

Combating gender-based cyber-violence

As the world moves online, forms of violence that already affect women and girls disproportionately are following suit, and digital technologies are enabling them to take on new guises. The EU does not have a legislative framework to address this gender-based violence, despite its harmful impacts on individuals, society and democracy. A legislative-initiative report calling for EU legislation to fight gender-based cyber-violence, and provide its victims across the Union with equal protection is expected to be put to the vote during Parliament's December 2021 plenary session.

What is gender-based cyber-violence?

Cyber-violence – i.e. the use of online and communication technologies to cause, facilitate or threaten violence against individuals – can be experienced by anyone. However, [research](#) shows that it is not a gender-neutral phenomenon, since women and girls are targeted disproportionately and in specific ways. '**Gender-based cyber-violence**' is one of [several umbrella terms](#) used to describe this dimension of the violence enabled by the internet, email, smartphones and social media platforms. [Part of](#) a wider continuum of [gender-based violence](#), its evolving manifestations include sexist [hate speech](#), [trolling](#), [doxxing](#), online (sexual) harassment and stalking, rape and death threats, [sextortion](#) and other forms of [image-based abuse](#). Like other forms of gender-based violence, it is rooted in [inequalities and unequal power relations](#) between women and men, and shaped by [intersecting inequalities](#). What [distinguishes](#) it is the anonymity it confers on the perpetrators and the fact that it can be carried out from anywhere, at scale and indelibly.

How widespread is it?

A March 2021 [EPRS European added value assessment](#) (EAVA) on gender-based cyber-violence stresses the need for better data at EU and national levels. Based on surveys carried out by the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency in [2012](#) and [2019](#), it estimates that between 4 and 7 % of women aged over 18 in the EU-27 experienced cyber-harassment in the previous 12 months, and between 1 and 3 % experienced cyber-stalking. The study finds that prevalence has risen with greater use of the internet and social media, and is likely to increase further. Younger age groups are particularly affected. Global surveys conducted by the [World Wide Web Foundation](#) and the [Economist Intelligence Unit](#) (EIU) paint a similar picture. The latter also flags low levels of reporting. Women in public life, including [journalists](#), [activists](#) and [politicians](#) are especially likely to receive misogynistic and sexualised online abuse. [Women from ethnic minorities](#) and [LGBTIQ+ people](#) are also affected disproportionately. Increased internet usage during the coronavirus pandemic has put [more women and girls](#) at risk of cyber-violence, as well as catalysing [new types](#) of crime, with [evidence](#) that misogynistic online content is spreading from minority to mainstream social platforms, normalising abuse.

What are its impacts?

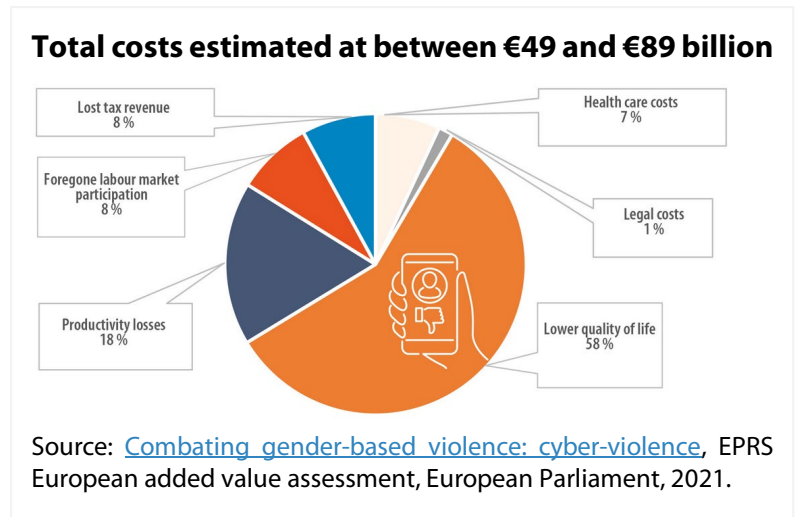
The Council of Europe (CoE) [notes](#) that the impacts of cyber-violence are often under-estimated or not taken seriously, but the resulting physical, sexual, psychological and economic harm can be devastating. An overwhelming majority (92 %) of respondents to the EIU survey reported that the violence they had experienced or witnessed had harmed their wellbeing. Nearly three quarters (74 %) were afraid of online violence escalating into real world threats, and a third said they thought twice about posting any content online. Action to prevent cyber-violence was inadequate. This illustrates the combined effects of gender-based cyber-violence on women's quality of life, sense of safety and ability to participate fully in the online spaces that are now vital to personal, work and public life. The United Nations (UN) [Special Rapporteur on violence against women](#) is one of a number of voices stressing that, as well as harming individuals, gender-based cyber-violence has negative impacts on gender equality and the quality of democracy.

International standards and recommendations

The CoE's [first guidance](#) on how parties to the [Istanbul Convention](#) should approach the digital dimension of violence against women recommends that they should review their existing legislation against the [standards](#) set out in the Convention and the [Budapest Convention](#) on cybercrime and, if necessary, adopt new legislation. The UN [stresses](#) that, 'international human rights law and targets on achieving gender equality, empowering women and girls and eliminating violence against women in public and private life are fully applicable in digital spaces'.

Potential for further EU action

The European added value assessment carried out by EPRS for Parliament's Committees on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) and Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM) finds that the quantifiable costs of gender-based cyber-violence in the EU are substantial. In view of this, and given the gaps it identifies at EU and national levels, including the lack of harmonised legal definitions, the limited data, under-reporting, and varying levels of protection for victims, the study finds that there is a need to act at EU level. It assesses a number of potential legislative and non-legislative policy options and concludes that a combination of both would have the strongest impact. In 2020, an [opinion on combating online violence against women](#) by the European Commission's Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men also found that there is potential for effective EU action. It recommended that the EU adopt legislation on cyber-violence against women and take it into account when developing further regulation of information and communications technology providers.



European Commission proposals

There is no specific EU legal instrument to address gender-based violence [in general](#) or gender-based cyber-violence in particular. However, as part of its [commitment](#) to prevent and combat gender-based violence, the European Commission is expected to put forward a [legislative proposal](#) encompassing online violence early in 2022. A proposal for a [digital services act](#) (DSA) to secure a safer and more accountable online environment is already under discussion by the co-legislators, and could lead to better protection if it were to include a gender perspective.

European Parliament position

Parliament's FEMM committee has [proposed](#) gender-sensitive amendments to the DSA and [sought input](#) from stakeholders on how to deal with gender-based cyber-violence. Parliament has already [highlighted](#) the need to address cyber-stalking and online harassment, and [deplored](#) the increasing violence against women online, including during the [coronavirus pandemic](#), and its impacts on women's and girls' freedom of expression and participation in public life. It has urged Member States to define and criminalise new forms of digital violence, and called for an EU directive to prevent and combat all forms of gender-based violence, including cyber-violence. Pending the Commission's proposal for a directive, the FEMM and LIBE committees have adopted a legislative-initiative report setting out [specific proposals](#) to be included in EU legislation. These include a common criminal law definition of gender-based cyber-violence, harmonised sanctions, and provisions to protect, support and ensure reparation for victims.

Legislative-initiative report: [2020/2035\(INL\)](#); Committees responsible, FEMM and LIBE (jointly under Rule 58); Rapporteurs: Elissavet Vozemberg-Vrionidi (EPP, Greece) and Sylwia Spurek (Greens/EFA, Poland).

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