Calls for a holistic approach to combating digital violence

Digital forms of violence are faster and can have far more impact than violence offline. Therefore, it necessitates special attention, according to GREVIO member Aleid van den Brink.

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(Illustration: iStockphoto)

The rapid development of information and communication technologies opens new avenues for violence against women and girls, exposing them to more risks of abuse. This was the topic of the online conference hosted by Greece and Cyprus on 10 March 2022 (see fact box).

The Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) defines and outlines the problem, and provides practical guidance on how to effectively combat online and technology-facilitated violence in its first General Recommendation

"Grevio publicly demonstrated the need for awareness of the all-encompassing presence of digital forms of violence. By offering this new interpretation of the Istanbul Convention within the existing framework, we hope to increase the relevance of the convention and its implementation," said van den Brink in her presentation at the online conference: The digital dimension of violence against women.

Read also: European countries meet to discuss methods to address the Digital Dimension of Violence against Women

Still talking about combating violence against women

The Istanbul Convention was written over ten years ago. Van den Brink argues that the Istanbul Convention is still relevant today - if you also include the digital dimension:

"When the convention was written, it was obviously meant to address all forms of violence, regardless of whether they belong to the physical or the digital sphere. But the situation has changed in the digital world and the influence of the digital possibilities has grown. The whole world of social media and social platforms did not exist then."

"This digital world adds a new dimension. In Grevio, we refer to it as a continuum; it is not that these forms of violence are completely new, but they appear in new ways. Take stalking, for example. It is still stalking, but now the stalking possibility, for perpetrators, has changed. You can stalk online as well as offline and often it is also a combination of the two," she adds.

In Grevio, they use the term "the digital dimension of violence against women", what does this term comprise?

"We call it 'the digital dimension' because if you think of images, videos, spyware or smart things at home we mean all these manifestations of violence."

Towards a paradigm shift: Not secret – yet safe

Aleid van den Brink, member of GREVIO and its Working Group on a General Recommendation on the digital dimension of violence against Women

In Van den Brinks former professional life, she worked with shelter organisations for women and children for several years. She has over 40 years of experience governing various institutions committed to combatting domestic violence against women, children – and also men.

"The work came close to my heart. People often ask me, why did you stay for so long? Because this is very harsh work. But in my opinion, this is not harsh work. It has a real meaning, and it has impact for so many women and children," says Van den Brink.

At the conference, Van Den Brink highlighted the relevance and importance of the recommendations for all service providers and women advocates, and not only for those involved atthe policy level. When talking about ways to combat digital forms of violence, she adds a personal remark from her professional life working with shelter services:

"Let's learn from the past and be careful to not repeat what we did in the first period of the women shelter movement. We focused primarily on one solution when violence against women occurred, namely to advise women to hide in secret places, in isolation, far away from their home and their network. Of course this is sometimes necessary and we still need safe places, but fortunately, this is not the only way to fight violence."

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What is new is that we really need an intersectional approach with new models for design of social media and other platforms. We should focus on what effect games, social media and other digital platforms have on personal life. That's where you should start to keep people safe.

"In my former professional life, I was deeply involved in the initiatives in the Netherlands for the paradigm shift *Not secret – yet safe*. When it comes to digital violence, we sometimes have the same reflex to recommend leaving your social platforms, not using your smartphones. I would like to call for a focus on keeping an eye and ear on the safe presence in the digital world – for all women and girls."

"We need an intersectional approach"

Grevio's general recommendation is based on the four pillars of the Istanbul Convention - Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Coordinated Policies. The recommendation proposes specific actions to be taken.

"What is new is that we really need an intersectional approach with new models for design of social media and other platforms. We should focus on what effect games, social media and other digital platforms have on personal life. That's where you should start to keep people safe."

"For protection, we realise that women's special services in many European countries are not well financed. They need more funding and training. Since we do not want only technically oriented services, we encourage governments to make it possible for those working within all these services to be educated and to find new ways to serve women affected by these problems."

"We also need to cooperate and work together with social media platforms and tech companies. One of the recommendations is that states should incentivise all internet intermediaries including social media platforms to ensure robust moderation of content through the removal of accounts or content. They should also hold the perpetrators accountable, and they should assist women in removing harmful content. These things are done by states, but not in a holistic way."

The online conference as a space for dialogue

The conference held in March was organised and hosted by the Active Citizen Fund (ACF) Programme operators of Greece and Cyprus together with several stakeholders like the Council of Europe, the SYNERGY Network, as well as the Ministry of Justice and Public Security of Norway, as coordinator of the SYNERGY Network.

"The collaboration between Greece and Cyprus was developed out of a shared interest to foster regional collaboration and exchange of knowledge, expertise and good practices on a topic prioritised in both programmes", says Natalia Kouhartsiouk, Centre and Project Manager at NGO Support Centre in Cyprus.

"For several years, Greece has ranked last in the EU on the Gender Index, and the issue of gender-based violence has recently become more prominent, following a series of femicides and attacks, including well-publicised cases of online abuse of women."

"At the same time, Cyprus demonstrates gaps in recent data on the topic, which hinders the support of victims and stifles the development of policies and actions preventing gender-based violence."

Natalia Kouhartsiouk, Centre and Project Manager at NGO Support Centre in Cyprus

With this context in mind, both ACF Greece and [ACF Cyprus](#) have developed calls for proposals in order to finance projects that promote gender equality, combat gender-based violence and focus on the empowerment of vulnerable groups, including women and girls.

A surge in reported incidences of violence

Why is this topic, the digital dimension of violence against women, important to highlight now?

"A surge in the level of reported incidents of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls had been identified in many countries, also facilitated by measures to contain the covid-19 pandemic in the last two years," says Kouhartsiouk.

"The increased use of information and communication technologies globally has facilitated violence against women and girls through the digital medium. This is exhibited in a range of formats such as non-consensual content sharing, exploitation, sexualised bullying, cyber-flashing and cyber-stalking among others."

"In Greece and Cyprus alone, several femicides and attacks, including cases of online abuse of women, have recently been made public," Kouhartsiouk adds.

The conference took place a few days after the International Women's Day. When asking Kouhartsiouk in what way the conference is related to this international day, she answers:

"This global day offers a timely opportunity for highlighting the consequences of and discussing ways to combat technology-facilitated violence towards women and girls that is often overlooked or not prioritised."

Like van den Brink, Kouhartsiouk highlights the need for a holistic, multi-stakeholder response to the issue of digital dimensions of violence:

"For countries to take effective measures against the issue in the areas of prevention, protection, prosecution, and coordinated policies it is important to rely on an in-depth understanding of the topic and the exchange of good practice, expertise, and experience between non-governmental and governmental entities and other relevant bodies and groups."

"The conference on digital violence against women will help to develop more ways to assist women and offer support and guidance. It is very good to have this international exchange, as good practices are often applicable in many countries," van den Brink adds.

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