

Online Sexual exploitation of Venezuelan women and girls

Mulier

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Online Sexual exploitation of Venezuelan women and girls. Modalities and stigma

Sexual exploitation results from the abuse of conditions of unequal power, threats, coercion, force or trust to compel a person to perform actions of a sexual nature with the objective of making a profit or obtaining a personal benefit. This crime has women as its most frequent victims and is also the most common destination for trafficked women and girls.

In contexts of human mobility, as is the case of Venezuela as a result of the Complex Humanitarian Emergency, women have also become more vulnerable to sexual exploitation due to factors such as xenophobia, lack of regular migration status, hypersexualization and prejudices related to stereotypes about their bodies and their perceived sexuality.

Since the start of our media monitoring of information on Venezuelan women rescued from trafficking networks in 2019, we have found an increasing number of reports of sexual exploitation where messaging apps and social media have played a key role in the recruitment or exploitation of victims.

Online Sexual exploitation implies the use of a technological device or digital platform to share, send, produce, offer, store, or disseminate videos, photos, conversations or any other type of material with sexual content, without the consent of any of the people involved. There are different ways in which sexual exploitation can be carried out online: sexual abuse through the production of images or videos through the use of technologies; the transmission, distribution, possession or advertising of photographs or videos with explicit content without the consent of their protagonists; interactions through technological tools in which the victim is subjected to sexual harassment, coercion or intimidation for the production, making or sending of sexual content; trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation where girls are advertised on websites or forced to engage in acts of a sexual nature on digital platforms.



Hunting and fishing



With the help of the internet, traffickers have learned to adapt their strategies to effectively target specific victims, by actively ‘hunting’ those who they deem as vulnerable to falling victim to trafficking, or passively ‘fishing’ for potential victims by posting advertisements and waiting for potential victims to respond.



*UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons (2020)*¹



With the onset of the pandemic and afterward, digital platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp became the typical channel for the distribution of fraudulent job offers used by exploiters to recruit new victims for sexual purposes. The Internet has also boosted the practice of grooming, which consists of deliberate actions or behaviors by an adult to earn the trust, friendship and even love of their victims with the purpose of sexually exploiting them.

There are no specific characteristics to easily identify people that engage in online sexual exploitation, as they can belong to any social class, academic level, skin color, or gender. This makes prevention efforts valuable in disseminating information about these forms of exploitation that allow women and girls to remain alert to any signs they consider suspicious or make them feel distrustful.

¹ UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons (2020), https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTiP_2020_Chapter5.pdf

Webcam modeling and explicit content production: Opportunity or exploitation?

Previous reports and public presentations by Mulier have discussed webcam modeling from a perspective that recognizes it as an opportunity for economic stability for those who do it voluntarily, especially in Venezuela's economic context, even though we do not underestimate the fact that this activity may facilitate trafficking for sexual exploitation. Webcam modeling consists of performing acts of a sexual nature that combine desire and fantasy in front of a webcam. In this activity, models develop connections with their clients from which they build a base of followers. They develop a personal style and approach and can also set their own limits.

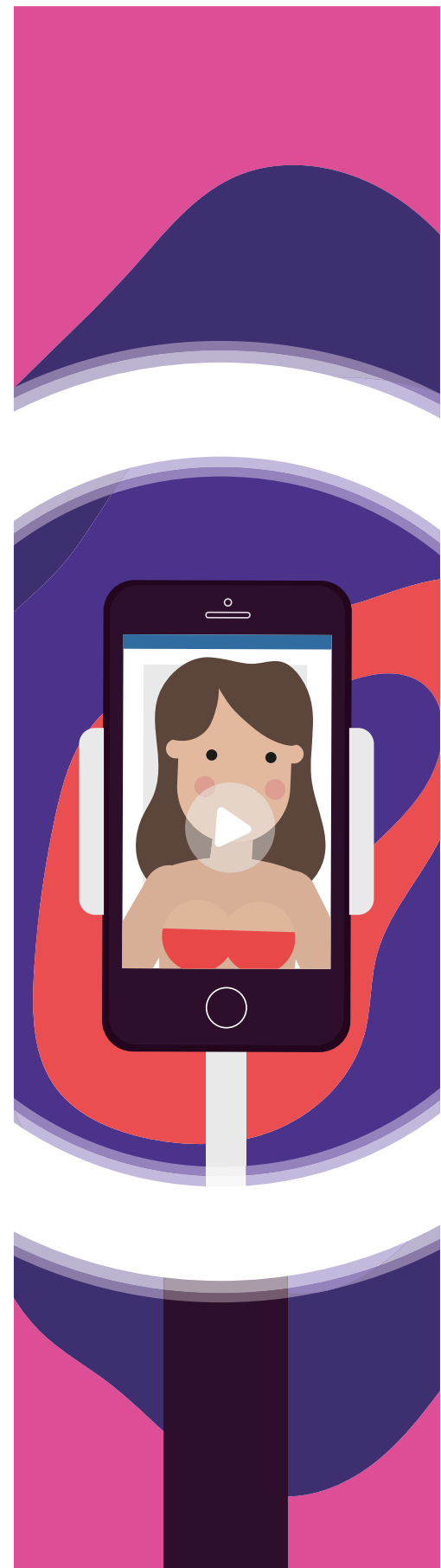
Under this description, this activity, considered legal in Colombia, allows models to achieve a significant degree of sexual and labor freedom in which they can choose their working hours and the type of content they want to produce. That is one side of the coin.

Streaming vs. Content Creation

Streaming

There are different ways of selling explicit content on the web. Webcam modeling is a business that has been around for more than 15 years. Traditionally, webcam models would connect to websites to broadcast or stream their shows. They would plan the impersonation and fantasy they wanted to show and perform them in front of the screen for several hours to connect with users online in real time and stimulate the exchange of tokens as payments for specific shows.

Models can either work on their own on one of these streaming sites or join a webcam studio. The studio facilitates the activity by providing a place with a good internet connection and a website. This usually gua-



rantees the stability of the connection, better quality equipment and a certain flow of traffic (audience) for the shows. This investment by webcam studios means less autonomy and less income for women dedicated to this type of modeling.

Content creation platforms

The main advantage of these platforms is that interaction with users is not in real-time, so models can schedule their content on a daily basis and automate its distribution. Followers subscribe to their channel for a fee and models can charge extra money for sending pay-per-view messages such as photos or videos. One disadvantage is the need for a strong presence on social media to drive traffic or visits to the model's profile.

There are success stories of Venezuelan cisgender and transgender women who have found the need to engage in this practice after migrating. For them, webcam modeling has been a way out of a precarious economic situation and to support themselves and help their families. Venezuelan news site El Diario published the story of Alicia, a webcam model: after migrating to Medellín and losing her job, Alicia decided to try her luck with webcam modeling. She used to receive job offers and watch ads related to the industry on social media, especially Facebook. She first contacted a studio through one of these ads and told the managers that she was from Venezuela and was interested in the offer but lacked experience. She was given an appointment and was hired later. Alicia decided to become independent after working with 4 different studios.



I have time to study now. I never thought I would work in this, in Venezuela I didn't even know it existed but as a webcam model, I have been able to furnish my house and help my family, she told El Diario².



Lilith, 26, a Venezuelan migrant trans woman in Colombia, is also a model of explicit content through an online platform. She explained Crónica Uno³ that this is her way to earn a living without being discriminated against because of her gender identity.

² El Diario (20 de junio de 2021), Historia de una venezolana que trabaja como modelo webcam, <https://eldiario.com/2021/06/20/venezolana-trabaja-como-modelo-webcam-en-colombia/>.

³ Crónica Uno (28 de julio de 2022), Mujeres trans venezolanas se arriesgan a salir del país a pesar de riesgos, <https://cronica.uno/mujeres-trans-venezolanas-son-vulnerables-a-la-explotacion-en-colombia/>.

The other side of the coin

Although the examples above show how some women manage to profit from these platforms, webcam modeling, on the other hand, can serve as a front for trafficking for sexual exploitation.

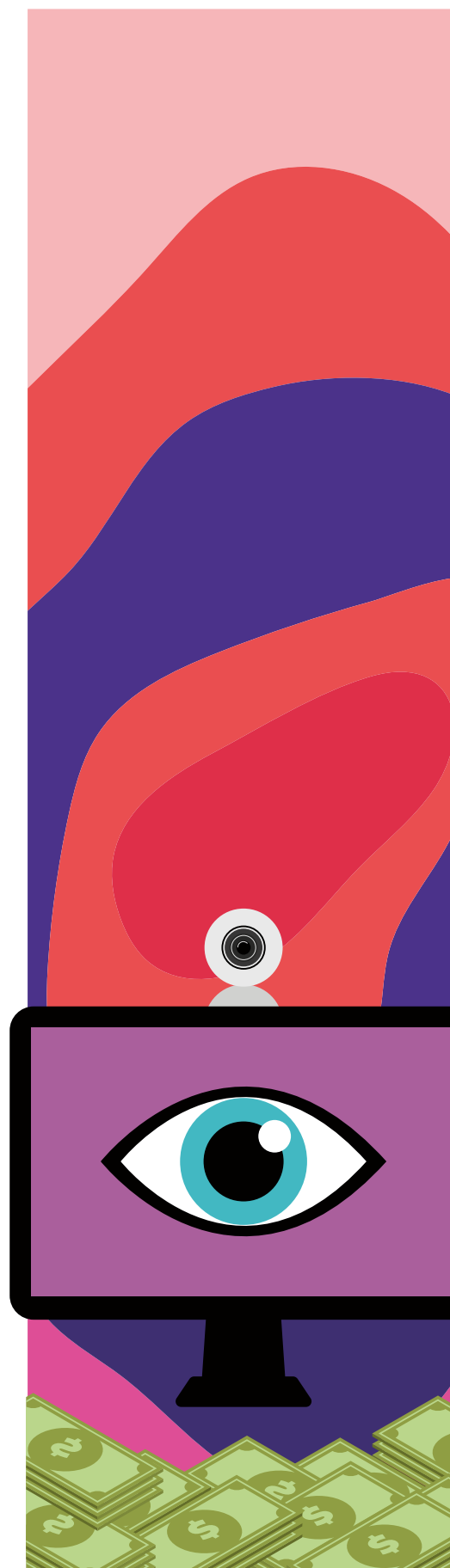
In 2021 Mulier was able to register at least three cases of exploitation of Venezuelan cis and trans women and girls, as well as other people who identify as LGBTIQ+, in webcam studios located in Colombia and Brazil. Some of these studios are managed by Venezuela nationals. The cases of at least 2 cis women, 6 girls and one trans woman were registered in our 2021 monitoring. However, the cases are many more due to underreporting.

In some cases, the victims initially agree voluntarily to a job offer as a webcam model where they are offered a platform and a network of followers for publishing their sexual content in the expectation of good remuneration. Once they enter the studio, conditions change and they begin to be exploited.

According to the testimony provided to the Brazilian newspaper *Folha de S.Paulo*⁴, Stephany, a Venezuelan trans woman, arrived in Boa Vista in search of a better life and ended up being sexually exploited. Stephany was forced to prostitute herself in a room with four other trans girls. This is the reality that many Venezuelan trans women in conditions of human mobility face. According to the CSO Caribe Afirmativo, Venezuelan trans women are marginalized, leaving them in a situation of rejection and exclusion that expose them to trafficking networks for sexual exploitation.

However, not only Venezuelan trans women can fall victim to this crime. Although all women are vulnerable,

⁴ Folha de S.Paulo (18 de octubre de 2021), Traficantes de pessoas mudam tática e atraem mulheres para dívidas impagáveis, <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2021/10/traficantes-de-pessoas-mudam-tatica-e-atraem-mulheres-para-dividas-impagaveis.shtml>.



girls and women belonging to the LGBTIQ+ community are particularly vulnerable. The few figures available are alarming. In Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, the authorities announced the dismantling of 800 to 1,000 houses of sexual exploitation of Venezuelan women under the webcam modality.

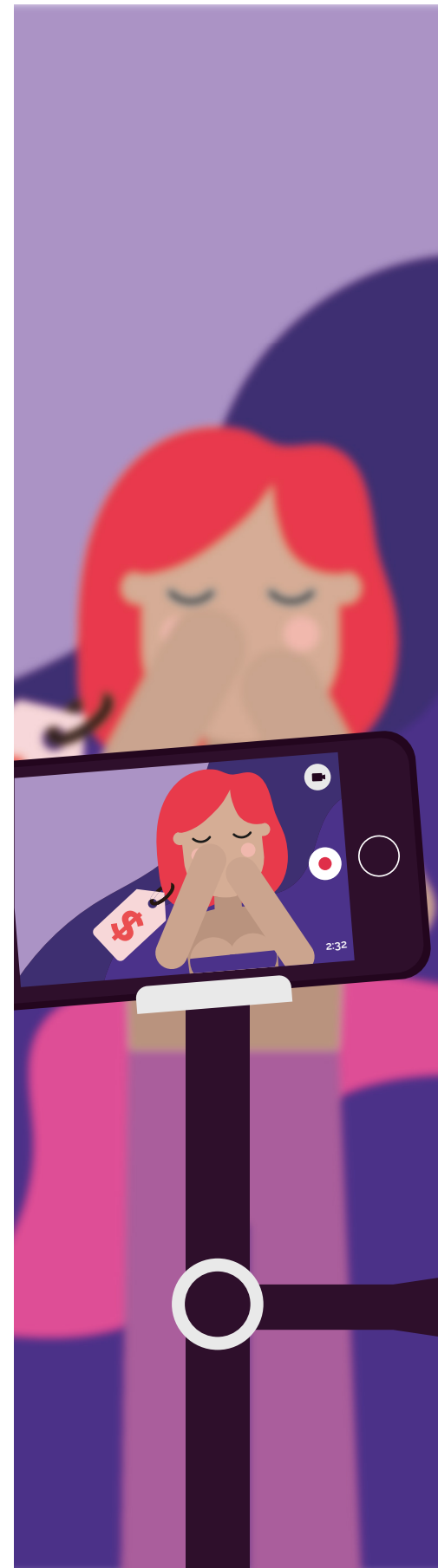
The situation of girls

Venezuelan girls are of particular concern as the number of them who have fallen victim to trafficking for sexual exploitation has been on the rise since 2019, according to our monitoring. In face-to-face workshops provided by Mulier in different communities, girls have spoken about the different ways in which they have been sexually exploited online or were on the verge of being so.

Mulier received a report about the case of a young woman who was forced by her boyfriend to keep an OnlyFans account and produce sexual content for the platform under the threat of showing intimate pictures and videos to her parents and loved ones. The aggressor also profited from all the dividends generated by the payments of subscribers on the platform.

Other girls, aged 12 to 14, spoke of the existence of chat groups of their favorite TikTokers or influencers on Telegram, even divided by age. By participating in these groups, they are contacted by people posing as internet celebrities who ask them for pictures and, little by little, more explicit images.

Facebook is one form of contact that comes to attention. A girl agreed to send content to a third party through this platform because it posed as a person with whom she had a romantic relationship. When the interaction became uncomfortable, she wanted to stop it but received in response the threat of publishing her pictures, which forced her to delete her account in the belief that this would get her rid of the problem. However, this may not be enough be-



cause the content that has been shared remains in the hands of whoever saved it, even if the account is deleted. The same is true for other digital platforms such as Instagram. Even if a user gets blocked or an account deleted, this is not enough to assume that the content will disappear, as these girls naively believe.

These cases reveal that it is becoming increasingly easy to contact girls on the internet and request explicit content or even recruit them for trafficking for sexual exploitation. At the same time, it is becoming more difficult to prosecute the crime because many people blame the girls because they consider that sending such content, in a relationship the girls deem trustworthy, implies assuming the consequences of these abuses and the crime of publishing and sharing it without their consent. Simply put, this is a cultural way of punishing the expression of female sexuality, which ignores the evident inequality of power that makes it easier for these young women to be tricked or coerced into accepting the exchange of content. This is aggravated by the fact that the content uploaded to the internet, whether videos and images leaked without consent to explicit websites, is almost impossible to entirely delete or make disappear. Even if the affected person achieves the difficult endeavor of getting the administrators to remove the content from the platform, it may have been downloaded and risks being reposted on other websites, affecting the lives of the girls victims of this type of violence forever.

Addressing the crime

General recommendation No. 38 of The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)⁵, warned about the increasing use of social media to recruit potential victims of trafficking, especially in the context of economic restriction and isolation imposed by the pandemic, and urged States to take the necessary measures to protect women and girls following the provisions of Article 6 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Even though the Convention was ratified by Venezuela, the reality is that little to nothing is being done by the Venezuelan State to educate about the safe use of social media among this age group.

The modern dynamics of relationships and the exploration of sexuality such as sexting are common among young people, becoming an alternative during the period of isolation caused by the pandemic. However, this type of activity, which in safe

⁵ Comité para la Eliminación de la Discriminación contra la Mujer (CEDAW) (2020), Recomendación General Núm. 38, relativa a la trata de mujeres y niñas en el contexto de la migración mundial, <https://www.ohchr.org/es/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-recommendation-no38-2020-trafficking-women>.

conditions can facilitate natural sexual-affective experiences for this age group, is unfortunately exploited by aggressors, who take advantage of the shame historically associated with the exercise of women's sexuality, to manipulate, blackmail and subject them to other forms of violence.

According to Valera (2017)⁶, one of the main characteristics of male power is the control of female sexuality by physical, verbal, psychological, legal, social, religious and cultural means. In this sense, the mechanisms of oppression associated with sexuality can be clearly identified in the fear of the victims to the threats of seeing their confidential sexual content being published, leading many of them to refrain from filing a complaint or seeking help in the face of signs of violence such as the threat of publication without their consent.

Venezuela's Special Law on Cyber Crimes proscribes and regulates crimes against the privacy of persons and their communications, including the unlawful disclosure of personal data or information; crimes against children or adolescents, such as the dissemination or exhibition of pornographic material or the pornographic depiction of children and adolescents, and economic crimes, such as the appropriation of intellectual property.



The Internet Watch Foundation reported a 77% increase in child “self-generated” sex material between 2019 and 2020.

*We Protect Global Alliance, Global Threat Assessment 2021*⁷



Also, the latest reform of the Organic Law on the Right of Women to a Life Free from Violence (2021), established cyber violence as a new criminal offense, which, under a broader interpretation, could apply to the cases in discussion, in addition to article 72 on trafficking in women, girls and adolescents.

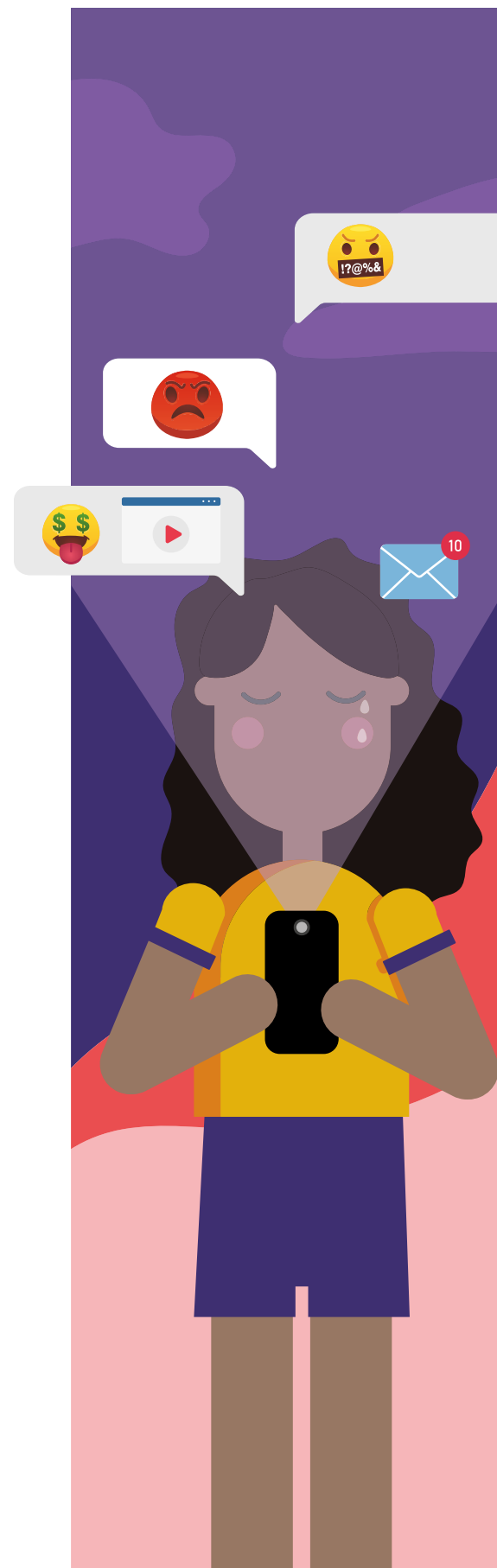
⁶ Varela, Nuria (2017), *Íbamos a ser reinas. Mentiras y complicidades que sustentan la violencia contra las mujeres*, Barcelona: Ediciones B.

⁷ We Protect Global Alliance, *Evaluación de Amenazas Globales de 2021*, <https://www.weprotect.org/global-threat-assessment-21/>.

Venezuelan women who denounce online violence and sexual exploitation can find protection in the criminalization of these practices. However, the stereotypes surrounding sexual violence and gender-based violence, both socially and institutionally, hinder the prevention, attention and prosecution of sexual exploitation.

Because of guilt, stigma or the fear of giving more visibility to their situation, many women choose not to file a complaint. At the institutional level, complaints are usually dismissed or the system lacks a genuine will to advance the proceedings that lead to an effective conviction. At the same time, the digital space makes things even more difficult. The detection and prosecution of these crimes are further complicated by the lack of knowledge and economic and technical resources necessary to carry out actions such as ensuring that the content is removed every time it is uploaded.

It must be emphasized that exploitation networks use increasingly sophisticated systems that complicate the prosecution of these crimes. The transnational character of the management of the websites with this type of content, as well as the use of novel methods for their financial management, such as the use of cryptocurrencies, pose significant challenges for the legal protection of victims and the punishment of exploiters.



They are not alone

The challenges of punishing online sexual exploitation do not mean that we are helpless in the face of this crime. Just as we recognize cyberspace as a place where we can explore our sexuality, we must denaturalize online sexual exploitation. We must understand it as a serious crime with very serious, painful and real consequences for the victims, which can persist indefinitely given that the contents uploaded to the internet are extremely difficult to delete.

The damage can be similar to that of real-life sexual exploitation: social isolation; mental health problems, addiction problems, and suicidal ideation, among others. In the long term, having gone through this situation can make it challenging to find a job and lead a fulfilling life.

There is the need to stop blaming the victims of these crimes for “putting themselves in that situation” and understand the conditions, betrayals and power relations involved in these cases. No one deserves to be a victim of sexual exploitation on the internet, and the fact that it happens online does not make its consequences any less real.

The prevention of these forms of exploitation should be the responsibility of the whole society, and information about this problem should be incorporated transversally into the education system and the media to reduce the vulnerability of Venezuelan women. Fathers, mothers and other caregivers or persons responsible for children and adolescents must also be encouraged to promote the safe use of the Internet and social media. It is naïve to think that children can be kept off the use of technology, which has and will have an increasingly important role in all aspects of their lives. Therefore, the key to promoting safe use begins by closing the digital gap among adults that often turns into restrictions or apathy that leave children and adolescents more vulnerable to the dangers of the online world.

Finally, it is necessary to know and evaluate how cases of online sexual exploitation are being handled by institutions, how victims are treated, and whether offenders are being convicted. Victims of online sexual exploitation deserve justice and support.

**Right
for all**



Resources

1 Mulier has compiled a **Guide for the Prevention of Trafficking in Women and Girls. Steps to stay #FreeandSafe**. In addition to useful information about trafficking for sexual exploitation, we share strategies for using the internet as a tool to stay free and safe.

2 The **Revenge Porn Helpline** established in 2015, helps victims of violence who have had their intimate images published without their consent. Since its creation, the initiative has provided support to thousands of victims, resulting in the removal of more than 200,000 non-consensual intimate images from the internet.

LIBRES Y SEGURAS

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HEARTS ON VENEZUELA

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