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**UNITED NATIONS PROGRAMME FOR GENDER EQUALITY
AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN (UN WOMEN)**

Combatting Sexual Violence in the Digital Era

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DISCLAIMER

Please be advised that this paper discusses topics related to sexual violence. These details are presented to examine the guides analysis on combatting sexual violence in the digital era. Please consult with your advisor if you are uncomfortable with this topic, and need to be moved to a different committee.

Introduction

Sexual violence remains one of the most pervasive and underreported violations of human rights worldwide, disproportionately affecting women and girls across all regions, socioeconomic groups, and cultural contexts. Despite sustained international efforts to address gender-based violence, rapid technological advancements have reshaped the terrain on which such violence occurs. The digital revolution, while facilitating global connectivity, economic opportunity, and civic participation, has also generated new spaces in which sexual violence can be perpetrated with unprecedented reach, anonymity, and permanence. As societies become increasingly digitized, the threat of sexual violence has expanded beyond physical spaces into online environments that are often insufficiently regulated and inadequately governed.

Technology-facilitated sexual violence represents a critical and evolving challenge within the broader framework of violence against women and girls. Digital platforms, social media networks, messaging applications, artificial intelligence systems, and data-sharing technologies have become tools through which perpetrators can harass, exploit, intimidate, and silence women.¹ These acts are not confined to virtual harm but produce tangible psychological, social, economic, and physical consequences. Survivors often experience prolonged trauma, reputational damage, and exclusion from public life, with digital abuse frequently intersecting with or escalating into offline violence.

The United Nations system, particularly UN Women, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), World Health Organization, and United Nations Development Programme, has increasingly recognized that sexual violence in digital spaces must be addressed as a matter of human rights, public health, and sustainable development.² Digital sexual violence undermines progress toward gender equality, weakens democratic participation, and reinforces existing structural inequalities.³ However, international and national legal frameworks have struggled to

¹ UN Women. “FAQs: Digital Abuse, Trolling, Stalking, and Other Forms of Technology-Facilitated Violence against Women | UN Women – Headquarters.” UN Women – Headquarters, 10 Feb. 2025, www.unwomen.org/en/articles/faqs/digital-abuse-trolling-stalking-and-other-forms-of-technology-facilitated-violence-against-women.

² UN Women, Violence against Women and Girls in the Digital Space, UN Women Discussion Paper (New York: UN Women, 2023), <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/09/violence-against-women-and-girls-in-the-digital-space>

³ “Violence Against Women in the Digital Space: A Growing Threat to Democracy.” n.d. International IDEA. <https://www.idea.int/blog/violence-against-women-digital-space-growing-threat-democracy>.

keep pace with technological change, leaving gaps in accountability, survivor protection, and prevention.⁴

Defining Sexual Violence in Digital Contexts

Technology-facilitated sexual violence refers to acts of sexual harm that are committed, enabled, amplified, or aggravated through the use of digital technologies. UN Women defines this phenomenon as a form of violence against women that occurs online or through digital tools and results in physical, sexual, psychological, economic, or social harm.⁵ This definition emphasizes that digital sexual violence is not merely symbolic or abstract but produces concrete consequences that mirror, reinforce, and extend offline forms of gender-based violence.

Digital sexual violence encompasses a wide range of behaviors. These include online sexual harassment, which involves repeated unwanted comments, explicit threats, and gendered insults; image-based sexual abuse, including the non-consensual sharing or creation of intimate images; cyberstalking, which enables surveillance and coercive control; doxxing, which exposes personal information to facilitate harm; and the creation and distribution of Artificial Intelligence-generated deepfakes. These behaviors often occur simultaneously, creating cumulative harm that is difficult to escape.

The gendered nature of digital sexual violence is well documented. Studies conducted by UN agencies demonstrate that women are significantly more likely than men to experience sexualized harassment online, particularly when they occupy visible or authoritative roles in politics, journalism, academia, or activism.⁶

Importantly, technology-facilitated sexual violence exists along a continuum of violence rather than as a distinct or isolated category. Survivors of intimate partner violence frequently report digital monitoring, harassment, and threats as tools of ongoing abuse. Conversely, online sexual violence may escalate into offline stalking, assault, or coercion. Artificial distinctions between “online” and “offline” violence obscure the lived realities of survivors and hinder effective policy responses.

International Legal and Normative Frameworks

The international legal foundation for addressing sexual violence is rooted in universal human rights principles that affirm the inherent dignity and equality of all individuals. The 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW) remains a cornerstone of

⁴ Koenig, Alexa . “Digital Investigations of Systematic and Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: Practice and Possibilities | Chicago Journal of International Law.” Uchicago.edu, 2025, [cjil.uchicago.edu/print-archive/digital-investigations-systematic-and-conflict-related-sexual-violence-practice-and-possibilities](https://www.uchicago.edu/print-archive/digital-investigations-systematic-and-conflict-related-sexual-violence-practice-and-possibilities).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ World Health Organization, Violence against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018: Global, Regional and National Prevalence Estimates for Intimate Partner Violence against Women and Global and Regional Prevalence Estimates for Non-Partner Sexual Violence against Women (Geneva: WHO, 2021), <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240022256>.

global efforts to combat gender-based violence. DEVAW defines violence against women as any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering, whether occurring in public or private life.⁷ Although adopted prior to the widespread use of digital technologies, this definition is sufficiently broad to encompass technology-facilitated sexual violence.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) further obliges states to eliminate discrimination against women in all spheres of life. The CEDAW Committee's General Recommendation No. 35 explicitly recognizes that gender-based violence may be perpetrated through technology and emphasizes state responsibility to prevent, investigate, punish, and provide reparations for such acts.⁸ This interpretation establishes a clear normative basis for addressing digital sexual violence within existing treaty obligations.

UN Women

UN Women has played a central role in advancing policy frameworks that recognize the severity of digital violence. Through the “UN Women Knowledge Hub on Ending Violence against Women”, the UN Agency has documented how online abuse undermines women's political participation, economic empowerment, and freedom of expression.⁹ The organization advocates for survivor-centered approaches, legal reform, and accountability mechanisms that extend to technology companies and digital platforms.

UNFPA situates digital sexual violence within broader sexual and reproductive health and rights frameworks, emphasizing its impact on bodily autonomy, mental health, and access to essential services. UNFPA has highlighted how digital violence disproportionately affects adolescent girls and young women, particularly in contexts where access to digital literacy and support services is limited.¹⁰ WHO similarly frames violence, including digital forms, as a public health issue, linking exposure to long-term mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress.¹¹

At the policy level, the UN General Assembly has increasingly addressed digital violence through resolutions on violence against women and girls, the safety of journalists, and the promotion of inclusive digital transformation. These resolutions call for gender-responsive

⁷ United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: Making All Spaces Safe* (New York: UNFPA, 2021), <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence>

⁸ United Nations General Assembly, *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*, A/RES/48/104 (20 December 1993), https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.21_declaration%20elimination%20violence%20against%20women.pdf.

⁹ UN Women, *General Recommendation No. 35 on Gender-Based Violence against Women, Updating General Recommendation No. 19*, CEDAW/C/GC/35 (Geneva: United Nations, 2017), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/general-recommendation-no-35>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ European Institute for Gender Equality, *Cyber Violence against Women and Girls* (Vilnius: EIGE, 2017), <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/cyber-violence-against-women-and-girls>.

technology governance, international cooperation, and the integration of digital safety into national action plans.

Structural and Technological Drivers

The persistence of sexual violence in digital spaces is rooted in structural gender inequality. Digital technologies do not operate in a social vacuum; rather, they reflect and amplify existing power imbalances. Patriarchal norms that normalize misogyny, entitlement, and control over women's bodies and voices are reproduced in online environments, where accountability mechanisms are often weak or absent.

Anonymity and disinhibition play significant roles in facilitating digital abuse. Many platforms allow users to conceal their identities, reducing perceived social consequences for harmful behavior. This anonymity enables coordinated harassment campaigns and emboldens perpetrators to engage in extreme forms of abuse that would be less likely in face-to-face interactions.¹²

Platform design choices further exacerbate the problem. Algorithms that prioritize engagement frequently amplify sensational or abusive content, inadvertently rewarding harassment with visibility. Reporting mechanisms on many platforms are opaque, slow, or retraumatizing for survivors, discouraging victims from seeking redress. Inadequate moderation resources, particularly in non-English languages, deepen global inequalities in protection.

Further, Artificial intelligence has introduced new dimensions to digital sexual violence. AI-powered image manipulation tools allow for the rapid creation of realistic explicit deepfakes with minimal technical expertise. UN Women reports that the vast majority of deepfake sexual content targets women, often without their knowledge or consent.¹³ These technologies complicate legal accountability by obscuring authorship, enabling mass distribution, and challenging evidentiary standards.

Cultural stigma surrounding sexual violence further silences survivors. Victim-blaming attitudes, fear of reputational damage, and lack of trust in legal systems discourage reporting. In many contexts, women who experience digital sexual abuse face social exclusion or professional consequences, while perpetrators remain anonymous and unpunished.

Impacts on Individuals and Societies

The consequences of digital sexual violence are profound and multidimensional. Survivors frequently experience psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, trauma-related symptoms, and suicidal ideation. The permanence of online content means that harm can be ongoing, with victims unable to fully escape abuse even after reporting or account

¹² Danielle Keats Citron, *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674976282>.

¹³ *Ibid.*

deletion.¹⁴ Social and economic impacts are equally significant. Women targeted by online sexual violence may withdraw from professional opportunities, public engagement, or education. Journalists and politicians have reported self-censorship or resignation due to sustained harassment, which undermines democratic participation and reinforces gender gaps in leadership and decision-making.

Digital sexual violence also poses tangible physical safety risks. Cyberstalking and doxxing expose victims' locations and personal information, increasing vulnerability to offline harassment or assault. Online threats of sexual violence generate fear that is indistinguishable from offline intimidation, reinforcing patterns of coercive control.¹⁵ At the societal level, the normalization of online misogyny erodes trust in digital spaces and weakens the promise of technology as a tool for empowerment and inclusion.

Case Study I: The Nth Room Case in South Korea

The Nth Room case represents one of the most severe documented instances of technology-facilitated sexual exploitation. Between 2018 and 2020, perpetrators used encrypted messaging platforms to coerce women and girls into producing sexually explicit content under threat of exposure. The material was distributed to paying subscribers, creating a criminal enterprise involving tens of thousands of participants.¹⁶ Victims were targeted through social media and messaging apps and manipulated through threats against family members or the release of personal data. Public outrage led to legal reforms in South Korea, including harsher penalties for digital sexual crimes and expanded victim support services. The case demonstrated the need for platform accountability, international cooperation, and survivor-centered justice.

Beyond its scale, the Nth Room case exposed systemic failures in digital governance and law enforcement preparedness. The exploitation was sustained not only by perpetrators but by thousands of passive consumers who paid to access this content, revealing how digital platforms can normalize sexual violence through commodification. The use of encrypted messaging services and anonymous payment methods created jurisdictional and evidentiary challenges that delayed intervention, allowing abuse to continue unchecked for extended periods. Victims reported long-term psychological trauma, social isolation, and fear of continued exposure due to the permanence of digital content. The case demonstrated that sexual violence in digital spaces

¹⁴ Amnesty International, *Toxic Twitter: A Toxic Place for Women* (London: Amnesty International, 2018), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-1/>

¹⁵ UN Women, *Online and ICT-Facilitated Violence against Women and Girls: A Call for Evidence* (New York: UN Women, 2020), <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/09/online-and-ict-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls>.

¹⁶ World Wide Web Foundation, *Women's Rights Online: Closing the Digital Gender Gap for a More Equal World* (Washington, DC: Web Foundation, 2015), <https://webfoundation.org/research/womens-rights-online-2015/>

can be decentralized, financially incentivized, and socially embedded, requiring responses that extend beyond traditional criminal justice models.¹⁷

The legal and societal response to the Nth Room case offers critical lessons for the international community. Following public outrage, South Korea enacted stronger penalties for digital sexual crimes, expanded victim anonymity protections, and increased funding for survivor support services. However, UN Women and UNDP analyses note that reactive legal reform alone is insufficient. Prevention must include proactive platform regulation, early detection mechanisms, and digital literacy education that addresses demand as well as supply. The case underscores the necessity of treating digital sexual exploitation as organized gender-based violence rather than isolated criminal acts. It also highlights the importance of survivor-centered justice models that prioritize long-term recovery and dignity over purely punitive responses.¹⁸

Case Study: AI-Generated Deepfakes

AI-generated deepfakes have emerged as a rapidly growing threat, particularly in non-consensual contexts. In 2025, multiple cases revealed that AI tools embedded in widely used applications had generated non-consensual explicit images of women, including minors.¹⁹ Victims faced immense psychological harm and reputational damage, with limited legal recourse. These cases prompted regulatory responses, including the European Union's Violence Against Women Directive, which criminalizes the creation and distribution of deepfake sexual content. The cases underscore the urgency of gender-sensitive AI governance.

The rise of AI-generated deepfakes represents a disturbing shift in the nature of sexual violence. Unlike traditional image-based abuse, deepfakes allow perpetrators to fabricate sexual content without any prior interaction with the victim. This erodes the foundations upon which many legal systems rely, as victims must prove both non-consent and falsification. Women affected by deepfake abuse have reported profound identity violations, describing the experience as a loss of bodily autonomy despite the absence of physical contact. Educational institutions and workplaces have struggled to respond appropriately, often lacking policies that recognize AI-generated sexual content as a form of sexual violence rather than misconduct or defamation.²⁰

Moreover, the deepfake crisis illustrates the urgent need for gender-responsive AI governance. UN Women has emphasized that AI systems are not neutral and frequently reflect the biases of their creators and training data. The disproportionate targeting of women through deepfake sexually explicit content demonstrates how emerging technologies can reinforce

¹⁷ Council of Europe, Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) (Istanbul: Council of Europe, 2011), <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Guidance Note on Addressing Gender-Based Violence against Women and Girls in Criminal Justice Reform (Vienna: UNODC, 2019), https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Gender_based_violence_guidance_note.pdf.

²⁰ Clare McGlynn and Erika Rackley, "Image-Based Sexual Abuse," *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 37, no. 3 (2017): 534–561, <https://academic.oup.com/ojls/article/37/3/534/3826788>

gendered harm when ethical safeguards are absent. Lessons from these cases include the necessity of regulating AI at the design stage, mandating transparency from developers, and criminalizing both the creation and distribution of non-consensual synthetic sexual content. Additionally, survivor remedies must include rapid takedown mechanisms, reputational restoration measures, and psychological support. Deepfake abuse highlights that technological innovation without human rights oversight risks reproducing sexual violence at unprecedented scale.²¹

Online Harassment of Women Journalists

Even journalists who report on the aforementioned issues are not safe. Highlighting the depth of this issue, UN Women has recently documented the disproportionate violence faced by women journalists. UN Women and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report that female journalists are frequently targeted with violent threats, sexualized insults, and image-based abuse aimed at silencing their reporting.²² In several documented cases, online harassment escalated into offline threats, leading journalists to leave their professions. This pattern demonstrates how digital sexual violence undermines press freedom, democratic accountability, and women's participation in public life.

The targeting of women journalists through digital sexual violence represents a strategic form of gendered silencing. Threats of assault, dissemination of manipulated sexual images, and coordinated harassment campaigns are frequently employed to undermine credibility and deter investigative reporting. Studies by UNESCO and UN Women show that such abuse disproportionately targets women covering politics, corruption, or human rights, particularly in polarized or authoritarian contexts. The psychological toll of sustained online abuse has led many journalists to self-censor, withdraw from public platforms, or leave the profession entirely. This pattern reveals how digital sexual violence functions not only as interpersonal harm but as a structural threat to freedom of expression and democratic accountability.²³

Lessons drawn from these cases emphasize the interconnectedness of gender equality, digital safety, and press freedom. UN frameworks increasingly call for institutional responsibility, including newsroom protocols for online harassment, platform cooperation with media organizations, and state-level recognition of digital sexual threats as violations of human rights. Protecting women journalists requires legal recognition of online sexual violence as a

²¹ Human Rights Watch, "My Life Is Over": Online Harassment and Violence against Women in Egypt (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2020),

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/07/06/my-life-over/online-harassment-and-violence-against-women-egyp>.

²² United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Behind the Screens: Insights from Youth on Sexuality, Gender, and Digital Life* (Paris: UNESCO, 2023), <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/behind-screens-youth-digital-life>.

²³ UN Women, *Safe Spaces Now: Ending Online Violence against Women and Girls* (New York: UN Women, 2021), <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/csw65/ending-online-violence-against-women-and-girls>

form of gender-based persecution, as well as international solidarity mechanisms to support those targeted across borders.²⁴

Strategies for Prevention and Response

Combatting digital sexual violence requires comprehensive, multisectoral strategies. Legal frameworks must explicitly criminalize technology-facilitated sexual violence, including AI-generated abuse, and ensure survivor access to justice. Digital platforms must adopt safety-by-design principles, transparent moderation policies, and rapid response mechanisms. Additionally, education and digital literacy programs are critical for prevention. Survivor support services must be expanded, including psychological counseling, legal aid, and digital forensics assistance. International cooperation through UN-led initiatives is essential for harmonizing standards and sharing best practices.

Creative Solutions

Beyond conventional legal reform and platform regulation, innovative prevention strategies must integrate gender equality principles directly into digital governance architectures. One promising approach is the institutionalization of gender-responsive technology impact assessments, modeled on existing gender mainstreaming tools endorsed by UN Women and the Economic and Social Council. These assessments would require governments and technology companies to evaluate the potential gendered risks of new digital products, algorithms, or AI systems before deployment. Drawing on frameworks such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, states could mandate that private sector actors identify, mitigate, and publicly report risks related to technology-facilitated sexual violence. Such measures would shift responsibility upstream, moving beyond reactive content removal toward structural prevention embedded in digital design and innovation processes.²⁵

Another creative avenue involves the expansion of cross-border digital protection mechanisms through multilateral cooperation. Given the transnational nature of digital platforms, unilateral national responses are often insufficient. Building on existing UNFPA and UNDP initiatives on digital safety and cybersecurity, nations could establish a coordinated international referral and rapid response network for cases of severe digital sexual violence.²⁶ This mechanism could facilitate expedited content takedowns, evidence preservation, and survivor referrals across

²⁴ UN Women and UNICEF, *Cyber Violence against Women and Girls in Asia-Pacific* (Bangkok: UN Women Regional Office, 2022), <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/03/cyber-violence-against-women-and-girls>.

²⁵ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Gender Equality and the Digital Transformation* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2018), <https://www.oecd.org/gender/gender-equality-and-the-digital-transformation.htm>

²⁶ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Digital Strategy 2022–2025: Leveraging Digital for Inclusive Development* (New York: UNDP, 2022), <https://www.undp.org/publications/digital-strategy-2022-2025>

jurisdictions, particularly in cases involving deepfakes or organized exploitation. Complementing this approach are survivor-centered restorative justice models, which are adapted from WHO-supported trauma-informed care frameworks. These models would prioritize survivor agency, psychological recovery, and acknowledgment of harm while challenging cultures of impunity that thrive in anonymous online environments.²⁷

Conclusion

Sexual violence in the digital era represents one of the most complex and urgent challenges facing the international community's efforts to advance gender equality and human rights. As digital technologies become increasingly embedded in every aspect of social, political, and economic life, the harms inflicted through these systems can no longer be treated as peripheral or secondary to "real-world" violence. Technology-facilitated sexual violence is real, enduring, and deeply harmful, undermining women's autonomy, safety, and participation across societies. Its persistence reflects not only gaps in law and regulation but also deeper structural inequalities that shape how technology is designed and used.

UN Women, alongside UNFPA, WHO, and other UN entities, occupies a critical role in shaping a coordinated global response. Addressing digital sexual violence requires integrated strategies that combine legal reform, platform accountability, education, survivor support, and international cooperation. Importantly, solutions must move beyond reactive enforcement and embrace preventive, gender-responsive digital governance. Incorporating human rights principles into the design and regulation of emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence, is essential to preventing the replication of harm in new technological forms.

²⁷ International Telecommunication Union (ITU), *Addressing Online Gender-Based Violence and Harassment* (Geneva: ITU, 2020), <https://www.itu.int/en/action/gender-equality/Documents/Addressing-Online-GBV.pdf>.

Guiding Questions for Research

1. How do existing international frameworks, including CEDAW General Recommendation No. 35 and UN General Assembly Resolution 75/161, address technology-facilitated sexual violence?
2. In what ways do emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, deepfake software, and encrypted platforms exacerbate sexual violence against women and girls?
3. What legal, cultural, and institutional barriers prevent survivors of digital sexual violence from accessing justice and support services, and how do these barriers differ between high-income and low-income countries?
4. How have partnerships between governments, civil society organizations, UN agencies, and private technology companies been used to prevent and respond to online gender-based violence?

Guiding Questions for Debate

1. To what extent should states regulate digital platforms and technology companies to prevent sexual violence online, and how can such regulation balance accountability with privacy concerns?
2. How can survivor-centered approaches be meaningfully incorporated into digital safety policies without increasing surveillance, stigmatization, or unintended harm to women and girls?
3. What role should UN Women and the broader UN system play in coordinating data collection, capacity-building, and enforcement mechanisms related to sexual violence in digital spaces, and how can these efforts be adequately funded and monitored?