HOW AI IS EXACERBATING TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

everyday sexism project

UN WOMEN

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ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS
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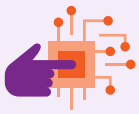
KEY CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

Technology-facilitated violence against women and girls (TF VAWG)	"Any act that is committed, assisted, aggravated or amplified by the use of information communication technologies or other digital tools, that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological, social, political, or economic harm, or other infringements of rights and freedoms."[1]
 **Artificial intelligence (AI)**	**The ability of a digital computer or computer-controlled robot to perform tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings.**[2] • Machine learning (ML) models are AI programs that ingest information (data) to identify patterns and make decisions on unseen data sets; these include open-source and closed models. • Multi-modal models refer to AI that ingests a combination of inputs (e.g., text, audio, image), allowing the learning intelligence to infer a more accurate result.
Generative AI	**"AI technology trained on large amounts of data that can create or generate content, including images, text, video, audio, code, etc., in response to 'prompts' or directives given."**[3] • Types of generative AI are classified according to the type of input they are trained on and the type of output they generate. ChatGPT and Bard are examples of generative AI text models because they create text outputs. Other kinds of generative AI include image, voice and video.
Misinformation/disinformation	While misinformation refers to the accidental spread of inaccurate information, disinformation is not only inaccurate but intends to deceive and is spread to cause serious harm.[4]
Deepfakes	**Deepfakes are synthetic media that have been digitally manipulated to deceive, while appearing truthful or authentic, often by replacing one person's likeness convincingly with that of another.** • *Interactive* deepfakes can impersonate real people and have been used to commit fraud and cause reputational damage, including in the creation of fake pornographic material.[5] • *Compositional* deepfakes can be fabricated by synthesizing misinformation and disinformation across several media types that corroborate one another, facilitating coordinated disinformation campaigns. For example, a compositional deepfake may comprise several AI-generated 'news' stories, along with photographs, video and social media commentary, gaining traction online and influencing the narratives of real-world events even if the information is false.

INTRODUCTION

Rapid technological change continues to create new risks and contexts for violence against women and girls (VAWG), with new forms of violence and abuse emerging at alarming rates leading to serious harm, both online and offline.

Though comparable global data on technology-facilitated violence against women (TF VAWG) remains limited, **available data shows that this phenomenon is intensifying**, with studies indicating that its prevalence ranges from 16 to 58 per cent.

One global study found that

38% of women

have personal experiences of online violence.

85% of women

who are online having witnessed digital violence against other women.[6]

One Libya-based study of thousands of social media profiles and comments found that 76 per cent of comments were misogynistic.[7] Violence in online spaces may transition offline in various ways – including coercive control, surveillance, stalking, physical violence or even femicide.

The unique features of digital spaces that create an enabling context for VAWG include the scale, speed and ease of communication and anonymity, combined with automation, affordability and impunity. Despite efforts to improve gender balance, technology also remains a male-dominated industry. **The absence of women's perspectives in the sector impacts the gender-responsiveness and inclusivity of technological design**, and the rapid growth of artificial intelligence (AI) is exacerbating this issue.

In recent years, new risks and opportunities related to rapid technological change have taken greater prominence. In particular, the recent growth of generative AI – through deep-learning and algorithmic models that create information, voice, text and image – is transforming the way people access information and services. AI is reshaping services, work and governance. AI tools are now often used in recruitment, healthcare, financial services, criminal justice and many other sectors. Yet the absence of meaningful regulation or **safety by design** is contributing to and exacerbating existing gender bias and discrimination.[8] Gender bias in the systems that practitioners in our healthcare or justice systems rely upon or in the systems that financial institutions use to determine which people can receive credit, and how much, has profound impacts on women's short and long-term psychological, economic and health security. It can also reinforce and amplify gender stereotypes and harmful social norms that are at the root of misogyny and discrimination and gendered violence. A society in which women are less able than men to access financial independence or careers is also one in which they are more likely to be trapped in abusive situations.

Of 138 countries assessed, only 24 referenced gender in a national AI strategy and just 18 included substantive gender-responsive provisions – risking inequality being "baked in" to future systems.

In low-income countries, only 21 per cent of women are connected to the Internet – locking millions out of AI benefits.

Only 30 per cent of the world's AI professionals are women; women comprise 28.2 per cent of STEM workers overall. Fewer women designing systems means products that ignore women's realities limiting the extent to which technologies are designed to be gender-responsive, inclusive of and safe for women.

Sources: *UNESCO (2024) Women for Ethical AI: outlook study on artificial intelligence and gender; ITU (2023) Facts and Figures 2023. The Gender Digital Divide; World Economic Forum (2024) Global Gender Gap Report.*

Of particular concern is how AI is creating new forms of TF VAWG and exacerbating existing forms, as well as reinforcing and intensifying the misogynist norms that justify, excuse and normalize common forms of TF VAWG.[9] **Such trends** are not only impacting the perpetration of VAWG in digital contexts but **are perpetuating VAWG across various settings, including offline, resulting in significant harm to women and girls in all spheres of their lives**.[10] For instance, the ubiquity of sexual aggression and gendered violence in pornography that is now widely and freely available online, has been linked to the normalization of intimate partner violence and sexual violence against women and girls.[11] The rapid growth of AI "girlfriend" applications – many of which have been downloaded hundreds of millions of times – have created new avenues for normalizing extreme and regressive ideas about sexual violence, control and male dominance.[12] These technologies often promote a male-supremacist model of relationships and reinforce harmful gender hierarchies, blurring the lines between intimacy, exploitation and abuse. Their popularity, particularly among younger and socially isolated users, raises serious concerns about the shaping of attitudes towards consent, relationships and women's autonomy.[13]

KEY ISSUES

AI is exacerbating and intensifying existing forms of TF VAWG largely because the scale and undetectability of AI can create more widespread and significant harm. Like all forms of online violence, the anonymity of perpetrators impedes access to justice for victims, while inadequate laws and regulatory frameworks uphold a culture of impunity for perpetrators.[14] Bots add additional layers of anonymity and undetectability, which further complicate accountability and access to justice.

While much of the most popular AI is open-source and therefore able to be scrutinized, it is, for this same reason, also liable to be misused and mutated for malicious intent.[15] As such, many legal, social, regulatory, technical and ethical challenges arise due to the rapidly changing and unpredictable nature of AI, necessitating different approaches to those taken to offline forms of VAWG. Moreover, it is not only AI tools that have been designed for malicious intent or that are deliberately misused that are exacerbating violence against women and girls, but **often mainstream AI tools can also have unintended consequences in amplifying bias or intensifying violence and abuse**. For instance, mainstream AI tools can be used to generate disinformation campaigns or to create and disseminate hateful content and harassment campaigns automatically and at scale. Unintended model *hallucinations*,[16] which occur as a result of gender bias in training data, can lead to fabricated information that is factually incorrect but appears accurate. Alternatively, it can result in 'synthetic histories' – realistic false narratives about individuals that can be weaponized by malicious actors. Furthermore, **AI may provide dangerous advice or unhelpful responses in sensitive or emergency situations** which could be devastating for women or girls seeking support or assistance in situations of violence or abuse.

Notably with regard to generative AI, legal and ethical frameworks for the use of AI are wrestling with how to respond to the emerging reality that harm done to a person's likeness online can have the same – sometimes worse – impacts than harm done to them directly, online or offline.[17]

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The following table sets out how AI is exacerbating common forms of technology-facilitated VAWG.

Common forms of online or TF VAWG	How AI is exacerbating harms
 Disinformation, misinformation, cyberharassment and hate speech What this looks like: • **Spreading rumours and slander to discredit or damage a woman's character** • **Repeated behaviour using textual or graphic content to frighten and undermine self-esteem** • **Sexist or hateful language designed to attack or humiliate** Disinformation and misinformation are among the most common forms of TF VAWG. This form of abuse was experienced or witnessed by over **65% of women** in a study covering 51 countries.[18]	• The sheer volume of media created using ever more advanced generative AI is obscuring the distinction between genuine, good information and 'fakeries'.[19] **AI bots can be used to increase the volume of malicious, targeted disinformation** previously disseminated more slowly by human trolls. • **Bots also contribute to the automated, large-scale and often-unintended promulgation of misinformation**. For example, analysis of input image data sets used to train AI models revealed that more women than men are disproportionately represented in caregiving or domestic roles, such as cooking and teaching, leading to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes.[20] • **Much AI is also gendered through design and associated with feminine characteristics** – consider the default voices used by Siri (Apple) and Alexa (Amazon), which are typically female. **This reinforces patriarchal norms by positioning women as subservient**, compliant or service-oriented digital assistants. Microsoft's Tay chatbot further demonstrated how quickly AI systems can absorb and replicate misogynistic, racist and homophobic language through interaction with users.[21] • **The 'manosphere' is reinforced as machine-learning models target misogynistic content** (including deepfake pornography) to users prone to engaging with it, increasing their exposure to gendered hateful content. Moreover, guardrail tools – themselves often AI models – are increasingly missing problematic content because of the euphemisms used in the manosphere to malign women and girls.[22]
 Sextortion, scamming and impersonation What this looks like: • **Creating a false online presence in someone else's name.** • **Intercepting communications and data using social media and/or location tracking.** • **Blackmailing a person using sexualized images of them** Impersonation and hacking and stalking experienced or witnessed by **63% of women** in a study covering 51 countries.[23]	• **AI-enhanced impersonations facilitate hacking of women's online accounts**, leading to scams and other damaging consequences for their offline lives. • Additionally, **information obtained online using AI can be used to threaten and blackmail women in their offline lives**, silencing their expression and restricting their political participation. This is **especially the case for women journalists, politicians, human rights defenders and activists**.[24] • By linking scattered data points, **AI can create comprehensive profiles of individuals, even if they have taken steps to anonymize themselves online**. This disproportionately harms women and girls who are trying to protect their identities from stalkers, abusers or harassers, particularly in cases of intimate partner violence or harassment after leaving abusive relationships.[25] • **Known as 'catfishing', the practice of impersonation on dating sites is able to be scaled and rendered more realistic as AI bots adapt to simulate human conversations**. This can lure women and girls into revealing private information or into meeting up offline, which can lead to incidents of physical and sexual abuse.[26]

Common forms of online or TF VAWG	How AI is exacerbating harms
 Image-based abuse What this looks like: • **Sharing private images or video with malicious intent** **Video- and image-based abuse were experienced or witnessed by** **57% of women** **in a study covering 51 countries.[27]**	• AI-generated deepfakes (which can take the form of other media, as well as often being image-based) constitute a particularly troubling form of online image-based abuse. **Interactive deepfakes operate on social networking platforms and dating sites**, impersonating humans and beginning conversations with women and girls who do not know they are interacting with a bot. Depictions of women's[28] and girls'[29] avatars being raped underline the connection between violence perpetrated in a virtual universe and real-world violence. Deepfake pornography makes up 98 per cent of all deepfake videos online and 99 per cent of deepfake pornographic content features women as the primary subjects.[30] The total number of deepfake videos online in 2023 was 550 per cent higher than in 2019.[31] This has profound implications for women's and girls' privacy and leaves them open to numerous human rights breaches. • The ubiquity of **AI-generated deepfake pornographic images is especially pernicious because a person's likeness, once disseminated, can exist as an unknown number of replicas**, often stored on privately-owned devices, making them difficult to locate and remove.[32] • The availability of user-friendly, free online tools for creating deepfake images and videos is resulting in an unprecedented amount of such content.[33] Technical expertise is no longer needed for a user to create a deepfake image or video and publish it online. One in every three deepfake tools allow users to create deepfake pornography and it costs $0.[34] In this context, **the rise of 'sextortion' using deepfakes** – in which non-consensual, fabricated images are shared widely on pornographic sites to harass women – **is a growing concern**.[35] • **Deepfake sexual imagery has become a powerful tool of gendered political violence**, used to silence, humiliate and discredit women in public life. An alarmingly high proportion of women politicians, journalists and other public figures have been targeted, including an estimated **one in six congresswomen in the U.S.**,[36] for example, who have appeared in non-consensual deepfake sexual content. These attacks are not only violations of individual dignity and safety but also constitute a **democratic threat**, as they deter women from participating in public and political life, distort civic discourse, and erode the inclusivity and legitimacy of democratic institutions. Public debates often frame deepfakes as a *future* risk to democracy due to potential misinformation – overlooking that for women, this threat is already present and profoundly gendered.
 Doxing and violent threats What this looks like: • **Threats of physical harm delivered through online channels** • **Posting personal, real-world information to perpetuate violence** **50+ per cent** **experienced or witnessed one of these threat tactics, according to a study covering 51 countries.[37]**	• **The non-consensual sharing online of personal information** (such as a person's home address) **is made easier through AI**, which can quickly scrape vast quantities of information for personal data. • Furthermore, Natural Language Processing (NLP) tools can identify vulnerable or controversial content in women's posts (such as discussing sexual harassment or calling out misogyny), making them easier targets for doxing campaigns. In some cases, **AI is even used to craft personalized, threatening messages using a victim's own words and data**, escalating psychological abuse.[38]

THE WAY FORWARD

Laws and frameworks

Laws must keep pace with rapid developments in generative AI to ensure access to justice for victims of TF VAWG. **Widespread preventative measures, in the form of regulatory frameworks, will help to shift the onus for staying safe online** from the individual to the owners of platforms where much of the abuse takes place. Laws and frameworks should also reflect the different approaches required in handling acute (intense, short-term) and more chronic cases.[39] Frameworks should focus on safety by design and include requirements for AI tools to undergo checks to ensure they do not reproduce bias before release, rather than focusing on reporting by victims after damage has already been done. Furthermore, frameworks of accountability should be developed, including checks to ensure that AI tools once embedded in sectors like recruitment or criminal justice are regularly audited to ensure unintended consequences have not arisen as a result of their implementation.

When considering regulation for AI, it is crucial to treat it like any other sector that poses risks to public safety. Just as industries such as food, toys or automobiles are regulated at the point of consumer use to ensure safety and accountability, AI systems and tools should also be subject to similar standards and oversight before they are made publicly accessible. This approach would help prevent harm at scale rather than relying upon responses once harm has already occurred.

Where models are learning from large data sets, consideration should be given to the provenance and quality of those data sets, with transparency and sampling as one way to test for potential bias. Other considerations might include pathways to civil remedies for survivors and ringfenced statutory funding for support services for survivors.

Examples of legal frameworks adapting to emerging trends include **the UK Online Safety Act**, passed in 2023, **which made it illegal to share explicit images or videos that have been digitally manipulated**. However, the Act does not prevent the creation of pornographic deep fakes or sharing them where intent to cause distress cannot be proved.[40] Furthermore, the **European Union's AI Act promotes transparency by requiring the creators of deepfakes to inform the public about the artificial nature of their work** and providers of general-purpose AI tools to tag AI-generated content and identify manipulations.[41] The Australian Government is also looking to introduce legislation to strengthen laws targeting the creation and non-consensual dissemination of sexually explicit material online and material created or altered using generative AI, including deepfakes.[42]

Laws and frameworks to tackle TF VAWG should take note of the intersectional nature of this form of abuse, with women from marginalized communities often at greater risk and often least likely to be protected by legislation. (For example, the definition of intimate images in some deepfake abuse legislation takes a white, western lens that leaves women who might experience harm from other perceived definitions of intimacy unprotected.)

Sector-wide cooperation

Actions by content distributors and generators play an important role. **Content distributors should develop better methods of reporting**, including more robust reporting mechanisms that identify falsified content. Proactive solutions for identifying falsified content, including auto-checking for watermarks, would also help with content identification. By encouraging and supporting independent initiatives to monitor and address coordinated and automated harassment campaigns, content generators can also play an important preventative role. Swift responses to reports of harmful content remain crucial, as does collaboration with other generators and distributors, to share good practices and identify malicious accounts. All responses should ensure that those harmed are not removed from the public sphere or forced to act.[43]

There needs to be a greater emphasis on prevention through proactive accountability for platforms. The onus should not rest solely on victim reporting. Platforms should have transparent processes for

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how victim reports are received, assessed and acted upon. However, **platforms should also adopt a more preventative approach by proactively monitoring, identifying and intervening** to halt the spread of harassment campaigns or harmful content as well as ensuring there is greater cooperation between platforms to share good practices, trace malicious accounts and address repeat offenders.

Moreover, accountability must extend beyond social media platforms to the **broader ecosystem of digital intermediaries** that enable and profit from abusive technologies – including search engines, app stores, web hosting services and payment-providers – all of which play a significant role in amplifying the reach and the monetization of technology-facilitated violence and abuse. Ensuring that all responses prioritize keeping those targeted **visible and safe within the public sphere**, rather than forcing them to withdraw or self-censor is also key.

The role of AI in prevention and response

AI and digital tools are increasingly being used for positive social change, and to prevent or respond to VAWG, although greater sophistication is needed to keep pace with the evolution of tools used to inflict harm.

Chatbots, which are accessible 24/7, **can supply users with succinct, location-specific information about reporting sexual violence**, preserving forensic evidence and accessing support services. Secondly, **AI can be used to 'scrape' websites for TF VAWG**. In this vein, AI 'bodyguards' are being used in France to filter out online hate and abuse towards sports stars.[44] Researchers are also developing 'machine learning' algorithms to detect, intervene and prevent TF VAWG.[45] Thirdly, the 'Internet of things' presents opportunities for rapid response and prevention. Wearable devices that detect physiological and auditory signs of distress through heart rate and galvanic skin response mechanisms can alert emergency services to situations where women and girls are at risk.[46]

'Data feminist' machine-learning models can identify cases of femicide reported in the news media, to help counteract the absence of official data while reducing the labour required to obtain more accurate prevalence data on VAWG.[47] There is also a growing movement for 'feminist AI', which seeks to make visible the gendered power imbalances reflected in traditional and generative AI, and calls for elevating the voices and perspectives of marginalized groups in the design of AI. It also calls for making visible and addressing the inherent gender bias in data that underpins AI and drives gendered outcomes.[48]

Finally, ongoing global cooperation remains crucial to managing and pre-empting potential harms in the dynamic world of AI. The recent establishment of the UN High-Level Advisory Body on AI and the normative advances represented by the UN Global Digital Compact hold promise as coordinated efforts to mitigate the ongoing threats posed by TF VAWG. Ensuring a gender perspective and a focus on ending TF VAWG in this work will be crucial. Finally, the Council of Europe has developed an important new instrument: the **Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law**,[49] which establishes common principles like accountability, transparency and non-discrimination for AI systems, and mandates procedural safeguards. For instance, it obliges States to ensure that AI systems throughout their lifecycle respect human rights, democracy and the rule of law, mandates risk and impact assessments, and allows for moratoria or bans on applications posing unacceptable harms.

AI FOR PREVENTION: EMERGING PRACTICES

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- **Sophia Chatbot: is a 24/7 digital ally for anyone experiencing domestic violence**. Sophia is an AI-powered chatbot that offers a safe and accessible pathway for individuals impacted by domestic violence to: learn about the signs of abuse and their rights and to seek assistance without leaving a digital trace. It allows survivors to upload potential evidence of abuse in a "**digital safe**", walks them through their legal options and rights, and refers them to relevant resources such as helplines and shelters to contact.

- **OlimpIA is an AI Chat bot that provides legal advice and emotional support to survivors of digital sexual violence**. Developed by survivors of online sexual violence in Mexico and Ecuador who collaborated with psychologists, lawyers and other experts for months to train the chatbot with specific input and a language that imitates a kind human voice. OlimpIA was recognized as one of the 50 most innovative projects at the **Artificial Intelligence Action Summit** in Paris in February 2025.

- **Stop non-consensual intimate image-use (NCII): Stop NCII allows anyone concerned about an image being in the hands of someone who could misuse it to generate a hash (digital fingerprint) of the image, which prevents anyone from sharing it**. StopNCII also allows a pathway for anyone who has had an intimate image shared without their consent to have it removed from the participating platforms. The survivor uploads their content by creating a case, which is then shared with the platform and allows the survivor to track progress on their case.

- **AI Ally: An AI-powered dashboard that uses natural language-processing to detect and document online harassment in real-time on platforms like Discord**. The tool automatically flags inappropriate messages, helps users categorize harassment types, preserve evidence and connect with support resources while maintaining control over their responses. Co-designed with over 230 young women and gender-diverse individuals in Australia, AI Ally addresses the finding that 44 per cent regularly experience gendered harassment online and find formal reporting processes challenging.[50]

- **KEMI ChatBot: An AI-powered WhatsApp chatbot** launched by **Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative**, co-created with survivors Benin, Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal and Togo **to support survivors of technology-facilitated gender-based violence across West and Central Africa**. Operating in multiple local languages, KEMI guides users through confidential conversations about online abuse, provides practical advice and referrals to psychosocial and legal resources, without logging identifiable data. Co-created with survivors through 41 workshops across Benin, Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal and Togo, the chatbot addresses findings that 92 per cent of women in the region experienced TF GBV, yet fewer than half reported incidents due to stigma, fear of blame and mistrust of existing support systems.

UN Women's AI School:

UN Women's Asia-Pacific Regional Office AI school is a regional movement that has engaged 2,000+ participants including civil society, youth leaders, UN staff and policymakers across Asia and the Pacific to **learn, build and govern safe**, gender-inclusive AI. Through a shared core curriculum on AI foundations, responsible use and prompt craft – plus weekly **Expert Talks** and hands-on **Innovation Labs** – participants turn ideas into policy briefs, tools and data sets that serve communities across the region. A 24/7 **Companion GPT** supports practice and catch-up, and the **Grand Challenge** spotlights stand-out projects. All toolkits and templates are open for replication across Asia and the Pacific. Replicating the model developed by UN Women's Asia Pacific office, UN Women has expanded the AI school, through the support of the EU-funded **ACT programme**, to equip women's rights organizations and activists with the skills to use AI to end VAWG. With a cohort of over 150 participants, the AI school covers responsible AI, exposing the many risks and biases within AI and how to be in the driving seat of shaping this technology and making it work for women.

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UN WOMEN EXISTS TO ADVANCE WOMEN'S RIGHTS, GENDER EQUALITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS.

As the lead UN entity on gender equality and secretariat of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, we shift laws, institutions, social behaviors and services to close the gender gap and build an equal world for all women and girls. Our partnerships with governments, women's movements and the private sector coupled with our coordination of the broader United Nations translate progress into lasting changes. We make strides forward for women and girls in four areas: leadership, economic empowerment, freedom from violence, and women, peace and security as well as humanitarian action.

UN Women keeps the rights of women and girls at the centre of global progress – always, everywhere. Because gender equality is not just what we do. It is who we are.

UN WOMEN

FOR ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS

220 East 42nd Street
New York, New York 10017, USA

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