



menable

Against gender-based
violence online

Beyond words:
**Understanding and responding
to gender-based violence online**

**An empirical study to develop
educational approaches**

Abstract:

The menABLE research report presents a comprehensive synthesis of the key findings emerged from literature review, qualitative focus groups, and semi-structured interviews involving diverse stakeholders and experts in the field of GBV online. By documenting the current state of the art, it identifies specific areas for intervention and conducts a comparative analysis across partner countries (Belgium, Denmark, and Greece). Serving as both theoretical and empirical foundation, the report contributes to the educational and awareness-raising initiatives of the project, including valuable insights to combat gender-based violence online.

Keyword List: gender-based violence online, young men and boys, intersectionality, victim blaming, doxing, misogyny online, education, cyberbullying, hate speech online, awareness-raising.

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Please cite this report as:

MenABLE (2024) Beyond words: understanding and responding to gender-based violence online – An empirical study to develop educational approaches.

This research report is published under the menABLE (Empower Manpower against Gender-Based Violence Online) project by European Schoolnet (EUN). It is the result of a collaborative effort in cooperation with the project consortium partners Fondation Pour Enfants Disparus et Sexuellement Exploités (Child Focus), Center for Digital Pædagogik SL (CDYC) and Idryma Technologias Kai Erevnas (FORTH). More information about the menABLE project and partners is available at www.menable.eu.

The publication was financially supported by the 'Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV-2022-DAPHNE)' of the European Union; European Commission – Directorate-General Justice and Consumers by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship. The contents of the publication are the sole responsibility of the authors and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Commission.

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*“I’m a man without power.
Does that make me a woman?”*

-Barbie, 2023

Acknowledgement

The menABLE report *“Beyond words: Understanding and responding to gender-based violence online – An empirical study to develop educational approaches”* was developed in a collaborative effort. Hence, European Schoolnet (EUN) as menABLE project coordinator would like to take a moment to express its gratitude to the various contributors.

First, we would like to thank the menABLE consortium partners, Child Focus (Belgium), CDYC (Denmark) and FORTH (Greece) for conducting with diligence and care a series of national focus groups with young people, formal and non-formal educators. We thank them for providing us with insightful materials, directions and feedback on creating this report.

In this respect, we would like to express our gratitude to all the participants involved in the national focus groups: the young people and the diverse pool of formal and non-formal educators. All participants provided important and valuable insights which helped to shape this report. Their engagement and constructive input made it possible to develop such a comprehensive report, which will serve as inspiration and guidance to develop further activities of the menABLE project.

Furthermore, we would like to express our thanks to the experts from the public and private sector who agreed to take part in the interviews, providing remarkable and key insights and views on the topic through their experiences and critical feedback. The experts involved are listed in Annex 1 of this report. We express our thanks also to those who desired to remain anonymous.

Finally, we would like to thank Chiara Arnoldo, who during her internship at EUN greatly contributed to the literature review and provided valuable support in setting up this report.

We hope the menABLE report and the selected resources presented will serve as inspiration to the reader.

Table of abbreviations

Acronym	Meaning
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AVMSD	Audiovisual Media Service Directive
CEFM	Child Early and Forced Marriage
CSAM	Child Sexual Abuse Material
CAWVG	Cyber Violence Against Women and Girls
DSA	Digital Service Act
EAVA	European Added Value Assessment
EU	European Union
FGM	Female genital mutilation
GBV	Gender-based violence
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GPS	Global Positioning System
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IoT	Internet of Things
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning and other identities
MRA	Men's Rights Activism
NCII	Non-Consensual Intimate Image
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
T-CY	Cybercrime Convention Committee

TEU	Treaty on European Union
TFCC	Technology facilitated coercive control
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
TFGBV	Technology-Facilitated Gender-based Violence
TFSV	Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence
VLOPs	Very Large Online Platforms

Institutions and organisations acronyms

Acronym	Meaning
CDT	Center for Democracy & Technology
CDYC	Center for Digital Pædagogik
CEDAW	Committee on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
Child Focus	Fondation Pour Enfants Disparus et Sexuellement Exploites
CoE	Council of Europe
EC	European Commission
EIGE	European Institute for Gender Equality
EP	European Parliament
EUN	European Schoolnet
FORTH	Foundation for Research and Technology-Hellas
FRA	European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights
GREVIO	Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence
HRC	Human Rights Council
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee

IEFH	Institute for Equality of Women and Men
SWGfL	South West Grid for Learning
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
WHO	World Health Organization

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GENERAL PREFACE: The menABLE project and its research programme

Gender-based violence (which will be referred to from here on with the acronym GBV) is a historical yet also modern societal issue, which has also been spreading in recent years in the digital environment due to the increase of the use of digital technologies, creating a new category of GBV, called gender-based violence online. The continuing changes in interpersonal relations due to technological progress, further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences, are contributing to the spreading and diversification of GBV, making it also more complex and more difficult to tackle. The increased issue of GBV is spilling into the digital space, turning the digital ecosystem into a hostile environment, not only for women or girls, but also for other vulnerable groups and minorities (such transgender, gender-non-conforming people, disabled people, sexual, ethnic, and religious minorities), and even men and boys.

To complement existing programmes, initiatives, and strategies, to regulate, monitor or report GBV online, a more pro-active and inclusive approach is needed. menABLE (Empower Manpower against gender-based violence online) is a twenty-four-month project co-funded by the European Commission (EC) which aims to tackle GBV online by promoting mutual awareness, tolerance, and respect and by means of prevention strategies primarily, but not exclusively, targeting boys and young men¹. European Schoolnet (EUN), together with Child Focus (from Belgium), CDYC (from Denmark), and FORTH (from Greece) are partnering together in the menABLE project to target GBV online. Since achieving this target will only be possible when men and boys become part of the solution, the project aims to prevent GBV online by tackling its root causes. The menABLE project aims to promote a better understanding of the phenomenon of GBV online, by providing a European Toolbox for educators/practitioners, comprising a wide variety of resources, such as guidelines and interactive materials to be used in formal and non-formal education settings. A wide range of national and European training and outreach activities to train and support young people, teachers, school professionals, social workers and other caregivers will take place as part of the activities, alongside awareness-raising campaigns and activities to promote the Toolbox and to tackle gender-based prejudices, bias, and stereotypes which could lead to GBV online.

In more concrete terms, the menABLE project targets early teens (13-15 years) and late teens (16-18 years) through formal and non-formal education settings, by engaging them – together with their peers, educational professionals, and adults – in youth-centric consultations, through a multifaceted learning journey.

In order to take an evidence-based approach to prevent and remediate GBV online, it is fundamental to first understand what it is and how it works. Therefore, the menABLE Toolbox is

¹ For more information about the menABLE project, see <https://www.menable.eu/>. The menABLE project is co-funded by the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV-2022-DAPHNE) of the European Union; European Commission – Directorate-General Justice and Consumers by the European Union's Rights, Equality and Citizenship. The contents of the publication are the sole responsibility of the authors and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Commission.

built on a comprehensive research programme that comprises three interrelated components enriching each other: a literature review, a series of qualitative focus groups and seventeen semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders and experts in the field. The current report synthesises main research findings, and it provides a theoretical and empirical backbone for the education and awareness-raising activities carried out as part of the menABLE project.

PART I: Literature review

1. Introduction

1.1 Overall objectives and structure of the literature review

GBV – whether physical or online – is a threat to the physical and mental well-being of people. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are among the factors that have contributed to amplifying and normalising GBV. In particular, a distinctive phenomenon of GBV is the violence perpetrated against women and girls, who are statistically one of the most affected categories by this type of violence. The European Union Agency of Fundamental Rights (2014) estimates that one in ten women have experienced some form of cyber violence since the age of 15. Even though they represent the vast majority, other categories are also shown to be targeted by GBV online, such as LGBTQI+ community and, to a different scale and extent, boys and young men.

Despite the risks and potential harms that the online world can pose, access to the Internet as well as possessing adequate digital skills are increasingly important for people of all backgrounds, cultures, and ages which offer tremendous opportunities for personal, academic, and professional development and civic participation. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that digital public spaces are safe and empowering places for everyone, regardless of sex, gender, gender identification or other potential discriminatory factors. Reference is often made to the socio-cultural contexts in which GBV online occurs, to its connection with its offline version to the various forms and shapes it can take, and to the possible perpetrators and group targets. GBV online varies extensively in its form and impact, and the most common forms it can take include online (sexual) harassment, cyberbullying, violations of privacy, doxing, personal content shared without consent, image-based sexual abuse, “sextortion”. Due to its multidisciplinary nature, an eclectic mix of concepts and ideas are being used, sometimes interchangeably, to describe its nature and dimensions. Is GBV online comparable to the offline phenomenon? Where do they differ? And how does GBV transpose into the online environment in which children and young people are nowadays growing up? Which are the main forms of GBV online? Why are some individuals/groups disproportionately affected? GBV online is an emerging, complex, and evolving phenomenon, so even researchers and policymakers struggle to agree and understand what GBV online effectively is.

This literature review has the aim to recognise the existing diversity of perspectives, approaches and terminologies used to describe and address this phenomenon, but equally, seeks to develop a comprehensive GBV online definition. From an educational point of view, youth need to be equipped for meaningful and open dialogue, peer-to-peer discussion, and inclusive participation to explore and reflect upon their own views and experiences, using strategies to avoid victimisation, victim blaming, and stigmatisation. In trying to capture the full complexity of the GBV online phenomenon, the first part of this research explores the definitions and academic discussions on the topic; its key features, its nature and prevalence, its main forms, risks, causes and consequences. The last part of this literature review provides a more anecdotal account of how this all translates across menABLE partner countries, namely Belgium, Denmark, and Greece.

2. What is gender-based violence?

2.1. Introduction

Nowadays, the term “gender-based violence” has become common and somehow familiar to assess crimes against one’s sex, gender, or gender identity (Lindqvist, Renström, & Gustafsson Sendén, 2021). However, the concept of identifying an act of violence that is motivated by gender-based reasons is relatively new. From history books to middle age novels, GBV has always been present, but institutions and society often failed to identify it as such. Today, due to the technological progress and the possibility to connect to and from every corner of the world, people can express and report but also commit an act of violence at any time and from any place, even anonymously. Hence, academia and community started to question the feasibility of a crime committed against one person or a group because of their sex, gender, or gender identity, both offline and online. Before delving into the most specific issue of GBV online, which is at the core of this research, it is key to understand the root-causes and consequences of this ‘intimate’ yet spread crime.

Underpinning the entire research, a special focus should be given to the two most used terms: “gender” and “violence”. Both words have seen a radical change in their features and nuances throughout the decades due to the many societal and cultural progresses, such as economic, political, and technological. The study of their terminology contributes to broaden the understanding of the topic.

First, “gender” is a specific term that is based on the contextual, societal, and cultural environment. The first main difference to highlight is the difference with the term “sex”, as the latter represents a more biological and binary form (Sumerau, Mathers, Nowakowski, Cragun, 2017). As WHO states: “Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. Gender interacts with but is different from sex, which refers to the different biological and physiological characteristics of females, males and intersex persons, such as chromosomes, hormones and reproductive organs”².

In hierarchical structures, gender inequality has underpinned most discriminations for many centuries. Gender-based bias potentially intersects with other factors of discrimination, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, age, and gender identity, among others. Gender identity dynamics and developments mirror inner characteristics of a human being, which may not correspond to a person’s physiology or sex at birth, and it lies outside the constraints of the biological form (Aldred & Biglia, 2015). This fluid concept of gender identity has been a legacy of the latest decades, when people started to advocate for different identification of oneself, which could not fit in a binary check box. While this new wave of identification of one self’s gender has given the possibility to multiple groups of people to feel more included and inclusive at the same time, the concept of GBV has been also extended, to also encompass these gender identifications that were not previously contemplated. For this reason, the present research does not exclusively address

² https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab_1.

GBV against women and girls but comprises all the vulnerable groups which are mostly targeted because of their gender or gender identity. This does certainly not exclude boys and young men, which are affected by GBV in a different scale and manner.

Clearly defining gender or gender identity is important for the purposes of this research report as it allows for the correlation with the second term analysed in this chapter. While the terminology surrounding the word “violence” may sound explicit, there is much more to understand and to analyse when considering this term, especially when addressing GBV online. The term violence contains many different features and nuances; however, this chapter focuses mainly on these categories of violence present in GBV. As stated in a WHO Report (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi Lozanoin, 2002) violence is: “[...] the intentional use of physical force or power threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation”. This definition allows to highlight two key characteristics of the violence phenomenon: its interpersonal nature and its perceptibility.

Firstly, while analysing this definition, it is key to notice the use of the term “group or community”. This can apply to a cluster or a group which identifies as one gender. Another relevant feature is collective violence; that a group of people with the same gender identity can be targeted by violence due to the nature of their shared gender identity.

Secondly, violence is not only physical force, but it can also take an invisible form using power, which affects the mental, psychological, and emotional status of targeted victim(s). Psychological violence can go unseen and have extremely serious and lasting consequences on a victim. Threats, coercive control, exploitation of one’s vulnerability and verbal aggression may not leave physical marks, but their strength resides in the power of the words and the weight these actions have on victim’s mental and emotional wellbeing. Psychological violence has seen a sharp rise due to the use of social media, sharing platforms and online blogs, which can be used by both a known person and a stranger to perpetrate an act of psychological violence. According to the research conducted by the Economist Intelligence Unit (2021), 38 per cent of women around the world experienced personally online violence and the statistics rise to 85 per cent when witnessing such violence. The same research also shows that 9 out of 10 women confirms that GBV online is harmful to their general wellbeing.

GBV happening in the digital sphere is as real as GBV happening in the physical environment, even if their features and impact might differ. To understand, prevent and fight against GBV online, it is fundamental to first understand and define what GBV is since these two different forms are not mutually exclusive, they are part of a sort of continuum, and multiple incidences of violence can be happening at once and reinforcing each other. GBV is built on complex dynamics and structural problems, and it is characterised by being transversal to different social statuses (Grignoli, Barba, & D'Ambrosio, 2022). Therefore, the way in which it is defined largely depends on cultural, societal, economic, and contextual factors. As such, it is likely to evolve over time and places, with new forms and shapes emerging.

2.2 An eclectic mix of GBV definitions...

The most complicated and controversial issue in studying and understanding GBV is related to its operational definition. Transposing the fight against GBV into policy and legislative language has been proven difficult as policy writers and government seem to miss how structural forms and cultural behaviours have a role in defining GBV.

The first internationally agreed definition of GBV was introduced in the 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, which in its Art. 1 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 to women including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”³.

This has been reinforced also by the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the so called “Istanbul Convention”, 2011). This international instrument followed almost three decades after the UN Declaration mentioned before. Article 3 of The Istanbul Convention defines both terms ‘violence against women’ and ‘domestic violence’. “Violence against women” is defined as “a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of GBV that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”⁴. The EU’s recent accession to the Istanbul Convention, on 1 June 2023, marks a significant step in intensifying actions against GBV and providing a binding legal framework for the protection of women. By embracing the Convention, the EU recognises the structural aspects of violence against women and addresses the specific needs of its victims, unifying the EU Member States under a common legal framework to combat violence against women and promoting gender equality throughout the EU⁵.

Within the European legal framework, the EU has not adopted its own definition of GBV yet, nor has it enacted specific legislation encompassing this phenomenon; instead, the EU refers to already existing definitions developed by the above-mentioned UN and the Council of Europe instruments. Although there are similarities and commonalities between national policies to prevent and combat GBV, the Member States have adopted different approaches and strategies.

If policies and legislations for adults have been lacking the overall framework and recognition of issues related to GBV, for children and young people this problem is even more exacerbated. There is quite a tension between two main approaches: protection and empowerment (Alldred & Biglia, 2015). While the two approaches seem to have at their core the best interests of young people, it is also key to address the complexity of issues such as sexual abuse and discrimination due to gender-related motives. On the one hand, children must be protected from dangers due to their special

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-elimination-violence-against-women>.

⁴ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/council-of-europe-convention-on-preventing-and-combating-violence-against-women-and-domestic-violence>.

⁵ <https://tinyurl.com/GBV-convention>.

status as vulnerable groups (which contains other subcategories of vulnerabilities other than age); and on the other hand, children must also be given the means and tools to understand dangers and to fight GBV (Archard, Macleod, 2002). The latter reasoning includes also granting them an agency such as adulthood, meaning that society and legislators must consider them also when discussing about committing crimes (being not only a victim but also a perpetrator) and possibility to act in the sexual sphere. The present dichotomy among dependency and autonomy has been a common underpinning of major pieces of legislation involving young people, and this will only increase the difficulty of addressing topics like sexuality and gender identity.

Moreover, GBV represents a distinct and specific form of violence, which needs to be differentiated from other forms of violence. It is important to address that any crime happening to a woman cannot be defined immediately as a GBV act. Recognising the context is key before drawing conclusions which may not match the real reason. It is important to keep in mind that GBV can be identified in the motive of the perpetrator, and the motive would be to threaten to hurt or hurt a person or a group of people for their gender or gender identity.

While most research on GBV is more prone to focus on cisgender women and girls, it is important to recognise that GBV affects individuals of all genders. Emerging research shows that the LGBTQI+ community, as well as men who do not conform to patriarchal norms of masculinity, are disproportionately harmed by GBV (Dunn, 2020). These individuals are targeted due to their sexuality, gender expression and identity, stressing the necessity for new and even more comprehensive and inclusive definitions of GBV. For the aforementioned reasons, the term “gender-based” is used because such violence is shaped by gender roles and status in society. GBV appears to be a more comprehensive and inclusive term since it can be applied to all instances where gender is the basis for violence carried out against a person, transcending gender binarism and including all LGBTQI+ people. Furthermore, men and boys can also be victims of GBV, even if to a statistically lesser extent in comparison with women and girls, but it should not be neglected⁶. The UNHCR has adopted the IASC definition of GBV as “an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will and that is based on socially ascribed (i.e., gender) differences between males and females. It includes acts that inflict physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion, and other deprivations of liberty. These acts can occur in public or in private”⁷.

2.3 Key features of GBV

Although there are many different forms of GBV, it is possible to identify a set of key features which can help individuals – including children and young people – to identify or recognise it.

First of all, GBV is a phenomenon that is not confined to a specific culture, region, or country, or to specific groups of people within a society. Therefore, GBV is both universal and local. It is universal in that there is no region of the world, no country, and no culture which is free from and not affected

⁶ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/what-is-gender-based-violence>.

⁷ <https://gbvguidelines.org/en/capacity-building/iasc-gbv-guidelines-introduction/>.

by it. However, it is important to point out that in a broader community the “toleration” of violence can be diverse. For example, women in some countries may experience a lower or higher threshold of violence depending on the personal perception, which might also be influenced by cultural systems they are living (Eurostat, 2022).

The different manifestations of such violence and a personal experience of it is shaped by many factors, including economic status, race, ethnicity, class, age, sexual orientation, disability, nationality, religion, and culture. Moreover, different forms of GBV may be linked, or reinforce one another, with many forms of violence occurring in more than one setting: for example, trafficking is a form of GBV that involves family, community, and State and crosses international boundaries (UN Secretary General, 2006). Secondly, most forms of violence including IPV, child sexual abuse, and much non-partner sexual abuse do not occur as single or unique incidents, but are ongoing over time, even over decades. Often, the victim not only knows the perpetrator(s) but might live with or interact regularly with them (Watts & Zimmermann, 2002).

GBV often features aspects of “victim blaming”, meaning the way in which society attributes blame to victims. Girls or women who have been sexually assaulted or raped are frequently said to have “provoked it” or “deserved it” by the way they were dressed or behaved – even when the victim is a child (Watts & Zimmermann, 2002). As one of FRA survey (2014) key findings reported, for all types of violence, most women do not report their experiences to the authorities due to victim-blaming, fear, shame, or lack of confidence in the authorities. Victims had reported their most serious incidents of IPV to the police in only 14 per cent of cases, and the most serious incidents of non-partner violence in only 13 per cent of cases. The 2016 Eurostat survey⁸ showed that more than one in five respondents believe that women often make up or exaggerate claims of abuse or rape, and 27 per cent think that there are situations where sexual intercourse without consent is justified, meaning that the full scale of GBV is not reflected in official data and is underestimated.

All forms of GBV have a profound impact on victims, causing both immediate and long-term physical and mental health consequences, while also placing a significant burden on society. The FRA survey (2014) revealed that victims’ experiences fear, anger, shame, loss of self-confidence, vulnerability and anxiety as emotional response to victimisation. Additionally, around half of the victims suffered injuries. Research conducted by EIGE in 2022 shows that psychological violence can lead to higher risks of suicide, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). As far as the economic and societal costs are concerned, all forms of GBV always incur several types of costs, in the short and the long term: the direct cost of services in relation to violence, the indirect cost of lost employment, and productivity, the value placed on human pain and suffering are just some of them. GBV is a serious and major public concern, which should not be considered and addressed as a private issue. Therefore, more should be invested in early intervention and prevention strategies, rather than allowing such violence to persist.

⁸ <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2115>.

3. The phenomenon of GBV online

3.1 Introduction

The boundaries between physical and digital world have fallen. Due to technological progress, it has now become a current habit to seek or transfer social relations in the virtual world (Grignoli, Barba, & D'Ambrosio, 2022). Therefore, as Internet access increases across the globe, so do incidents of GBV online. The use of digital communication technologies for the facilitation of psychological and sexual violence and harassment is an increasingly significant and widespread phenomenon. These attacks, together with other violent forms of GBV online, create many safety concerns and psychological damages, involve great invasions of privacy, and can have significant financial costs for those targeted.

This chapter focuses specifically on GBV online: an area that is under-researched and mistakenly considered as a phenomenon wholly separate from “real world” violence (Iannazzone, Clough & Griffon, 2021). Nevertheless, GBV online can (and should) be considered an extension of GBV in the more traditionally understood sense, since it is caused by the same social norms and structural discriminations and inequality as “offline” societies.

3.2 Defining GBV online and its key features

...in the international research literature and policy

A different set of terminologies are used to describe the specific issue of GBV online, ranging from gendered cyberhate, technology-facilitated violence to digital violence, networked harassment, and online violence against women and online misogyny (Ging, & Siapera, 2018). For instance, the Centre for International Governance Innovation (2020) uses the term technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) to describe “a modern form of gender-based violence that utilises digital technologies to cause harms. (...) Like other forms of gender-based violence, TFGBV is rooted in discriminatory beliefs and institutions that reinforce sexist gender norms. It intersects with racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism and other discriminatory systems in many of its manifestations”. GBV online is a term that also includes “the use of telecommunications systems to control current or former intimate partners; stalking and harassment through telecommunications tools and on social media platforms; and exposing personal information (doxing) or abusive content (e.g., the non-consensual sharing of sexualised images or videos) through content hosts and social media platforms” (Suzor et al., 2019).

The Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO), in its General Recommendation No.1 (2021), analyses the digital dimension of violence against women which “encompasses a wide range of acts online or through technology that are part of the continuum of violence that women and girls experience for reasons related to their gender, including in the domestic sphere, in that it is a legitimate and equally harmful manifestation of the gender-based violence experienced by women and girls offline”. Precisely, “GREVIO’s understanding of the concept of violence against women in its digital dimension encompasses both

online aspects (activities performed and data available on the internet, including internet intermediaries on the surface web as well as the dark web) and technology-facilitated (activities carried out with the use of technology and communication equipment, including hardware and software) harmful behaviour perpetrated against women and girls”.

The concept of GBV online has also become a topic of discussion and analysis at the European level. In 2021 the European Parliament has adopted the European Added Value Assessment (EAVA), which complements its own initiative legislative report on Combating Gender-based Violence: Cyber Violence (2020/2035(INL), requesting the Commission to submit proposals on combating GBV and on adding this phenomenon as a new area of crime listed in Article 83(1) of the TFEU. In the EAVA, the Parliament highlights that “gender-based cyber violence is an evolving issue, due to the changes in technology and behaviour which sum with the complexity of the problematic of GBV. Although there is a broad understanding of what gender-based cyber violence is and what it constitutes, there is no distinct definition, at either EU or national level”⁹.

...from the perspective of industry

GBV online mainly occurs on digital platforms, such as email, social media, websites, online blogs, message boards/forums and instant messaging apps; all these are managed mainly by major tech companies or Internet service providers. While there is an important aspect in tackling GBV online by raising awareness and involving communities and people in advocating for respect of other’s gender or gender identity and against violence, tech companies must also be part of the process and manage the content being shared on their platforms in a more restricted and safe manner. The specific issue with cyber violence is the fact that whatever happens online has the potential to be found and experienced by others online in the future. Even if deleted by a user or a digital platform, a compromising photo or a comment on a picture can continue to be found or circulated online if other users have saved or created copies (such as screenshots) and reposted content to other online spaces.

Due diligence and management of online content shared on digital platform by tech industries has not been thoroughly regulated by the EU before. Some good practices that set an important underpinning for future regulations are the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in 2016 and the Audiovisual Media Service Directive (AVMSD) in 2018, which however do not enforce reporting mechanisms for tech companies to assess if they are practising due diligence and implementing any risk assessment measures to prevent and combat actively GBV online. Moreover, there are other good practices and guidelines which are non-statutory for industry and therefore carry no assessment or reporting requirements.

The issue of regulating tech industries on the content shared on their platforms has been a key topic in recent years in the EU. In 2020, discussions around the Digital Service Act (DSA) started to arise and the document started to be drafted, due to the sharp increase in the use of digital platforms and the amount of data and information shared. The DSA came into force for numerous

⁹ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/662621/EPRS_STU\(2021\)662621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/662621/EPRS_STU(2021)662621_EN.pdf).

Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) on 25 August 2023 and it will be a key driver in changing the landscape of online content regulation¹⁰. The DSA provides tech companies with a framework on how to contrast illegal and harmful content online. The DSA can be a strong tool to tackle the issue of GBV online, however at the time of this research report publication, it is too early to assess whether the enforced measures will be efficiently implemented by tech companies and effective in fighting this issue. In fact, one concern around the DSA in general is its broad nature: the legislation seemed to tackle different issues related to the online environment in a very general way to create a tool that can fit all demands (van Hoboken et al., 2023). Moreover, there would be the need to raise awareness about GBV online among specific categories of workers in the sector, such as content moderators. It could be key to use an intersectional approach to solve specific risks such as GBV, which can intertwine with many other risks such as racism, age, ethnicity and more.

3.3 The nature of GBV online

From offline to online GBV

Nowadays, ICTs and new digital media are increasingly exploited as an instrument for stigmatisation, discrimination, exclusion, and incitement to hatred or for the perpetration of numerous forms of violence against certain individuals or groups. Hence, GBV has become a phenomenon that transcends online-offline boundaries, persists over time, becomes horizontal, viral and with very strong impacts and consequences on victims (Grignoli, Barba & D'Ambrosio, 2022). However, cyberviolence is very often dismissed as an insignificant or minor virtual phenomenon, that is less dangerous and impactful to its victims, as harmful and violent digital acts do not always lead directly to visible physical harm. The violent acts and threats perpetrated through technology and taking place in the digital sphere are an integral part of the same violence that victims experience in the physical world, for reasons related to their gender.

As Henry and Powell (2015) highlight “ICTs are often celebrated as creating spaces for the construction of increasingly “flexible” or “fluid” identities that in turn suspend or subvert traditional gender dualisms, hierarchies, and power relations, yet at the same time, they may also create opportunities for the reconstruction and widespread dissemination of more traditional gender norms”. Therefore, digital technologies do not merely facilitate or aggregate existing forms of GBV, but also create new ones (Ging & Siapera, 2018). While hate speech, sextortion, non-consensual sharing of intimate images, and doxing may occur exclusively online, they may also occur in connection with offline events, and they almost always have consequences or repercussions that are experienced both on- and offline. For instance, Amnesty International (2017) ran a poll in which it was discovered that 41 per cent of women who had experienced online abuse or harassment reported that, on at least one occasion, these experiences made them feel worried about their physical safety. Nevertheless, it is important to note that cyberviolence against men and boys, including online (sexual) harassment, cyberbullying and the sharing of images without consent, is an equally significant and growing problem which should not be neglected nor denied.

¹⁰ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022R2065>.

As Henry and Powell (2015) highlight, the problem of GBV online is often framed as “an age-specific issue of vulnerability, linked to a moral panic over youth sexuality, namely, that young people, should be protected from online sexual predators and cyberbullies, and from themselves”. However, “such conceptualisations fail to account for the newly emerging patterns of Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence (TFSV) and tend to divert attention from the gendered nature of these harms”. Digital harms must be taken seriously as distinct harms, especially when directly related to physical violence. New and appropriate legal frameworks or other remedies considering the nature, extent, and prevalence of these digital harms need to be further theorised and implemented, in order to take concrete action and protect victims. There is a need for more intersectional work and approach, which considers how GBV online intersects with other forms of abuse (offline) such as racism, homophobia, classism, and ableism.

Forms of GBV online

Given the huge variety of typologies and subcategories in which the phenomenon can be declined, three main categories of GBV online can be identified, namely: cyber harassment, image-based sexual abuse, and ICT-related violations of privacy. Each of these categories contains and encompasses other more specific phenomena and subcategories, and some of them may obviously overlap. Besides, it is relevant to highlight that, as GBV online is an evolving issue, its categories and subcategories may also change in the course of time, mainly due to the continuing and rapid changes in technology, and new forms may emerge.

Cyber harassment

Cyber harassment is one of the broadest forms of GBV online. It can include unwanted sexually explicit emails, text (or online) messages; inappropriate or offensive advances on social networking websites or internet chat rooms; threats of physical and/or sexual violence by email, text (or online) messages; hate speech, meaning language that denigrates, insults, threatens or targets an individual based on their identity (gender) and other traits (such as sexual orientation or disability) (EIGE, 2017). According to the Cybercrime Convention Committee (2018), cyber harassment “involves a persistent and repeated course of conduct targeted at a specific person that is designed to and that causes severe emotional distress and often the fear of physical harm”. Harassers terrorise their victims by threatening violence. Cyber harassment can involve a brief incident, such as a single targeted racist, homophobic, misogynist, or sexist comment, or a long-term organised attack.

One specific form of cyber harassment is ‘online sexual harassment’, which may include either virtual or face-to-face unwanted or unrequired interactions in public forums or chat rooms or through private communications via mobile phone, e-mail, applications, or Internet sites using either verbal comments or graphic images (Barak, 2005). Online sexual harassment also comprises online sexual coercion and sextortion. Online sexual coercion entails the use of various available or possible means — such as bribes, frightening emails, viruses, to elicit sexual cooperation or to achieve some sexual gains by putting some kind of pressure on a victim. In contrast, online sexual extortion (also called ‘sextortion’), is “the act of using the threat of publishing sexual content (images,

videos, deepfakes, sexual rumours) to menace, coerce or blackmail someone, either for more sexual content or for money, sometimes both” (van Der Wilk, 2021).

Cyber harassment also includes another quite widespread form of GBV online, which is ‘cyberbullying’. Many different definitions of cyberbullying have been provided by different authors, which can be summarised broadly as “any behaviour performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicate hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others” (Tokunaga, 2010). Children and young people are not the only victims of cyberbullying; the term includes adults, particularly journalists. In 2017, the Council of Europe study on “journalists under pressure” demonstrates that journalists in more than half of the 47 Member States have experienced cyberbullying during the last three years. Cyberbullying thus also impacts the freedom of speech and expression (Clark & Grech, 2017). Additionally, many journalists, human rights defenders, and politicians face daily death or rape threats just for speaking out about equality issues or for simply being a woman in a leadership role.

Hate speech has been understood by the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers (2022) as comprising “all types of expression that incite, promote, spread or justify violence, hatred or discrimination against a person or group of persons, or that denigrates them, by reason of their real or attributed personal characteristics or status such as race, colour, language, religion, nationality, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation”. Hate speech dehumanises and encourages violence or hatred toward a person or a group of people based on an identifying feature. For this reason, intersecting identity factors can increase the likelihood that a person will be targeted by hate speech (Dunn, 2020). Hate language is characterised by its multi-offensiveness and risk of escalation since “the hater does not merely verbally attack the victim but the social category to which he or she belongs, instigating other users to do the same” (Grignoli, Barba & D'Ambrosio, 2022). The risk of escalation, on the other hand, consists of the social acceptance of discrimination or normalisation of hate and violence, which also allows an increase in hate crimes.

Hate speech is a quite controversial topic, since it often conflicts with other fundamental rights, such as the right to freedom of expression and freedom of speech (Cammaerts, 2009). Hate speech constitutes a specific type of expression, which might undermine safety, health, morals, or reputation, and more generally speaking the human rights of others. Consequently, in recent years, many countries have started to ban or at least regulate, and discipline hate speech, including cyber hate in their national legislation. With the internet providing a platform for freedom of expression, hate speech has proliferated in the digital world, with white-supremacist, Islamophobic, antisemitic, anti-LGBTQ+, and women-hating or misogynistic groups finding spaces to gather and promote their discriminatory belief, or spilling over into the physical world, causing violence and even death.

Social media platforms and online chat forums have been known to host groups that promote hatred against women and girls, including incels and Men's Rights Activism (MRA). In several documented cases, hateful online rhetoric spread by the members of these groups has led to violence against women and girls in the physical world. Indeed, according to Nussbaum (2010), much of the gender-based hate speech online is committed instrumentally to satisfy the needs of

the hater. This objectification is frequently contingent on the reduction and debasement of the victim to bodily parts and physical appearance.

As reported by the GREVIO in its General Recommendation No.1 (2021) on the digital dimension of violence against women, sexist behaviour such as sexist hate speech often constitutes a first step in the process towards physical violence. It also contributes to a social climate where women and girls are demeaned, their self-regard and self-esteem lowered and their activities and choices restricted, including at work, in their private, public life or digital environment. Misogynistic, sexist, or hurtful hate speech frequently includes 'slut-shaming', which can be defined as the act of attacking or stigmatising a person based on their appearance, sexual availability, and actual or perceived sexual behaviour, or for engaging in behaviour judged to be promiscuous or sexually provocative. It is a long-standing form of GBV and victim blaming, which often occurs in cases of sexualised bullying, and is amplified in the digital sphere. The expansion of the phenomenon in the digital sphere is due to the facility and the speed with which such content has the potential to be shared. The incitement also from other people, even strangers, can also play a critical role in such phenomenon. Like other forms of GBV online, slut-shaming is underpinned by sexist attitudes and stereotypical views of gender roles, deeply rooted in structural relationships of inequality between women and men. However, it is worth remarking that men and boys, particularly those belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, can be as well victims of slut-shaming and other forms of cyberhate, and that girls and women can also be perpetrators of these practices, being gender stereotypes and stereotypical attitudes and behaviours often internalised and assimilated by anyone, regardless their gender identity.

Image-based sexual abuse

The second category of GBV online is 'image-based sexual abuse', also referred as 'non-consensual intimate images' (NCII). The concept of image-based sexual abuse was defined by UK scholars Claire McGlynn and Erika Rackley in 2017 as "private sexual images that have been created and/or distributed without the consent of the person featured in them, as well as the threats to create and distribute these images". Very often, perpetrators manage to consensually/non-consensually obtain sexually explicit images or videos during a relationship (or during a previous intimate relationship) or obtain them by hacking or stealing them from the victim's computer, social media accounts or phone, to share them online. Similarly, the non-consensual distribution of intimate images occurs when a person's sexual, private, and/or manipulated images are shared through ICT means (or are threatened to be shared through ICT means), with a wider than intended audience without the subject's consent (Dunn, 2020). In popular discourse, the most common term used to define this second category of GBV online is 'revenge porn', a flawed term, as it wrongly implies that the victim is to blame in some way. Additionally, the term 'porn' does not emphasise the non-consensual nature of the practices. Therefore, NCII or image-based sexual abuse are the preferred terms.

Even the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes, and consequences, in its 2018 Report, uses this term to describe precisely the "non-consensual online dissemination of intimate images, obtained with or without consent, with the purpose of shaming, stigmatising or harming

the victim, in retaliation for ending a relationship”. Altogether, the term is predominantly used when a partner (or ex-partner) is involved in the dissemination or distribution of the materials, in order to humiliate or intimidate the victim. However, perpetrators of NCII are not necessarily partners or ex-partners, and this does not necessarily need not be motivated by personal revenge or by any personal feelings towards the victim. Images and videos can also be obtained by hacking into the victim’s computer, social media accounts or phone, and can aim to inflict real damage on the victim’s ‘real-world’ life (such as getting them fired from their job).

Common motivations include sexualising the victim, inflicting harm on the victim, seeking revenge, seeking sexual gratification or monetary gain, or negatively affecting the life of the victim. While partners or ex-partners are commonly the ones who take or distribute sexual images/videos without the victim’s consent, perpetrators also include a wide range of people, including family members, colleagues, friends, and strangers. According to the Cyber Civil Rights Institute (2015), up to 90 per cent of non-consensual intimate image victims are women, where 57 per cent of the victims stated that the material was shared by an ex-boyfriend. This trend has been confirmed in several European countries, such as Italy, where 83 per cent of the victims of NCII were women (Sangiovanni, 2021). In France (2020) one youngster out of four have seen NCII between chats and apps, and 2 per cent of them has been a victim, mainly girls¹¹. A study in Belgium (Van de Heyning et al., 2023) clearly shows that young people are regularly confronted with the non-consensual reception of sexually explicit images, particularly girls and women, young people aged 15 to 18 and LGBTQIA+ populations. This study also highlights some important features such as 1 out of 3 girls aged 15-25 have been a victim of “cyberflashing”. Moreover, 74 per cent of people aged 15-25 believe that the non-consensual possession of intimate images should be penalised.

The term ‘sexting’ (or more commonly, taking a “selfie” or “nOodz”) — which means the sending of private or sexual images via mobile phones, computers, online video chat, pictures and videos sharing sites and social networking sites — is often used in relation to online sexual violence (Henry& Powell, 2015). The act of creating and sending intimate pictures between two minors who know and trust each other, while technically illegal in many countries, is often not pursued by law enforcement who recognise it as consensual and typically age-appropriate behaviour. For two consenting adults, the consensually sending of intimate images is not illegal. As the EU project CYBERSAFE (2021) explains, “young people experiment with relationships, love and sex, both offline and online. On social media and apps, they make friends, flirt, date and sometimes exchange sexual messages”. Therefore, “it is important to recognise that this sexual exploration is usually part of the normal social, emotional and sexual development of young people and that online contact can contribute to their development in a positive way”. However, it might happen that these practices may turn badly, especially when the images are shared outside the involving parties without asking for consent and therefore breaking the relationship of trust. It is precisely the non-consensual aspect of these practices which makes them distinct from sexually explicit content online more broadly. Therefore, image-based sexual abuse and NCII are a category of GBV online

¹¹ <https://madame.lefigaro.fr/societe/en-france-plus-dun-jeune-sur-quatre-a-deja-ete-temoin-dun-revenge-porn-etude-210220-179891>.

that constitutes a real crime and violation, regulated, and punished in several countries through criminal laws and procedures.

ICT-related violations of privacy

The third category of GBV online comprises all those criminal, offensive practices that involve some form of violation of privacy to people. Similarly, to what has been explained above in reference to NCII, in most cases, these types of practices constitute a very serious crime and violation of fundamental rights (e.g., right to privacy, right to personal liberty and integrity etc.,) in many countries around the world. ICT-related violations of privacy may include computer or mobile intrusions to obtain, steal, reveal or manipulate intimate data, the researching and broadcasting of personal data ('doxing'), the theft of personal identity, personalisation, or acts such as 'cyberstalking'.

Thanks to the anonymity, ease, and efficiency of the Internet, cyber-stalking can occur in a multitude of ways, like one user repeatedly sending unwanted, hostile, or threatening e-mails/instant messages to their victims. It can also involve the online impersonation of the victims, by stealing their accounts or login credentials, or the surveillance of a victim's location through a variety of technologies (Marcum, Higgins & Ricketts, 2014). Similar to NCII or image-based sexual abuse, the development of new and sophisticated technologies, such as applications and software, has very often facilitated cyberstalking.

Among the most common consequences of ICT violation of privacy is doxing. Doxing is an online abusive practice that consists of publishing, manipulating or researching a victim's personal details and sensitive data online such as home address, contact details, photographs, personal legal name and the names of family members, without the victim's consent or against their will. As the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women (2018) stated, doxing "includes situations where personal information and data retrieved by a perpetrator is made public with malicious intent, clearly violating the right to privacy". Doxing has been used to intimidate victims by driving online harassment against them and making them fear that they may be harassed or harmed in person (Dunn, 2020). It is very often perpetrated in the context of IPV or domestic violence, but, given the fact that it is a practice quite widespread on social media platforms and on instant messaging platforms, it is also frequently employed by cyberbullies and online gamers to expose and shame their victims, especially women and girls. For instance, Amnesty International's online poll (2018) found that in the USA, almost 1 in 3 women who experienced abuse or harassment on social media platforms had been doxed. Moreover, since the publication or disclosure of personally identifiable information usually allows victims to be physically located, doxing can also be a precursor for violence or harassment in the physical world (EIGE, 2017). In France, a new trend has emerged which consists of creating a new type of Snapchat or Telegram account called "ficha" (for "afficher": ridiculing in public). These local accounts repost young women's – sometimes underage – nudes, revealing both their identity and contact information, directing mobs of sexual abusers at them, in their local community (Brudvig, Chair & van der Wilk, 2020).

3.4 Risks, causes and consequences

What is intersectionality?

The Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies, in its Glossary of Gender-related Terms (2009) defines ‘intersectionality’ as “a tool for analysis, advocacy and policy development that addresses multiple discriminations and helps understand how different sets of identities impact on access to rights and opportunities”. Intersectional analysis starts from the premise that people live multiple, layered identities derived from social relations, history, and the operation of structures of power¹². Therefore, intersectionality is a useful analytical tool for studying, understanding, and responding to these multiple identities, also by identifying the various ways in which gender or gender identity intersects with other individual features. It also aims at revealing how these intersections expose the different types of identities to unique experiences of discrimination, disadvantage, oppression, or privilege, that occur because of this combination of identities.

For the purpose of this research, it is key to focus on the intersection between children and young people and gender identity. They could be victim of specific acts such as sexual abuse, production, and dissemination of child sexual abuse material (CSAM), grooming and so on. These illegal acts could intertwine with gender-based motives. Gender plays a significant role in cases of grooming, where there are distinct gender differences observed among victims of sexual abuse and exploitation. A recent study (Agir Contre la Prostitution des Enfants, Child10, Child Focus, Protect Children, Netzwerk gegen Menschenhandel, 2023) has shown that in Belgium, the majority of reported grooming cases in 2021 involved girls under the age of 16, constituting 75 per cent of the total 43 cases. Similarly, in Germany, girls accounted for 74 per cent of the victims, while boys accounted for 26 per cent. In Finland, although the gender disparity was slightly less pronounced, girls comprised 67 per cent of the victims, compared to 34 per cent who were boys. The same trend can be seen in the CSAM production and dissemination, where girls represent 91 per cent of the victims (INHOPE, 2022). These examples highlight the gendered aspects present in specific forms of violence, emphasising the need for targeted interventions and support.

Building upon the industry perspective afore mentioned, an intersectional model of operation is needed to tackle GBV that intertwines with other types of discrimination, and which can create an even more delicate situation for certain vulnerable group. The possibility to create an interconnection within different variables which could cause more discrimination and disadvantage to a specific individual due to their gender identity, race, ethnicity, age, social status, political belief and other could be effective to future policy regarding the issue (e.g., the DSA). It is crucial for legislators and policymakers to receive training on intersectionality and understand how to apply it in effectively in policies (Allen, 2022).

To effectively address GBV, it is essential to recognise and understand how different individuals are impacted based on their gender and sexual identities, ethnicities, abilities, and cultures. Developing

¹² <https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1263>.

solutions that consider these diverse nuances is essential. Adopting a one-size-fits-all approach to addressing GBV will not effectively reach those who are most in need of support. Even in the context of online abuse, it is vital to acknowledge that individuals can be targeted due to various aspects of their identity, and adopting an intersectional approach is crucial in addressing their specific situations and providing appropriate support.

Identify the main targets/persons at risk

As the extensive previous research shows, women and girls are the most affected by GBV online. However, emerging research shows that LGBTQI+ community, as well as men and boys who fall outside patriarchal norms of masculinity, are victims of many forms of GBV online. These persons are targeted due to their gender expression and gender identity. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights in its 2013 study found that LGBTQI+ people were harassed and threatened online because of their gender expression and sexual orientation. Moreover, they were more likely to have their intimate images distributed without their consent (Dunn, 2020). Research conducted by the Witness Media Lab in 2016, showed that transgender people were attacked in public and that these attacks were even filmed and published online along with transphobic commentary.

In addition to sexuality and gender identity, there are many other intersecting inequality factors, such as race, skin colour, and disability that may expose people to higher levels of online harassment and abuse, compared to white, heterosexual, cisgender and/or able-bodied individuals (Dunn, 2020). Lisa Nakamura (2013) has reported widespread sexism, racism, and homophobia within the online gaming community, where discriminatory comments often combined racist, homophobic, and sexist expressions. Furthermore, a 2017 US study by the Pew Research Centre on online harassment found that 59 per cent of black internet users said they had experienced online harassment compared with white users and Hispanic users¹³.

Secondly, persons in abusive intimate partner relationships, especially women and girls living in a context of domestic violence, are more likely to experience some form of GBV online, at the hands of their (ex) intimate partners (Dunn, 2020). A Women's Aid 2014 survey found that 45 per cent of domestic violence victims reported experiencing some form of abuse online during their relationship. Moreover, many forms of GBV online are quite widespread among young teenagers too. In a recent study conducted in Italy to examine online dating violence among adolescents, results revealed that around 42 per cent of the participants reported experiences of online dating violence among their friends, with a higher prevalence among non-binary participants (51.7 per cent) and females (45.6 per cent) compared to boys (32.9 per cent). Furthermore, the vast majority of the surveyed youth indicated that behaviours such as creating fake social media profiles to monitor their partners were very common. Similarly, around 40 per cent reported a high frequency of threats to disseminate embarrassing information, photos, or videos of their partners, while almost half highlighted a very high frequency of sharing private images and/or videos without their partner's consent (Save the Children, 2023).

¹³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/07/25/1-in-4-black-americans-have-faced-online-harassment-because-of-their-race-or-ethnicity/>.

Thirdly, women and girls in leadership positions, such as politicians, human rights defenders, bloggers and journalists, experience significantly higher levels of violence and harassment online, particularly if they speak out about equality issues or about issues traditionally dominated by men or again if they possess any other intersecting inequality factors (Dunn, 2020). In this respect, by examining abusive tweets aimed at members of Parliament (MPs) in the United Kingdom over a particular period, Amnesty International (2018) made an unpleasant discovery. It found that Diane Abbott, the only Black female MP, had received nearly half of all abusive tweets aimed at women MPs. Moreover, a report by the Association for Progressive Communications and Hivos (2013) found that prominent women bloggers, journalists, and leaders are regularly the targets of online violence and abuse, especially when they work or are involved in those fields where men are traditionally considered more experienced and expert, such as gaming, politics, and technology. Women in politics have also been particularly subjected to online abuse. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016) showed that social media platforms have become the number one place in which online violence against women parliamentarians is perpetrated. This attempt to silence and exclude their voices represents yet another big challenge to women's participation and engagement in politics.

Another primary group of victims of GBV online, in particular with respect to online sexual violence, is represented by children and young people. New ICT technologies have in fact increased the accessibility to children by persons looking to sexually abuse and exploit them, also by making commercial gains from their sexual exploitation easier. In this sense, ICTs have often fuelled CSAM and child prostitution, also by facilitating the sharing and spreading of images and videos of sexual abuse, thus further reinforcing the long-lasting hurtful impact and trauma of the abuse. Moreover, a study conducted across Europe (Krahé et al., 2015) shed light on the prevalence of sexual violence among young adults aged 18-27 revealing that a considerable percentage of both young men (27.1 per cent) and young women (32.2 per cent) had experienced sexual violence before reaching the age of consent. Furthermore, a separate study conducted in Flanders in 2014 focusing on the LGBT+ community, found that around 3 out of 10 transgender individuals had encountered sexual violence at least once in their lives¹⁴.

From causes to consequences

The root causes of GBV online are many and strictly related to the same gender inequalities, power imbalance, discrimination, gender stereotypes, and sexism that characterise the phenomenon of GBV in general.

There are some forms of GBV online which are particularly popular among young people, like cyberbullying or cyber harassment. Children and young people may engage in these abusive activities, because of the peer pressure that they frequently feel, often in the family or school environment. Against this wall, through cyberbullying and other forms of cyber abuse they wish to gain the approval and respect, especially when they are afraid of becoming victims themselves if they do not get involved. Cyberbullying is particularly relevant among children and young people

¹⁴ <https://www.violencessexuelles.be/>.

when someone does not conform to the norms of the popular group. For this reason, cyberbullying related to gender issues can also intertwine with other intersectional factors (e.g., ethnicity, sexuality, disability, or non-conforming bodies which are not represented by the society standards).

Many forms and categories of GBV online are often normalised and not recognised as actual violence, and therefore, people may participate in these forms of violence just because they think it is funny, without being aware of the strong emotional, and sometimes even physical, impact their abusive behaviour has on the victims. One example can be the use of derogatory language, which could contain sexist or discriminatory expressions which would be disguised as jokes. Due to the “excuse” of being a joke, people who are subjected to this tend to normalise this behaviour and not react to it.

Anonymity is also among the possible triggering factors which facilitate the perpetration of GBV online, allowing perpetrators to hide their identity behind a fake social media profile or a nickname. Anonymity could also impact the gravity of the violence perpetrated. As the perpetrator could use other names or other profile pictures, they could engage in GBV online with more strength and abusiveness.

Although common thinking mistakenly believes that GBV online, because of its nature, is less virulent and impactful than GBV in the physical environment, it is as damaging as its offline counterpart. The effects of GBV online are amplified by the viral character of distribution and sharing. What was once a private affair can now be instantly replicated and distributed to thousands of users via the Internet. Moreover, even if GBV online does not always cause physical harm, it can reach a wider audience, it often goes unpunished, and the evidence may stay online forever, further exacerbating the sufferings of people who experienced it. Therefore, victims of GBV online experience different forms of harm, ranging from material, economic to psychological and emotional harm, just as it occurs with GBV offline. The harms caused by GBV online are felt both at the individual and the systemic level. Individuals can have their privacy or personal space invaded, and their autonomy threatened, experience psychological and emotional harms, feel fearful, limit their freedom of expression, be silenced, and face reputational, professional, and material consequences (Dunn, 2020). Yet, on a broader scale, this violence also has significant systemic impacts. It helps reinforce gender inequality and gender hierarchies and maintains discriminatory norms that limit people from living with freedom and fully realising their human rights. In research to date, some of the most recurring and commonly reported forms of harm that people experience online include physical, material, economic, psychological, and emotional harm, as in the case of GBV offline (Woodlock, 2017).

As far as these last ones are concerned, GBV online can take a serious mental toll on victims. In fact, this form of violence can be so pervasive, relentless, and widespread, to leave victims in a constant state of fear, with no escape, since they can be always accessible or reachable through social media, texts, or their digital devices (Dunn, 2020). Specific forms of GBV in the digital environment like online (sexual) harassment and NCII, especially when prolonged over a long period, have been known to cause severe mental health outcomes, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts, self-inflicted harm, or even a combination of all of them.

In the survey conducted by Plan International (2020), for the surveyed young women and girls, emotional distress, anxiety, and depression were the second most common effects of GBV online. Whereas the qualitative data collected by Samantha Bates (2016) show that women and girls who had their intimate images shared without their consent experienced similar forms of psychological distress as those who had been victims of sexual assault. They reported experiencing issues with trust, anxiety, depression, PTSD, suicidal ideation, and other mental health impacts (Dunn, 2020). The Amnesty International IPSOS MORI poll from 2017 reports that across all countries, 61 per cent of those who said they had experienced some form of online abuse or harassment, confessed they had experienced lower self-esteem or loss of self-confidence as a result. Indeed, more than half said they had experienced stress, anxiety, or panic attacks after experiencing these online abuses, with 63 per cent reporting having experienced some form of sleeping disorder. And finally, around a quarter of those who experienced online abuse, confessed that it had made them fear not only for their personal safety, but also for their family's safety (Ging & Siapera, 2018). Additional emotional impacts, both in the short and long term, may include humiliation, bullying, shaming, blaming, stigma, which can lead to diminished self-esteem, resignation, feelings of guilt and shame, anti-social behaviour, traumas, and re-traumatisation.

Several forms of GBV online such as cyberstalking, doxing and even NCII, involve invasion and violations of privacy. When people feel fearful about their private information being stolen or released by abusers, it limits their ability to express themselves in the digital sphere or save private content through digital means, negatively impacting on their personal autonomy, freedom of expression and ability to define their personhood (Dunn, 2020). In fact, once personal information is released online, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to get it back. It may remain permanently online or stored on another person's device, increasing the risk of future privacy invasions, or exposing the victim to a further risk of harassment, not only online, but even in the physical world.

Another very serious harm that many victims of GBV online experience is silencing their voices, constraining them to self-censor and reducing or ending their participation in the digital sphere and leadership roles. The systemic impact of this silencing implies further very negative consequences since it reinforces discriminative gender roles and stereotypes and reduces online content related to equality and human rights, by making it unsafe and unwelcoming for them to express themselves freely in the digital world (Dunn, 2020). Multiple studies demonstrate that targets of GBV online reduce their time online, sometimes they even leave social media platforms entirely or completely change what they write or post to avoid this type of abuse. As reported by the EIGE (2022), 51 per cent of young women refrain from engaging in online debates after witnessing or directly being victims of online abuse. Particularly, women of colour and non-binary people are experiencing an increased risk of GBV online (Web Foundation, 2020).

The psychological and emotional impact of GBV online can seriously affect the victims' daily lives, by making it difficult for them to focus on school and work. It can alter their behaviour and routine, also by constraining them to conform to discriminatory gender norms, to avoid additional violence and abuse (Dunn, 2020). In fact, often these affected from GBV online have rebounds on their educational, professional, and economic life, other than psychological, physical, and social. Many

victims often “retire” from social media or from a class or workplace because of the gendered-bias environment, and this can influence largely the stability of the family. When concerning young people in school or universities, GBV online (as of the offline phenomenon) can disrupt the quality and enjoyment of their experience, which could lead to low grades or drop out. This brings a heavy toll on the future generation. This can also happen in the work environment, by having the person victim of GBV drop out of work or not attempting enough to their tasks.

In conclusion, between causes and consequences it is possible to identify a *fil rouge*. Consequences could transform into causes and vice versa, for this reason the primary need of society should be to prevent discriminatory action from happening towards a specific group of people in every environment they live.

Young men and boys and online risk

Drawing upon from the previously mentioned paragraphs, it appears that girls and women are disproportionally affected by GBV (both online and offline), while perpetrators are often identified as boys and men. It is also important to note that most research on GBV both online and offline is carried out identifying girls and women as the main victim category. The research on GBV against boys and men is indeed marginal, and there are very few data and investigation on the causes and consequences of this phenomenon on boys and men. This could be also linked to the fact that boys and men may not recognise GBV as such and therefore they do not report it. The aim of this chapter is to identify why boys and young men seems to represent mostly the category of perpetrators, and the consequences of this.

GBV is rooted in the legacy of a cultural system that often condoned (and still condones) aggressive and controlling behaviours by boys and men against girls and women, but it represents a retained issue underpinning most of the cultures of the modern age. Boys and young men are among the principal recipient – from family culture and societal norms – of a belief that violence could represent the way to gain benefits, friends, but mostly the respect within the society, from peers and other people (Schwartz & DeKeseredy 2008). Even when boys and men are not violent, it is a shared social idea that men must show dominance over women and control them, as part of masculinity behaviours with the outcome to have a prominent position and status in their community. In fact, the way that the negative norms towards gender and sexuality could be apprehended by boys and young men largely impact their way of approaching the other people which under the masculinity culture are defined as ‘weak’ (Connell, 2005).

This shared value of toughness and power is expressively present in the digital environment, as the research pointed out, and it is mainly carried out by boys and men. Cyberbullying is one key example to understand GBV online. The cause behind it (as for bullying) is to not show weaknesses and to be similar and “equal” to the other peers. Features like different sexual orientation, ethnicity or social or physical status are mostly among the reasons behind a cyberbullying attack. Children and young people perpetrate these abusive behaviours towards other peers to preserve their status and do not fall into shame at the eyes of the others and to not be victims themselves (Westmarland et al., 2021).

Societal norms on representation of masculinity and use of violence are also combined with the fact that boys and young men are in a specific period where they are learning about relationships and how to behave intimately with a partner. It is a common belief in many societies that masculinity is reinforced with a “violent” approach to sexual relationships. Many researchers highlight that most of the IPV starts early in the adolescence, perceiving it as normal behaviour in a relationship (Laner, 1990). Research stated that more than a half of rape perpetrators admitted that they committed their first sexual offense in the early years of adolescence (Fulu, Warner, Miedema, Jewkes, Roselli & Lang, 2013). In the digital environment, IPV is often related to the sharing of non-consensual intimate images. This action is mostly carried out by boys or men to “avenge” their intimate partner or former one or to “show the price” to their peers, by sharing details, pictures, and videos. Another potential reason behind the sharing intimate images is to also ensure a status among the peers, to show a “successful” and working relationship with a girl. While the distribution of such material has more often a lesser impact on boys and young men, it weights a higher toll on the girl’s health, both physical and psychological, as images and videos shared through the internet can hardly be removed. Often girls falling victim of NCII abuse are judged as an easy target and victimised for what happened due to the way they could be dressed or the way that they behaved, while boys and men are seen as playboys and glorified for it. From the analysis of what drives boys and young men to perpetrate GBV online, it is possible to also identify the triggering factors of becoming a perpetrator. Risk of being a perpetrator are broad, and especially for boys and men who feel pressured to meet certain criteria into the society, triggering factors can be provoking, leading to perpetrate GBV both in the physical and digital environment.

The range of factors that could lead boys and young men to perpetrate could also be identified in external drivers, such as society and community norms, from poverty to traditional gender norms supporting violence. Other factors can be identified in the circle of trusts, such as family and school in which GBV could be often displayed as the normality, and this could be linked to the socio-economic status of the family. Locality is often a very important driver for boys and young men’s masculinity, which tends to be highly emphasised within a small context as to occupy a ‘safe’ and high hierarchical spot to declare their power position (Ward et. al., 2015). Psychological, educational, and cultural causes can also endanger certain categories of people at greater risk of becoming potential perpetrators (or victims) of this form of abuse. For instance, (young) people who experienced or witnessed domestic, sexual, psychological, physical violence or abuse in one or more circle of trusts (family, schools, or sport community) could be more likely to commit violence themselves. For people who have experienced their up-bringing in a social and cultural environment where GBV is normalised and even justified, they are unlikely to have been taught what a healthy, equal, and respectful relationship resembles or the consequences of engaging in such abusive behaviours. The boys and young men falling into this category are more prone to behave impulsively, under a constant rage and most of them lack empathy and remorse for the violence they perpetrate (Fonagy & Target, 2003).

Triggering factors can also be found in the digital community. Digital spaces have been key to connecting people who are alike and who share same ideas and values. While this is a positive feature of being connected to people from different parts of the world, this can also increase the

risk of radicalisation. Boys and young men who already share the same masculinity belief, could be also more prone to perpetrate violence both offline and online by finding and engaging with a community that acts as an ‘echo chamber’ to encourage this behaviour.

In summary, boys and young men are not born with the willingness to perpetrate GBV, as no one is born to be violent. Therefore, society plays a key role in this regard. Boys and young men are often the fruit of what the society request them to represent: strength and power, with little space to emotions and weaknesses and if they fail to up live to these standards, they will not be treated as such. Moreover, preventing triggering factors (such as domestic violence and peer pressure) plays a key aspect in building new ways to tackle GBV against anyone, including boys and young men.

4. The national perspectives: Belgium, Denmark and Greece

As part of the menABLE literature review, partners reviewed the status of GBV online in their respective countries and what relevant policies and legislations are in place in Belgium, Denmark, and Greece respectively. While partners were asked to develop their contribution around the same set of questions, they were expected to provide answers in line with their interpretation of how the subject is viewed and addressed in their respective countries. This resulted in pieces which vary in scope and tone, but all give more concrete insight on how GBV online is currently approached across a subset of EU Member States.

4.1 The Belgian perspective (by Child Focus)

The national context

The phenomenon of GBV is a growing issue in the Belgian society, according also to the latest data collected in the country: 24 per cent of women in Belgium aged 18-74 have experienced intimate partner physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lives, highlighting the seriousness of the problem. Over 1,000 instances of gender-related discrimination were reported to the Institute for Equality of Women and Men (IEFH) in 2022 (16 per cent more than the year before). Moreover, among the 1,020 reports received by the IEFH in 2021 can be divided into three categories: complaints (51 per cent increase compared to 2020), requests for legal information (12 per cent increase) and notices (13 per cent drop)¹⁵.

"Society is increasingly aware of the problem of sexual harassment, sexist comments and the phenomenon of non-consensual distribution of intimate images, also called revenge porn" Liesbet Stevens, Deputy Director of the IEFH, said in a press release¹⁶. In 2021, a rise of 23 per cent has been detected in non-consensual dissemination of intimate material. The rising numbers can partly be explained by the fact that the Institute for Equality of Women and Men became competent to support victims of non-consensual dissemination of intimate images¹⁷.

Current legislative framework

Since 2001, Belgium has pursued its policy to combat GBV in the physical and digital environment through several national action plans coordinated by IEFH. The national action plan to combat all forms of gender-based violence (2015—2019)¹⁸ constitutes an integrated approach to GBV and covers intimate partner violence, FGM, forced marriage, honour-based violence, sexual violence and prostitution. Its priorities include the collection of qualitative and quantitative data on GBV, prevention through awareness raising and education, measures to support and protect victims, and strengthening protection measures.

¹⁵ <https://www.brusselstimes.com/236222/over-1000-reports-of-gender-based-discrimination-in-belgium-last-year>.

¹⁶ <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/liesbet-stevens-ernstig-en-uitzonderlijk-dat-iemand-voor-vijf-slachtoffers-wordt-veroordeeld-b7df20bc/>.

¹⁷ <https://www.brusselstimes.com/belgium/119279/revenge-porn-victims-given-new-support-in-belgium>.

¹⁸ https://igvm-iefh.belgium.be/sites/default/files/88_-_stop_violence_nap_2015-2019.pdf.

Concerning specifically the Belgian legal framework, Belgium is one of the first countries in Europe to not only define femicide, but also to recognise different forms of violence against women and establish victims' rights to improve state support towards victims of GBV.

Firstly, Belgium officially recognised feminicide, or the murder of women for gender-based reasons, as its own separate crime under homicide in October 2022. Feminicide, sometimes called femicide, is often lumped in with domestic violence, however feminicide refers specifically to murder. Femicide is indeed defined by European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2021) as "the killing of a woman or girl because of her gender, and can take different forms, such as the murder of women because of intimate partner violence; the torture and misogynist slaying of women; killing of women and girls in the name of 'honour'; etc."

On 11 May 2020, the Brussels Parliament also adopted the "Brussels Plan to Combat Violence against Women" (2020-2024)¹⁹ designed to establish a specific alert mechanism in partnership with dispensing pharmacies for victims of domestic violence. Within the criminalisation of feminicide, the Belgian bill distinguishes between several forms of this type of crime: intimate (committed by a woman's companion), non-intimate (a woman in a prostitution ring), indirect (because of a forced abortion or female genital mutilation) and gender-based homicide. The law also mentions the different forms of violence that can precede this type of crime, such as sexual violence, psychological violence and coercive control, and names special rights for victims of an attempted feminicide. These include the right to be interviewed by a member of the law enforcement of the gender of their choice, the right to be received in a suitable room offering the necessary privacy and discretion, the right to interact with a police officer trained specifically on GBV related crimes, and the right to receive information on existing protection measures.

In June 2023, new criminal provisions about rape and other sexual violence that centre around the concept of consent, entered into force²⁰. This last new law has a double intent: on the one hand it decriminalises sex work, on the other hand it made it possible to open two new care centres for survivors of sexual violence, bringing the total number of operational facilities to seven, with at least three more planned.

The Advisory Board of the Belgian Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel (CSA)²¹ adopted on 14 July 2022 a "Code of conduct on commercial communications sexist, hyper-sexualised and based on gender stereotypes"²². Set within the framework of the French-speaking Community of Belgium's government strategy "Women Rights 2020-2024"²³, this code is the result of several working group sessions with broadcasters, advertisers, experts, and representatives of the civil society.

¹⁹ <https://equal.brussels/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Brussels-plan-violence-against-women.pdf>.

²⁰ <https://www.brusselstimes.com/231594/belgiums-updated-sexual-criminal-law-takes-effect-today-what-changes>.

²¹ [CSA Belgique – Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel](https://www.csa.be/fr/Conseil-Superieur-de-l-Audiovisuel).

²² [20220714_Codepubsexistes.pdf \(csa.be\)](https://www.csa.be/fr/20220714_Codepubsexistes.pdf).

²³ [Plan Droits des Femmes 2020-2024 - Egalite des chances - Secrétariat Général - Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles \(cfwb.be\)](https://www.cfwb.be/fr/Plan-Droits-des-Femmes-2020-2024-Egalite-des-chances-Secretariat-General-Federation-Wallonie-Bruxelles).

At a more regional level, the Brussels Government expresses its major ambition to combat violence against women in its Regional Policy Declaration 2019-2024²⁴. By developing and implementing the first comprehensive Brussels Plan to Combat Violence against Women, the objective is to address all aspects of this issue in a coordinated, cross-cutting, transparent, and effective manner. This plan therefore covers prevention and raising awareness as well as assistance for victims and perpetrators. This first Brussels Plan 2020-2024 was developed in close coordination with all the relevant ministers, secretaries of state and public services in the Brussels-Capital Region. This cross-cutting approach brings with it a shared responsibility and collectively sustained investments. This Plan is also innovative in that it is part of a participatory and democratic process. In addition to the requirement for transparency, this Plan aims to ensure the traceability and clarity of its measures. This is emphasised by the referencing and transparency of budgetary provisions and established indicators. In order to work closely with civil society, from its preparation and implementation, a mid-term assessment of the measures will be carried out in 2022. The assessment showed that some vulnerable groups have been left behind. Especially young people, elderly women, women working in precarious situations and migrant women. Also there seems to be a lack of regional political and integrated vision to combat violence.

The national initiatives

Belgium does not have a national helpline for GBV specifically, instead each region has its own helpline. For the Flemish-speaking region there is one helpline (1712), which covers all forms of violence including violence against women and girls. The helpline is free of charge. For the French-speaking region, the existing helpline is Ecoute Violences Conjugales (0800 30 030), which covers domestic violence and is free of charge. People experiencing sexual violence in the French speaking area of Belgium can also call the helpline SOS Viol (02/534 36 36). Always in the French speaking part of Belgium there is the Centre for the prevention of Domestic and Family violence. Even though there is not a national helpline specific for this kind of issues, there is one listening service that covers all the regions in Belgium called “tele-accueil”²⁵, which also covers matters related to GBV.

According to the Council of Europe, there are seven women’s shelters in Flanders with a total of 113 beds for women and children. In the region of Brussels there is one women’s shelter and 15 in the Walloon Region; 34 beds are available in Brussels and 678 in Wallonia²⁶. Regarding perpetrators of partners and domestic violence, there is an organisation called Proxis²⁷ which operates in all Belgian regions. The scope of this organisation is to help perpetrators, through a set of educational and awareness activities.

In the last years, many organisations emerged and grew in Belgium to defend the rights of young girls and women. Child Focus, as coordinator of the Belgian Safer Internet Center, developed many initiatives to tackle GBV and stop the culture of victim blaming. Sextoooh²⁸, is an example, of a

²⁴ <http://www.parlement.brussels/texte-de-ladeclaration-de-politique-generale-du-gouvernement-bruxellois/>.

²⁵ [Que fait Télé-Accueil Bruxelles ? – Télé Accueil Bruxelles \(tele-accueil.be\)](https://www.tele-accueil.be/).

²⁶ <https://www.icrb.org/en/projects/the-belgian-sexual-assault-care-centres-from-piloting-to-evaluation>.

²⁷ [Qui sommes-nous ? | Praxis \(asblpraxis.be\)](https://www.praxis.be/).

²⁸ <https://sextoooh.be/fr>.

pedagogical tool developed for secondary schools to deconstruct gender stereotypes online specifically linked to cases of sexting, by raising awareness on the influence of these stereotypes and by stimulating critical thinking.

4.2 The Danish perspective (by CDYC)

The national context

Historically, many Danish people have considered Denmark to be a progressive and free-spirited country with a high level of gender equality. Within recent years, a vast number of different discussions have been taking place in Danish media of relevance to GBV, including the digital sphere. There have been repeated debates on subjects such as involuntary sharing of intimate pictures or online harassments and threats towards female politicians and other female public figures. There have been at least two waves of #MeToo debates with a particular focus on unwanted sexual attention at workplaces. There has also been a related ongoing debate on honour-based violations towards women in ethnic/religious minority communities.

Discussion around the topic of GBV online started arising especially around 2020, when a Danish 20-year-old man was sentenced to 6 years in prison. He had extorted 169 girls and women in ages all the way down to 11²⁹. Especially in 2022, Denmark was shaken by the murder of a young woman who was abducted, raped, and killed on her way home from a night out in Aalborg. This tragedy sparked a widespread debate on violence against women in society. While discussions and activism regarding GBV have existed for decades, the case garnered broader public attention in the wake of the second wave of the #MeToo movement.

The second wave of the #MeToo movement was initiated by a famous entertainment presenter, Sofie Linde, whose speech on sexual harassment in the entertainment work was quickly endorsed by more than 700 women from the entertainment industry who co-signed a statement of support for her³⁰. This led to a wave of #MeToo disclosures in Denmark, with women from various professions coming forward with similar collective statements and stories, including over 300 politicians³¹, later followed by women in fields such as healthcare and the military, sharing their experiences of sexism, harassment, and abuse. Several revelations led to political leaders, media figures, and powerful union leaders resigning from their positions.

The debate revolved around several key themes. Firstly, there was an overarching discussion about violence against women. Additionally, it touched on the feelings of insecurity and unwanted advances many young women experience in nightlife. GBV was also examined in a broader societal context, where discussions about gender inequality and power dynamics between the sexes were prevalent. Questions were raised about why society had not effectively addressed the deeper roots of GBV and the underlying patriarchal structures that persist.

²⁹ <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/regionale/syd/dom-i-brutal-sag-om-digital-afpresning-og-voldtaegt-ung-mand-afpressede-og>.

³⁰ <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/indland/701-mediadvinder-stoetter-sofie-linde-laes-hele-brevet-her>.

³¹ <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/322-kvinder-protester-mod-sexisme-i-dansk-politik>.

Current legislative framework

Within the last few years, the existence of these public debates has spilled into the formulation of new national legislation. Firstly, a bill was introduced in 2019 by the Ministry of Justice in the Penal Code about the juxtaposition of psychological violence to physical violence. This bill also considers those who are affected by psychological violence below the age of 18 years, and especially if the perpetrator is part of their family or their “circle of trust”³².

In 2020, the Danish Parliament decided to strengthen the legislation concerning rape by making it prohibited to have intercourse without explicit content (rather than focusing on whether there was an explicit rejection)³³. In 2021, Denmark has also adopted a provision on explicit prohibition of stalking. This new bill has an important value as for the initiatives which have been implemented with its introduction. Therefore, the law enforcement will have specialised teams which will handle specifically cases of stalking, by receiving appropriate training on how to handle victims³⁴.

The Danish Criminal Code also deals with online hate speech. According to paragraph 266b: “A person who, either publicly, or with the purpose of dissemination to a large group of people, makes a statement or another kind of message, wherein a group of people is threatened, ridiculed or degraded, on the basis of their race, skin colour, national or ethnic origin, religious belief, or sexual preference, is liable to being punished by being fined, or by being imprisoned for up to two years”³⁵. Even though there are many references of what could be described as GBV online in the Danish legal framework, there is no specific mention of GBV online in the laws.

The national initiatives

Together with the passing of the above-mentioned laws, several national initiatives have been undertaken to tackle GBV. Among these, there is the update of teaching and information material on sexual education and sexuality in general for primary and secondary schools. Moreover, a specific hotline for victim of rape has been institutionalised with ad-hoc professionals to answer to the call and provide a round-the-clock support to victims, who can request to be treated anonymously. Due also to the role of the law enforcement in such cases, and often the lack of understanding of the gravity of the issue, the police will receive appropriate trainings to support victims of rape, by creating a specialised team within the law enforcement. Moreover, the Danish government intends also to increase the funds towards the Danish Stalking Centre to increase their capacity to deal with more cases over the year.

Related to the national initiatives to tackle GBV online, in Denmark there is an existing focus to tackle the issue from a male perspective. In recent years, there has been an increased focus on men's health, including their mental well-being. This development has been particularly driven by the

³² <https://www.justitsministeriet.dk/pressemeddelelse/nyt-lovforslag-ligestiller-psykisk-og-fysisk-vold/> and <https://dkr.dk/vold-og-voldtaegt/psykisk-vold/lovgivning>.

³³ <https://www.justitsministeriet.dk/pressemeddelelse/folketinget-vedtager-ny-samtykkelov/>.

³⁴ <https://www.justitsministeriet.dk/pressemeddelelse/enigt-folketing-vedtager-ny-selvstaendig-stalkingbestemmelse-i-straffeloven/>.

³⁵ [Denmark-Criminal-Code.pdf \(antislaverylaw.ac.uk\)](#).

Forum for Mænds Sundhed (Forum for Men's Health), which has worked diligently to raise awareness about men's unique health challenges and the underlying factors behind men's overrepresentation in statistics related to substance abuse, violence, gambling addiction, and suicide.

Forum for Mænds Sundhed has especially been a champion for highlighting that men often struggle to express their emotions and seek help, thereby emphasizing the need to develop communities and methods that specifically support boys and men's motivation to seek assistance when facing psychological and emotional pressure. The gender equality debate is another example of an area where there is to some extent a shift towards a broader discussion about men's roles in society, and how traditional gender roles can be limiting for both men and women. Therefore, it is important to create a space where men can express their feelings and desires without fear of judgment³⁶.

Danish Men's Society is an example of an organisation which has emerged precisely out of the need to support a more nuanced approach to the gender equality debate, considering all gender-specific challenges and needs.

4.3 The Greek perspective (by FORTH)

The national context

The popularity of the Internet, the proliferation of mobile information services and the widespread use of social media, combined with the rise of GBV, have led to the emergence of online violence against women and girls, which is now a growing global problem with significant social and economic consequences. In an attempt to have a more accurate timeline, one could say that GBV online was first noted as a problem in Greece about 10 years ago, when the use of social media became rapidly popular and extended. In addition, in Greece a similar growth can be observed in the phenomenon of cyberviolence, accordingly to the estimated Greek population of 11 million.

In research conducted in 39 countries worldwide in 2017³⁷, it was found that the use of smartphones or other digital media appears to be less extended in adults in Greece (66 per cent), compared to the global percentage (75 per cent). However, the picture is different if shifting the attention on younger age groups, as the percentage of people aged 18-36, who said they use the Internet, social media or have a smartphone, rises to 99 per cent. One can deduct from the above findings that online violence and GBV online would appear much increased in younger ages. More specifically, in Greece, one can only assume that the phenomenon follows the same pattern regarding the extended use of Internet or social media in younger age groups and the increased occurrence of GBV online incidents, since there have been no recent studies regarding this phenomenon, nor have any related statistics been presented over the last three years. However, it is possible to collect evidence from cybercrime incidents, and GBV cases, to deduct a safe assumption of a rising scale. A study by the Cybercrime Division of the Hellenic Police published in

³⁶ <https://sundmand.dk/site/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Ny-undersogelse-om-maends-trivsel-med-bilag.pdf>.

³⁷ www.pewresearch.org.

2022, revealed the rapid growth of cybercrime incidents, reported to the police over the last years especially during the pandemic. The research however is studying cybercrime in general and does not focus on GBV online.

The most recent and accurate report on GBV in Greece was published from the Deputy Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, responsible for the Demography and Family Policy³⁸, as the Third Annual Report regarding Violence against Women. It stated that the occurrence of GBV online incidents had increased rapidly over the last years, including cyber harassment, revenge porn and cyber stalking, proposing more solid laws to include such incidents, even though there has already been implemented a change in legislation relating to revenge porn incidents, since 2021. In this report, cyber violence is identified as a form of GBV, with the subcategories of cyber stalking, cyber harassment, image based cyber abuse, revenge porn, and non-consensual intimate image. The statistics gathered from 41 Counselling centres for Women all over Greece, have reported data for incidents of GBV but no data for the online phenomenon.

Finally, the European Institute for Gender Equality reports that regarding Greece, due to the lack of data, statistics can only be provided up to 2019³⁹, which is pre-pandemic, and one can only assume that a similar trend would follow in the years during the pandemic and in the post-pandemic era. According to their research (FRA, 2019), 3 per cent of women were subjected to cyber harassment in the past five years, and among women aged 16-29, 11 per cent experienced cyber harassment at the same time.

According to a most recent research conducted by the Greek Safer Internet Centre at FORTH during the months of December 2022 and January 2023 (Daskalaki et al, 2020), among 4.400 school professionals from all different educational levels, 26 per cent of them were aware of at least one incident of cyberbullying among their students, which lead us to suggest that cyberbullying is the most common form of GBV online, especially in the young ages of 12 to 18. Cyberbullying is considered to be a broad category of online violence, occurring in many forms, under the gender factor.

Current legislative framework

In Greece, GBV online is not stated clearly on the criminal legal system yet, similar to most of the European countries. There are some citations referring to offline as well as online criminal acts, such as in Act No. 4411/2016 FEK 142 / A / 3-8-2016 on the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime and its Additional Protocol, on the criminalization of acts of a racist and xenophobic nature, committed through computer systems. Another remarkable legislative improvement was the transposition into Greek legal order of the Directive 2013/40/ EU of the European Parliament and of the Council on attacks against information systems and the replacement of Council Framework Decision 2005/222 / JHA, penitentiary and anti-crime policy arrangements and other provisions (National Legislation⁴⁰). At national level, there is also Act.

³⁸ <https://isotita.gr/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/3h-ethsia-ekthesi-Via-kata-twn-Gynaikwn-GGDOPIF.pdf>.

³⁹ <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2021/domain/violence/EL>.

⁴⁰ National Legislation, 2022. <https://www.datawo.org/>.

4604/2019 which promotes substantive gender equality, preventing and combating gender-based violence.

In Greece, different regulations are taken under consideration for each case of GBV online, such as the Penal Code (Article 336 about sexual assault and Article 337 about defilement or Act No. 3500/2006 about domestic violence).

Among the other relevant legislative measures to tackle GBV online legally, in Greece there are:

- Act No. 3896/ΦΕΚ 207/8.12.2010 about sexual harassment
- Different acts concerning human trafficking, the recent one being Act No. 4478/2017 (ΦΕΚ/Α /91/23.06.2017 for the ratification of the Convention about human trafficking signed by the Council of Europe on 16 May 2005 are also relevant.
- A new provision regarding the offence of "revenge pornography" is added in Article 38 of the Law 4947/2022 (Government FEK A 124/23.6.2022) (Article 346 in the CC).
- Ratification of the Istanbul Convention by the Greek State by the Act 4531/2018.

As it seems, the legislation is beginning to take under notice the problem of GBV online, but still, we are at an initial stage.

The national initiatives

Over the last years, Greek society has witnessed a great awakening regarding the phenomenon of GBV both online and offline. This fact is due to a number of actions taken by national authorities, NGOs, academic Institutions and women's organisations that have conducted many actions, events, projects and campaigns in order to disseminate their materials and raise awareness in the Greek population.

The National Research Centre for Gender Equality, in co-ordination with the national General Secretariat for Equality and Human Rights and the regional committees, conduct events, seminars, awareness raising visits to schools and other social groups throughout the year. The main topic of those events is GBV, but the online forms are included, especially when the event is focused on young people⁴¹. DIOTIMA centre, as a non-profit organisation, has conducted quite significant awareness projects over the years⁴². DIOTIMA and UNICEF collaborated to launch the educational game of PLAY SAFE, aiming to raise awareness about GBV online and harassment among young people and adolescents. Centre Diotima as the coordinator along with the Department of Communication and Mass Media of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and Genderhood as partners, in collaboration with the Greek Ombudsman and the Association of Social Workers of Greece (SKLE) are implementing the still ongoing project of PRESS, until 2024. Their final aim is the operation of a holistic support centre for women, girls and LGBT people over 16 years old⁴³.

⁴¹ <https://isotita.gr/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/National-Action-Plan-for-Gender-Equality-2021-2025.pdf>.

⁴² <https://diotima.org.gr/en/digital-campaign-on-cyber-violence/>.

⁴³ <https://press.genderhood.org/en/home/>.

Last but not least, the Greek Safer Internet Centre, and more specifically, SaferInternet4kids, have launched a number of successful campaigns over their operating years and have developed useful material for educators, parents and children according to their age group regarding online violence. Among this material, informative leaflets and posters relating to GBV online are also offered⁴⁴.

⁴⁴ <https://saferinternet4kids.gr/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/GBV.pdf>.

PART II – Qualitative research: empirical findings

As previously explained in the literature review, despite ongoing research and policy making efforts across Europe, a harmonised definition of GBV online has not yet been achieved. The national landscape review from menABLE partners further reinforced this picture; even at national level, it proves difficult to agree on what GBV online is, let alone on what should be done to regulate or remediate it across the EU. Complementary to the literature review outlined in the first part of the report, qualitative research was carried out as part of the menABLE project.

In accordance with the aforementioned, the second part of this report will examine and interpret the key insights derived from a comprehensive series of focus group discussions and expert interviews, thereby shaping the qualitative findings of this study. At first, the following chapter will summarise the outcomes gathered during a series of semi-structured expert interviews conducted with different stakeholders, ranging from academia, policy, civil society, and industry. Secondly, other two chapters will deepen on the findings gathered in the three rounds of focus groups. Focus groups involved early and late teens, formal and non-formal education settings and were carried out by Child Focus, CDYC and FORTH in their respective countries.

1. Expert interviews

The primary goal of the semi-structured interviews was to gather insights and experiences regarding GBV online across Europe and beyond, including existing best practices, common challenges, opinions on current policies and interventions, and assessments of available technological and non-technological solutions.

1.1. Methodology

The diversification of the stakeholders' groups involved in the interviews was essential for obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, allowing for a more inclusive exploration of the topic and consideration of various perspectives and experiences.

The interviews, conducted online, were guided by a set of predetermined questions that emerged from five overarching themes. These themes were designed to steer the conversation and enable a thorough analysis of the topic, with an opportunity for additional insights:

- a) Gender-based violence: from offline to online.
- b) Identifying and working with perpetrators.
- c) Preventing and responding to GBV online: Strategies.
- d) Preventing and responding to GBV online: Actors.
- e) Tech and non-tech solutions for preventing and responding to GBV online.

All partners have actively participated in the process of conducting expert interviews, thereby contributing to a diverse framework for the interviews that also incorporates national perspectives.

1.2. Data collection

In total, 21 experts from diverse sectors have been interviewed. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of GBV online, six distinct target groups were involved: young people and influencers, academia, policymakers, industries, NGOs, and media authorities.

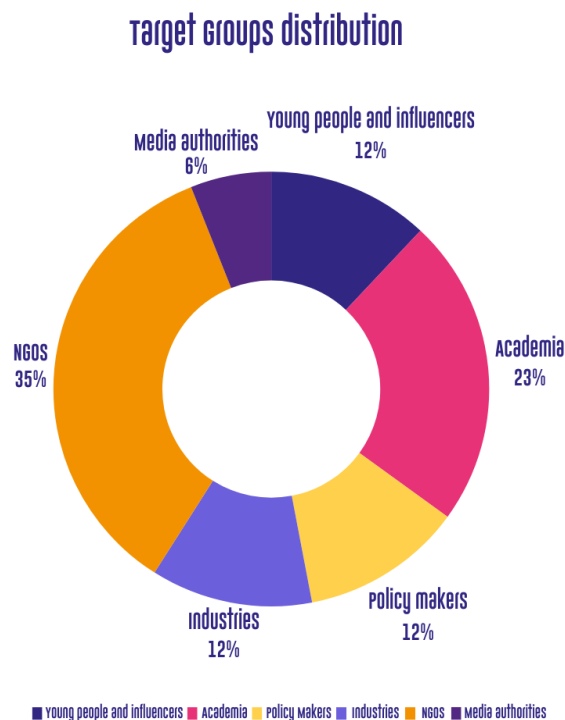


Figure 2 - Target groups distribution throughout the expert interviews.

The engagement with these diverse stakeholder groups aimed to foster a holistic and well-informed approach to address GBV online. This multifaceted approach ensured that efforts were rooted in thorough research, sensitivity to the needs of vulnerable groups, and potential influence on policies and practices related to GBV online.

Notably, the engagement with young people and influencers, particularly activists and members of the LGBTQI+ community, provided invaluable insights into the unique challenges faced by these groups in online environments. Collaboration with academia enriched the understanding with research-driven perspectives on GBV online, offering theoretical and empirical insights into the causes, trends, and implications of this phenomenon. Additionally, the involvement of policymakers played a pivotal role in bridging the gap between research findings and the effective implementation of policies, while NGOs brought frontline experience and advocacy work into focus, and industries contributed not only from a user's perspective but also from a policy-oriented

standpoint, enriching the discussions. Finally, recognising the advertising sector's role in content delivery, the discussion with media authorities provided an important addition to ultimately understanding how to create a safer and more inclusive online environment.

1.3. Results

a. Gender-based violence: from offline to online

The insights gleaned from the experts' interviews have illuminated several key transformations in the nature and scope of GBV in the digital era. One of the first shared elements emphasised the digital role in leading to a new era where the boundaries between offline and online experiences blur. While GBV has always existed, the Internet provided an even more accessible platform for its perpetration, and the COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated these changes.

Intersectionality, involving various aspects of an individual's identity, influences experiences of GBV online, and cultural contexts shape its interpretation and manifestation. As a result, as more factors intersect with each other, the level of vulnerability to GBV online increases. In particular, Myriam Halimi (Rosa vzw)⁴⁵ and Jill Michiels (Zijn vzw)⁴⁶ pointed out how girls from Maghreb backgrounds are particularly targeted due to the perpetrator's attraction to the exotic origin and appearance, and the taboo atmosphere around the sexual experiences. Young people without legal status, such as refugees and asylum seekers, are also highly vulnerable. Moreover, within the LGBTIQ+ and transgender communities, marginalised groups and those with non-binary gender identities, often experience higher rates of online harm, stemming from a lack of understanding of diverse sexualities and genders.

Another shared revelation from the interviews was the differing nature of GBV online compared to its offline counterpart. GBV offline often inflicts more immediate physical harm on victims, while the online realm can significantly impact victims' mental health. Although GBV online may not lead to immediate physical injury, the emotional and psychological toll stemming from online harassment and abuse can be profound. However, the perception of GBV online tends to be less severe, with many mistakenly believing that it has less impact on victims than offline.

"Online gives people the chance to act more upon words that it would in person. It gives people some "fake confidence" to say more words and to use more negativity to bring you down."

(Jacob Donegan, TikTok creator)

⁴⁵ www.rosavzw.be.

⁴⁶ <https://vzwzijn.be/>.

An interesting example of the digital role was presented by Sophie Mortimer (South West Grid for Learning)⁴⁷ which emphasised how doxing and NCILs have become prevalent forms of online violence, extending beyond the early stages of a relationship breakdown. Perpetrators have indeed begun skilfully using these digital tools, exploiting the increased availability of images from consensual sharing within relationships.

However, as noted by experts, in the digital age there are both opportunities and challenges that distinguish GBV online from the offline. Transnational communication, anonymity, rapid dissemination, and the revival of removed content play significant roles. Transnationality, for instance, offers opportunities for protecting vulnerable groups and sharing experiences beyond geographical origins and language barriers. However, it also allows harmful content to swiftly reach a global audience and be easily copied or downloaded, increasing the harm and suffer for victims. Anonymity also encourages protective behaviours among users to avoid physical or aggressive contact when addressing such misconduct. However, it is also one of the main factors that empower users to engage in aggressive and harmful behaviour in the first place.

Additionally, GBV online is an intricate problem intertwined with offline experiences, particularly for children and young people. Digital environments are far from gender-neutral spaces, and the line between online and offline life is increasingly blurred, posing profound challenges for identifying and addressing GBV.

“We are talking about a generational shift of violence. It's not only about our voices in the online space, but about a digitalised society that has magnified the level of violence that women and girls can face, how public it can be, how often they can be victimised on multiple levels and on multiple occasions and beyond secondary victimisation.”

(Asha Allen, CDT Europe)

The interviews with experts also emphasised the challenges in the fight against GBV online, many of which demand urgent attention and innovative solutions. One of the primary challenges is the pace of policymaking. Technology advances quickly, leading to outdated policies that struggle to combat evolving online threats. While GBV online has proliferated quickly, political will to address it comprehensively has been delayed, allowing perpetrators to adapt swiftly to new circumstances. Moreover, definitions of violence often require specific conditions, typically centred around physical harm. GBV online, which predominantly includes psychological violence and coercive control, does

⁴⁷ <https://swgfl.org.uk/>.

not always align with these criteria. As a result, victims often find it challenging to seek legal redress, stressing the need for an updated legal perspective.

Another significant issue lies in data collection across EU Member States, where inconsistencies and inadequacies prevail. This inconsistency extends to incidents like doxing, confirmed Asha Allen (Center of Democracy and Technology)⁴⁸ where varying categorisations create hurdles in gathering precise data. Unfortunately, dedicated bodies face funding limitations, which not only hinder comprehensive data collection but also contribute to the limited understanding of GBV online. The lack of coordination among legal instruments within the EU exacerbates the problem.

In examining the challenges posed by technological factors, several common issues have been identified by industries. One of the central challenges lies in striking a delicate balance between preserving users' anonymity and privacy while also ensuring accountability. Anonymity can be a lifeline for vulnerable individuals, providing them with a safe and inclusive space to express themselves. However, the same privacy also poses a significant hurdle when it comes to identifying both victims and perpetrators of harm. Moreover, online misconduct often knows no boundaries and spills over into multiple platforms. This creates a complex web of challenges as efforts to combat GBV online must extend beyond the borders of a single platform.

In addition, as interestingly noted during the interview with Aylo⁴⁹, due to the lack of appropriate legislations, in recent years there has been a growing emphasis of platforms on trust and safety initiatives, aimed at bridging the gap between policies and rapidly advancing technology. Different platforms have their own policies and guidelines, which can vary significantly from one country to another as they strive to align with local regulations. Unfortunately, this has resulted in certain policies lagging behind in crucial areas, and complementing enforcement problems which remain one of the most challenging aspects of Internet legislation. Furthermore, since some platforms face stigma due to their nature, decision-making processes result in incomplete and ineffective responses to the needs of the digital world.

Finally, as experts consistently underscored, in the overarching battle against GBV online it becomes evident that the fundamental cause extends beyond the realm of legal and technology frameworks. This root issue is deeply entrenched within the society, which remains profoundly patriarchal in nature and based on gender stereotypes and cultural norms.

Within this context, cultural models have emerged that deflect responsibility onto the victims of GBV online, effectively normalising victim-blaming behaviours. This normalisation, in turn, perpetuates the pervasive rape culture that is a daunting obstacle in the efforts to combat GBV in the digital sphere. The digital age has amplified the prevalence of misogyny, resulting in a sharp increase of GBV online cases. According to the expert, the alarming promotion of misogynistic messages by influential male figures within the manosphere is also connected to the surge in various forms of online harassment, intimidation, and hate speech, often rooted in gender-related

⁴⁸ <https://cdt.org/>.

⁴⁹ Former MindGeek, <https://aylo.com>.

biases. These individuals actively propagate rigid definitions of what it means to be a 'real man', fostering feelings of victimhood among some men who perceive gender equality as a threat to their privileges. Recognising the intrinsic connection between these deeply ingrained societal norms and the perpetuation of GBV online is crucial. To effectively address this issue, it is key to confront and challenge these cultural norms, fostering a more equitable and empathetic online environment for all.

"It's not about technology. This is all about people. It's about human behaviour, because if it wasn't about people, we wouldn't have a problem. Technologically, we could fix these issues. It's the people that are the problem."

(Sophie Mortimer, SWGfL)

b. Identifying and working with perpetrators

Expert interviews have provided valuable insights into the identification and management of perpetrators of GBV online. This comprehensive exploration offered significant insights into the complexities of dealing with perpetrators, including indicators, tools, and strategies.

One of the primary aspects emphasised the importance of comprehending the underlying motivations of perpetrators as a fundamental indicator for their identification. As interestingly highlighted by Maureen Mincke (Criminologist) in adult life, revenge often drives harmful behaviour within intimate relationships, typically targeting women. On the other hand, teenagers are often motivated by the need to assert themselves within peer groups, particularly among young boys. This quest for acceptance is heavily influenced by group dynamics and toxic masculinity, leading young boys to overlook the harm caused by collecting and disseminating intimate images of their peers, particularly sexualising young girls.

Another noteworthy outcome is related to the technical aspect of perpetrators' identification. Interviews with industries revealed that identifying online perpetrators relies on the strategic use of various tools and technologies. These tools include the implementation of keyword restriction in multiple languages to prevent and detect harmful contents, as well as taking immediate actions against individuals posting illegal material, including bans and content removal. However, perpetrators frequently exploit platforms' anonymity by creating fake profiles and they often possess the technical skills to navigate the Internet anonymously, using tools like anonymisation and encryption, making their identification challenging.

Furthermore, the reluctance to report GBV online cases plays a critical role in identifying perpetrators. Victims, especially young people, and vulnerable groups, often hesitate to report

incidents of GBV online for different reasons. On one hand, the fear of shame and judgment restrains them from reporting, while on the other hand, the limited support they receive from both platforms and authorities makes them perceive the reporting as ineffective for seeking justice. While it is true that users' reports submitted by affected individuals or witnesses to platforms play a significant role in providing valuable information for identification purposes, the constraints of the platforms themselves can complicate the process. Additionally, legal differences surrounding GBV online across different regions add further complexity to the identification process.

Coincidentally, as Sara De Vido (Ca' Foscari University of Venice)⁵⁰ highlighted, authorities have the technical means, such as tracing IP addresses, to identify many perpetrators, but as underscored by Sophie Mortimer (SWGfL) sometimes the challenge lies in the lack of preparedness and understanding among authorities to address these issues effectively.

Another important outcome stressed how addressing GBV online and working with perpetrators requires a multifaceted approach encompassing rehabilitation, education, understanding, and support. As highlighted by Brunella Greco (Save the Children Italy)⁵¹ this is particularly crucial when dealing with young offenders. The emphasis should be on rehabilitation and education to combat GBV both online and offline. Recognising the potential for rehabilitation is vital, as education helps young individuals comprehend the consequences of their actions and the impact of GBV.

Additionally, exploring the underlying causes of harmful behaviour is instrumental in providing necessary assistance and support. Education and understanding the roots of the problem are essential since online haters often express hate due to their insecurities or past experiences with hate. Moreover, cultural and familial beliefs may also contribute to these actions, making it beneficial to involve parents in the change process. Offering support to these individuals, such as counselling or therapy, can help prevent them from repeating harmful behaviour and break the cycle.

"I feel like that sometimes you can forget the haters but if you just forget them, they are going to keep doing it. Instead, giving them help to stop the meanness, it means less suffering for others in the future."

(Molly Hickey, BIK Youth Ambassador)

As emerged by the interview with Aylo, online platforms may serve as a key initial point of contact for individuals engaged in harmful behaviour by displaying deterrent messages. These messages, often combined with actions like banning specific terms related to illegal activities, serve as a clear

⁵⁰ <https://www.unive.it/>.

⁵¹ <https://www.savethechildren.it/>.

reminder to individuals about the illegality of their actions, providing valuable information on where and how to access help and resources.

Finally, a unique perspective offered by TikTok creator, Jacob Donegan, underscored the importance of genuine and personal communication when addressing GBV online. Prioritising personal feelings and experiences over impersonal interactions can be more effective in fostering understanding and respect.

c. Preventing and responding to GBV online: Strategies

To effectively combat GBV online, it is crucial to consider the broader context of creating safe and inclusive digital environments. Insights from interviewed experts have illuminated various strategies, including education, awareness-raising, comprehensive support systems, and tailored approaches, interconnected with the overarching goal of fostering safer online spaces.

However, it is important to acknowledge the inherent complexity of this task and the challenge of achieving safety for everyone in digital environments. This perspective underscores the need for these strategies to be rooted in principles of equity, free access, and anti-discrimination while recognising that online harassment often mirrors broader societal issues, including sexism, racism, and patriarchy. This undertaking calls for a multi-sphere approach that not only safeguards specific rights but also confronts and mitigates the deep-seated societal issues at the core of online harassment, aiming to foster safety, equity, and societal change online.

As part of this multifaceted preventive approach, education stood out as a fundamental cornerstone. When considering children and young people, many experts have emphasised the need of integrating comprehensive digital education programs into school curricula to equip children and young people with the knowledge and skills required for safe navigation in the online realm, addressing the current gap in digital citizenship education.

On a related note, experts stressed the importance of incorporating GBV awareness classes within school settings to address issues such as offensive jokes and harmful behaviours that often perpetuate GBV and to educate students about human rights and the dangers of aggressive language, both in the online and offline realm. Moreover, it is essential to make subjects like consent, sexuality, and gender education mandatory components of school curricula, using dedicated hours for discussions, role-playing, and debates.

“Everyone, in all ages, should fully understand the importance of consent, of healthy relationships, of each other’s boundaries, how do we express ourselves, how do we accept and thank the person who expresses their wish to be or not be with us, under the context of respect.”

(Anonymous expert)

However, acknowledging that cultural change is a gradual and generational process, some experts pointed out that education should not exclusively target the youth, underlining the significance of lifelong learning. Adults, including parents, formal and non-formal educators, and practitioners in the mental health area, play a significant role in helping address this problem and they must have access to the right tools and resources to effectively support and educate young people. Their awareness is essential, as their lack of knowledge can lead to missed opportunities for prevention and timely support. In this context, awareness campaigns are essential for fostering understanding on GBV online, contributing to the elimination of taboos embedded in the society.

In this framework, strategies for involving young people in the discussions have been suggested, such as leveraging social media, video games, and activities appealing to the younger audience to disseminate information and promote responsible online behaviour. On the other hand, practical resources, like pocket cards or similar tools, have been identified as valuable for spreading knowledge and empowering both children and the broader community in a user-friendly manner. This proactive engagement underscores the significance of addressing these concerns in their early stages, as experts emphasised that early intervention plays a pivotal role in serving as a preventive and proactive measure against GBV online. Additionally, peer-to-peer campaigns and mutual support have proven effective, particularly when engaging with teenagers. As reported by Giulia Radi (Save the Children Italy) initiatives that involve young people may foster a sense of community and understanding among them. Furthermore, to bolster awareness campaigns, the use of emotional testimonials – ideally shared by young individuals – who highlight the real-life consequences faced by victims has proven to resonate deeply with the young audience.

While experts offered various suggestions for preventive methods, they also underscored the intricate nature of addressing GBV online when it comes to protective and responsive measures. This complexity requires a holistic approach that respects the nuances of the digital landscape and the rights of all individuals involved.

As highlighted by Aylo regarding the legislative aspect, while the DSA can function as a regulatory framework, it is evident that one-size-fits-all solutions are inadequate, necessitating context-aware strategies. Indeed, achieving a safer online environment while safeguarding individual rights requires a combination of platform-specific considerations, strong enforcement mechanisms and a delicate balance between privacy and safety. For all these reasons, accessible and cost-effective universal standards should be established, ensuring compliance across all companies. Alternatively, policymakers can institute minimum baselines through legislation, ensuring widespread adherence to safeguard against GBV online.

In addition, acknowledging that GBV online frequently intersects with multiple rights, such as freedom of expression, anti-discrimination, and data protection, the formulation of laws and regulations should meticulously account for these complex relationships. Asha Allen (CDT Europe) pointed out that it is crucial to strike a balance between data protection and combatting GBV online, involving consultation, inclusion, and nuanced policymaking to harmonise these rights effectively. End-to-end encrypted services, though prone to misuse, play a vital role in protecting the privacy and safety of individuals, particularly those facing domestic violence. To strike the right balance, civil

society and rights holders must be integral to decision-making, ensuring the perspectives of those directly affected are thoroughly considered.

Currently, much of the focus on GBV remains centred on offline episodes, with limited attention given to the online sphere. Once again, as underscored by interviewed policymakers, the DSA presents a unique opportunity to bridge the data gap on GBV online, including doxing, in Europe. In fact, it introduces due diligence obligations for online platforms, allowing researchers and organisations access to data from major platforms. This access can empower researchers to investigate and analyse the prevalence and nature of GBV online, offering critical insights into its extent and patterns. However, the effectiveness of these provisions depends on rigorous enforcement, with smaller platforms often struggling to comply with these guidelines compared to larger ones.

Moreover, while interviewed experts raised additional concerns over platforms' responsibility for their content, highlighting the need for robust moderation practices and clear harassment policies, many industries emphasised their adherence to the "safety by design" principle, which, by embedding human rights due diligence into their business models and incorporating enforcement considerations into policy development processes, can fortify community protection.

Additionally, within the legislative domain, policymakers agreed in affirming the need of assigning legal consequences to specific actions related to GBV, such as NCII or engaging in cyberstalking. Formulating policies and legislation based on empirical data and real-world experiences ensures that these legal measures accurately reflect the needs and concerns of the communities they aim to protect, while also involving meaningful community consultation to ensure that their input is genuinely heard, considered, and translated into meaningful action. Moreover, by adopting an intersectional approach, policies and interventions can better account for the specific experiences and needs of marginalised groups, benefiting everyone involved.

To all of these, comprehensive support systems must align with legislations to effectively combat this issue. However, existing challenges and gaps need to be addressed. Governmental allocation of dedicated funds for emotional and psychological services is imperative, especially in light of the alarming absence of services due to understaffing and lack of specialisation. Access to a wide range of resources, including psychologists and self-help professionals, is essential for healing trauma, emphasising the need for quick and easily accessible support mechanisms. Remarkably, there is a severe absence of support from victims' immediate social circles, with friends and family sometimes even turning against them, perpetuating a culture of victim-blaming. In this context, establishing a non-judgmental support system is critical, with schools being ideal starting points for victim support, provided that educators are trained in addressing online abuse.

Additionally, budget funding must be prioritised to ensure that legal assistance is accessible to all victims, together with addressing the lack of preparedness and understanding among authorities regarding the law and its impacts. Authorities should be well-versed in the legal framework surrounding GBV, both online and offline, to effectively respond to cases and provide the necessary support. Moreover, encouraging victims to report abuse and providing legal guidance is equally

important. Indeed, the absence of free legal support intensifies their suffering, highlighting the need for increased budget allocation. This entails comprehensive training and education for law enforcement and relevant agencies to close the knowledge gap and better support victims.

Finally, focusing on the most vulnerable groups, including young people, is imperative, involving active listening, understanding their unique realities, and collaborating in developing tools and solutions that align with their experiences. Myriam Halimi (Rosa vzw) and Jill Michiels (Zijn vzw) highlighted how recognising and addressing the online realities of young people is key to effective prevention efforts, ensuring they are based on their communication preferences and experiences. Beyond school contexts, reaching out to young people who have discontinued formal education or lack legal status in the country is essential to providing comprehensive support and prevention.

“If we only develop tools to prevent GBV online, we will miss a lot of young people in our prevention message. Engaging young people and developing tools for young people together with them will be more effective.”

(Myriam Halimi – Rosa vzw, Jill Michiels – Zijn vzw)

d. Preventing and responding to GBV online: Actors

Addressing the complex issue of GBV online demands a multistakeholder and collaborative approach. In this context, interviewed experts pointed out the roles and responsibilities of key actors in combating GBV online while emphasising the importance of including everyone. Indeed, recognising power dynamics among stakeholders is fundamental, as governments, industry, and civil society each hold varying levels of influence in the discussion. Moreover, involving diverse voices and considering intersectionality is imperative to ensure equity within the stakeholders involved, particularly by representing marginalised groups directly impacted by GBV online.

Taking a bottom-up and youth-centred approach, experts focused on engaging young people, both vulnerable and less exposed, as key actors in addressing the issue. It is essential to involve them in shaping prevention strategies, empowering them, and encouraging their active engagement and advocacy for instigating change. Moreover, recognising the distinctive perspectives and needs of vulnerable young people is paramount throughout the process. Among young people, the majority of experts highlighted that young men and boys hold a critical role in the effort to challenge and combat GBV, both online and offline. Their involvement is not about legitimising harmful behaviours but, instead, involves a shared responsibility to unite against violence. Since it is proved that the majority of perpetrators are men, it is essential to initiate strategies with their education and engagement.

Importantly, GBV is not a women's issue, but a societal concern. Involving men in prevention efforts and raising awareness is a pathway to positive change and offers the potential to reshape the narrative. Encouraging them to comprehend the concept of toxic masculinity and promoting the significance of healthy, respectful relationships is paramount. The active inclusion of supportive men who wish to be allies in the fight is equally vital; they should be welcomed and empowered. To this purpose, it is equally essential to consider the cultural context in which boys grow up, fostering a meaningful debate among young men.

“Even if it may not be easy, men and boys are key actors because they can be both the target audience and also agents of a meaningful change.”

(Sara De Vido – Ca’ Foscari University of Venice)

Under this framework, Myriam Halimi (Rosa vzw) and Jill Michiels (Zijn vzw) interestingly noted that numerous men and boys already actively denounce instances of violence, expressing their willingness to step in when they witness such situations. Nevertheless, they stressed that empirical research underscores the increased complexity of this task within the confines of intimate friendships, where peer influence significantly inhibits their inclination to address acts of violence. Unfortunately, men who do take on the challenging role of intervention within their peer groups often face offensive labels. This critical phenomenon highlights the profound hesitation that many hold about potentially losing social status and friendships, a concern shared by both men and women. Under this context, it is essential to acknowledge that the role of men extends beyond merely safeguarding women; it also encompasses safeguarding themselves against toxic masculinity. To this purpose, an effective approach within male peer groups may involve implementing a "Call in" strategy, refraining from assigning blame and instead fostering face-to-face dialogues that recognise everyone makes mistakes and offering a chance for personal growth.

A noteworthy point raised by experts is the importance of recognising that boys and men can be both perpetrators and victims of violence. Approaching the topic without focusing it solely on one gender can be a helpful strategy to motivate everyone to engage in discussions. Additionally, diverse male role models from various fields play a pivotal role in positively influencing young people. Encouraging identification with these positive male figures can help combat toxic attitudes related to gender and race in both formal and non-formal educational settings.

Moving towards the educational community, initiatives to tackle GBV online should begin within the inner circle of young people, recognising the crucial role of parents as key stakeholders. Parents play an instrumental role in shaping their children's behaviour, working to break harmful and stereotypical patterns, not only for their children but also for themselves. Educators and teachers should also be aware of their role in this process. Schools are central in addressing the risks

associated with social media, and innovative approaches, such as inviting social media creators and professionals with expertise in the digital realm to discuss online risks, significantly contribute to promoting understanding and inspiration for both young audiences and the education of teachers.

To this purpose, as suggested by Jacob Donegan (TikTok creator), influencers, especially those from the LGBTQI+ community, play a significant role in promoting understanding and inspiration as their experiences can be immensely valuable in helping others understand the challenges faced by individuals and the broader community.

As for civil society organisations, including advocacy organisations and researchers, their valuable expertise and close connections with local communities provide an in-depth understanding of specific circumstances. To this aim, as importantly noted by Annachiara Sarto (Protection4kids)⁵², it is crucial to encourage collaboration between organisations over competition, as NGOs are indispensable in working with governments for advocacy, policy development, first-hand information from civil society, capacity building, and support services for victims.

Additionally, it is crucial that individuals and communities who are frequently the most marginalised and affected by GBV online should have a voice in discussions. It is not enough to merely engage them in sharing their stories, only to disregard their input afterward, as this can retraumatise them without having any purpose and final investment in supporting those communities and individuals.

“Right now, there is still a power imbalance among the people involved in the political discussion. We should make sure that when we talk about a diversity of stakeholders, we truly mean diverse and equitable as well, and that we address the power dynamics about the stakeholders involved.”

(Asha Allen, CDT Europe)

On a broader level, online platforms and tech companies are fundamental stakeholders to address GBV online on their platforms through the implementation of effective policies and content moderation practices for creating a safer online environment for users.

Interviewed industries suggested that a diverse group of stakeholders must collaborate to tackle this issue effectively, including users themselves which play a crucial role in flagging harmful behaviours occurring on the platform. Promoting information sharing across industry stakeholders and fostering collaboration through multi-stakeholder forums and coalitions has become a significant trend, aiding platforms in identifying harmful behaviours and contents. Under this framework, addressing cross-border implications in combating online violence that transcends

⁵² <https://protection4kids.com/en/>.

national borders presents a significant challenge. Once again, the DSA aims to tackle this by mandating the removal of harmful content from all platforms, regardless of jurisdiction. However, conflicting jurisdictional issues can hinder global action by online platforms, even though the potential exists to address harmful content globally through navigating these intricate jurisdictional challenges.

Finally, national governments and authorities at the prefecture and municipality levels have a pivotal responsibility in combating GBV online through the creation and enforcement of laws and regulations to protect their citizens' well-being. Their active involvement is indispensable, and collaboration with organisations at the national level helps ensure that the impact and implications of EU law are understood and implemented correctly. In addition, financing and adopting effective policies to improve the educational system and support schools in addressing this topic are crucial components in the comprehensive effort to combat GBV online. Law enforcement and authorities are pivotal actors in the fight against online GBV, as their approach can either alleviate or exacerbate the trauma experienced by victims.

e. Tech and non-tech solutions for preventing and responding to GBV online

In the digital age, addressing GBV online demands an approach that considers the diverse needs of different groups. Regardless of the specific tools employed, experts underscored the high demand among young people and professionals for resources addressing GBV online.

Online access to digital applications is integral when discussing online violence, as individuals can use online tools to talk, create, share, and exchange experiences. The #MeToo movement, which resonated globally, underscores the role of the digital world beyond mere interaction, as it serves as a powerful advocacy tool. Online tools prove more effective for individuals with internet access, especially young people for whom online interactions are a part of their daily life. Engaging with young people, particularly on platforms like TikTok, Twitch, and Instagram, is pivotal. Leveraging the power of digital and technical tools based on video content and testimonials aligns with the formats preferred by the younger generation.

Also, for educators, embracing technology is imperative to address GBV online effectively. Younger educators, being more familiar with digital platforms, can be valuable assets in this endeavour. While for young people, integrating tools into existing platforms and games is recommended, teachers and parents may benefit from separate websites.

Moreover, while there is a pressing need for campaigns addressing GBV, advocating for breaking the cycle and amplifying the voices of affected individuals, the influence of social media platforms in conducting successful campaigns cannot be underestimated, as they bridge the gap between offline and online communities, making them invaluable tools. Concurrently, special attention must be directed toward individuals without internet access to ensure inclusivity. It is crucial not to overlook those from lower socio-economic backgrounds who lack online access or technical resources. Recognising the existence of vulnerable groups without internet access, inclusive awareness interventions are paramount. This was notably overlooked during the shift to online

schooling amid the pandemic, highlighting the need to employ a range of tools tailored to meet the unique needs of each group.

“If we create modern productions that appeal to a younger audience without being patronising, and if we use modern technology and media platforms, we will have better results. However, we should view digital and physical tools as complementary to each other and, in cases where a person is digitally isolated, we should go back to the physical interaction and the old-fashioned paper and pencil.”

(Anonymous expert)

On the other hand, it is worth emphasising that the importance of physical presence and interaction in creating safe spaces for sharing experiences should not be underestimated. The combination of tech and non-tech tools can be very useful for interacting with young people. Using digital tools can enhance engagement and interaction with young people, while incorporating role-playing, scenarios, and group discussions can be helpful in deepening their level of understanding and analysis.

According to Svend Aage Madsen (Rigshospitalet), when working with young boys, it may be useful to use visual, role-playing, and tactical methods that rely on images rather than just text. Additionally, to effectively address boys' emotional expression, it is crucial to acknowledge that they do discuss their feelings, even if uniquely. Instead of imposing a specific approach to emotional conversations, it is vital to connect with them on their terms. Boys do require a means of expressing their emotions, which does not necessarily have to mirror girls' methods. Under these premises, it might be more effective to present a range of emotions from which they can choose, rather than solely asking them to identify what they are feeling, as they may not have articulated their emotions independently yet. Also, employing questions and phrasings that encourage action rather than being designed to identify conditions is essential when working with boys.

“It's really important to notice that when boys say something, there are a lot of emotions in their communication. Not necessarily the emotions you want, but there are emotions in all shapes and forms.”

(Svend Aage Madsen, Rigshospitalet)

2. Focus Groups – Consulting youth

The focus groups consulting youth were carried out with a pool of young people ranging from 12- to 23-year-old, across menABLE partner countries (Belgium, Denmark and Greece). These focus groups were primarily designed to explore and analyse the understanding, perspectives and experiences of children and young people regarding GBV online, while also asking their views and expectations on possible sources of help and coping strategies.

2.1 Methodology

During the focus groups, children and young people were confronted with diverse overarching topics on GBV online with the aim of defining what young people understand as GBV online and what are the implications and the consequences of the phenomenon on the young generation of today. While partners agreed on a general framework and common standards to achieve through the focus groups, the implementation of the activities were carried out by each partner individually, drawing upon their great experiences and best practices working with this target audience. This decentralised approach was essential when organising and running the focus groups to respect cultural settings at local and national level.

Each focus group started with an ice-breaking activity, carrying out the consultation in a more interactive way, avoiding unilateral lessons about GBV online. A variety of activities were prepared by partners to engage young people in the conversation to understand their definition and perception of the issue and how it makes them feel. The activities implemented were prominently interactive, including games, Q&A and group discussions. All the activities were carried out respecting the partner's child protection policies, by putting the best interest of the young participant first. The activities were carried out in a child friendly manner, and young people could withdraw anytime from the focus group if they felt overwhelmed or insecure about the activities.

2.2 Data collection

Each partner took responsibility in conducting two focus groups consulting youth, minding the balance with age and gender distribution to better gather a diversified set of perspectives and opinions on GBV online. A total of 83 youngsters were consulted during the six focus groups.

The participation of different categories from a gender and age perspective, including members of the LGBTQI+ community, provided an important asset to the results of the focus groups (see Figure 3 and 4).

gender distribution

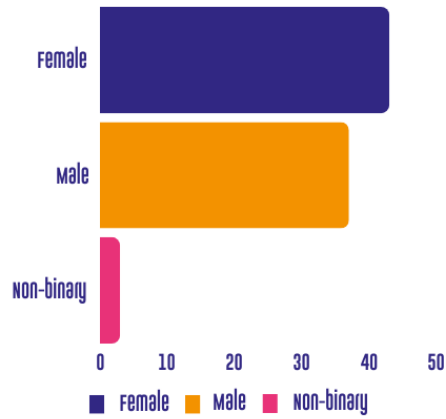


Figure 3 - Gender distribution throughout all focus groups (consulting youth).

Age distribution

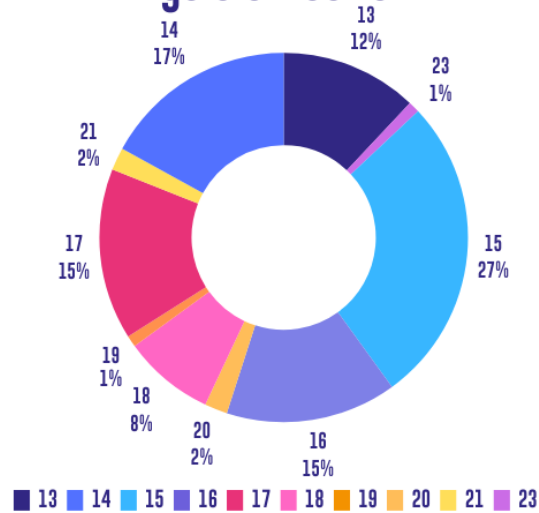


Figure 4 - Age distribution throughout all focus groups (consulting youth).

Against this wall, focus groups took place in one middle school and one high school in Greece, in a youth centre in Denmark and in a summer camp in Belgium. As a result, country partners managed to build a balanced representation of participants: around half were recruited through formal education setting (44 youngsters), while the other half came from non-formal education settings (39 youngsters). The choice of organising the focus groups in presence enhanced the quality of the activities, also considering the diversified target. The mix of different education settings provided a wider pool of young people which also came from vulnerable backgrounds.

2.3 Results

A comprehensive set of themes related to GBV online emerged from the thematic analysis of the focus groups consulting youth, covering a rich variety of ideas and perspectives, as synthesised below in the form of four master themes:

- a) The different forms of GBV online.
- b) Victims and perpetrators.
- c) The consequences of GBV online.
- d) The ideas of young people on how to tackle GBV online.

a. The different forms of GBV online

Identifying GBV, in particular in the digital environment, has been proven to be a difficult task for researchers and policy makers. This difficulty can be also seen with children and young people, who might have encountered the issue in different situations, but failed to recognise it as such because of the many grey areas GBV online entails. For this reason, when involving children and young people, the first step to tackle GBV online is to recognise the issue at its roots. One of the first key findings of the focus groups was the way young people identify the many forms GBV online can take and how they respond to it. The first impression of children and young people regarding GBV online has been the sense of its meaner and harsher nature in comparison to GBV in the physical environment. One of the most common reasons is probably because perpetrators hide behind a screen and stay anonymous.

After understanding the nature of GBV online and its peculiarities, different types of GBV online have been identified. These could be gathered in three different macro-categories: sexual, verbal and psychological. As these categories can overlap among each-other, it has been key to assess what kind of acts and actions children and young people perceive as violent and relating them to GBV online.

Sexist harsh language and hate speech seemed to be the most perceived threat in the digital environments where children and young people spend most of their time. Young people from Denmark particularly identified that there are specific environments where sexist harsh language is more present and “accepted”, such as in gaming platforms, other than in social media platforms.

“When gaming as a girl, I do hear others telling me to go back to the kitchen, because that is where I belong.”

Girl (Denmark)

When GBV online is involved, harsh language can be associated to cyberbullying, cyber harassment and cyberstalking. These behaviours can be found in discriminatory groups which target young people based on their gender and/or gender identification. These groups seem to be known amongst young people and they can easily be traced on different social media platforms. The aim of these fora is to undermine one person, or a group of people, based on their gender or gender identity, by addressing them with harsh words and often sexist comments. Some young people also state that these groups are often advertised by content creators and famous influencers.

Sexist harsh language seems to be often present in cases of shocking and unwanted sexual content and non-consensual sharing of intimate images. The phenomenon of sending “nudes” and images depicting the body in a sexualised manner is an increasing matter, which is particularly gender driven. The obsession with a certain depiction of the body can be also linked to what one focus group from Belgium perceived. The young participants stated that it was partly the fault of influencers and the “ideal body culture” which has been developed and promoted through social media. This leads also to other categories of GBV online which arose during the discussions, such as non-consensual sharing of intimate images (together with name, phone number and other personal information in groups – also known as doxing), sexting, grooming and unwanted sexual content.

Even though it is possible to perceive an overall alignment with the literature review concerning the different categories of GBV online, the identification by young people of the different forms related to GBV online came in more waves. At first, many young participants did not fully recognise what GBV online entailed, and they took many of its features for granted, as if they internalised these characteristics as unharmed. As a matter of fact, several young participants from different focus groups discovered that there are many other forms of GBV online that they always thought were jokes or pranks. One argument that young people brought up in the discussion was the use of the language and its context. One example can be taken from the Danish focus group, where young people were asked if the term “b!tch” could be used in certain circumstances. The reply to this question was that it all goes back to the intention, tone, situation and relation to the person. However, the group also mentioned that if the certain words were used by a stranger, the effect would be entirely different and perceived as an insult/harassment.

b. *Victims and perpetrators*

“The only way you can understand how devastating GBV online is, is when you become a victim yourself.”

Boy (Greece)

The categories of victims and perpetrators represent a very important step when identifying the different forms of GBV online. This distinction, when referring to GBV online, is mainly represented as respectively girls as victims and boys as perpetrators. This can be linked to one of the main root causes of GBV online, which is gender stereotyping.

Across all focus groups there is a shared understanding that girls and women are disproportionately affected by GBV online, in all the forms described in the previous chapter. This data is also widely acknowledged by the academia and the many experts interviewed throughout the qualitative section of this project. Moreover, girls and young women do not only perceive themselves as one of the most targeted categories by GBV online, but also from a societal perspective, it is clear that they are the most affected by the phenomenon, both in the physical and the digital world. The perception of danger and unsafety is common in many different environments, from home or school settings to social media and gaming platforms. In gaming environments, girls are often seen as “outsiders” and not part of that cluster since gaming and technology related activities are perceived more as “manly” interests.

Girls and young women are perceived to be more subjected to GBV online also due to the portrayal of gender stereotypes. For example, among Greek youngsters, girls are perceived to be treated more strictly by family members and by society in general, expected to fulfil a perfect ideal of being always polite and caring.

Sexual content is among one of the most important issues when tackling GBV online from a victim perspective. On the one hand, some girls and young women experienced that in the online environment they are often treated with unwanted sexual attitudes. Some of them experienced unwanted sexual content from people even though they never requested it. On the other hand, girls are often asked to send “nudes” and they are pressured to do so by friends or partner. In the Belgian focus group, the young people debated that lesbian girls are often the most targeted due to their sexual orientation, and the harassment towards them is always very sexualised. Sexting has been also a controversial topic, especially among Belgian youngsters. When girls and young women send “nudes”, according to some boys they are still to blame as girls have been the ones sending it, as they should have been more careful. This has also consequences on the non-consensual sharing of these images in group chats where boys and young men share not only pictures and videos of the girls, but also name, age, addresses, and other personal information. This discussion sprung a conversation with the girls participating in the Belgian focus group which

also raised the need to talk about shared responsibility, as boys happen to share private pictures without the consent of the other person involved.

Besides girls and young women, it appears that also non-binary young people face GBV online at a disproportionate scale. This category of young people seems to be affected by more targeted harassment online. One of the Danish focus groups elaborated that this category is especially targeted by young boys (11 to 13 years old) and middle-aged men. One of the possible reasons laying behind this is that young boys often engage in a violent behaviour due to the fear of social exclusion and peer-pressure.

“It is about fear of social exclusion. Young people do not hold these opinions at heart. They are just participating in order not to be targeted themselves.”

Boy (Denmark)

Even though on a smaller scale, boys and young men have been also identified as victims of GBV online across all focus group. Even though GBV online affects them differently, this does not mean that they are not subjected to it. Moreover, it was raised by the young people that young gay boys are often faced with the most aggressive GBV online as they do not represent the male societal standards. As seen also in the literature review, this can be associated to the issue of gender stereotypes which do not only affect girls and women, but also boys and young men. The issue of “toxic masculinity” and the need to be always a strong and dominating boy or man reflects on how young boys behave with their peers and trying to impose their power by acting violently towards these who seems to be outside the “male standards”.

c. The consequences of GBV online

Victims of GBV online are largely affected by the repercussions of this violence also in the physical world and in a great scale. When GBV occurs in the digital environment, it seems to have a high toll on the psychological and mental health of the victim, which could hinder their personal and social life also in a long-term manner. The risks related to GBV online can also transcend the digital sphere and penetrate the physical life. These consequences expand in every area of a young person’s life, such as family, school and friendships and it can hinder their upbringing.

Psychological and mental repercussions of GBV online are also linked to the feelings of anxiety and suicidal thoughts in many young people, causing a victim to feel unsafe and insecure in the actions of the everyday life. In particular, the Greek focus groups shared a set of feelings that GBV online makes them feel:

“Anger - Shame - Disgust - Fear - Pressure - Disappointment - Terror - Confusion - Compassion - Pain - Injustice - Sorrow - Despair - Disgust.”

The feeling of unsafety can also often interfere with normal everyday actions, as for example hiding their gender or gender identity in public or online environments. This phenomenon can also be described as silencing, as many people are afraid to speak up or identify themselves due to backlash. Due to these issues, they often prefer to not disclose private information, or they even decide to not intervene or avoid further interactions. In one of the Danish focus groups, a girl shared her own experience while gaming online and she stated that to avoid cyber harassment she tries not to be recognisable by the other players to not be subjected to gender-related comments and insults.

“When I am gaming, I keep away from the voice chat, because I don't want to listen to that. Either if it's about how I play or my gender I don't have to deal with it.”

Girl (Denmark)

Intersectionality seems to be also a very important topic when being present in the digital environment. The crossing of different personal features (such as nationality, religion, age, or social status) can eventually be a trigger to further violence which will not only be gender-motivated, but also intertwines with other personal characteristics. This is linked to the fact that one consequence of GBV online is the need to hide your identity and other personality traits, including gender or nationality, to not get targeted and be subjected to online violence.

As stated in the previous chapter, girls and women are the most affected category by GBV online, and this creates a general lack of trust towards boys and young men. In particular in the Belgian focus groups, girls' participants stated that they have little faith in boys and men because of how they could possibly behave with them, both in the physical and digital environment. This feeling of distrust and unsafety towards the perpetrators greatly disrupts the everyday life of the victims, while impairing their social, economic and mental status. Moreover, it is a common trait among the focus groups that girls often feel a sense of insecurity, from walking alone in the street to what to post on social media, while this feeling was not shared by the boys. This distrust also expands towards those who should be able to protect the victims and even prevent these crimes from happening. Indeed, many victims also share a common scepticism in reporting to society and social platforms in general when GBV online occurs as they think it may not be effective.

The distrust that girls and women feel towards the society in general has an influence on also who are supposed to be the main perpetrators of GBV online. Many boys and young men across the focus groups have feelings of guilt even if they never harmed another person, especially a girl. This apologetic feeling turns into the “not all men” notion, and which makes boys and young men feel

sorry every time something GBV-related happens. The fact that there is a generalisation of boys as perpetrators of GBV online can also turn into a defensive behaviour which could lead to more damage. Moreover, boys across different focus group brought up also the fact that violence towards another person, especially a girl, should not always be connected to GBV, as there are also other forms of violence which are not gender motivated.

“It is just not fair; all boys are being blamed and accused for something only a few of them do. I don’t want to keep on apologising for being a boy.”

Boy (Greece)

d. *The ideas of young people on how to tackle GBV online*

The identification of the different forms of GBV online, its victims, perpetrators and the consequences that this phenomenon can have on them has been a key asset to build the conversation on how to prevent and tackle GBV online.

When asking young people about different ways of combating GBV online, most participants agreed that young people hold responsibility in fighting such issue. However, young people should not take the responsibility alone, they need to be supported and empowered. Other stakeholders, starting from the family, school and social environment to governments and industry need to tackle GBV online together with the young people. Listening to their ideas and opinions will help in finding preventive tools and mechanisms to tackle the issue.

As a matter of fact, one of the most shared actions across all focus groups participants is to start educating children at an earlier age. Initiating digital education at an earlier stage of life may be beneficial due to the fact that younger children possess less bias when discussing GBV online. On the contrary, tackling the issue with older young people can prove difficult due to the internalised bias they have already formed during their upbringing. In fact, one of the outcomes from one of the Greek focus groups was that gender stereotypes are more internalised in the older cluster young people (16-18), while the younger generation has less gender-related bias. After this consideration, the group agreed that an early education on GBV online and “netiquette” would be needed to start addressing the issue. This educative path would need to be interactive and not formal lessons. On a common ground, children and young people would like to be more informed on a range of specific topics related to GBV online:

- The notion of consent,
- The identification of abusive or harmful behaviour online,
- The reporting mechanisms available.

When asking young people to state an opinion on how they would like to be informed about GBV online, their preferred method would be to have interactive discussions, watching movies, listening to podcasts, and hearing directly from experts and influencers. These activities could be organised directly by the schools and together with children and young people. One important feature that came out in one of the Belgian focus groups concerned the need to create a safe space when discussing these sensitive topics. Hence, young participants talked about the need to create a safe place to talk freely, without judgement and if possible, in an anonymous way, to not receive backlash on what they might state.

According to the young people, another important aspect of awareness raising and education on GBV online would be the need to address the issue also with the adults, including families, schools, governments and industry (especially social media and gaming platforms). At first, educating parents/caregivers and teachers could improve their understanding on the possible positive and negative sides of the Internet. By knowing this, parents/caregivers and teachers could be better equipped in identifying negative signs of young people's online behaviour. Regarding industries, young people believe that they should better implement features and mechanisms on their platforms to better identify when GBV online occurs and put in place stricter rules to put limits on the damage on the victim. Moreover, they should be able to implement better mechanisms to intercept perpetrators.

“When someone degrades and insults another human being, just for the fun of it, it makes me sad and embarrassed. I wish I could put a stop to it.”

Unknown gender (Greece)

3. Focus groups – Consulting in formal and non-formal education settings

The focus groups consulting in formal and non-formal education settings were organised with a pool of 105 professionals, across menABLE partner countries (Belgium, Denmark and Greece). These focus groups aimed at understanding how these groups of professionals perceive the problem of GBV online, by having a first-hand impression of their views, experiences and perspectives on the issue.

3.1 Methodology

During the focus groups, both formal and non-formal educators engaged in discussions covering diverse overarching themes related to GBV online. The primary objective was to define together their familiarity with the phenomenon, their practices in discussing it with young people, and the strategies they employ to address and mitigate it.

While partners agreed on a general framework and common standards to achieve through the focus groups, each of them implemented the activities independently, drawing upon their extensive experiences and best practices in working with the target audience. This decentralised approach was crucial in organising and conducting the focus groups to respect cultural settings at both local and national level. The majority of focus groups started with a roundtable introduction of the participants and the presentation of the project, carrying out the sessions in a friendly and informal way, and stimulating the discussion among participants. A variety of topics and questions were prepared by partners to engage professionals in the conversation to understand their professional perception of the problem of GBV online. Throughout all focus groups, active engagement was prioritised, ensuring meaningful participation from all participants and deep exchange of ideas and experiences. All sessions were conducted to promote a respectful and focused discussion on the critical subject of GBV online.

3.2 Data Collection

Each partner took responsibility in conducting two focus groups consulting in formal and non-formal education setting, minding the balance of the setting distribution to better gather a diversified set of perspectives and opinions on GBV online. A total of 105 professionals were consulted during the six focus groups. The representation of both formal and non-formal education settings was quite balanced, with a slightly higher representation of formal educators (59) than non-formal educators (46). Nevertheless, in all focus groups a diverse spectrum of professionals from formal and non-formal education settings has been involved, from teachers to psycho-medical support (see Figure 5). The intentional inclusion of such a varied array of professionals, combined with an approach that embraces gender inclusivity, set the stage for a comprehensive dialogue and understanding of the topic.

Formal and non-formal settings distribution

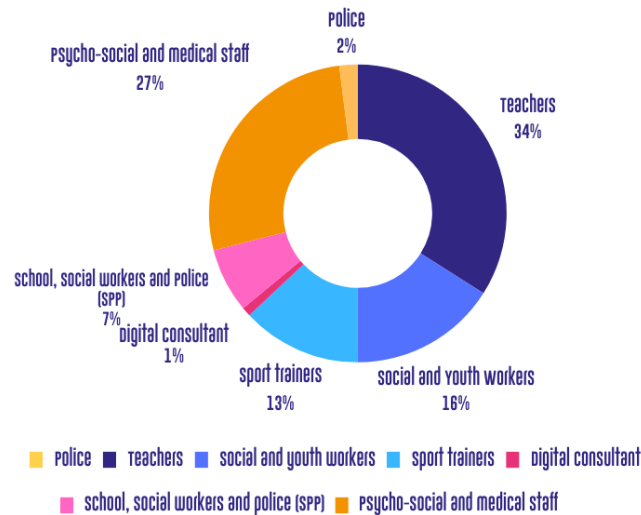


Figure 5 - Settings distribution throughout the focus groups (consulting in formal and non-formal education).

In addition to the professional distribution, partners also strived to provide a balanced gender representation. Despite efforts to include a wider gender representation, there was a noticeable imbalance, with a higher proportion of female participants compared to male ones. The unbalanced gender representation can be also linked to the fact that in the field of education, social and supportive services there is a higher representation of females. Furthermore, this distribution aligned with the gender dynamics typically associated with discussions around GBV (see Figure 6).

gender distribution

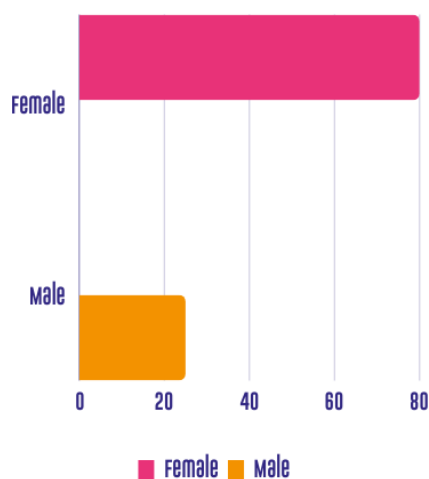


Figure 6 - Gender distribution throughout the focus groups (consulting in formal and non-formal education).

3.3 Results

Across the formal and non-formal educators consulted in the focus groups, several discussions arose around the topic of GBV online and how this issue has been explored and tackled in the formal and non-formal settings, among adults as well as with children and young people. Four main themes can be identified across the outcomes of the focus groups:

- a) Perception of GBV online by formal and non-formal educators.
- b) The role of intersectionality in understanding GBV online.
- c) The challenges in facing GBV online in formal and non-formal education settings.
- d) Needs and strategies of educators to discuss GBV online with children and young people.

a. Perception of GBV online by formal and non-formal educators

Formal and non-formal educators shared a common understanding of the rise of incidents regarding GBV online which has evolved in the last decade, especially among their pupils. Cyberbullying and sharing of intimate images are understood to be the most prominent issues related to GBV online among young people, and especially girls, as it was also confirmed by the young people themselves during the focus groups. The response to such acts is also quite different based on the gender of the victim. One formal educator from the Belgian focus group provided an interesting example about the act of forwarding of intimate images. While for girls this act resulted in significant commotion and drama within the school, with rapid awareness among students and prompt notification to teachers, in contrast, incidents involving boys and similar situations did not

evoke a similar response, triggering only smiling reactions, without any apparent judgment or subsequent commotion.

"Even girls minimise forwarding sexts. 'It's just for a laugh, guys don't mean anything bad by it.' So how do you deal with this as a teacher?"

Formal educator (Belgium)

GBV online seems to be constantly spreading and evolving especially in recent years, resonating at a higher scale the forms of GBV happening already in the physical world. Nevertheless, the phenomenon should not only be understood by what it is tangible and visible (e.g. abuse, physical violence, verbal assault or hate comments), but it must be analysed thoroughly in deeper roots. GBV both in the physical and digital environments finds its underpinnings in the social and cultural normalised behaviours, which might condone GBV in all its forms, including the online ones.

In this context it highlights the reason behind the difficulty in understanding when someone is a victim or a perpetrator of GBV online. As already highlighted in the focus groups consulting youth, and in both formal and non-formal education settings, it can be challenging to acknowledge the forms of GBV online, what the term entails and how to recognise this phenomenon. The search for what represents GBV online in formal and non-formal education settings has been an important asset not only to understand the point of view of educators themselves on GBV online, but also to assess the point of view of young people through the experiences of their teachers and educators.

Professionals working in formal and non-formal education settings have acknowledged that young people today are more likely to express their opinion in an open-minded and inclusive manner rather than a decade ago. The discussions including gender-expression and gender identification seems to be more present and relevant, also including the issues around GBV offline and online. A pedagogue consulted in the Danish focus group, highlighted a growing trend among young people expressing an increased desire to change their gender, offering unique insights into the evolving dynamics of gender identity.

"Something is happening for the youth online about being aware of illuminating others when they overstep boundaries of how you should treat other people."

Non-formal educator (Denmark)

Judgemental attitudes and problematic behaviour towards inclusion and gender-related topics (such as gender identity and gender expression) seem to come more from the adults, including parents, caregivers and formal and non-formal educators. Adults show greater difficulty in discussing gender-related topics with ease, as it was commonly stated that this topic was not particularly common when they were young, also due to the taboo linked to the phenomenon. If not properly equipped with the right tools, adults may overlook some of the forms of GBV online and not identify the problem even when there is one.

Through the eyes of their teachers and educators, young people seem to be aware of the phenomenon of GBV online and strive to stand against hate and violence happening in the digital environment. However, it should also be noted that not every young people seem to properly recognise the issue or understand when they are perpetrating GBV. Formal educators from Greece expressed their concerns regarding underreported GBV online, which might be due also to the fact that young people might overlook GBV by thinking that it is just a prank, and it will only happen that one time. One reason behind this could be explained by the role played by intersectionality when tackling GBV online.

b. The role of intersectionality in understanding GBV online

Identifying the key features and recognising the signs of GBV online can become increasingly challenging when GBV intersects with many other features of each individual. One of the first objectives that this project proposes is to tackle GBV online by targeting boys and young men. As they should be part of the solution, a diverse range of factors comes into play when educators are understanding the challenges of addressing GBV online with the young people. Young people of all genders might know how to refer to GBV online, as previously said they are increasingly becoming more aware of the gender-related topics. Nevertheless, this awareness can depend on a set of factors which are beyond the gender characteristic.

Age plays a pivotal role when addressing the topic of GBV online. Among the formal and non-formal educators there is a common understanding that younger children (between 12 and 14 years of age) struggle to identify GBV online when they encounter it or perpetrate it. Gender inequality among younger children seems to be very much present but not well-acknowledged, as stated by different formal educators in the Belgian focus groups. Moreover, younger children often seem to dismiss such acts as jokes or pranks, by using the humour card. This outcome can relate to a previous finding in the focus group consulting youth, where younger people may not fully understand GBV. However, it seems that educators also agree that young people above the age of 15 seem more aware of the existence of GBV online. This outcome must be however balanced with the level of maturity of each young individual which can depend on factors such as social and familiar context, education, religion and economic status.

Young people coming from difficult home situations seem to be particularly sensitive to the topics evolving around gender and gender identification. Young people are shaped by their experiences, and the upbringing by families is a very crucial part in shaping values and one's own identity especially in their early childhood. The issue of GBV is particularly relevant in dysfunctional families,

where women and girls often occupy a submissive position. The perception of such gender roles could be embodied in young people who often adopt them without conscious awareness and real understanding of the underlying reasons. This can be applied to both boys and girls, which can adopt or tolerate such strict behaviours. In this context, vulnerability of young people, and especially girls, is much increased, and they can easily become target of GBV online.

One formal educator from the Greek focus group shared an important note regarding acknowledging GBV. There can be male perpetrators who immediately recognise their mistakes and apologise, but there can be female perpetrators who refuse to acknowledge their negative behaviour instead, and vice-versa. According to their experience, it seems that these young people coming from dysfunctional families have a harder time in acknowledging their negative behaviour. In this context, it is key to acknowledge that gender is not the only factor which must be taken into consideration when understanding GBV online, but most importantly age and all the other intersectional factors of the individual.

The open-minded attitude and the willingness to tackle the topic of GBV online seems also to be strictly linked to the demographical environment the young people are raised in. It is not only the intimate sphere of the family, or micro-environment such as school or peers, but also the macro-environment, such as the city or the village where the young individual is settled. According to one of the non-formal educators in the Danish focus group, young people living in residential areas might have more restrictive attitudes towards gender inclusion, whereas young people living in cities are more in contact with different cultures and values, which increases the chances of being more exposed to diversity. Moreover, gender stereotyping seems to be more common in rural areas, especially from young boys and men. Among the macro-environment influencing the upbringing of children and young people is also worth mentioning the online environment, such as gaming platforms and social media. According to some educators, the digital space is often filled with negative examples and behaviours that are mimicked by young people.

One more factor that can be crucial when addressing GBV online is understanding the experiences and the perception of the phenomenon by neurodiverse young people, these with special needs and/or disabilities. Different partners decided to draw their attention on this cluster of young people, which is often overlooked when addressing such issues. By consulting with specific educators in this setting, one important outcome must be highlighted. Young people with special needs are not always aware of their use of sexist or gender-stereotypical nature of their statements and behaviours. Their inhibition levels are lower than the neurotypical young people, which drives them to act more spontaneously. Against this wall, children with special needs are more prone to accept challenges and can more easily become victims but also perpetrators.

"Children with special needs can more easily become victims of online violence, as well as perpetrators, in an attempt to mimic typical behaviour from their friends, siblings or peers. They have not received the appropriate education on how to deal with GBV online."

Non-formal educator (Greece)

All these factors must be considered when also addressing technical and professional challenges that educators face when understanding the best ways to respond to GBV online with their pupils.

c. The challenges in facing GBV online in formal and non-formal education settings

Educators in both formal and non-formal education settings come often into contact with a broad spectrum of young people who vary in age, maturity, culture, social and economic background, religion and physical and mental well-being. This spectrum can be seen also in the composition of the classes, posing unique challenges to the educators, demanding efforts in critical thinking and empathy. Among all the formal and non-formal educators consulted in the focus groups, several challenges arose which should be addressed to those working in education settings to better respond to GBV online.

Not all educators feel comfortable in addressing the topic of GBV online with a group of young people. Among the reasons behind such feeling educators cited potential discomfort among students, uncertainty about initiating discussions, and the challenge of creating safe and open environments. The threshold of misunderstanding and miscommunication is very low, and any wrongdoing or approach may be criticised. Maintaining neutrality during such discussions is an important asset but cannot always be taken for granted. One clear example can be wrongly expressing that young boys and men are always found as perpetrators in GBV online. This statement, if not well explained, can hinder the entire conversation and it might inadvertently focus on the idea that young boys and men are always to blame for GBV.

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, many factors must be considered when involving young people in the discussion on GBV online, especially the family environment. Many educators from across all focus groups expressed their fear to address the topic of GBV online with their pupils due to misinformation around the topic and also due to the reactions of parents/carers, who might not agree with addressing such topics with their children due to different social, cultural or religious beliefs. In this context, educators also noted that in order to tackle the roots of GBV, families should also be involved and receive appropriate education on GBV and gender-stereotyping, by also providing such education within the family environment, especially these who live in vulnerable

conditions. Educating young children not only in schools but also within the family environment is one important step towards gender equality and respect.

Some educators felt there was a lack of competence and knowledge to navigate the complexities of addressing GBV online with young people, underscoring the need for research, guidance, and a supportive framework. Some felt they were not up to date with young people's experiences and their own understanding of the modern gender-related topics with open-minded attitude and sensitivity. For this reason, many educators try to avoid the conversation so as to not cause offence or create/exacerbate issues around GBV online.

“To me, a lot of this [gender-related topics] is really hard to grasp, and I don't know enough about it.”

Formal educator (Denmark)

Lack of time seems to be also a part of the many challenges faced by educators. Besides their heavy workload and limited time to carry out activities, educators in both formal and non-formal education settings seem to face organisational and structural issues. The schools usually do not provide enough time to organise these classes with the students. Moreover, limited time is reserved to trainings and information sessions, which are already lacking. Time also factors into the difficulty in creating a trusting bond with the young person. Many educators consulted in the focus groups, especially these from non-formal education setting, stated that often young people do not have enough confidence to tell their trainers about such topics. This could be also linked to a previous finding in the focus group consulting youth that young people feel that adults do not know enough about online life to be able to help. Additionally, it is important to outline that often young people seem to dismiss GBV-related incidents and therefore do not report.

An additional note should be added regarding the lack of resources targeting young people neurodiverse young people, these with special needs and/or disabilities. The scarce availability of such resources drives to improvisation from the educators, which might be dangerous if not totally aware of the issue of GBV. Improvisation can lead to giving poor advice that threatens pupils' safety online, reinforces negative stereotypes or introduces an educator's personal views being taken as 'fact' rather than opinion. Despite these complexities, all educators involved in the consultations expressed their willingness to address the topic, highlighting the need for tailored approaches adapted to the individual background of young people, especially including age.

d. Needs and strategies of educators to discuss GBV online with children and young people

As previously mentioned, the age of the target audience is a key aspect when understanding needs and assessing strategies to respond to GBV online. A common ground among educators is to start education on GBV online and all related topics at an early stage of life. Concepts such as consent

and the issue of gender-stereotyping should be among the notions discussed in the classrooms and in non-formal settings, as they are the underpinning concepts required to tackle the root causes of GBV online.

The majority of the educators expressed a desire for teaching resources that include tailored materials, clear lesson plans, case studies, practical example with images, and threshold-reducing tools from other cultures and disadvantaged backgrounds. External training by experts familiar with GBV online were also mentioned as an important tool for both teachers and students. Participants also highlighted the importance of incorporating storytelling and video materials to engage students, and stressed the need for resources supporting those who may have experienced GBV online.

Among the suggested strategies to start the conversation with children and young people is the use of platforms commonly used by young people, in order to create a safe and trusted environment. One educator from the Belgian focus group proposed to plan a lesson on GBV online on a streaming platform where gamers show how they play certain video games. As female gamers are harshly targeted in the gaming environment and often victims of GBV online, they refuse to engage cameras or use voice converters to hide the fact that they are female. In this context, boys were asked to put on a female avatar for a day on the used streaming platform in order to understand the point of view of girls in such environments. The use of gaming platforms seems to be a high-valued tool for educating youth also by Danish educators. Such platforms were used to properly explain the notion of respect and respectful language.

Effective prevention strategies also require consistent and continuous interventions with children and young people, and the necessity of providing training to both young people and their families, recognising that children and young people nowadays start using technological devices from a very young age. The circles of trust of the child must be included in the educational and awareness process. It is also note-worthy that several educators highlighted how some of the young people tend to educate each other about the risks and opportunities of the digital environment. The proactive willingness to educate each other comes also from the positive attitude children and young people have today, in comparison to a decade ago. Nowadays young people seem to embrace more diversity, on the contrary it seems that adults refrain more in such topics. In this context, young people are more prone to educate each other because they might believe that they possess a deeper and a less biased knowledge of the online world compared to the adults. This is an important aspect to consider when also addressing the possibility to use peer-to-peer education or a bottom-up approach.

“Hopefully, in the next generations of parents and children, after having received the appropriate education for risks, dangers and accepted online behaviour, we will witness less violent, online incidents of insults and abuse.”

Formal educator (Greece)

PART III – The menABLE response to GBV online

1. A multi-stakeholder approach to GBV online

Delving into the topic of GBV online from a theoretical framework served an important role in understanding how GBV online is perceived in the society as a whole, and especially by young people and these adults who work closely with them. The qualitative research set the stage for underpinning the future activities of the menABLE project, due to the emerging results especially in the focus groups consulting experts, youth, formal and non-formal educators. Three key findings can be highlighted from the qualitative research:

- **The role of intersectionality:** approaches must be tailored not only based on gender, but also considering the unique features of each young individual, starting from age, cultural, social and family background.
- **Tailored approach for boys and young men:** a diverse approach must be considered when targeting this cluster of young people considering the different manner they approach and express emotions and feelings.
- **Educating the circles of trust of youth:** family and formal and non-formal educators must be equipped to address the topic of GBV online with knowledge, materials and tools to be able to discuss the subject with the young people.

As mentioned at the beginning of this research report, the primary objective of the menABLE project is to combat GBV online by fostering mutual awareness, tolerance, and respect and by promoting means of prevention strategies primarily, but not exclusively, targeting boys and young men. In this context, the menABLE project aims to achieve its objective not only by understanding the topic of GBV online throughout a series of activities and research, but also by using this knowledge to raise awareness on different levels, especially in education settings whether formal or non-formal.

Based on the key findings gathered through the literature review and qualitative research, the project also aims to train education stakeholders to prevent, identify and respond to online risks and GBV online, through different awareness raising activities on online risks and GBV online. Alongside this will be the investigation of the role of boys and young men in the fight against GBV online and how to better equip them with knowledge and best practices on the topic.

As previously mentioned, awareness raising activities will target in a greater scale the formal and non-formal education setting. For this reason, an important part of the project is the development of an educational Toolbox supported by training and outreach activities on GBV online for different stakeholders (see Figure 7).

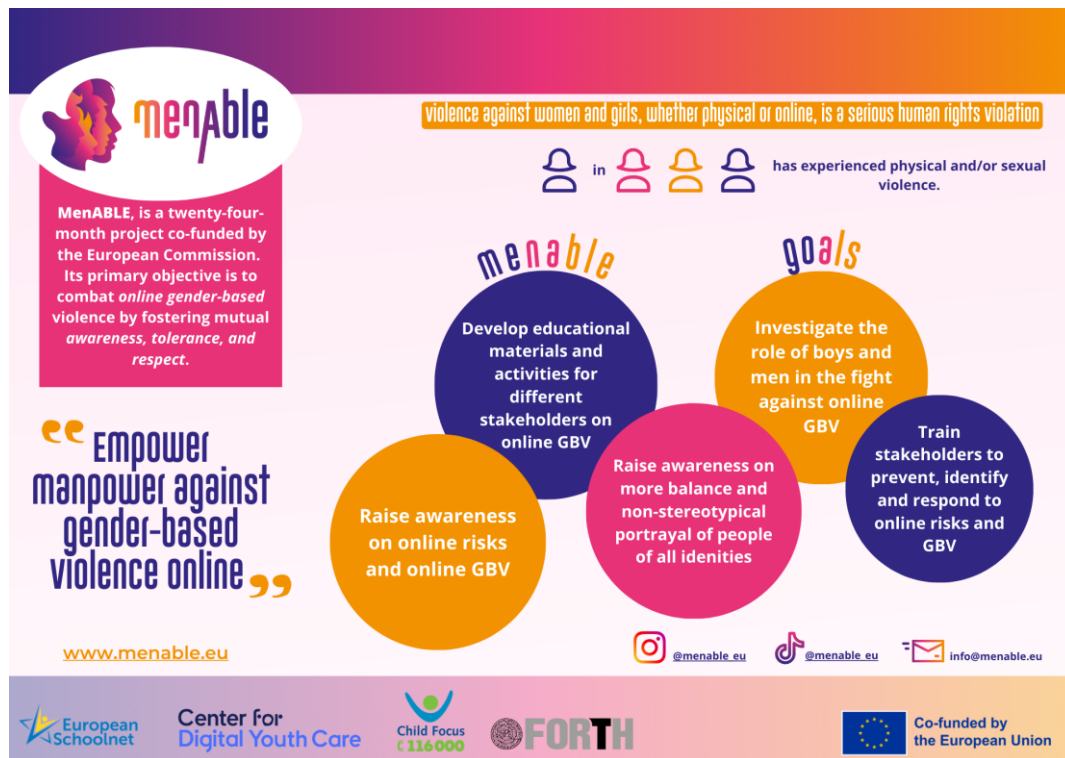


Figure 7 - menABLE project objectives.

2. The menABLE definition of GBV online

Through the development of the literature review and the various conversations with experts, young people and educators as part of the qualitative research, an important aspect came to light when discussing the definition of GBV online. There is no harmonious definition of the phenomenon both at the European and national level. Moreover, children, young people and adults find it difficult to provide a clear definition of GBV online and what the phenomenon entails.

For this reason, the project consortium decided to create the menABLE definition of GBV online, which will help tailoring future activities of the project. The menABLE definition of GBV online has the aim to create a harmonious framework when understanding the actors involved, its forms and its features.

*“Gender-based violence (GBV) online is a broad concept within the phenomenon of GBV that includes a **wide range of different forms** of psychological violence or violations perpetrated (anonymously) **by an individual or a group of people**, aggravated or assisted, directly or indirectly, fully or in part, through **digital communications means** on the grounds of gender or a combination of **gender and other factors** (e.g., race, ethnicity, age, disability, sexuality, social status, profession or personal beliefs).*

*GBV online disproportionately affects **females, transgender and gender non-conforming people**, and, to a lesser extent, men and boys.*

*GBV online may **intersect** with other forms of discrimination in all its manifestations, such as racism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia or ableism, which may largely affect the personal, social, political and/or financial life of the victim of GBV online.*

*It can take many **different forms**, such as online harassment and hate, different violations of privacy and/or personal content **shared without consent**, amongst others.”*

The menABLE definition of GBV online will help in creating a better framework of action in particular for the educational Toolbox, at the core of the menABLE project.

3. The menABLE Toolbox concept model

Drawing from the experience of project partners and insights gathered from the qualitative research, there is a common understanding that adults supporting children and young people need to be better equipped on GBV online.

In this context, the project consortium has pronounced belief that materials about GBV online requiring several hours of prior preparation rarely manage to get used in education settings, due to the lack of time teachers and educators often face in their work. Therefore, the idea of being able to quickly put the Toolbox into use has been fundamental, leading to the adoption of a plug & play concept.

The Toolbox will contain a range of different activities presented in a digital game format including:

- **Short dilemmas** that young people discuss in groups with the goal of generating one or several possible solutions based on their own experiences and opinions.
- **Challenges** that require more than just conversation. They can vary in scope, with some engaging in teamwork exercises, while others designed to lead to the creation of a product.

- **Quiz** questions based on existing research and knowledge. This is not about the young people's own opinions or experiences, but rather about providing factual information about GBV online.

Within all three types of activities, a number of different themes within the overall topic of GBV online will be addressed.

To facilitate a plug & play experience, the Toolbox will have a built-in functionality that allows the user to set up a path through the different activities based on a variety of selected elements. Setting up the game include deciding:

- Whether participants are responsible for configuring the game by selecting themes and types of activities or if they are to using a preselected set chosen by their teacher.
- Whether participants should engage independently with the "game" or if the teacher/educator should actively participate in the activities. Both content and hints to the activity changes depending on the choice.
- If activities should discuss all themes available within the Toolbox or only specific ones.
- If all or only specific types of activities (dilemma, challenge, quiz) should be represented within the different themes.
- Which timeframe the participants have for the activities, and this will also affect the availability of the chosen activities.

Creating a final Toolbox that is entirely identical across borders can be a challenge. Besides the question of language, there may be specific structural, cultural, and political differences that require more than just simple adjustments, and the aim is to address this challenge from the beginning of the creation process.

Therefore, the Toolbox will be available in different national versions. The English version will contain elements that are available in three national versions. Additionally, customised for specific audiences, the Greek, Belgian (in double language, French/Dutch), and Danish versions may incorporate additional activities tailored to their respective national audiences.

In conclusion, the menABLE research provides a theoretical and empirical backbone for the menABLE Toolbox, which will be made available on www.menable.eu in the spring of 2024. It will enable multiple stakeholders to work on GBV online with young people aged 13-18.

Annex

1. List of experts

Target Group	Expert ⁵³	Affiliation	Country
Young people and Influencers	Jacob Donegan	TikTok creator	Ireland
	Molly Hickey	BIK Youth Ambassador	Ireland
Academia	Annachiara Sarto	Protection4kids	Italy
	Barbara G. Bello	Independent expert	Italy
	Maureen Mincke	Criminologist	Belgium
	Svend Aage Madsen	Rigshospitalet	Denmark
Policymakers	Asha Allen	Center for Democracy & Technology Europe (CDT Europe)	Belgium
	Sara De Vido	Ca' Foscari University of Venice	Italy
Industries	Anonymous	Aylo	Global
	Angeline Lee	Discord	Global
	Brianna Riggio	Discord	Global
	Mauro Sanna	Discord	Global
NGOs	Antigoni Angelaki	UNICEF	Greece
	Brunella Greco	Save the Children Italy	Italy
	Giulia Radi	Save the Children Italy	Italy
	Jill Michiels	Zijn vzw	Belgium
	Myriam Halimi	RoSa: Center of Expertise on Gender and Feminism	Belgium
	Sophie Mortimer	South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL)	UK
Media Authorities	Lucas Boudet	European Advertising Standards Alliance (EASA)	Belgium

⁵³ Two additional experts, who have expressed a preference for anonymity, are to be included in this list.

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The project is funded by the European Union - 'Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV-2022-DAPHNE)'. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. European Union cannot be held responsible for them.