



The Girls are Online: Protecting Women and Girls Beyond Legal Frameworks

Recent legislation like the TAKE IT DOWN Act has finally created a federal US framework to address the growing concern of technology-facilitated gender-based violence. Yet, even when laws exist, the proliferation of online harm towards women and girls is abundant. This brief discusses three distinct ways young women and girls are harmed online and outlines nonlegislative approaches to prevent violence before it starts.

Introduction

Violence against women and girls is a pervasive societal issue that intersects with many facets, including (and oftentimes exacerbated by) technology and digital spaces. As technology evolves, age-old harms are perpetuated or amplified, and offenders have found new ways to commit acts of violence towards women and girls. Because of the severity and prevalence of the issue, many jurisdictions have created or amended laws to address online harassment or technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). Despite the number of laws that exist, TFGBV remains a concern for many young people and has even [pushed some young women off of the internet](#).

On May 19, 2026, the first federal law in decades that aims to address technology-facilitated gender-based violence is set to go into effect. The [TAKE IT DOWN Act](#) requires tech companies to remove nonconsensual intimate imagery (NCII) from their platforms within a maximum of 48 hours from being notified. This is a [significant advancement](#) in legislation to address the proliferation of nonconsensual intimate imagery, a type of online abuse that has harrowing emotional, psychological, and reputational effects on victims. [One individual](#) so far has been convicted under this new law.

Additionally, each of the US states has a law on the books to address the distribution of nonconsensual intimate imagery. However, the proliferation of NCII means these images and the tools used to create them are still easily accessible. The First

Amendment protects Americans' speech, including online, yet some spaces are damaging and hostile towards women, and content creators have grown platforms based on misogynistic rhetoric that can have [real-life harmful effects](#). Many young girls have turned to social media influencing for fun, to generate income, and to share ideas, yet merely existing online opens women and girls up to harassment and exploitation.

It is unacceptable for the safest option for women and girls to be limiting or removing themselves from online spaces. Rather, taking advantage of technical solutions to mitigate nonconsensual intimate imagery, creating easy-to-use reporting mechanisms, and allowing users to shape their experiences online will ensure all users, especially women and girls, are safe to explore, engage, and simply exist online.

This brief includes recommendations to achieve a safer internet for women and girls that expand beyond legislative solutions. It will take a whole-of-society approach to address the existing and emerging ways women and girls experience harm online.

The Online Manifestation of Offline Abuse: Why the Issue is Gendered

Generative AI and Deepfake Technology

The US Government Accountability Office ([GAO](#)) defines “deepfake” as a video, photo, or audio recording that seems real but has been manipulated with AI. Deepfake technology can replace faces, manipulate facial expressions, and synthesize faces and speech. The technology has improved drastically in recent years, making it much harder for the average person to tell if something is authentic or manipulated. This becomes especially alarming when deepfakes realistically depict someone appearing to say or do something that they in fact never said or did.

Generative AI and deepfake technologies are quickly increasing technology-facilitated gender-based violence. The US government [reported](#) that 90% to 95% of all online deepfake content is nonconsensual intimate imagery, and the [best available estimates](#) show that 98% of all intimate deepfake images are of women and girls. This issue disproportionately and overwhelmingly harms women and girls. Adding to the scale of the problem, [projections](#) estimate that the global prevalence of NCII is around 49 million victims, resulting in over 420 million NCII images generated annually. The issue is pervasive, expanding, and specifically targets women and girls.

*There is an important distinction to make here. **When these images involve minors, this is child sexual abuse material (CSAM), which is explicitly illegal to possess, create, or distribute under almost every country in the world.** For more information on CSAM, please visit the [National Center on Missing and Exploited Children](#) (NCMEC). When we discuss NCII, we are referring to real or AI-generated/deepfake content featuring adults. NCII is trickier. Across jurisdictions, there are varying levels of guardrails and enforcement. For example, many NCII laws make the distribution of this material illegal, but not the possession. In all cases, enforcement is rarely applied equally and remains an extreme challenge for victims.*

The [tools](#) to make these images are easy to find, often free, and do not require much technical skill. Once shared, AI-generated content can be copied, saved, and spread across platforms, making it almost impossible to remove completely. The psychological and emotional toll that this places on victims is overwhelming, and while laws exist to address the creation, distribution, and selling of these images, widespread access to the tools, coupled with difficult enforcement protocols, makes recourse difficult for victims. Young people also have access to these tools, and a growing concern is the [use of these tools in schools](#), where young boys are creating these images of their classmates, who are almost always girls. [Schools often lack](#) the protocols to manage this issue.

Laws vary widely across countries. Globally, fewer [than half of countries](#) have laws against online abuse, and even fewer laws address AI-generated deepfakes. In the UK, [laws have been updated](#) to include deepfake images into existing statutes. In other countries, deepfake intimate imagery exists in a legal grey area. Survivors often do not know if the abuse is illegal or if those responsible can be prosecuted. In the United States, the TAKE IT DOWN Act covers AI-generated intimate images and requires platforms to remove them within 48 hours of receiving notification.

In April 2026, the FBI prosecuted what they believed to be the [first documented violation under the TAKE IT DOWN Act](#). In this case, one perpetrator created more than 700 AI-generated explicit images of real women and sent those images to the victims' employers. While the new law is integral to holding this perpetrator

accountable, there may never be enough justice for the damage to these victims' reputations and emotional and psychological wellbeing.

In [December 2025](#), UK journalist Daisy Dixon found AI-generated intimate images of herself on X. These images were made with the platform's Grok AI tool. The platform took several days to block the feature, and the abuse continued to spread during that time.

These examples are unfortunate evidence that even when laws exist, and content is removed, abuse can cause irreversible harm and reputational damage. It cannot be overstated that laws must work in conjunction with prevention methods to reduce and ultimately eliminate the prevalence of NCII.

One potential approach to mitigate these gaps comes from a program out of the UK, the [Global Clearing Centre](#). The aim of this pilot program is to convene global NGOs to train them to use tools to identify and respond to NCII, and to coordinate efforts to tackle the issue on a global scale.

Whether Influencing or Merely Existing, Women and Girls Bare the Brunt of Online Harassment

While harassment, bullying, and technology-facilitated abuse can happen to anyone, there are extreme disproportionate impacts for women and girls. One [study](#), taking experiences from 14,000 young girls across 31 countries, found that over half of the girls have been harassed online. Moreover, much of this harassment is simply because they are girls. Unsolicited inappropriate images or expressing knowledge about the girl's personal information are among some of the harmful actions they face online.

Women leaders, journalists, activists, and public figures face deepfake attacks and coordinated harassment campaigns designed to silence, shame, and push them out of public life. In a [study](#) of over 600 women across 119 countries, 41 percent of respondents reported that they censor themselves online to avoid harassment. This widespread self-censorship for fear of harassment means that women and girls do not get to show up and participate online as freely as they should.

Women influencers also face much higher rates of online bullying than their male counterparts. According to a research report by [Views4You](#), female respondents said they experience more frequent and severe abuse across all social media platforms. These women regularly deal with sexist attacks, criticism about their appearance, and sexual harassment, along with the usual trolling that all content creators encounter. Influencers interviewed described sexist or homophobic comments as “common occurrences,” and some said they receive inappropriate direct messages because of their gender or identity.

Even when girls take ownership of their online experiences, like becoming influencers, without proper guardrails and oversight, there can be exposure to exploitation. Not just through unwanted contact, but sometimes through the minors’ guardian. During an investigation into the exploitation of child influencers, [one parent](#) found that her preteen daughter’s social media account had a follower demographic of 92% men. The investigation found that photos posted on Instagram (by the parent) were later discovered on other platforms and had been shared among known distributors of CSAM and NCII. Yet, because of the earnings the account generated, little was done to protect the minor’s images from being used.

Data varies on the exact demographics of minor influencers, but overwhelmingly, the influencer space is dominated by women and girls. A [Pew Research study](#) found that 64% of all beauty influencers are women. While this applies specifically to adults, similar trends can be inferred about accounts for girls, creating a unique harm for an already vulnerable and impressionable group.

Online Misogyny and the Manosphere

A growing part of the digital world is the “manosphere,” a loose network of communities that say they address men’s struggles, such as dating, fitness, and fatherhood. However, these groups often share harmful advice and attitudes. The [United Nations Secretary General’s report on violence against women and girls](#) points out that these communities are connected by their [opposition to feminism](#) and often portray men as “victims” of today’s social and political climate.

The [manosphere](#) reaches men and boys across platforms from social media to podcasts to gaming sites and dating apps. Many people join these spaces looking for open discussions or information about men's issues. These spaces attract young men by promising to teach personal responsibility. Yet, rather than promoting self-exploration to address men's challenges, they often claim that men are victims of society's misandry, or prejudice against men, and young girls face the brunt of these attacks.

Many of the young men involved in these online spaces view efforts for women's equality as discrimination against men. Stereotypes about women in the manosphere spread myths and create barriers that limit women's opportunities. An international [survey](#) for HeForShe, a UN Women initiative, found that Gen Z is the generation most exposed to sexist language online. At the same time, younger men are now [more likely than older men](#) to have traditional views about gender roles, which could threaten progress made toward gender equality.

While the US's First Amendment can allow this type of content to exist, many women and girls are not afforded the same protections *from* this type of content, nor from its offline manifestations.

Looking Beyond the Law: Nonlegislative Actions to Address Online Harm Towards Girls

Legislation is critical to ensure accountability for harms towards women and girls, and the TAKE IT DOWN Act and the UK's progress are encouraging examples. Yet, more must be done to prevent other "lawful but awful" trends of online gender harms. Leveraging technologies that can detect and delete nonconsensual intimate images, working with platforms to create reporting and preference tools, and establishing funds for schools and community programs to teach young people how to engage online safely are all critical to reaching places legislation cannot go.

Recommendations

Expand Hash Matching Capabilities: Hash matching is a digital security method that creates unique "fingerprints" for uploaded content. [These fingerprints](#), called hashes, are checked against databases of known content to help prevent the reuploading,

sharing, or spread of CSAM and other NCII, breaking the cycle of distribution. It allows platforms to identify harmful content without having to view the actual images. These databases are managed by child safety groups and law enforcement agencies.

[StopNCII.org](https://www.stopncii.org), for example, is setting a global standard for this technology.

This technical solution has shown positive results in detecting CSAM through [PhotoDNA](#) and now shows promise in combating NCII through [global collaborations](#).

Improve Industry Standards for Blocking, Reporting, and Age Assurance: Women and girls are reporting in droves that they are seeing distressing content and experiencing harassment. Improved, easily accessible user safety measures are critical to ensuring that women and girls can enjoy online life safely. Blocking and reporting mechanisms may exist on major platforms, but new apps that reach young people faster than legislation can be passed may not have these features. Furthermore, to ensure reports are handled timely and to the user's satisfaction, companies should establish efficient processes that prioritize timely report responses and incorporate some level of human oversight.

An additional approach could be to adopt age-assurance mechanisms for certain platform features (such as live chats with other users, subscriber-only content, and direct messaging) to prevent young people from engaging with unknown adults. Age assurance helps ensure young people are in age-appropriate spaces with stronger default privacy and safety settings, like [TikTok's Teen Accounts](#), which prohibit certain types of content for teen users, turn off direct messaging, and prohibit virtual gifts and the ability to "go live." Investing in safe teen spaces is crucial so that all young people, including young women, can participate in online life and do so safely.

Invest in Digital and Media Literacy: Harassment and violence towards women and girls did not start in the internet age. Preventing harm online means shifting culture offline. Investing in digital and media literacy education for K-12 schools and community centers can help demystify challenges young people face and empower schools to support students navigating the harms of NCII. It is paramount that victims know their options and avenues for recourse should they become the target of NCII. But to stop harm before it starts, all young people need to be taught the significant

harm of spreading NCII. Cultivating an environment where young people can share their experiences together (rather than siloed on corners of the internet) will help foster a sense of community and make harmful online spaces less appealing.

Conclusion

Despite laws on the books and more on the way, women and girls are prevented from engaging in online life as freely as they should because of the proliferation of harassment, AI-generated NCII, and content with damaging, misogynistic rhetoric. A cultural shift towards protecting women and girls in all spaces will take a whole-of-society approach. It will mean moving beyond judicial punishment or retroactive responses, changing the culture so that harassment is no longer normalized, updating platform policies to protect user experiences, and investing in digital literacy. But it will be worth the collective effort when young people can enjoy a life free from exploitation - online and off.