



PARLAMENT DE CATALUNYA

Cycle «Gender-based Violence on Social Media»

Session 2: «Digital Gender-based Violence against High-Profile Women»

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Conclusions

Origin and manifestation of digital violence

Digital violence is a type of violence that affects society as a whole, but gender-based violence, which is directed against women, also takes place in the digital sphere. Furthermore, as in any other sphere, this violence is exacerbated by intersecting factors such as origin, skin colour, age and social class.

According to a report by the Women's Institute, attached to the Ministry of Equality, 7 in 10 young women have suffered some form of sexist attack on social media and 1 in 10 has ended up leaving these platforms because of these attacks. This departure by some women creates digital environments that are increasingly less equitable and democratic, which is why it is necessary to assess its impact and consequences.

Impact on freedom of expression and the democratic quality of digital environments

Gender-based violence in the digital environment seeks to silence women who speak, decide, lead or think in public, which means they are subject to more violence than recognition, ultimately undermining the quality of democracy.

Cyberbullying has become an inherent risk for all women who express their opinions publicly. These attacks, which are usually perpetrated by groups acting together in the virtual sphere at the service of other people in positions of power, are intended to discredit, humiliate, defame and threaten women so that they censor themselves.

The personal impact includes anxiety, fear and deterioration of mental health. Self-censorship is the most immediate effect and leads women to stop posting on social media or to redirect their professional lives.

When women censor themselves, voices and perspectives are lost in public debate and their right to freedom of expression remains limited. Women's freedom of expression must be a mechanism to combat discrimination and inequality on the grounds of gender.

Digital harassment of women manifests itself with greater aggression against women who suffer intersecting discrimination, due to the dehumanisation they experience. This normalisation of violence and online hate raises the expected threshold for evaluating violence on social media and puts democratic progress and the political representation of women at risk.

Institutional strategies and responses

In general, women who suffer digital violence find themselves without mechanisms or knowledge when it comes to defending themselves. Self-defence strategies are insufficient and very often the legal route is not useful, because the perpetrators avoid direct threats and choose instead to generate misogynistic comments that are continuous over time, which judges can frame as freedom of expression.

Institutional responses must be multi-dimensional and include:

1. The **application of legislation**. It is necessary to strengthen and enforce the existing legislation on equality and the fight against gender-based violence.
2. **Political responsibility**. Political parties and institutions must stop normalising this violence. It is very relevant that the codes of conduct for MPs can allow sanctions, as this reflects greater public accountability.
3. **Policies for digital platforms**. Policies are needed that compel platforms to respect freedom of expression and information and to provide transparency in the application of their algorithms.
4. **Rights-based approach**. The issue of digital gender-based violence must be addressed from the perspective of the rights affected (freedom of expression, privacy, public participation) and, for this purpose, the existing legal tools must be used (such as data protection in cases of disclosure of personal information or doxing).
5. **Training and education**. Training and education are needed for the general population so that people understand what is happening on social networks and the real impact it has on lives and on democracies.
6. **Collective involvement**. A persistent challenge is the lack of interest among men (the other half of the population) and the need to involve them in the fight against digital gender-based violence, since the spaces for discussion on gender-based violence are made up mainly of the very women affected, who are the ones seeking solutions from within their suffering.