

Chapter 5

Online Violence Against Women as a Challenge of the Digital Age and the European Union's Role in Combating the Violence Against Women

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ABSTRACT

With the advances in technology, the online aspects of life have been enhanced significantly in the digital age. Online opportunities have equipped people with many new opportunities, but they have also brought about many new challenges difficult to overcome, especially with the emergence of online versions of the widespread offline problems. This chapter elaborates on the online violence against women as one of the challenges of the digital world. In this scope, online violence against women is examined both as a concept and as a phenomenon. In addition, the European Union is covered in the study as an actor coping with the violence against women with all of its versions with a special emphasis over the online forms getting more common. The study argues that as the level of digitalization increases, it will be more likely to meet with the unwanted consequences of the advanced technologies, like the online violence against women.

INTRODUCTION

One of the frequently used terms to define the current era is the digital age by taking into account the expanding role of digital devices and services in all aspects of life. Despite the unequal distribution and changing pace of digitalisation across the world, the online world has turned progressively into a zone in which people experience a greater part of their lives. In the digital age, it is faster and easier to communicate, to get and disseminate information, to reach a huge amount of content without paying any

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significant effort and bearing a high cost, and to build every kind of connection transcending political boundaries between the states. As a result, self-expression, interactions and relationships have transformed radically. It has become possible to contact globally without facing the borders. In a nutshell, technology has changed all of our lives, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse.

Resisting the attractiveness of the internet in the current age is really difficult. With the numerous opportunities provided to the service of humanity, advances in technology, as well as the widespread use of the internet, smartphone and social media with the increasing affordability, have enriched the lives and empowered people. It has made shopping, organizing personal finance and carrying out business-related activities from everywhere giving the chance of connecting to the online world possible. The recent global pandemic, shaping our lives predominantly since the end of 2020 and forcing people to spend longer times at their homes to protect themselves from the unsterile environment of the outside world, has further intensified the digitalization of life in an irreversible way. It has brought about significant changes in daily routines, social life, delivery of public services, as well as in conduct of business. In addition, the pandemic has also redefined the people's online experiences by making them prone to go online frequently to meet certain needs, such as fulfilling the obligation to work. That is, the relative weight of the online world in our lives is getting bigger.

The development of digital technology cannot be associated solely with positive consequences all the time. There are many adversities stemming from the online experiences, because the communication in the online world can sometimes be aggressive, threatening, offensive, and often sexually and physically violent in content. In other words, the online world is not always safe just like the offline one. The effects of the historically constructed inequalities, such as the discriminations against women, in the societies are also felt in the digital world. As a result, the online versions of the offline discriminations have come to fore and the attempt to keep women in an inferior position also prevailed in the online spaces. Online violence against women, constituting the main concern of this study, is also one of the common online discriminations towards women in the online spaces. To put it succinctly, the online world could not provide the same level of safety to women and men. In 2015, the United Nations (UN) Broadband Commission warned about the unchecked online violence against women and defined such risk as a 21st-century global pandemic with significant negative consequences for all societies in general and irreparable damage for women in particular. It also noted that 73% of women had encountered some form of online violence; women were 27 times more likely to be abused online than men; 61% of online harassers were male; and women aged between 18 and 24 were at particular risk (Broadband Commission for Digital Development, 2015).

Europe, as a continent having a considerable reputation in respecting human rights and acting as an ardent supporter of freedoms globally, is not an exceptional case in the world in terms of online violence against women. According to a survey which was conducted by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) of the European Union (EU) in 2014, one in every ten women in Europe expressed that they had experienced online violence since the age of fifteen. This common problem is taking the attention of a wide range of actors in the continent, including the EU, and leading them to pay effort to eliminate the problem.

This chapter aims, on the one hand, to shed a light on the issue of online violence against women; on the other hand, to focus on the EU's approach to the issue of online violence against women by presenting the issue as a part of the Union's overall fight against the violence against women. The questions of what kinds of a challenge is the online violence against women and whether or not the EU has the appropriate and efficient policies and mechanisms to eliminate violence against women, including its online versions, are taken into consideration during this study. In this scope, the study includes two sec-

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