The effects of social media on girls: keeping children safe, preventing abuse and cyber-bullying, and mental health issues

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Summary of text:
Social media has transformed the relationship between citizens and governments and the way information can be shared across geographical boundaries. This has greatly facilitated women's rights movements, with platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter enabling activists to transmit events in real time and increase public engagement with women's rights issues. Similarly, social media has facilitated the creation of tools to tackle gender-based violence and has provided a platform for knowledge exchange around welfare and support services for victims.

In 2020, girls younger than nine years old spent an average of two hours online each day, with the majority of time spent consuming videos, especially on YouTube. This growth in Internet usage means girls and young women are increasingly exposed to stereotypes and perceived expectations related to their physical appearance, which can lead to poor body image and low self-esteem. Women and girls are also more vulnerable to non-consensual image or video sharing, rape or death threats via social media, online sexual harassment, stalking, gender-based cybercrime, and cyber flashing. Over half of girls aged 15-25 have experienced online abuse, with 20% leaving social media and a further 12% altering their online behavior as a result. Scholars have even suggested that greater use of social media may be responsible for the recent increase in suicide rates among adolescent girls. Existing initiatives to tackle social media-facilitated gender-based violence include victim helplines, awareness campaigns and incident reporting centers.

Key recommendations:

- Social media platforms should adopt international frameworks on human rights and privacy-by-design principles and make granular data on online gender-based violence available and comprehensible.
- Social media platforms should invest in content moderation and localization software to enable swift and accurate detection of incidents and make legal information and information related to mental health support services available to their users, with translations in local languages.
- Governments should establish frameworks which connect digital public goods, such as open-source software, open data and open AI models to supporting policies on data governance, data protection and cybersecurity. A strong legal framework to prevent and combat gender-based violence, online and offline, should be formulated and applied effectively.
- An operational framework should be established to support the mental health of social media users, including the provision of psychological counseling on online addiction, support to victims of online bullying and harassment, and the creation of awareness campaigns and accountability channels. Innovative methods of policy implementation should be leveraged, such as the use of gamification in efforts to educate children about online safety.