Gender-based violence (GBV) is one of the most widespread violations of human rights and an obvious expression of unequal gender relations in a society. GBV is a serious hindrance to sustainable development and ending GBV is a specific target in the 2030 Agenda. Ending GBV is also a priority for the Swedish government, reflected in development cooperation. GBV occurs all over the world and takes many forms at different arenas.

This brief gives attention to GBV online. During the last years, concerns about GBV online have gained wide recognition as a growing and alarming phenomenon. It is used to attack, oppress and silence women and girls and LGBTI persons in private and public spaces. GBV online particularly targets women human rights defenders, for whom the Internet is a key tool. The brief focuses on the nexus of GBV, information and communication technologies (ICT) and the rights to freedom of expression.

DEFINING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE ONLINE
Gender-based violence (GBV) is recognized as one of the most severe and prevalent human rights violations in the world. Women and girls are statistically by far the most targeted; global estimates indicate that one in three women experience physical and/or sexual violence during her life. Also other communities at risk are exposed and within them men and boys are included, and all over the world LGBTI persons are especially targeted. The intersection of multiple forms of discrimination – based on for example sex, age, gender identity/expression, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion etc – must be taken into account when making visible and addressing GBV.

GBV is addressed in national legislation and a large number of UN and other international and regional agreements. It is a specific target under Sustainable Development Goal 5 on Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda. However, as GBV reveals unequal and discriminatory patterns, making this violence visible often evokes resistance at a personal as well as societal level. There are still significant gaps in policy and legislation, and at all levels the implementation is far from sufficient. Most cases go unreported and the impunity for GBV is widespread and alarming.

1. In addition to the references specified in the text and listed at the end as “further readings”, the following material has been used in this brief: a) interviews with 11 activists and experts from Africa, Latin America, South-East Asia, MENA, and Europe during, and in connection to, Stockholm Internet Forum (SIF) 2019, b) the panel “The shifting terrain of gender-based violence online” at SIF 2019, c) experiences from previous Sida-discussions on GBV online (Director General’s round-table discussion 2015, SIF 2015 and 2017, Development Talk 2016, Stockholm Forum on Gender Equality 2018).


3. For continuous update, see the website of UN Women (http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women).

Gender-Based Violence Online

Sida defines gender-based violence as any harm or suffering that is perpetrated against a woman or girl, man or boy, and that has a negative impact on the physical, sexual or psychological health, development or identity of the person. The cause of the violence is founded in gender-based power inequalities and gender-based discrimination.5

Gender-Based Violence Online, as defined by the Association for Progressive Communication (APC), encompasses “acts of gender-based violence that are committed, abetted or aggravated, in part or fully, by the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as mobile phones, the internet, social media platforms, and email”.6

As GBV in general is difficult to recognize and name, and there are significant gaps in access to justice for survivors, this is even more true when this violence occurs online. Even though the personal (physical and psychological) as well as social, political and even economic effects and consequences of GBV online may be as severe as GBV offline, it is often not recognized as violence.

"Women who are exposed to GBV online are neglecting it, saying that they are not afraid and that what is happening online is not violence. But still, later, it hits them.”
Interview with activist from Europe

The internet is used for widespread and systematic discrimination against women and girls and LGBTI persons, and it is an arena for multiple, recurring and interrelated forms of gender-based violence.7

GBV online should be taken into consideration in all types of gender equality work to achieve sustainable development, in gender mainstreaming as well as in targeted work for gender equality. This includes for example in education, women’s economic empowerment, sexual and reproductive health and rights, in conflict and migration and not the least in political participation. This brief acknowledges this broad context, and focuses on the nexus between GBV, ICT, and the right to freedom of expression.

10 Ibid.
12 For elaboration, see Sida (2013) Gender and ICT (https://www.sida.se/contentas-sets/7d808d712d0fa-c08ba8dx8d1075-128a%20%20gender-and-ict.pdf)
13 For elaboration, see Sida (2019) Democracy in the digital age – challenges and opportunities for development cooperation. Document no: 02/10/19
In her report on online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective, the Special Rapporteur on violence against women states that in spite of benefits and an empowering potential of the Internet and ICT, women and girls have increasingly voiced their concern of harmful, sexist and violent content and behaviour online. The Internet is being used in systematic discrimination, and ICTs have facilitated new forms of gender-based violence that are increasingly violating human rights.17

FORMS AND CONSEQUENCES

GBV may be interpreted as a continuum18, where different forms of violence are interconnected with and made possible through each other. Also violence taking place at different arenas, including offline and online violence, should be seen as interconnected. The relationship between violence offline and online can be described as fluid. For example, when sexual abuse is filmed and spread on social media, the violence does not only take place offline, but repeatedly online. Or when women’s activists receive online threats, followed by attacks on the street, and the attacks are supported and spread online, the violence simultaneously takes place both offline and online.

GBV online take multiple forms. It includes, but is not limited to, verbal and graphic threats, abusive comments and harassments; sexual assault and rape photos/videos; distribution of photos and videos without consent; accessing, sharing, faking and deleting private data; stealing of identity, money or property; blackmailing/extortion.20 It also takes the form of surveillance by intimate partners, states or social control.21

The consequences of GBV online are the same as for GBV in general. It effects the everyday life at all levels of those who are exposed: emotional, physical, psychological and has effects in social, economic and political life.22

"We internalize what they write, and it drains us. And threats do not only involve you, but also your family. This is toxic, and many withdraw. But if I do that: what am I teaching my daughter?"”

Interview with activist from Africa

It may also lead to lost self-esteem, health problems including depression and even suicide, economic harm and social isolation. An overall effect is that women and other discriminated groups are silenced; withdrawing from democratic discussions online, or even from the Internet and the public sphere at large.23

Harassmap

In the Harassmap project in Egypt, women anonymously report incidences of sexual harassment by using text messaging from their mobile.28 By mapping SMS reports on a public website, displaying location and details provided by the survivors of violence, the extent of the problem is documented. The project’s Assistance Information and Referral System provides victims with a list of services to turn to. Another part of the project, Police Response, pinpoints hotspots aiming to increase police presence in high harassment areas. In addition, community outreach activities, social media awareness and blogging campaigns are included. Harassmap acts as an advocacy, prevention, and response tool, highlighting the severity of the problem and offering proactive responses.

15 According to the Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition this term includes women’s activists; men who defend women’s rights; lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender (LGBT); human rights defenders; other groups committed to the advancement of women’s human and sexual rights [https://www.defendwomendefendingrights.org/our-work/]
17 Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on online violence against women and girls, from a human rights perspective. A/HCR/38/47 [https://documents.un.org]
19 GenderIT.org: 15 manifestations of gender-based violence online [https://www.genderit.org/resources/15-manifestations-gender-based-violence-online-handbook/]
20 See for example Recognising and Responding to Online Gender-Based Violence (APC online course) [https://www.advocacyassembly.org/en/courses/139/Reagoning/1/lesson/1]
21 See for example this case from Tanzania, where surveillance via apps is used to track down LGBTI persons [https://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/melt-down-protect-transgender-victims/digital-and-online]
23 See for example Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on online violence against women and girls, from a human rights perspective. A/HCR/38/47 [https://documents.un.org]
24 from harassmap.org/en/
POLICY RECOGNITION – AND LEGAL GAPS

Over the last years, concerns about GBV online has gained wide recognition in global discussions. Several of Sida’s partners, in particular the Women’s Rights Programme of the Association of Progressive Communication (APC), have actively been pushing for policy changes during a decade. These advocacy efforts have translated into concrete results. Here are some examples:

- The 2019 report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders focuses on women human rights defenders and points at how they are often subjected to “online harassment, violence and attacks” and makes the link between online and offline assault.25

- In 2018, the Human Rights Council adopted a resolution on “Accelerating efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls: preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in digital contexts”.26

- The 2018 annual report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women focuses on online violence against women and girls. The Special Rapporteur states that it is “important to acknowledge that the Internet is being used in a broader environment of widespread and systemic structural discrimination and gender-based violence against women and girls”, which is a grave hindrance for human rights.27

- On the 8th of March 2017, the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression made a joint statement. They urged states and companies to address online gender-based abuse, while at the same time warned against censorship to safeguard freedom of expression.28

- The updated CEDAW General Recommendation 35 2017 makes reference to ‘contemporary forms of violence occurring on the internet and digital spaces’ when talking about the fact that gender-based violence against women occurs in all spaces and spheres of human interaction, whether public or private.29

Gendered Dimensions of Privacy

The Association of Women in Development (AWID) and APC has pushed for policy recognition of the critical issue of the gendered dimension of privacy. They point at how the collection and exploitation of data by state and non-state actors are not gender neutral, and how misogyny, heteropatriarchy and gendered injustices are exacerbated in the digital age, including through GBV online.30

The gaps between international agreements and national recognition, as well as legal and implementation gaps at country level are still huge. Reports from various countries show similar obstacles and challenges.31 GBV online is falling between chairs – neither fitting laws addressing GBV nor cybercrimes. There are also contexts where laws are non-existent and where there is a lack of access to and trust in the legal system at large. Some governments also use GBV online as an excuse to implement protectionist regulations that tends to criminalise or regulate free speech.

Women are reluctant to report GBV in general and GBV online in particular, and they may face further violence when seeking help. Moreover, it is often hard to identify perpetrators, as the fluidity of offline and online spaces makes evidence and tracking difficult. There is often a lack of capacity and knowledge among legal and law enforcement professionals. In addition, national legal frameworks have a limited impact on – and governments are reluctant to address – crimes crossing national borders and/or corporate responsibility.32

In relation to GBV online, private companies have emerged as a new form of duty bearer. Insufficient reporting, response, and remedy mechanisms by private companies, when GBV is being exercised on social media platforms, is at the center of national and global discussions on legislation regarding responsibilities of the private sector. To avoid stricter legislation, which is likely to have adverse effects on human rights, civil society has put forward demands of self-regulatory bodies, similar to the ones within the media sector. This recommendation has also been put forward by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression.33


28 UN experts urge States and companies to address online gender-based abuse but warn against censorship [https://www.genderit.org/EN/News/Events/Pages/DivisionNews.aspx?NewsID=771317]


30 See for example the Oral statement Clustered Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the right to privacy and the Special Rapporteur on cultural rights. [https://www.ohchr.org/en]


STRATEGIES TO COUNTER GBV ONLINE
Where GBV online occurs, there are also strategies to counter this violence. These can take different forms, occur to different extent and be found at all levels; global, regional, local and personal. The policy recognition described above of GBV online at a global level, would not have been possible without strategic advocacy, lobbying and awareness raising from women’s rights activists. These changes, creating an enabling environment at policy level, is a prerequisite for making a difference at all levels. They provide a foundation for states willing to find ways to respond to new forms of GBV, and for activists putting pressure on states to fulfil promises and make real change on the ground.

Safety of Female Journalists Online
The Representative on Freedom of the Media at the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), has since many years put focus on GBV online targeting female journalists.34 They have published a report on how to counter online abuse of female journalists, including recommendations to states. This include recognition of GBV online, strengthened capacity for law enforcement, support to collection of data and network building. For media organisations, they recommend industry-wide guidelines, comprehensive system to report, and support systems for female journalists.35

In her report, the Special Rapporteur on violence against women calls for action to prevent GBV online, to protect those who are exposed, and to prosecute perpetrators – all in line with strategies against all forms of GBV.36 Along the same line, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders calls for protection of women human rights defenders in online spaces, including adopting policy protecting them from libel and hate speech.37

As GBV online is still a phenomenon that is largely unrecognized, an important counter strategy is to raise knowledge and awareness about the phenomenon as such, and about the consequences at personal and societal level, and for democracy at large. Capacity building on digital security among women human rights defenders is spreading. In this work, an important aspect is the adaptation of resources to local languages, in order to make tools for digital security available for all. Young activists are often the most targeted, but they are also the ones that are aware of the risks and consequences, and knowledgeable of the online arena. Sometimes it is harder to reach and educate activists in older age-groups, although these are far from exempt from GBV online.38

Research – Education – Influencers
7amleh, together with Kvinna till kvinna, conducted research on Palestinian women’s experiences of GBV online.39 The research shows that Palestinian women’s freedom of expression is impacted by both the patriarchal society and the Israeli occupation. They have a lack of trust in institutions to deal with cases, leading to further dependence on patriarchal family structures. Building on this research, 7amleh has created an educational package on digital security for girls and boys in high schools. They also run a public awareness campaign together with Instagram influencers – feminists and journalists, but also fashionistas and food bloggers. In their own words, these influencers talk about GBV online, boundaries, protection and how to resist violent behaviour.

A key strategy is to get to know and understand the space, in order to make informed decisions; to have online agency.

“Sometimes online is even more dangerous. Offline we know how to protect ourselves, we know about where not to go, signs of attacks to a demonstration, safe house etc. We have indicators and tools. But online we don’t have that. We don’t know what we’ve agreed to, or who’s watching.”

Interview with activist from MENA

Activists talk about the necessity to sometimes create a shield, and to answer and argue but also allow oneself not to. Self-care online is described as a political act, part of being a sustainable activist and to preserve your mental health. The importance of mobilizing together, being a part of a network and not being alone is emphasized again and again as key counter strategies. However, as much as personal and collective digital security is necessary, this is only part of the solution. Change is not possible without responsibility taken by the states as duty bearers and by companies to follow guiding principles for sustainable business.

34 Safety of female journalists online (https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/safety-of-female-journalists-online)
35 Countering online abuse against female journalists (https://www.osce.org(fout2011)download)
38 Interview with activist from Europe.
ENTRY POINTS FOR SIDA
ICT can be a powerful catalyst for political, social and economic empowerment of women and girls and LGBTI persons. For women human rights defenders and others who raise their voice and exercise their rights to freedom of expression, the internet and ICTs are crucial political tools. Therefore, donor support to counter GBV online is key in achieving gender equality for sustainable development. This may include:

- Support to organisations and networks of women’s rights activists, including rights online, to enable them to address gender-based violence online at national, regional and global level.

- Support efforts to increase digital security and awareness among women and LGBTI human rights defenders and organisations.

- Support research and capacity building on GBV online, including the phenomenon, prevalence, consequences, prevention and counter strategies. This includes work with men and boys, addressing violent masculinities.

- Sensitise policy makers and other donors to include the online arena when legally addressing GBV and include GBV in cybercrimes; always from a human rights perspective, respecting international human rights law.

- Support initiatives that build awareness about the personal and societal impact of GBV online, accessible for all in local languages.

- Support freedom of expression advocates to build awareness of online violence as an inhibitor of women’s free expression.

- Support efforts in understanding the most used platforms by women, girls, LGBTI persons and other individuals and communities at risk to create safe and secure online spaces.

FURTHER READINGS AND RESOURCES
APC: Recognising and Responding to Online Gender-Based Violence (Online course)
https://advocacyassembly.org/en/courses/34/#/chapter/1/lesson/1

APC/GenderIT: Collection of research and resources on GBV online
https://genderit.org/onlinevaw/

Article 19: Speaking Out on Online Abuse Against Women

Freemuse: Privatising Censorship, Digitising Violence: Shrinking Space of Women’s Right to Create in the Digital Age

International Association of Women in Radio and Television: Safety Handbook for Women Journalists

OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media: Collection of resources on Safety of Female Journalists Online
https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/safety-female-journalists-online

Plan International: GBV Online Against Girls and Children
https://plan-international.org/node/15589/

https://documents.un.org

UNESCO: Fostering Freedom of Expression, including several initiatives on GBV online
https://en.unesco.org/themes/fostering-freedom-expression

UNICEF: #ENDviolenceonline
https://www.unicef.org/endviolence/endviolenceonline/