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**The Effects of Social Media on Girls: Keeping Children Safe,  
Preventing Abuse and Cyber-Bullying, and Mental Health Issues**

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

<b>Introduction</b>	2
<b>The Effects of Social Media on Girls</b>	3
The Positive Effects	3
Social media as a tool to tackle violence against women:	3
Social media hashtag activism bringing the spotlight on women’s rights:	4
The Negative Effects: Deteriorating Mental Health Among Social Media Users	4
<b>Keeping Children Safe online: Preventing Abuse and Cyber-bullying</b>	6
Steps Being Taken to Reduce Rates of Cyber Bullying	7
<b>Recommendations</b>	9
At the private sector level	9
At Government level	9
<b>References</b>	11

## 1. Introduction

The advent of the digital age has established unprecedented technological advancement. This era, which is characterized by a rapid epochal shift from traditional industry established by the industrial revolution to an economy primarily based upon information technology, has had tremendous effects on the world as we know it. According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), approximately 4.9 billion people – or 63 per cent of the world’s population – are using the Internet in 2021. This represents an increase of 17 per cent since 2019, with 782 million people estimated to have come online during that period<sup>2</sup>. This means that the digital world is transforming rapidly and changing governments, economies and communities in turn. But old and new issues challenge social progress and economic development. For instance, globally, there are more men than women online, with 62 percent of men using the Internet, compared with 57 percent of women, in 2020<sup>3</sup>. This is especially evident in the global South where access to the internet remains too often beyond the means of people. Of the 2.9 billion people offline, 96 per cent live in developing countries<sup>4</sup>. This digital divide is equally evident in rural areas, with people in urban areas twice more likely to use the Internet than those in rural areas. In Africa the gap is greater: one-half of urban dwellers are online, compared with just 15 percent of the rural population.<sup>5</sup> All of these suggest that women living in rural areas in developing countries bear the tripartite risk of being left behind and not fully benefiting from the access to employment and education that comes with connectivity and digital literacy. But even in areas where the internet is accessible and available, social media can expose users to threats like abuse, cyberbullying and have a significant effect on mental health, especially among girls.

With CSW 67 offering a powerful spotlight on critical issues affecting the status of women, this paper explores the effects of social media on girls and their mental health, while putting forward recommendations regarding the prevention of abuse and cyberbullying.

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<sup>2</sup> The full ITU report can be found here: [Facts and figures 2021 \(itu.int\)](https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-T/development/Documents/Facts_Figures2021.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Source: ITU [Facts and figures 2021 \(itu.int\)](https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-T/development/Documents/Facts_Figures2021.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> International Telecommunication Union, Development Sector (2021) Measuring digital development Facts and Figures 2021. Available at: [Facts and figures 2021 \(itu.int\)](https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-T/development/Documents/Facts_Figures2021.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Source: [Facts and figures 2021 - Internet use in urban and rural areas \(itu.int\)](https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-T/development/Documents/Facts_Figures2021.pdf)

## 2. The Effects of Social Media on Girls

Social media has transformed how information is shared globally and the relationship between citizens and governments (Shirky, 2011). Beyond its use as a social networking tool, social media allows for the first time any individual to share content and opinions to a global audience, bypassing traditional media or other modes of information transmission (European Parliament, 2013). Platforms such as YouTube, Facebook or Twitter have allowed activists around the world to retransmit events live to a broad online audience, such as during the Arab Spring movement (Pew Research Center, 2012). Social media has tremendous effects on the lives of women and girls both positively and negatively. Through social media, young women have been exposed to abuse, bullying, threats and non-consensual image sharing which has had adverse effects on their mental health. But social media has also helped to advance women's rights through the creation of tools to tackle violence against women, and by bringing women's rights issues to the attention of the wider public.

### *The Positive Effects*

#### ❖ **Social media as a tool to tackle violence against women:**

The advancement of technology has enabled us to connect, share important information, speak up, and raise awareness on human rights violations. But it has also created a new means to perpetrate violence against women. Though online violence is experienced by both women and men, women are more likely to be victims. Due to technology, more women are exposed to non-consensual images or videos sharing, rape, and death threats via social media, online sexual harassment, and stalking, including the use of tracking apps and devices. Young girls are even more vulnerable to abuse as well as bullying by their peers in the digital space. Especially girls at risk of or exposed to intersecting forms of discrimination. For example, according to a report by Amnesty International, women of color are more impacted by violence online than white women, with Black women being 84% more likely to receive abusive tweets on Twitter.<sup>6</sup> This study also established that women with disabilities, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or intersex women (LBTI), female journalists, and women's rights defenders, experience higher rates of online abuse on Twitter<sup>7</sup>. A 2017 UK study conducted by the University of Northumbria titled 'Online Abuse of Feminists as An Emerging form of Violence Against Women and Girls' found that Twitter was the social media

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<sup>6</sup> Amnesty International report: <https://decoders.amnesty.org/projects/troll-patrol/findings>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-2-3/>

platform used most commonly by respondents for feminist debate (80%). It also found that respondents experienced the most abuse on Twitter with some respondents reporting that abuse started when they began to use Twitter. The study found that 88% of the respondents who use Twitter regularly for feminist debate had experienced abuse on the platform (Lewis, 2017).

The Beijing Platform for Action recognised and predicted the media's "potential to make a far greater contribution to the advancement of women" (para. 234). This prediction was quite accurate as social media tools have also been created and used to help create a space for women to exchange knowledge and information on their rights, legal processes, and welfare services. In 2010, HarassMap was launched in Egypt as an online mapping tool to allow victims to anonymously report cases of sexual harassment directly from their mobile phones. This crowd-sourcing initiative maps all the reports and is coupled with campaigns to raise awareness on the scale of the problem in Egypt (Young, 2014).

#### ❖ **Social media hashtag activism bringing the spotlight on women's rights:**

Social media hashtag activism has been increasingly used to draw the public's attention to women's issues. For example, the #BringBackOurGirls campaign in 2014, reached over 1 million tweets, helping to raise awareness on the abduction of more than 300 girls from a school in Chibok, Nigeria (Tomchak, 2014). Clark (2016) studied the #WhyIStayed hashtag, which emerged in response to the Ray Rice domestic violence news in 2014, where activists challenged the victim-blaming rhetoric of domestic abuse narratives. Clark (2016) argued that the movement illustrated the power of hashtag feminism to intervene in normative, oppressive discourses: "Hashtag feminism, in its form, content, and production process, empowers its users to take control of the sociocultural narratives associated with their identities and subjective experiences"

### *1. The Negative Effects: Deteriorating Mental Health Among Social Media Users*

Girls are growing up in a world that is saturated with the media. Research shows that as of 2020, girls between birth and age 8 take in approximately two hours of screen media a day, with a

majority of that time spent with videos, especially on YouTube.<sup>8</sup> As a result, girls tend to absorb a lot of media stereotypes about their appearance and sexualization. This can lead to negative body image and mental health concerns, including depression.<sup>9</sup> Also, social media promotes social comparison among girls causing them to compare themselves to others which can trigger mental health issues including poor self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and lower life satisfaction. Considering the fact that girls are more exposed to non-consensual image or video sharing, rape and death threats via social media, online sexual harassment, stalking, gender-based cyber crime, and cyber flashing<sup>10</sup>, scholars have suggested that the increase in suicide rates from 1999 through 2014 among girls between the ages of 10 and 14 could be the result of greater social media use (Luby J, 2019).

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<sup>8</sup> Rideout V, Robb MB. [The Common Sense Census: Media Use By Kids Age Zero To Eight, 2020](#). San Francisco: Common Sense Media; 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Ward LM, Aubrey JS. [Watching Gender: How Stereotypes In Movies And On TV Impact Kids' Development](#). San Francisco: Common Sense Media; 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Cyber flashing consists of sending unrequested and imposed sexual pictures using dating apps, message apps or texts etc.

## 2. Keeping Children Safe online: Preventing Abuse and Cyber-bullying

The first challenge with regards to keeping children safe online is in how one defines a child.<sup>11</sup> The Convention on the Rights of a Child defines a child as someone who is below the age of 18.<sup>12</sup> While this definition provides a point of common reference for international organizations, NGOs and governments, operational definitions in the field may differ.

For example, the International Committee of the Red Cross defines an unaccompanied minor as “below 15 years of age and not being accompanied by an adult”. In contrast, the UNHCR definition is consistent with the CRC and sets “under 18” as the age for inclusion in family tracing services. During the return of African National Congress members to South Africa, the term “youth” was widely applied to people up to the age of thirty-five.<sup>13</sup> In other countries, the threshold for youth may be at a much younger chronological age. Beyond these definitions, social media platforms such as Tiktok, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook have an age restriction that states that those who are younger than 13 should not join the platform.

So who exactly is a child in this context? Due to the fact that the conversation revolves around a harm-prevention perspective, an ideal definition would be one that incorporates one’s exposure to digital/social media and their consequent vulnerability to digital harm. To illustrate this, a fifty-year-old, using a phone for the first time today may be just as vulnerable as a fifteen-year-old who has accessed a social media platform for the first time. This is because they would both have similar levels of familiarity with these novel systems.

This is a relevant statistic because of the ongoing digital gender divide. Currently, there is an 8% gender gap in global internet use.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, not only are girls less likely to use the internet, but they are also more likely to start using the internet and technology later than their male

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<sup>11</sup> Christakis, D. A. (2019). The challenges of defining and studying “digital addiction” in children. *Jama*, 321(23), 2277-2278.

<sup>12</sup> UN Commission on Human Rights, *Convention on the Rights of the Child.*, 7 March 1990, E/CN.4/RES/1990/74, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f03d30.html> [accessed 20 September 2022]

<sup>13</sup> Gyimah-Brempong, K., & Kimenyi, M. S. (2013). Youth policy and the future of African development. *Brookings Institution: Washington, DC, USA*.

<sup>14</sup> Kapiyo, P (20220). Bridging the Gender Digital Divide is Critical for Achieving Digital Rights in Africa, CIPESA, *Kampala, Uganda*.

counterparts in many societies across the globe. These two facts only compound the vulnerability that young girls have when it comes to online bullying and abuse.

The statistics surrounding online abuse only corroborate this. In a study carried out by Plan International, it was found that among 14,000 girls aged 15-25, over half of them had experienced online abuse. This further caused 20% to leave social media and another 12% to change how they used it. Additionally, women and girls have been shown to be more vulnerable to sexual abuse online and to activities such as stalking, which pose a physical danger as well.<sup>15</sup>

With the terminology asymmetry, disproportionate effects on girls & marginalised groups, and the variety of ways in which online abuse and cyberbullying can happen, it is clear that there is a digital pandemic that needs a solution. There is no clear “one size fits all” and instantaneous solution to adopt, however, there are steps that are being taken to solve the problem.

#### *Steps Being Taken to Reduce Rates of Cyber Bullying*

- ❖ Raising awareness concerning cyber-bullying - Multiple organisations such as cybersmile, stompout cyberbullying, UNICEF and many others are currently raising awareness on the prevalence and the effects of cyberbullying and online abuse. This is a starting point when it comes to reducing the vulnerability of marginalised groups and also provides victims with information on how to report instances of online abuse and other actions that should be taken following such incidents.<sup>16</sup>
- ❖ The creation of cyberbullying helplines and reporting centers - More and more organisations and countries are beginning to introduce helplines through which reporting of online abuse can be done. This helps bridge the gap in access to reporting mechanisms for various groups of people, who previously may not have known which route to take.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The Guardian, (2020) Most girls and young women have experienced abuse online, report finds, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/05/most-girls-and-young-women-have-experienced-abuse-online-report-finds>

<sup>16</sup> Livingstone, S., & Palmer, T. (2012). Identifying vulnerable children online and what strategies can help them.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, E. R. (2019). *Fighting Cyberbullying with Technology: Anonymous Reporting Access Impact on Student Perceptions of School Climate* (Doctoral dissertation, Fordham University).



- ❖ Increasing policy focus on digital harm prevention - Various countries are introducing data protection and privacy laws, child protection laws, and content moderation policies that are geared towards protecting children online and preventing cases of online abuse. This is a positive step as it not only do they provide individuals for means to use to address online abuse, but they also provide incentives for social media companies to make their platforms safer.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Suzor, N., Dragiewicz, M., Harris, B., Gillett, R., Burgess, J., & Van Geelen, T. (2019). Human rights by design: The responsibilities of social media platforms to address gender-based violence online. *Policy & Internet*, 11(1), 84-103.

### 3. Recommendations<sup>19</sup>

#### *At the private sector level*

- ❖ Platforms should be encouraged to adopt international frameworks on human rights, including frameworks and norms on women's rights, and to show more accountability in preventing and remedying initiatives available to victims.
- ❖ Legal information should be available on every platform, adapted to the user's country/language of residence. Additionally, social media companies should adopt privacy by design principles so as to minimise instances of the violation of privacy online.
- ❖ Social media platforms should invest more in content moderation and localisation so as to enable them to detect instances of online abuse earlier and more accurately.
- ❖ Social media platforms should increase the promotion of the use of mental health services among their users in order to help their users better manage their mental health and regulate their use of social media.

#### *At Government level*

- ❖ States should especially insist on the transparency and availability of granular data on every type of violence against women perpetrated on said platforms.
- ❖ Governments should craft frameworks for digital public goods to amplify the development impact of digital technologies and the internet, such as open-source software, open data, open artificial intelligence models, open standards and open content and the supporting policies for data governance, data protection, cybersecurity and the protection of people online.
- ❖ Co-design an operational framework to promote mental health to minimize risks and avoid the harmful effects of digital media and the internet on girls, such as creating a network for medical/psychological counseling on online addictions, providing support and redress to victims of online bullying and harassment, creating channels for whistle-blowing and carrying out awareness-raising campaigns.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/no-space-for-violence-against-women-and-girls-in-the-digital-world>

- ❖ Ensure that a strong legal framework is in place to prevent and combat gender-based violence, hate speech, and discrimination, online and offline, and that it is applied effectively
- ❖ Make use of innovative policy implementation mechanisms. Governments could use gamification to educate children on online safety, which would likely appeal better to that specific demographic, and use other ways of innovation to implement their policies. This would, in the long run, improve their outcomes and increase rates of adaptation amongst the public for certain policies and initiatives.

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