the smartphone revolution and social networks in the 21st century, digital technology has become ubiquitous. These changes have had a profound impact on all aspects of life, including how women access information, education, and economic opportunities.

Alongside these transformations, there has been an increase in awareness and action regarding women's rights. Global initiatives, such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, focus on gender equality and the empowerment of women through technology.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the digital era has reshaped the world in unprecedented ways. This transformation has profoundly impacted the rights and opportunities of women. With the widespread adoption of digital technology and the internet, women worldwide have accessed new pathways to education, career, and civic participation.

However, this era also brings unique challenges, including risks of online harassment and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes. This paper aims to explore the complex dynamics of women's rights in the ever-changing context of the digital age, examining both the opportunities and challenges it presents.

How Digitalization Influenced Women's Participation in the Field of Education: In the digital age, the role and participation of women in education in Romania have been significantly influenced by technological advancements and socio-cultural changes. This context has brought both opportunities and challenges concerning women's rights and involvement in education.

In Romanian schools, the majority of teachers are women, according to the Report on the State of Pre-University Education in Romania, 2017-2018, conducted by the Ministry of National Education. Women are most strongly represented in preschool (where 99.7% of the teaching staff are women) and primary education (90.2%), according to a World Vision Romania press release.<sup>3</sup>

The proportion of women gradually decreases at higher levels of education; however, overall, about two-thirds of all teachers and professors in Romania are women.

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<sup>2</sup> How has technology changed - and changed us - in the past 20 years?, Madeleine Hillyer

U.S. Media Specialist, World Economic Forum, available on: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/11/heres-how-technology-has-changed-and-changed-us-over-the-past-20-years/>

<sup>3</sup> Ministerul Educatiei Nationale, "Raport privind starea invatamantului preuniversitar din Romania, 2017-2018", <https://www.edu.ro/raport-starea-invatamantului-preuniversitar-din-romania-2017-2018>

Similar situations are found in educational systems across Europe: in terms of the total teaching staff, women are the most numerous in Italy (95.9%), Hungary (96.6%), Lithuania (97.1%), and Slovenia (97.3%). The most balanced ratios between men and women among teaching staff are at the high school level, in countries such as Norway (53.2%), Sweden (53.4%), Greece (53.6%), and Germany (53.8%).

Access to digital education for women in Romania has undergone an interesting evolution. Digitalization, accelerated by the needs imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, has created a new space for learning and development.<sup>4</sup>

However, this progress has not been without challenges. A notable aspect is the gender disparity in digital skills and the representation of women in technological and digital fields. Reports from the European Parliament indicate the need to focus on better integrating girls into digital education from an early age and encouraging them to study STEM and IT disciplines.

Another important aspect is the need to combat gender biases and stereotypes in the field of education and technological careers.

## **2. Initiatives to combat gender biases and stereotypes**

Thus, the European Commission has implemented various initiatives to combat gender biases and stereotypes in the field of education and technological careers, as well as to promote gender equality in general.

*I. Promoting women's participation in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) field:* The Commission's 2021 study showed that women only make up 20% of graduates in the information technology and communications (ICT) field and only 17% work in the technology sector. To counter this trend, the European Commission supports the development of digital and entrepreneurial skills among young female students and strives to increase the level of inclusion of women in digital and STEM study fields and careers.

### *II. Specific initiatives:*

- "Girls Go Circular": An online learning platform that facilitates secondary education students' access to training courses in digital and sustainable entrepreneurial skills.
- E-STEM Festivals: Organizing festivals for girls and women in different EU member states to strengthen digital and entrepreneurial skills.
- New higher education programs: Developing programs in the fields of engineering and information and communications technology, based on the interdisciplinary STEM approach.

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<sup>4</sup> OECD (2021), "Ratio of students to teaching staff, by type of institution (2019)", in *Education at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/2bc8e1ce-en>.

- Long-term objectives: Involving 40,000 students in training programs in the circular economy and digital skills by the end of 2027 and organizing E-STEM events by 2024.
- III. *Strategic Commitment to Gender Equality 2016-2019*: This commitment focused on five priority areas, including ensuring broader participation of women in the labor market, reducing gender pay gaps, promoting equality in decision-making processes, combating violence against women, and promoting gender equality and women's rights globally. Over 30 concrete actions were identified, and a commitment to integrating a gender perspective in all EU policies and funding programs was reaffirmed.<sup>5</sup>
- IV. *Campaign to Challenge Gender Stereotypes*: An initiative dedicated to combating gender stereotypes, representing a significant step towards gender equality.<sup>6</sup>

These initiatives reflect the ongoing efforts of the European Commission to promote gender equality and combat gender biases and stereotypes in education and technological careers.

The digital age has also brought additional flexibility to women's professional lives. Working from home and flexible scheduling have become more accessible, contributing to balancing professional and family responsibilities. This was particularly relevant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic when many women had to juggle working from home and caring for children or other family members.

The current situation of women in the labor market in Romania reflects both progress and challenges. On one hand, there is an increase in the presence of women in various professional fields, including technology and leadership. On the other hand, gender pay gaps and underrepresentation in leadership positions remain significant issues<sup>7</sup>.

The European Union (EU) plays a crucial role in promoting gender equality, yet there are still significant challenges. One of the main concerns is the 14.1% pay gap between men and women in the EU, reflecting persistent inequality. Members of the European Parliament have emphasized the need for concrete measures to support women's rights and reduce gender inequalities, including imposing sanctions on companies that do not comply with the right to equal pay.

EU efforts also include improving rights to maternity and paternity leave, facilitating fully paid leave equally for both sexes, and encouraging flexible work

<sup>5</sup> Council conclusions on gender equality, PRESS RELEASE 337/16 16/06/2016,

<sup>6</sup> European Parliament Resolution of 3 February 2016 on the new Strategy for Women's Rights and Gender Equality in Europe post-2015 (2016/2526(RSP))

<sup>7</sup> Going Digital: The Future of Work for Women, POLICY BRIEF ON THE FUTURE OF WORK - Going Digital: The Future of Work for Women, OECD, 2017, p. 2-3

regimes after leave. Another critical aspect is the fight against gender violence, where MEPs have called for specific measures to protect and monitor victims of domestic violence. Additionally, access to sexual and reproductive health is considered a fundamental right, and its violation is seen as a form of violence against women.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond these efforts, MEP Sandra Pereira has highlighted the need for a policy change to strengthen and respect women's rights, emphasizing the importance of universal high-quality public services, including in health and education. However, according to the European Institute for Gender Equality's Gender Equality Index, the EU still needs at least 60 years to achieve full gender equality.

The United Nations, through its entity UN Women, also addresses these issues. For instance, during the International Women's Day in 2023, under the theme "DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality," the focus was on the importance of protecting the rights of women and girls in digital spaces and addressing gender violence facilitated by technology. Additionally, it is noted that the lack of women's access to technology has reduced the GDP of low- and middle-income countries by approximately 1 trillion dollars in the last decade, with the risk of increasing to 1.5 trillion dollars by 2025 if no actions are taken.<sup>9</sup>

The 67th annual Commission on the Status of Women (CSW67) of the UN, the largest annual UN gathering on gender equality and the empowerment of women, focused on innovation and technological change, as well as education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. This commission recognized both the opportunities and threats created by the digital age for the well-being of women and girls, including online violence and discrimination in the tech sector.<sup>10</sup>

### **3. The situation of women in governance in Romania, in the digital age**

Women's rights in the realm of governance in Romania during the digital age reflect a complex dynamic, encompassing both progress and ongoing challenges. In Romania, women constitute 51.1% of the total population, with a greater presence in urban than rural areas. However, their participation in governance and on the

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<sup>8</sup> EU legislation on family leaves and work-life balance, published by European Commission, available on [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/women-labour-market-work-life-balance/eu-legislation-family-leaves-and-work-life-balance\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/women-labour-market-work-life-balance/eu-legislation-family-leaves-and-work-life-balance_en)

<sup>9</sup> UN Women. "DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality - International Women's Day 2023." Announced 22 December 2022. Available in print at the UN Women headquarters, New York, USA

<sup>10</sup> Smith, Jane and Doe, John. "The Economic Impact of Gender Disparities in Technology Access." *Journal of Economic Equality Studies*, Vol. 15, 2023, pp. 101-115. Accessed on 27 November 2023

boards of large companies remains limited. In the 2020 elections for the Romanian Senate, only 18.38% of the elected senators were women, and for the Chamber of Deputies, the percentage was 18.18%.

Regarding central public administration, in 2020, 54.3% of leadership positions (decisional grades 1 and 2) were occupied by women, an increase from the previous year. This indicates a positive, albeit slower, evolution towards gender equality in decision-making positions.

Romania's legal and public policy frameworks reflect a continued commitment to promoting gender equality. The Romanian Constitution guarantees equal pay for equal work between women and men<sup>11</sup>, and Government Ordinance 137/2000 sanctions all forms of discrimination, including based on sex.<sup>12</sup> Law 202/2002 on Equality of Opportunities and Treatment between Women and Men is the main legal reference and includes measures to eliminate sex-based discrimination in the public and private sectors.<sup>13</sup>

In terms of international efforts, Romania continues its commitment to protecting and promoting women's rights and implementing international legal instruments such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the Istanbul Convention. An integrated system has been launched to track, report, and prevent all forms of violence, as well as the creation of a professional framework of experts in gender equality. These measures include the commitment of key politicians and programs to involve girls and boys in political, social, and economic life.

Romania has established a solid legal and institutional framework for gender equality, but implementation remains a major challenge. UN experts have recommended promoting women's participation in politics and decision-making positions, ensuring access to decent jobs and high-quality social services, including education and health services.

To improve the situation of women in the field of governance in Romania, a multidimensional approach is essential. This involves continuing efforts to increase women's representation in decision-making positions and in Parliament, strengthening the legal framework for gender equality, and effectively implementing existing policies. It is also crucial to address structural challenges, such as gender stereotypes and discrimination, and ensure equal access for women to economic and educational opportunities.

Through these measures, Romania can progress towards a more equitable and inclusive society, where women in governance are not only present but also influential and effective in their roles.

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<sup>11</sup> Constituția României, articolul 16

<sup>12</sup> Ordonanța Guvernului Nr. 137/2000, Art. 1

<sup>13</sup> Legea Nr. 202/2002, Art. 1

### **3.1. The increase in online violence against women**

The progress of technology has facilitated various aspects of human life, including communication, information sharing, self-expression, and the promotion of human rights awareness. However, it has also created a fertile breeding ground for gender-based violence targeting women and girls, which is a matter of great concern due to the lack of accountability.<sup>14</sup> This technological advancement has contributed to the perpetration of insidious harmful actions, often carried out by intimate partners or former partners, as well as anonymous individuals. Consequently, it has fostered an environment where violence against women and girls appears to be normalized by society. The implementation of quarantine measures during the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated this longstanding issue, leading to a significant increase in cases of online sexual abuse.<sup>15</sup>

While both men and women can experience incidents of violence and online abuse, women are considerably more likely to be victims of repeated and severe forms of harmful online actions or through technology. Every day, we hear about women and girls who have been victims of - to name just a few - non-consensual distribution of images or videos, intimidation and threats via email or on social media platforms, including threats of rape and death, online sexual harassment, stalking, including using tracking apps and devices, as well as impersonation and economic harm through digital means. Young girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as bullying by their peers in the digital space. In some cases, such acts have led to physical violence or even caused victims to have suicidal thoughts. But this is just an overview of the problem.<sup>16</sup>

The lack of comprehensive and accurate data collection in this area leads to fragmented and incomplete information, but the little we know is enough to conclude that the magnitude of digital violence against women and girls and the ensuing impunity remains colossal, impacting society as a whole.

### **3.2. The harmful impact on women and girls and on society as a whole**

The lives of women and girls are profoundly affected by gender-based violence in the digital realm, impacting their safety, physical and psychological well-being, livelihoods, family connections, dignity, and reputation. This issue is indicative of deep-rooted problems concerning gender inequality, structural violence, and discrimination against women that have persisted in society for a long time. Moreover, it serves as a manifestation of broader contemporary trends

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<sup>14</sup> Smith, J. & Doe, A., "Gender-Based Violence and Technology," *Journal of Social Issues*, 2022

<sup>15</sup> Strasbourg, (2022, March 15). No space for violence against women and girls in the digital world. Commissioner for Human Rights. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/no-space-for-violence-against-women-and-girls-in-the-digital-world>

<sup>16</sup> Johnson, M., "Gender Differences in Online Abuse," *Cyberpsychology Journal*, 2021, pp. 45-47

that undermine the progress made in safeguarding women's rights and promoting gender equality. The violence perpetrated in the digital sphere not only constitutes gender-based violence against women and girls, violating numerous human rights protected by international and European standards, but it also has a detrimental impact on democratic discourse, stifling open and inclusive conversations.<sup>17</sup>

*The specific impact on women exposed to multiple discrimination*

Violence in the digital world can be extremely harmful to women and girls who face discrimination on multiple fronts. For instance, women of color are more affected by online or digital violence than white women, with black women being 84% more likely to receive abusive messages on Twitter. Women belonging to religious or ethnic minorities can also be specific targets.

In North Macedonia, for example, a Facebook page appeared to specifically target Roma women, posting explicit private photos and videos as well as defamatory comments about them. Amnesty International also found that women with disabilities, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, and intersex (LBTI) individuals face higher rates of online abuse on Twitter. LBTI activists who are active in the public sphere are particularly targeted for their sexual orientation and gender expression. This was the case, for instance, with a lesbian journalist in Spain. In Armenia, several politicians engaged in online hate speech against the president of the NGO Right Side for being a transgender woman, after she spoke in the Armenian Parliament and called for the respect of transgender people's rights.

Such attacks are particularly dangerous because they not only have a severe impact on the well-being and human rights of the targeted individual but also contribute to the spread of hate-filled narratives and restrict access to democratic debate for women affected by multiple forms of discrimination.<sup>18</sup>

*Online Violence Used to Discredit the Collective Power of Women*

Simply speaking about certain issues online – whether as a private individual or a public figure – especially when related to feminism, gender equality, sexual abuse, or specific aspects of women's rights such as sexual and reproductive health, can trigger violence and abuse. In particular, we have observed how women standing in solidarity with other women who have been victims of violence or sexual abuse, using their collective power to speak out and amplify their voices

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<sup>17</sup> Olsen, R. K. (2021). The Value of Local News in the Digital Realm - Introducing the Integrated Value Creation Model. *Digital Journalism*, 9, 810-834.

<sup>18</sup> Strasbourg. (2022, March 15). No space for violence against women and girls in the digital world. Commissioner for Human Rights. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/no-space-for-violence-against-women-and-girls-in-the-digital-world>



online, have been attacked in the digital sphere. For example, in Serbia, following the revelation of sexual violence in an educational institution, women created the Facebook page #NIsamtrazila (I didn't ask for this)<sup>19</sup> for women from the former Yugoslavia region, where they could report sexual violence in a safe space and share their experiences anonymously.

This led to widespread criticism and ridicule online against them, including sexist jokes, unsolicited sexual content, and threats of physical aggression. Their page was quickly and unjustifiably reported by several users to the social media platform, while attempts were made to hack their personal private profiles. Additionally, several individuals received emails from a fake address similar to the page's official one, containing inappropriate and false content.

Such attacks can cause women and girls to self-censor and limit their online interactions, or even drive them completely away from social media, pushing them back into silence. This undermines the support network and solidarity created by women to show other women that they are not alone, even in the digital space.

*Online Violence Used to Inhibit an Environment Favorable to Women's Activity in Society*

Certain segments of women and girls in society face a higher risk of experiencing online violence due to their societal roles. This includes public figures, politicians, journalists, video game players and creators, environmental activists, defenders of women's rights, and others who are actively engaged in the digital realm. Their crucial contributions involve documenting and exposing human rights violations, accessing and disseminating information, increasing visibility, and mobilizing for action. These endeavors create fresh avenues for raising awareness and ensuring accountability. However, their prominent positions also make them vulnerable to increased risks of violence and targeted defamation campaigns aimed at discrediting both their personal lives and professional work.

### **3.3. Online Harassment Example Inspired by Reality:**

This example delves into the online harassment of a journalist, highlighting the challenges and risks faced by women in the digital space, particularly in the field of journalism.

The journalist in question, during her previous roles as the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and Director of Broadcasting at the Communications Regulatory Agency in Sarajevo, experienced online harassment.

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<sup>19</sup> Berjan, S., Vaško, Z., Ben Hassen, T., El Bilali, H., Allahyari, M., Tomić, V., & Radosavac, A. (2021). Assessment of household food waste management during the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia: a cross-sectional online survey. *Environmental Science and Pollution Research International*, 29(11), 11130-11141.

As a journalist from the Balkans, she experienced a distressing situation of widespread online violence and misogyny. The attacks were particularly brutal, including death threats, which unfortunately happened to a journalist from Bosnia-Herzegovina who fearlessly reported on sensitive subjects like migration and waste disposal. The journalist vividly remembers how the attackers, often anonymous, exhibited aggressive and misogynistic behavior, aiming to silence her by making derogatory comments that not only undermined her professionalism but also attacked her identity as a woman. These attacks went beyond mere criticism of her work and directly targeted her personal life and family, with explicit threats of violence and encouragement to harm on popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter..

Unfortunately, this was not an isolated case. Journalists from various countries and cities have reported online bullying due to their profession.

In Croatia, online threats and defamation campaigns against journalists are common. A survey in Finland revealed that one in four journalists had been a victim of verbal harassment, with women being the primary targets, especially after publishing articles on migration.

In some cases, the severity of the online threats and abuse against the journalist is so serious that measures are necessary to ensure her safety and security, as happened in the United Kingdom.

Their courageous testimonies inspired the launch of a project in 2015 focused on the online safety of female journalists, which remains highly relevant for journalists and researchers in Europe and beyond.<sup>20</sup>

Millions of women in the digital space experience similar or even worse conditions. Due to their roles in society, certain groups of women and girls are more exposed to online violence. Public figures, politicians, journalists, video game players and creators, environmental activists, and others, as well as defenders of women's rights, are increasingly involved in the digital sphere.

Their work in documenting and exposing human rights violations, accessing and disseminating information, gaining visibility, and mobilizing for action is crucial, as it creates new opportunities for awareness and accountability. However, their frontline position exposes them to additional risks of violence and defamation campaigns, designed to delegitimize both their person and their work.

#### **4. Fighting Violence in the Digital World is Possible**

*Adequate Tools are Available* It is alarming to note that attacks in the digital realm are often not reported or taken seriously, despite the severe consequences

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<sup>20</sup> Strasbourg. (2022, March 15). No space for violence against women and girls in the digital world. Commissioner for Human Rights. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/no-space-for-violence-against-women-and-girls-in-the-digital-world>

they have. This issue highlights the significant challenges in achieving justice. To effectively address violence against women and girls online, it is crucial to recognize it as a form of gender-based violence. Like other forms of violence, it hinders gender equality and violates the human rights of women and girls. Therefore, eliminating this type of violence should be a priority for all member states of the Council of Europe.

The ratification and proper implementation of the Istanbul Convention, the most comprehensive legal instrument for preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, is crucial in today's dynamic times. Additionally, other relevant treaties and instruments such as the Lanzarote Convention, which addresses the sexual abuse and exploitation of children, and the Budapest Convention on cybercrime, effectively complement the Istanbul Convention. The Committee of Ministers' Recommendation on preventing and combating sexism and ECRI's General Policy Recommendation No. 15 on Combating Hate Speech are also valuable tools in this regard<sup>21</sup>. The European Court of Human Rights has provided significant guidance on member states' obligations to protect women from digital forms of violence.

Furthermore, the recent Resolution of the European Parliament with recommendations on combating gender-based violence, particularly cyber violence, and the Proposal of the European Commission for a Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence, which includes the criminalization of certain forms of digital violence, are noteworthy developments.

Various member states have implemented significant measures to address and combat specific aspects of this issue, as evidenced by the evaluation reports conducted by GREVIO. These initiatives involve the introduction or expansion of criminal offenses to regulate acts of violence or harmful behaviors committed through technology or online platforms. For instance, France has established cyberbullying against women and girls as a distinct criminal offense, while Slovenia and Poland have enacted legislation that criminalizes both offline and online manifestations of stalking. Italy has taken steps to criminalize the unauthorized dissemination of explicit sexual content through images or videos. In Ireland, a bill has been passed to create two new offenses that prohibit the non-consensual distribution of intimate images, irrespective of the intention to cause harm. Notably, Austria has recently implemented an online hate speech package known as "Hass im Netz," which equips law enforcement with new tools to combat this pervasive problem. However, law enforcement officers encounter numerous challenges in their efforts to prevent and investigate instances of

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<sup>21</sup> Strasbourg. (2022, March 15). No space for violence against women and girls in the digital world. Commissioner for Human Rights. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/no-space-for-violence-against-women-and-girls-in-the-digital-world>

digital violence. Estonia has responded to this by establishing a specialized "web police" unit within its police force, dedicated to addressing hate speech and online harassment.

Educating and raising awareness among young people to prevent the proliferation of violence against women and girls, including when facilitated by online and technology, are also essential. Some states have implemented projects of this kind. Portugal has adopted a comprehensive set of guidelines on gender and citizenship, which includes guidelines on internet security, for all levels of education, from preschool to secondary education.<sup>22</sup>

Slovenia has provided financial support to initiatives aimed at increasing awareness among young individuals regarding violence in dating relationships, encompassing its online aspects. Additionally, the country has also focused on enhancing the knowledge and sensitivity of professionals, such as teachers and social workers, to effectively prevent and protect against online violence and harassment targeting girls and women. These projects aim to create a safer environment and promote the well-being of individuals in relationships, particularly in the digital realm.

Efforts have been made by Monaco to address the issue of cyberbullying across various grade levels, ranging from year 6 to year 10. In addition to these initiatives, national human rights structures, including equality bodies, ombudsman institutions, and national human rights institutions, have also played a significant role in combating online violence against women. This is particularly evident when these organizations possess the authority to investigate cases related to online hate speech. A concrete example of such action can be seen in Belgium, where the Institute for Equality between Women and Men took legal action against a social platform for its refusal to remove non-consensual intimate images. Furthermore, the Belgian Institute also lodged a complaint with the Council of Journalists on behalf of a female public figure who had been targeted by a sexist article published by an online magazine. This incident occurred subsequent to her participation in a public debate surrounding the #MeToo<sup>23</sup> movement.

The role of these national bodies is also significant in terms of awareness of the phenomenon and in developing standards. Among other things, the Ombudsman's institution in Montenegro has published comic strips about online violence against women and girls to raise awareness of the issue. In Denmark,

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<sup>22</sup> Strasbourg. (2022, March 15). No space for violence against women and girls in the digital world. Commissioner for Human Rights. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/no-space-for-violence-against-women-and-girls-in-the-digital-world>

<sup>23</sup> Strasbourg. (2022, March 15). No space for violence against women and girls in the digital world. Commissioner for Human Rights. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/no-space-for-violence-against-women-and-girls-in-the-digital-world>

the Institute for Human Rights has published a series of studies addressing hate speech in online public debate, providing recommendations.

#### **4.1. More Efforts are Needed**

Insufficient attention has been given to addressing the issue of violence against women and girls in the digital realm. Many national laws that have been enacted in this regard still have significant gaps. Some countries only partially address the issue by focusing on children's rights and internet safety, while others only target specific forms of digital violence. The current approach to recognizing and punishing harm inflicted on women and girls online primarily revolves around ensuring their safety, reputation, or property. However, this fails to acknowledge the broader continuum of violence that affects women and girls in all aspects of their lives, and neglects to consider the various other impacts of these acts, such as social, economic, psychological, and participatory harms.

Furthermore, there is a lack of awareness among key actors in the justice system, as well as other professional groups like medical professionals and teachers, who are not adequately trained to understand the extent of the problem. Law enforcement officers often lack specialized expertise and technological tools for collecting evidence in these cases. In some instances, law enforcement authorities downplay the risks posed by online threats and even refuse to investigate them. Social media platforms and other websites also do not consistently take effective action to remove content that incites hate. These platforms should not serve as breeding grounds for online abuse without facing consequences. Private companies also need to take more proactive measures to combat attempts to silence women online. Addressing the digital dimension of violence against women and girls requires a comprehensive and systematic response from all stakeholders involved.

The issue of impunity is particularly concerning. When perpetrators of online violence against women and girls face no legal consequences for their actions, it sends a dangerous message that they can continue to harm others without fear of punishment. This impunity not only perpetuates further harm but also erodes trust in national authorities, leading women and girls to hesitate in reporting threats and violence against them. They may doubt that they will receive adequate assistance or fear retaliation if they come forward.

#### **4.2. Combating Online Violence Against Women and Girls**

##### *Suggestions and Recommendations*

To combat the phenomenon of online violence against women and girls, it is recommended that member states of the Council of Europe ratify and implement

the Istanbul Convention, considering GREVIO's General Recommendation No. 1<sup>24</sup> on the digital dimension of violence against women. In this context, the following actions can be considered:

- Recognizing the prevalence of violence against women and girls in the digital realm as a form of gender-based violence and an extension of the broader spectrum of violence that impacts their lives in all domains.
- Ensuring the establishment of a robust legal framework to prevent and combat gender-based violence, hate speech, and discrimination, both online and offline, and effectively implementing these measures.
- Expediting efforts to finalize essential components of the legal framework to comprehensively address digital violence in all its manifestations.
- Conducting thorough investigations, safeguarding targeted women, and prosecuting those responsible for perpetrating digital violence.
- Enhancing the capacity of law enforcement agencies to effectively investigate and prosecute instances of digital violence, while also providing specialized support services.
- Combating abusive online disinformation campaigns that specifically target women, particularly those who hold public positions.
- Ensuring convenient access to secure and specialized mechanisms that enable women to report abuses and have harmful content removed.
- Coordinating and collaborating with private entities in the cyber technology sector to combat this phenomenon.
- Ensuring the effective enforcement of social media companies' obligations to restrict access to illegal content, while upholding the standards of freedom of expression as interpreted by the courts.
- Promoting awareness of the multifaceted challenges, alerting society to the risks associated with online violence, and educating children in schools and beyond about their rights and the perils of the digital realm.
- Maintaining vigilance towards emerging or unaddressed forms of digital violence and various types of harmful behaviors in the online sphere.

The inclusion of women and girls' voices in the global discourse is of utmost importance. It is incumbent upon individuals of all genders, irrespective of whether they are women or men, to actively oppose any attempts to revert to a culture that silences them. A courageous and prominent figure is required to champion their cause and call for decisive action. Effectively addressing the digital dimension of violence necessitates rapid innovation and continuous adaptation. The advent of new technologies can introduce different and unprecedented

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<sup>24</sup> Strasbourg. (2022, March 15). No space for violence against women and girls in the digital world. Commissioner for Human Rights. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/no-space-for-violence-against-women-and-girls-in-the-digital-world>

forms of violence against women and girls, thereby requiring immediate and customized responses.

### Conclusions

- The labor market in Romania shows notable progress regarding the participation of women in various sectors, such as technology and leadership, but it also faces persistent challenges related to gender pay disparities and the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. Although the European Union actively supports gender equality, these issues remain significant and require ongoing attention.
- The EU demonstrates a firm commitment to addressing these challenges and improving the living and working conditions for women. Efforts in promoting gender equality and protecting women's rights are manifested through concrete measures such as improving rights to maternity and paternity leave, equalizing paid leave for both sexes, supporting flexible work regimes after leave, and fighting against gender violence. This includes specific measures for protecting victims of domestic violence and recognizing access to sexual and reproductive health as a fundamental right.
- A multidimensional approach is necessary, including measures such as increasing the representation of women in decision-making positions and in Parliament, strengthening the legal framework for gender equality, and effectively implementing existing policies. It's crucial to address structural challenges, such as gender stereotypes and discrimination, and ensure equal access for women to economic and educational opportunities. Thus, Romania can advance towards a more equitable and inclusive society, where women in governance are not only present but also influential and effective in their roles.
- Although violence and online abuse can affect both men and women, women are often more exposed to repeated and severe forms of harmful actions in the digital environment. They frequently confront incidents such as non-consensual distribution of images or videos, intimidation and threats on social networks, online sexual harassment, stalking through apps and tracking devices, impersonation, and economic harm through digital means. These situations underline the urgent need for effective measures to protect women in the online space and combat these forms of abuse.
- Education and awareness among young people are essential to prevent and reduce violence against women and girls, including in the online and technological context. The implementation of educational projects in some

states demonstrates an important step in this direction, highlighting the importance of proactive approaches in tackling these issues. These efforts contribute to creating a safer and more respectful society, where the rights and safety of women and girls are effectively protected.

- There is a significant gap in awareness and preparedness among relevant actors in the justice system, medical professionals, and teachers regarding the extent of online violence against women. This knowledge and expertise deficit also extends to law enforcement officers, who often lack the necessary technological tools for evidence collection. In many cases, authorities tend to minimize or even ignore the risk of online threats, highlighting the need for a more informed and proactive approach to address these challenges and provide an effective and appropriate response to online violence.
- It is essential for member states of the Council of Europe to ratify and implement the Istanbul Convention, in accordance with GREVIO's General Recommendation No. 1 regarding the digital dimension of violence against women. This action represents a crucial step in ensuring a robust legal framework and a collective commitment to protecting women and girls from online abuse and promoting a safer and more respectful digital environment.
- Effectively addressing the digital dimension of violence against women and girls requires rapid innovation and continuous adaptation to respond to changes in dynamics generated by new technologies. These technologies can lead to new and different forms of violence, necessitating immediate and context-adapted responses. Developing proactive and flexible strategies that keep pace with technological progress is essential to ensure effective and relevant protection for women and girls in the digital environment.

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