

Women's rights and democracy: combatting stereotypes, disinformation, violence in the digital age



Executive summary

The **expansion of digital technologies**, including artificial intelligence (AI), presents both transformative opportunities and profound challenges for the advancement of women's rights. While these innovations have revolutionised access to education, economic empowerment, and global advocacy—amplifying feminist movements and breaking down structural barriers—they have also exacerbated gendered risks, from algorithmic bias and online harassment to the weaponisation of deepfake technology. The same tools that enable progress can equally entrench inequality. By embedding rights-based frameworks into AI, platform policies, and data systems, digital innovation can be transformed into a tool for empowerment.

Harmful **gender stereotypes** can limit personal expression, perpetuate inequalities, and create detrimental pressures—such as discouraging boys from showing vulnerability or girls from pursuing careers in STEM fields. Challenging such stereotypes is essential for fostering a more inclusive society where people are free to define their identities and aspirations without constraint. Education, media representation, and open conversations play key roles in dismantling harmful generalisations and promoting genuine equality.

The **shrinking of civil space** and the rise of anti-gender backlash represent a growing threat to democracy, human rights, and gender equality worldwide.

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), or gender-based cyber violence, is part of the continuum of violence against women, which stems from and sustains multiple forms of offline violence. The global prevalence of TFGBV is high, with younger women being more likely to experience such abuse firsthand. The most prevalent forms of online violence against women and girls are misinformation and defamation; cyber-harassment; hate speech; impersonation; non-consensual intimate image abuse; hacking and stalking and doxing. One of the biggest challenges to tackling cyber violence is underreporting, which is due either to fear of reprisals or to lack of awareness about the reporting options available.

Hate speech is amplified by social media platforms, with misogyny being the most prevalent form of online hate across platforms. According to a survey of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)¹, the vast majority of online hate—measured by volume of posts—targets women. Posts directed at women contain the highest levels of offensive language and denigration. Women also face higher levels of incitement to violence.

Women in public life are especially vulnerable to online hate and violence. Female politicians, journalists, and human rights defenders experience significantly higher levels of online abuse than their male counterparts.

Online hate targeting women is exacerbated by **manosphere and incel communities online**. A recent study by the Centre for Countering Digital Hate, which analysed over a million posts from the world's leading incel forum over eighteen months, found that more than one in five posts contain misogynistic language.

Beyond these persistent challenges of prevalence and underreporting, the **rapid rise of AI** is introducing additional risks. Deepfakes have emerged as one of the most alarming developments. According to a report by Security Hero, between 2019 and 2023 the number of deepfake videos increased by 550%, with 98% of all deepfakes being pornographic. Of those targeted in deepfake pornography, 99% are women.²

In today's technology-driven world, the demand for people skilled in information and communication technologies (ICT) is growing. Yet, women remain underrepresented in this critical sector, as they are across

¹ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2023). *Online Content Moderation – Current challenges in detecting hate speech*, https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2023-online-content-moderation_en.pdf.

² Security Hero (2023), *2023 State of Deepfakes*, <https://www.securityhero.io/state-of-deepfakes/>.

other fields **in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)**. In the EU, only 1 in 3 STEM graduates and 1 in 5 ICT specialists are women.³ In 2024, 80.5% of ICT specialists in the EU were men and 19.5% were women.⁴ Women also account for just 24% of self-employed professionals in technical professions, such as science, engineering and ICT.⁵ According to the International Telecommunication Union's data, the global Internet use gender gap stands at 8%.⁶ This showcases the persistent digital gender divide between men and women, which restricts women's and girls' access to information, learning, and employment opportunities.

Although these numbers provide snapshots of specific aspects of gender equality in the digital world, it is important to note that the **lack of comprehensive and accurate data** collection leads to fragmented information. This underscores the need for robust data collection of women's experiences of technology-facilitated gender-based violence, hate speech and discrimination.

1. Women and Girls in the Digital World: Combatting Stereotypes

Gender stereotypes, as defined by EIGE⁷, are preconceived ideas whereby females and males are arbitrarily assigned characteristics and roles determined and limited by their gender. A stereotype is harmful when it limits people's capacity to 'develop their personal abilities, pursue their professional careers and make choices about their lives and life plans.'⁸

The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) does not explicitly define the term 'gender stereotypes'. Nevertheless, its preamble and various provisions address this topic, in light of Article 3 of the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women⁹. The CEDAW Committee is currently working on the elaboration of a General Recommendation on the impact of gender stereotypes on the enjoyment of the rights enshrined in the Convention¹⁰.

Two Eurobarometer surveys from 2024 show that most EU citizens reject harmful gender stereotypes, though attitudes vary significantly between Member States.¹¹

³ European Commission (April 2025), *Women in Digital*, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/women-digital>.

⁴ Eurostat (April 2025), *ICT specialists in employment*, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=ICT_specialists_in_employment.

⁵ European Commission (June 2025), *Women's participation in STEM studies and careers*, <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan/Women-participation-in-STEM>.

⁶ ITU (November 2023), *Bridging the gender divide*, <https://www.itu.int/en/mediacentre/backgrounders/Pages/bridging-the-gender-divide.aspx>.

⁷ EIGE, <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/thesaurus/terms/1223>.

⁸ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Gender stereotypes and Stereotyping and women's rights* (September 2014), https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Gender_stereotyping.pdf.

⁹ 'All appropriate measures shall be taken to educate public opinion and to direct national aspiration towards the eradication of prejudice and the abolition of customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority of women.'

¹⁰ United Nations Human Rights, office of the High Commissioner (17 February 2025), *Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women Holds Half-Day General Discussion on Gender Stereotypes, discrimination-against-women-holds*.

¹¹ Zamfir, I. (February 2026). *EU action against harmful gender stereotypes*, European Parliament Research Service, <https://eprs.in.ep.europa.eu/filerep/upload/EPRS-AaG-782654-EU-action-gender-stereotypes-FINAL.pdf>, citing Eurobarometer SP545 on gender stereotypes and Flash Eurobarometer FL544 on violence against women.

Gender Inequalities in the Media Sector

Women and girls remain both misrepresented and under-represented in the media at two levels: the ways in which women are represented in content, and the involvement of women in the production of the media. Media content continues to **portray women mainly in traditional, sexualised, or supporting roles**, while men are far more often shown as primary decision-makers and executive agents. In this context, media refers to both 'old' media (prints, television, radio) and 'new' media (internet, apps, social media). Media can be understood as a powerful force in shaping and transmitting cultural values and beliefs, while also having the capacity to perpetuate gender stereotypes and contribute to bias, discrimination, and even violence.¹²

While social media offers benefits such as community-building and activism, it also reflects societal power structures and amplifies harmful behaviours through algorithms and echo chambers. Legal measures at EU level like the Digital Services Act or the General Data Protection Regulation aim to improve safety, but gaps remain.

The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), which is the largest and longest-running research on gender in the world's news media, monitored gender parity in media across more than 90 countries in eight global regions, analysing around 30,000 news items. In its 2025 report¹³, it found that **women account for only one quarter of those seen or heard in the news**, despite representing half of the world's population.

The 2025 GMMP findings show continued **progress toward gender parity among news reporters**, with women making up around 40% or more of reporters in print, television, and radio, and slightly higher levels in online news. However, women are still most often featured as sources in ordinary roles that require no specialized knowledge, offering popular opinions or eyewitness accounts rather than recognised expertise. Despite long-term professional advances, **media recognition of women's expertise remains limited**, and the proportion of women who are the focus of news stories has not changed in the past five years. Furthermore, historical patterns show that women reporters are more likely than men to cover female news subjects. Achieving gender balance in news media is important to highlight social issues. For example, gender-based violence (GBV) affects half of the global population but appears in fewer than 2% of news articles worldwide. Increasing gender parity in reporting could help raise coverage of GBV. Notably, women journalists already report half of the stories on technology-facilitated GBV.¹⁴

Gender inequalities persist across **all media sectors, including advertising, film, visual media, and video games**. Studies show that men continue to dominate speaking roles in films, while women are often portrayed in sexualised or caregiving roles, with little progress over time. Similarly, despite gender balance among gamers, video games largely feature male protagonists and sexualised female characters, a pattern linked to the under-representation of women in media and game production.¹⁵ The Council of Europe also highlights¹⁶ that women remain under-represented across media industries, especially in senior and decision-making roles, despite often entering journalism in equal or greater numbers than men, and continue to face significant pay gaps. In the film industry, structural barriers and biased market practices limit

¹² McCracken, K. et al. (January 2018), *Gender Equality in the Media Sector*, Study commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/596839/IPOL_STU\(2018\)596839_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/596839/IPOL_STU(2018)596839_EN.pdf).

¹³ Global Media Monitoring Project (December 2025), *Who makes the news? Progress on a plateau. 30-year Findings on Change in Gender Equality In and Through the World News*. Published by WACC in Toronto, Canada, <https://whomakesthenews.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/GMMP2025-GlobalReport.pdf>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ European Institute for Gender Equality (2020), *Beijing + 25: the fifth review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the EU Member States*, Area J – Women and the media: harmful stereotypes persist, https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/20190452_mh0419050enn_pdf.pdf.

¹⁶ Council of Europe (n.d), *Women in Media and artificial intelligence*, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality/women-in-media-and-artificial-intelligence>.

women's advancement: although women make up nearly half of film school graduates, fewer than one in four works as directors. Studies also show that greater gender equality behind the camera leads to more balanced and nuanced representation of women on screen, with Nordic countries cited as positive examples. Similar inequalities persist in the video game industry, where women represent only around 10% of designers, face widespread harassment, and remain marginalised in production—contributing to sexist portrayals, a male-dominated gaming culture, and reduced innovation.¹⁷

According to the European Audiovisual Observatory, women remain under-represented in **European film production**. Overall, parity across all film production roles would only be achieved around 2047.¹⁸ Similarly, a study of the European Women's Audiovisual Network on gender inequality in the European film industry highlights the persistent marginalisation of female directors.¹⁹

Social Media Impact on Women and Girls

In terms of **social media impacts on women and girls**, a study commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs (2023)²⁰ highlights multiple harms and challenges, including negative body image, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, (self) censorship, online harassment, and targeted hate campaigns. Girls are particularly affected, showing higher rates of depressive symptoms, eating disorders, and exposure to misogyny and violent pornography. Measuring these harms is challenging due to their complex, often subconscious nature and limited transparency from social media platforms.

Social media reinforces gendered norms by exposing young women to heavily edited images that promote **unrealistic beauty standards**, leading to heightened self-scrutiny and 'nano-surveillance' of their bodies. This pressure is amplified by targeted ads for cosmetic procedures and beauty products, contributing to phenomena like 'Snapchat Dysmorphia', highlighting the growing gap between how young women see themselves through 'beauty filters' and how they perceive their natural, unedited faces and bodies. Research shows that exaggerated, gender-stereotypical selfies often receive more positive feedback, further reinforcing ideals of appearance. Overall, rather than liberating users from restrictive norms, social media tends to perpetuate traditional gender expectations through its design and algorithms.²¹

Drawing on objectification, social comparison, and self-discrepancy theories, an article by Merino, M. et al. (2024)²² shows how societal and media-driven beauty ideals encourage self-objectification, upward comparisons, and gaps between actual and ideal selves. Social media affects **body image** differently across genders. Women are disproportionately targeted with thinness-focused ideals and socialised to prioritise appearance, making them especially vulnerable to body dissatisfaction and related mental health issues.

¹⁷ Council of Europe (n.d.). *Women in Media and artificial intelligence*, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality/women-in-media-and-artificial-intelligence>.

¹⁸ Schneeberger, A. (September 2025). *Female professionals in European film production 2015 - 2024 figures. A publication of the European Audiovisual Observatory*, <https://rm.coe.int/female-professionals-in-european-film-production-2015-2024-figures-sep/4880286d54>.

¹⁹ European Women's Audiovisual Network (2015), *Where are the Women Directors? Report on gender equality for directors in the European film industry (2006-2013)*, <https://www.ewawomen.com/research/>.

²⁰ Park, K. et al. (March 2023), *The impact of the use of social media on women and girls*, Study commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/743341/IPOL_STU\(2023\)743341_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/743341/IPOL_STU(2023)743341_EN.pdf).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Merino, M. et al. (12 July 2024), *Body Perceptions and Psychological Well-Being: A Review of the Impact of Social Media and Physical Measurements on Self-Esteem and Mental Health with a Focus on Body Image Satisfaction and Its Relationship with Cultural and Gender Factors*, Healthcare (Basel). 12(14):1396. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11276240/#sec11-healthcare-12-01396>.

However, research increasingly shows that men are also affected, as social media promotes ideals of muscularity and leanness that can lead to body dissatisfaction and extreme fitness or dietary behaviours. This highlights the need for a gender-inclusive approach to body image concerns. Conversely, emerging body-positive and diversity-focused movements show that social media can also promote healthier body image and psychological well-being, highlighting the need for digital literacy, inclusive online spaces, and more balanced social media use.²³

Advertising remains a powerful driver of sexist stereotypes, particularly in its portrayal of women. While representations have evolved over time, women are still frequently depicted as young, slim, hyper-sexualised, and valued primarily for their appearance. Such portrayals objectify and infantilise women and reinforce narrow gender roles. Because gender identities are socially constructed, repeated exposure to these messages, especially among children, normalises harmful stereotypes that limit personal and professional development, perpetuate discrimination, and can contribute to violence against women. Continued exposure also desensitises audiences to sexism, with research showing that men in particular are less likely to recognise or acknowledge the problem.²⁴

A study on TFGBV against feminist Instagram influencers in Italy shows that **challenging patriarchal norms** may trigger widespread online abuse that harms mental health, silences activists, and weakens feminist solidarity.²⁵

The Manosphere: Anti-Feminist and Male Supremacist Groups Online

Much online misogyny originates in the **manosphere**, a loose network of anti-feminist and male-supremacist online communities enabled by social media. It includes groups such as Pick-Up Artists, MGTOWs (Men Going Their Own Way), Traditional Conservatives (TradCons), and incels (Involuntary Celibates), all sharing the belief that feminism has created a gynocentric society that disadvantages men. Such groups promote ideas of male entitlement, alpha masculinity, and women's subordination, often drawing on misused evolutionary psychology. They promote the idea that feminism has created a liberal world order biased against men. Therefore, men must reclaim power through alpha masculinity and the subordination of women, linking these ideologies to rising online abuse and misogyny. Unlike earlier men's rights movements focused on legal or mental health issues, contemporary male-supremacist networks emphasise sexual entitlement, evolutionary justifications for inequality, and targeted harassment of women. Influencers on platforms like YouTube and TikTok amplify these messages under the guise of self-improvement, often acting as gateways to more extreme misogynistic ideologies.²⁶

Their tactics go beyond verbal abuse, including stalking, doxing, hacking, sextortion, deepfakes, and coordinated attacks, often using nude images to shame and control women rather than for sexual gratification. Emerging technologies, like tagging in non-consensual photos, Airdrop harassment²⁷, and

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See, inter alia, Giomi, E. et al (2013), *Women and Girls as Subjects of Media's Attention and Advertisement Campaigns: The Situation in Europe, Best Practices and Legislations*, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/>; European Parliament Research Service (March 2018). *Sexism in Advertising – At a Glance*, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2018/>.

²⁵ Esposito, E. and Semenzin, S. (2025), *Women's activism online in Italy: Claiming spaces, navigating misogyny, reimagining feminisms*, *European Journal of Communication*, 40(4), 373-390, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231251349009>.

²⁶ Park, K. et al. (March 2023). *The impact of the use of social media on women and girls*. Study commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/743341/IPOL_STU\(2023\)743341_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/743341/IPOL_STU(2023)743341_EN.pdf).

²⁷ AirDrop harassment refers to the misuse of Apple's AirDrop feature to send unwanted, inappropriate, or offensive content (often explicit images) to nearby people without their consent.

deepfakes, further facilitate sexual objectification, shaming, and intimidation of women, creating a persistent and evolving online threat.²⁸

A report by the **Center for Countering Digital Hate's Quant Lab** analysed over a million posts on a major incel forum over 18 months, revealing the community as highly dangerous to women, other men, and children. The study found a core group of angry, extreme members whose interactions escalate harmful behaviours, with only 5.8% of thread content being positive and violent rhetoric increasing 59% over a year. The report highlights how incel communities normalize extreme behaviours and pose growing radicalization risks if left unchecked.²⁹

Over 20% of **posts on incel forums** contain misogynist, racist, or homophobic language, highlighting hate and dehumanization as central to the community. Specifically, 16% of posts use misogynist slurs. Sexual violence against women is a frequent topic, with the word 'rape' appearing every 29 minutes across 18,530 posts by 1,583 users—39% of the dataset.³⁰

2. Women on the Frontlines of Democracy

Shrinking Civic Space and Anti-Gender Backlash

The UN Guidance Note on Protection and Promotion of Civic Space defines civic space as the environment that enables individuals and groups to participate meaningfully in political, economic, social, and cultural life of their society. A functioning civic space allows civil society actors to express themselves freely and safely, engage in dialogue with authorities, and contribute to policymaking and decision-making processes.³¹

The 2025 Global State of Democracy report, released by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, highlights a **global democratic decline**. The report found that in 2024, 94 countries, representing 54% of those assessed, experienced a deterioration in at least one democratic factor compared to five years earlier, while only 55 countries (32%) showed improvement. This marks a further worsening compared to the previous year, with a notable increase in democratic declines worldwide. The European region accounted for the second largest share of global democratic decline (25%) following the African region.³²

A recent report by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) highlights a worrying trend of public authorities restricting civic space without adequate justification or risk assessment. Their research shows that **shrinking civic space strongly correlates with democratic backsliding**, as restrictions on civil society organisations (CSOs) weaken their ability to monitor governments, uphold democratic norms, and act as a bridge between citizens and institutions. CSOs representing **groups at risk of exclusion**, such as women, LGBTI persons, people with

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Center for Countering Digital Hate (September 2022), *The Incelosphere: Exposing pathways into incel communities and the harms they pose to women and children*, <https://counterhate.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/CCDH-The-Incelosphere-FINAL.pdf>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ United Nations (2020). *United Nations Guidance Note: Protection and Promotion of Civic Space*, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/CivicSpace/UN_Guidance_Note.pdf.

³² International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2025), *The Global State of Democracy 2025*, <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/html/global-state-democracy-2025-democracy-move>.

disabilities, and ethnic minorities, face disproportionate barriers, including limited access to policymakers, lack of resources, discriminatory funding practices, and societal hostility toward the issues they defend.³³

Violence Against Women as Defenders of Rights: Human Rights Defenders, Politicians, Journalists

Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) include women and girls working on any human rights issue, as well as people of all genders who advocate for women's rights and gender equality³⁴. While all human rights defenders face restrictions and attacks, WHRDs experience distinct and heightened risks due to who they are, the movements they belong to (such as feminist or LGBTI movements), and the rights they promote. They face gender-specific challenges, including discrimination, threats and violence, targeting of family members, online harassment, defamation campaigns, exclusion from decision-making spaces, under-recognition and underfunding, and stigmatization by communities, authorities, and faith-based actors. WHRDs are often targeted because their work is perceived as challenging traditional gender roles, family structures, religion, or cultural norms.

A survey of 458 women human rights activists across 67 countries conducted by Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation in 2023, reveals a sharp increase in **threats and harassment against activists**, with an overall three out of four activists saying they or their organisations have been threatened or harassed, and one in four activists having received death threats. The most common forms of abuse include general harassment aimed at intimidation and humiliation (reported by half of respondents), smear campaigns and false accusations (one in three, particularly prevalent in Eastern Europe and the MENA region), and restrictive laws and regulations.³⁵

Women remain significantly underrepresented in **political decision-making** worldwide and achieving gender parity is still distant. Globally, only 19 countries have a woman Head of State according to UN Women, and women hold only 22.9% of Cabinet minister positions, as of January 2025. In legislatures, women make up just 27.2% of parliamentarians globally, despite progress from 11% in 1995. Only six countries have reached or exceeded 50% women's representation in parliament.³⁶ These figures reveal persistent structural barriers to women's equal participation in political life across regions and levels of governance. While the causes of this situation are complex, one key factor stands out: violence against women engaged in politics, which continues to deter many women from entering and remaining in the political arena.³⁷

A 2018 **Inter-Parliamentary Union survey** conducted with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, focusing on violence against female politicians in Europe, found high levels of sexism, harassment, and violence against female MPs, particularly affecting those under 40. One third reported that such abuse

³³ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Parliamentary Assembly (2024). *Fostering Free and Inclusive Societies: The Role of Civil Society Organizations in a Time of Democratic Decline*, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/special-representatives/gender-issues/report-17/4995-2024-gender-report-fostering-free-and-inclusive-societies-the-role-of-civil-society-organizations-in-a-time-of-democratic-decline-eng/file>.

³⁴ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (n.d.), *Women human rights defenders: OHCHR and women's human rights and gender equality*, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/women/women-human-rights-defenders>.

³⁵ The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (November 2023), *The state of women human rights defenders 2023*, <https://kvinna.tillkvinna.org/publications/the-state-of-women-human-rights-defenders-2023/>.

³⁶ UN Women (15 September 2025), *Facts and figures: Women's leadership and political participation*, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-womens-leadership-and-political-participation>.

³⁷ Zamfir, I. (November 2025), *Violence against women active in politics in the EU: A serious obstacle to political participation*, European Parliament Research Service, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/759600/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)759600_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/759600/EPRS_BRI(2024)759600_EN.pdf).

limited their freedom of expression and visibility in office, while many incidents, especially sexual harassment, went unreported.

Although the EU lacks comprehensive data, multiple sources confirm that psychological and symbolic violence are pervasive in **European politics**. This includes attacks on women's private lives, appearance, and competence, driven by gender stereotypes and backlash against women's political participation. Electoral campaigns and online spaces are particularly hostile environments, with social media enabling widespread harassment, as illustrated by evidence from Finland showing disproportionate and sexist abuse targeting female ministers. Similarly, a 2023 Europe-wide survey on violence against women in politics among locally elected female politicians conducted by the Council of European Municipalities and Regions found that 32% of respondents had experienced violence, yet reporting rates were low and consequences for perpetrators rare. Psychological and cyber violence emerged as the most common forms of violence respondents had encountered while physical and sexual violence were less frequent but still present.³⁸

Numerous policies at both international and European level tackle the rising incidents of violence against women in politics. Resolution 2274 (2019) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe focuses on promoting parliaments free of sexism and sexual harassment.³⁹ Resolution 459 (2020), adopted by the Congress of Regional and Local Authorities of the Council of Europe, aims at fighting sexist violence against women in politics at local and regional level.⁴⁰ The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the OSCE has issued a toolkit with specific measures and recommendations for parliaments, political parties, civil society and women in politics, following the four pillars of the Istanbul Convention: prevention, protection, prosecution and policy co-ordination.⁴¹

Female journalists are also at the centre of attacks. A 2020 global survey⁴² by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists examined online violence against women journalists, drawing on responses from over 900 participants in 125 countries. The findings show that online violence has become a major threat to journalism and freedom of expression, particularly for women. 73% of women respondents reported experiencing online violence, often involving harassment, abuse, threats of physical or sexual violence, privacy breaches, and coordinated disinformation campaigns. These attacks frequently spill into the offline world, with 20% reporting related offline abuse. The mental health impact was the most common consequence, with some journalists seeking medical or psychological support. Attacks were most often linked to reporting on gender, politics and elections, and human rights, and 41% of respondents believed they were targeted as part of orchestrated disinformation campaigns. Social media platforms, especially Facebook, were perceived as unsafe and ineffective in responding to abuse. Reporting rates were low, and responses from employers were often dismissive or absent. As a result, many women journalists engage in self-censorship, avoid online engagement, or withdraw from public debate altogether, demonstrating how online violence effectively silences women's voices and undermines press freedom.

³⁸ Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians*, <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2016-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-parliamentarians>.

³⁹ Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (2019), *Resolution 2274 Promoting parliaments free of sexism and sexual harassment*, <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/27614/html>.

⁴⁰ Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (2020), *Resolution 459 Fighting sexist violence against women in politics at local and regional levels*, <https://rm.coe.int/fighting-sexist-violence-against-women-in-politics-at-local-and-region/1680a0c056>.

⁴¹ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (2022), *Addressing Violence Against Women in Politics in the OSCE Region Toolkit*, <https://odhr.osce.org/odhr/530272>.

⁴² Posetti, J. et al. (2020), *Online violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidence and Impacts*, UNESCO, <https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/UNESCO>.

3. Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence and Gender Bias in AI Systems

Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: an all-encompassing term

Many forms of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (**TFGBV**) exist, but the most prevalent forms are cyber harassment, cyber stalking, gender-based hate speech, non-consensual intimate image abuse or doxing. The type of **perpetrators** also varies, ranging from those commonly considered in a gender-based violence context, such as relatives, acquaintances, intimate partners and ex-partners, to anonymous and/or unacquainted in the cybersphere. Thus, TFGBV is a cross-cultural, global phenomenon as global networking features of social media platforms and other internet websites allow frequent spillover phenomena.⁴³

The main characteristics of TFGBV include the **different cyberspaces** where violence can take place such as social media platforms, messaging apps, discussion sites and AI-driven chatbots. Due to the **rapidly evolving nature of technology**, new technologies are bound to give rise to new and diverse manifestations of violence. For example, deepfake technology and deepfake pornography can detrimentally impact the reputation and well-being of women and girls. Additionally, a vast array of ICT tools may be misused to stalk, harass, survey and control victims, including smartphones, computers, cameras, other recording equipment, GPS, satellite navigators, smart watches, smart home devices, as well as dedicated digital technologies such as spyware or stalkerware.⁴⁴

TFGBV often mirrors and amplifies **offline gender-based violence**, reinforcing it rather than replacing it. TFGBV is usually referred to as a continuum of offline violence, meaning that actions in the digital sphere can lead to physical violence, whether inspired by or directly continuing the harm inflicted online. TFGBV **disproportionately targets women and girls** and tends to be more severe and to have particularly harmful impacts on them. The **impacts on victims** span a broad spectrum of serious psychological, physical, social and financial harms. The digital environment enables anonymous, wide-reaching attacks against women in public life, such as female politicians, that aim to silence them, resulting in self-censorship, reputational damage and decreased participation in political, social, and professional life.⁴⁵

UN and Council of Europe approaches

The **UN General Assembly's 2024 Resolution on the digital environment**⁴⁶ provides a comprehensive framework for preventing and eliminating violence against women and girls in the digital environment. The resolution calls upon States to strengthen legislation, policies, and enforcement; address the structural causes of gender inequality; dismantle discriminatory norms and stereotypes; tackle intersecting forms of discrimination; refrain from or cease the use of artificial intelligence systems and technologies that are impossible to operate in compliance with international human rights law. The resolution recognizes the

⁴³ European Institute for Gender Equality (2022), *Cyber Violence against Women and Girls – Key Terms and Concepts*, https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/cyber_violence_against_women_and_girls_key_terms_and_concepts.pdf.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ European Parliament Research Service (December 2024), *Cyber violence against women in the EU*, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/767146/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)767146_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/767146/EPRS_BRI(2024)767146_EN.pdf).

⁴⁶ United Nations, *UN General Assembly A/RES/79/152 'Intensification of efforts to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls: the digital environment'*. Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 17 December 2024 <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4069721>.

importance of partnerships and calls for States to work with the private sector, community-based and feminist groups, women human rights defenders and other civil society actors.

Similarly, the **UN Secretary-General's Report on TFGBV** calls for zero-tolerance policies in digital spaces toward all forms of gender-based violence, including harassment, stalking, threats, surveillance, trafficking, and illegal access to devices. The recommendations towards States include to criminalize all forms of digital violence, including digitally manipulated explicit images, and strengthen law enforcement capacity to investigate and prosecute these crimes. States are further recommended to implement risk assessment frameworks to identify extremist groups and misogynistic online activity, to ensure regulatory obligations for tech intermediaries to detect, prevent, and address online violence, with penalties for non-compliance, and to recognise misogyny as hate speech. The report also recommends that new technology and AI products should be tested in consultation with women's rights and safety experts to prevent harm and avoid perpetuating violence against women and girls.⁴⁷

The **UN Human Rights Council** tasked its Advisory Committee with preparing a study on technology-facilitated gender-based violence, its impacts on women and girls, global good practices, and recommendations for action, to be presented at the Council's sixty-third session.⁴⁸

The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, also known as the **Istanbul Convention**, is a legally binding document, requiring Member States to develop laws, policies and support services to end violence against women and domestic violence. It does not refer explicitly to cyber violence against women, but its provisions on gender-based violence are applicable to cyber violence. In October 2023, **the EU became party to the Istanbul Convention**, meaning the EU must comply with the Convention within the areas where it has competence (mainly EU law related to crime prevention, victims' rights, asylum, non-discrimination, and judicial cooperation).

The Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (**GREVIO**), tasked with the monitoring of the implementation of the Convention, adopted its **General Recommendation No. 1 on the digital dimension of violence against women**.⁴⁹ It highlights that the digital dimension of violence against women includes many behaviours that fit the Istanbul Convention's definition of gender-based violence under Article 3a: '*all acts of gender-based violence against women that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life*'.⁵⁰ GREVIO also reaffirms that due diligence applies fully to digital and technology-facilitated violence.

The **Committee of Experts on combating technology-facilitated violence against women and girls of the Council of Europe** is currently working on a Recommendation on combating technology-facilitated violence against women and girls. The Recommendation will set out a comprehensive approach to addressing

⁴⁷ United Nations, UN General Assembly A/79/500 (8 October 2024). *Report of the Secretary-General 'Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls: technology-facilitated violence against women and girls'*, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/a-79-500-sg-report-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-2024-en.pdf>.

⁴⁸ United Nations, UN Human Rights Council A/HRC/56/L.15 (3 July 2024) '*Technology-facilitated gender-based violence*', <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/ltd/g24/109/55/pdf/g2410955.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Council of Europe, Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO), 20 October 2021, *General Recommendation No. 1 on the digital dimension of violence against women*, <https://rm.coe.int/grevio-rec-no-on-digital-violence-against-women/1680a49147>.

⁵⁰ Council of Europe (2011), *Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*, Council of Europe Treaty Series - No. 210, <https://rm.coe.int/168008482e>.

technology-facilitated violence against women and girls. It should ensure that Member States are equipped to provide victims with adequate and effective responses, particularly within the scope of criminal law.⁵¹

Challenges of Combatting TFGBV

Among the many challenges to combat TFGBV is the **lack of comprehensive, comparable and disaggregated data collection efforts**, both at EU level and among Member States. According to EIGE, most Member States do not collect data on cyber violence consistently, and existing data is often limited or too general. As a result, it is difficult to get an accurate, comprehensive, and up-to-date picture of how widespread different forms of cyber violence are across the EU. Moreover, inconsistencies in notion definitions, the underreporting of incidents and the extent to which these forms of violence are taken seriously by the authorities and recognised as crimes varies greatly among Member States. No Member State has a dedicated monitoring mechanism for cyber violence; instead, it is typically included only as a small part of broader data collection efforts. In some countries, there is also limited information-sharing between authorities such as the police, academia, and social services. As a result, reliable statistics are lacking, making it difficult to fully understand cyber violence or respond effectively to emerging trends.⁵²

Underreporting and impunity are also major challenges to effectively fight against and prevent TFGBV. Only 1 in 4 women report⁵³ the abusive behaviour to the online platform where it occurs, mostly because they are often unaware of the reporting options available for harmful online behaviours or fear to report because of stigma, victim-blaming attitude and fear of second victimisation due to inadequate police support and lack of specialist support. Consequently, huge challenges still lie along the path towards **obtaining justice for the women victims** who do find the courage to speak out.

Rapidly evolving nature of technology leads to new forms of TFGBV, especially with the expansion and integration of AI technologies. AI enables the creation of highly convincing manipulated sexual videos or audio recordings through deepfake technology, leading to **deepfake nudes** or **deepfake sexual abuse**, which disproportionately affect women and girls and can detrimentally impact their reputation and well-being. **AI-driven chatbots and virtual assistants** are becoming more and more popular and carry the risk of perpetuating gender stereotypes as they can be programmed in ways that reflect and reinforce existing biases. These technologies may produce inappropriate responses to gender-related queries which can contribute to the normalization of sexist attitudes and behaviours. Similarly, **generative AI algorithms** can automate hateful or threatening messages, enabling large-scale and sustained online harassment campaigns against women and dissemination of misinformation. In this sense, **digital technologies can be weaponised to conduct coordinated online attacks**, including doxing, defamation, image-based sexual abuse, and the spread of false information aimed at undermining feminist movements.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Council of Europe (2025), *Committee of Experts on combating technology-facilitated violence against women and girls (GEC/PC-eVIO)*, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality/committee-of-experts-on-combating-technology-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-gec/pc-evio-1>.

⁵² European Institute for Gender Equality (2022), *Combating Cyber Violence against Women and Girls*, https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/combating-cyber-violence-against-women-and-girls?language_content_entity=en.

⁵³ The Economist Intelligence Unit (March 2021), *Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women*, <https://onlineviolencewomen.eiu.com/>.

⁵⁴ European Institute for Gender Equality (2025), *Combating cyber violence against women and girls: Developing an EU measurement framework, Methodological report*, https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/combating-cyber-violence-against-women-and-girls-developing-eu-measurement-framework?language_content_entity=en.

Gender gap and gender bias in AI systems

Data on **gender representation** in AI is limited, but existing evidence shows a significant disparity with men predominantly designing, coding, engineering and programming AI technologies. According to a LinkedIn report⁵⁵, 2019 data showed that women made up only 16% of AI-skilled professionals in the EU and UK, with national figures ranging from 9% to 29%. The gap widened with experience: women represented just 12% of AI professionals with over 10 years' experience and 20% of AI professionals with 0-2 years' experience.⁵⁶ According to another analysis of data on nearly 1.6 million AI professionals worldwide, women comprise only 22% of AI talent globally, with even lower representation at senior levels, occupying less than 14% of senior executive roles in AI. Within the EU, although countries like Sweden and Germany rank among the top in closing the overall gender gap, their AI workforces show strikingly low female representation: 20.3% and 22.4% respectively, highlighting persistent, sector-specific barriers for women in AI. This gender gap in AI talent pools is significantly more pronounced than in the overall workforce.⁵⁷

Gender bias is often built into AI systems, reflecting the norms and biases of their designers. Bias in design means that AI systems' default operational mode is discriminatory, exclusionary or sexist. This result in higher error rates for groups like women due to biased or incomplete training data and modelling. For example, technologies such as facial and voice recognition perform less accurately for women and non-white people, while AI tools like virtual assistants often reinforce gender stereotypes by adopting feminised, subservient personas such as Alexa, Cortana and Siri.⁵⁸

Gender bias is embedded throughout the **AI lifecycle**⁵⁹, making ethical and legal frameworks, such as the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence and the EU AI Act crucial in promoting AI literacy and reducing discriminatory outcomes. Although often unintentional, technical and human biases reinforce one another when designers fail to recognise their own assumptions, allowing AI systems to scale discrimination.⁶⁰ AI models learn from publicly available data that reflects existing societal inequalities, causing them to reproduce or even amplify these biases in their outputs. This issue is intensified by the lack of diversity in the AI workforce, where women are seriously underrepresented. This underrepresentation risks reinforcing biases in AI systems and constraining innovation. While increasing the presence of women and underrepresented groups in AI won't automatically correct biased datasets, it fosters a long-term drive for more diverse and representative data collection. Diverse teams are more likely to challenge existing norms, identify gaps in data, and promote inclusive practice.⁶¹ However, it is important to highlight that it is not just about hiring more women, but it is important to directly include them in AI design and development, avoid superficial 'pink-washing,' and ensure diverse leadership to prevent homogenous perspectives from shaping 'unreflective' data and design decisions.⁶²

⁵⁵ LinkedIn (November 2019), *AI Talent in the European Labour Market*, <https://economicgraph.linkedin.com/content/dam/me/economicgraph/en-us/reference-cards/research/2019/LinkedIn-AI-Talent-in-the-European-Labour-Market.pdf>.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Pal, S., Lazzaroni, R.M., Mendoza, P. (October 2024), *AI's Missing Link: The Gender Gap in the Talent Pool*, interface, <https://www.interface-eu.org/publications/ai-gender-gap>.

⁵⁸ European Institute for Gender Equality (2021), *Artificial intelligence, platform work and gender equality*, <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/artificial-intelligence-platform-work-and-gender-equality-report>.

⁵⁹ AI lifecycle comprises key phases: design, data collection and processing, model building and validation, deployment, operation and monitoring, and retirement and decommission.

⁶⁰ Munarini, M. (January 2025), *Multi-stakeholder guidelines on how to address gender bias in AI systems*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bruessel/21886-20250304.pdf>.

⁶¹ Pal, S., Lazzaroni, R.M., Mendoza, P. (October 2024), *AI's Missing Link: The Gender Gap in the Talent Pool*, interface, <https://www.interface-eu.org/publications/ai-gender-gap>.

⁶² Munarini, M. (January 2025), *Multi-stakeholder guidelines on how to address gender bias in AI systems*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bruessel/21886-20250304.pdf>.

4. Women's Participation in STEM and the Digital Gender Gap

In Europe, women remain **underrepresented** in STEM, and especially in ICT (information and computer technology), AI, and cybersecurity despite documented benefits of gender diversity for innovation and company performance. Although women's employment in science and engineering is rising, major gaps persist in leadership roles, salaries, and the distribution of care responsibilities. This hinders Europe's competitiveness, equal opportunities, Europe's shortage of workers with advanced digital skills and diversity needed for innovation to produce better, fairer and more inclusive digital technology and solutions.

Girls begin school with equal or better STEM attitudes and performance than boys, yet by early high school they lose confidence, expect less success, and show declining interest in STEM careers. Effective tools to support girls include spatial training, role models, mentoring, and boosting STEM self-efficacy. However, girls' strong verbal and math abilities give them broader career options, making them less likely than boys to choose STEM, while gender stereotypes from teachers, peers, and parents further undermine their confidence. Support can also backfire if it reinforces perceived deficits. Higher **education** remains shaped by masculine academic cultures, biased hiring, and gender-based harassment, contributing to women's lower self-confidence and persistence⁶³.

According to a McKinsey analysis⁶⁴, Europe faces a significant tech talent gap—estimated between 1.4 and 3.9 million workers by 2027. Doubling the share of women in tech to around 45% could **close this gap and generate an additional €260–600 billion in GDP**. However, women's graduation rates in STEM fields at the higher education level are falling. In the workforce, women are least represented in the fastest-growing tech roles, such as DevOps and cloud computing. If current trends continue, the proportion of women in tech positions in Europe is projected to drop from 25% to 21% by 2027.

Low representation leads to isolation, reinforcing the cycle and contributing to further dropouts. After graduation, another major decline occurs, with only 23% of women STEM graduates entering tech roles, compared with 44% of men.⁶⁵ This phenomenon is usually referred to as the **leaky pipeline** due to the progressive disappearance of women in STEM as they advance in their career.⁶⁶

According to the **GENDEX index**, funded by the European Innovation Council (EIC) under Horizon Europe, women's representation differs substantially across various tech specializations. The GENDEX index seeks to develop a comprehensive, practical index to assess the European innovation landscape, particularly within deep tech, with the goal of identifying and addressing major gender disparities in leadership and investment across the ecosystem. The deep tech talent tier shows that while women make up 42% of STEM graduates in the EU, they remain significantly under-represented in key deep-tech fields—only 28% of engineering graduates and 25% of ICT graduates are women. Progress among STEM researchers has been minimal, with women representing 31% (up from 30% in 2017), and only 20–25% hold senior academic positions. Similarly, the investment and social capital tier highlights that women founders hold far fewer intellectual property (IP) rights and are more likely to create IP independently rather than inheriting it from previous institutions, unlike men. Women remain under-represented in major tech companies and unicorns. Only 22% of deep

⁶³ Zacharia, C. et al. (April 2020), *Education and employment of women in science, technology and the digital economy, including AI and its influence on gender equality*. Study commissioned by the Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs at the request of the FEMM Committee, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/651042/IPOL_STU\(2020\)651042_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/651042/IPOL_STU(2020)651042_EN.pdf).

⁶⁴ Blumberg, S. et al. (24 January 2023), *Women in tech: The best bet to solve Europe's talent shortage*, McKinsey & Company, <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/tech-and-ai/our-insights/women-in-tech-the-best-bet-to-solve-europes-talent-shortage>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Farah Dubois-Shaik and Bernard Fusulier (2015), *Academic Careers and Gender Inequality: Leaky Pipeline and Interrelated Phenomena in Seven European Countries*, Garcia Working Papers, https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/garcia_working_paper_5_academic_careers_gender_inequality.pdf.

tech firms in the EU and UK are women-led, with biotech, robotics, autonomous systems, and quantum technologies showing the highest shares. In addition, women-led start-ups face slower fundraising, lower valuations, and less favourable term sheets than men-led companies.⁶⁷

GENDEX also confirmed that **women's talent is increasingly lost at each stage of the tech pipeline**, harming the sector overall. It recommends that investors and governments require gender-diversity reporting before funding companies and direct more capital to women-led teams. The index can also help investors assess the diversity of their own portfolios.⁶⁸

Key barriers for women in STEM include lack of role models, mentorship programs, and social and corporate norms, while policy measures should also address institutional obstacles to female entrepreneurship and the growth of women-led firms.⁶⁹ Furthermore, women in STEM encounter deep-rooted gender stereotypes that suggest men are naturally better suited for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, discouraging women from entering or advancing in these fields. Work-life balance challenges coupled with pay disparities persist, as STEM careers often demand long working hours with lack of flexibility, making it difficult for women to manage family responsibilities. Additionally, women are more likely to face harassment and discrimination in STEM workplaces compared to non-STEM fields.⁷⁰ Besides the leaky pipeline phenomenon, another persistent issue in STEM is the '**Matilda effect**', a phenomenon in which women's contributions to science are overlooked or attributed to male colleagues or supervisors.⁷¹

Researchers have put forward various recommendations⁷² in view of **advancing gender equality in STEM**: addressing early drop-offs in primary and secondary education; supporting women already in STEM university programmes, through better internships, mentoring, coaching, and recruitment into cutting-edge and leadership roles; shifting women from declining roles (e.g. systems administrators and programmer

⁶⁷ European Commission (March 2025), *Gender and Diversity Index for a fair, competitive, resilient and sustainable Europe: GENDEX Data Analysis of the Gender & Diversity Scorecard, Deliverable D3.3. CORDIS – EU research results*, <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101105161/results>.

⁶⁸ Desmarais, A. (6 March 2025), *Gender index reveals 'unbalanced representation' in the entire EU tech ecosystem*, Euronews, <https://www.euronews.com/next/2025/03/06/gender-index-reveals-unbalanced-representation-in-the-entire-eu-tech-ecosystem>.

⁶⁹ Davaki, K. (2018), *The underlying causes of the digital gender gap and possible solutions for enhanced digital inclusion of women and girls*. Study commissioned by the Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs at the request of the FEMM Committee, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604940/IPOL_STU\(2018\)604940_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604940/IPOL_STU(2018)604940_EN.pdf).

⁷⁰ Womentech network (n.d.), *What Are the Challenges Facing Women in STEM Today, and How Can We Overcome Them?*, <https://www.womentech.net/forum-topic/what-are-challenges-facing-women-in-stem-today-and-how-can-we-overcome-them>.

⁷¹ UNESCO (25 March 2025), *Women and girls in science: exploring the challenges facing female scientists today*, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/women-and-girls-science-exploring-challenges-facing-female-scientists-today>.

⁷² See, inter alia:

Zacharia, C. et al. (April 2020), *Education and employment of women in science, technology and the digital economy, including AI and its influence on gender equality*. Study commissioned by the Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs at the request of the FEMM Committee, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/651042/IPOL_STU\(2020\)651042_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/651042/IPOL_STU(2020)651042_EN.pdf);

Davaki, K. (2018), *The underlying causes of the digital gender gap and possible solutions for enhanced digital inclusion of women and girls*. Study commissioned by the Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs at the request of the FEMM Committee, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604940/IPOL_STU\(2018\)604940_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604940/IPOL_STU(2018)604940_EN.pdf).

Blumberg, S. et al. (24 January 2023), *Women in tech: The best bet to solve Europe's talent shortage*, McKinsey & Company, <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/tech-and-ai/our-insights/women-in-tech-the-best-bet-to-solve-europes-talent-shortage>.

analysts, which have been heavily affected by layoffs) into growing, high-value positions such as product leads, machine learning engineers, and AI experts; ensuring workplace flexibility.

5. Legislation and Actions at EU Level

Combatting stereotypes and gender-based violence

Regulation of **advertising and media** content mainly falls under Member State authority, especially regarding cultural issues. The EU has limited power to regulate such content directly, including gender **stereotypes**, unless it relates to the internal market or sex discrimination. Nevertheless, the EU can still influence this area through gender equality frameworks and soft law instruments. The Audiovisual Media Services Directive 2018/1808/EU and the Regulation on a Single Market for Digital Services (EU) 2022/2065 have limited effect on the regulation of harmful gendered content.⁷³

The Audiovisual Media Services Directive 2018/1808/EU⁷⁴ was adopted in 2010 and revised in 2018. In Article 9 of the revised directive, it is explicitly stated that Member States must ensure that audiovisual commercial communications do not undermine human dignity or promote discrimination based on sex or other protected characteristics.⁷⁵

The Regulation on a Single Market for Digital Services (EU) 2022/2065⁷⁶ (hereinafter: Digital Services Act or DSA) addresses potential negative effects of media content to gender-based violence, public health and physical and mental well-being under Article 34. Additionally, the Digital Services Act introduces mandatory due diligence obligations for very large online platforms (VLOPs) and search engines to address societal risks. Article 34 requires VLOPs to carry out regular risk assessments to identify and mitigate potential harms, creating potential scope to address harmful gendered content in advertising and media.

The Digital Services Act requires online platforms to implement measures to prevent the spread of illegal goods, services, and content. These measures include tools for users to report illegal content and obligations for platforms to work with designated 'trusted flaggers.' Under Article 35, very large online platforms (VLOP) and search engines must take reasonable and effective steps to promptly removing or blocking access to illegal hate speech or cyber violence.⁷⁷ All online platforms and search engines have to comply with the general DSA obligations, which have been in effect since 17 February 2024.

⁷³ Davies, D. (2025) *Tackling harmful gendered content and gender stereotypes in advertising and the media in Europe: new challenges and opportunities*, European Commission - Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/5a4f4488-fb04-11ef-b7db-01aa75ed71a1>.

⁷⁴ Directive (EU) 2018/1808 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 November 2018 amending Directive 2010/13/EU on the coordination of certain provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the provision of audiovisual media services (Audiovisual Media Services Directive) in view of changing market realities, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018L1808>.

⁷⁵ Davies, D. (2025), *Tackling harmful gendered content and gender stereotypes in advertising and the media in Europe: new challenges and opportunities*, European Commission - Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/5a4f4488-fb04-11ef-b7db-01aa75ed71a1>.

⁷⁶ Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022R2065>.

⁷⁷ Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022R2065>.

In 2024, the EU adopted the **Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence**, the first-ever EU legislation to combat violence against women and domestic violence, including its digital dimension. In Article 5, 6, 7, 8, the Directive **criminalises some technology-facilitated offenses**, including non-consensual sharing of intimate or manipulated material, cyber stalking, cyber harassment, and cyber incitement to violence or hatred. The directive emphasises that cyber violence particularly targets female politicians, journalists and human rights defenders and introduces **aggravating circumstances** under Article 11 such as targeting public journalists, human rights defenders or victims because of their gender. It also **strengthens the rights of victims** by providing the possibility to make online complaints for acts of cyber violence (Article 14) and by requiring specialist support services for victims (Article 25). Member States need to provide access to information on legal advice, legal aid for victims as well as must promptly remove or block access to harmful online content. The Directive is a legally binding document which establishes an obligation for Member States to adopt national action plans for preventing and combating gender-based violence by June 2029 and review national legislation by considering new technological developments. It also obliges Member States to transpose the rules of the Directive in their national legislation by June 2027.⁷⁸

In 2024, the EU also adopted the **EU AI Act**, which is the first-ever comprehensive legal framework on AI. The AI Act sets out a clear set of risk-based rules for AI developers and deployers regarding specific uses of AI with the aim to **foster trustworthy AI** in Europe.⁷⁹

The Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 recognises that the ‘media and the cultural sectors have considerable say in shaping people’s beliefs, values and perception of reality, and are thus further key channels for changing attitudes and challenging stereotypes.’

The European Union invests in actions that reinforce diversity, combat stereotypes and prevent gender-based violence via **programmes** such as Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV), Horizon Europe or Creative Europe.

The European Commission has also launched #EndGenderStereotypes EU-wide campaign⁸⁰ to challenge limiting beliefs about roles for men and women in careers, home life, and decision-making, using educational tools and public awareness to foster equal opportunities.

In January 2026, the European Commission opened a new **investigation into X under the Digital Services Act**, alongside extending its ongoing probe into the platform’s compliance with recommender system risk-management obligations. The new case focuses on whether X adequately assessed and mitigated risks linked to the deployment of Grok in the EU, particularly the spread of illegal content such as manipulated sexually explicit material, including potential child sexual abuse content.⁸¹ Additionally, in February 2026, the Commission adopted the **Action Plan Against Cyberbullying** which seeks to protect the mental health of children and teenagers online across the EU. A key measure is the development of a user-friendly app

⁷⁸ Directive (EU) 2024/1385 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on combating violence against women and domestic violence, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_202401385.

⁷⁹ Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence and amending Regulations (EC) No 300/2008, (EU) No 167/2013, (EU) No 168/2013, (EU) 2018/858, (EU) 2018/1139 and (EU) 2019/2144 and Directives 2014/90/EU, (EU) 2016/797 and (EU) 2020/1828 (Artificial Intelligence Act) (Text with EEA relevance), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1689/oj/eng>.

⁸⁰ European Commission, #EndGenderStereotypes EU-wide campaign, https://end-gender-stereotypes.campaign.europa.eu/index_en.

⁸¹ European Commission (26 January 2026), *Commission investigates Grok and X’s recommender systems under the Digital Services Act*, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_26_203.

that allows young victims to report abuse to national helplines, receive support, and securely store and share evidence.⁸²

Bridging the Gender Divide in STEM

Directive (EU)2019/1158⁸³ on work-life balance for parents and carers sets minimum requirements to promote gender equality in the workplace by improving labour market opportunities and supporting work–family balance for parents and carers. While the Directive applies across all sectors, its measures to strengthen work–life balance and promote a more equal sharing of care responsibilities are particularly relevant for women in demanding fields such as STEM.

Directive (EU)2022/2381⁸⁴ on improving the gender balance among directors of listed companies and related measures aims to achieve gender balance on the boards of listed companies by setting targets for the underrepresented sex—40% of non-executive directors or 33% of all directors by 30 June 2026. This Directive provides a strong legal basis to improve gender balance on boards of listed companies, which may indirectly support women in sectors including STEM.

The **EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025⁸⁵**, in its objective 'Thriving in a gender-equal economy', recognises that women are significantly under-represented in STEM field, and refers to targeted measures promoting women's participation in innovation under the Horizon Europe and European Innovation Council. **Horizon Europe⁸⁶** makes gender equality a cross-cutting priority in research and innovation to foster inclusive work environments and ensure research better reflects societal needs. For instance, certain organisations must have a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) to participate and integrating the gender dimension into research and innovation is required by default along with a target of 50% women in Horizon Europe related boards, expert groups and evaluation committees. **Women TechEU⁸⁷** is funded under the Horizon Europe, supporting female founders with funding, coaching, and networking.

The **Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027** and **Women in Digital Scoreboard⁸⁸** aim to support women in ICT careers and studies. Additionally, the updated **Skills Agenda for Europe⁸⁹** helps to address horizontal segregation and gender gaps in education and training.

⁸² European Commission (10 February 2026), *Commission launches Action Plan Against Cyberbullying to protect young people online*, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_26_332.

⁸³ Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019L1158>.

⁸⁴ Directive (EU) 2022/2381 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 November 2022 on improving the gender balance among directors of listed companies and related measures, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022L2381>.

⁸⁵ European Commission (2020), *A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025*, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-equality-strategy_en.

⁸⁶ European Commission (n.d.), *Gender equality in research and innovation*, https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/strategy-research-and-innovation/democracy-and-rights/gender-equality-research-and-innovation_en#latest.

⁸⁷ European Commission (n.d.), *Women TechEU - Supporting deep-tech start-ups led by women*, *European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency (EISMEA)*, https://eisma.ec.europa.eu/programmes/european-innovation-ecosystems/women-techeu_en.

⁸⁸ European Commission (12 August 2024), *Women in Digital Scoreboard 2024*, News Article, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/news/women-digital-scoreboard-2024>.

⁸⁹ European Commission (n.d.), *Communication on a European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience*, https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/skills-and-qualifications/european-skills-agenda_en.

The **Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027**⁹⁰ establishes a common EU vision for high-quality, inclusive, and accessible digital education, aiming to help education and training systems adapt to the digital age. It sets out 14 actions, including measures to empower young women to develop digital and entrepreneurial skills. Under Priority 2, Action 13 focuses on increasing women's participation in STEM by supporting young female students in developing digital and entrepreneurial skills. As part of this education plan, **two Council Recommendations**⁹¹ adopted in November 2023 urge EU countries to close the gender gap in digital skills among teachers, promote gender-balanced and stereotype-free STEM education, and address gender bias in ICT by providing upskilling and reskilling opportunities for girls and women.

The **European Digital Skills awards** for women in ICT are aimed specifically at increasing the number of women ICT professionals and challenging digital gender stereotypes.⁹² Additionally, **DigiEduHack** is a flagship initiative of the Digital Education Action Plan that empowers participants to create innovative digital solutions to challenges in education. Although open to all, it places a strong emphasis on engaging young people, particularly girls, in digital education and innovation.

As regards education, the EU funds the **Girls Go STEM project**⁹³ led by the European Institute of Innovation and Technology to encourage women to participate in STEM studies and careers, close the gender gap in STEM and ensure that the next generation has the skills needed to succeed in the evolving job market. Similarly, the Commission together with the European Innovation and SMEs Executive Agency (EISMEA) supports **ESTEAM festivals**⁹⁴ in different EU countries, to help women and girls to improve their digital and entrepreneurial skills and boost their confidence to choose STEM career paths. Over four years, 23 ESTEAM festivals are being organised in 14 Member States to build competences, boost confidence, and foster peer networks.

The **EU Digital Decade policy programme 2030**⁹⁵ sets up a monitoring and cooperation mechanism to achieve the common objectives and targets for Europe's digital transformation. One of its targets is to employ at least 20 million ICT specialists in the EU by 2030 while promoting women's access to the field.

6. European Parliament position

The European Parliament plays a key role in advancing women's rights and gender equality. It adopts legislation together with the Council, issues resolutions that call for further progress and organises a Gender Equality Week every year. Committees organise public hearings and exchanges of views on specific gender-related topics. Parliament has adopted a robust position on women's rights and democracy in the digital age, explicitly addressing the threats posed by gender stereotypes, disinformation, and online violence.

⁹⁰ European Commission (n.d.), *Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027*, <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/actions>.

⁹¹ Council of the European Union (23 November 2023), *Council Recommendation on improving the provision of digital skills and competences in education and training*, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15740-2023-INIT/en/pdf> and Council Recommendation of 23 November 2023 on the key enabling factors for successful digital education and training (C/2024/1115), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32024H01115>.

⁹² European Parliament Research Service (March 2023), *Women in the digital sector*, AT A GLANCE, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/739380/EPRS_ATA\(2023\)739380_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/739380/EPRS_ATA(2023)739380_EN.pdf).

⁹³ European Institute of Innovation and Technology Community (n.d.), *Girls Go STEM*, <https://eit-girlsgostem.eu/>.

⁹⁴ European Commission (n.d.), *ESTEAM Fests and Communities for girls and women*, https://eismea.ec.europa.eu/esteam-fests-and-communities-girls-and-women_en.

⁹⁵ European Commission (n.d.), *Digital Decade - Policy programme*, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-decade-policy-programme>.

In a 2021 resolution⁹⁶, Parliament stresses that increasing women's participation in **STEM** is essential for gender equality, economic competitiveness, and the EU's green and digital transitions. Persistent barriers, such as gender stereotypes, discrimination, unequal care responsibilities, pay gaps, lack of role models, and hostile or unsafe environments, continue to limit girls' and women's access to STEM education, careers, leadership, and entrepreneurship. It calls on the EU and Member States to address these barriers through early and inclusive education, gender-sensitive curricula and teacher training, targeted careers guidance, pay transparency, zero tolerance for harassment, work-life balance policies, and lifelong learning opportunities. Particular attention is urged for women facing intersecting forms of disadvantage, supported by better data collection and monitoring. The resolution highlights the gender gap in digital technologies and emerging fields such as AI and cybersecurity, warning against biased systems and calling for diverse teams, ethical AI frameworks, and gender mainstreaming in digital policy.

In a resolution focusing on **cyber violence**⁹⁷, Parliament emphasises that gender-based cyber violence is a continuation of offline gender-based violence and cannot be effectively addressed without recognising this link. It calls for stronger action against cyber violence linked to the sex industry, including pornography connected to trafficking and sexual violence, and for misogyny to be recognised within hate speech and hate crime frameworks.

In its resolution on the **EU Gender Action Plan III**⁹⁸, Parliament stresses the need to improve women's and girls' access to digital tools, training, and STEM careers in **its external actions**. It warns that social media and digital platforms are major sites of gender-based violence and harassment, which restrict women's political participation and online engagement. Stronger regulation, legal enforcement, targeted protection mechanisms, and greater involvement of women in the design of digital technologies and AI are deemed essential to prevent the reproduction of gender bias. The text also notes the potential of e-commerce and emerging technologies such as blockchain to empower women entrepreneurs by expanding access to markets and finance and overcoming discriminatory barriers, while calling on the EU to actively support women in adopting these technologies.

Parliament's resolution on the **Gender Equality Strategy 2025**⁹⁹ highlights how gender stereotypes hinder access to STEM, particularly ICT, and persist in the media. It stresses the importance of early educational intervention and calls on the Commission and Member States to use European Social Fund Plus resources to address stereotypes in education and career guidance. Parliament also urges the Commission to mainstream the prevention of online GBV across all EU digital policies, fully enforce platform risk assessment and mitigation obligations, and hold online platforms accountable for the algorithmic amplification of sexist and misogynistic content through greater transparency and sanctions where necessary. Parliament further urges the Commission to address emerging digital threats linked to artificial intelligence, invest in education, digital and media literacy, and awareness-raising programmes, particularly for young people, and to support intersectional research to better understand and counter online misogyny, gender disinformation and the radicalisation of online spaces.

⁹⁶ European Parliament resolution of 10 June 2021 on promoting gender equality in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education and careers ([2019/2164\(INI\)](#)), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0296_EN.html.

⁹⁷ European Parliament resolution of 14 December 2021 with recommendations to the Commission on combating gender-based violence: cyberviolence ([2020/2035\(INL\)](#)), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0489_EN.html.

⁹⁸ European Parliament resolution of 10 March 2022 on the EU Gender Action Plan III ([2021/2003\(INI\)](#)), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0073_EN.html.

⁹⁹ European Parliament resolution of 13 November 2025 on the Gender Equality Strategy 2025 ([2024/2125\(INI\)](#)), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-0278_EN.html.

In terms of women's representation in the media, Parliament adopted a resolution on **gender equality in the media sector in the EU**¹⁰⁰, underlining persistent structural challenges for women, including precarious employment, gender pay gaps, stereotypes, ageism, and the widespread occurrence of sexual harassment and abuse, especially online. Regarding media content, the resolution emphasises the media's role in shaping public opinion and calls for the elimination of sexist stereotypes, degrading portrayals and violent or discriminatory content, while respecting freedom of expression. The text further stresses the importance of media literacy, gender-sensitive education and professional training to challenge stereotypes and prevent discrimination, cyber violence and hate speech. It recommends the use of soft measures such as equality guidelines, databases of women experts, and the collection of sex-disaggregated data.

Ahead of the 70th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, Parliament urges¹⁰¹ the Council of the European Union to demonstrate strong EU leadership by fully implementing international commitments on gender equality and women's empowerment. It calls for firm action against online hate speech, digital and AI-enabled violence against women, and for stronger accountability of online platforms, alongside support for media literacy and digital safety. Parliament urges renewed efforts to eliminate impunity for all forms of gender-based violence, promote inclusive and quality education as a key tool for prevention and empowerment, and counter online misogyny, disinformation, incel ideology and the manosphere. It also calls on the EU to develop tools to monitor democratic and women's rights backsliding and to lead global efforts against anti-gender and anti-rights movements. Parliament stresses the need to protect the mandate and credibility of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, especially in light of funding cuts to UN agencies. It calls on the EU to increase development aid to fill these gaps, reaffirms strong support for UN Women, urges all UN member states to ensure its adequate funding, and commits the EU to sufficiently financing gender equality, women's rights and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

¹⁰⁰ European Parliament resolution of 17 April 2018 on gender equality in the media sector in the EU ([2017/2210\(INI\)](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0101_EN.html)), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0101_EN.html.

¹⁰¹ European Parliament recommendation of 12 February 2026 to the Council concerning the EU priorities for the 70th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women ([2025/2240\(INI\)](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2026-0051_EN.html)), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2026-0051_EN.html.

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