Exploratory study on
**Technology-Facilitated Violence against
Women and Girls** (TF VAWG)
in Quito, Cuenca and Guayaquil

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

UN Women's Safer Cities Program seeks to prevent and respond to sexual harassment in public spaces. This study, conducted by the Taller de Comunicación Mujer, aims to analyze the violence that occurs through Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). The increased use of ICTs during the COVID-19 pandemic and the constant technological development has generated challenges for gender equality and human rights that demand effective and timely actions. **Technology-facilitated violence against women and girls (TF VAWG) is defined as any** act committed, assisted, aggravated or amplified by the use of ICT or other digital tools, which results or is likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological, social, political or economic harm, or other violations of rights and freedoms, and constitutes gender-based violence. TF VAWG has characteristics of its own: the anonymity of the aggressors, the easy access to digital tools such as artificial intelligence, the multiplicity of attacks and the possibility of making them viral, the impunity, and the likelihood of attacks to extend over time.

A study in 51 countries around the world found that:

38% of women over the age of **18**

have experienced **online violence**.[1]

A study in 22 countries around the world found that:

58% of women between the ages of **15 and 25**

have experienced **online harassment**.[2]

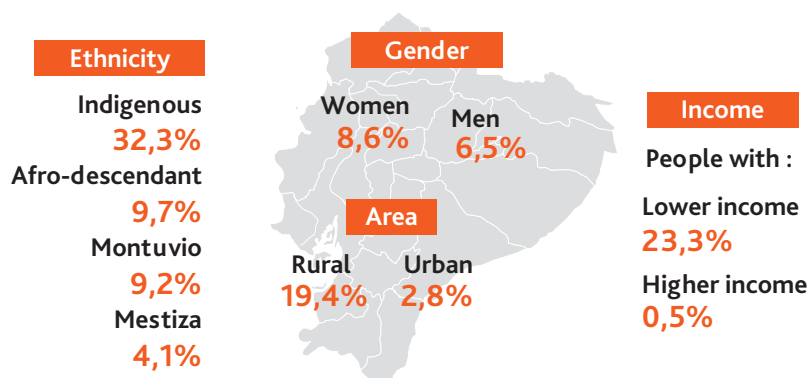In Ecuador:

37% of adolescents and youths

under the age of **25**

have experienced **online harassment and other forms of digital violence**.[3]

Furthermore, the digital divide affects people's access to ICT and decision-making about its design, as well as self-care strategies and actions taken against TF VAWG. In Ecuador, the digital divide is wider in women, indigenous people, Afro-descendants, Montuvio people, people with lower incomes, and in rural areas.

Digital illiteracy in Ecuador

Ethnicity

**Indigenous
32,3%**
**Afro-descendant
9,7%**
**Montuvio
9,2%**
**Mestiza
4,1%**

Gender

**Women
8,6%**   **Men
6,5%**

Area

**Rural
19,4%**   **Urban
2,8%**

Income

People with :

**Lower income
23,3%**

**Higher income
0,5%**

Source: National Institute of Statistics and Censuses of Ecuador, July 2023: *Employment, Unemployment and Underemployment Survey* (ENEMDU). There is no data available by age, sexual orientation or other variables.

A methodological note on the study

An **exploratory qualitative study** was carried out in 3 cities under the Safer Cities Program: Quito (Eloy Alfaro and Quitumbe zonal administrations); Cuenca (two urban parishes: El Vecino and San Sebastian; three rural parishes: Quingeo, Victoria del Portete, and Sidcay); and Guayaquil (District 1, sector S-81). **Information gathering activities: 12 focus groups**, 4 per city (2 including adult women, 1 adolescent women, and 1 including adolescent men), with an intersectional approach in terms of age, ethnicity, nationality, gender identity, and sexual orientation. **Total number of participants**: 112 (42 in Quito, 37 in Cuenca, 33 in Guayaquil). 55 adult women, 31 adolescent women, 25 adolescent men, and 1 non-binary adolescent. **47 interviews with key informants** (State actors and civil society organizations): 17 in Quito, 17 in Cuenca, and 13 in Guayaquil.

Main results

Perceptions of safety and gender on the internet and in the technological sphere

The women and adolescents who participated in the study use ICT to research, study, engage in activistm, enjoy their time of leisure, work and communicate with their family and close networks. They agree that ICT exposes them to risks where gender identity and other characteristics such as ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, nationality or socioeconomic status influence their experience of insecurity due to the existence of sociocultural prejudices and structural discrimination. Women and female adolescents reported experiencing more situations of violence due to the fact that they are women, the systematic hypersexualization of their posts and bodies, the fear of expressing their opinions, or the constant invasion of their intimacy and privacy online. Adolescent men stated that women are exposed to greater risks in ICT environments.

"(…) I belong to the [LGBTQ+] community and I think there are people (…) who get angry at you. That person writes to you again and again, and when you say no because you linke other women, their anwer is: 'Try it out with me and you will see that you will change'." (adolescent woman, Guayaquil, 2023).

Victims of TF VAWG

- **Women of all ages.** Most frequently: adolescents and young women (there are reported cases from the age of 11)
- **Women with diverse identities:** Afro-descendants, indigenous women, trans women, lesbians or bisexuals
- **Women with public profiles:** *human rights defenders, politicians, activists, communicators, leaders*
- Victims of gender violence in other contexts such as family, school, work, or politics. TF VAWG is part of the different types of violence that women and girls experience throughout their lives

Out of 112 focus group participants (adult women, adolescent women, men and non-binary adolescents):

45,5% has experienced online violence directly

63,4% reported personal cases and cases in their immediate enviroment

43% of adolescents women and adult women had experienced TF VAWG

In ICT environments, men and gender diverse adolescents are also exposed to gender-based violence such as sexual violence and attacks based on gender stereotypes, sexual orientation or power relations. A queer adolescent experienced violence based on sexual orientation.

? Who are the aggressors?

- Most of the aggressors have unknown user profiles, in many cases with male identities. In several cases, the victims suspected that they were people in their immediate environment.
- Multiple unknown user profiles (fake profiles or trolls) in attacks against women with public profiles.
- Partners, male ex-partners, and women who are their new partners. Frequently, in cases of non-consensual dissemination of images. When they occur in school environments, classmates contribute to make the attacks viral.
- Relatives and people in the victim's immediate environment, recurrently in cases of non-consensual exposure of sexual orientation against adolescents.
- User profiles that have the ability to influence social networks and take advantage of their visibility to establish contact or relationships with their female followers.

- In cases of violence against adult women and adolescent women, the most common places are social networks such as Facebook, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Instagram and TikTok.
- In cases of violence targeted at adolescent men, the attacks were more recurrent through online games and WhatsApp.
- Other digital media identified through interviews were Telegram, Tinder, Grindr, educational platforms, pornographic pages (Hispasexy.org, XVideos.com).

Types of technology-facilitated violence

112 participants reported **78 cases of online violence** (experienced directly and/or by people in their family and community environment).

- 59% technology-facilitated sexual harassment and violence (TF SHV)
- 28.2% online harassment
- 12,8% other forms of violence (hate speech, identity theft, non-consensual access to accounts and devices, extortion)

Technology-facilitated sexual harassment and violence (TF SHV)[4]:
- 20% of adult women
- 48.4% of adolescent women
- 24% of adolescent men
- 1 *queer* adolescent

experienced TF SHV directly

"(...) While gaming someone wrote to me saying: 'Hello friend. Where are you from? You are very pretty.' (...) Later, someone else wrote to me saying that I should give him my WhatsApp number so that I could send him a nude photo and that he would pay me very well." (Adult woman, Quito, 2023) .

The most common forms of **TF SHV** identified were:

- **Against adult women** intimate image abuse (photos, video, audio) and online sexual harassment.
- **Against adolescent women**: grooming, distribution of sexual content, and online sexual harassment.
- **Against men and gender diverse adolescents**: online sexual harassment and exposure of sexual orientation.

Cases of political, economic and symbolic violence were evidenced in different spheres –family, school and community–, as well as algorithmic violence, which refers to the reproduction of discriminatory acts and stereotypes in the design and programming of algorithms. An example of this is the dissemination of advertisements and content that promotes prejudices about beauty, gender and ethnicity.

"(...) In each session, there is something racist, either through memes or advertising. I see advertisements for rhinoplasty, hair straightening (...) and a skin whitening cream that guarantees you will look as white as a snow or like porcelain." (Afro-descendant lesbian woman, Guayaquil, 2023)

Impacts

The impacts reported by women, adolescents and key informants are grave, numerous, and multidimensional.

- **General health issues**: fear, anguish, depression, feeling exposed and persecuted, low self-esteem, self-harm (the suicide of a university student was reported in Quito). It was difficult for women and adolescents to identify impacts on sexual and reproductive health.
- **Economic issues**: loss of work and income.
- **Deterioration of relationships** within the family, school and community.
- **Limitation on the exercise of digital rights** to intimacy, privacy, freedom of expression, access to internet services, among others.
- **Limitation on the exercise of the right to gender equality** –abandonment of leadership activities, activists' self-censorship, the digital divide, and gender and intersectional stereotypes become more acute.

Digital security measures, action strategies and access to services

Adult and adolescent women tend to adopt limited **digital security measures** based on increased privacy and security on social networks. Some adolescent men are acquainted with more complex digital security tools than female adolescents, such as applications that hide IP addresses. Among the participants, the **action strategies** they have devised against online violence involve reducing the use of social networks and devices. Several women and adolescent women –especially those from rural areas in Cuenca– do not know what to do besides reporting and blocking the aggressors. They are also unaware of which **specialized services** they could resort to and how the complaint filing process works. Furthermore, cases of lack of attention from public institutions and situations of re-victimization were identified through the study.

The levels of impunity in cases of TF VAWG are very concerning. The records show that 100% of certain crime types did not result in conviction.

> "(…) I told my student advisor but she did nothing about it. She said, 'They are just being teenagers. Children do things without thinking.' And then I talked to my mom and my grandma and they complained at the school. They were told that it was my fault for looking so suggestive in class and things like that." (12-year-old adolescent woman, victim of online and offline sexual violence, urban parish in Cuenca, 2023)

Percentage of complaints not resulting in conviction			
Crime (Comprehensive Organic Penal Code of Ecuador)	Quito	Cuenca	Guayaquil
Violation of privacy	100%	100%	99,95%
Online grooming	99,47%	98,39%	98,63%
Child pornography	98,05%	100%	95,35%
Sexual extortion	100%	100%	100%

Source:State Attorney General's Office. Record of complaints between January 1, 2019 and August 31, 2023.

It is urgent to take action: priority measures

It is necessary to:

- Strengthen internal regulations and devise intersectoral public policies at the national and local levels in order to clearly define the combined competencies of the institutions involved in the management of TF VAWG, especially with the aim of providing victims with advice and guidance on digital security.
- Produce statistical information and carry out specialized studies with a gender and intersectional approach that prioritizes children and adolescents, women with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ population, rural women, women in human mobility, and women from the different peoples and nationalities of Ecuador.
- Improve technical capacities and training processes for public officials and civil society (social organizations; children and adolescents; women in all their diversity; and the LGBTIQ+ population) at the national and local levels, on the subjects of digital care, digital security, safe use of ICT, digital rights, gender violence and TF VAWG.
- Address TF VAWG in health and comprehensive sex education processes.
- Design specialized care services for victims of TF VAWG and adapt the protection system to the context of online violence.
- Strengthen access to justice: identify existing obstacles; provide information about reporting processes; improve the safeguarding of digital evidence, investigative processes and international cooperation against cybercrime.

Footnotes

1. The Economist Intelligence Unit (2020). *Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women*. https://onlineviolencewomen.eiu.com/

2. Plan Internacional (2020): *¿Libres para estar en línea?. Las experiencias de niñas y mujeres jóvenes con el acoso en línea.* https://plan-international.org/uploads/2023/06/SOTWGR2020-CommsReport-edition2023-ES.pdf.

3. Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador y UNICEF (2022): *Internet Seguro U-Report*. Resultados encuesta. https://www.unicef.org/ecuador/sites/unicef.org.ecuador/files/2023-03/Resultados-Internet-Seguro.pdf

4. The term "technology-facilitated sexual harassment and violence" refers to multiple acts of a sexual nature that include online sexual harassment, intimate image abuse, and technology-facilitated sexual exploitation. Some examples are threats, sexual comments, non-consensual creation and dissemination of images, among others.