Societal-level impacts of online violence against women and girls

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Query: Please summarise the evidence on societal level impacts of online violence against women and girls (VAWG)[1], including:

- What do we know about the economic cost of online VAWG?
- How are social norms around violence against women changing as a result of behaviours and discourse online?
- How does online VAWG impact on political and civic spaces?[2]
- What is the evidence on the links between online VAWG, conflict dynamics and violent extremism?

Key takeaways:

Online violence against women and girls (VAWG) has costs to individuals and their families, to businesses, and to the wider society and economy. For example, research[3] in Australia estimated that the cost of online harassment and cyberhate is $3.7 billion (£2.1 billion pounds) in health costs and lost income. However, most studies are based in high-income countries and not gender-disaggregated. Few VAWG studies specifically consider online forms of VAWG.

Harmful online discourse and behaviour both reflects and amplifies the same social norms that underpin other forms of violence against women and girls, often in racist and discriminatory ways.[4] There is an evidence gap in the measurement of the impact on social norms, and the development of tools to measure norms is at a nascent stage. Emerging evidence suggests that harmful online discourse and behaviour is changing social norms that: (1) maintain and tolerate sexual violence; (2) encourage impunity and a lack of social sanctions; and (3) reduce female participation in civic discourse. The impact on social norms is exacerbated by the way in which which technology platforms are designed and who takes the decisions, including use of algorithms, anonymity of online spaces, the role of content moderators, amongst others

Online VAWG has significant consequences for political and civic spaces, threatening women's right to participate in public and political life. Impacts include female politicians stepping down from political office or campaigns,[5] discouraging women from standing for office, causing women journalists and activists to self-censor or step away from reporting and advocacy.[6] Violence targeted at women from marginalised backgrounds, younger women, women with disabilities and from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) community also limits the diversity of voices in public discourse.[7] Gendered disinformation have also been used to "incite moral panics in the targeted populations" and increase "distrust in the ideas of multiculturalism, tolerance, feminism and liberalism".[8] These campaigns form narratives that go beyond attacks on individual women, to attacking the broader rights of women.

There is growing evidence that online VAWG is being committed systematically by the State and others within conflict contexts, fueled by and fueling violent conflict. It is often targeted towards women from marginalised groups, increasing tensions that can lead to violent conflict. As a result of the links between online VAWG and violent conflict, it is now being recommended as a gender-sensitive early warning indicator for conflict. Online VAWG is also likely to pose a barrier to women's participation in peace negotiations, increasing the likelihood that peace treaties will fail to accommodate the needs of women.[9]

Online VAWG is also associated with support for and perpetration of violent extremism. Research undertaken in Indonesia, Bangladesh and the Philippines found that individuals who support VAWG are three times more likely to support violent extremism. Most evidence comes from the Global North and points to the growing risks of violent extremism from the Incel (involuntary celibacy) ideology.

1. What do we know about the economic cost of online VAWG?

Online VAWG, like other forms of VAWG, has financial costs to individuals, their families, businesses, and the wider society and economy. However, despite increasing recognition of the growing prevalence and harm of online VAWG around the world, the evidence base on the economic cost of online VAWG is still limited. Although there are studies which estimate the economic costs of violence against women and girls, none of the costing methodologies reviewed as part of this report explicitly referenced online violence.[10]

> **Victims of cyberstalking have financial costs of more than US$1,200 compared to about US$500 for traditional stalking victims**
>
> **[MATT ET AL., 2012]**

In low- and middle-income countries, most methodologies are based on simple accounting approaches which look at out-of-pocket expenditures after survivors seek health care following an episode of violence, which tends to be either physical or sexual partner violence.[11] Even the most advanced costing studies of violence against women and girls (e.g. in Ghana and South Sudan) focus on economic, psychological, physical and sexual violence, but do not mention online violence.[12] As online and offline forms of VAWG are highly connected and interrelated, and technology is increasingly used by perpetrators to facilitate VAWG, this is a significant omission in existing studies.

There are a number of studies which specifically look at the economic impact of online abuse, harassment and stalking, however these studies are not disaggregated by gender. In addition, costing studies have a focus on high-income countries (United States, United Kingdom and Australia) and therefore even less is known about the costs in low- and middle-income countries. Measuring the economic cost of online VAWG, including integrating online forms of VAWG into broader costing studies on VAWG, will help make a stronger business case to governments, technology companies and other actors for addressing online VAWG.

1.1 Cost to individuals

There are both direct and indirect costs to survivors and their families Direct costs include out-of-pocket costs to take legal advice and action, psychosocial support / counselling, moving expenses and change in email addresses/contact details, while indirect costs include opportunity costs incurred such as loss of income and productivity.[13] There are also likely to be costs to women who witness abuse online and withdraw from these spaces, but no studies could be found which have attempted to measure these costs.

Few recent studies have measured the costs incurred by individuals of online VAWG. One study in the United States estimated the costs to victims of stalking and cyberstalking and found

that both took similar self-protective measures (e.g. time off, changing jobs, avoiding relatives and friends, legal fees). However, cyberstalking involved more self-protective measures and higher out-of-pocket costs with an average dollar value of more than $1,200 for cyberstalking victims compared to around $500 for traditional stalking victims. This study was carried out over ten years ago, and therefore costs are likely to be much higher now. The study does not disaggregate costs by gender, but notes that female victims represent 58% of cyberstalking cases.[14]

There have also been studies which have estimated the costs for women in public life. For example, a survey of women journalists (901 respondents from 125 countries) found that 73% had experienced online violence, with employment and productivity impacts. Women journalists reported making themselves less visible (38%), missing work (11%), leaving their jobs (4%) and even leaving journalism altogether (2%).[15] In Malawi, 76% of women and girls aged 15-45 who had experienced gender-based cyber violence had some for of associated loss of income and 12% were unable to find new employment.[16] Consultations held as part of the Web Foundation's Tech Policy Design Lab highlighted the economic impacts for women in public life: "'logging off' for an extended period of time is simply not an option because online platforms are often closely tied to their ability to generate an income".[17] Online spaces are how journalists connect with sources, track breaking news and share articles, while for politicians it is a platform to share views, connect with constituents and build support. Targeted abuse, harassment and disinformation campaigns can cause economic and professional harm. One participant in the Web Foundation's consultations noted how "the expertise of Black women can be discredited, and their work can be miscited or completely disregarded".[18]

1.2 Cost to businesses

The costs to businesses of online VAWG are likely to be considerable. In the UK, the government's impact assessment estimates the cost to platforms of implementing the Online Safety Bill on innovation at £2.1 billion, with £1.7 billion of costs on content moderators.[19] Government research also notes that smaller online platforms bear higher costs (£45 per user) than larger platforms (25p-45p).[20]

In addition, there are also reputational and litigation costs to businesses. It can cost companies a large sum of money to settle with victims, not to mention the impacts on brand reputation. For example, reports of sexual harassment in the Metaverse have led to it being branded #MeTooVerse, with 61% of adults saying they are concerned about sexual harassment in the metaverse.[21]

There are also costs of staff experiencing abuse and taking time off or being less productive, however this rapid review was unable to find any studies looking at these costs from online VAWG to businesses.

1.3 Costs to nations

Online VAWG also has financial impacts that ripple through society and the economy. The failure to address online VAWG has considerable economic costs for national economies. To date, few studies have looked at the costs to nations. Research conducted in Australia estimates that the cost of online harassment and cyberhate is $3.7 billion (£2.1 billion pounds) in health costs and lost income. [22] It finds that one in three Australian internet

Online harassment and cyberhate is estimated to have cost Australians $3.7 billion dollars [£2.1 billion pounds] in health costs and lost income

[THE AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE, 2019]

users have experienced some form of online harassment or abuse, with one in four of these saying they had seen a medical professional as a result, and one in four saying it had impacted their work. The calculations include only medical and reported income costs and are therefore likely just the tip of the iceberg in terms of costs. The study does not disaggregate data by gender; however the researchers acknowledge that women and young people were more likely to experience online harassment. Despite these limitations, the findings build a powerful case for investment in measures to address online abuse, and suggest that the costs to the global economy, if it were to be measured, would be billions if not trillions. As well as the health and economic costs, there are also additional security and justice costs to the state, such as police responses, investigation and processing cases through the justice system which were not included in the Australia study. To our knowledge, no studies have attempted to calculate these costs.

In Europe, the economic costs of online GBV to individuals and society to EU countries is estimated to be between €49 to €89.3 billion per year. The analysis used data on cyber-harassment and cyber-stalking for young people aged 18-29, and estimated costs include healthcare costs, legal costs, labour market costs and costs associated with a reduced quality of life. Of these, the largest cost is the monetised value of a reduced quality of life, which accounted for over half the overall costs, followed by labour market impacts at around 30%.[23]

2. How are social norms around violence against women changing as a result of behaviours and discourse online?

2.1 Evidence on how different social norms around violence against women are changing due to behaviours and discourse online

Few studies have measured the impact of online discourse and behaviours on social norms[24] around violence against women. In part, the lack of evidence reflects the fact that "the development of norms measures and tools is still nascent",[25] with only 14% of 173 social norms publications discussing measurement.[26] Nevertheless, there are promising tools being developed

within the broader VAWG field that could be applied to the study of online VAWG, including vignettes and survey-methods. Researchers have started to analyse 'big data'[27] as a potential tool to infer the presence of norms. For example, one study looked at a dataset of 10,000 tweets from 10 sub-Saharan African countries to measure gender norms around sexual relationships and partner violence between younger women and older men. Although there were some challenges, including identifying gender from a username, the researchers concluded that big data is a potential tool to explore social norms, but should be part of a larger toolkit to track changes over time.[28]

Despite the lack of rigorous data tracking changes in social norms, evidence is emerging that harmful and abusive online material maintains and even amplifies gendered social norms, as well as other discriminatory norms based on race, sexuality, age and disability amongst others. This section explores the impact on:

(1) Social norms that maintain and tolerate sexual violence, such as sexual consent (e.g. 'She says no, but she means yes') and sexual entitlement (e.g. 'Men are entitled to sex');

(2) Social norms around impunity and lack of social sanctions for abuse (e.g. 'Abuse is just part of being online' and 'Everyone knows there is no point reporting abuse'); and

(3) Social norms around female participation in civil discourse (e.g. 'Women should not be vocal on the internet or in public spaces).

Social norms that maintain and tolerate sexual violence Researchers and activists have expressed growing concern about the normalisation of consensual sexual violence, and in particular choking, through mediums like social media and online pornography. In the UK, a study of 2,002 women aged 18-39 found that 38% had experienced unwanted chocking / strangulation, as part of sex that began as consensual – an estimated 2 million women.[29] Women's rights organisations have observed that "this is likely due to the widespread availability, normalisation and use of extreme pornography", while psychologists who specialise in sex and relationships note that "It's a silent epidemic. People do it because they think it's the norm, but it can be very harmful".[30] The We Can't Consent To This movement[1] has many examples of men being violent in sexual situations without first seeking consent, as well as using the 'sex game gone wrong' defence after murdering their partner.

> **In the UK, 38% of women under 40 (an estimated 2 million women) have experienced unwanted choking / strangulation, as part of sex that began as consensual**
>
> **[BBC / COMRES, 2019]**

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[1] The We Can't Consent to this Movement is a response to the increasing use of 'rough sex' defences to the murder or violent injury of women and girls

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The impact is likely to be greatest during adolescence – a formative period for the emergence of norms and shifts in existing ones.[31] A 2020 Hope Not Hate report[32] highlighted how the online manosphere[2] influences boys' and young men's attitudes and norms. The survey of 2,076 young people aged 16-24 in the UK found that the manosphere is leading to widespread and heavily normalised misogyny, with 50% of young men thinking 'feminism has gone too far'. It gives examples of boys repeating manosphere talking points at school and harassing female teachers. The report notes that the organised men's rights movement, pick-up artists and the so-called manosphere are acting as "slip roads to the far right, appealing to young men feeling emasculated in an age of changing social norms".[33]

Overlapping with concerns about misogynistic discourse and behaviour are concerns about exposure to violent pornography on smartphones and other digital devices. In India, a 2016 survey[34] of 3,500 college students aged 16-21 in Karnataka State found around 30% of male students watch violent porn, viewing an average of 19 rapes per week. Boys begin watching porn at around 9 years. The study estimates that by the time they begin their

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> **[CLIFFORD, 2016]**

college degree course, the male students who consume violent porn have viewed 4,900 rapes. Given the rise in mobile Internet use,[35] it is possible that this figure may have increased since 2016. Disturbingly, the survey found that 76% said that watching rape clips stokes the desire to rape someone, although the study does not measure impact on perpetration. The box below summarises some of the more rigorous evidence (meta-analyses and longitudinal studies) on the impact of violent pornography on attitudes and behaviour around violence against women. It should be noted that few studies note whether the violent pornography is viewed through the Internet, other digital media, or more traditional settings, or the difference in impact.

Rigorous studies on the impact of violent pornography on violence against women

Meta-analyses (systematic research that synthesizes multiple studies) have found that consumption of pornography is associated with attitudes supportive of violence and sexual aggression. One meta-analysis[36] that looked at 22 studies from 7 countries found that pornography consumption was associated with sexual aggression, among males and females. It noted that the association was stronger for verbal than physical sexual aggression, although both were significant. Another meta-analysis[37] found that violent pornography was weakly correlated with sexual aggression but was unable to distinguish between a selection effect and a socialisation effect.[38]

Longitudinal studies (which follow subjects over time with repeated monitoring) also show links to sexually violent attitudes and behaviour later in life. In the United States, a study of adolescents aged 10-15 who watched violent pornography were more than six times more likely to engage in sexually aggressive

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[2] A loose collection of websites, forums, blogs and vlogs concerned with men's issues and masculinity, oriented around an opposition to feminism and, within parts, embrace of extreme misogyny (Hope not Hate, 2020).

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behaviour, whereas exposure to nonviolent pornography did not have a statistically significant impact. The association was similar for boys and girls. The study adjusted for other potentially influential risk factors, such as substance abuse and sexual aggression victimisation. Another longitudinal study of early adolescents (average age of 13.6 years) found that watching violent pornography predicted more frequent perpetration of sexual harassment two years later.[39]

However, it is important to note that although the evidence suggests a link between exposure to violent pornography and sexual violence, the risks are greater for some users than others, and many users are not sexually aggressive. More research is needed on the mediating factors that put some users at higher risk.

Social norms around impunity and absence of social sanctions for abuse. The rapid, dynamic pace of technology and rise of online VAWG has outpaced law reform and legal conceptualisations of online harm,[40] creating a widespread sense of impunity. This practical challenge is compounded by the normalisation of violence in online spaces which many regard as 'just online,' 'not in the real world' and therefore "not really a problem, nor worthy of regulation".[41] For example, a survey by Project deSHAME of 3,257 students aged 13-17 in Denmark, Hungary and the UK found that 1 in 5 (22%) thought receiving comments objectifying or shaming them were "just part of being online", with boys being significantly more likely to agree with this (25%) than girls (17%).[42] In Asia, research found that patriarchal social norms and taboos around sex and sexuality normalise online VAWG and 'drive the scrutiny' to the targets, leading to the stigmatisation of survivors for being online.[43]

Research is also beginning to explore peer group dynamics around social sanctions for online sexual harassment and misogyny. Within adolescent peer groups, there may be a normalisation of online sexual harassment that 'everyone is doing it' or 'it's just banter'. In the Project deSHAME research,[44] the perceived responsibility of bystanders to call out or report online sexual harassment varied by whether it was a close friend who was targeted compared to someone in their wider peer group. Few young people were likely to report online sexual harassment to a social network (39%), police (27%), a helpline (15%) or a teacher (14%), with worries about their reactions and judgements, as well as confidentiality.

The culture of impunity and what is known about the inadequate responses when abuse is reported is undermining any existing norms about reporting violence and emboldening potential perpetrators. Research in seven countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, DRC, Kenya, Mexico, Pakistan and the Philippines) found a widespread culture of victim-blaming and trivialising of online VAWG by police personnel. In Indonesia, research found that police and court officials express 'victim-blaming' attitudes that creates a social atmosphere where survivors are shamed, and perpetrators allowed to act with impunity.[45] The structural and systemic failure to investigate and address online abuse creates a culture of impunity that silences women rather than encourages them to assert their right to live free of violence.[46]

Social norms around female participation in civil discourse. Online violence and misogynistic discourse against women in public life both reflect and can change wider social norms. It can weaken social norms around inclusion and what is acceptable civil discourse.[47] Abuse in shared

online spaces can silence democratically elected voices, weaken trust in democratic institutions and compromise media freedom, leaving people more vulnerable to manipulation from malign actors. It has an impact beyond its direct target; it communicates to society that "women should not participate in public life in any capacity".[48] A study by Plan International[49] of 26,000 girls and young women aged 15-24 from 26 countries found that online abuse creates a 'corrosive' environment that reinforced harmful gender norms and undermined civic and political participation. Online misinformation and disinformation are damaging trust in digital platforms, but also more broadly in government legislators. Girls and young women described having to change their behaviour, teaching themselves to "endlessly cross-check and validate information". One in five young women said they had stopped engaging in politics altogether. Section 3 explores in greater detail the impact of online VAWG on political and civic life.

2.2 How does online discourse and behaviour shape social norms?

It is important to note that online VAWG, and misogynistic discourse more broadly, not only reinforces existing harmful social norms around gender and violence but amplifies them due to the way in which technology platforms are designed, content is monetised, and who takes the decisions, and how people communicate online. The following section explores how some of the features of online platforms and spaces shape social norms around violence against women.

Anonymity and 'freedom' from offline social norms: The anonymity of online spaces allows users to express behaviours, attitudes and opinions without being "bound by regular social norms".[50] One notable example is the /pol/ (political discussion board) on 4chan, an anonymous discussion board which is short for 'Politically Incorrect' and the site's most active board. As well as misogynistic content, it has widespread racist, antisemitic, anti-Muslim and anti-LGBT content. A study[51] of Serbian user discourse on the /pol/ subboard found that the anonymity of users encouraged them to express their 'honest opinions' which might be inappropriate in the offline world. Most of the discourse explicitly framed women in politics "as a mistake", with users arguing that the failure of women as intimate partners means they are unfit for politics as well. Researchers have shown how these anonymous 'fringe' communities have been able to influence content on more mainstream platforms, with a 2017 quantitative analysis[52] finding that 3% of Twitter news links came from the /pol/ board. The board has also been linked to extremist violence in offline or physical spaces.[53]

Algorithmic systems amplifying harmful content and perpetuating gender bias: There are growing concerns about the ways in which algorithms, which are designed to optimise user engagement, can amplify harmful online content and gender bias.[54] By feeding more and more extreme content to a user who has previously viewed or searched for harmful content (and often has not), it can start to change a person's way of seeing the world and how they perceive others

to think and behave.[55] Using experimental YouTube accounts,[3] research in Australia found that YouTube's algorithms (and particularly YouTube shorts) were 'luring' boys and young men into the manosphere. It found that YouTube served misogynistic content - without being prompted - that became more extreme over time, including recommendations for Incel (involuntary celibates), neo-Nazi and white supremacist content as well as hateful and dehumanising attitudes towards women. The algorithm did not distinguish between the underage and adult accounts in terms of content.[56]

Extremity bias in user-generated content: Social media has the potential to alter human behaviour to extremes ('extremity bias') through social rewards (e.g. likes and retweets) and punishments (no likes, negative comments). Researchers have observed that this can act as a form of 'behavioural modification system' which encourages people to express more extreme viewpoints or behave in more extreme ways.[57] Few studies have looked specifically at how this might work in relation to online VAWG, but there are other studies which demonstrate the ways in which user-generated content can lead to extreme behaviour changes. For example, a study of makeup tutorials on Instagram observed that exposure to 'extreme' makeup styles on social media shifted social norms about what is perceived as a 'normal' or 'acceptable' way to look (online and offline). It also observed that social norms move at a faster rate based on people's consumption of social media.[58]

Misogyny influencers and 'toxic parasociality': The role of public figures in shaping social norms is well-established, with social norm approaches promoting the positive power of role models in violence prevention. Typically these include community leaders, religious figures, music or sports stars, but can also be peers who challenge norms on violence against women.[59] However, the rise of misogyny influencers has raised questions about the potential of public figures to influence social norms in a harmful way to women and girls. For example, the influencer Andrew Tate rose to fame (or infamy) after video footage emerged of him hitting a woman with a belt (which was claimed to be consensual). With over 12 billion social media views, Tate was banned from social media platforms, but his videos continue to be widely circulated. Two months after the ban, a clip in which Tate said women should "take some degree of responsibility" to prevent rape had been watched 2.5 million times.[60] Researchers have noted how Tate 'mastered the art of virtual manhood acts' to gain influence and status, and in doing so reproduced harmful norms around gender and violence among his audience of mostly boys and young men. These acts include: (1) presenting masculinity, (2) enforcing hegemonic gender norms, (3) oppressing and sexualising women, and (4) policing other men to adhere to strict masculine norms.[61] Tate's followers have been described as displaying 'toxic parasociality' – an intense, one-sided form of social interaction which often fills the gap of real-life relationships.[62]

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[3] The research used 10 experimental accounts – 4 boys under 18, who followed content at different points along the ideological spectrum, from more mainstream to extreme sources and influencers; 4 young men over 18, who followed content at different points along the ideological spectrum; and 2 blank control accounts that did not deliberately seek out or engage with any particular content, but instead followed the videos offered by Youtube's recommendations.

Manosphere: Online communities within the 'manosphere'[4] are normalising misogyny and masculine grievances for their users, with young people often finding their way to the manosphere through algorithms on YouTube, TikTok and other platforms. Part of the reason these communities are seen as compelling to their followers is a perception that they are challenging mainstream norms, although their ideas around gender and violence are often quite old-fashioned and deeply rooted in discrimination. Sugiera (2021) has observed that the misogynistic attitudes found in the manosphere are "symbolic of structural misogyny and patriarchal systems of socialisation … this type of extremist behaviour is not confined to online spaces but is exacerbated by digital technologies".[63]

Gendered disinformation: Coordinated gendered disinformation weaponise social norms, particularly within target populations such as the manosphere. They can also have a broader impact on social norms by reshaping the terms of civic discourse in a way that harms women.[64] A study[65] of Russian and pro-Russian disinformation campaigns targeting EU and EU aspiring members over a five-year period (2015-2020) concluded that gendered disinformation had been highly effective. The "extremely potent emotionally based content" exploited existing cognitive biases about gender to create fear, confusion and anger. Gendered disinformation campaigns had a strong unified message that Western governance systems corrupt 'traditional' gender norms, and in turn elicited support for alternative non-Western (Russian) values. Further analysis of the ways in which gendered disinformation impacts on political and civic spaces is discussed in Section 3 below.

Role of content moderation in setting and enforcing social norms: Further research is needed to understand how content moderation sets and enforces social norms. Most platforms have content moderators to decide what is appropriate content, typically flagged by users or algorithms. Politicians and internet safety campaigners have recently expressed concern about 'relaxation' of content moderation at Twitter leading to a proliferation of hate speech and online abuse.[66] Content moderation is notoriously secretive; moderators are often forced to sign strict Non-Disclosure Agreements. Arguably, content moderation teams and algorithms replicate and reinforce the biases of the white, male staffers at social media platforms who devise the content moderation strategies.[67] One example of misogynistic bias in content moderation is images of menstrual blood being banned, while graphic scenes of bloody injuries and violent attacks are allowed. Feminist writers have argued that content moderation 'protects' men from periods, breast milk and body hair, while pictures of underage girls are 'objectified' and 'pornified', reflecting wider social norms around men's entitlement to women's bodies – "men who have grown up on sanitized and sexualized images of female bodies".[68]

Underrepresentation of women in Internet governance: There is a notable lack of women making decisions about how technology platforms are designed and operated – i.e. setting the

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[4] The manosphere has been described as "a network of online men's communities against the empowerment of women who promote anti-feminist and sexist beliefs". It consists of four main groups: men's rights activists (MRAs), Men going their own way (MGTOW), pick-up artists (PUAs), and involuntary celibates (Incels). See Aiston (2021) What is the Manosphere and why is it a concern?

norms by which people participate in online spaces. For example, in 2022, men held 3 out of 4 (74.5%) leadership roles in the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) – one of the internet's governance coordination bodies. Men represent 9 in 10 of the community of the Internet Engineering Task Force – the principal body responsible for creating and promoting internet communication standards and protocols.[69] Women's underrepresentation helps create an enabling environment in which online discourse and digital technologies perpetuate gender stereotypes and misogynistic behaviour.

3. How does online VAWG impact on political and civic spaces?

Online VAWG has major consequences for political and civic spaces, threatening women's rights to participate online and offline.[70] In many contexts, online VAWG is perpetrated systematically by the state and armed groups as a method of political oppression, with a view to silencing opposition voices.[71] For example, in Iraq, political and armed forces have deployed 'electronic armies' of bots to implement gendered disinformation campaigns and perpetrate image and video abuse and gendered hate speech against women journalists and activists.[72] As Lawyers for Justice in Libya articulate, "The ability to equally participate in public and political life is arguably one the cornerstones of a thriving democracy. Excluding women from being able to contribute effectively to public and political debate...– both online and offline – is a serious threat to building a sustainable democracy and fostering respect for human rights."[73]

Globally, online violence against female politicians has caused female candidates to withdraw from political campaigns, posing a threat to women's representation in decision-making bodies. In Iraq, gendered hate speech and misogynistic disinformation campaigns, which often centre claims about sexual behaviour and deviancy, have caused female candidates to either step down from campaigns or be asked to step down by parties, afraid of the reputational risk these campaigns bring.[74] In this context, paramilitary groups, those in power and members of the political class are the primary drivers of online VAWG against female candidates, seeking to keep women out of power. This is in part due to perceptions that women candidates are more likely to push for women's rights and gender equality than conservative political parties. This pattern has been repeated globally, with 17.6% of women in politics in Indonesia reporting they had experienced online VAWG, 22.7% of those in Kenya, and 50.2% of those in Colombia.[75] As well as causing female candidates and politicians to step away from political office, online VAWG also deters potential candidates from standing.

In addition, online VAWG is often disproportionately targeted at women politicians from marginalised backgrounds, in an attempt to limit the diversity of voices within public discourse. In India, an investigation into online VAWG found that one out of seven tweets mentioning women politicians was abusive, with Muslim women politicians and women politicians from marginalised castes, at increased risk of online violence.[76] In Australia, 60% of women aged 18-21 and 80% of those over the age of 31, were discouraged from standing for political office

due to how the Prime Minister Julia Gillard had been treated in the media. Women with disabilities, and women from impoverished backgrounds or geographically diverse areas were especially discouraged from standing for political office.[77] Similar trends can be found globally, with Amalia Toledo, a researcher on gender and tech issues in Latin America highlighting that, while women across the political spectrum are at risk of online violence, certain factors exacerbate violence, including being a woman of colour.[78] By discouraging women from marginalised groups from standing for political office, perpetrators of online VAWG, enabled by technology, increase the risk that the needs of these groups will not be represented to decision makers.

Online violence against female journalists has led many to stop reporting or to self-sensor when discussing political issues. In Libya, according to the Defender Center for Human Rights and the Libyan Center for Freedom of Press, two thirds of women journalists surveyed in 2020 left their jobs as a result of online intimidation and harassment.[79] In cases where female journalists have stayed in their jobs, online VAWG has led many to self-censor or use pseudonyms, which can have a negative impact on their professional lives and limit the scope of public discourse.[80] Within Brazil, 80% of female journalists reported that they had changed their behaviour to protect themselves from various forms of online VAWG, with 25% closing their social media accounts for periods of time.[81] Online VAWG is causing women journalists, especially those of colour and members of the LGBTQI+ community, to be forced out of public dialogue, which increasingly takes place online, while perpetrators act with impunity.[82] Documenting and reporting on human rights abuses as well as challenging those in power is key to holding states accountable.

Online violence against women's rights activists also poses a significant threat to their work, limiting their ability to speak out about certain issues, and causing some to step away from activism and advocacy either temporarily or permanently. Within Libya, women activists and human rights defenders are in the top three groups most at risk of online VAWG.[83] This has led women to be more likely to participate in and comment on private all-female online spaces and to avoid mixed online public fora. Survey data from 67 civil society organisations and 90 women activists and human rights defenders from 14 countries across the Arab States found that 70% felt unsafe online, with 60% having experienced online violence in the past year, and 44% having experienced online violence more than once.[84] Of these women, 44% reported that an incident of online violence had moved offline. [85] This high prevalence of online VAWG had practical implications for their activism. Over one in five women activists who experienced online violence deleted or deactivated their accounts in response to the incidents, while one in four started to self-censor. [86] These findings echo those found globally, which suggest women are more likely than men to censor themselves due to the risk of online violence associated with their online political participation.[87] Online VAWG poses a significant threat to civil society's role in holding States to account and raising awareness of women's rights. The National Democratic Institute highlights that online violence is being used as a tactic by illiberal and anti-democratic groups across the world to hamper the participation of women in political and public spaces, and limit the diversity of opinions and agendas that are voiced in public discourse.[88]

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Online violence is also directed at female citizens, sharing their political views online and engaging in elections, presenting a barrier to their political participation. In a global survey of 14,000 girls across 22 countries found that 98% of them used social media and almost 50% reported experiencing online violence for their opinions before they were of voting age.[89] This caused 20% to stop sharing their opinions online. In India, a study found that 28% of women who had experienced online violence intentionally reduced their presence online, withdrawing from online dialogue around issues that are important to them.[90] The International Foundation for Electoral Systems has also documented online violence globally against women in elections, finding that targets include not only activists and politicians, but also voters and electoral management officials.[91]

Online violence impacts adolescent girls, increasing the risk of self-censorship at a young age, which risks continuing into adulthood. Research by Plan International collected insights from 14,071 interviews across 22 countries, in addition to in-depth interviews with 18 young female activists from 16 countries.[92] It found that, as well as causing increased fear and anxiety among young women, online violence has led to self-censoring behaviour among girls as young as 15. For example, a young activist from Peru explained that she had stopped talking about abortion and LGBTQI+ rights because of online violence that she experienced. Similarly, a young activist from Ecuador explained she felt insecure about speaking online about gender-based violence and feminism. Online VAWG not only contributes to stifling the voices of young women in public discourse, it also risks creating a culture whereby those women continue to self-censor later in their lives.

Gendered disinformation campaigns have also been used at the global level to "incite moral panics in the targeted populations" and increase "distrust in the ideas of multiculturalism, tolerance, feminism and liberalism".[93] These campaigns form narratives that go beyond attacks on individual women, to attacking the rights of women and feminism more broadly. These techniques have been used by Russia over the past decade to undermine European political administrations and the hard-won rights for women, LGBTQI+ people and people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. They have also been used by the Kremlin to legitimise Putin as the "defender of the Russian State and People", helping to garner support from the public for his anti-European agenda. These campaigns have involved the development of false narratives around sexual predation by an "Other" against Russian women, who therefore need protection by the Russian State. It also involves conspiracy theories that international institutions such as the United Nations are trying to impose a "liberal gender order", which involves forced homosexuality in Europe. Gendered Disinformation campaigns have also been used by Duerte in the Philippines, Oban in Hungary, Bolsonaro in Brazil and Erdogan in Turkey to attack both female critics and feminism itself.[94] During the 2020 election cycle in the United States of America, the then-Vice President Elect Kamala Harris was subjected to a coordinated disinformation campaign which disseminated false claims about her record and claimed that she had used sex to gain power. Other prominent examples of women who have been subjected to disinformation campaigns

include Svetlana Tikhanovskaya in Belarus, Svitlana Zalishchuk in Ukraine, and Hilary Clinton during the 2016 US presidential campaign.[95]

4. What is the evidence on the links between online VAWG, conflict dynamics and violent extremism?

There is a significant evidence gap on the links between online VAWG, conflict dynamics and violent extremism. However, the evidence that does exist suggests that online VAWG, conflict and violent extremism reinforce each other: violent conflict and community tensions are likely to lead to higher rates of online VAWG, while online VAWG is often used as a method of oppression that may fuel conflict dynamics and violent extremism.

There is growing evidence that online VAWG is being committed systematically by the state and others within conflict contexts. Research with women activists and human rights defenders across the Arab states found that 70.4% of women activists in Iraq had experienced online violence in the last year, with 62% in Yemen, 60.3% in Libya and 54.2% in Palestine.[96] A 2021 survey found that one third of Palestinian women speaking out against the systematic oppression, discrimination and alleged war crimes committed by Israeli authorities experienced sexual violence and harassment online, along with attempts to suppress their voices through social media account bans.[97] In Iraq, political and armed forces have deployed 'electronic armies' of bots to implement gendered disinformation campaigns and perpetrate image and video abuse and gendered hate speech against women journalists and activists who voice dissent.[98] In Libya, online VAWG perpetrated by State actors has been used to "purposefully inflict severe mental pain or suffering"[99], causing Lawyers for Justice in Libya to argue that in some cases it amounts to psychological torture.[100] In Iraq and Libya, incidences of tyre slashings, kidnapping and murder, have been documented as physical manifestations of VAWG that were preceded by and linked to online VAWG, suggesting a direct link between online VAWG in conflict settings and further conflict-related violence against women. [101]

State-sponsored VAWG has the potential to limit women's participation in public life, including activism, journalism and politics, posing a threat to the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies. In 2020, a survey conducted with women in Somalia found that 68% of respondents had experienced online abuse more than once and for 43%, this led them to self-censor in order to avoid online VAWG.[102] Instances of online violence by the State and affiliated armed groups in Iraq are expected to discourage women from participating in the public sphere, negatively impacting policy-making by entrenching inequality and increasing grievances that drive conflict.[103] Further, by reducing the routes for people to peacefully challenge the State without fear of violence, online VAWG increases the risk of individuals turning to violent methods of dissent, which could fuel violent conflict.[104] Additionally, the impact of online violence on reducing the participation of women in politics more broadly suggests that online violence is likely to pose a barrier to women's participation in peace negotiations. Any factor that reduces women's

participation in peace negotiations increases the likelihood that peace treaties will fail to accommodate the needs of women or further equitable political rights, which increases the risk of an unstable peace.[105]

Online violence is often targeted towards women from minority groups, fueled by and fueling tensions between communities that can lead to violent conflict. According to the UN, in many countries more than three quarters of the survivors of online hate are members of minority groups, with female members of these groups disproportionately targeted.[106] In Nigeria, online hate speech has been used to boost group-identity at the expense of the out-group members, posing a risk to peace, with the potential to fuel inter-group violence.[107] The Nigerian Stability and Reconciliation Programme found that 45% of hate speech messages in Nigeria called for discrimination, 38% called for war, and 10% called for the killing of others.[108] These trends are being witnessed globally, with Sinhala Buddhist ultranationalist groups in Sri Lanka linked to a rise in online gendered hate speech towards women from religious and ethnic minorities.[109] In many cultures women are considered symbolic representatives of group identity, causing an attack against a woman to be perceived as an attack on an entire community.[110] Therefore, online violence against women from minority groups can be expected to increase the risk of physical attacks against these groups, as well as retaliatory attacks from the targeted minority.

Online VAWG could be used as a gender-sensitive early warning indicator for conflict. Guidance on gender-sensitive indicators for early warning of violence and conflict from 2021 has included 'the number of reported incidents of gender-based violence (GBV)' as a gender-sensitive early warning indicator of conflict, reflecting that levels of GBV tends to rise during times of crisis and so can signal rising insecurity.[111] This guidance also highlights that VAWG can indicate growing political instability when used as a strategy for suppressing women's participation in public spaces. Further, it includes 'the number of threats against/ incidents of intimidation of/attacks on women in public roles' as a gender-sensitive early warning indicator of conflict. This is because attacks and threats against women in public life can indicate a growing intolerance of individuals not behaving in accordance to strict gender roles or coming from minority groups. This guidance recognises the importance of considering how these forms of violence can be perpetrated online when using these indicators to predict violent conflict and suggests social media monitoring as a potential method of evidence collection.

Online VAWG linked to extreme misogynistic views is associated with support for violent extremism. Emerging evidence around the links between online VAWG and violent extremism is primarily situated in the Global North and points to the Incel (involuntary celibacy) ideology. This ideology stems from online anti-woman communities known as the "manosphere". It holds, among other positions, the supremacist view that all men are entitled to sex with women without consent. The Centre for Countering Digital Hate's Quant Lab conducted an in-depth study into the most influential and largest Incel forum in 2022. It found that over an 18-month period, examining almost 1.2 million posts, there had been a 59% increase in mentions of mass attacks, widespread approval of sexual violence against women, with rape mentioned on average every

29 minutes, and evidence that 9 out of 10 individuals who posted supported pedophilia.[112] One in five posts on the forum were also racist, antisemitic or homophobic. These groups are also often linked to racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists (REMVE) groups.[113] Research undertaken in Indonesia, Bangladesh and the Philippines between 2018 and 2019 found that individuals who support VAWG are three times more likely to support violent extremism. According to this research, support for VAWG predicted support for violent extremism more than any other factor. [114]

Online VAWG linked to extreme misogynistic views has led to multiple instances of violent extremism. Research into Incel groups documents evidence that some individuals go beyond threats of violent extremism. Since 2012, there has been an increase in terrorist incidents linked to Incel ideology.[115] In North America more than 53 people have been killed and hundreds injured in Incel-related attacks, leading Canada's Security Intelligence Service to label Inceldom a form of violent extremism in 2019.[116] There is also evidence that the Incel ideology is spreading beyond North America, with a man linked to Incel groups jailed in the UK in 2020 for ownership of explosive substances following evidence that he intended to carry out a massacre.[117] There was no evidence found related to Incel groups beyond North America and the UK, however given the global nature of the internet, the risk of this ideology spreading globally is high. The Christchurch Call to Eliminate Violent Extremism Online has highlighted the need to deepen the evidence base on the links between online misogyny as a vector for violent extremism.[118]

Annex 1: Methodology

This rapid research query has been conducted as systematically as possible, under tight time constraints.

Step 1: Search – Literature was identified primarily through existing evidence reviews on the impacts and implications of online VAWG. In addition, searches were conducted using Google and relevant electronic databases using key search terms including but not restricted to: online VAWG, online GBV, online violence against women, digital gender based violence, gendered impacts, social norms, cost, women in politics, women journalists, women in elections, women voters, women activists, women's rights activists, gendered disinformation, manosphere, algorithm, gendered hate speech, online sexual harassment, online abuse, conflict dynamics, state oppression, silencing opposition, community tensions, violent extremism, terrorism, extremism, incel, public discourse.

Step 2: Inclusion - To be eligible for inclusion in this rapid mapping, reports had to fulfil the following criteria:

- **Focus:** Research or case studies demonstrating or predicting the economic costs of online VAWG, and the impact of online VAWG on social norms, political and civic space, conflict dynamics and violence extremism.
- **Time period:** From January 2010 to present.
- **Language:** English.
- **Publication status:** Publicly available – in almost all cases published online
- **Geographic focus:** Global
- **Format:** Research reports, evaluation reports, peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, rapid assessments, grey literature
- **Study design:** All study types, designs, and methodologies including primary and secondary studies with clear methodologies to enable an assessment of quality

Endnotes

[1] Please use the broad definition offered by the UN Special Rapporteur on VAWG. This states that Online VAWG is gender-based violence that is perpetrated through electronic communication and the internet: "Online violence against women therefore extends to any act of gender-based violence against women that is committed, assisted or aggravated in part or fully by the use of ICT, such as mobile phones and smartphones, the internet, social media platforms or email, against a woman because she is a woman, or affects women disproportionately."

[2] Examples of issues to consider - how does it impact who is at the table (digital gender divide issues, women not putting themselves forward for public positions etc), who is able to speak once they are there, what are they allowed to talk about (push back on raising gender equality issues in the online space), and whose voices and issues are amplified (e.g. Russian disinfo tactics)?

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[24] Social norms are shared beliefs about what is appropriate behaviour in a group. They are typically understood as informal rules that people in a group confirm to because they believe that: (a) most other people conform to the rules (i.e. it is typical behaviour); and (b) most other people believe they *ought* to conform to it (i.e. it is appropriate behaviour). These shared beliefs in turn shape the actual behaviour of groups of individuals. (Alexander-Scott, M. Bell, E. and Holden, J. (2016) *DFID Guidance Note: Shifting Social Norms to Tackle Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)*. London: VAWG Helpdesk)

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