

TECHNOLOGY-RELATED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

“More inquiry is needed about the use of technology, such as computers and cell phones, in developing and expanding forms of violence. Evolving and emerging forms of violence need to be named so that they can be recognized and better addressed.”

– UN Secretary General (2006)¹

What is technology-related violence against women?

Technology-related violence against women (tech-related VAW) **encompasses acts of gender-based violence that are committed, abetted or aggravated, in part or fully, by the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs)**, such as phones, the internet, social media platforms, and email.

Just as women face risks offline, in the streets and in homes, women and girls can face specific dangers and risks on the internet such as **online harassment, cyber stalking, privacy invasions with the threat of blackmail, viral ‘rape videos’** and for young women in particular, the **distribution of ‘sex videos’** that force survivors to relive the trauma of sexual assault every time it is reposted online, via mobile phone or distributed in other ways.

Can domestic violence be perpetrated through technology?

Like all VAW, much of **tech-related VAW is perpetrated by someone known**. Of 24 case studies collected in APC’s research project, [End violence: Women’s rights and safety online](#)², 14 of the perpetrators were known to the survivors. In most of these cases, the **perpetrator had an intimate relationship with the woman, or belonged to the survivor’s immediate circle**.

In addition, findings from over a thousand cases reported on the [Take Back the Tech! online map](#)³ revealed that the **majority (40%) of cases are perpetrated by someone known to the survivor**.

Is online abuse really “violence”?

Violence against women is often **erroneously interpreted** as encompassing only physical or sexual harm against women. However, relevant international human rights documents, such as the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW) and CEDAW General Recommendation 19, include **psychological or mental harm, as well as threats of harm** under the full definition of VAW⁴.

A 2003 UN General Assembly resolution on the elimination of domestic violence against women also recognized that **“domestic violence can take many different forms, including physical, psychological and sexual violence”**⁵.

How is non-physical violence harmful?

Analysis of cases from APC’s Take Back the Tech! mapping project showed that the harms resulting from technology-related VAW include **emotional or psychological harm, harm to reputation, physical harm, sexual harm, invasion of privacy, loss of identity, limitation of mobility, censorship, and loss of property**.

¹ [A/61/122/Add.1](#), para.155

² Between April 2013 and June 2014, APC carried out a multi-country research project titled [End violence: Women’s rights and safety online](#). The project explored the adequacy and effectiveness of domestic legal remedies and corporate policies and redress mechanisms to address the issue of technology-related violence against women (tech-related VAW).

³ Between 2012 and 2014, APC hosted a [mapping project](#) which recorded around 2000 incidents of tech-related violence against women.

⁴ [www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm](#); CEDAW General Comment 19 (1992), para.6

⁵ [A/RES/58/147](#), para.1 (c) and (d)

Other cases have shown that **technology-related VAW can result in a violation of the right to life**. For example, a case of spousal abuse resulting in a woman being fatally stabbed by her husband, submitted to CEDAW, included reference of **threats and harassment made by the perpetrator to the victim by telephone**⁶. Various cases covered by the media have shown incidences of online violence and harassment leading to the victim **committing suicide**⁷.

Do the same rights apply online as offline?

Since 2009, the UN has adopted **several resolutions**⁸ referencing the effect of the internet on rights, including the HRC consensus resolution on "The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet" which affirmed that **the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online**⁹ and, most recently, the HRC consensus resolution on "The right to privacy in the digital age"¹⁰.

Has the UN recognized technology-related VAW?

Over the last few years, **UN human rights experts as well as intergovernmental bodies** have begun to address the issue of technology-related violence against women.

In March 2013 the **Commission on the Status of Women's agreed conclusions** on violence against women and girls urged governments and relevant stakeholders to "**develop mechanisms to combat the use of ICT and social media to perpetrate violence against women and girls**"¹¹.

In mid-2013, the **UN Working Group on discrimination against women in law and practice** included specific reference to the internet as "a site of **diverse forms of violence against women**".¹²

At the end of 2013, the UN General Assembly adopted a **consensus resolution on protecting women human rights defenders**, which acknowledged that:

"... **information-technology-related violations, abuses and violence against women** [...] such as online harassment, cyberstalking, violation of privacy, censorship and hacking of e-mail accounts, mobile phones and other electronic devices [...] **are a growing concern and a manifestation of systemic gender-based discrimination, requiring effective responses compliant with human rights**"¹³.

The **UN Special Rapporteur on VAW**, in a report to this session of the Human Rights Council expressed concern about the "**risk of threatening and offensive advances on the Internet** [...] including humiliation, harassment, intimidation and "sexting" as a form of bullying [...] and that] boyfriends commonly published, and/or threatened to publish, photographs of consensual sexual activity to **harass and manipulate women and even force them to engage in sexual activity**"¹⁴.

What can the Human Rights Council do?

Under its core mandate, the Council is "responsible for promoting universal protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction of any kind and in a fair and equal manner"¹⁵.

⁶ *Fatma Yildirim (deceased) v. Austria*, communication No. 6/2005, views adopted 6 August 2007, para. 12.1.3

⁷ See <http://nobullying.com/six-unforgettable-cyber-bullying-cases/>

⁸ See for example, [A/HRC/RES/12/16](#) [A/HRC/RES/21/16](#), [A/HRC/RES/23/2](#), [A/HRC/RES/24/5](#), [A/RES/68/163](#), [A/RES/68/167](#), [A/RES/69/166](#)

⁹ [A/HRC/RES/20/8](#)

¹⁰ [A/HRC/RES/28/16](#)

¹¹ [CSW agreed conclusions on the Elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls](#), March 2013, para.34(ww)

¹² [A/HRC/23/50](#), para.66

¹³ [A/RES/68/181](#)

¹⁴ [A/HRC/29/27/Add.2](#), paras.23, 25

¹⁵ [A/RES/60/251](#), OP 2

Technology-related violence against women **should not be a politically sensitive issue**. It is an issue that is **affecting women in all regions of the world**.

In order to effectively combat violence against women, the **Human Rights Council needs to engage with the issue holistically**, including through addressing the **global and pervasive harms resulting from technology-related violence** such as violations of freedom of expression and the right to participate in public life, as well as economic loss and psychological violence.

The Human Rights Council should fulfil its mandate by explicitly including technology-related violence against women in its resolutions, actions and other initiatives on violence against women.

Further information:

<http://www.genderit.org/VAWonline-research>

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