

The impact of the use of social media on women and girls ¹

ABSTRACT

This study, commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs at the request of the FEMM Committee, outlines and assesses the impacts of social media on women and girls, on gender equality, and on democracy and civic participation more generally. It further analyses whether social media are creating a bias in their treatment of women and men, and provides recommendations to policy makers.

This study was commissioned by the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality of the European Parliament, in response to growing concerns about the scale of digitally mediated harms experienced by women and girls. Despite the numerous beneficial aspects of social media, academics, policy-makers and activists working in the area of gender have recently devoted increasing attention to the issue of gender-based and sexual digital harm, with various large-scale surveys indicating the alarming scale and intensity of this issue². In its resolution of 17 April 2018 on gender equality in the media sector³, the European Parliament highlighted that violent and sexist media content is negatively affecting women and their participation in society, and that it may be causing psychological or physical damage to children and young people.

This study outlines and critically evaluates the impact of social media on women and girls, using available data, reports, studies and analyses from a wide range of sources from EU, national and international institutions. Issues covered include sexism and gender stereotypes in the content and algorithms of online advertising, the impact of pro-anorexia and thinspiration content (images and text promoting thinness), gender-based and sexual abuse and harassment online, including various forms of image-based sexual abuse (such as sending unsolicited nudes, non-consensual image sharing, and sextortion), technologically-facilitated coercive control, misogyny in gaming, targeted hate campaigns against female politicians, journalists and other professionals, algorithmic bias and radicalisation, the rise of male supremacism and pornography. While the study uses resources from a range of disciplines, the meta-analytical perspective is techno-social: it posits that the digital world cannot be understood as divorced from social, cultural, political, economic and legal contexts. For this reason, the lens of online misogyny is used to capture and analyse the range of harms inflicted on women and girls. This lens facilitates an in-depth understanding of the digital affordances of social media, but never in isolation from the broader power structures that dictate contemporary gender relations.

Objectives

¹ Full study in English: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/743341/IPOL_STU\(2023\)743341_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/743341/IPOL_STU(2023)743341_EN.pdf)

² Ging, Debbie, and Eugenia Siapera, eds., *Gender Hate Online: Understanding the New Anti-Feminism*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland, 2019.

³ European Parliament resolution of 17 April 2018 on gender equality in the media sector in the EU (2017/2210(INI)), available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0101_EN.html



The overall objective of the study is to outline and assess the impacts of social media on women and girls, on gender equality, and on democracy and civic participation more generally. It is based on concrete quantitative and qualitative evidence, and provides an overview of gendered patterns of social media usage in the EU. The study identifies key areas of gender inequality in terms of access, self-expression, stereotypes, body image and self-esteem, (self) censorship and targeted hate campaigns on different social media platforms. It also provides an overview of the position of the European Parliament and the European Commission and of existing legislation, programmes, guidelines or actions at EU and international level related to protection of women from negative impacts of social media. Finally, the study provides practical and policy recommendations for the most relevant actors (the decision makers, EU Institutions and Member States) and to the European Parliament, aimed at structurally improving the impact of the use of social media on women and girls in the EU.

Main findings

- In the European Union, social media use is slightly higher among women than men across all age groups. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, WhatsApp and Pinterest are more popular among women, while Twitter, LinkedIn, Reddit, Discord, Twitch and Telegram are more popular among men.
- There are significant differences between women and men in types of social media usage. Men are more likely to share opinions, while women are generally more interested in maintaining strong social ties. Girls place more importance on popularity and positive social experiences and feel the impact of negative interactions with others more than boys.
- Boys and men are more likely than girls and women to engage in risky behaviours online (including sexting, sharing violent materials, online harassment, hacking and cyberfraud).
- Boys appear to have a higher level of confidence online and feel more resilient to negative actions from others. Women and girls are more conscious of privacy risks.
- More time spent on social media is associated with an increase in depressive symptoms for both boys and girls, but the effect is larger in girls. Factors include lack of high-quality sleep, online harassment, low self-esteem and negative body image.
- Gender is a major factor in targeted advertising on social media. However, inadequate details are available on how exactly these algorithms work. Gender is also a major factor in recommender functions, delivering different content to males and females. In this sense, social media reinforce and even amplify gender stereotypes.
- The emphasis on popularity and likes that is embedded in the platform affordances and algorithmic politics of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram exert a primarily gender-conservative effect on how users self-present.
- Girls and women are more likely than boys and men to experience negative body image and eating disorders in connection with their social media use.
- Girls and women are more likely to experience sexual and gender-based abuse on social media, including image-based sexual abuse (receiving unsolicited images, being asked to send nudes, having their images shared).
- Female politicians and journalists experience higher rates of online gender-based and sexual abuse and harassment than their male counterparts. Due to self-censorship and the 'chilling effect', attacks on female journalists and politicians exert a negative impact on professional and civic participation.
- The mainstreaming and normalisation of male-supremacist misogyny among youth poses a significant and urgent threat to women and girls on social media. In addition to this, girls report that easy access to violent pornography is impacting boys' understandings and expectations of sex.

- Social media can also be used to further the rights of women and girls through large-scale campaigns such as #MeToo and Everyday Sexism.
- The Digital Services Act promises to improve the safety of women and girls on social media platforms. However, the failure to include gender as a sensitive area of personal data represents a failure to adequately address the negative impacts of social media on women and girls. Implementation of the DSA will require strong monitoring and evaluation to ensure that it effectively tackles issues of gendered harm.

Key recommendations

- Conduct a gender based harm focused review of the Digital Services Act after a 12 month period to ensure that it is functioning as intended and that social media companies are complying with their obligations in relation to access to data and algorithmic transparency.
- Complete the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and adopt the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence.
- Stricter content moderation and harsher sanctions by the social companies for instances of abuse, harassment and hate speech.
- Greater regulation of social media advertising, including the expansion of the Digital Services Act to include gender in restriction of targeted advertising.
- The development of campaigns, interventions and policies which encourage a shared vocabulary that would help social media users to identify acts of gender-based violence or abuse.
- The development of campaigns, interventions and policies which encourage social media literacy, by educating women and girls about unhealthy norms, image manipulation, and social media incentives.
- Encourage technological and social innovation at an EU level to develop state of the art approaches to challenging gender norms and reducing online gendered harm.
- Member States should review their educational curriculum to ensure that boys and girls receive relatable, evidence-based education around social media literacy, digital consent and digital ethics, image based sexual abuse, online gender-based violence and gender norms.

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External Authors:	Kirsty PARK, Debbie GING, Shane MURPHY, Cian MCGRATH, Ina SOKOLSKA	Dublin City University Dublin City University Dublin City University Dublin City University Dublin City University
Research Administrator responsible:	Ewelina MIAZGA	
Editorial assistant:		
Contact:	poldep-citizens@europarl.europa.eu	

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