



Digital Violence

A new quality of gender-based violence

New digital means are leading to a new quality of gender-based violence. This is illustrated by the example of stalking: digital surveillance by means of spy apps or stalkerware installed unnoticed on mobile phones is becoming increasingly critical. It is mostly women who are affected by such violence, which is often exerted by (former) partners. When it comes to gender-based violence in the digitalised world, the boundaries between analogue and digital space are thus blurred. Digital tools such as stalkerware or spy apps facilitate and expand the possibilities of using violence in the “real” world: they provide offenders with information about the victim, e.g. about her/his whereabouts. This makes it possible for the offenders to comprehensively track the victim in the real world: They can, for instance, visit the victim’s home if the victim is not there and leave their traces. Or they can specifically seek out the person being spied on where they have located him or her and make concrete threats. At the same time, violence also takes place in the digital space itself. For example, nude photos of the affected person are uploaded to porn sites, or private personal information is published online. Spy apps enable unauthorised access to such data.

There are many different forms of gender-based digital violence. The following characteristics define them and must be taken into account in the fight against such violence:

- » Digital technology enables offenders to commit acts of aggression **at any time and from any place**. Via the internet, they can display their acts or victims in front of an immense audience.
- » In the digital world, one can act anonymously. On the one hand, the protective cloak of **anonymity** often makes equal capabilities irrespective of gender possible in the first place. On the other hand, however, anonymity and the possibilities of **identity theft** make it more difficult to prosecute assaults.
- » Data is **long-lived, easily replicated, and quickly disseminated** (“the net does not forget”). Requesting deletions, for instance, is a difficult, lengthy, and often unsuccessful endeavour. Once something has been uploaded online, it is very difficult to remove it again.

IN THIS FACT SHEET

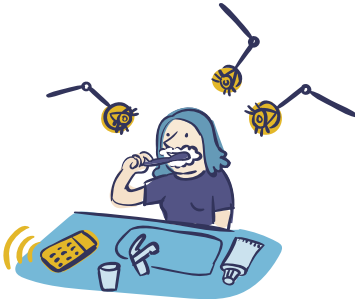
- » Forms and occurrence
 - » Specific challenges
 - » Solution approaches
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Digital violence constitutes a new quality of gender-based violence. In order to effectively counter it, legislation must introduce new regulations and adapt existing ones. Competence on gender-based violence as well as technical competence must be interlinked at counselling centres and within public authorities.

Where does gender-based digital violence occur?

Following Regina Frey, the Expert Opinion for the Third Gender Equality Report distinguishes four areas in which gender-based digital violence takes place. These areas are the close social sphere, politics and voluntary work, employment/paid work, and the public sphere. Each of these areas is characterised by different forms of digital violence.



Close social sphere

In the close(r) social sphere, digital violence is mainly used to make people (mostly women) submissive/obedient and to control them. This is done, for instance, by threatening to publish personal data or pictures (“doxing”, “revenge porn”). New digital possibilities in terms of spying and surveillance (spy- and stalkerware) in the context of intimate partner violence do not only threaten those directly affected by it. An example: Women seeking protection can be located via geodata. When they go to a women’s shelter, their location is tracked – which in turn can also endanger the safety of the staff working there.

Politics and voluntary work

Offenders use online hate speech to deliberately disparage people on the basis of personal characteristics such as gender, gender orientation, or disability. Such hate comments often persist and survive online. They thus become part of a person’s “digital profile” and therefore have a negative impact on those affected. Hate speech is particularly often used to attack female politicians. Gender equality officers and (queer) feminist activists are also target groups of such attacks. The goal is to “mess up” and silence the victims.



From “cyber grooming” to “spy apps”: The most frequently used terms in the area of digital violence are explained on the homepage of the Federal Association of Rape Crisis Centres and Women’s Counselling Centres (bff): <https://www.aktiv-gegen-digitale-gewalt.de/de/glossar.html>

Paid work

In almost all professions, employees have to deal with digital applications such as email programmes. For journalists or influencers, their workplace is the digital public sphere. They are thus particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment in digital form (cyber harassment). For example, perpetrators send messages with sexualised content or unsolicited (pornographic) pictures (e.g. pictures of male genitals, so-called dick pics). Sexual harassment, also in the form of gender-based digital violence, is a means of exercising power. It is deployed to assign women their supposedly “rightful” place within a hierarchical gender order.

The gaming industry occupies a special position in various respects. There are increasingly many publications focusing on the gaming industry and e-sports which report sexual harassment, assaults, and an overall problematic culture that particularly affect women. Some companies in the industry are said to have a male “buddy culture” that is in urgent need of reform with regard to its impact on digital violence.

Public sphere

Digital technologies enable new forms of gender-based violence also in public spaces. One example is “upskirting” (which is now prohibited by law): Offenders use tiny digital cameras (spycams) to make films and photos of the victim’s private parts unnoticed, for example on escalators. The recordings are then exchanged or sold online via corresponding forums. Another example is illegal films/pictures taken in changing rooms or toilet stalls. In Germany, first cases of filming during music festivals became known, but secret filming is also taking place in swimming halls, gyms, solariums, and department stores.

Impacts, challenges, and countermeasures

Many victims of gender-based digital violence withdraw from political office, for example, in order not to expose themselves and their families to (further) hostility. In this way, hate speech and other forms of digital violence have a direct limiting impact on **democratic participation**. Economic losses and **financial burdens** are also frequent consequences. In some cases, those affected lose their livelihoods: This is the case, for example, if they earn their income by publishing in the digital public sphere, but are forced to temporarily or permanently discontinue online formats such as blogs or video channels due to online harassment and hostility. **Forced relocations and switching identities** may be further consequences.

Interference with sexual self-determination and the **violation of personal rights**, e.g. through secretly captured intimate recordings and their dissemination online, has **mental health impacts** on those affected. If violence transcends the digital space, the **physical well-being** of those affected is also at stake.

Gender-based digital violence is thus a major problem in both the digital and analogue world. It is exacerbated by the following circumstances:

Lack of competence within the protection and support systems

On the one hand, a range of counselling and support facilities are available for those affected by gender-based digital violence. These include the counselling organisation HateAid, which is directed against online hate: <https://hateaid.org/>. The 24-hour helpline of the Federal Office of Family and Civil Society Functions (BAFzA) is available specifically for women (<https://www.hilfetelefon.de/>), as is the service offered by the Federal Association of Rape Crisis Centres and Women's Counselling Centres (Bundesverband Frauenberatungsstellen und Frauennotrufe, bff): <https://www.aktiv-gegen-digitale-gewalt.de/>.

The Expert Commission for the Third Gender Equality Report recommends:

- » Expanding initiatives and projects on the topic of gender-based digital violence and supporting their work with the aim of building sustainable structures and preserving the expertise gained on a long-term basis.

On the other hand, it is also true that most experts on gender-based violence have little technical knowledge/competence. Conversely, specialists in digital technology and cybercrime often have little knowledge regarding gender-based violence. Thus, victims of gender-based digital violence seeking help often encounter a competence gap. This also applies to specialised counselling centres, police, and law enforcement agencies. It can therefore happen that a woman reports an incident of stalking, for instance, but the police do not even contemplate there potentially being spy- or stalkerware installed on the victim's mobile phone. The victim will thus not be advised to have their mobile phone scanned for such software.

The Expert Commission for the Third Gender Equality Report therefore recommends:

Adjusting violence prevention and support systems

- » Competences on digital violence must be established and fostered in counselling centres, the police, law enforcement and regulatory authorities, and the judiciary. A violence protection and support system that is adapted to the challenges of gender-based digital violence must be developed.

Developing and establishing protection measures

- » People at high risk of gender-based digital violence must be protected swiftly and unbureaucratically and receive effective help. It could be the task of an independent body to support the initiation of the respective necessary steps. This includes, for instance, ordering the deletion of hate comments or gathering evidence.



The Germany-wide initiative **"Stärker als Gewalt" (Stronger than Violence)** of the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth helps those affected to recognise digital violence and to defend themselves: <https://staerker-als-gewalt.de>



Insufficient action by social media companies against digital violence

Companies providing social media platforms find themselves in an economic dilemma: the manual filtering of comments and content is cost-intensive. At the same time, provocations lead to more clicks, which in turn increases advertising revenues. The providers have thus no incentive to intervene. After all, the users of the platforms are not paying customers, but merely a target group for the advertising industry.

The Expert Commission for the Third Gender Equality Report therefore recommends:



Holding platforms accountable

- » Platform providers and operators must take responsibility in the fight against digital violence. This includes reporting and evidence gathering obligations for the operators to better identify offenders and to hold them accountable. The relevant Network Enforcement Law (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz) must – in accordance with the German constitution – be amended accordingly.

Moreover, the Expert Commission recommends readjusting/adapting **further legal regulations**, for instance with regard to protection against cyber harassment at work. In general, more efforts should be made to **improve research, indicator-based recording**, and **effective combating** of gender-based digital violence. With regard to the latter, attention should also be paid to the development of **algorithm-driven and hybrid techniques**. In particular, this involves mechanisms that can recognise and delete hate speech online – without restricting freedom of expression. An example of this is a Swiss project which uses an algorithm called Bot Dog to detect hate speech and enable targeted counter-speech by users: <https://stophatespeech.ch/>.

All recommendations on digital gender-based violence made by the Expert Commission as well as all other recommendations for action can be found in the brochure 101 Handlungsempfehlungen (**101 recommendations for action**). This brochure is available for download at: <https://www.dritter-gleichstellungsbericht.de/de/article/280.digitalisierung-geschlechtergerecht-gestalten-101-handlungsempfehlungen.html>.



Further reading

- » Chapter B.IV.2 on gender-related digital violence in the Expert Opinion of the Third Gender Equality Report of the German Federal Government. The Third Gender Equality Report of the German Federal Government is available (in German) at: <https://www.bmfsfj.de/gleichstellungsbericht>
- » Agency for the Third Gender Equality Report of the German Federal Government (2021): Shaping digitalisation in a gender-equitable way. Summary of the Expert Opinion of the Third Gender Equality Report of the Federal Government. Berlin: Agency for the Third Gender Equality Report. Download at: <https://www.dritter-gleichstellungsbericht.de/de/topic/50.english.html>
- » Frey, Regina (2020): Geschlecht und Gewalt im digitalen Raum. Eine qualitative Analyse der Erscheinungsformen, Betroffenheiten und Handlungsmöglichkeiten unter Berücksichtigung intersektionaler Aspekte. Expert opinion for the Third Gender Equality Report of the German Federal Government, available (in German) at: <https://www.dritter-gleichstellungsbericht.de/de/topic/62.expertisen.html>
- » bff/Prasad, Nivedita (eds) (2021): Geschlechtsspezifische Gewalt in Zeiten der Digitalisierung – Formen und Interventionsstrategien, Transcript Verlag, also available online (in German) at: <https://opus4.kobv.de/opus4-ash/files/421/0a9783839452813.pdf>

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