

OGBV Regional Insights

Europe



The World Wide Web Foundation is working with Social Finance and members and affiliates of the Women's Rights Online Network to address online gender-based violence and develop responses that lead to lasting and systemic change. This regional summary is part of a research project aiming to develop a global landscape of the responses to online gender-based violence (OGBV) from civil society, tech, and governments. It has a particular focus on Western Europe and the Balkans.

Executive Summary

Across Europe, rates of internet penetration are high, often higher than the global rate of 63.5%. As we see globally, the true extent of OGBV in Europe is hard to measure, due to underreporting, the absence of a standard definition and a lack of transparency from tech companies about what is happening on their platforms. In Eastern Europe in particular there is a lack of engagement from tech companies, and facilitating better engagement is made difficult when they do not have sufficient representatives in the region. In order to better hold tech companies to account, some governments have developed new legislation; the EU Digital Services Act and the UK Online Safety Bill both aim to regulate the digital space rendering it safer for users, but each come with their flaws and potential risks. Civil society organisations have been vocal in lobbying both the UK and EU government to address women's needs more specifically and to create frameworks for implementation that will make impact more tangible.

Regional partners

- Pen to Paper, Eastern Europe
- Social Finance UK

Context

- **[Internet penetration across Europe](#) is typically higher than the global rate (63.5%), with countries in Western Europe having some of the highest of all.** The United Kingdom has a rate of 98%, while France and Germany are both at 93%. In Eastern Europe the rate of internet penetration is typically lower than in Western Europe, although it is still high relative to the global average: in Albania it is 72%, in Croatia 82% and 83% in Montenegro.
- **Unsurprisingly, the tech space in Europe is dominated by the tech big four, and particularly Meta and Google platforms.**
 - In Eastern Europe, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat are all popular, with the latter being popular particularly among those under 25. Telegram and Viber are also commonly used.
 - In the UK in 2022, the social media platforms with the most users were Facebook with 35 million users, YouTube with 58 million users, and Instagram with 32 million users. These three platforms also had the most users in France, Germany and Spain.
- **As is the case in many parts of the world, women working in the public eye in Europe are particularly disproportionately affected by OGBV. For example:**
 - [Ana Lalic](#), a reporter for Serbian news website Nova.rs, wrote an article in April 2020 about the conditions at a hospital in Serbia in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. She was subsequently arrested for spreading panic and unrest. Following her release from detention, Lalic received hundreds of threats via Facebook and Facebook Messenger, in addition to a paid Google Ad on the Google Play app, which contained threatening and degrading language about her and a link to a website with further disinformation about her.
 - British author and investigative journalist, Carole Cadwalladr, rose to prominence in 2018 for her role in exposing the Cambridge Analytica scandal. She faces 'highly gendered' and 'misogynistic' abuse on Twitter, which, according to [research conducted by UNESCO](#), is ultimately aimed to discredit her professionally.
- **What happens online is often a manifestation or product of the cultural context offline. In Eastern Europe, racial and political tensions, as well as misogyny, inevitably make their way into the digital space. There is the ongoing risk that tech could be used as a tool to benefit autocratic regimes and to further suppress marginalized voices.**
 - In the Balkans, government leaders at various levels tend to engage in gendered disinformation to silence dissenting voices.
 - There is ongoing [hostility between Kosovo and Serbia](#), for example, with many Serbs in the north not recognising Kosovo's independence.
 - [Viktor Orban was recently re-elected as Prime Minister of Hungary](#). His growing power in Hungary, and popularity in neighbouring countries, means that his rampant misogyny, xenophobia and homophobia, is gradually being codified in legislation online and offline. It has dangerous implications for the oppression of women, and other members of marginalized communities, exacerbating existing further full and safe community participation.

- In Belarus, the [2020 General Election was much disputed](#) with Svetlana Tikhonovskaya, refusing to accept the 80% majority of Lukashenko - Belarus' first and only President - saying it did not reflect the reality of feeling in the country.

OGBV prevalence and data

- **OGBV is prevalent in Europe; however, the true extent is hard to measure due to lack of transparency from tech platforms, underreporting and the lack of a standardized definition.** An [Amnesty International online poll](#) gathered information about women's experiences of abuse and harassment on social media platforms across eight countries, six of which are in Europe. Out of the 4009 women surveyed, 23% said they had experienced online abuse or harassment at least once, 8% of respondents in the UK specifically said that intimate images of them had been posted online without their consent.
- **The prevalence of OGBV is inherently linked to the violence and abuse that women face offline.**
 - In the UK, [Women's Aid conducted a survey](#) of 307 women survivors of domestic violence, which showed that 45% reported experiencing some forms of online abuse during their relationship.
 - [In France](#), 77% of women who have faced cyberharassment have also experienced at least one form of sexual and/or physical violence from a romantic partner.
- **In Eastern Europe, a few civil society organizations have investigated the prevalence of abuse online, however this has not been focused on gender-based violence specifically.**
 - [An investigation by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network \(BIRN\)](#) found that tools used by big tech to uphold their own community guidelines are failing. There were hundreds of reports of violations, with half of the Bosnian, Serbian, Montenegrin and Macedonian reports made to Facebook and Twitter relating to hate speech. Out of the content that was reported as hate speech, threat of violence or harassment, half of it remains online.
 - SHARE Foundation has a [digital rights monitoring database](#). While cases are not gender disaggregated, they do specify cases of intimate image abuse, doxxing, and other violations that could be classed as forms of OGBV. For example, there are eleven cases of 'publishing information about private life' recorded, and 52 cases of 'insults and unfounded accusations', which include a report of insults directed towards female politicians in the Bosnia Cantonal Assembly going viral.

Tech company initiatives

- **In Eastern Europe, the digital environment is characterized by a lack of engagement on the part of tech companies, with no meaningful mechanisms in place to facilitate closer cooperation with civil society, unless facilitated by larger organizations. Tech platforms often have no representatives in Eastern European countries; the lack of access to tech platform representatives who**

know the local language and culture in these countries is seen to diminish the protection of citizens' rights online.

- Meta has only one representative covering the Eastern Europe region, meaning the specificities of cultural context and language cannot be fully understood in relation to content moderation and addressing OGBV on the platform.
 - Meta has partner organizations in Eastern Europe who act as 'trusted flaggers' and whose role is to mark abusive or harmful content that should be removed, and report it to Meta. These arrangements are not well-known or publicized.
 - In one recent case, harmful comments were made online about a deceased female politician in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and this content was marked by a trusted flagger. Whilst to local civil society organizations this seemed an obvious violation of community guidelines, Meta said that the content did not constitute a violation. Civil society organizations felt that in this case, Meta's judgment was limited by their lack of knowledge of the local context and language.
- **Despite lack of engagement by large online platforms, new approaches to reducing the risk of online harm can be seen in the development of Safety Tech by start-up businesses in Europe.**
 - [The UK is the global market leader in Safety Tech](#), with an estimated 25% of total Safety Tech firms worldwide being based in the UK. There have been signs of newly registered start-ups that are working in the domains on disinformation, content moderation, and video and image analysis.
 - The fertile ground for Safety Tech development is partly being encouraged by the UK Government; DCMS hosted the world's first Safety Tech conference, while also providing £555,000 of funding for the Safety Tech Challenge Fund.
 - An example is [Contex.ai](#), a spin-out from London Imperial College, that develops content moderation solutions and seeks to emulate human understanding when detecting harm.

Government initiatives

- **Europe is at the forefront of the rapidly evolving landscape of legislation regarding online abuse and misuse, with the EU Digital Services Act coming into force at the end of 2022, and the Online Safety Bill in the UK Parliament in early 2023.**
 - As the UK's Online Safety Bill has not yet been passed into law at the time of writing (Jan 23), there are uncertainties on how it will be implemented going forward; however, amendments have been made to strengthen its approach to OGBV. Cyberflashing has been made a criminal offense and pornographic deep fakes have also been criminalized. As regulator, Ofcom¹ will have the power to gather information to oversee and enforce regulation. Criticism has been directed to the Bill, however, for acknowledging the disproportionate harm faced by women and girls online but not reflecting this strongly enough in its recommendations.
 - The Digital Services Act (DSA) in the EU enables users to have more of a say on what content they see online and flag illegal content. Companies will have to make public reports on how they limit serious risk to society regarding

¹ Ofcom is the regulator and competition authority for the UK communications industries

freedom of speech, public health, and elections. As this Act came into force at the end of 2022, its enforcement and effect cannot yet be measured.

- Specificity around OGBV comes from the EU Directive to Combat Violence Against Women 2022, which acknowledges that women are systematically targeted online and that attacks can be motivated by gender even if this is not explicit in the language of the attack. The Directive proposes the criminalization of cyberviolence against women and the strengthening of support and protection for victims, among other actions.
- The impact of the DSA will be felt beyond the bounds of its jurisdiction, as EU law commonly sets a precedent for the region as a whole. There is a risk that, without outlining an effective mechanism for implementation, the DSA could be used by autocratic regimes to suppress women and marginalized communities, rather than to protect them.
- In countries across Europe, there are specific laws on intimate image abuse (France, Slovenia, Croatia). In some countries (e.g. North Macedonia and Kosovo), policy is being changed to ensure national Criminal Codes are compatible with the Istanbul Convention, which could include specific provisions for OGBV. Kosovo's Law Against Domestic Violence 2010 is currently being amended to give new priority to countering violence against women online.
- **While there is legislation that can be used to address OGBV, the lack of enforcement and leniency of punishment continues to be a problem.** [Research suggests](#) that additional legislation around OGBV in Europe is not necessary, but that better and more consistent application of existing legislation is needed. This would require the training and upskilling of the relevant professionals in the legal enforcement and judicial sectors, as well as meaningful engagement from big tech, to effectively prevent, investigate and sanction OGBV.

Civil society initiatives

- **There is a strong presence of organizations working on issues related to OGBV in Europe, who engage with the issue of OGBV in various ways.** These organizations are crucial to the investigation into OGBV, and play an important role in supporting survivors and lobbying governments. Some examples include:
 - [Women Against Violence Europe \(WAVE\)](#) is a network of 164 members across all European countries. WAVE works across a range of women's issues, including violence against women and girls online.
 - The organization [Access Now](#) has a digital security hotline, open 24/7 for incident response, available in nine languages. They offer real-time support, in both a reactive and preventative capacity.
- **Civil society organizations in the UK have been active in their advocacy for better legislation and for making amendments to the Online Safety Bill which would better serve women and girls. For example:**
 - [Glitch](#) is a charity at the forefront of online rights work in the UK. Their aim is to build a safer online world through training, research, workshops and community building. They have a particular focus on black women and

- marginalized people.
 - [End Violence Against Women](#) is a group of feminist organizations who take an intersectional and anti-racist approach to challenging the environment that enables abuse against women in all forms.
 - [Refuge](#) is a charity that provides support to women and children who face domestic abuse. They have been active in their response to the Online Safety Bill and the need for it to protect women more explicitly.
- **In Eastern Europe, there are no organizations specifically targeted on OGBV, but the organizations that do address it tend to be ones that work on media freedom, as part of their work protecting female journalists, or feminist and LGBTQIA+ organizations who work on OGBV as part of a broader GBV advocacy agenda. For example:**
 - [SHARE Foundation](#): an NGO established to advance human rights and freedoms online and a decentralized internet. Engagement in OGBV initiatives is minimal, but they are included here given the reliance of OGBV advocacy on the data gathered via SHARE's digital rights monitoring database.
 - [Balkan Investigative Reporting Network \(BIRN\)](#) (regional with hub office in BiH), including BIRN Hub: a network of non-governmental organizations promoting freedom of speech, human rights and democratic values in Southern and Eastern Europe.
 - [Reporting Diversity Network](#) (Balkans): a regional network of CSOs established to effectively influence media representation of ethnicity, religion and gender in the Western Balkans.
 - [Da se zna!](#): an association of citizens founded in 2016, with the main focus on mapping and documenting the illegal treatment of LGBTQI+ people in the Republic of Serbia.
 - [Journalists Against Violence Against Women](#) (Serbia): collective of journalists and editors who carry out advocacy work to counter violence against women.
 - [Stella](#) (North Macedonia and Hungary): International (UK, Netherlands) NGO that advocates for gender equality as a platform for community development, and knowledge generation.

This is not an exhaustive list, please find further information on civil society organizations working in this region [here](#).

Case studies

- In Western Europe, a coalition of organizations, including local government, civil society, and a tech company, have come together to produce the [DeStalk project](#), aimed at addressing the issue of stalkerware. They have established an e-learning platform available in five languages, along with communication materials and e-learning modules.
- [An EU-funded UNESCO project, Social Media 4 Peace](#), running in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as in other countries across the world, aims to maximize the potential for digital technologies to promote narratives and initiatives that create incentives for peace.
- Another EU-funded project is [CyberSafe](#), where nine project partners collaborated to create an online educational tool aimed at facilitating behavioral change among young people aged 13-16 with regard to OGBV. They created the CyberSafe Toolkit, a game-based learning tool available in all partner languages.

Selected reports

Below are some selected reports on OGBV in Europe. *For an extensive list of reports, see [here](#).*

- [Revenge Porn: Comparative Analysis in South East Europe](#). A short comparative analysis on legislation regarding non-consensual intimate image sharing in South Eastern Europe. (*Share Foundation, 2022*)
- [UNESCO The Chilling: What more can news organizations do to combat gendered online violence?](#). A chapter from a global study on online violence against women journalists about what actions news organisations can take. (*UNESCO, 2022*)
- [UNESCO The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists](#). A global study on online violence against women journalists. (*UNESCO, 2022*)
- [Cyber Violence Against Women and Girls in the Western Balkans](#). Selected cases studies on OGBV in the Balkans and how OGBV can be addressed through good cybersecurity governance. (*Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, 2021*)