

THE DARK SIDE OF DIGITALIZATION: Technology-facilitated violence against women in Eastern Europe and Central Asia



POLICY BRIEF

1. BACKGROUND

Technology and digitalization expand women's opportunities to access information, knowledge and services; to connect with others; and to pursue their interests and advocate for their rights, among other benefits. However, in a context of rampant gender-based violence against women grounded in structural gender-based inequalities and widespread patriarchal norms, technology also provides powerful tools for perpetrators to commit and intensify violence against women.

In line with UN Women's commitment to end violence against women, as emphasized in the Strategic plan 2021-2025, the UN Women Europe and Central Asia (ECA) Office has implemented comprehensive research on technology facilitated violence against women (TF VAW) in 13 countries of the ECA region: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo¹, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Montenegro², North Macedonia, Serbia, Tajikistan, Türkiye, and Ukraine.

2. PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

With this research, UN Women ECA intended to better understand the types and prevalence of 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.

The importance of this research is multi-fold:

- It provides insights in an area of VAW where there are still critical data gaps.
- It examines how various key stakeholders perceive technology-facilitated VAW, how they work with or around them, and their roles and capacities to address them adequately.
- It offers recommendations for global, regional and national processes aiming at improving legislation, policies and institutional responses toward more effective prevention and protection from TF VAW.

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.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research involved several components:

- **Desk review of relevant documents and existing research on TF VAW** – A desk review was conducted during the preparatory stage of the research to conceptualize and design the methodology as well as to collect insights from existing literature and research on TF VAW conducted by UN Women, academia and other research organizations.
- **Mapping of normative and policy framework relevant for TF VAW** – The mapping was designed as a ‘light mapping’ and provides basic insights into processes focused on the development of legal and policy frameworks and the recognition and inclusion of online and technology facilitated violence in key conventions, laws and strategies/action plans at global, regional, and national levels.
- **Large scale web-based survey** – A web-based survey was conducted from January to June 2023 by the independent research agency RIWI. The sample included 12,527 women aged 18 years and above, with at least 1,000 from each participating country.
- **Qualitative research** – Qualitative research was informed by the preliminary findings of the web-based survey. It was conducted with various stakeholders across all the 13 countries included in the research. The objective of this research component was to delve deeper into awareness and understanding, experiences related to handling cases of TF VAW, capacities, and challenges in addressing TF VAW in each country through targeted focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews.

4. KEY FINDINGS

✓ 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, and contribute to advance the development of a common understanding to enable further progress regarding legal frameworks, data collection, research and statistics and other initiatives.

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 an adequate legal and policy framework to address TF VAW.



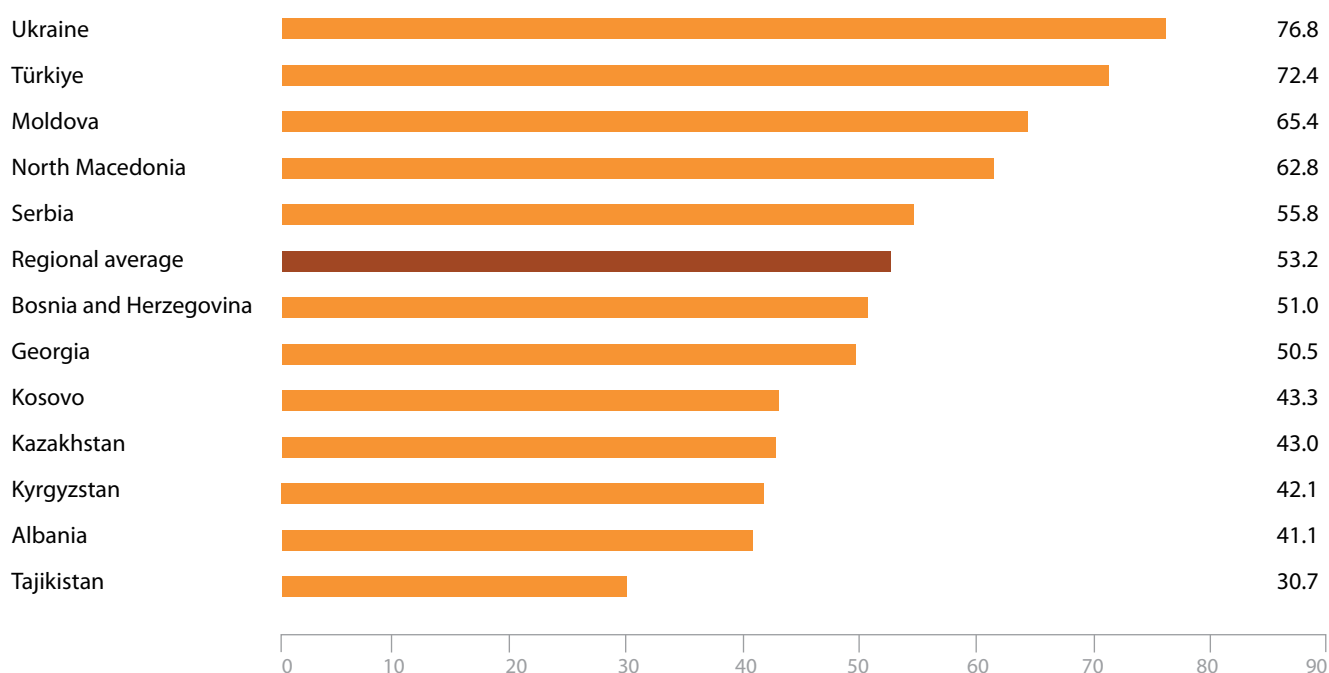
✓ WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES WITH TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED VIOLENCE

Prevalence of technology-facilitated violence against women

More than half of women present online in the region (53%) have experienced some form of technology-facilitated violence at least once.

The cross-country differences are significant, with the highest prevalence rate 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.

Figure 1: Proportion of women who experienced at least one form of technology-facilitated violence, regional average and by country (%) (N=12,526)



Source: UN Women ECA regional survey 2023

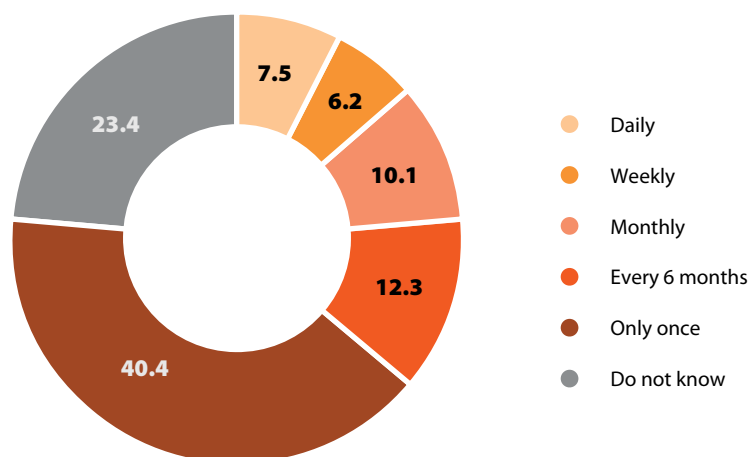
Forms and frequency of technology-facilitated violence against women

The most prevalent forms of online and TF violence include receiving unwanted or offensive content or messages, receiving inappropriate sexual advances or content on social networking and hacking women's accounts and web pages. The highest proportion of women experienced one single form of online and TF violence, but one woman in four experienced multiple forms (three or more).

A large proportion of women experienced TF violence once (40.4%), while one in seven women experiences such violence daily or weekly.

There are remarkable differences between countries and subregions, with women in Türkiye being exposed in the highest proportion to repeated experiences of violence compared to women in other countries.

Figure 2: Women who experienced at least one form of technology facilitated VAW, by frequency of violent acts (%) (N= 6662)



Source: UN Women ECA regional survey 2023

The '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.

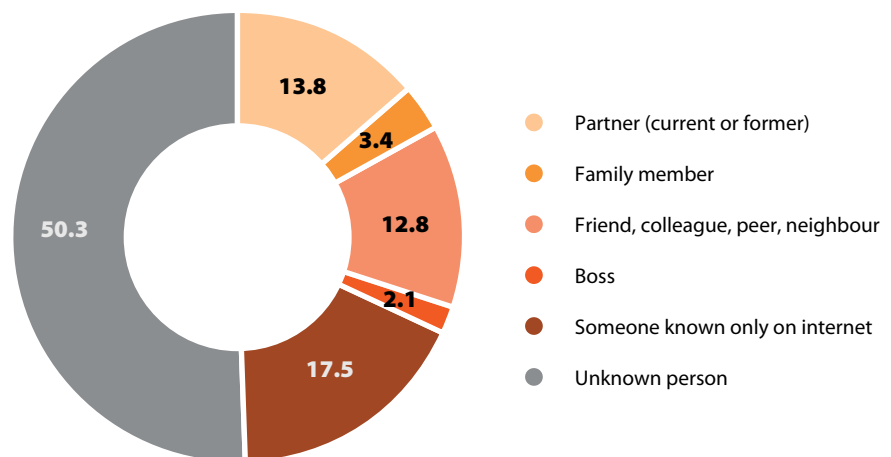
The platforms on which women experienced TF violence differed by country and region, with Western Balkan women having more violent experiences on Facebook than women in other countries, women from Albania and Türkiye pointing more to Instagram, and women from Central Asia pointing more than other women to WhatsApp and Telegram.

Perpetrators

The majority of technology-facilitated violence 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.

Figure 3: Perpetrators of technology-facilitated violence against women (in case of multiple experiences, the most recent) (%) (N= 6657)



Source: UN Women ECA regional survey 2023

✓ RISK FACTORS

Socio-demographic characteristics of women

The risks of TF VAW are not evenly distributed among women with different socio-demographic backgrounds, with younger women at higher risk of TF VAW than older women and women with secondary technical training are at highest risk of being exposed to TF VAW. LGBTQI women, women from bigger cities and divorced women also face higher risk of TF VAW.

Risk factors related to digital communication

Women who spend more time on the internet are at higher risk of being exposed to violence. The highest risks are found among women participating in online gaming, followed by women who most often use social media messaging, such as Snapchat, Viber, Facebook or Instagram, and then women who use Telegram. Possession of a public profile on internet platforms, particularly more than one, and a larger number of friends and followers increase also the risk of violence.

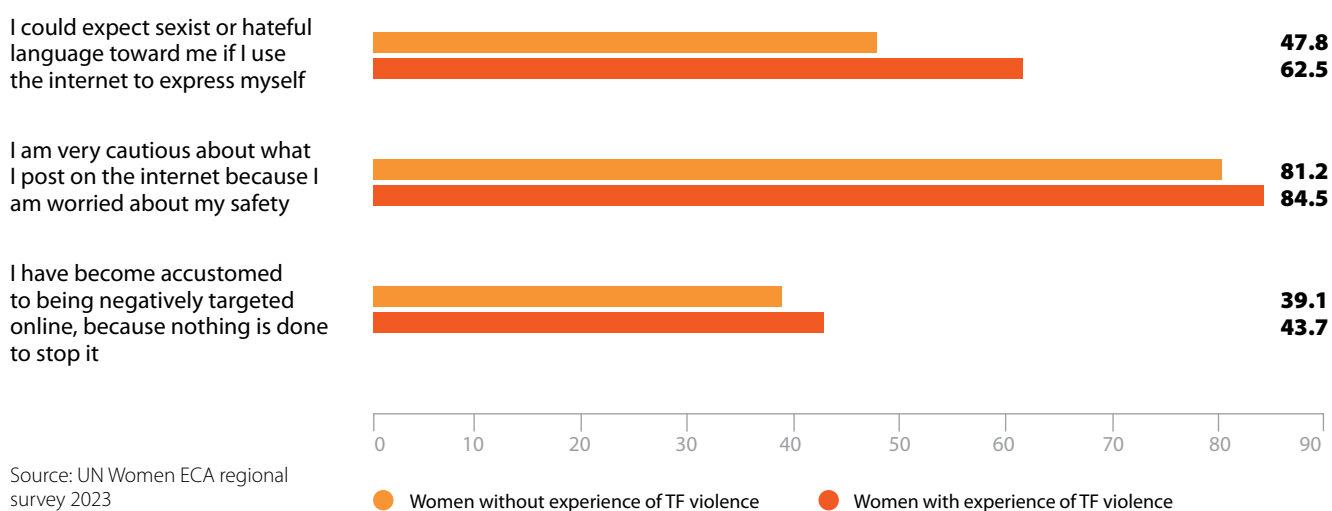
CONSEQUENCES OF TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

TF VAW has notable consequences for women's psychological wellbeing, as two thirds of women with experience of TF VAW reported some emotional symptoms, feelings of unsafety or embarrassment because of the exposure to TF VAW. 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 experience of TF VAW, except for embarrassment, which is more present among women who experienced a single violent accident.

Women who have experienced forms of technology-facilitated violence feel more unsafe online. They are also more cautious in digital communication and more often utilize various precautionary measures, such as turning off webcams and location sharing 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.

Figure 4: Women's attitudes towards technology-facilitated VAW, by experience of technology-facilitated VAW (% of agree and strongly agree answers) (N = 12526)



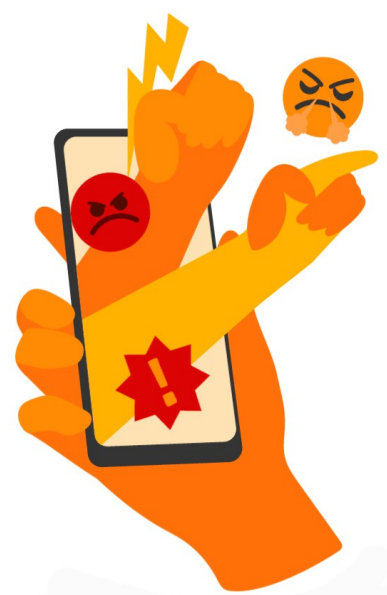
REPORTING AND COMBATING TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

After experiencing TF VAW, the majority of women took some steps to increase their safety on the internet, such as to block, mute or unfriend the person who caused harm.

Women rarely report cases of violence to the police or other institutions. 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 women would like stronger accountability and responsibility from companies that own internet platforms and apps, more effective protection from institutions, and more awareness raising in order to empower women to prevent, report or counter TF VAW.



5. RECOMMENDATIONS



IMPROVING LEGAL AND POLICY INSTRUMENTS

State actors can take a number of steps to improve legal and policy instruments, also guided by the agreed conclusions of the 67th session of the Commission on the Status of Women and processes to harmonize national legislation with the EU legal framework on TF VAW, particularly by developing, amending and/or expanding EAW legislation and policies as per global and regional standards to cover the digital dimensions of VAW and strengthen their implementation including through victim-informed responses and fast-track processes to prevent, eliminate and respond to all forms and dimensions of TF VAWG. Strategies for preventing and combating TF VAW should be gender and age responsive, including to specifically address sexual exploitation and abuse of girls in digital contexts. 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 also play an important role in accelerating the improvement of legal and policy instruments, particularly in advancing and promoting international and regional frameworks on TF VAW, producing guidance on states' alignment with such frameworks, and ensuring that relevant frameworks under preparation. 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**, including state and civil society actors as well as technology companies, must strengthen their cooperation and coordination to prevent and respond to TF VAW.

At **international level, all stakeholders**, with an emphasis on **state actors**, should enact, support and advocate for the following:

- Effective cooperation among national police forces. This collaboration should allow victims to report violence to the police in their own countries rather than in perpetrators' countries.
- Exchanges of knowledge and learning from countries with more advanced systems for addressing TF VAW.
- Regional exchange between gender equality mechanisms can contribute to more coordinated efforts to improve cross border cooperation in cases of TF VAW that include perpetrators and victims from different countries.



CONDUCTING WHOLE-OF-SOCIETY PREVENTION STRATEGIES

All stakeholders, state and non-state, should:

- Raise awareness among all professionals, including the police, prosecution, judiciary, social protection, and education sectors about the magnitude, manifestations, consequences of TF VAW, so they can understand that TF VAW requires equal attention as other dimensions and forms of VAW;
- Encourage a more proactive role of the education system in raising awareness among students and teachers about TF VAW.
- Prioritize digital literacy and knowledge on the nature and forms of TF VAW and how to protect personal security while using digital and communication technologies, also reflected in national gender equality policies and programmes;

- Educate men and boys 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 also play a role in shaping public opinion and perception of TF VAW. Journalists and members of the media 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. 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 MULTISECTORAL RESPONSE TO TF VAW

State actors should consider several recommendations to strengthen the multisectoral response to TF VAW:

- Specialized and generalized services should address TF VAW. This necessitates the revision of protocols for multisectoral cooperation and the development of capacities for professionals from all sectors involved in EAW;
- 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;
- Response services and interventions focused on protection of women and girls from gender-based violence should include women and girls in their design, apply a victim centered approach and be accompanied by guidelines for data protection, with a focus on meeting the needs of particularly vulnerable women, such as women living in rural and remote areas, women with disabilities, women affected by conflict, refugee and displaced women, women from minority groups;
- Specific protection mechanisms should be developed to protect women in the public eye, including women activists and civil society actors engaged in support services to VAW survivors as they are more often exposed to TF VAW. Their protection is crucial for creating a safe and enabling environment in which they can provide support to women and contribute to their empowerment.

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, as this has far-reaching consequences that victimize the broader community in addition to the direct victims. 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 empower CSOs and women's rights organizations to effectively address TF VAW:

- Support CSOs to strengthen their capacities to fully understand and provide services related to TF VAW;
- Include CSOs as key partners in the development of programmes, policies and legislation related to TF VAW;
- Ensure sustainable funding for CSOs service 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:

- Global standards and guidance are needed on the collection of data on TF VAW. The work of the UN Statistical Commission, supported by UN Women and its sister agencies, and in consultation with National Statistics Offices and other relevant stakeholders, should in the coming years offer tools to do so, that are responsive to regional and sub-regional specificities;
- 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 expand their practices:

- Administrative data systems on VAW should be strengthened, better coordinated and include dimensions related to TF VAW. Administrative data reports should be regularly shared and should clearly present (anonymized) findings;
- Fund and produce research on TF VAW that not only covers interpersonal violence but also sexist, misogynistic hate speech on social media, providing an evidence base for designing campaigns that counter such behaviour;
- Monitor the proportion of funds from public budgets or international aid allocated to prevention and combating VAW, specifically TF forms and dimensions.

Finally, **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.

