

THE DARK SIDE OF DIGITALIZATION:

Technology-facilitated violence against women in Eastern Europe and Central Asia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

Digital advancements offer significant means for empowering women, granting them greater access to information, fostering connections, and enabling them to champion their rights and interests. Nevertheless, in an environment marked by prevalent gender inequalities and deeply rooted patriarchal views, these same technologies can be weaponized to commit and escalate violence against women (VAW). The rapid evolution of technology and its misuse for gender-based violence against women outpaces the capacity of governments and civil society organizations to effectively respond. This lag in response, coupled with inadequate victim support, has amplified the scope and intensity of technology-facilitated violence against women, contributing to women's reluctance to participate in online spaces and jeopardizing their ability to fully seize the benefits of digitalization.

To shed light on technology-facilitated forms and dimensions of VAW, the UN Women Europe and Central Asia (ECA) Regional Office conducted comprehensive research in 13 countries of the ECA region: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo,¹ Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Montenegro,² North Macedonia, Serbia, Tajikistan, Türkiye, and Ukraine.

With this research, UN Women ECA intended to better understand the types and prevalence of technology-facilitated (TF) VAW in the region and its consequences on women and women's attitudes, experiences and access to services, while at the same time exploring the existing normative and institutional context and role and perspective of relevant stakeholders in providing prevention and support services to survivors of such violence.

¹ References to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

² Montenegro was not included in the web-based survey due to the cost of web-based randomized research in the context of a small population. However, Montenegro was included in the qualitative research, and having in mind similarities in the technology facilitated VAW and more broadly women's situation in the Western Balkan countries, the findings obtained from the web-based survey for neighbouring countries are very much valid for Montenegro as well.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Rigorous ethical standards were applied to data access and storage, as well as presentation of findings.

Research components

1. Mapping of relevant normative and policy frameworks at global, regional and national levels

Aim: To provide basic insights into processes focused on the development of legal and policy frameworks and inclusion of technology-facilitated violence in key conventions, laws and strategies/action plans at global, regional, and national levels. Over 50 legal and policy documents were reviewed directly, and not through secondary sources.

2. Large scale web-based survey with the participation of over 12,000 women across the region

Aim: To assess the prevalence, characteristics, consequences and support services related to TF VAW. From January-June 2023, at least 1,000 women (aged 18+) were surveyed in each country. National samples are not representative of national populations but rather the population of women present online, which on average is younger, more urban and with higher education.

3. Qualitative research with governmental and non-governmental stakeholders

Aim: To delve deeper into stakeholders' awareness, understanding, capacities, challenges and experiences related to handling cases of TF VAW. Over 80 stakeholders across the region participated in interviews and focus group discussions. Research captured perspectives of governmental gender equality mechanisms, human rights oversight institutions, police (including cybercrime police), CSOs, activists, gender experts and women with experience of TF VAW.

CONCEPTUAL APPROACH AND DEFINITION

The conceptual framework adopted for the purpose of this research, including the definition of technology-facilitated VAW, were informed by the ongoing discussion coordinated by UN Women and the WHO.³ Per this discussion, TF VAW is understood as an expression of gender-based violence and discrimination that exists online and offline. Offline and technology-facilitated VAW are not separate forms, but rather could be understood as a continuum in which some forms occur only offline, some occur only through the use of digital technologies, and many include both offline and technology-facilitated components. Regardless, the risk factors, consequences and underlying causes – such as structural gender inequalities, misogyny and unequal power between women and men – remain the same. Violence and fear of violence can lead to self-censorship and the withdrawal of women, restricting their access to the internet and technologies which are of crucial importance for many aspects of social inclusion and participation, including in education, employment, politics and social life.

Technology-facilitated violence against women is 'any act that is committed, assisted, aggravated or amplified by the use of ICTs or other digital tools, that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological, social, political or economic harm, or other infringements of rights and freedoms.'

Expert Group Meeting report
Technology-facilitated violence against women:
Towards a common definition (2023)

Operational definition of TF VAW. To adequately measure experiences of technology facilitated violence in the web-based survey, the questionnaire utilized act-based definitions. It provided a list of acts of TF VAW from which respondents could select, allowing for multiple responses. The questionnaire also included an "other" option for respondents who felt the list wasn't comprehensive and wanted to report an act of violence not mentioned, as well as a "none of the above" option for those who had not experienced TF VAW. Those who selected any of the listed acts were categorized as women who have experienced technology-facilitated violence.

³ UN Women, WHO, Technology-facilitated Violence against Women: Towards a common definition. Report of the meeting of the Expert Group 15-16 November 2022, New York, USA, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/Expert-Group-Meeting-report-Technology-facilitated-violence-against-women-en.pdf>

KEY FINDINGS ON NORMATIVE AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

International, regional and national actors are still in the early stages of addressing technology-facilitated violence against women (TF VAW), and the countries included in this research are no exception.

Global processes have intensified during the last several years, driven by the concurrent processes undertaken by the UN General Assembly, Secretary General, UNSRVAW and Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which have been supported by the work of UN Statistical Commission,⁴ WHO and UN Women. These processes advance the development of a common understanding to enable further progress regarding legal frameworks, data collection, research and statistics and other initiatives. Gender mainstreaming of the International Convention on Countering the Use of Information and Communications Technologies for Criminal Purposes adds to the number of ongoing processes related to developing legal instruments to prevent and combat TF VAW.

European regional processes are marked by various initiatives of the Council of Europe and EU. One of the crucial milestones is the effort to reaffirm the Istanbul Convention and its relevance for TF VAW in GREVIO recommendation No. 1.

As with most countries worldwide, countries in the ECA region do not have adequate legal and policy frameworks to address TF VAW. This mapping exercise showed that only in a few cases key laws address TF VAW directly, at least to some extent. The same is found for current gender equality and EVAW policies.

Overview of national legislation and strategies that directly address TF VAW

Country	Criminal code	Specialized law on GE, VAW/DV	Gender Equality Strategy	Specialized VAW/DV strategy
Western Balkans				
Albania	↓	↓	↓	—
BiH – state level	↓	↓	—	—
BiH – FBiH	↓	↓	—	—
BiH – Republika Srpska	↓	↓	—	—
Kosovo	↓	↓	↓	↗
Montenegro	↗	↓	↓	—
North Macedonia	↗	↗	↓	—
Serbia	↗	↓	↓	↗
Türkiye				
Türkiye	↗	↗	↓	↗
Eastern Europe				
Georgia	↗	↓	↓	↓
Moldova	↓	↓	↓	—
Ukraine	↓	↓	—	—
Central Asia				
Kazakhstan	↓	↓	—	—
Kyrgyzstan	↓	↓	↓	—
Tajikistan	↓	↓	↓	↓
Legend				
↑	Law/policy directly addresses TF VAW as defined by UN Women in majority of forms			
↗	Law/policy directly addresses some forms of TF VAW as defined by UN Women			
↓	Law/policy at best only indirectly addresses some forms of TF VAW			
—	There is no such law or strategy			

4 At the 54th Session (2023) of the UN Statistical Commission, the need for methodological work to measure technology – facilitated was recognized: <https://unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/statcom/54>

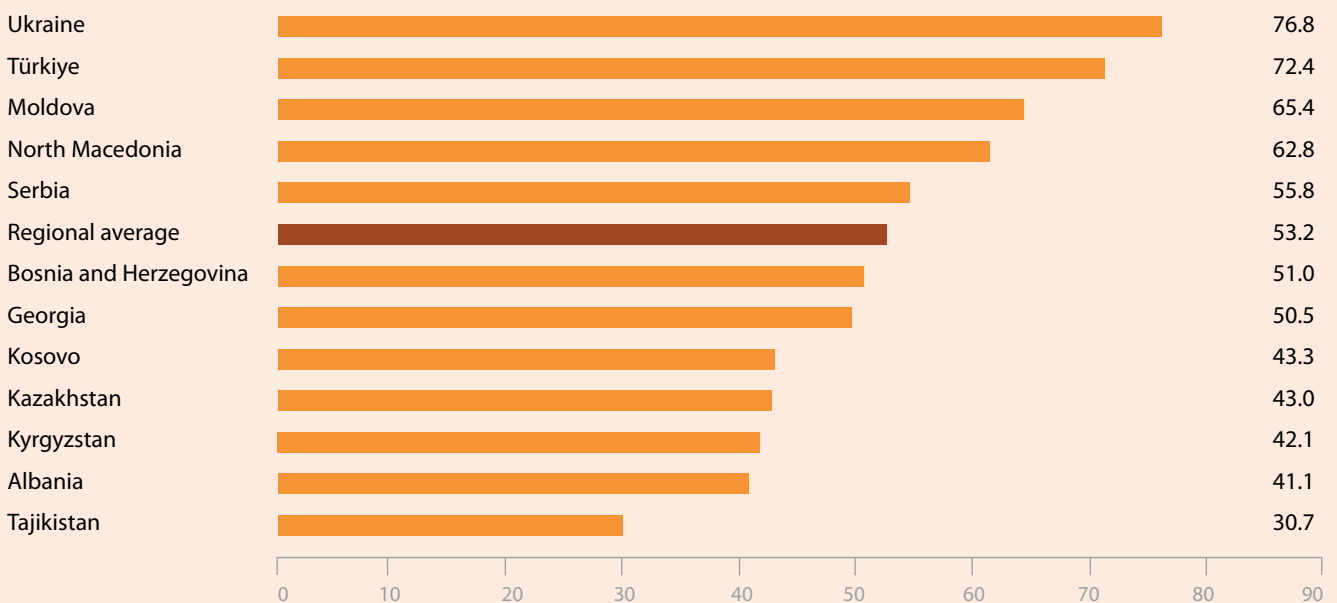
KEY FINDINGS FROM WEB-BASED SURVEY



Prevalence. More than half of women (18+) present online in the region have experienced some form of technology-facilitated violence in their lifetime.

The cross-country differences are significant, with the highest prevalence in Ukraine and lowest in Tajikistan. By subregion, the highest prevalence is in Türkiye and Eastern Partnership countries, while prevalence is lower in the Western Balkans and lowest in Central Asia.

Proportion of women who experienced at least one form of technology-facilitated violence, regional average and by country (%) (N=12,526)



Forms of violence. Among women who had experienced TF VAW, the most prevalent forms include receiving unwanted or offensive content or messages (39.7%), receiving inappropriate sexual advances or content on social networking (30%) and hacking women's accounts and web pages (25.4%). A large proportion of women experienced TF violence once (40.4%), while one in seven women experiences such violence daily or weekly.



Virtual 'places' of violence. Facebook and Instagram are the platforms most reported by women as places where they experienced violence, as every third woman who experienced technology-facilitated (TF) violence had that experience on one of these two platforms. One in ten women experienced TF VAW on TikTok, e-mail or messaging applications such as Skype, Snapchat, Messenger, Viber or similar. The platforms on which women experienced TF violence differed by country and region, with Western Balkan women having more violent experiences on Facebook than women in other countries, women from Albania and Türkiye pointing more to Instagram, and women from Central Asia pointing more to WhatsApp and Telegram.



Perpetrators. The majority of technology-facilitated VAW is perpetrated by unknown persons (50.3%) or persons known only on the internet (17.5%). However, almost one third (32.1%) of technology-facilitated violence is perpetrated by persons in women's social proximity, such as partners, family members, friends, acquaintances, colleagues, bosses or co-students, and therefore may represent an extension of offline violence. While unknown perpetrators and those only known to women on the internet are more inclined to commit violence in the forms of hacking women's accounts and sharing offensive or other unwanted content or messages, partners are more likely to use threats or controlling acts, while family members combine controlling acts with sexual harassment, and bosses are more linked to acts in the forms of sexual harassment. Although all forms

of violence regardless of perpetrator occur mainly on Facebook and Instagram, there are certain differences between perpetrators related to types of platforms they use in acts of violence: partners more often use Twitter, WhatsApp, and meeting tools; friends and acquaintances more often use Telegram, TikTok, and online gaming platforms; while persons only known to women online more often use Facebook, Instagram and dating platforms.



Risk factors. The risks of TF VAW are not evenly distributed among women with different socio-demographic backgrounds.

- Younger women are at higher risk of TF VAW than older women: the probability of experiencing TF VAW is 4 times higher for women aged 18-24 than for those over age 65.
- Women with education beyond primary level are at higher risk than women with primary school education, and the risk is highest for women with secondary technical training.
- LGBTQI women, women from bigger cities and divorced women also face a higher risk of TF VAW.
- Employment status has no influence on the risk of TF VAW.

Some risk factors are related to online activities and communication-related practices and behaviours:

- Women who spend more time on the internet are at higher risk of being exposed to violence.
- The risk is highest for women participating in online gaming, followed by women who most often use social media messaging applications, such as Snapchat, Viber, Facebook or Instagram, and then women who use Telegram.
- Having a public profile on internet platforms, particularly across multiple sites, and having a larger number of friends and followers also increase the risk of experiencing violence.



Consequences of TF VAW. Two thirds of women subjected to TF VAW reported feeling emotional consequences, unsafety or embarrassment as a result. One in ten women reported that violence damaged their personal social relations with others. The consequences are more prevalent among women who were exposed to repeated violence compared to women with one-off experiences of TF VAW, with the exception of embarrassment, which is more present among women who experienced a single violent incident. Women whose perpetrators were current or former partners were more likely to suffer psychological consequences, while those whose perpetrators were bosses were more likely to feel unsafe, and those whose perpetrators were persons only known on the internet felt more embarrassed.

Women who have experienced any form of technology-facilitated violence feel less safe online. They are also more cautious in digital communication and more often utilize various precautionary measures, such as turning off webcams and location sharing, using different passwords for different accounts, customizing privacy settings on platforms, and only communicating with persons they know offline.

Experiences of violence discourage women from expressing themselves on the internet, and a significant proportion becomes accustomed to violent attacks, potentially leading to increased tolerance for violence and a less proactive approach to combat it.



Reporting and combating TF VAW. After experiencing TF VAW, the majority of women took steps to increase their safety on the internet, such as to block, mute or unfriend the person who caused harm (36.6%). Women rarely report cases of violence to the police (7.1%) or other institutions (4.5% to human rights institution, 2.6% to educational facility), and even less so to non-governmental organizations (2.5%); less than half of women reported their experience to friends or family (43.8%). The reasons for not reporting are the belief that nothing will be done, lack of trust in institutions, fear that confidentiality will not be respected and fear that they will be blamed for the experience.

Women who asked for support from their partner, family or friends often received support. A high proportion of all women participating in the survey (70.4%) would like stronger accountability and responsibility from companies that own internet platforms and apps, more effective protection from institutions (66.5%), and more awareness raising in order to empower women to prevent, report or counter TF VAW (69.7%).

KEY FINDINGS FROM QUALITATIVE RESEARCH



Governmental stakeholders. There is a consensus among interviewed representatives of governmental gender equality mechanisms and institutions engaged in response to violence against women – e.g., police (including cybercrime police), judiciary, social protection – that technology-facilitated violence against women has increased in frequency and intensity since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, they are aware of their limited capacities to adequately respond to these new trends, and they have proposed ways to further improve legislation, policies, measures, instruments, and practices in response to TF VAW. A systematic lack of statistical data and administrative evidence on TF VAW was noted across the countries.

Multisectoral mechanisms are established to varying extents in the countries of the region, but they are often ineffective even for offline dimensions of VAW, for which they are mainly responsible. Meanwhile, TF VAW is mostly under the responsibility of cybercrime police. However, according to testimonies, cybercrime police are not sufficiently equipped to effectively address the growing issue of TF violence against women, are often more focused on TF violence against children, and are not integrated into multisectoral cooperation mechanisms.

Cooperation with the internet platforms on which violence occurs and between stakeholders in the region or in the broader international community is crucial, as TF VAW has no borders. However, qualitative research reveals that cooperation is limited and that there are still obstacles in identifying perpetrators and processing cases in cross-border situations.



Civil society perceptions and response. Similar to governmental stakeholders, civil society organizations, whether they are direct service providers, advocacy-oriented activists in the area of women's rights, or gender equality experts, are much more engaged in the 'traditional' areas of gender-based violence and VAW. Only a few are particularly focused on technology-facilitated violence. During focus group discussions and interviews, they often emphasized that technology-facilitated dimensions of violence are increasingly present in their work. They also described various forms of technology-facilitated violence they face in their work and highlighted categories of women who are at higher risk of being exposed to such violence. This includes women in divorce procedures, women in public positions (e.g., politicians, journalists, activists), women from ethnic minorities, young women, women in rural areas, women living with disabilities, LGBTQI women, women with HIV, and women affected by earthquakes or war (such as refugees, IDPs, and victims of conflict-related sexual violence).

Research found very innovative approaches among CSOs that specialize in addressing TF VAW. Unfortunately, there aren't many such organizations. The majority of organizations lack knowledge and skills to engage with TF VAW, even when it comes to adequately addressing technology-facilitated dimensions of cases of domestic and partner violence, which are often a focus of their work. Regarding the main challenges in addressing TF VAW, organizations reported inadequate legal frameworks, lack of awareness and underreporting, problems in referrals and cooperation with public service providers, the weak role of the education sector in preventing and screening for TF violence among children and young people, difficulties related to cross-border cases, and a lack of knowledge and tools. As one of the conclusions, participants emphasized the need to create new alliances with IT organizations in order to develop new capacities and approaches in preventing and combating TF VAW. Some innovative solutions were uncovered during the research which can be used as good practices that can be further replicated or inspire other organizations to transform their practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings and proposals of governmental and non-governmental stakeholders participating in the qualitative survey, as well as the suggestions and recommendations provided by UN Women offices and members of the Technical Advisory Board, sets of recommendations are proposed for relevant stakeholders.



Improving legal and policy instruments

In consultation with relevant stakeholders, including victims of TF VAW and women's organizations, **state actors** should develop, amend and expand legislation and policies to address digital dimensions of VAW, strengthen their implementation, and fast-track processes to prevent, eliminate and respond to TF VAW. Laws and policies should also ensure the responsibility of perpetrators, including in the case of transborder acts of violence, and accountability of the technology sector, including through a firmer control over digital and communication technologies and online media to prevent and address TF VAW, hate speech, gender stereotypes, and sexual abuse.

International and regional organizations should advance and promote international and regional frameworks on TF VAW, produce guidance on states' alignment with such frameworks, and ensure that relevant frameworks under preparation are gender-sensitive and sufficiently address TF VAW. Furthermore, EU institutions should leverage EU accession processes to encourage and support EU candidates and potential candidate countries to align national legislation with the EU legal framework related to TF VAW.

The technology sector, including social media, online gaming and IT companies, should closely monitor the development of the international and national legal frameworks for protection from TF VAW and align their 'community guidelines' to international norms.



Improving multistakeholder coordination on TF VAW

At national level, all stakeholders must strengthen their cooperation and coordination in order to achieve a robust multisectoral approach to prevent and respond to TF VAW.

At international level, all stakeholders, with an emphasis on **state actors**, should ensure more effective cooperation among national police forces and allow victims to report violence to the police in their own countries rather than in perpetrators' countries. All stakeholders should also engage in regional and bilateral knowledge exchanges to learn from other countries and establish more coordinated efforts.

International coalitions and networks such as the multistakeholder Generation Equality Action Coalitions on Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality and on Gender-Based Violence which share TF VAW as a common priority and the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse can leverage their commitments and goals to accelerate progress towards ending TF VAW and engaging more state and non-state partners to participate in these global efforts.



Conducting whole-of-society prevention strategies

All stakeholders, state and non-state, should raise awareness among relevant professionals on the magnitude, manifestations and consequences of TF VAW, as well as encourage a more proactive role of the education system in raising student and teacher awareness on TF VAW. Digital literacy and knowledge should be advanced among the general population to improve personal security while using digital and communication technologies, also reflected in national gender equality policies and programmes. Finally, men and boys should be educated on the forms, dimensions, severity and consequences of TF VAW, with a particular focus on the forms and dimensions that may already be normalized or are at risk of being normalized, as well as more generally on equitable masculinities and non-violent communication.

The **technology sector** has an important role to play, by its outreach, to contribute to prevention efforts to change social norms and attitudes and should develop educational resources to raise awareness on TF VAW and the importance of nonviolent and safe communication and use of technologies.

Media outlets should improve their awareness and understanding of TF VAW, and journalistic standards and codes should be revised to include ethical considerations related to TF VAW. Further, the media should raise awareness about TF VAW and accurately report on cases of TF VAW rather than minimizing or romanticizing the actions and their impact on victims.



Improving multistakeholder response to TF VAW

State actors should ensure that general and specialized services address TF VAW and meet the needs of particularly vulnerable women. In countries where cybercrime police are mandated with investigating TF VAW, they should be more systematically integrated into multisectoral mechanisms, and their roles in responding to TF VAW should be defined more clearly in bylaws or protocols. Specific protection mechanisms should be developed to protect women in the public eye as they are more often exposed to TF VAW.

Civil society organizations should expand their services to cover dimensions and forms of TF VAW as well as strengthen cooperation and coordination among CSOs to more effectively and cohesively counter TF VAW.

The technology sector should proactively, promptly and effectively monitor and remove hate speech, sexist and misogynistic content and incidents of TF VAW, including by improving response to platform-based reporting mechanisms. They should also enhance their cooperation with law enforcement to improve response time to cases of TF VAW and more rapidly lock or remove offenders' accounts.



Empowering CSOs and women's rights organizations

State actors, as well as **international and regional organizations**, should support CSOs to strengthen their capacities to fully understand and provide services for TF VAW, as well as include CSOs as key partners in the development of programmes, policies and legislation related to TF VAW. They should also ensure sustainable funding for CSO services providers, outside of project-based funding.



Improving data and evidence

International and regional organizations are well positioned to lead the way on improving data collection on TF VAW, particularly through the development of global standards and guidance on the collection of data on TF VAW. Further, statistical surveys on VAW should encompass technology-facilitated dimensions. In the European region, learnings from methodologies to collect survey and administrative data on TF VAW developed by Eurostat, EIGE and FRA should feed and inform further regional and global methodological developments in this area.

State actors should also strengthen and better coordinate administrative data systems on TF VAW, and administrative data reports should be regularly shared and should clearly present (anonymized) findings. State actors should also fund and produce research on TF VAW to serve as an evidence base for designing campaigns to counter it. Finally, states should monitor the proportion of funds from public budgets or international aid allocated to prevention and response to TF VAW to ensure sufficient allocation.

Civil society organizations that provide services to victims of VAW should develop and improve their internal collection of administrative service data to screen for and document incidents of TF VAW.