

Statement on Online Violence Against Women and Girls

Online is the new front line for violence against women and girls, and it has increased exponentially during COVID-19 and the lockdowns. Online violence is an epicentre of risk, intersectional and intergenerational, and compounding multiple forms of violence against women and girls, including trafficking.

This statement accompanies the advocacy of Online VAW webinar organised by **Women's UN Report Network EU**, held on the 4th November 2020, which was urgently held to highlight not only the severity of the problem but its increase during the Covid-19 pandemic. **Sadia Mir** of WUNRN stated the history going back to 2017, when WUNRN highlighted this issue with the UN Human Rights Council through the office of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls **Dr. Dubravka Simonovic**. **Dr. Simonovic** worked on a mandate to include online violence and cyber bullying as forms of the larger mandate on violence against women and women in political/public life.¹ At the time **WUNRN** felt it was paramount to ensure safety for women and girls, when populists had taken to the internet in an attempt to silence women's voices. It was also the climate where hate speech was becoming somewhat acceptable and going viral online against women in the public domain, post the death of MP Jo Cox, online was a repeated concern from women who would write in, in an already exasperated environment which was a backlash against gender rights.

Once the corona virus took hold, attacks on women increased in households but also online, yet this aspect was rarely covered in the reports we accessed, which propelled an urgency to highlight Online VAW and further assist in this capacity building advocacy.

Honoured to have the Special Rapporteur to the United Nations **Dr. Dubravka Simonovic**, once again supporting this work and lending her expertise. **Dr. Simonovic** pointed out that Women's human rights that are protected offline should also be protected online; any measures to address online violence against women and girls should be framed within the broader international human rights framework. Policy and legislative measures to eradicate online violence against women must aim at creating an enabling environment for achieving gender equality through the use of information and communications technology (ICT), including the protection of women's rights to freedom of expression, to privacy, to have access to information shared through ICT, and in particular to live a life free from violence.

We also learnt of the important work that was being done through the **UK All Party Parliamentary Group on Population Development and Reproductive Health** (APPG on PDRH), via its **Vice Chair Baroness Hussein-Ece**. **Baroness Hussein-Ece** recognised the need for action at a critical time, her intervention pointed out that this 'new area' on VAW was recognised as a problem, especially during the pandemic, as 25% of women have been subjected to online abuse.² **Baroness Hussein-Ece** noted that a helpdesk on VAW had been set up, through cross party work by the Department for International Development.³ The APPG PDRH identified the digital sector as a vast resource that needed to be harnessed to support the vulnerable and disadvantaged rather than distance them from it.

¹ <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/38/47>

² <https://plan-international.org/publications/freetobeonline>

³ <https://www.sddirect.org.uk/our-work/vawg-helpdesk/>

As Chair of the Sub Committee on Human Rights Member of European Parliament, Maria Arena expressed her concerns as violence against women harms society as a whole. It violates women's fundamental rights and freedoms, their dignity and equality and it impacts their lives at all levels: physically, psychologically, socially and financially, thus impacting the development of a fair, sustainable and healthy society. It is important to stress that online gender-based violence is a continuum of offline violence, and not a separate phenomenon. At the EU level, there should be commonly accepted definitions of the various forms of violence targeting women online that could serve as a basis for legislation. The EU and its Member States should increase awareness on the phenomenon and ensure that their laws are appropriate for the digital age and that they reflect how technologies are being used for abuse, crimes and exploitation of women. Moreover, online gender-based violence should be further criminalized. All Member States should ratify the Istanbul Convention in order to better prevent, protect and prosecute cyber violence against women and girls.

Ms. Simona Lanzoni- Second Vice President of Grevio-CoE and member of **Fondazione Pangea Reama**, informed that 'firstly, we note the need to highlight the continuum of violence against women and domestic violence offline and online, **GREVIO** decided during its 21st plenary meeting to prepare its very first General Recommendation. This work will demonstrate the relevance and scope of application of the Istanbul Convention in relation to online and technology-facilitated violence against women in order to provide guidance to state parties to the Convention.

Secondly, this period of restrictions due to the pandemic has seen an increase in online violence, it is necessary to be very careful because cyber space has no defined mechanisms to stop the violence when it is committed, that is why we need specific and effective multi-stakeholder based measures put in place.

Ms. Andrijana Radoičić- Atina's Coordinator of direct support for victims of human trafficking expressed that victims should be heard, understood and respected. Concerns mount as more than 40 per cent of female victims of human trafficking have also been subjected to some form of online abuse, according to a report⁴ by Atina, identifying the correlation between the two. In interviews with 178 women and girls who received support from Atina over the past five years, 42 percent reported being the target of online abuse.

Expert Panellists stressed that the same standards need to be put in place just as they are for violence against women offline, to combat violence against women online. These recommendations were put forward intending to inform policy for a new digitalised world;

- To put in place standards that are crucial for States at the national level, to implement the existing treaties properly, as gaps occur with regards to cooperation and implementation to commitments on an international level, with respect to laws
- To emphasise the relationship between the UN instruments and regional instruments such as Cedaw, Beijing, SDG Agenda and the Istanbul Convention, where the United Nations standards are supporting regional standards. Furthermore the Istanbul Convention is providing a regional roadmap that assists in implementation
- Criminalisation of this abuse through the new recommendations such as those defined by Grevio
- For big tech to start with transferring these instruments and their methods into the digital space and ensure safety of use, for women and girls

⁴<http://www.atina.org.rs/sites/default/files/Behind%20the%20screens%20Analysis%20of%20human%20trafficking%20victims%27%20abuse%20in%20digital%20surroundings.pdf>