
Violence against women online: "Freedom of speech ends where threats abound"

Women often face harassment online, ranging from insults to threats of rape or physical violence. Various measures to tackle this and to encourage more women to work in the ICT sector are set out in the report "Gender equality and empowering women in the digital age". MEPs debate it on Wednesday 27 April and vote on it the following day. We talked to report author Terry Reintke, a German member of the Greens/EFA group, about how to make internet and the ICT sector more hospitable to women.

Internet has transformed the world, yet anonymity online can foster various forms of violence. What are the dangers and risks that especially women are exposed to?

Violence against women did not start on the internet; it is just a new platform on which violence against women often becomes an ever bigger problem. The virtual world is an expression of a society in which there is a lot of violence against women. Women, especially those who are very active on the internet, may be threatened, stalked or harassed and this can go all the way to real physical violence.

Often there is a criminal law framework which is supposed to prevent this, but not enough steps have been taken yet to adapt it to the digital age. Police and judicial authorities have to be trained better and cooperate more closely on a European level, because the internet simply functions on a cross-border level. Also, it is important that the European Commission supports networks that combat such forms of violence. The internet can also be used as a means to counter violence against women.

Where is the line between freedom of speech and harassment?

Freedom of speech, especially when it concerns expression on the internet, is the absolute foundation of our societal discourse, nonetheless freedom of speech naturally ends where threats abound. It is not freedom of expression to consciously intimidate people on Facebook and Twitter, especially women, insult them, express the wish to rape them or to threaten physical harm. One has to act on this even across borders at the European level.

Your report states that in Europe only 9% of developers and 19% of entrepreneurs in ICT are female. Why are women so underrepresented in this sector and what can be done to increase the proportion of women?

The ICT sector is very male-dominated in Europe, which often has the effect that women do not feel encouraged to become active as an entrepreneur or to apply for jobs. That is not just bad for women, but also for society, because a lot of potential is lost.

With this report, we want to stress that concrete instruments do exist to change that, for instance more targeted investments in this area, especially those that make it possible for women to have access to capital to launch small start-ups.

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[Women's rights committee](#)
[Terry Reintke](#)
[Steps of the procedure](#)



Terry Reintke