

# Ending Violence Against Women and Girls in Digital Contexts:

A Blueprint to Translate Multilateral Commitments  
into Domestic Action

Lisa Sharland and Ilhan Dahir

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## **Please Cite this Publication As**

Lisa Sharland and Ilhan Dahir, 2023, *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls in Digital Contexts: A Blueprint to Translate Multilateral Commitments Into Domestic Action*. The Stimson Center, Washington D.C., USA.

## **Acknowledgments**

The authors are particularly thankful to those government and UN officials, academics and civil society organizations that volunteered their time to contribute knowledge and expertise to this project through a workshop hosted in Washington DC in March 2023, and through interviews and a workshop held in Nairobi, Kenya in March 2023. The authors would also like to thank Julie Gregory, Raphaëlle Rafin, Kathryn Travers and Samantha Turner for their comments on earlier drafts.

This project was undertaken with funding support from the United Kingdom’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. All views reflected in this report remain the responsibility of the authors.

*Cover photo: Scenes from the Opening Session of CSW67 held in the General Assembly Hall at United Nations Headquarters in New York on 6 March 2023. Photo credit: UN Women/Ryan Brown.*

March 2023

# *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls in Digital Contexts: A Blueprint to Translate Multilateral Commitments into Domestic Action*

Providing a strategy for governments and a framework for civil society to hold governments to account for the commitments they have made to end violence against women and girls in digital contexts through UN multilateral processes.

By Lisa Sharland and Ilhan Dahir

Women are impacted by violence in digital contexts in a variety of ways. While technology and the internet have catalyzed opportunities for men and women to engage, communicate, and further their human rights, digital space also poses a gendered risk, as abuses offline are mirrored and replicated online. Technology facilitated violence disproportionately affects women and can be used to perpetuate different types of inequality. Member states have reached agreement through multiple UN processes on the importance of enacting legislation, developing policies, creating monitoring and accountability mechanisms, and providing effective remedies for victims and survivors of violence in digital contexts. However, efforts to advance domestic implementation have been slow. Building on previous research by the Stimson Center, this paper provides a blueprint that offers ten overarching strategies for governments to consider in the development of more effective and coherent domestic policy on ending violence against women and girls (VAWG) in digital contexts. The blueprint also offers a framework for civil society to hold governments to account for the commitments they have made to end VAWG in digital contexts.



# Table of Contents

**Executive Summary .....5**

**Introduction .....7**

**Ending VAWG in Digital Contexts: A Human Rights Issue .....9**

**Multilateral Commitments: Addressing Violence in Digital Contexts ..... 11**

**Implementation of Commitments: Obstacles and Opportunities ..... 19**

**Blueprint for Domestic Action on Ending VAWG in Digital Contexts.....27**

**Conclusion.....33**



Scenes from the Chalk Back for Gender Justice action following the observance of International Women's Day 2023 at UN Headquarters in New York on 8 March 2023. Photo credit: UN Women/Ryan Brown.

# Executive Summary

The digital gender divide continues to grow in many countries across the globe. While technology has brought immense benefits, the migration of social and economic life online during COVID-19 has contributed to the expansion and evolution of different forms of violence that occur through or are amplified using technology. Women and girls face a range of threats to their safety online and are more likely than their male counterparts to be harassed and targeted through different forms of technology-facilitated gender-based violence. For those women in public life—whether politicians, journalists, activists, or human rights defenders—abuse may be targeted to silence and deter them from engaging in debate and to restrict their use of online platforms. Violence in online contexts is particularly pernicious because it is difficult to remove or eliminate harmful content. Unfortunately, in many countries violence in online settings or that is enabled through different forms of technology is not considered as serious and worthy of a response as some other forms of violence or crime, despite the significant harms that may result.

There are a range of multilateral and multistakeholder processes underway to address the issue of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in digital contexts. The recently adopted conclusions of the 2023 Commission on the Status of Women build on efforts in the UN General Assembly's Third Committee and in the Human Rights Council over the last decade to develop consensus on the different types of action required to end VAWG in digital contexts. These include calls for legislation, accountability mechanisms and support to survivors. However, as with all multilateral commitments, progress relies on the actions of governments to implement domestic change. National processes to implement multilateral commitments to address VAWG in digital contexts remain largely ad-hoc and are limited by lack of political will, resources, understanding, and capacity to effectively address this issue.

There is a need to expand understanding about the different obstacles that need to be addressed to strengthen domestic implementation of the multilateral commitments that have been made to end VAWG in digital contexts. Building on previous research by the Stimson Center, this paper provides a blueprint that offers ten overarching strategies for governments to consider in the development of more effective and coherent domestic policy on ending VAWG in digital contexts. The blueprint also offers a framework for civil society to hold governments to account for the commitments they have made to end VAWG in digital contexts through different multilateral processes.



*Scenes from the observance of International Women's Day 2023 on the theme "DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality". The event brings together technologists, innovators, entrepreneurs, and gender equality activists to provide an opportunity to highlight the role of all stakeholders in improving access to digital tools. Photo credit: UN Women/Ryan Brown.*



# Introduction

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is creating a more gender-unequal world. While digital technologies have catalyzed opportunities for men and women to engage, communicate, and further their human rights, they are a double-edged sword, as abuses offline are mirrored and replicated online. More than a third of women have experienced online violence, and there are estimates that at least 85 percent have “witnessed digital violence against other women.”<sup>1</sup> Violence that occurs through or is amplified by technology is deterring many women from engaging online, silencing women in public digital spaces and offline, and exacerbating the existing gender digital divide. Such violence has implications for efforts not only to uphold human rights, but also to maintain peace and security, and advance development.

Efforts to strengthen domestic implementation of multilateral commitments on human rights and gender equality are being challenged by the pushback on women’s rights across the globe.<sup>2</sup> During the opening of the 67<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in March 2023, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres noted that “Gender equality is growing more distant” and that current progress suggests it is 300 years away. Technology will have a significant impact on these efforts to advance gender equality, as our online and offline lives become more indistinguishable. Yet women and girls are being left behind, and COVID-19 has exacerbated structural gender inequalities and led to an escalation of violence in digital contexts. The agreed conclusions of the 2023 CSW build on efforts in the UN General Assembly’s Third Committee and in the Human Rights Council to develop consensus on the action required to end VAWG in digital contexts. But as with all multilateral commitments, progress will first and foremost rely on the actions of governments to implement domestic change.

Member states face a range of obstacles and opportunities when it comes to implementing their multilateral human rights commitments, as found in earlier research conducted by the Stimson Center.<sup>3</sup> These obstacles span from the way human rights are framed, to how data is collected and information made publicly accessible, through to the presence of justice and accountability measures. The digital environment brings an additional layer of complexity for member states and civil society in protecting human rights, particularly given the diffuse range of actors with different responsibilities on the issue.

This report examines the challenges to advancing implementation of multilateral commitments on ending VAWG in digital contexts and offers a blueprint for member states and civil society to strengthen their domestic implementation. First, the report begins with an analysis of the scourge of VAWG that occurs through or is amplified by the use of technology and the challenges in addressing it. Second, it details the commitments that have been made at the multilateral level in the General Assembly’s Third Committee, the Human Rights Council, and, more recently, the CSW. Third, it surveys examples of practices by different countries in addressing VAWG in digital contexts, drawing on the framework of opportunities and obstacles identified in Stimson’s prior research. And finally, it provides a structural blueprint for member states

and civil society to use to understand and hold member states accountable to the different multilateral commitments that have been made on ending VAWG in digital contexts, with the aim of progressing domestic efforts to end VAWG. While this report considers the important role of technology intermediaries and private sector entities in addressing VAWG in digital contexts, we were unable to examine these avenues of accountability in significant depth. Consequently, the blueprint is focused on the actions that can be taken by member states and civil society, though it acknowledges that many of these are dependent on partnership and cooperation with a range of stakeholders.

This report is based on research carried out by the Stimson Center with the support of UN Women between January and March 2023. It draws on desktop research focused on nine diverse case study countries selected — Australia, Canada, Colombia, Kenya, Liberia, Malaysia, Norway, Tunisia, and the United Kingdom — and a selection of discussions with member states and UN officials in the margins of CSW 2023 and the fourth substantive session of the Open-ended Working Group on security of and in the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) 2021–2025. The research was further informed by a roundtable on ending VAWG in digital contexts hosted in Washington, DC, in March 2023, with a range of member states and civil society organizations (CSOs), as well as travel to Nairobi, Kenya, for a roundtable and a series of interviews in March 2023 with Kenyan government officials, civil society organizations and the diplomatic community.

# Ending VAWG in Digital Contexts: A Human Rights Issue

Women are impacted by violence in digital contexts in a variety of ways. Rising online violence is occurring in a political context where there is significant pushback on the value and importance of human rights and women's rights.<sup>4</sup> Understanding the nature of the challenge and its impact is essential not only to informing domestic implementation, but to shaping how to develop policy responses that result in more gender-equal outcomes.

There is no clear definition of VAWG in digital contexts. This paper uses the language “VAWG in digital contexts,” drawing on the language utilized in the Human Rights Council, Third Committee, and Secretary-General's reports. It is intended to be broad and all-encompassing, to include “online violence,” “information and communications technology-related violence against women,” “cyberviolence against women and girls,” “tech-facilitated violence against women and girls,” and “online gender-based violence”<sup>5</sup> — the range of terms and terminology utilized across different UN bodies and settings, and by member states. As will be discussed later in this paper, these definitional disputes present problems for accurately capturing data on the extent of VAWG in digital contexts and efforts to address it.<sup>6</sup>

Reach, transmission, and speed, combined with enhanced anonymity, distinguish online or technology-facilitated VAWG from other types of violence.<sup>7</sup> Such characteristics make it even more challenging for victims and survivors to seek justice and forms of redress. Furthermore, the nature of violence in digital contexts is such that it is very difficult to remove or eliminate, meaning it is not just one event but may be ongoing and retraumatizing.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, efforts to implement multilateral commitments to prevent and address VAWG in digital contexts require new approaches and innovation to keep pace with technological change and the ways such tools may be manipulated for nefarious purposes.

What constitutes gender-based violence over the last three decades has evolved to include behaviors “such as coercive control, digital violence, and financial abuse.”<sup>9</sup> Digital, online, or technology-facilitated abuse as we currently understand it can include trolling, gendered disinformation, use of deepfakes, stalking, doxing, hacking, identity theft, sexual harassment, surveillance and monitoring, and non-consensual sharing of images. But we are still trying to comprehend, for instance, the role of artificial intelligence in patterns of online abuse. As with all current and emerging technology, we can expect it will mirror (and possibly amplify) the gender inequality and biases that remain embedded across society.<sup>10</sup>

The harms caused by VAWG in digital contexts at the individual level can be ‘physical, sexual, psychological, social, political, or economic’.<sup>11</sup> Women and girls may change their patterns of life and behaviors, including restricting their engagement and use of online platforms, which contributes to a widening digital divide. But doing so may not always enable them to escape the abuse or seek restitution for what has happened. Justice mechanisms are often too slow; law enforcement has limited knowledge, expertise, capacity, or authority to order content taken down; and traumatization remains ongoing as a consequence. Violence in the online space may transition offline in various ways including coercive control, surveillance, stalking, physical violence, or even death. Unfortunately, violence in online settings is not considered as serious and worthy of a response as some other forms of violence or crime, despite the significant harms that may result.

For public figures, VAWG in digital contexts has an aggravated impact at the individual and societal levels. Abuse may be targeted to silence women’s voices and deter them from entering or remaining engaged in public life — whether as a politician, journalist, activist, or human rights defender. For women who remain engaged in political life, for instance, harmful gender norms that suggest women should fit certain stereotypes can be reinforced through the release of intimate information, whether real or fake.<sup>12</sup> This can damage the political viability of female candidates, even more so if they are advocating for gender equality or reforms.<sup>13</sup> All of these factors undermine efforts to increase women’s political participation, which not only violates the human rights of the women affected but diminishes progress on gender equality and efforts to advance women, peace, and security. Put differently, online and technology-facilitated gendered violence toward women undermines national security at a domestic level, and international peace and security at a global level.

One key challenge is how to avoid replicating known and unknown biases and inequality in the design of technology and the policies that support the moderation of content on platforms. Increasing women’s participation (and that of other marginalized groups) is one way to support these efforts and to ensure their perspectives are included and represented. But also required are more comprehensive gender-responsive approaches that consider issues of safety in the development of different technologies.<sup>14</sup>

Many of the treaties and conventions established to uphold women’s human rights and advance gender equality have been able to integrate considerations of online and technology-facilitated violence. For example, according to the Special Rapporteur on ending violence against women, the Convention on the Elimination of the Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) has been resilient.<sup>15</sup> However, until recently, multilateral efforts to end VAWG in digital contexts tend to be stovepiped, with a limited number of experts focused on the intersection between VAWG and issues related to technology or cybersecurity.<sup>16</sup> Technical guidance and support is required to ensure countries can uphold their commitments on ending VAWG in digital contexts. The commitments made in multilateral resolutions within the UN system offer a good starting point to direct and support domestic reforms.

# Multilateral Commitments: Addressing Violence in Digital Contexts

Multilateral commitments to end VAWG have been in place for decades. Since the adoption of CEDAW in 1979, the UN and member states have been working to strengthen multilateral norms and commitments to end VAWG and uphold women’s human rights.<sup>17</sup> However, only very recently has the issue of VAWG in digital contexts emerged as a consideration, with the first dedicated resolution on the issue adopted by the Human Rights Council in 2018.<sup>18</sup>

## Tracking different multilateral and multistakeholder approaches

Efforts to end VAWG in digital contexts take place in a range of UN intergovernmental settings. The UN General Assembly’s Third Committee, the Human Rights Council, and the CSW focus on the impact of violence on the human rights of women and girls and on efforts to advance gender equality. This is where the most substantive normative progress on ending VAWG has taken place, with thematically focused resolutions and outcomes on the issue.<sup>19</sup> But efforts to end VAWG in digital contexts also have dimensions relevant to efforts to maintain international peace and security, as well as furthering global development goals.

Women politicians are among several groups that are often disproportionately targeted for online abuse and harassment as a means to deter them from political participation.<sup>20</sup> This is at the core of the women, peace, and security agenda within the Security Council. Although the issue of online violence towards women has not been considered in depth through the adoption of resolutions on women, peace, and security, it has been raised in more recent open debates.<sup>21</sup> There are also gendered aspects to the use and application of cyberspace, which have more recently been considered through the work of the Open-Ended Working Group on Information and Communications Technologies. For instance, the application of internet shutdowns, attacks on critical infrastructure, and data breaches can have differential impacts on women and their human rights, and in some instances put their personal safety at risk (e.g., when data is released through a breach).<sup>22</sup>

Access to the internet is also integral to supporting implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Yet the digital divide between men and women is growing.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, as the Secretary-General’s Roadmap for Digital Cooperation outlines, technology can be used to erode or violate human rights. These areas include “data protection and privacy,” “digital identity,” “surveillance

technologies,” and “online harassment and violence and the need for content governance.”<sup>24</sup> All these issues are likely to be considered as part of intergovernmental negotiations on a Global Digital Compact as part of the UN Secretary-General’s Our Common Agenda in 2024.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to the efforts of formal committees and processes, a range of multilateral and multistakeholder partnerships and processes are intended to inform and advance efforts to end VAWG in digital contexts, driven by civil society, member states, international organizations, and the private sector. These include the Gender Equality Forum, which is focused on catalyzing action on gender equality over a five-year period from 2021 to 2026. It has six Action Coalitions, including one focused on “Gender-Based Violence” and another on “Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality.”<sup>26</sup> Both these Action Coalitions are working to address technology-facilitated gender-based violence. Tactics to advance action to prevent and eliminate online and tech-facilitated gender-based violence and discrimination by 2026 include a focus on service delivery (“design tools to better prevent, detect, respond and monitor”), laws and policies (“enhance legislation, law enforcement and restorative justice responses”), and norms (“demonstrate cultural change”).<sup>27</sup> In addition to UN-based forums, there are initiatives spearheaded by member states including the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse.<sup>28</sup> Collectively, these different initiatives have the potential to strengthen efforts to implement various multilateral commitments domestically, by identifying different policy solutions, tools, and best practices, but there is a need for ongoing cooperation and coherence in approaches.

## **Identifying the multilateral commitments: what have member states committed to do?**

Gradual and systematic progress articulating common goals and shared objectives among UN member states on ending VAWG has been made in the Human Rights Council and Third Committee over the last decade.<sup>29</sup> Such resolutions “have articulated a range of actions that states have agreed to take to provide measures of prevention, address discriminatory societal attitudes, minimize barriers to justice, and provide multisectoral responses for victims.”<sup>30</sup> Because their respective mandates focus on human rights, each body considers the issue on a regular basis and routinely adopts thematic resolutions.<sup>31</sup> Such action is complemented and guided by reports of the Secretary-General on the “Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls,”<sup>32</sup> as well as reports of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes, and its consequences.<sup>33</sup>

Only one resolution to date has focused specifically on the issue of ending VAWG in digital contexts. Human Rights Council resolution 38/5 (2018)<sup>34</sup> offers the most comprehensive articulation of some of the different commitments made by member states to end VAWG in digital contexts. Other thematic resolutions on VAWG negotiated and adopted since this one have included some focus on addressing VAWG in digital contexts, recognizing that this forms part of the spectrum of challenges requiring action to end VAWG.

For instance, resolution 77/193 (2022) in the Third Committee builds on many of the commitments related to violence in digital contexts by member states detailed in HRC resolution 38/5. This resolution drew on some of the recommendations outlined in the Secretary-General’s report on VAWG in 2022, which focused on the “emerging issue” of VAWG in digital contexts.<sup>35</sup> These connections demonstrate the ongoing value and utility of the reporting from the Secretary-General (through the UN Secretariat) to draw attention to emerging challenges and issues that member states need to consider in their negotiation of resolutions, particularly on new or emerging human rights challenges.

The resolutions adopted in the Human Rights Council and Third Committee recognize that digital technologies can bring enormous benefits that support the advancement of women and gender equality, by enabling women and girls to exercise their human rights. But the misuse of these technologies limits women’s enjoyment of their human rights, and even worse, may threaten their security. The resolutions have slowly articulated a range of commitments from member states, particularly in the last five years, which are outlined in detail in Box 1 below.

#### **BOX 1. MEMBER STATE COMMITMENTS MADE IN THE HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL AND THIRD COMMITTEE<sup>36</sup>**

Human Rights Council resolution 38/5 (2018) on *Accelerating efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls: Preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in digital contexts*. In resolution 38/5, member states committed to, *inter alia*:

- **Enact/enforce legislation** including with private sector and civil society to prevent and eliminate violence against women and girls in digital contexts
- Develop, review, and strengthen **inclusive policies (with adequate resources)** to address underlying causes of unequal relations and risk factors for violence against women and girls
- Prioritize **integration of gender perspectives** in development and implementation of “national policies, legislation, programmes, projects, strategies and regulatory and technical instruments in the area of digital technologies”
- **Create monitoring and accountability mechanisms, and analyze gender impact** of such policies in consultation with “women digital technology specialists, civil society organizations and gender equality advocates”

- Encourage **digital technology companies to adopt measures and policies that “promote gender equality** in the design, implementation and use of digital technologies”
- Develop and implement education programs including comprehensive sexuality education for adolescents and youth to eliminate prejudices and build skills **to develop respectful relationships**
- Ensure women and girls can **express freedom of opinion and expression online** without risk of violence
- Promote and support **women’s full, equal, and meaningful participation** in digital technology conceptualization
- **Mainstream a gender perspective** into the criminal justice systems and efforts to prevent and combat crime
- **Protect victims and survivors** by holding perpetrators to account and ensuring legislation allows for timely and effective investigation, prosecution, sanction, and redress
- Publicly condemn all forms of violence through media and information campaigns and **provide effective remedies that protect privacy and avoid secondary victimization**
- **Remove gender bias in administration of justice** and provide systematic gender-sensitivity and awareness training for police and security forces, prosecutors, judges, and lawyers
- Encourage business enterprises to **protect private data of women and girls**, create transparent reporting mechanisms, and develop meaningful policies to protect them from violence in digital contexts
- Ensure the **participation of women and girls** in the development of policies, programs, and initiatives to eliminate VAWG
- Establish a system to **collect, analyze, and publish statistical data** disaggregated by sex, age, and disability status on complaints about gender-based violence against women
- Collect, share, and **positively recognize good practices to counter gender stereotyping** in forms of media and digital technologies
- Enhance international cooperation to support national efforts to **reduce digital and information divides** between developed and developing countries and enhance access to digital technologies



Third Committee resolution 77/193 (2022) reiterates some of the provisions included in resolution 38/5 in more general terms, as well as calling upon member states to take specific action in relation to the use of information and communication technologies, online environments, and digital technologies to, *inter alia*:

- **Prevent, address, and prohibit all forms of discrimination**, intimidation, harassment, and violence online and offline that prevent women and girls from enjoying their human rights
- Take measures to **address the digital divide and equal access to the design and consumption of information and communication technologies**
- **Mainstream a gender perspective** in the conceptualization, development, and implementation of digital technologies
- Take appropriate measures to **prevent all forms of violence**, intimidation, threats, and attacks against women online and through digital technologies; consider adopting laws to protect them from defamation and hate speech

Most recently, the 67<sup>th</sup> session of the CSW had as its theme “Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls”. It had before it the report of the Secretary-General providing recommendations for consideration to the CSW.<sup>37</sup> These included addressing gender stereotypes, taking an intersectional approach to address gender gaps in digital access, fostering gender-responsive digital policy, adopting a human rights approach to design, teaching digital citizenship and responsible use of technology as a means to address gender-based violence, and engagement and accountability of state and non-state actors. In the agreed conclusions — adopted in the early hours of March 18, 2023 — member states committed to a range of measures building on the previous resolutions (see Box 2). The commitments are more comprehensive than many of the measures adopted in the Human Rights Council and Third Committee, which may be in part reflective of a range of side-events that included the participation of civil society and technology companies in the margins of the negotiations.

## **BOX 2. MEMBER STATE COMMITMENTS ON VIOLENCE THAT OCCURS THROUGH OR IS AMPLIFIED BY THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN THE AGREED CONCLUSIONS OF THE 67<sup>TH</sup> CSW (2023)<sup>38</sup>**

- **Eliminate, prevent and respond to all forms of violence** against all women and girls in public and private spaces, online and offline, through **multisectoral and coordinated approaches to investigate, prosecute, and punish the perpetrators** of violence and end impunity, and take appropriate measures to create a safe, enabling, and violence-free working environment for women
- Condemn and take all appropriate measures, including legal or criminal action, to **combat the use of digital tools, including social media and online platforms, for the purpose of harassment, hate speech, and racism against women and girls**, trafficking in persons, all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse of women and girls, as well as for child, early and forced marriage and forced labour, and any non-consensual sharing of personal, sexually explicit content of women and the production and distribution of child pornography, also known as child sexual exploitation and abuse material
- **Strengthen the understanding of and track patterns of forms of gender-based violence that occur through or are amplified by the use of technology** in order to guide evidence-based policymaking and programming and comprehensively measure its impact
- **Develop, amend and expand legislation and policies and strengthen their implementation** in consultation with relevant stakeholders including inter alia victims and survivors of violence and women's organizations, including victim- and survivor-informed responses and fast-track processes to prevent, eliminate and respond to all forms of violence against women and girls that occur through or are amplified by the use of technology, and institute measures to address such violence
- Adopt comprehensive measures and programmes that seek to address forms of gender-based violence and human rights violations against women and girls which can occur through the use of technology
- Provide **support to victims and survivors of gender-based violence that occurs through or is amplified by the use of technology through the provision of service responses that avoid the re-traumatisation**, including comprehensive social, health, care and legal services and the provision of helplines; ensure women's and girls' equal access to justice, including by providing accessible, confidential, supportive and effective reporting mechanisms for incidences of such violence; increase women's legal literacy and awareness of available legal remedies and dispute resolution mechanisms; and provide civil and administrative alternatives for victims and survivors who have difficulty in gaining access to legal avenues owing to financial barriers or systemic discrimination, while recognizing the major contribution of civil society women's organizations providing supporting services to survivors;

- Develop **effective gender- and age-responsive strategies**, while bearing in mind the best interest of the child, for preventing and combating sexual exploitation and abuse of girls in digital contexts,
- Strengthen the **capacity and improve policy coherence and coordination of government actors, including parliamentarians, policymakers, law enforcement officials, the judiciary, health and social workers and educators, and of civil society organizations**, to develop knowledge, skills and digital expertise to prevent and eliminate violence against women and girls that occurs through or is amplified by the use of technology including through institutional trainings, and provide victim- and survivor-centered support
- Ensure that **public and private sector entities prioritize the prevention and elimination of gender-based violence that occurs through or is amplified by the use of technology by implementing, through meaningful engagement with victims and survivors, safeguards and preventive measures** that address multiple risk and protective factors that underlie violence, including improved content moderation and curation; interoperability, transparency, accessibility and effectiveness of reporting systems; including by establishing robust and reliable content removal processes fully compliant with relevant obligations under international human rights law

Nonetheless, fault lines emerged during the negotiations around two sets of issues.<sup>39</sup> The first related to terminology. As noted above, technology-facilitated gender-based violence has been a preferred term of several UN agencies and was identified as a preferred term in the negotiations by several member states. However, some delegations argued that it was not the appropriate forum to be considering issues related to technology. As a consequence, variations of the terminology were used in conjunction with “violence against women and girls that occurs through or is amplified by the use of technology.” Similar differences existed on the issue of whether the commission could come to agreement on a definition as proposed by the Secretary-General, but delegations were divided, with fears that pushback might whittle down a definition to the lower common denominator.

The second key area of difference involved language related to comprehensive sexual education and sexual and reproductive health and rights in the context of education policies focused on education, consent, and respectful relationships. Several delegations opposed any reference, despite the importance of addressing gender inequality at an early age, and the adoption of language on comprehensive sexual education in previous resolutions.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, no references made it into the final text. These differences do not detract from the overall outcome and important progress achieved in the agreed conclusions, but they do highlight some areas where advancement on domestic implementation among member states is likely to differ.



Nearly 1000 people gathered in Popayán, capital of the department of Cauca, for the 5K race “Corro por Ti Mujer” organized by the Mayor’s Office, the Women’s Secretariat and UN Women Colombia., Photo credit: UN Women/Miguel Varona.

# Implementation of Commitments: Obstacles and Opportunities

To inform our understanding of the opportunities for and obstacles to implementing the multilateral commitments on ending VAWG in digital contexts, we examined how nine countries — Australia, Canada, Colombia, Kenya, Liberia, Malaysia, Norway, Tunisia, and the United Kingdom — approach addressing VAWG in digital contexts.<sup>41</sup> These countries were selected to ensure the findings reflected geographic, economic, democratic, and cultural diversity, as well as varying levels of support for upholding human rights obligations. Analysis of the approaches of different countries was supported primarily by desktop research, as well as two roundtables focused on the contexts of Australia<sup>42</sup> and Kenya,<sup>43</sup> as well as in-country interviews with government officials, UN Women, and civil society representatives in Kenya.

Countries invest considerable efforts into negotiating multilateral resolutions. Yet efforts to follow through on those commitments and ensure there is domestic implementation are often ad hoc, with member states taking a selective approach — either deliberately or because of limited understanding about the commitments they have made at the multilateral level. Previous research by the Stimson Center on strengthening human rights “identified eight factors that influence whether and how countries implement the commitments they have made in New York and Geneva within their own borders: the domestic political context; regional mechanisms, resourcing, and in-country capacity; data and access to information; justice and accountability mechanisms; levels of gender mainstreaming; breadth of civic space; and communication and coordination within government.”<sup>44</sup> This section examines how different countries have navigated those obstacles and identified opportunities for reform when it comes to ending VAWG in digital contexts, identifying some good practices, as well as lessons learned.

## Domestic politics and framing of human rights

There is a growing awareness across various UN member states that VAWG in digital contexts is a part of the spectrum of gender-based violence that prevents girls and women from exercising their human rights. However, the full extent of the threat against women and girls is not completely appreciated or understood — and in some instances, there is hostility to considering this a form of “violence,” with views that this is something women should “ignore and move on.”<sup>45</sup> Similarly, online violence impacts men and women differently,

particularly on issues related to the non-consensual distribution of intimate images.<sup>46</sup> Even the language “revenge porn” implies that the victim has done something wrong, with efforts to shift language to “non-consensual sharing of images or image-based abuse.”<sup>47</sup> Attitudes around the issues of online and technology-facilitated abuse and its impact on women present a significant barrier to political will for legislative and policy reforms. The prevailing view that online violence is less harmful than physical or offline violence<sup>48</sup> is serving as a roadblock to more concerted action and reform in addressing VAWG in digital contexts.

Education campaigns focused on prevention offer one important vehicle for dealing with these perceptions around online violence. In Australia, the Council of Governments (bringing together all the state and territory governments) initiated a fourth phase of its “Stop it at the Start” campaign in 2021, which is the national primary prevention campaign to reduce VAWG.<sup>49</sup> Australia’s most recent National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children acknowledges the significant problem of technology-facilitated abuse, and the need for preventative measures that advance gender equality and “strengthen positive, equal and respectful relationships between all people in public and private spheres.”<sup>50</sup> Education programs targeted at youth and adolescents on comprehensive sexuality education and respectful relationships remain a core component of bridging the gap around attitudes on the issue of online violence and how to prevent it.<sup>51</sup>

Action taken at the national level, including both legal precedence and governmentally organized campaigns, plays a major role in defining the scope of the issue and raising its profile as a major human rights concern. In 2022, the Administrative Court of Cundinamarca in Colombia recognized that there is a pattern of online violence levied against women journalists<sup>52</sup> — the first time a judicial authority recognized this gendered pattern in Colombia. The decision also led to the establishment of the National Electoral Council, meaning that the Ethics Committees can sanction political parties that invoke online violence against opponents.<sup>53</sup>

Annual campaigns such as the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence in November and December each year can provide a valuable opportunity for governments, the private sector and civil society to raise awareness about the inextricable link between eliminating gendered violence and upholding human rights.<sup>54</sup> However, while such campaigns are important at drawing attention — particularly in domestic contexts — it is essential that they target messages at audiences who need to hear as part of targeted prevention campaigns, rather than becoming an echo chamber for those that are already convinced of the need to address the problem of VAWG.

## Justice and accountability

Laws and legislation can frame attitudes on issues of national importance and ultimately affect how well those issues can be addressed. The absence of such mechanisms for justice can impact attitudes around the nature of these abuses. Governments have sought to address the issue of online VAWG through a range of legal responses, including legislation that is not specifically aimed at cyberviolence but that can be applied to instances of these types of offenses. In 2016, a Supreme Court case in Norway (HR-2016-2263-A) resulted in a conviction against a man for assisting in the distribution of a large number of private images of young women that were downloaded without the owners' knowledge or consent.<sup>55</sup> This is noteworthy since it illustrates how online gender-based violence can be prosecuted using instruments of legislation already in existence. In Canada, anyone who knowingly disseminates intimate images of a person without prior consent from that individual is guilty of an indictable offense and could be imprisoned as a result.<sup>56</sup>

Various legal and regulatory provisions have been used to address online VAWG. Importantly, online gender-based violence can be prosecuted using instruments of legislation already in existence. In Kenya, relevant pieces of national legislation that can address online VAWG include the Kenya Information and Communication Act, Cap. 411A (Rev. 2012), which includes language concerning cybercrimes that could result in action against online VAWG, as well as the Data Protection Bill (2012), which is meant to regulate the collection and disclosure of information that is processed through automated measures.<sup>57</sup> Australia's Online Safety Act (2021) requires online platforms to remove dangerous and harmful content within 24 hours to limit reach; it also combats "adult cyber abuse" (menacing, harassing, or harmful content shared to intentionally impact another person's physical or mental health).<sup>58</sup> In Malaysia, the Sexual Offences against Children Act 2017 addresses online violence against children, while the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 prohibits "offensive content" and "improper use of network facilities."<sup>59</sup> However, in many instances, there remains a need for a framework of legislative and legal tools to comprehensively address online VAWG and adequately deliver justice for survivors of this kind of violence.<sup>60</sup> Mapping of the regulatory gaps that exist could assist in strengthening the application of legislation to address online and technology-facilitated VAWG.<sup>61</sup>

Some countries have taken the approach of creating governmental initiatives responsible for ensuring online safety. Australia's Federal Parliament passed Australia's Enhancing Online Safety Act in 2015, which established an independent statutory Office of the eSafety Commissioner.<sup>62</sup> It has been expanded further under the Online Safety Act (2021), which includes four reporting schemes: Adult Cyber Abuse Scheme, Cyberbullying Scheme for children, the Image-Based Abuse scheme, and the Online Content Scheme for illegal and restricted content.<sup>63</sup> More than 50 staff working for the office are trauma trained, and there is a 90 percent success rate for addressing image-based abuse and getting it taken down.<sup>64</sup> This demonstrates the importance of not only adequate resourcing, but ensuring individuals are appropriately trained to facilitate survivor-centered approaches.

Technology-facilitated VAWG also presents the unique issue of changing character as technology develops. As sophisticated technology such as deepfakes becomes more commonplace, we will see many more instances of harassment of women via deepfake pornographic images and videos. The evolving nature of technology will require that legislation and regulatory frameworks be able to address new challenges, including by leaving safeguards against newly emerging technologies. Governments must build considerations for this evolving threat landscape into legislation and work with technology intermediaries to build in provisions such as “safety by design” from the outset.<sup>65</sup>

## Regional mechanisms

Regional human rights frameworks have the potential to help governments address VAWG in digital contexts, uphold human rights and support gender equality. Civil society organizations have utilized regional frameworks to support domestic reform initiatives. For example, in Liberia, the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa – known as the Maputo Protocol – has been used as a tool to advance a ban on female genital mutilation.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, the protocol has been used to train judicial officers to advance women’s rights on the continent, including in Kenya.<sup>67</sup> However, reservations continue to limit the application of the convention.

There are several regional conventions that can assist governments in shaping national responses on issues related to women’s rights, children’s rights, and cybersecurity. In Europe, this includes the Budapest Convention on cybercrime, the Lanzarote Convention on sexual abuse and exploitation of children,<sup>68</sup> and the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.<sup>69</sup> However, many of these conventions have been silent on addressing online violence or that it forms part of gender-based violence. This led the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence to issue General Recommendation No.1 under the Istanbul Convention in October 2021, which outlines the application of convention to “the digital dimension of violence against women”.<sup>70</sup> This demonstrates the potential for regional instruments and agreements to be adaptable in ensuring that online violence is recognized as part of the spectrum of gender-based violence, and provide further guidance in support of national approaches.

In addition to conventions, some regional organizations have developed practical guidance and tools to assist member states and those affected by online violence. For example, the Cybersecurity Program of the Inter-American Committee against Terrorism and the Inter-American Commission of Women of the Organization of American States partnered in the development of a manual on “Online gender-based violence against women and girls”.<sup>71</sup> Notably, the manual is intended to raise awareness of the issue of online gender-based violence among women and girls who use the internet, survivors, staff providing services and those in the cybersecurity sector. It reflects an important collaboration between



regional entities to further address the risks faced by women on the internet and offers an innovative example of the ways that regional entities can support efforts to prevent VAWG in digital contexts.

## **Civil society engagement and communication**

Civil society plays a key role in defining and combating online VAWG in various country contexts. Civil society actors are also at the forefront of efforts to define the scope of the issue while also providing direct services to survivors. The role of civil society varies, from working to influence the drafting of legislation, to using legal pathways to prosecute perpetrators, to providing direct services to the survivors of online gender-based violence. In Colombia, Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa (FLIP) filed a writ of protection on behalf of nine women journalists who had faced online violence by political actors in 2020. FLIP argued that lack of effective oversight by political parties as well as the National Electoral Council (CNE) facilitated the violence against the journalists. As a result, the court decided that the ethic committees of the political parties as well as CNE must combat this kind of violence more proactively.<sup>72</sup> This type of legal advocacy is at the core of work being done by civil society actors to lead to determinations that will serve to protect women and girls from online violence, including recognizing online violence as a threat to both the privacy and safety of women online and pressuring governments to take proactive approaches against online VAWG.

However, CSOs may not always succeed in pushing for reforms that will enable a more gender-responsive approach to legislation around online safety. In the United Kingdom, CSOs organized to put online violence against women on the national agenda through recommendations for the UK government to explicitly address gendered online abuse within the Online Safety Bill. These recommendations included recognition of online VAWG as a specific harm in the Online Safety Bill, inclusion of image-based sexual abuse, specific revenue raised from the Digital Services Tax to fund specialist VAWG sector efforts, and specific recommendations for private sector actors to increase transparent reporting and mitigate potential harm.<sup>73</sup> It remains unclear whether such proposals will find their way into the proposed legislation.

In addition to advocacy work, civil society can also actively engage in supporting capacity-building and narrowing the gender digital divide. In Kenya, organizations such as KITCANet have developed tools to strengthen women's online safety,<sup>74</sup> with several civil society organizations providing workshops and capacity-building programs to prepare electoral candidates and parliamentarians to manage and report online abuse.<sup>75</sup> It is important to note that the onus is not on women to prevent or protect themselves from online violence, however these resources can provide important safeguards in the absence of more stringent legal protections and support women in their ongoing engagement online.

## Data and access to information

In part because online VAWG can manifest in differing ways, reliable data on the extent of this type of VAWG is limited.<sup>76</sup> This means our understanding of the problems and harms caused by VAWG in digital contexts is restricted, and that policy responses are likely to be inadequate. The collection of data related to online or digital violence is not comprehensively gathered and is thus not readily available for policymakers or CSOs to draw on to make the case for legislation and policies, or advocate for funding to provide services to survivors of VAWG.

Addressing the issue of VAWG in digital contexts as well as collecting up-to-date data on it is made difficult by a lack of a common and shared definition. While some data is available, it may only examine one angle of the problem. This is an issue that slows the responses of governments and technology companies in addressing technology-facilitated VAWG.

Lack of access to information about the various aspects of VAWG in digital contexts as well as existing legislation and reporting mechanisms for survivors is another barrier to effectively combating online VAWG. Individuals may not have direct access to the resources that they require to use to report and get assistance with online VAWG, and they may not be proactively assisted by technology companies when they suffer attacks on their platforms. A report by Pollicy included interviews of 850 women in Kenya, many of whom were unaware of the available legislation and reporting mechanisms for those suffering from online violence in that country.<sup>77</sup> This example demonstrates the importance of governments and other stakeholders utilizing public information campaigns, education programs and online tools to communicate the different options available to seek removal of content, as well as options for reporting abuses.

## Funding, resourcing, and in-country capacity

The provision of funding and adequate resourcing are essential to ensure that governments and civil society have the required tools and capacity to prevent and address VAWG in digital contexts. In countries where political commitments are directly tied to government funding, we see clearer efforts to curtail online VAWG. In Norway, the government funds the Norwegian Media Authority (NMA), which facilitates cooperation between the private sector, NGOs, and the government in an effort to make online spaces safer for all.<sup>78</sup> Norway also specifically earmarks funding for the National Criminal Investigation Service to develop a framework against online child abuse.<sup>79</sup> Resource constraints as well as a lack of training on the topic of online VAWG in justice systems cause issues with investigating and collecting evidence for these cases.<sup>80</sup> In Tunisia, government-provided services have made direct efforts to respond to online VAWG through the implementation of helplines for survivors of all types of gendered violence.<sup>81</sup>

The allocation of additional funding resources to address violence in online settings was particularly important during COVID-19. During the pandemic, some countries directed funding to VAWG to address the gendered “shadow pandemic” occurring both online and offline. In Kenya, feminist organizations petitioned the government for a 30 percent allocation of COVID-19 funds to combat gender-based violence.<sup>82</sup> The Government of Canada also committed funds to address gender-based violence during the pandemic, budgeting \$300 million in emergency COVID-19 funding to frontline organizations that work with those suffering from VAWG.<sup>83</sup>

For smaller and developing countries with limited ICT infrastructure, there is often a lack of in-country capacity and resourcing to support efforts to end violence in digital contexts, and legislative frameworks to protect women may be lacking.<sup>84</sup> International donors and countries with experience developing more comprehensive regulatory frameworks around online violence can provide capacity-building programs that enable more countries to fulfill their multilateral commitments on ending VAWG in digital contexts.

## **Communication within government**

Governments often struggle to identify which ministry or government departments should have the lead in coordinating and developing policy to end VAWG in digital contexts. This has resulted in a diverse and ad-hoc approach to the question of online VAWG across country contexts.

Within differing legislative frameworks, VAWG in digital contexts is generally handled in one of three ways: 1) tackled in combination with efforts against domestic violence and sexual harassment, 2) included in a comprehensive law that prohibits VAWG online and offline, or 3) addressed through the adoption of laws on cybercrime or online safety.<sup>85</sup> For instance, in Kenya, CSOs are working to address regulatory gaps to provide a safer space for women and girls online, finding that the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act was inadequately providing protection against online violence.<sup>86</sup>

Consideration of different aspects related to VAWG in digital contexts takes place across a series of UN General Assembly Committees and processes. This provides government ministries and departments with an important opportunity to coordinate across different multilateral processes and share lessons from policy implementation processes and emerging research. Furthermore, engagement in these processes offers an opportunity to close the loop on lessons learned from implementation processes and to engage with civil society to develop more informed multilateral commitments.

## Gender-responsive policies

Structural discrimination, gender inequality, and stereotypes underpin many of the cultural factors that drive VAWG, including in digital contexts. Policy reforms need to be gender-responsive in their approach, considering the needs of women and girls, men and boys, and gender and sexual minorities, and the varying impact that different approaches are likely to have on them. Policies must take into consideration that access to the online space is increasingly important in a digital world and that providing protection against gendered online violence is crucial to ensuring that all people have equal access to the digital space.

Women's participation in the formulation of policy and technology design is a good starting point. While women tend to be overrepresented in discussions about women's rights, they also need to be at the table when multilateral frameworks are being discussed around cybersecurity.<sup>87</sup> Capacity-building initiatives such as the women's cyber fellows program in the UN General Assembly's Open-Ended Working Group on ICTs, for instance, has increased the meaningful engagement of women in those processes. But women's participation alone will not address biases in design, nor discrimination or gender-blindness in legislation and policy. As the highly anticipated Online Safety Bill released by the United Kingdom's government demonstrated, there are glaring oversights when the needs of women and girls are not considered. The bill disappointed many activists because it fell short of naming VAWG on its face.<sup>88</sup> Applying gender analysis and an intersectional lens to policies to prevent and address VAWG in digital contexts is essential. It is particularly important that the voices of traditionally marginalized groups are also considered.

# Blueprint for Domestic Action on Ending VAWG in Digital Contexts

This blueprint offers a roadmap for use by a range of actors to hold governments to account for their multilateral commitments on ending VAWG in digital contexts. It provides a guide for governments, CSOs, and to a limited extent the private sector<sup>89</sup> to inform the development of policy reforms to catalyze action to end VAWG in digital contexts. It draws on some of the strategies developed as part of the Toolkit on “Strengthening Domestic Implementation of Multilateral Human Rights Commitments” to frame practical options for action in a range of areas.<sup>90</sup> It also categorizes some of these approaches according to specific obstacles or opportunities as they relate to strengthening human rights, including greater information sharing, awareness raising, and communication; increased efficacy of existing tools, mechanisms, and resources; adequate funding; improved training and capacity building; and enhanced data and reporting.

The blueprint provides ten overarching strategies for governments to consider in development of more effective and coherent domestic policy on ending VAWG in digital contexts, which takes into consideration the commitments adopted in New York and Geneva. Rather than simply replicating those commitments, it offers a range of more practical options for action, drawing on the examples and experiences of the different country case studies examined as part of this paper. The legend provided in this blueprint identifies how the recommendations link to different obstacles to and opportunities for strengthening human rights.

## LEGEND

Opportunities for and obstacles to human rights implementation



Domestic politics and framing of human rights



Civil society engagement and communication



Regional mechanisms



Justice and accountability



Funding, resourcing, and in-country capacity



Communication within government




Data and access to information



Gender-responsive policies

GOVERNMENT STRATEGIES	PRACTICAL OPTIONS FOR ACTION <sup>91</sup>
<p><b>Address risk factors for violence against women and girls, including through targeted public messaging and information campaigns and early intervention education programs.</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publicly communicate multilateral commitments that have been made on ending VAWG in digital contexts, why they have been made, and how these uphold human rights. This might include translating key commitments in thematic resolutions into national and local languages, and utilizing platforms of public figures and social media influencers to socialize the impact of different types of abuse and why it needs to be addressed, making clear distinctions between free expression and abuse.<sup>92</sup></li> <li>• Develop education policies and early intervention programs on respectful relationships to support long-term attitudinal change and efforts to prevent technology-facilitated gender-based violence.</li> <li>• Ensure that the private sector is represented and engaged in multilateral discussions about ending VAWG, and facilitate engagement in multistakeholder networks that work with technology companies to address online abuse in a cooperative manner.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Enact legislation and develop policies that are appropriately budgeted, funded, gender-responsive, and resourced to prevent and eliminate violence against women and girls in digital contexts, working with the private sector and civil society in their drafting and development.</b></p>   	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify a lead department or entity for action within government or coordination mechanisms to facilitate policy responses (which could take the form of a separate regulatory or enforcement office in government if existing frameworks are inadequate).</li> <li>• Map existing gaps on ending VAWG in digital contexts in legislation, regulations, and policies in order to identify comprehensive reforms to provide justice and accountability for survivors.</li> <li>• Ensure that any legislation proposed or amendment to existing legislation has been developed in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, including civil society, the private sector, and technology intermediaries, and survivors of technology-facilitated violence.</li> <li>• Make sure any legislation to address violence in digital contexts has been assessed for its gender-responsiveness, including through appropriate gender ministries or agencies to assess whether it may have adverse impacts.</li> <li>• Ensure sufficient budgeting for any new legislation or amendments to existing legislation (as well as national action plans — see below) so that adequate resources are provided for implementation, particularly as relates to engaging with victims and survivors to support immediate and timely remedies, as well as enforcement actions.<sup>93</sup></li> </ul>

<p><b>Ensure that relevant regional and national action plans, policies, and programs consider gender-based violence in digital contexts; are budgeted and funded; and are held accountable for implementation.</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrate the issue of technology facilitated gender based abuse into regional and national action plans and policies, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▸ ending VAWG against women and girls;</li> <li>▸ national gender equality strategies; and</li> <li>▸ women, peace, and security.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Integrate gender-responsive approaches into the development of national cybersecurity strategies, as well as policies that include a digital or technology focus, drawing out the links between safety and personal and national security, as well as the differential impacts of the use of technology on women and girls.<sup>94</sup></li> <li>• Support mechanisms that foster women’s digital inclusion and minimize obstacles to their participation in the technology sector.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Regularize data collection, analysis, and research that identifies cultural and policy interventions to end VAWG in digital contexts and draw on this evidence-based data to inform public policy.</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regularly collect national data through surveys (that comply with ethical collection processes and that are representative of the population) to understand perceptions, understandings, impact, and extent of the problem on VAWG in digital contexts, drawing on clear and consistent definitions to capture the data.<sup>95</sup></li> <li>• Encourage technology companies and intermediaries to share anonymized and disaggregated data about content removals, complaints, appeals process and sanctions imposed with research institutions and CSOs to better inform policy responses</li> </ul>
<p><b>Include national and regional capacity-building measures in foreign assistance and development programs to foster women’s inclusion and prevention of VAWG in digital contexts.</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that any cybersecurity capacity-building programs are gender-responsive, integrate an intersectional approach, and include a focus on addressing technology-facilitated gender-based abuse and addressing women’s participation in the technology sector.</li> <li>• Support regional and sub-regional organizations (where applicable) to develop a coherent approach to ending VAWG in digital contexts, consistent with existing multilateral commitments and reflective of national policies among member states.<sup>96</sup></li> <li>• Prioritize funding and capacity-building support as part of development and international assistance programs to projects and women’s rights organizations working to end gender-based violence in digital contexts, including through education, training, and capacity-building programs.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Undertake capacity building and training to support law enforcement, regulatory agencies, health services, and policymakers in responding to instances of VAWG in digital contexts.</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide training on the different ways that VAWG can manifest on digital platforms, including through harassment campaigns, doxing efforts, and unauthorized sharing of intimate images.</li> <li>• Ensure that VAWG is understood as a part of a continuum of harm and violence that can have deleterious effects within both the online and offline spaces.</li> <li>• Working with technology intermediaries, create reporting mechanisms that survivors can use to ensure that incidents can be easily reported in real time, that there are appropriate remedies and justice mechanisms, and that all approaches are survivor-centered and trauma informed.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Engage technology intermediaries to support women’s participation in the ICT sector, integrate diverse perspectives to address biases against marginalized groups, and establish mechanisms to prevent and respond to online abuse.</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish interdepartmental and multisectoral working groups with technology intermediaries, government stakeholders, CSOs, research institutions, and survivors to exchange lessons and information on recent developments, lessons, and reforms required to address online abuse.</li> <li>• Ensure that legislation, regulations, and policies about VAWG in digital contexts are sufficiently broad so that the guidance is “future-proofed” and stays relevant to a changing technological landscape (especially considering evolving threats from artificial intelligence).</li> <li>• Equip regulators to compel action by social media and technology intermediaries to remove harmful and abusive content.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Share policy implementation lessons and emerging research with Permanent Missions in New York and Geneva to develop multilateral positions and inform multistakeholder processes.</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthen collaboration between domestic ministries and regulatory agencies working on ending VAWG in digital contexts, with human rights experts and technology and cybersecurity experts at Permanent Missions in New York and Geneva, to share lessons and challenges on domestic implementation to inform multilateral negotiations.<sup>97</sup></li> <li>• For Permanent Missions, invite and engage with CSOs, researchers, and survivors to understand lived experiences with ending VAWG in digital contexts, and draw on lessons from research that can be used to integrate further reforms and recommendations as part of multilateral negotiating processes.<sup>98</sup></li> <li>• For Permanent Missions, communicate priorities about engaging in multilateral processes to further commitments on ending VAWG, including through social media and online platforms, to make clear how such efforts contribute to upholding human rights and strengthening gender equality.<sup>99</sup></li> </ul>



**Promote the role of and provide financial support to civil society actors to diversify voices in policy consultation and formulation, amplify education campaigns, and inform and support survivors and victims.**



- Government to engage regularly and provide funding support to women’s rights and digitally focused CSOs to engage and support multilateral consultations and ensure a diversity of voices with different experiences (nonurban, indigenous, disabled, marginalized groups, public figures) are represented in policy formulation through regular consultation mechanisms across government departments.<sup>100</sup>

For CSOs:

- Independently track and report on government implementation of non-binding resolutions (e.g., Third Committee, Human Rights Council, and CSW) related to technology-facilitated gender-based violence, including through shadow reports and dialogues.<sup>101</sup>
- Advocate for more inclusive consultation processes that bridge the digital divide, bring together governments and technology intermediaries, and ensure that discussions capture a wider audience in the conversation through use of targeted and diverse terminology (depending on the target constituencies), and including the participation of those with lived experience of the issues, including survivors and victims.<sup>102</sup>

**Safeguard the free expression and meaningful participation of all women, particularly those in politics and journalism, women human rights defenders, and those engaged in public debate, with policy interventions to prevent, address, and mitigate harassment and abuse.**



- For governments, international organizations, technology intermediaries, and CSOs: Work collaboratively to develop more tools and resources that can support women and girls (and those affected by technology-facilitated abuse) to understand their rights and ensure they are informed of their options to seek justice and remedies if victims of violence.
- Working with CSOs, fund and support research that examines the impact and drivers of different types of online and technology-facilitated violence (e.g., gendered disinformation and the role of artificial intelligence in elections).
- With partners, develop training programs that enable and increase women’s participation in public roles (e.g., electoral campaigns, journalists, human rights defenders) by providing women with tools to address and seek remedies for online and technology-facilitated violence.



Scenes from the Opening Session of CSW67 held in the General Assembly Hall at United Nations Headquarters in New York on 6 March 2023. Photo credit: UN Women/Ryan Brown.

# Conclusion

This year's 67<sup>th</sup> session of CSW brought together stakeholders from a range of backgrounds and attempted to bridge the divides between those focused on gender and ending VAWG, and those working in the technology and online space. The result was agreed conclusions that draw together a range of issues related to gender equality, the role of technology, bridging the gender digital divide, and ending VAWG in digital contexts. However, as the UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director UN Women noted at the adoption of the CSW Agreed Conclusions, "success of these Agreed Conclusions lies beyond their finalization today, in how we will collectively take them forward."<sup>103</sup> To support domestic implementation of these commitments, member states need to focus on catalyzing change.

First, this requires an appreciation that understanding of the problem is limited and that it is unclear whether much progress is being made in addressing it. More research on technology-facilitated violence against women is needed. Technology is evolving rapidly, so it is important to have ongoing forms of education that is targeted to different age groups, genders, cultural backgrounds, and other sectors. Civil society and the private sector have an important role here in supporting awareness raising, particularly in terms of seeking remedies and initiating removal of content, but also in guiding the positive use of these platforms. A clearer breakdown of the data is also needed to better understand the scope of the problem and whether present interventions are working.

Second, prevention efforts need to focus on addressing negative gender stereotypes. Online platforms mirror inequality across society and exacerbate it through speed, anonymity, and reach. Legislation and self-regulation mechanisms are important to hold any perpetrator of technology-facilitated violence against women accountable; however, there is a fundamental need to shape behaviors and attitudes.

And finally, there is more scope for member states and organizations to share lessons from and approaches to addressing VAWG in digital contexts. There are some excellent examples of countries that are being creative in developing new and innovative approaches to addressing issues related to online safety, content moderation, and education campaigns. There is an appetite for good practices and measures to hold actors accountable. This blueprint offers a starting point to guide governments and provide a tool for civil society to call for greater accountability in catalyzing change.

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- <sup>5</sup> United Nations General Assembly, *Report of the Secretary-General: Intensification of Efforts to Eliminate All Forms of Violence Against Women and Girls*, UN Doc. A/77/302, 18 August 2022, p. 2. For the purposes of this paper, references to VAWG in digital contexts includes “violence that occurs or is amplified through the use of technology”, which is language that was utilized in the Agreed Conclusions of the 2023 Commission on the Status of Women. Different terms as outlined in the paragraph may be used interchangeably depending on context.
- <sup>6</sup> Discussions are underway within UN Women and the WHO to identify a common definition of “Online and Technology Facilitated Violence Against Women and Girls” to capture the unique spectrum of characteristics of violence in digital contexts and how they may be mobilized in offline settings to commit further abuse. In an effort to fill this gap, a multistakeholder group convened by UN Women proposed terminology and a common definition of “technology-facilitated violence against women”, see UN Women, *Technology-facilitated Violence against Women: Towards a Common Definition*, March 2023, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/Expert-Group-Meeting-report-Technology-facilitated-violence-against-women-en.pdf>
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- <sup>16</sup> See Allison Pytlak and Deborah Brown, *Why Gender Matters in International Cyber Security*, Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and the Association for Progressive Communications, April 2020, <https://reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Publications/gender-cybersecurity.pdf> and Lisa Sharland, Netta Goussac, Emilia Currey, Genevieve Feely and Sarah O’Connor, *System Update: Towards a Women, Peace and Cybersecurity Agenda*, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, Geneva: UNIDIR, 2021, [https://unidir.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/UNIDIR\\_System\\_Update.pdf](https://unidir.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/UNIDIR_System_Update.pdf).
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- <sup>18</sup> UN Human Rights Council resolution 38/5 on *Accelerating efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls: preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in digital contexts*, UN Doc. HRC/RES/38/5, 17 July 2018.
- <sup>19</sup> This is outside of the Universal Periodic Review process or reporting on CEDAW by member states.
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- <sup>28</sup> The Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse was launched by the US Biden-Harris administration in 2022 during the 66<sup>th</sup> session of the CSW. See Cailin Crockett and Rachel Vogelstein, White House Gender Policy Council, “Launching the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse” (blog), March 18, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/gpc/briefing-room/2022/03/18/launching-the-global-partnership-for-action-on-gender-based-online-harassment-and-abuse/>. Current partners as of March 28, 2023 include Australia, Canada, Chile, Denmark, Iceland, Kenya, Mexico, New Zealand, the Republic of South Korea, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. See U.S. Department of State, “2023 Roadmap for the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse”, March 28, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/2023-roadmap-for-the-global-partnership-for-action-on-gender-based-online-harassment-and-abuse/>
- <sup>29</sup> The first resolutions related to ending VAWG in the Human Rights Council and Third Committee were adopted in 2012. See Annex 1 in Rimmer, *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls*, p.16.
- <sup>30</sup> Rimmer, *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls*, p. 6.
- <sup>31</sup> The Third Committee adopts resolutions on “intensification of efforts to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls” every two years, and the Human Rights Council has regularly adopted resolutions on “accelerating efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls.” See Rimmer, *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls*.
- <sup>32</sup> See, for example, United Nations General Assembly, *Report of the Secretary-General — Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls*, UN Doc. A/77/307, 18 August 2022.
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- <sup>34</sup> Resolution 38/5 on “Accelerating efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls: Preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in digital contexts” was facilitated by Canada and adopted by consensus in June 2018.
- <sup>35</sup> See United Nations General Assembly, *Report of the Secretary-General — Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls*.
- <sup>36</sup> This text box draws directly on some of the exact language in the relevant resolutions, however it has been edited for brevity.

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- <sup>38</sup> This text box draws directly on some of the exact language in the relevant resolutions, however it has been edited for brevity. Draft copy on file with authors.
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- <sup>40</sup> See HRC/RES/38/5 (2018).
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- <sup>51</sup> See, for example, A/HRC/38/5 (2018), para. 10(f).
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- <sup>90</sup> Lisa Sharland, Julie Gregory, and Ilhan Dahir, *Toolkit: Strengthening Domestic Implementation of Multilateral Commitment on Human Rights*, Stimson Center, March 2022 (hereafter *Toolkit*).

- <sup>91</sup> All actions are directed at governments, unless otherwise directed in the table.
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- <sup>93</sup> See “Set feasible and budgeted policy commitments to implement in the short and long term” in *Toolkit*.
- <sup>94</sup> See “Mainstream gender and develop gender-responsive policies” in *Toolkit*.
- <sup>95</sup> See “Regularize data collection and analysis to inform public policy” in *Toolkit*.
- <sup>96</sup> See “Meaningfully engage with regional organizations” in *Toolkit*.
- <sup>97</sup> See “Strengthen collaboration between New York and Geneva” in *Toolkit*.
- <sup>98</sup> See “Engage domestic CSOs in work at the UN” in *Toolkit*.
- <sup>99</sup> See “Communicate priorities and processes for upholding human rights” in *Toolkit*.
- <sup>100</sup> See “Promote the role of CSOs in supporting human rights” in *Toolkit*.
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