Online violence: real life impacts on women and girls in humanitarian settings
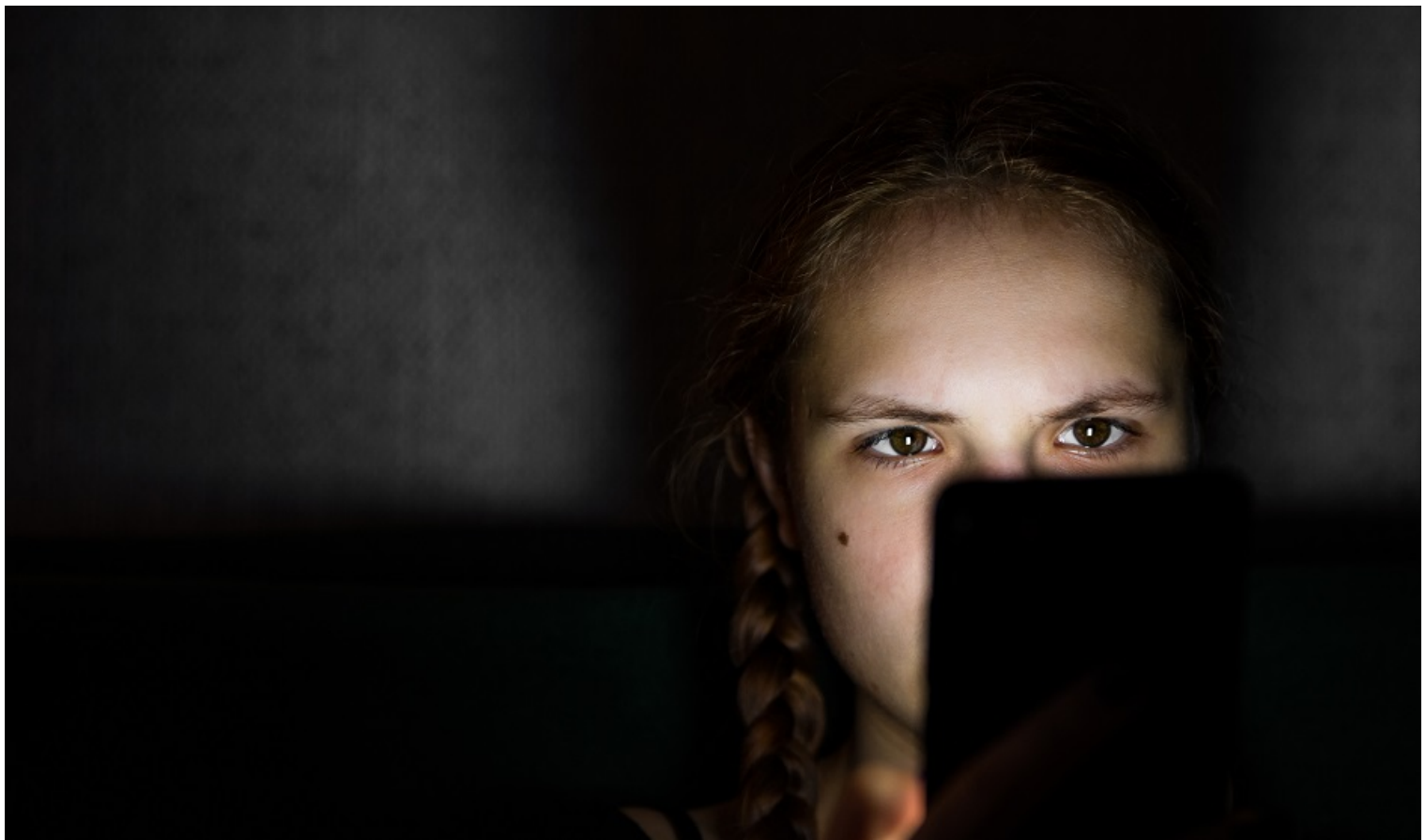
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Online violence is not contained by the digital sphere – it is killing women and adolescent girls in offline spaces. It seeps into their daily lives, infecting their psychological and physical well-being and resulting in paranoia, shame, isolation, and even leading to their deaths through honor killing, murder, and suicide.

In this post, part of a new series on Cybersecurity and data protection in humanitarian action, Megan O'Brien, from the International Rescue Committee's Violence Prevention and Response Unit, summarizes her discussions with GBV experts and her review of the existing literature to better understand the impact online violence and technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) has on women and girls in emergency and conflict settings.

ICRC Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog · *Online violence: real life impacts on women and girls in humanitarian settings*

Patriarchal structures aren't reserved for physical spaces; they have also shaped the digital world, where online violence and abuse reaches women and girls globally and toxic masculinity norms and practices are amplified. TFGBV is rooted in the same *structural gender inequality, cultural and social norms,*

and patterns of harmful masculinities that cause GBV. TFGBV aims to *shame, intimidate, and humiliate* women and girls, and it takes shape in an increasing number of ways in humanitarian settings, including, but not limited to, image-based abuse, extortion, and trafficking.

Online violence can extend into physical spaces, just as physical violence can extend online. *TFGBV can be defined* as "any act of gender-based violence against women that is committed, assisted or aggravated in part or fully by the use of information communication technologies (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".

Access to technology and the internet is a right. Technology and social media can be incredibly useful – even lifesaving – when providing access to safe and reliable information, and it is critical to ensure women and girls have equal access and safe experiences within these digital spaces.

How does the online violence women and adolescent girls experience move, from digital to physical spaces?

There are significant gaps in data and underreporting of TFGBV due, in part, to a lack of standardized definitions and data collection methodologies, societal stigma and access to relevant services. Still, *one study* found that 38% of women have personally experienced TFGBV and 85% of women who are online have witnessed digital violence against other women. Forced or accidental witnessing of violence online, whether threats, images, or videos, can have an impact on the viewer's emotional wellbeing. It can humiliate, intimidate, and isolate. It can also socialize and normalize TFGBV.

TFGBV is pervasive, and can be ongoing, anonymous, and perpetrated by one or more persons. It is part of the continuum *"of multiple, recurring and interrelated forms of gender-based violence"* that occurs throughout women's lives, and it can accelerate and amplify this continuum by increasing exposure to and expanding types of possible violence. Furthermore, TFGBV is part of a cycle, moving to offline spaces with economical, psychological and physical consequences.

Cyberbullying often coincides with in-person bullying, with "*adolescent girls experiencing a higher risk of exposure than boys*". Such bullying can result in *feeling upset and ashamed, losing interest in daily activities, losing sleep, having physical symptoms like stomachaches and headaches, and in extreme cases lead to suicide.* In humanitarian settings, cyberbullying can also target affected communities, fueling tensions and exacerbating distress and isolation.

Image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) is common across humanitarian contexts. Perpetrators, both known and unknown to women and girls, obtain, share or threaten to share images that are deemed "inappropriate" with a woman or adolescent girls' family. IBSA can then be used to blackmail the survivors to stay in a relationship, share additional images, or force them into sexual acts both online and offline. Women and adolescent girls also experience receiving unwanted messaging, phone calls, and sexually explicit images. These acts of violence originate with technology, but *inevitably shift into the physical world, resulting in shame, paranoia, stalking, rape, and in some cases honor killing.* And in humanitarian settings, IBSA is not just about harassment or coercion. It can also expose survivors to a range of other context- and conflict-specific violations, such as forced displacement, false confessions, violent reprisals by different actors or armed groups, and murder.

Digital technologies and social media have been utilized for trafficking in humanitarian settings to *deceive, recruit, groom, transport and maintain control over women and girls.* Trafficking is a vector for many other types of harms, including forced prostitution and sexual slavery. *In humanitarian settings, many internet users – particularly children, adolescent girls and young women – are especially vulnerable* to traffickers on social media. This is, in part, due to the digital gender divide, varying digital literacy levels, a lack of exposure to safe online practices, pervasive mis- and disinformation, and an amplified need for acceptance and friendship.

GBV service providers have also witnessed women be targeted by phishing attacks which have resulted in *extortion, identity theft and economic damages* for those manipulated into paying money for resettlement opportunities, cash assistance services, and dignity kits.

Offline violence can also move into digital spaces. ICTs have been used to perpetrate intimate partner violence, allowing abusers to monitor, stalk and control the women they are or have been in relationships with.

How is the experience of adolescent girls different from their adult counterparts?

This online to offline cycle of GBV can take shape in many ways, with young women and adolescent girls experiencing a greater risk compared to their adult counterparts due to *their age, gender identity and higher level of ICT use. Fifty-eight percent* of adolescent girls and young women have experienced some form of online harassment, and *most report their first experience between the ages of 14 and 16.*

Additionally, an adolescent's *brain doesn't finish developing and maturing until their mid-to-late 20s.* During this critical development *girls face increased risks, isolation, and limited opportunities* that can detrimentally impact their development. Online violence against adolescent girls in humanitarian settings can compound these effects, especially when their social support networks are disrupted and services may be inaccessible, resulting in a survivor not having access to essential care and severe negative impacts on their long-term mental health.

There are also cultural and social norms that create risks and barriers to tech and social media for young women and adolescent girls. In September 2022, Sudan honor killings had already doubled compared to the prior year because *young women were being attacked by their male relatives for appearing to talk to men on mobile phones.* On July 7, 2023, a man in Jordan was charged with murder for *repeatedly stabbing his 15-year-old daughter when he saw her talking on her cell phone.*

The distinct risks adolescent girls face when accessing ICTs and digital spaces require focused protection strategies, such as online safety and digital literacy education, promoting responsible digital behavior, and fostering open and safe communication. However, it's important to balance these concerns without stifling independence. Additionally, many service providers in humanitarian contexts – especially those working in less digitally connected spaces – are not always equipped to provide GBV case management services and psychosocial support to survivors who have experienced TFGBV or to adequately address the humanitarian needs arising from these incidents. This gap and lack of relevant services can exacerbate the impacts survivors face.

What impact does online violence ultimately have on women and girls?

The impacts of TFGBV are *just as severe, harmful and life-threatening as offline violence* and can act as a vector for other types of GBV. These impacts can be amplified via the continual sharing and permanence of digital content, the anonymity of perpetrators, social stigmatization, and context-specific risks. The inevitable online to offline cycle of violence compounds these impacts, and women and girls who experience this have *severe, long-term psychological impacts*; they can feel consumed, physically unsafe, and isolated. They may experience low self-esteem, mental and emotional stress, paranoia, depression and anxiety, which can even lead to suicide.

TFGBV also limits women and girls' empowerment, freedom of expression, development, and full enjoyment of human rights. And in some humanitarian contexts, and especially for displaced persons on the move, the only way to stay safe, maintain contact with families, and have access to vital information (such as how to apply for asylum or how to access services) is through digital platforms. When women and girls are forced to silence themselves by deactivating or deleting their social media accounts, turning off their phones, or not posting their opinions and thoughts in an effort to protect themselves, this has detrimental impacts on their overall safety. These impacts widen the digital gender gap, increase risks, and reduce women's voices in essential spaces, bolstering existing structures that distribute power in favor of men.

The victim-blaming and social stigma that accompanies TFGBV can also have devastating consequences. Patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes wrongfully suggest online violence against women and girls should be expected as it is a part of digital life, and by being active digital participants they are "asking for it". As a result of this stigma and shame, survivors may be less likely to seek services and support. Additionally, familial and social reactions to TFGBV, especially IBSA and sexual harassment, have led to honor-based violence and the killing of women and girls.

What gaps and opportunities exist to respond to and prevent these cycles of violence?

There are significant gaps when it comes to the prevention of, and response to, TFGBV.

There is a lack of:

- fair and equitable access to ICTs and the internet for women and girls
- tools and support resources for women, girls and service providers
- GBV specialists equipped with the necessary tools to adequately address the humanitarian needs arising from incidents of TFGBV
- capacity and accessibility of GBV case management services
- focused response strategies for adolescent girls
- knowledge and evidence of what works in preventing TFGBV
- standardized definitions and data methodologies
- legal frameworks, reporting mechanisms and access to justice

However, with each of these gaps there are opportunities to mitigate, respond to and prevent TFGBV, such as:

- Intentionally including women, girls, and local women-led and women's rights organizations in discussions about their experience, needs and ways forward
- Prioritizing digital literacy and online safety curriculums for women and girls, empowering them to safely use ICTs and the internet in whatever way they choose
- Destigmatizing TFGBV and supporting help-seeking behavior through tools and resources
- Developing updated guidance on how to manage TFGBV using evidence-based prevention and response frameworks
- Strengthening the capacity of service providers to support survivors of TFGBV
- Developing and mainstreaming focused prevention strategies for adolescent girls
- *Recognizing TFGBV as a human rights violation and implementing laws and regulations to criminalize, investigate and prosecute digital violence*
- Raising awareness of existing legal protections and reporting pathways for survivors through both social media and law enforcement

How do we move forward?

Online violence against women and girls is violence against women and girls. It is a cycle that moves between digital and physical worlds and is a human rights violation that denies women and girls a respected life free of violence. It impacts their long-term emotional and physical wellbeing, and in some cases results in their deaths.

Understanding the full experience and impact of TFGBV in humanitarian settings is an essential step in supporting women and girls as they heal and realize their full potential as digital citizens. Without effective integration of TFGBV into GBV prevention, mitigation, and response strategies and without adequately understanding the humanitarian consequences of TFGBV, support for survivors and their ability to access the care they need will fall short.

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