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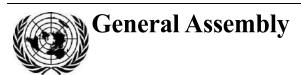
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Advancement of women

Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls

Report of the Secretary-General**

Summary

　　Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 75/161, on the intensification of efforts to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls, the present report is focused on the urgent need to address violence against women and girls in digital contexts, as well as on broader efforts to eliminate violence against women, particularly in the context of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). The report provides information on measures taken by Member States and entities of the United Nations system to address violence against women and girls, and contains conclusions and specific recommendations for future action.

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I. Introduction

1.   Violence against women and girls persists as a global crisis, with a serious impact on the health and lives of women and girls, families, communities and societies at large. The most recent global estimates show that the prevalence of violence against women has remained largely unchanged over the last decade with one in three women subjected to physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lifetime.[1]

2.   In its resolution 75/161, the General Assembly reiterated the need to intensify efforts to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls in public and private spheres in all regions of the world. In addition, it recognized the growing impact of violence against women and girls, including sexual harassment, in digital contexts, especially on social media, its impunity and the lack of preventive measures and remedies. The eradication of violence against women is a key priority in the report of the Secretary-General entitled "Our Common Agenda".

3.   The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic exemplified how crises exacerbate the drivers of violence against women and create barriers to accessing essential services as resources are diverted to respond to the emergency. The pandemic exposed pre-existing gaps in responses to survivors and stalled progress in prevention. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) rapid gender assessment of the impact of the pandemic confirmed an intensification of violence against women since the start of the pandemic; 45 per cent of women reported that they or a woman they knew had experienced a form of violence since the start of the pandemic while 6 in 10 felt sexual harassment in public had worsened.[2]

4.   Another form of violence that has escalated in the shadows of the pandemic is violence against women in digital contexts.[3] Violence against women and girls in digital contexts takes many forms and often occurs as part of a continuum that is connected to offline violence. These experiences are common for all women and girls, but women in public life are particularly targeted (see box 1). Such violence can have a chilling effect, impeding women's full and equal participation in public life with serious health, social and economic impacts across all areas of women's lives (see A/HRC/38/47).

Box 1
Women in public life at greater risk

     Women journalists, politicians and human rights defenders are highly exposed to violence in digital contexts (A/HRC/38/47, para. 28). Research on online violence against women journalists found that 73 per cent of women journalists have experienced online violence in the course of their work, including threats of physical and sexual violence, along with

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[1] World Health Organization (WHO), "Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2018", 9 March 2021.

[2] United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), *Measuring the Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women during Covid-19* (2021).

[3] For the purpose of the present report, the term "violence against women and girls in digital contexts" is used, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 73/148, in which the Assembly recalled Human Rights Council resolution 38/5, entitled "Accelerating efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls: preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in digital contexts". Currently, there is no agreed terminology or definition of violence against women and girls and terms such as "online violence" and "information and communications technology-related violence against women", "cyberviolence against women and girls", "tech-facilitated violence against women and girls" and "online gender-based violence" are used interchangeably.

digital security attacks. One in five women journalists reported that they had been abused and attacked offline in connection with online violence.[a]

Women in politics at national and local levels are also at significant risk. A study undertaken in 2021 by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) of women parliamentarians in Africa found that 46 per cent of those women had been the target of sexist attacks online.[b] IPU also indicated that, according to a similar study conducted in Europe, 58 per cent of women parliamentarians had been subject to online attacks.[c]

Women who are politically active online experience insults, hate speech, reputational risk, physical threats and sexualized misrepresentation.[d] Women activists are targeted by forms of abuse intended to silence them, including "pile-ons" where activists are targeted by coordinated waves of different forms of online abuse.[e] There is evidence that women and girls experience higher rates and more severe online violence when engaging in advocacy, particularly related to gender justice.

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[a] UNESCO, "Online violence against women journalists: a global snapshot of incidence and impacts", 2020, p. 2.

[b] Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women in Parliaments in Africa*, 2021, p. 2.

[c] Ibid.

[d] National Democratic Institute, "Tweets that chill: analyzing online violence against women in politics: a report of case study research in Indonesia, Colombia and Kenya".

[e] World Wide Web Foundation (Tech Policy Design Lab), "Online gender-based violence and abuse: Consultation briefing", 2021, p. 4.

5.   The present report provides an outline of new developments, promising practices, gaps and trends in preventing and responding to violence against women. Section I is focused on violence against women in digital contexts as an escalating issue of concern. Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 75/161, section II contains information about key developments in ending violence against women more broadly, including in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The report reflects information provided by Member States[4] and United Nations entities.[5]

II.   Emerging issue: violence against women and girls in digital contexts

6.   Anonymity and widespread reach within online spaces have created a conducive context for increased violence in digital contexts. COVID-19 has increased the use of digital technology and the Internet, including among women and girls. As lives shifted online for work, school, access to services and social activities, reports emerged of a surge in violence against women and girls in digital contexts.

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[4] Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Colombia, Czechia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, El Salvador, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Guatemala, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Jordan, Republic of Korea, Latvia, Mali, Mauritius, Madagascar, Mexico, Nigeria, Portugal, Romania, Senegal, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Togo, United Arab Emirates, Uruguay and Zimbabwe.

[5] International Labour Organization, UN-Women, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and World Food Programme.

A. Defining violence against women and girls in digital contexts

7. The present report refers to "violence against women and girls in digital contexts" to describe a wide range of violence committed against women in digital spaces and/or using information and communication technologies. There is currently no internationally agreed definition of violence against women in digital contexts, also known interchangeably as "information and communications technology-facilitated violence", "online violence", "tech-facilitated or related violence", "digital violence" or "cyberviolence". In 2018, the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences defined online violence against women to encompass any act of gender-based violence against women that is committed, assisted or aggravated in part or fully by the use of information and communications technology (ICT), such as mobile phones and smartphones, the Internet, social media platforms or email, against a woman because she is a woman, or affects women disproportionately (A/HRC/38/47, para. 23).

8. As technology and its usage evolve, so too do the forms and patterns of online and ICT-facilitated violence. Violence against women in digital contexts takes many forms – sexual harassment, stalking, "zoombombing",[6] and these continue to multiply in a context of rapidly expanding digitalization, accelerated by the pandemic. Virtual reality and the metaverse are creating new digital spaces for misogyny and sexual violence. The emergence of new forms of violence has been exacerbated by the growth of artificial intelligence such as deepfake pornographic videos and their negative impact on women's and girls' professional and personal lives.[7] There is also a growing number of extremist groups and incels[8] engaging in sexual harassment of women in the "manosphere".[9] Studies show that online violence against women and girls often precede violence carried out against women and girls offline.[10]

9. Sexual harassment is a particularly pervasive form of violence against women in digital contexts. Such harassment can include unwanted and uninvited sexually explicit content online, unwanted and persistent sexual advances and sexualized comments through dating applications or social media, and sexualized threats and denigrating comments, including trolling[11] and public shaming. It can also involve personal or identifying details shared online, also known as "doxing" (see A/HRC/44/52). Online sexual harassment can also be connected to gendered hate speech, the intent of which is to spread, incite, promote or justify hatred based on sex.

10. Violence against women and girls in digital contexts also encompasses intimate partner and domestic violence. Many forms of violence from intimate partners occurring offline – including stalking, financial abuse and coercive control – are often replicated and intensified in digital spaces.[12] Furthermore, abusive partners or

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[6] "Zoombombing" describes the practice of disrupting or infiltrating a videoconference call and showing racially charged or sexually explicit material to the unexpecting participants. See Sexual Violence Research Initiative, "Online safety in a changing world – COVID-19 and cyber violence", 2020.

[7] European Institute for Gender Equality, "Artificial intelligence, platform work and gender equality", 2021.

[8] Incels, short for "involuntary celibates", are misogynistic men who blame women and feminism for different kinds of personal and social problems. See footnotes 12 and 13 below.

[9] The "manosphere" describes a loose online network of men's interest groups, notable for its extreme misogyny. London Metropolitan University (Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit), "The links between radicalisation and violence against women and girls", June 2020.

[10] UNESCO, "Online Violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidents and Impacts", 2020, p. 3.

[11] "Trolling" consists in the posting of messages, images or videos and the creation of hashtags for the purpose of provoking or inciting violence against women and girls. Many "trolls" are anonymous and use false accounts to generate hate speech. See A/HRC/38/47, para. 23.

[12] Bridget Harris and Delanie Woodlock, *Spaceless Violence: Women's Experiences of Technology-facilitated Domestic Violence in Regional, Rural and Remote Areas* (Canberra, Australian Institute of Criminology, 2022).

ex-partners use digital tools to monitor, track, threaten and perpetrate violence including tracking devices or publishing private and identifying information.

11. Traffickers are increasingly using technology to profile, recruit, control and exploit their victims as well as using the Internet, especially the dark web, to hide information about their activities and identities. Such trends have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.[13]

B. Extent of the problem

12. The absence of agreed definitions and methodologies for measurement coupled with widespread underreporting are a challenge for understanding the true prevalence of violence against women and girls in digital contexts. A global study found that 38 per cent of women have personal experiences of online violence, with 85 per cent of women who are online having witnessed digital violence against other women.[14] The most common forms of online violence included misinformation and defamation (67 per cent), cyber harassment (66 per cent) and hate speech (65 per cent). Alarmingly, only one in four women reported the behaviour to the online platform(s) on which it occurred. Furthermore, nearly three quarters of the women surveyed expressed concern about online abuse escalating to offline threats.

13. Country-based and regional studies also demonstrate the pervasive nature of the problem. In the United States of America, 33 per cent of women under 35 report they have been sexually harassed online, compared to 11 per cent of men.[15] In Australia, the reliance on digital communication during the pandemic has likely led to the 210 per cent increase in image-based abuse reported to the Office of the e-Safety Commissioner. A multi-country survey conducted in 2017 of women aged 18 to 55 in Denmark, Italy, New Zealand, Poland, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States found that nearly a quarter (23 per cent) of the women surveyed said they had experienced online abuse or harassment at least once.[16] A study conducted in the Arab States by UN-Women in 2021 found that 60 per cent of women Internet users in the region had been exposed to online violence in 2021.[17] A study undertaken in 2020 of women in five countries across sub-Saharan Africa found that 28 per cent of the women interviewed had experienced online gender-based violence.[18] The Digital Sex Crime Victim Support Center in the Republic of Korea offered services to 169,820 digital content deletion cases in 2021.

14. Young women and girls are particularly targeted by ICT-facilitated violence. Research found that more than half of the girls and young women surveyed globally had experienced online violence.[19] Most girls report their first experience of social

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[13] Europol, "Exploiting isolation: Offenders and victims of online child sexual abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic", 19 June 2020.

[14] The Economist Intelligence Unit, "Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women", 2021. Available at https://onlineviolencewomen.eiu.com/ (accessed on 24 June 2022).

[15] Emily Vogels, "The state of online harassment", Pew Research Center, 13 January 2021.

[16] Amnesty International, "Amnesty reveals alarming impact of online abuse against women", 20 November 2017. Available at https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/11/amnesty-reveals-alarming-impact-of-online-abuse-against-women/ (accessed on 24 June 2022).

[17] UN-Women, "Violence against women in the online space: Insights from a multi-country study in the Arab States", 2021.

[18] Neema Iyer, Bonnita Nyamwire and Sandra Nabulega,"Alternate realities, alternate Internets: African feminist research for a feminist Internet", August 2020.

[19] Plan International, *Free to Be Online? Girls' and Young Women's Experiences of Online Harassment*, 2020, p. 7; World Wide Web Foundation and World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, "Survey: young people's experience of online harassment", 2020.

media harassment between the ages of 14 and 16, and 47 per cent of girls who have been harassed online have been threatened with physical or sexual violence.[20]

15.   While men can also experience online violence and abuse, women and girls are more likely to experience unique forms of gendered violence in digital contexts, reflecting a similar pattern to violence against women and girls in the physical world. Women, and especially young women, are more likely to report having been sexually harassed online.[21]

16.   Women belonging to ethnic minorities, indigenous women, lesbian, bisexual and transgender women, and women with disabilities are at even greater risk (A/HRC/38/47, para. 28). Where these identities intersect, exposure to online violence is heightened. In the United States, a Pew Research Center study has shown that lesbian, gay or bisexual online harassment targets are more likely to report having encountered harassment online because of the intersection of their gender and sexual orientation.[22] Women with intellectual or cognitive disability can be particularly susceptible to technology-facilitated violence.[23]

C.   Drivers of violence against women and girls in digital contexts

17.   Although the patterns and forms of violence against women in digital spaces can be unique, they are part of the continuum of multiple, recurring and interrelated forms of violence across online and offline spaces. Many forms of violence occurring offline are replicated and intensified in digital spaces. Digital spaces reflect, reinforce and exacerbate systemic structural gender inequality, deep-seated cultural and social norms as well as patterns of harmful masculinities that drive all forms of violence against women.

18.   The intersection of age and gender discrimination, alongside the higher level of ICT use among young women and girls for learning, accessing information and connecting to peers, increases their vulnerability to online violence.

19.   There are specific features of digital spaces that create a particularly conducive context for violence against women, including the scale, speed and ease of Internet communication combined with anonymity, pseudonymity, affordability and impunity. Cross-platform abuse, is enabled through the proliferation of new technologies and can be particularly challenging to combat as abusive content removed from one platform, can reappear and persist on another.

20.   Current laws addressing digital violence lack clear and consistent definitions and have not kept pace with technological developments and different forms of violence in digital contexts. Addressing violence against women in digital contexts is particularly challenging in cases with multiple offenders, victims and platforms across different jurisdictions.

21.   A key challenge is the significant underrepresentation of women in the technology sector, resulting in the embedding of inequalities and systematic biases into ICT technologies.[24] In addition to the lack of inclusive design, content moderation and the detection of abuse is a key challenge. Some types of violence in digital contexts, for example death threats in the form of memes, are subtle enough to go undetected by automated abuse reporting systems and Internet intermediaries have limited abuse moderating capabilities in countries and languages outside their major markets.

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[20] Plan International, "Free to Be Online?", pp. 16–17.
[21] Emily Vogels, "The state of online harassment", pp. 7–8.
[22] Ibid., p. 10.
[23] eSafety Commissioner Australia, *"For My Safety": Experiences of Technology-Facilitated Abuse among Women with Intellectual Disability or Cognitive Disability* (August 2021), pp. 3–4.
[24] UNESCO, "The Chilling: Assessing big tech's response to online violence against women journalists", 2022, p. 21–24; UNESCO and Equals Skills Coalition, "I'd blush if I could: closing gender divides in digital skills through education", 2019.

D.   Impact of violence against women and girls in digital contexts

22.   Survivors of violence in digital contexts experience significant harm to their health and well-being, while the cumulative effects of offline and online violence can sometimes lead to self-harm, depression and suicide. Research shows that online abuse can leave women with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, particularly when the abuse is frequent.[25] The results of a study undertaken in Latin America by the Follow-up Mechanism to the Belém do Pará Convention and UN-Women highlight the fact that the impact of online violence can be as serious as offline violence.[26] Young women and girls also experience serious psychological effects in response to online violence, including feeling physically unsafe, lower self-esteem or loss of confidence, mental or emotional stress and problems at school.

23.   Violence against women in digital contexts also impedes women's equal and meaningful participation in public life through humiliation, shame, fear and silencing. Women's voices are often silenced, discredited and censored by online violence. This is the "chilling effect", whereby women are discouraged from actively participating in public life.[27] Research shows that digital violence can result in women and girls having to restrict their online activity, which in turn inhibits their access to the Internet and increases the digital gender divide.[28] There is also the intergenerational impact of digital violence, as the online abuse of women in public life (and women from marginalized communities in particular) serves as an impediment to young women entering professions such as politics and journalism, due to fear of similar abuse.[29]

24.   The impact of online and ICT-facilitated violence extends into educational settings and the workplace. According to the results of a study released in 2022, online abuse of women in professional contexts is widespread, with 51 per cent of women who experienced online abuse also reporting a serious impact on their professional life because of the abuse.[30]

E.   Actions needed to drive change

25.   The obligations of States to promote and protect human rights online are well established (A/HRC/38/47, para. 13). However, tensions at the intersections of the rights of digital users – to freedom of expression, including access to information, to privacy and data protection – and the right to a life free from violence, are often cited as a challenge (A/HRC/38/47, paras. 20 and 30). Nevertheless, the right to freedom of expression cannot be invoked to justify language or other forms of expression designed to incite discrimination, hostility or violence, including online violence against women and girls (A/HRC/38/47, para. 52). Furthermore, States have obligations to ensure that both State and non-State agents refrain from engaging in any act of discrimination or violence against women and girls, including due diligence obligations to prevent,

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[25] Emma Kavanagh and Lorraine Brown, "Towards a research agenda for examining online gender-based violence against women academics", *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, vol. 44, No. 10 (2020) p. 1383.

[26] See https://lac.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/Informe-Ciberviolencia-MESECVI_1Abr.pdf.

[27] UNESCO, "The Chilling", p. 8 (see footnote 24); National Democratic Institute, "Tweets that chill: Analyzing online violence against women in politics", 2019.

[28] The Economist Intelligence Unit, "Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women" (see footnote 18); Plan International, "Free to Be Online?" (p. 7, see footnote 23).

[29] World Wide Web Foundation (Tech Policy Design Lab), "Online gender-based violence and abuse: Consultation briefing", 2021. p. 7.

[30] Bridget Harris and Delanie Woodlock, *Women in the Spotlight: Women's Experiences with Online Abuse in Their Working Lives* (eSafety Commissioner Australia, 2022).

investigate and punish acts of violence against women committed by private companies, such as Internet intermediaries (A/HRC/38/47, para. 62).

26. Internet intermediaries, social media and traditional media companies, have human rights responsibilities under the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations "Protect, Respect and Remedy" Framework (A/HRC/17/31, annex). The 10 principles of the United Nations Global Compact also include a commitment for businesses to make sure they are not complicit in human rights abuses.

27. In his report entitled "Road map for Digital Cooperation", the Secretary-General has called for greater efforts to ensure that human rights standards apply in the digital age, including for the prevention of online harassment and violence (A/74/821, para. 52). Pursuant to the proposal in "Our Common Agenda", for agreement on a Global Digital Compact, a Summit of the Future will be held in September 2023 to outline shared principles for an open, free and secure digital future for all. Ensuring that violence against women and girls in digital contexts is firmly addressed through these processes will be critical for strengthening cooperation between States, the technology sector and civil society. A high-level consultation on violence against women in digital contexts could be convened to inform the Roadmap for Digital Cooperation and the actions of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology in collaboration with UN-Women, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

28. In order to effectively address violence against women in digital contexts, the United Nations system will work together with States, civil society and technology providers to develop international standards and a framework for preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in digital contexts, including standardized definitions, legal standards, roles and responsibilities, standards of accountability for internet intermediaries and transnational cooperation and coordination. These standards should clarify the relationship between freedom of expression and privacy, and the rights to freedom from discrimination and violence.

29. The Statistical Commission, in collaboration with UN-Women and the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat, among other entities, is well placed to look into internationally agreed standards and methodologies for measuring violence against women and girls in digital contexts.

30. Finally, building on the outcomes of the Transforming Education Summit, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), UN-Women, civil society organizations and young women and girls will continue to shape standards for inclusive, equitable, safe and healthy educational spaces both online and offline.

1. Consistent laws, regulatory frameworks and effective implementation

31. States are increasingly updating their legal frameworks to address violence against women and girls in digital contexts (see box 2), however, there remain significant gaps and inconsistencies in the forms of violence which are covered by laws and the remedies that can be accessed, with survivors often navigating a patchwork of inadequate laws. For example, where States have not consistently criminalized the non-consensual online dissemination of intimate or sexually explicit images of adult persons, victims are left to rely on other criminal law provisions (see A/HRC/38/47).

32. Even when laws are in place, law enforcement personnel often do not treat online violence as seriously as physical violence and lack the skills and capability to identify and respond appropriately to such violence. The inadequate response from

law enforcement often reflects an attitudinal barrier where online violence is trivialized or not considered as harmful as violence in the physical world.

33. Measures to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls in digital contexts have been largely left to self-regulation and voluntary measures of digital service providers and platforms and there is very weak enforcement, lack of sanctions, accountability, and independent oversight.[31] Women journalists have reported inaction, or ineffective action from Internet intermediaries, and convoluted processes for reporting incidents.[32]

34. An important challenge that needs to be addressed is that the Internet is borderless, therefore transnational cooperation is urgently required to effectively address violence against women and girls in digital contexts.

Box 2
Government initiatives to create safety online

Emerging approaches from States which address online safety include the Digital Sex Crime Victim Support Center in the Republic of Korea, which offers comprehensive support to victims of digital sex crimes, including counselling, legal support and technological support for digital content deletion. Australia has strengthened the powers of the e-Safety Commissioner to address violence across all platforms, including video gaming platforms, dating websites and private messaging apps.

Some countries have introduced or amended legislation in relation to digital violence (Ghana, Mali, Mexico). Ghana has introduced laws to protect women from sexual and gender-based violence and harassment online, including the non-consensual sharing of intimate images. Mexico has introduced a new law that carries a six-year sentence for sharing non-consensual images depicting sexual content.

In partnership with civil society, Senegal has developed an online portal to flag sexual content or images of children. Colombia has integrated technology and innovation as a policy approach in its national strategy for the prevention of gender violence "Women free of violence strategy."[a] Germany has strengthened legislation to require stronger accountability by social media companies in relation to hate speech and provide criminal provisions for perpetrators.

The Spotlight Initiative is a global, multi-year initiative of the United Nations and the European Union to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls by 2030. In Zimbabwe, it has provided technical support to strengthen legal provisions to address different forms of online violence including making the non-consensual sharing of intimate images illegal, among other provisions. Focusing on the impact of on children of technology use driven by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, Bulgaria has developed online safety rules in partnership with various stakeholders from the public and private sectors.

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[a] See https://observatorioviolencia.pe/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Estrategia-Mujeres-libres-de-violencia.pdf.

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[31] Equality Now, *Ending Online Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Women and Girls: A Call for International Standards* (2021), p. 11.
[32] UNESCO, "The Chilling" (see footnote 24).

2. Prevention and response from technology intermediaries

35. Preventing violence against women and girls in digital spaces requires comprehensive and long-term action to transform harmful behaviours, social norms and gender stereotypes at a broader societal level (see box 3). Such efforts require a range of sustained actions targeted at different levels which focus on women's safety, addressing unequal gendered power relations, empowerment of women, ensuring environments are made safe and that services are available, community engagement and multisectoral partnerships.[33] Some States are integrating content on violence against women and girls in digital contexts into education as a prevention strategy. For example, Argentina has a specific course on digital gender violence for teachers as part of training on comprehensive sexuality education.

36. Given their significant reach and influence, the technology sector and Internet intermediaries have a critical role to play in the broader prevention of violence, as well as specific responsibilities to prevent and respond to violence on their platforms.

37. The design of products and services to ensure safe and accessible reporting pathways, support and responses for women who experience violence and abuse is critical. For technology design, such efforts include providing greater choice and control over settings, ensuring a more accessible user experience and providing accessible safety tools. There is also a need to ensure that content moderation is responsive to diverse cultural and linguistic contexts to ensure women's and girls' safety online across all contexts.[34]

Box 3

Civil society and private sector responses to violence against women in digital contexts

Innovative approaches to safe online spaces from civil society include the Feminist Tech eXchange (FTX) Safety Reboot, which is a digital security training curriculum for trainers who work with women's rights and sexual rights activists. The Access Now Digital Security Helpline provides technical assistance to civil society groups and activists, media personnel and human rights defenders, including rapid-response emergency assistance for digital security incidents.

The private sector is also increasingly investing in technological approaches to reduce and respond to digital violence. Jigsaw, a Google subsidiary, is undertaking research and developing products to reduce online abuse and toxicity, including a tool called "Perspective API" which uses machine learning models to identify abusive comments.

The Revenge Porn Helpline in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland partnered with Meta to launch stopncii.org, a free tool which supports victims and potential victims of non-consensual intimate image abuse by creating a digital fingerprint of an image that can then be proactively detected and removed by participating platforms.

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3. Data and transparency

38. While there is growing evidence of violence against women and girls in digital contexts, there is still a paucity of comparable data at the global level. A significant impediment to progress is the absence of a uniform definition of violence against

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[33] WHO, "RESPECT: Seven strategies to prevent violence against women", 2019.
[34] UNESCO, "The Chilling" (see footnote 24).

women in digital contexts and established methodology to guide data collection. A standard definition needs to be integrated into regular surveys to capture the diverse forms and impacts of violence against women and girls in digital contexts.

39. Big data can also be harnessed to inform early detection and warning systems to address violence against women and girls in digital contexts and stop escalation. For example, the International Center for Journalists and the University of Sheffield have collaborated to develop open-source digital tools based on big data to detect, monitor and alert key responders to high-risk cases of violence in digital contexts.[35]

40. In addition to better data monitoring and analysis, transparency from government and Internet intermediaries in relation to actions taken to address violence against women in digital contexts is necessary. This includes regularly published de-identified data on reports of violence against women in digital contexts, actions taken in response and support provided to survivors and the effectiveness and outcomes of such actions.

4. Partnerships between Governments, technology providers and women's rights organizations

41. Greater collaboration between technology and communications companies, civil society, Governments and experts is essential for tackling violence against women and girls in digital contexts. Such partnerships can open innovative avenues for responding to violence in digital contexts, for example, programmes involving collaboration between social media companies and civil society to provide contact points for escalating cases of violence against women journalists online. However, the involvement of civil society organizations should not replace the obligations of technology companies to allocate adequate capacity and resources to provide responses and support women who have experienced violence and abuse on their platforms.[36]

42. Several partnerships have emerged at the global level to support greater collaboration and cooperation in addressing violence against women in digital contexts (see box 4).

Box 4

Global Partnerships to address violence against women in digital contexts

The Generation Equality Forum, convened by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), is a multi-stakeholder initiative which has galvanized Governments, international organizations, civil society, philanthropies, youth and the private sector to launch a five-year Global Acceleration Plan to achieve irreversible progress towards gender equality through six thematic action coalitions. The Action Coalition on Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality focuses on preventing and eliminating online and tech-facilitated gender-based violence and discrimination as part of its roadmap. To this end, Finland and Iceland have jointly committed to advocating for the integration of online gender-based violence in relevant international forums, processes and instruments. Four of the world's largest tech companies have jointly committed, in partnership with the Web Foundation, to building better ways for women to curate their safety online and implement stronger reporting mechanisms.

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[35] The University of Sheffield, "Towards an early warning system for violence against women journalists", 19 October 2021.
[36] UNESCO, "The Chilling" (see footnote 24).

Many partners also committed to advocating for the protection of feminist movements and women human rights defenders, amplifying the voices and experiences of girls and adolescents or pushing for action on the issue of the unlawful sharing of intimate images.

The United States of America has convened a Global Partnership for Action on Gender-based Online Harassment and Abuse that brings together Governments, international organisations, civil society and the private sector to address gender-based online harassment and abuse. The Global Partnership has three strategic objectives: to develop and advance shared best practices and principles; to focus resources on preventing and responding to gender-based online harassment and abuse; and to expand reliable, comparable data at the national, regional and global levels on gender-based online harassment and abuse and its effects.[a]

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[a] United States Department of State, "2022 Roadmap for the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse: Fact Sheet", 16 March 2022.

III. Measures and initiatives reported by Member States and United Nations entities to eliminate violence against women and girls, including in the context of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19)

43.   Women's and girls' experiences of violence in digital contexts is reflective of the broader societal problem of unacceptably high levels of violence against women and girls across all contexts. The economic and social impacts of COVID-19 and responses to the pandemic have further exacerbated all forms of violence against women. Against this background, section III provides an outline of actions reported by States (see box 5) and the United Nations system (see box 6) to eliminate violence against women and girls, particularly in the context of the pandemic, in line with resolution 75/161.

Box 5
Policy responses in the context of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic

Despite the intensification of violence against women during the pandemic, there are only a few examples of national action plans or overarching policy frameworks which specifically address the impact of the pandemic. Countries such as Colombia and Romania have introduced specific laws, decrees or policy frameworks addressing violence against women and girls in the context of the pandemic.

Data from COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker developed by the United Nations Development Programme and the United Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) indicates that while 163 countries adopted 856 measures to address violence against women and girls, only 13 countries mainstreamed violence against women and girls in their broader COVID-19 response plans and only 0.0002 per cent of COVID-19 response funding by major donors went towards ending violence against women and girls.[a]

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[a] UN-Women and UNDP, *Government Responses to COVID-19: Lessons on Gender Equality for a World In Turmoil* (New York, 2022).

A. Strengthening laws, policy frameworks and accountability

44.   Global and regional normative commitments provide frameworks for States to legislate for preventative measures and effective justice responses to violence against women and girls. States have continued to strengthen the legal framework for addressing violence against women (Côte d'Ivoire, Madagascar, Portugal, Slovenia). Slovenia has introduced an affirmative consent model ("only yes means yes") for rape and sexual violence offences. Despite these developments, significant gaps in legislation remain. Over 60 per cent of countries lack rape laws based on the principle of consent.[37] In addition to law reform, countries have also introduced specific tribunals for gender-based violence (Uruguay) and reparation funds for victims of sexual violence (Democratic Republic of the Congo).

45.   The intent of legislation can, however, be undermined by poor implementation, inadequate financing and resources, limited awareness of laws, weak enforcement and consequent impunity for violence against women and girls. To address these gaps, many countries are engaging in capacity-building and training for authorities to better tackle gendered violence (Argentina, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Cameroon, Czechia, Mali, Mexico, Romania, Slovenia, Uruguay). Mali has engaged in capacity-building for traditional and religious leaders and service providers. Uruguay undertook capacity-building for preventing sexual harassment in education and work settings and provided guidance for judicial authorities on gender stereotyping and women's human rights. United Nations entities, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN-Women, are also supporting capacity-building work with the justice system.

46.   Member States have implemented national action plans that provide comprehensive, multisectoral and long-term blueprints for ending violence against women, pursuant to General Assembly resolutions 61/143, paragraph 8; 63/155, paragraph 16; and 65/187, paragraph 16. Several countries reported introducing new stand-alone national plans, strategies and programmes to counter violence against women and girls (Argentina, Australia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guatemala, Jordan, Mali, Mauritius, Mexico, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Zimbabwe). Steps are being taken in other countries to review or renew existing plans (Senegal, Uruguay). Despite these developments, information on the allocation of adequate budgets to implement national action plans is limited. This situation is a concern, given the persistent lack of funding for implementation – in 40 per cent of countries where budgetary commitments to address violence against women are required by law, no spending actually exists.[38]

Box 6
Spotlight Initiative

The Spotlight Initiative received a historic initial investment of €500 million from the European Union.

As an initiative of the United Nations and the European Union, the Spotlight Initiative has over the past five years demonstrated proof of concept on what is required to prevent, address and achieve zero gender-based violence. Efforts include a whole-of-society response, multi-stakeholder engagement in support of national Governments and with civil society at the centre, backed by significant investment. Key results achieved in 2021 include signing or strengthening 198 laws and policies

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[37] UN-Women and the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2021* (2021).

[38] World Bank, "Protecting women from violence: Bridging the implementation gap between law and practice", Technical Report, 2019.

focused on ending violence against women and girls, advancing gender equality across 41 countries and more than doubling the number of convictions of perpetrators of gender-based violence compared with 2020.[a]

United Nations trust fund in support of actions to eliminate violence against women

In 2021, the trust fund supported 157 projects in 68 countries and territories. The projects impacted the lives of 260,587 women and girls through specialist support services, prevention initiatives and participating in the implementation of projects to end violence against women and girls, including efforts to improve the effectiveness of legislation, policies and national action plans.

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[a] See https://mptf.undp.org/fund/sif00 (accessed in August 2022).

47. Significant gaps remain in laws and policies that address sexual harassment. This situation is of concern, given the evidence that nearly two thirds of women report that sexual harassment in public spaces has worsened in the context of the pandemic.[39] Some countries, such as Australia and Colombia, reported on the development of specific policy frameworks around preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based harassment. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has supported countries in adopting or amending laws and policies on sexual harassment. Sexual harassment against women is a serious violation of women's human rights and a major barrier to achieving gender equality, and continued efforts are therefore required to strengthen responses, including addressing gaps in legislation and data.[40]

B. Expanding services to support survivors and improving access to justice

48. High quality health, police, justice and social services can play a significant role in addressing the impact of violence on the well-being, health and safety of women and girls, assist in their recovery and empowerment, and stop violence from recurring. States have increased emphasis on multisectoral, interdisciplinary, inter-institutional responses to violence against women and girls (Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, El Salvador, Latvia and Togo) and strengthening safe spaces through holistic support (Cameroon). Despite these efforts, significant gaps in service provision remain a barrier to women's immediate safety and long-term recovery from violence. The data shows that only 12 per cent of countries have comprehensive protection and response services for survivors.[41] Such services must be sufficiently funded, well coordinated and meet quality standards to effectively respond to the immediate and long-term needs of women and girls who have experienced violence.

49. In the context of the pandemic, States have sought to improve access to justice and services through new advice and reporting helplines, hotlines and mobile phone applications in many countries (Bulgaria, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guatemala, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Mali, Mauritius, Mexico, Nigeria, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Uruguay, Zimbabwe). Such services provide a safe reporting environment and mitigate challenges faced by survivors in accessing services, especially during the pandemic. However, digital devices are not always available to

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[39] UN-Women and Women Count, *Measuring the Shadow Pandemic* (see footnote 2).

[40] ILO and UN-Women, *Handbook Addressing Violence and Harassment against Women in the World of Work* (2019), p. 2.

[41] World Bank, "Protecting women from violence" (see footnote 39).

women and when they are, women do not always have access to or control their use and may be closely monitored when they do.[42]

50. Interventions to improve access to criminal justice have included translating sexual violence laws (Senegal), introducing designated gender-based violence focal points or reception offices in courts or police stations (Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali) and specialized interrogation rooms for child victims of criminal offences (Slovakia). The new Reimagine Justice for Children agenda of UNICEF is aimed at strengthening child-friendly justice processes and procedures. In Slovenia, the police have been engaging with schools to educate children on responding to and reporting violence.

51. In crisis contexts, the need for services to respond to violence increases while access is reduced. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has deployed gender-based violence specialists as part of its emergency responses, to enhance access for forcibly displaced people to prevention, response and health services.

52. Women and girls with disabilities, migrant women and those living in rural and remote areas are more likely to experience violence and less likely to receive support.[43] Strategies to enhance access to services must account for the different needs of women and girls experiencing violence, particularly in the context of the pandemic. Few States reported on measures targeted at women who face layered structural barriers to accessing services.

C. Investing in long-term prevention to transform social norms and behaviours and promoting women's economic empowerment

53. Long-term prevention of violence against women and girls relies on, inter alia, fostering social norms which support non-violence and gender equitable relationships and promote women's empowerment through comprehensive and evidence-based whole-of-government strategies.

54. Despite the need for a comprehensive approach, prevention efforts continue to be limited mainly to awareness campaigns. Several States have mobilized communications campaigns to raise awareness about gendered violence (Argentina, Australia, Cameroon, Greece, Guatemala, Iran (Islamic Republic of), Jordan, Mexico, Romania, Serbia, United Arab Emirates, Uruguay, Zimbabwe). Awareness-raising campaigns can play a key role in building community understanding of legal frameworks, available services, and reporting and response options. Interventions that have sought to address the underlying drivers of violence against women and girls, including social norms and behaviours and gendered power relations, are important. For example, a national programme in Argentina for the prevention of gender-based violence involves raising awareness about masculinities and challenging gender stereotypes and unequal gendered power relations. Jordan has implemented a national multimedia campaign on changing stereotypical family roles.

55. Women's economic insecurity has deepened during the pandemic, exacerbating the risk of gender-based violence. During the pandemic, several States introduced measures to promote women's economic empowerment as a prevention strategy, such as legislation for easier access to social security, including specific measures for services addressing gender-based violence (Germany), and economic and social support for victims of gender-based violence (Cameroon and Senegal).

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[42] UN-Women, "COVID-19 and essential services provision for survivors of violence against women and girls", 2020, p. 4.

[43] Ibid.

56. Women's rights organizations continue to play a key role in driving long-term prevention strategies to end violence against women and girls. According to the UNDP and UN-Women COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker, countries with strong feminist movements adopted on average three more measures to address violence against women and girls than those with weak feminist movements.[44] Despite this evidence, few States reported on their investments and support for women's rights organizations as a critical strategy for eliminating violence against women and girls.

D. Generating data and research

57. Effective strategies to end violence against women and girls rely on robust, regular and comparable data. Several States have developed specific research instruments to address data gaps and monitor the specific impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on violence against women and girls (Australia, Bulgaria, Republic of Korea, Romania, Senegal, Uruguay). For example, the VERA project in Romania involves a study of domestic and gendered violence practices and trends in connection with the pandemic, to improve the response capacity of central and local authorities.

58. Countries have built national data collection systems to better research and monitor the incidence of different forms of gender-based violence and the impact of violence (Colombia, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guatemala, Jordan, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Serbia). United Nations specialized agencies and entities have also undertaken and supported significant research efforts on violence against women and girls, including on the impact of digital violence and the COVID-19 pandemic (UNESCO, UNFPA, UNHCR, UN-Women, ILO).

59. An important achievement is the statistical framework for measuring femicide/ feminicide,[45] jointly developed by UNODC and UN-Women and endorsed by the United Nations Statistical Commission in March 2022, which will strengthen the availability of quality, comparable data on gender-related killings of women and girls.

60. Although some progress has been made in improving violence against women data, States have made inadequate efforts to remedy data gaps, particularly in relation to sexual harassment and violence against women and girls in digital contexts.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

A. Conclusions

61. **Despite increasing efforts at international, regional and national levels, rates of violence against women and girls remain unacceptably high. Digitalization, climate change and environmental degradation, the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic and the global context of protracted crises and conflicts are further intensifying violence against women and girls. The priority theme of the forthcoming sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women is "Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls". The theme provides an important opportunity for strengthening normative frameworks on violence against women and girls in digital contexts.**

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[44] UN-Women and UNDP, *Government Responses to COVID-19: Lessons on Gender Equality for a World in Turmoil* (New York, 2022).

[45] Available at https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/53rd-session/documents/BG-3j-Crime&Criminal JusticeStats-E.pdf.

62. **The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated all forms of violence against women and girls and laid bare the pre-existing gaps in the responses and limited progress on prevention. Challenges in effectively preventing and responding to violence against women include discriminatory laws and social norms, gaps in legal and policy frameworks and poor implementation, inadequate financing, lack of access to quality services for survivors, the failure of duty bearers to hold perpetrators to account, and ad hoc efforts to prevent violence before it occurs. Financing and resources allocated to addressing violence against women and girls remain inadequate considering the scale of the problem. Furthermore, insufficient data remains an obstacle to understanding the full extent of the problem.**

63. **While there is growing attention to the issue of violence against women and girls in digital contexts, more needs to be done to effectively prevent and respond to new and escalating forms of online violence, including by governments and technology intermediaries. Effective measures to prevent and swiftly respond to online violence should include addressing the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators.**

B. Recommendations

64. **States are urged to recognize violence against women and girls in digital contexts as a human rights violation and form of gender-based violence against women and girls and to introduce effective laws, policies and regulatory frameworks in line with existing international human rights instruments to criminalize and prohibit all forms of violence in digital contexts and strengthen capacities of law enforcement agencies to investigate and prosecute crimes effectively.**

65. **States are urged to continue to intensify efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls (including in digital contexts) through the implementation and enforcement of comprehensive laws and budgeted national action plans. Comprehensive, evidence-based, whole-of-government prevention strategies are key. Increasing access to high quality, specialized multisectoral services and women's access to justice and reparations also remain a priority, along with the greater accountability of perpetrators. A continued focus is required on addressing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on violence against women and girls including the economic fallout as well as the impact of climate change and environmental degradation, conflict and crises.**

66. **States could increase cooperation with the technology sector, women's rights organizations, civil society and national human rights institutions to ensure that technology companies and intermediaries strengthen policies and measures to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls in digital contexts; to provide fast and effective responses and remedies to violence when it occurs; as well as to ensure transparent reporting from technology intermediaries on the nature and extent of the problem, and the actions taken in response.**

67. **Technology intermediaries should ensure the gender-responsive design of technology, through increasing the participation of women in the technology sector and partnerships with civil society and women's rights organizations. Technology intermediaries should ensure that the design features of technology enable women's safety online and accessible reporting options as well as access to support.**

68. **Technology intermediaries should establish, communicate and enforce strict codes of conduct for users on their platforms and develop consistent**

standards for content moderation that detect and respond to more subtle forms of online violence.

69.   It is critical to ensure that flexible funding is available for civil society and women's rights organizations in order to enable women's rights organizations to inform decision-making and policy on violence against women and girls and play a lead role in implementing effective prevention and response measures.

70.   States are strongly encouraged to continue to address data gaps and regularly collect data on violence against women and girls as well as to invest in evidence and knowledge of what works in eliminating violence against women and girls, including in digital contexts.

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