

Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences

67th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW67)

Interactive expert panel on ‘Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls’

14 March 2023

Intervention by the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, Reem Alsalem

Civic space and technology-facilitated gender-based violence

Madame Chair, distinguished delegates and participants - Good afternoon.

Thank you for the invitation to participate in today’s expert panel. I will focus my remarks on the intersections between civic space and technology-facilitated gender-based violence as I had been requested.

Through the numerous visits that I have conducted in my capacity as Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls as well as the engagements that I and other mandate holders have had with civic moments – both official and study visits – I have been alarmed at the proliferation of gender-based violence through technology, including against civic movements, often in a sexualized and gendered nature.

There are four trends that I wish to speak to with regards to the nexus between civic space and technology facilitated GBV

First Trend: Technology-facilitated gender-based violence has been for long one of the most common and most accessible tools used by perpetrators, for the many reasons that we know:

- The ease with which the aggressor can unleash their violence – anonymously and often with minimal concerns about accountability;
- The high tolerance level that digital platforms have for gendered violence, even though digital technology providers have a direct responsibility to protect and respect the right to freedom of assembly, association, belief and speech (though I realize that these rights are not absolute) and to provide victims with effective remedies.
- The way in which such violence can be enabled by the broader national legal framework, particularly if it fails to uphold and protect the human rights of all groups

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in society, including minorities, women, children, and others, and if it fails to protect civic space and civic participation.

Where such frameworks have loopholes in them, they tend to aid and abet discrimination, restrict, or undermine the right to freedom of association and expression of civil society actors, thereby allowing technology-based violence to thrive.

So, for example, if the narrative coming from officials working with the government or centers of powers in a society is condescending towards, say, a religious minority, or incites hatred against them, or undermines their religious beliefs, or depicts them as second-class citizens, then women belonging to these religious minorities will be amongst the first to be attacked online.

When women from this minority raise their voices and claim space in that society, it is seen as an affront to the wider ongoing efforts aimed at marginalizing and demonizing this religious minority and its members.

Second trend: Technology-based GBV is deeply embedded in the broader ecosystem of patriarchy and misogyny in any given society, one that justifies attacks on the personal integrity, sense of community as well as dignity, bodily autonomy, and humanity of the victim.

This system is all around us, we operate and live our lives in it, and it shapes gender relations and fosters inequalities and violence daily.

On this point, and since we are speaking about technology, I do not think we talk sufficiently of the many ways in which pornography and the normalization of its use contributes to violent, exploitative, and degrading ways of perceiving and treating women and children.

This patriarchy is felt at both the individual and collective level and can deeply impact the way women are able to access technology, which is also deeply gendered.

For example, access to the internet may not be available to communities already suffering from discrimination, and even less so to women from those communities. Where it may be available, internet use may be closely monitored by male relatives or allowed only through shared devices.

This is why it is so important to ensure that affordable internet is available, including to women who are involved in activism and to civil society organizations at the grassroots level and that may have limited resources, or that operate in remote and rural areas.

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Technology-based GBV can also not be delinked from a wider context of gender bias by law enforcement, the judiciary and their inability and unwillingness to receive reports by survivors of violence and to act upon them. It can also not be tackled in isolation from how a country deals with freedom of expression and how it defines and tackles hate speech.

In one country I have visited, online violence was acknowledged by everyone I met with as a serious problem, including representatives from the government. However, violence against women in all its forms in that country were skyrocketing. The country had no legal framework to combat violence against women; and not a single report of femicide or sexual violence had been seriously investigated or yielded the arrest or trial of any suspect. Worse, law enforcement was often involved in perpetuating violence against women, nationals, and foreigners alike, including within their own families.

In an environment such as this, it was out of question to even start speaking, yet alone tackling technology-based violence against women and girls and certainly not on its own.

The third trend: Government's actions and words set examples that either empower or disempower the perpetrators of violence against civic space actors, including women and feminist groups, as well as other marginalized groups and minorities.

Silence and failure to act is action.

If governments are silent when civil society actors are attacked by state or non-state actors and accused of undermining social or religious norms, or wrongly accused of proliferating hate speech, or are depicted as foreign agents, perpetrators of violence feel they greenlight to continue with their actions.

It is therefore important that States publicly condemn and duly investigate smear campaigns, hate speech, and attacks against women exercising their legitimate rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, and that those responsible are held accountable.

The fourth trend: Though technology remains a double-edged sword, civic movements are continuing to use it to advocate for rights, though they are trying to be 'smarter' and more self-protective – where they can.

Despite all drawbacks, civic movements, including those led by women, continue use this technology to the best of their abilities as a means of fighting the abuse and violence they suffer through the same technology and to fight for the rights of their constituency, for example, for sexual and reproductive rights.



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In doing so, still at high personal and collective costs, they will try to self-manage their online presence and activities and try to adopt self-protection measures.

It must be remembered that exercising self-care, caution, and self-protection is an additional cost, that donors do not always provide resources for. They may, however, not have the same opportunities, as some have access to the same financial or political support locally or abroad.

In conclusion, you can take technology out of the wider context in which it operates, but you cannot take the wider context, including its gender dimensions, out of technology. To tackle technology-based GBV we must tackle GBV within society at large and in civic space, and we must support civic movements in this process.

I thank you.