Technology-facilitated gender-based violence: Considerations across the life course

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a pervasive public health issue and global human rights violation that transcends national, cultural, and economic boundaries. It stems from enduring gender inequalities sustained by harmful gender and social norms and is experienced differently depending on individuals' social positions and intersecting forms of discrimination.

As technology becomes increasingly embedded in our everyday lives, it opens new spaces for the perpetration of violence and can intensify the experience of GBV. Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV)[1] is disproportionately experienced by women and girls and must not be understood or addressed as distinct from 'real-world' violence.

This brief explores TFGBV across the life course, highlighting its impact on both women and children, and emphasizes the need for policies and programmes that reflect those different life stages. It presents three key messages:

1. **TFGBV manifests differently across life stages**, with distinct and overlapping forms of violence that are shaped by intersecting forms of oppression and discrimination.

2. **Child protection frameworks are not designed for women and should not be applied to them**. Applying child-specific approaches, such as the 'best interests' standard, to women can undermine their autonomy and agency, and reinforce paternalistic practices that perpetuate unequal power dynamics which underpin GBV.[2]

3. **While distinctions are critical, there are important synergies between efforts to address TFGBV and technology-facilitated violence against children**. In the face of rapidly evolving digital threats, these synergies should be leveraged to maximise impact across research, policy, and programming. Key among these is centring the knowledge and experiences of rights-holders and affected stakeholders in shaping technology, research, policies, and programmes.

[1] See 'Note on terminology' below, which sets out the definitions used in this paper.
[2] See RESPECT Framework.

How TFGBV manifests throughout the life course

TFGBV affects individuals throughout the life course, with certain forms more closely linked to specific stages – for example:

- The creation and distribution of **child sexual abuse material, online grooming**, and tech-enabled **child marriage** affect children and adolescents.
- **Workplace-related** online harassment and **intimate partner violence** are more commonly experienced by adult women.
- Online **financial exploitation** and **coercive control by caregivers** disproportionately target older women.

Other forms of TFGBV, such as **cyberstalking, doxxing, image-based abuse** (including non-consensual sharing of intimate images and AI-generated deepfakes), and **coordinated online harassment**, can affect all age groups.[3] Adolescent girls often face heightened risks, as they navigate puberty, relationships, and active digital engagement. Older women, meanwhile, remain largely invisible in current research and service provision on TFGBV, despite being at risk of certain forms of online abuse and exploitation.

The impacts of TFGBV on all age groups can be severe, including psychological, emotional, physical, and economic harm. TFGBV often restricts individuals' participation in public life, including in digital spaces, and in the gravest of cases, can lead to femicide. Its effects can also extend beyond the targeted person and impact their children, siblings, caregivers, or others in their social networks who may witness, inadvertently facilitate it, or be directly affected.

While evidence on TFGBV across the life course remains limited, particularly from low-income countries, the following diagram offers an exploratory overview of how some forms of TFGBV may manifest at different life stages. It serves as a visual reference to help practitioners, policymakers, and technologists consider risks and harms across the life course.

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[3] UNFPA (2021). Technology-facilitated Gender-based Violence: Making All Spaces Safe.
Available at: https://www.unfpa.org/publications/technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence-making-all-spaces-safe

Common forms of TFGBV across the life course[4]

Illustrative examples	Young children (0-6)	Older children (7-12)	Adolescents (13-17)	Young women (18-24)	Women (25-59)	Older women (60+)
Exposure to harmful gendered content	0-6	7-12	13-17	18-24	25-59	60+
Cyberbullying	0-6	7-12	13-17	18-24	25-59	60+
Tech-facilitated child, early, and forced marriage	0-6	7-12	13-17	18-24	25-59	60+
Online grooming, recruitment, or luring	0-6	7-12	13-17	18-24	25-59	60+
Online harassment	0-6	7-12	13-17	18-24	25-59	60+
Coercive control and surveillance	0-6	7-12	13-17	18-24	25-59	60+
Image-based abuse	0-6	7-12	13-17	18-24	25-59	60+
Doxxing and hacking	0-6	7-12	13-17	18-24	25-59	60+
Digital intimate partner/dating violence	0-6	7-12	13-17	18-24	25-59	60+
Tech-facilitated workplace harassment	0-6	7-12	13-17	18-24	25-59	60+
Online financial exploitation	0-6	7-12	13-17	18-24	25-59	60+

[4] This list is non-exhaustive and does not intend to indicate that certain forms of TFGBV are exclusively experienced by certain age groups only. Many factors, including the intersecting forms of discrimination an individual may face, contribute to what form, how and when they may experience TFGBV.

Distinctions when addressing TFGBV throughout the life course

Different approaches, policies and programmes are required to address the distinct experiences, rights and needs of children, adolescents, women, and older women.[5]

Policy and programming must also reflect the differing legal and normative obligations toward women, adolescents, and children. **Child protection** responses are grounded in international child rights frameworks,[6] which recognise children's evolving capacities, their dependent status, and responsibilities of caregivers and authorities to act in their best interests. While these principles are essential for protecting children, they are not designed for **women**. International law and policy to address GBV against women in all their diversity prioritise survivor-centred approaches, which embed women's autonomy, confidentiality, and decision-making power. **Adolescent girls** require specific attention as they are often overlooked in both child protection and GBV programming and policies. It is essential to apply survivor-centred principles in ways that respect adolescents' evolving capacities, agency, and rights under international child rights law.[8]

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[5] These different experiences are also shaped by social and structural inequalities including forms of discrimination such as those based on age, gender, disability, social class, migration status, ethnicity and sexual orientation.

[6] For example, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and The Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. See also: UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment, CRC/C/GC/25, 21 March 2021.

[7] Children of all ages have the right to express their views and to have those views given due weight, in accordance with their age and maturity. This calls for rights-based, developmentally appropriate approaches that balance protection and participation, in line with children's evolving capacities: UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 12 (2009) The right of the child to be heard, CRC/C/GC/12, 20 July 2009.

[8] Children in adolescence, in particular, require distinct strategies that reflect both their growing agency and their continued need for support.: UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 20 (2016) on the implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence, CRC/C/GC/20, 6 December 2016.

There is also significant potential for mutual learning between efforts to address TFGBV against women and technology-facilitated violence against children. Child protection responses to technology-facilitated violence have evolved over nearly three decades, starting with efforts in the late 1990s to combat the proliferation of child sexual abuse materials. These efforts offer valuable experience in building international alliances, coordinating across sectors, and establishing shared priorities around 'child online safety' which serve as valuable learnings for the TFGBV movement.[9]

Efforts to address TFGBV began to emerge a decade later as a result of the targeting of feminist movements.[10] These efforts were, and remain, driven by the gendered power structures which permit TFGBV to persist. Given that gender inequality is, by definition, a driver of TFGBV and is also a strong determinant of a child's experience of violence, GBV programming brings critical expertise in applying a gendered lens to understand risks, harms and barriers – insights that can strengthen child-focused approaches.

Whether addressing TFGBV against women, children, or adolescents, efforts **should be integrated into existing child protection and GBV prevention and response systems** and tailored to context, recognising that experiences and risks vary across different regions, cultures, and communities.[11]
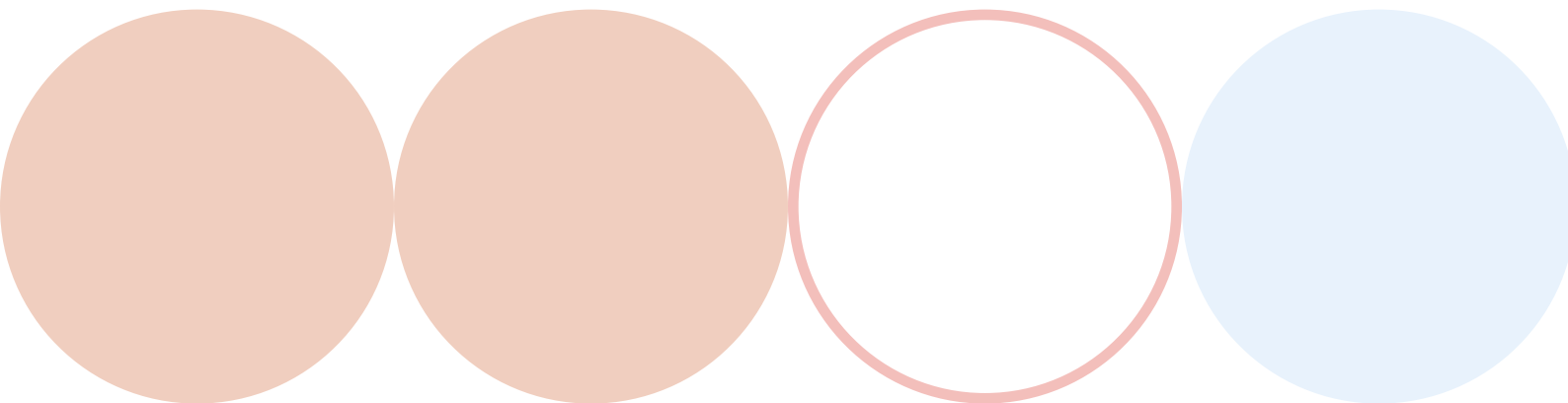
[9] See for example: Feather, J., & Miglio, V. (2024). Lessons from the Online Child Safety Sector. Violence Against Women and Children Helpdesk. Available at: https://www.datocms-assets.com/112720/1740592732-vawc-helpdesk-report-lessons-from-the-online-child-safety-sector_final.pdf.
[10] See Association for Progressive Communication (APC) (2005) Cultivating Violence Through Technology? Exploring the Connections between Information Communication Technologies (ICT) and Violence Against Women (VAW). Available at: https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/VAW_ICT_EN_0.pdf; APC (2014). Feminist Principles of the Internet. Available at https://feministinternet.org/; and FIRN (n.d.) Understanding of technology-facilitated gender-based violence beyond social media-centred analysis. Available at: https://firn.genderit.org/blog/understanding-technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence-beyond-social-media-centred.
[11] UNFPA (2024). A Framework for TFGBV Programming. Available at: https://www.unfpa.org/publications/framework-tfgbv-programming.

Harnessing synergies and improving collaboration across the life course

As technology rapidly evolves, so too do threats towards women and children. Addressing these calls for actions across five key areas: legal protections, prevention strategies, digital safety and tech accountability, quality responses, and evidence and research. Each has age-specific considerations and opportunities for collaboration:

1. **Survivor-centred legal protections:** Legislative measures are critical for addressing TFGBV across the life course. Criminal, civil and administrative laws must align with international human rights obligations and be survivor-centred, accessible, enforceable, and responsive to the distinct needs of women and children respectively. Outdated, overly punitive or ambiguous laws that can be weaponised to criminalise survivors, including children, of TFGBV must be reformed.[12] Legal frameworks should also ensure that individuals facing multiple forms of discrimination are not excluded from access to protection or redress. Equally important is ensuring survivors have access to gendered, age-appropriate and meaningful remedies and services. Effective implementation of laws and delivery of quality services requires coordinated action across sectors. Rights-holders, rights-holder defenders (including GBV, women's rights and child protection groups and organizations), affected stakeholders, and independent experts (including feminist data protection, privacy, and technology specialists) must be meaningfully consulted in the development of laws and policies.

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[12] UNFPA (forthcoming). Guidance on Rights-based Law Reform to Address TFGBV. See also: UNICEF (2022), Legislating for the digital age. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/reports/legislating-digital-age.

2. **Early intervention and prevention throughout the life course:** Primary prevention should include gender-transformative parenting programmes[13] that engage caregivers to challenge unequal gender norms and power dynamics, while fostering caring and non-violent family relationships. As children grow, particularly during adolescence, they need supportive home and school environments that build empathy and promote healthy, respectful relationships, including how these are expressed and navigated online. Integrating digital literacy into school curricula, including into age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education, is essential for institutionalising TFGBV prevention. Across all age groups, technology can be harnessed for self-expression and positive change, and boys and men can be engaged as allies in preventing GBV and advancing gender equality. Cross-sectoral prevention strategies can reduce risks and build resilience throughout the life course.

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[13] For more information on this approach, see UNFPA (2023) Gender-transformative approaches to achieve gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights. Available at: https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA_GTA-2023.pdf. See also: UNICEF, Parenting Programmes to Reduce Violence Against Children and Women - Brief series, Available at: https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/reports/parenting-programmes-reduce-violence-against-children-and-women.

3. **Safety-, privacy-, rights-by-design and tech accountability:** Technology companies must respect human rights in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.[14] This approach includes embedding safety-, privacy-, and rights-by-design measures that are age-appropriate, gender-responsive, and inclusive of diverse user identities and needs. By its nature, the digital environment can create contexts of competing rights, making dialogue and agreement among stakeholders essential. For women in all their diversity, safety-by-design emphasizes survivor-centred approaches and safe and ethical standards for GBV-related data, particularly around informed consent and robust data privacy.[15]

Companies should meaningfully engage rights-holders, relevant stakeholders, and independent experts in the design and monitoring of technologies. This approach is relevant to policies, products, features, and mechanisms, and in implementing TFGBV prevention and response efforts to ensure the safety of users across different age groups and compliance with global standards for child protection and GBV against women. Governments must also engage with relevant stakeholders, strengthen regulation and monitoring of business conduct, and ensure survivors have accessible, timely, and effective remedies for rights violations. Investment in, and agreement on, what safe, ethical, feminist technology looks like for all internet users is critical to developing innovative, survivor-centred solutions that prioritise safety, dignity, privacy, and freedom of expression.

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[14] UN Human Rights (2011). Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs). Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf. See also: UNICEF, UN Human Rights (2024). Taking a Child Rights-Based Approach to Implementing the UNGPs in the Digital Environment. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/childrightsandbusiness/reports/b-tech-contribution.

[15] Key principles at the intersection of GBV, data and technology include: do no harm, informed consent, transparency, participatory approaches, purpose limitation, and data minimisation. These often conflict with mainstream technology systems designed to collect and monetise large volumes of data. For women and LGBTQI+ identifying individuals, online safety often requires collecting only essential data, enforcing strict access controls, limiting use and duration, and ensuring robust data governance, including clear disposal policies and strong encryption: UNFPA (2023). Guidance on the Safe and Ethical Use of Technology to Address Gender-based Violence and Harmful Practices: Implementation Summary. New York. Available at: https://www.unfpa.org/publications/safe-ethical-tech-gbv. For children, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child calls for the highest standards of ethics, privacy and safety in relation to the design, engineering, development, operation, distribution and marketing of digital products and services. See further: UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment, CRC/C/GC/25, 2 March 2021.

4. **Capacity building and survivor-centred services:** TFGBV response and support services must be tailored to survivors' age, developmental stage, and rights. For young children, this can mean child-friendly, protective, and family-centred interventions. Adolescents need confidential and adolescent-responsive services, while women must be able to access services independently, with confidentiality and autonomy at the core. Across all age groups, services should be inclusive, trauma-informed, and context-specific and integrated into existing child protection and GBV systems.[16] Equipping frontline workers and service providers with digital literacy and coordinated, survivor-centred training is essential. Stronger coordination between GBV and child protection actors, such as through complementary training, protocols, and guidance on age-specific TFGBV can enable more consistent, gender- and age-responsive care across the life course.

5. **Learning and research across the life stages:** While adhering to age-appropriate and ethically sound research and data standards, practitioners and researchers working on TFGBV and technology-facilitated violence against children can support the closure of evidence gaps and guide coordinated, evidence-informed responses. Joint priorities may include exploring how exposure to harmful online content – such as violent, misogynistic, or hypersexualised material – shapes attitudes and behaviours linked to GBV, particularly during adolescence. There is also scope for shared inquiry into how TFGBV manifests across different life stages and among marginalised groups, including LGBTQ+ youth and people with disabilities. While further research can enhance prevention, mitigation, and response efforts, existing evidence already justifies urgent action. Strategic collaboration is also needed to systematically integrate digital risks into GBV and child protection assessments, and to develop tools to monitor and address emerging forms of TFGBV, including in humanitarian and fragile contexts. Across all settings, it is critical to safely centre the knowledge and experiences of rights-holders in shaping research agendas, policies, and programme design – ensuring their safety and rights are respected at every age and stage.

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16 UNFPA (2024). A Framework for TFGBV Programming. Available at: https://www.unfpa.org/publications/framework-tfgbv-programming.

Note on terminology ⊳

It is recognised that definitions of technology-facilitated violence are evolving and contested.[i]

The following definitions are used in this brief:

- **Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV):** an act of violence perpetrated by one or more individuals that is committed, assisted, aggravated and amplified in part or fully by the use of information and communication technologies or digital media against a person on the basis of gender.[ii]
- **Technology-facilitated violence against children:** Any act of violence against children that is perpetrated in part or fully through the use of information and communication technologies or other technological tools.[iii] Gender is a strong determinant of a child's experience of violence, influencing both the type of violence suffered and why violence is inflicted.[iv]

TFGBV and technology-facilitated violence against children overlap and intersect in various ways. For instance, children may experience technology-facilitated harm when TFGBV is directed at their caregiver,[v] or they may experience TFGBV directly in the context of an adolescent peer relationship. TFGBV is used throughout this paper to reflect violence against both women and children. 'TFGBV against women' is used to distinguish from violence against children. The reference to 'women' is a reference to women in all their diversity.

[i] See for example: CEDAW working group on gender-based violence (2025). Initial position paper on tech-facilitated gender-based violence against women, pages 8-11. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/position-papers/cedaw-working-group-gender-based-violence-initial-position-paper-tech.

[ii] UNFPA (2021). Technology-facilitated Gender–based Violence: Making All Spaces Safe. Available at: https://www.unfpa.org/publications/technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence-making-all-spaces-safe.

[iii] United Nations Children's Fund (2025). Measuring Technology-facilitated Violence against Children in Line with the International Classification of Violence against Children, UNICEF, New York. Available at: https://data.unicef.org/resources/data-brief-on-measuring-technology-facilitated-violence-against-children-in-line-with-the-international-classification-of-violence-against-children-icvac/.

[iv] United Nations Children's Fund (2021). Child Protection Strategy 2021-2025, page 12. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/media/104416/file/Child-Protection-Strategy-2021.pdf.

[v] See for example: eSafety (2020). Children and technology-facilitated abuse in domestic and family violence situations, Full report. Available at: https://www.esafety.gov.au/research/children-and-technology-facilitated-abuse-in-domestic-and-family-violence-situations.