Technology gap and other tensions in social support and legal procedures: stakeholders' perceptions of online violence against women during the Covid-19 pandemic

Inês Amaral; **Rita Basílio-Simões**; **Gabriela Poleac**

Inês Amaral ✉
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4929-4866

Universidade de Coimbra, Faculdade de Letras, Departamento de Filosofia, Comunicação e Informação (DFCI)
Colégio S. Jerónimo
3004-530 Coimbra, Portugal
ines.amaral@uc.pt

Rita Basílio-Simões
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6356-6042

Universidade de Coimbra, Faculdade de Letras, Departamento de Filosofia, Comunicação e Informação (DFCI)
Colégio S. Jerónimo
3004-530 Coimbra, Portugal
rbasilio@fl.uc.pt

Gabriela Poleac
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1254-557X

Alexandru Ioan Cuza University
Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences
Bulevardul Carol I, 11
Iași 700506, Romania
gabriela.poleac411@gmail.com

Abstract

As the Covid-19 pandemic intensified the digitisation of everyday lives and violent behaviours on many mainstream platforms, online violence against women raised renewed concerns. Across the literature, there has been an emphasis on survivors' experiences and actions to cope with technology-facilitated abuse. Still, little is known about how people perceive the nature, the prevalence, and the impacts of harmful online behaviours and the appropriate social and institutional responses to tackle them. This article aims to help fill this gap. It presents a qualitative study on stakeholders' perceptions conducted under the frame of a broader project which addresses the prevalence, nature and impact of online violence against women during the Covid-19 pandemic. Empirically, it draws on semi-structured interviews with Portuguese activists, police and law enforcement agents and different public and private service sector providers to explore perspectives on preventing, policing and coping with online violence. The findings expose several socio-technical challenges that prevent effective protection measures for victims and punitive consequences for perpetrators. They also suggest tensions in negotiating digital technology's role in social support and legal procedures.

Keywords

1. Introduction

Digital technologies offered unprecedented opportunities for coping with women's subordination, given their potential to be intrinsically democratic (**Papacharissi**, 2004) and participatory (**Dahlgren**, 2009). Across digital platforms, individuals and organisations address experiences related to sexism, misogyny, and violence, fight against gender injustice and different axes of social differentiation with which gender intersects, and put forward new ways of political engagement (**Keller**; **Mendes**; **Ringrose**, 2016; **Núñez-Puente**; **D'Antonio-Maceiras**; **Fernández-Romero**, 2019). However, digital technologies also raised new challenges to women's safety and feminist issues campaigns' by favouring the contexts for online gender-based violence and by helping create an unsafe environment (**Citron**, 2014; **Megarry**, 2014; **Brandt**; **Kizer**, 2015; **Henry**; **Powell**, 2015; **Ging**; **Siapera**, 2018; **Ging**; **Siapera**, 2019).

Evidence of ordinary women routinely experiencing online violence has raised new concerns about women's participation in the digital environment and the public sphere more broadly. Research suggests that women are more likely than men to experience online sexual harassment and stalking and to suffer devastating consequences following such abuse (*FRA*, 2014; **Dugan**, 2014; *EIGE*, 2017). Young women, in particular, disproportionately experience severe types of online harassment, including of sexual nature. These offences span the dark corners of the Internet and the most popular social media (**Muttaqin**; **Ambarwati**, 2020). Evidence also shows that misogynistic rhetoric and threats of sexual violence frequently occur as counter-back women engaged with feminist issues and struggles (**Banet-Weiser**, 2015; **Ben-David**; **Matamoros-Fernández**, 2016). Women with public visibility are preferential targets of abusive and misogynistic online attitudes and behaviours (**Lewis**; **Rowe**; **Wiper**, 2017). The mutual interplay between misogyny and anti-feminism is often the structural basis for online gendered abuse (**Ging**; **Siapera**, 2019). Hence, alongside helping to overcome systemic gender discrimination, the digital environment also supports gender-specific forms of status subordination. As pointed out by Wajcman,

> "while new information and communication technologies (ICTs) can be constitutive of new gender dynamics, they can also be derivative of and reflect older patterns of gender inequality." (**Wajcman**, 2006, p. 8)

As society was forced by the Covid-19 pandemic to reshape daily activities to overcome the confinements, already vulnerable communities were likely to be the least prepared to deal with hyper-connectedness (**Nguyen**; **Hargittai**; **Marler**, 2021). Digital inequalities have also shaped online sociability. The dynamics of power and resistance regarding ever-increasing online abuse practices have thus attracted increased attention. While general violence such as cyberbullying gained great scholarship prominence (**Chevis**; **Payne**, 2021), online abuse against women occupied important institutional agendas, from the *European Commission* to the *United Nations*.

Pre-Covid scholarship has extensively focused on users' experiences and actions to cope with online violence against women. Yet, with some exceptions (e.g. **Henry**; **Flynn**; **Powell**, 2018; **Free** *et al.*, 2017), little attention has been paid to how key stakeholders conceive harmful online gendered behaviours. Little is known about their perception of the most appropriate measures to protect victims, help survivors, and prosecute perpetrators. Moreover, while the growing spread of digital technologies intensified the challenges concerning violence towards women across nations, local specificities, such as national legislation and regulation patterns, must be considered.

This article presents results from a qualitative study examining Portuguese stakeholders' perceptions of online violence against women. It is part of a broader project which addresses online violence against women during the Covid-19 pandemic in Portugal. By recognising the role of digital platforms as facilitators of misogynistic discourse and violent behaviours, this project uses a new feminist materialist approach combined with feminist phenomenology to analyse qualitative data. Notably, it addresses the problem of online violence as a range of experiences of victimisation that reify women's subordination and prevent women from full participation. Like other research (**Amaral**; **Simões**, 2021; **Simões**, 2021; **Simões**; **Amaral**; **Santos**, 2021), it situates online abuse towards women on the *continuum* of violence against women (**Kelly**, 1987), which ranges from intimidating behaviour to life-threatening situations, from psychological to physical and sexual violence.

Empirically, this study draws on semi-structured interviews with activists, police and law enforcement agents and different private and public sector providers. We examine the nature of online violence against women, its impacts during the Covid-19 pandemic perceived by

> ❝ Digital technologies offered unprecedented opportunities for coping with women's subordination, given their potential to be intrinsically democratic ❞

stakeholders, and the social and institutional responses identified as proper to prevent and combat it. By analysing how key informants make sense of online violence against women and of coping with it, it further explores the challenges of designing institutional responses to capture the harms of technology-facilitated violence and provide gender awareness solutions.

> Digital technologies also raised new challenges to women's safety and feminist issues campaigns' by favouring the contexts for online gender-based violence and by helping create an unsafe environment

2. Digital participation

As digital technologies have infiltrated every part of our life (**Castells**, 1996), the need for relevant research on digital participation is mandatory. The idea of digital participation is linked to active participation in the digital society using modern information and communication technology (ICT) such as the Internet. Non-participation in the digital world can lead to social exclusion, and having access to the Internet and the motivation and abilities to use it can lead to a sense of social inclusion (**Seifert**; **Rössel**, 2019). Participation stems from civic agency, which involves the civic engagement of citizens in issues of public and political life (**Dahlgren**; **Álvares**, 2013). **Dahlgren** (2009) emphasises that the media directly impacts participation in public life in his model of civic cultures. The author considers that the idea of civic culture anchors in civic identity. Nevertheless, participation is more than media access or interaction (**Carpentier**, 2011; **Dahlgren**; **Álvares**, 2013).

Carpentier's definition of participation refers to minimalist and maximalist political-democratic models. The author argues that

> "while macro-participation relates to participation in the entire polis, country or political imagined community, micro-participation refers to the spheres of school, family, workplace, church and community" (**Carpentier**, 2011, p. 17).

Accordingly,

> "participation is not the same as access or interaction" (**Carpentier**, 2011, p. 27).

Furthermore, **Carpentier** (2011) contends that although access and interaction are part of the participatory process, participation implies the public takes action. In this sense, the participation dimension is more profound, implying direct consequences and not a mere engagement. In this sense, harmful participation forms can cause greater suffering than mere interaction, although both can be damaging.

Despite the Internet's remarkable characteristics in promoting free expression and bringing significant changes in political, social, economic, and cultural development, it also has a high potential for abuse, as with any powerful innovation (**Dickerson**, 2009). People increasingly use technology to engage with their peers, friends, love partners, and family members. As mediated interactions become more embedded into daily life, the potential to injure or emotionally harm someone rises. The new digital media practices create multiple forms of abuse and offences. At the same time, the increase in new media opportunities has enabled extremist groups and individuals to amplify their discriminatory messages, allowing them to shield themselves in anonymity (**Jakubowicz** *et al.*, 2017).

In addition, online engagement is a direct consequence of different communication patterns that influence individuals to have specific behaviours concerning participation (**Barnidge** *et al.*, 2014). The Internet may seem private, but everything that is shared can quickly become public. As a result, numerous types of abuse have emerged in the last decades, from cyberbullying to identity theft, from cyberharassment or cyberstalking to online rape and murder threats. As with other technology-facilitated harmful practices, these instances are seen as extensions of offline behaviours in that they often replicate the heavily gendered system of face-to-face interactions (**Ging**; **Siapera**, 2018). In particular, they encompass a wide range of forms of abuse, including verbal insults, sexist hate speech, sexual harassment, stalking, threats, intimidation, and invasion of privacy not typically aimed at women because of their actions but because of their mere existence as a group member and what this group is perceived to symbolise (**Ging**; **Siapera**, 2019). These harms have many forms. They often coincide with bullying directed at specific targets. Still, they equally often correspond to acts of gender discrimination and anti-feminism.

> Women with public visibility are preferential targets of abusive and misogynistic online attitudes and behaviours

3. The Covid-19 pandemic and online vulnerabilities

During the Covid-19 pandemic, when most of the world was isolated at home, people appealed to social media platforms like *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and *WhatsApp* to stay in touch. The Internet has become a lifeline, connecting one to individuals who are dear to them or just to outsiders. Advanced technology proved to be superior to all other forms of media. Users felt a sense of immediacy when communicating online. People noticed various apps that helped alleviate the lack of face-to-face meetings to some extent: corporate executives, relatives, partners, and friends met together in *Zoom*, *Skype*, *WhatsApp*, *FaceTime*, and other similar apps.

The lockdowns altered the external world in every meaningful way, including social interactions, online school and

college lectures, and working from home. Most people's online activity increased dramatically as a result of this move. Since social media has become a primary form of contact during the pandemic-induced lockdowns, people have been actively sharing new accomplishments and expressing their thoughts more openly than before (**Jain** *et al.*, 2020). The increased social media exposure

> This study addresses the problem of online violence as a range of experiences of victimisation that reify women's subordination and prevent women from full participation in society

combined with demographic factors significantly impacted the mental health of these respondents, who experienced depression and anxiety due to the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic's impacts (**Gao** *et al.*, 2020). Thus, even though people have been isolated throughout the pandemic, they have become more vulnerable to online abuse (**Robinson** *et al.*, 2020).

Evidence suggests that online forms of bullying differ from pre- to mid-Covid-19 times (**Barlett** *et al.*, 2021). At least two reasons explain these disparities.

- The first is related to the risen levels of stress and anxiety (**Boals**; **Banks**, 2020).
- Secondly, more access indicates a more severe danger.

Individuals spend more time online than average, and past research has shown that Internet use is associated with the emergence of cyberbullying (**Kowalski** *et al.*, 2014). When people consume more content on the Network and conduct most of their social and professional interactions through digital media, they are more exposed to hateful comments and harassment. This increases the risk of online victimisation and concerns about harmful online behaviours' nature, prevalence, and impacts. In Portugal, the *Safe Internet Line* of the *Portuguese Association of Victim Support* received 1626 requests for assistance and complaints on different types of cyber harm in 2021 and 1164 in 2020, mostly from women (*APAV*, 2020, 2021). In 2019, reports totalised 827, mostly from men (*APAV*, 2019). While these numbers reflect only the reported cases, not the ones that actually occurred, they mirror pre and post Covid-19 pandemic changes. Based on this, we sought to understand:

> RQ1: How do different stakeholders perceive online violence's nature, prevalence, and impacts during the Covid-19 pandemic?

4. Online violence against women

Despite the lack of data, the *European Commission* estimates that one in ten women have experienced online violence since age 15 (*EIGE*, 2017). The American *Pew Research Center* shows that the percentage of women reporting being sexually harassed online has risen since 2017 (**Vogels**, 2021). For the *United Nations* (*UNO*, 2021), the pandemic has been a catalyst for "a parallel global epidemic of violence against women around the world", with a significant increase in domestic violence, trafficking, sexual exploitation, and technology-facilitated abuse.

The proliferation of the Internet has long ago exacerbated the long-standing issues that women face, particularly those in conditions of increased vulnerability for not conforming to hegemonic identity patterns. Technology-facilitated harmful behaviours targeting women coexist with traditional, face-to-face violence. Both share the socio-cultural milieus in which cross-cutting gender subordination is historically rooted (**Shaw**; 2014; **Lewis**; **Rowe**; **Wiper**, 2017). Women may face a *continuum* of online aggressions, ranging from verbal offences and unwanted sexual advances to sexist and/or racist insults and frequent, harmful, frightening, and sometimes life-threatening abuse, as happens with offline violence. As pointed out earlier, the concept of the *continuum of violence*, from **Kelly** (1987), enables perceiving how both types of violence are not the result of isolated incidents but instead reflect patterns of asymmetrical power relations. Indeed, the ideologies that sustain the dominant power and unequal gender relations and the systemic discrimination that occurs in the digital environment must be seen in an interrelated way with the offline realm (**Amaral**; **Simões**, 2021).

Also, online and face-to-face violence seem to share numerous characteristics. **Lewis**, **Rowe** and **Wiper** (2017) found that most women have been subjected to various types of online abuse, with over half reporting that it is a regular feature of their online lives. The harmful behaviours are multiple and varied, just as in the real world. Their study also shows that the regularity with which abuse occurs is a hallmark of its impact. Rather than lessening its repercussions, frequency exacerbates it. As with real life violence, online abuse against women instils fear and silence, mainly through the threat of sexualised violence and exclusion, disdain, or discrediting. As others point out (**Sobieraj**, 2017; **Ging**; **Siapera**, 2018; **Ging**; **Siapera**, 2019), by favouring the scrutiny and policing of women's behaviour, the harmful online practices have

chilling, silencing and self-censorship effects on female public participation, limiting personal and professional opportunities, just like can happen in result of traditional forms of violence. In addition, as offline violence against women, online abuse cases can significantly influence mental health. A study from **Finkelhor** (2020) shows that 32% of victims report stress symptoms, and 38% experience emotional discomfort. Also, they limit women's

> Participation dimension is more profound, implying direct consequences and not a mere engagement. In this sense, harmful participation forms can cause greater suffering than mere interaction, although both can be damaging

online expression and public involvement by causing emotional pain and the fear of offline stigmatisation.

What distinguishes online violence from traditional harmful behaviours against women is that victims are more likely to be subjected to hostile events in multiple and new settings with infinite public visibility. The affordances of digital platforms, including –but not limited to– the visibility and spreadability of content, the anonymity/pseudonymity of users, and the multimodality of settings, enable an environment that differs from the offline and pre-social media era (**Bangasser-Evans** *et al.*, 2017; **Schrock**, 2015). The abusive practices can be transmitted in a variety of formats, including text, images, and GIFs (**Keum**; **Miller**, 2018) and linger on different platforms over time, amplifying the harm of victimisation. As **Williams** (2007, p. 103) suggests,

> "the permanency and visibility of violent narratives online give a certain longevity to the abusive text".

Indeed, abuse traces persist in cyberspace, intensifying the suffering of the victims (**Henry**; **Powell**, 2015).

Technology has allowed new forms of female victimisation and the emergence of networks based on a collective subculture of male dominance that aims to attack and silence women who dare to express their opinions about gender issues and masculine privilege by instigating abusive online practices (**Simões**; **Amaral**; **Santos**, 2021). Ultimately, permanence, itinerancy, and anonymity are among the most difficult challenges to manage (**Gagliardone** *et al.*, 2015, p. 13), and they all apply to both types of harmful behaviours.

As disseminating abusive content on the Internet becomes a significant cause of worry, the conflict between freedom of expression and hate control resurfaces. Societies still strive to protect freedom of expression and vulnerable groups from discrimination and abuse. Because both are recognised as fundamental human rights, governments face a challenging task in balancing the freedom to free expression with the protection from the consequences of hate (**Foxman**; **Wolf**, 2013). While hateful online practices don't deserve free speech protection (**Citron**; 2014; **Citron**; **Norton**, 2011), monitoring women's behaviour is a reminder of whoever is in charge and who sets the parameters within which women are free to move (**Megarry**, 2014), whereas men's freedom is unconstrained. Our interest is also in building on this research. Therefore:

> RQ2: What social and institutional responses are identified as proper to prevent and combat online violence against women?

5. Method

The methodological strategy we adopted starts from a feminist phenomenological perspective that considers womanhood and its historical, social structure (**De-Beauvoir**, 1949/2010; **Stein**, 1932/1996; **Arendt**, 1958/1973), her place of speech (**Spivak**, 2003), including the idea that the personal is political (**Hanisch**, 1969). This standpoint was co-opted by **Fraser** (2012), **Butler** (1988), and **Young** (2005) in multiple dimensions that state that gender does not focus exclusively on biology. We articulate this feminist phenomenological approach with a new feminist materialist perspective that argues that the dynamics of people's engagement with other people and objects are profoundly productive. Therefore, when people use digital technologies, they are not just consuming dominant ideologies but are also sensing, feeling, and embodying effective assemblages of matter, thought and language (**Barad**, 2007; **Bennett**, 2004; **Braidotti**, 2002; **Haraway**, 1988; 1991; **Lupton**, 2019). Interlinking these perspectives as a starting point for analysing perceptions of online violence against women allows, we believe, for a broader holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

From October 2020 to March 2021, we conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with Portuguese activists (8), law enforcement agents (4), and different private and public service sector providers, such as trade unions and victim support centres (5). The interviews ranged from 20 to 1h30 minutes, during which a series of open-ended questions were posed, asking about their perceptions and experiences with online violence generally and specifically regarding online violence against women and how they conceive the proper forms for dealing with it. Interviews were recorded and analysed for recurring ideas using qualitative methods. Following institutional ethic standards, participants' names are not used. Our analytical framework was critical thematic analysis. Following the proposal of **Lawless** and **Chen** (2019), the analytical process unfolded into two phases. Firstly, an open text coding was performed with the support of the *Maxqda* software to "identify, analyse and report patterns" in the data (**Braun**; **Clarke**, 2006, p. 79); secondly, the patterns recognised were interconnected with the broader ideological context. We thus search for both manifest meaning and more profound, critical interpretations.

'' As mediated interactions become more embedded into daily life, the potential to injure or emotionally harm someone rises. The new digital media practices create multiple forms of abuse and offences ''

'' As with real life violence, online abuse against women instils fear and silence, mainly through the threat of sexualised violence and exclusion, disdain, or discrediting ''

6. Results and discussion

We identified four interconnected themes, as shown in Figure 1.

(1)The context and nature of online violence,
(2) its social consequences,
(3) the role of digital technologies during the pandemic, and
(4) the appropriate ways to prevent and combat online violence.

Themes 1, 2 and 3 helped us to answer RQ1 and theme 4, the RQ2, as we will show in what follows.
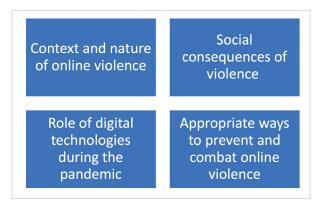
6.1. Context and nature of online violence

The first theme that surfaced in our data was the *Context and nature of online violence*. It groups intensively discussed issues and ideas on the modalities of violence, its difference from offline counterparts, and statements about the victims and the perpetrators. For the most part, stakeholders stressed the new modalities of aggressive behaviour digital technologies have favoured and the new challenges and risks they pose. Violence may occur in the shadows, but it also occurs on popular social media platforms such as *Instagram* and *Facebook* and instant messaging services such as *WhatsApp* and *Telegram*. Technology afforded new types of harmful practices and sometimes allowed to increase the intensity and severity of the existing ones. For instance, concerning stalking, as explained by an office manager from a victim support NGO:

> "The fact that the person is permanently in contact with the cell phone started to generate another type of violence and control (…), and even more aggravated forms of stalking through the use of the cell phone that did not exist before."

The interviewees reported the prevalence of a diverse range of new technology-facilitated harmful behaviours, often linked and profoundly dynamic, echoing the literature on the subject (**Citron**, 2014). From general and workplace harassment to sexist hate speech, from identity theft to doxing, from abuse through intimate images to cyber flashing, sextortion, image manipulation, and deep fake, for key Portuguese informants, online violence comes in many forms and affects women disproportionally. Some thus acknowledged the need to expand the defining field of violence against women.

Part of the interviewees recognises that the victims still normalise the violent acts they suffer. However, some contend that online practices are already considered more impactful than physical forms of aggression.

> "This psychological pressure, the control, the insults, the humiliation…, many of the women already identify this as violence that leaves more marks on them than sometimes this physical violence, which is watertight over time." (Office manager of a victim support NGO)

Overall, stakeholders believe that the victimisation profile is non-existence, except for being women or perceived as such. Online violence is transversal, most of them contended, reaching women of all ages and professions, just as happens with offline violence.

> "Women are heavily bombed with violent messages",

as stated by a psychologist of a social intervention team at an NGO. The interviewees are also more likely to contend that victims who experience these situations conditioned their responses/reactions due to fear. The immediacy of the digital and the ease of propagating violence on a continuum is said to encourage the perpetrator's behaviour but not the victim to snarl back. A few insisted that even disappearing online, women are never safe:

> "They all know that if they block all communication possibilities, violence will move from the online or remote context to the face-to-face context. (...) The big difference [in relation to offline violence] is that there is never, ever rest." (Volunteer at a Feminist NGO)

Despite the absence of official data, there is a trend to recognise the inexistence of a single type of perpetrator. Stranger males with a visible or an anonymous profile, acting individually or in organised groups, are the authors of direct and indirect violence targeting women, as are well-known men such as acquaintances and intimate partners. Some also stress the role of women and female profiles integrated into collectives and organised groups, whose action is recognised as being expanded by the sensation of anonymity and impunity offered by the Internet. Others, mostly law enforcement agents, highlighted that, despite the diversity, perpetrators are typically men and usually intimate partners or former teammates. As an advisor of the *Attorney General's Office* commented, even if the perpetrators are anonymous,

> "in the end it becomes clear that they are acquaintances of the victim."

Figure 1. Interconnected themes in online violence

> The *European Commission* estimates that one in ten women have experienced online violence since age 15

6.2. Social consequences of violence

Focused on how online violence impacts victims, local communities and society more generally, *Social consequences of violence* are also a recurring theme across the conversations. Most stakeholders speak of the online impacts, which include self-censorship, self-discipline and silencing and even the victim abandonment, albeit temporary, of social media where the experiences of violence took place. These impacts result in an enormous self-limitation of the victims in the same environment where the violence occurred. Blocking profiles or abandoning a digital platform is, in the end, ways of normalising harmful behaviours that can change lives. As a police inspector from the *Unit for Combating Cybercrime and Technological Crime* pointed out, giving the example of abuse through intimate images:

> "It always works like this. Some collectors have nothing else to do if they don't collect this. And that when they see that content has been removed, they will circulate it on a private Telegram group, on a Brazilian website, on an American website, on a German website, wherever it may be. These are the most common places, and we have to tell them: 'Prepare yourself because this could resurface'".

> **Governments face a challenging task in balancing the freedom to free expression with the protection from the consequences of hate**

The impacts of violence in the real life were also highlighted and described as immensely severe. They include stress and anxiety, isolation, feelings of insecurity, loss of self-esteem, and self-mutilation. The victim's entire web of social relationships is affected. Thus, some stressed that these have individual and collective impacts with which governments, social institutions and private agents should deal.

> "Some situations are leading to the voluntary dismissal of a woman who is being targeted by bullying online", stated a union leader.

Ultimately, as said by activists:

> "There will start to be a large group of people with poor mental health." (Person in charge of a victim support centre)

> "It has an impact primarily on the mental health and emotional and psychological well-being of the community." (Executive director of NGO for LGBT rights)

Some respondents also highlighted the impact of online violence targeting women on a deeper ideological level. Mostly, they believe we should expect negative consequences for the progress achieved regarding gender relations. Normalised online violence against women "increase the prejudice towards women", as contended by feminist activists. Also, in situations where there is already physical or psychological violence perpetrated by an intimate partner,

> "the online is another channel to introduce a new dimension of violence that will have a more generalised effect because it ends up affecting the victim in the community",

emphasised a member of a professional organisation.

6.3. Role of digital technologies during the pandemic

The third theme identified was the *Role of digital technologies during the pandemic*, which deals with observations about the use of digital technologies in the context of the pandemic and how they relate to motivated individuals using them for abuse and oppression. Overall, participants agreed that the pandemic has accelerated the phenomenon of digitisation of society by giving way to hyperconnectivity and accentuating online communication relationships. In general, they identify the benefits of digital technologies in light of the isolation created by the Covid-19 pandemic, namely in communicating with family and friends and in other daily life activities such as distance learning and labour work. Stakeholders are also unanimous when referring to the role of technology in shaping perpetration and victimisation patterns. As claimed by a person in charge of a victim support centre, "technologies interfere in our way of thinking".

> **The immediacy of the digital and the ease of propagating violence on a continuum is said to encourage the perpetrator's behaviour but not the victim to snarl back**

When most of the world was isolated at home, technology was an ally in the fight against loneliness and, at the same time, helped feed feelings of rage, ressentiment or simple boredom.

Some contend that there were undoubtedly cases of perpetrators being prompted to harmful practices, unaware that abuse can be profoundly terrifying with long-term consequences. Sometimes,

> "people don't have the exact idea of the gravity of what they are doing. But they are doing it",

said an inspector of the *Police Unit for Combating Cybercrime and Technological Crime*. Additionally, as a few stressed, the increase in digitisation, like the pandemic itself, took people and institutions by surprise. As technology incorporates social and political relationships, often increasing the burden on vulnerable groups (**Wajcman**, 2006), systemic inequalities were replicated "even if unintentionally", explained another agent of the Portuguese justice system.

Activists preferred differently to emphasise that, despite its essential role in connecting people and facilitating positive and negative actions, technology is far from the root cause of the problem.

> ' Perpetrators are typically men and usually intimate partners or former teammates '

"Technology is just the means of communication. The problem of violence is with the immaturity of violent people who cannot deal with anger and other primary emotions, such as shame",

argued a psychologist for a Social Intervention Team at an NGO. The attitudes, beliefs and values that sustain unbalanced power relations are endorsed by

"a culture in which women's role as caregiver and women sexual objectification, for example, is tolerated and supported in real life and online",

claimed an activist of a feminist NGO. By overwhelming women at home, the pandemic may be contributing to this, she added.

Thus, for most people, online violence modalities are dynamic and accompany the transformations of the digital environment, integrating the continuum of violence against women that is inseparable from the offline context. Violence occurs indiscriminately on digital platforms and is often normalised and even minimised, despite causing fear, anxiety, and stress and affecting the victims' personal, social and professional spheres. Additionally, the pandemic is recognised as responsible for increased online violence by facilitating digitation and new social and political relationships, which can reify social subordination.

6.4. Appropriate ways to prevent and combat online violence

The theme *Appropriate ways to prevent and combat online violence* describes how participants make sense of coping with online violence against women. Overall, people realise the existence of various technological and social constraints that prevent effective protection measures for survivors and punitive consequences for perpetrators.

Most stakeholders mention a "technology gap" in social support and legal procedures. Those who provide support are always one step behind, claimed most participants. As the head of a public body mentioned:

"The feeling I have as a user and observer is that this is very unmanageable".

Stakeholders agreed that efforts were made nationwide to go with technological changes. Still, the lack of knowledge to address the ever-evolving technology-facilitated harmful practices persists:

"Most social institutions and even some that work specifically to protect victims of violence, are not minimally prepared to deal with technology." (Office manager at a feminist NGO)

"In fact, there is still great unpreparedness among professionals in these matters." (President of NGO for supporting young people)

Participants stressed how it is challenging to regulate in this area due to the ever-evolving nature of technology affordances. However, most stakeholders stated that updating the legal framework according to the new types of harmful practices and the visibility they have is urgent. This means creating specific legal types with more targeted action warrants. Furthermore, while technology affords fast approaches, the justice system works slowly. That is why, most of the time,

"the victim ends up not feeling secure in turning to legal institutions to seek help",

argued an advisor to NGO for victim support.

Reporting does not mean the perpetrators will be punished, as some participants realised. They are often not identified, and the victims can be at higher risk following the report, especially if the perpetrator is not a stranger. Nevertheless, reporting the cases by victims is mainly referred to as the response that victims can give to online abuse.

"If it happens, get help as soon as possible to try to minimise the damage",

said an activist from a victim support NGO.

"The first thing is to report",

claimed a volunteer at a feminist NGO.

"We always encourage victims to report, but we also explain that it's a tough process that often goes nowhere, especially hate speech online",

said an activist from an NGO for LGBT Rights.

The reported cases are still not very expressive (*APAV*, 2019; 2020; 2021). The lack of awareness of online rights greatly influences victims' reactions:

"People don't know whom to turn to, what to do, or what rights they have. Therefore, this area also needs major investment at various levels." (President of NGO for supporting young people)

The interviewees primarily argued that prevention measures are more challenging but promise to be effective. They involve education and information focusing on digital literacy to guarantee people's rights in digital environments.

Knowing the advantages, disadvantages and dangers of the platforms we use is the best way to prevent online violence, some participants highlighted. A few also mentioned the need to raise awareness of gender inequalities and that online actions might reinforce stereotypes. As an activist claimed:

> '' Various technological and social constraints prevent effective protection measures for victims and punitive consequences for perpetrators ''

> "Really teach younger people. They must be taught to be careful with privacy issues and to understand the impact that some of our actions online have, whether in terms of violence or bullying." (Office manager of a victim support NGO)

Stakeholders also suggested the existence of tensions in negotiating digital technology's role in social support and legal procedures. While technology can be an ally, for instance, by affording the creation of sites where victims and bystanders can report harmful behaviours to authorities, it seems that this is not yet a regular practice. As a union leader contended, even platforms created by the Public Administration for public workers' complaints did not work "more than once in a while".

Some agreed that technology can also help combat online violence through mechanisms to detect and report abuse. A few referred to the willingness of most platforms to collaborate in this. At the same time, they adverted that their efforts are insufficient. Algorithms have limitations because they are blind to gender issues, and there are no consequences for abusers. As an interviewee said:

> "Perhaps at the level of *Facebook*, if a person is constantly the target of complaints, maybe he has to be banned from that social media [platform], because he does not have appropriate behaviours for this experience." (Member of *Women Lawyers' Organization*)

Thus, some stakeholders claimed that platforms must be accountable. As an *Attorney General of the Republic* contended,

> "the platforms themselves can do control, but there is no way to impose control on the platforms".

Overall, the proper ways to prevent and combat online violence require changes in many dimensions. Participants signalled that institutions need specialised knowledge in the new dynamics of technology-facilitated violence targeting women and the urgency to change the law and legal procedures to accompany these dynamics. Some also spoke about the role of digital literacy and gender awareness in preventing harmful practices. Others spoke of the unexploited potential of technology to combat the harm practised through it, including regarding status subordination.

7. Conclusion

This paper examined Portuguese stakeholders' perceptions of the nature, the prevalence, and the impacts of harmful online behaviours targeting women and the appropriate social and institutional responses to tackle them. A qualitative approach helped to understand the production of meaning on this issue among important key informants. As described above, the Covid-19 pandemic is seen as responsible for the increase in the intensity of online violence and for reproducing social and political relationships that can lead to status subordination. Also, while institutions struggled to catch up with technology-facilitated abuse, users normalised the harmful behaviours and the ideological context to which the harmful behaviour is connected. At the same time, despite its potential to facilitate and stop abuse, technology has been largely unexplored in this domain. Promoting digital literacy, changing the law and other regulatory frameworks, and taking advantage of technological possibilities are all considered proper ways to cope with the issue. However, designing institutional responses that capture the harms of technology-facilitated gender-based violence is still challenging for stakeholders. These perceptions thus yield that greater attention must be paid by public bodies, digital platforms and other private players to gender awareness and to the use of technology as an instrument of systemic change.

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