Helplines to address online gender-based violence cases

Monitoring and trends in Bolivia, Brazil and Ecuador

DERECHOS DIGITALES
América Latina

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Prologue

We are living through an unprecedented technological revolution. What only a few years ago seemed to be straight out of a science fiction novel is now part of our everyday lives, radically transforming the way we interact, work, live, and think as a society. Yet the true impact of these advances and their consequences for people remain largely unknown and underestimated. In a positive sense, we could say that these new technologies make it easier to connect with people far away, whether in other neighborhoods, cities, or countries. They have made it possible for families and loved ones to maintain daily contact, despite the distance; for medical consultations to be made with specialists from other parts of the world; and even for labor, academic, or activist collaborations to be fostered between countries in the region.

However, just as technology and the internet facilitate encounters and promote creativity, they also enable and amplify new forms of violence. Violence has always existed, but today it has digital means to manifest itself. In particular, gender-based violence, which has been present throughout history, takes on new dimensions in the digital environment. The anonymity and difficulty in tracing the perpetrators of these attacks make it easier for many aggressors to use these means to harass, threaten, and commit violence against women and LGTBIQ+ people.

To better understand the scope of these new forms of violence, it is crucial to focus on regulatory aspects, the actions of technology companies, and the role of helplines assisting the victims. There are huge legislative and regulatory gaps with regard to cases of virtual harassment, non-consensual dissemination of intimate images, threats, and hacking of personal accounts, among other forms of online violence. This inaction in the face of the violence suffered by women and LGBTIQ+ persons renders our region's judicial systems obsolete in digital matters in front of challenges that they are unable to address adequately.

It is also important to consider the role of technology companies that facilitate the use of these platforms. Here, it is worth noting that companies do not give us free products altruistically, they are not mere providers of services to society, but rather behind these social networks there are large economic interests, with millions of dollars in contracts with companies, governments, and other groups to offer advertising and traffic the data of their users.

The data presented in this report indicate that these companies, when confronted with requests to block users, remove content disseminated without consent, or recover hacked accounts, frequently fail to comply with these demands. The same companies that censor images of female nipples on their platforms are ignoring calls for help from users who are victims of digital gender-based violence.

Confronted with the lack of response from judges, entrepreneurs, and governments, in Latin America there are spaces organized by feminisms to support women and LGBTIQ+ people who suffer online gender-based violence. The work carried out by Derechos Digitales highlights the value of helplines in Bolivia, Brazil, and Ecuador, and their impact on the lives of thousands of people who turn to these spaces for assistance, advice, and digital self-defense tools.

Through the data produced in a feminist and collective way, we can better understand online gender-based violence, the actions that the affected people have tried to take to defend themselves, and how, in the absence of a response from institutions, police stations, and even their own community, they turn to helplines because, the way out is always collective.

The data collected on technology-facilitated gender-based violence are much more than just numbers: they reflect realities that would otherwise remain invisible. These data make it possible not only to measure the extent of this violence but also to identify patterns, understand the aggressors' strategies, and evaluate the responses-or lack of responses-from platforms and institutions. Counting on this information is crucial to design public policies that effectively respond to the needs of victims, and to demand that technology companies assume their responsibility in the protection of human rights in the digital environment. Without data, there is no evidence, and without evidence, there is no possibility of change.

It is crucial to provide visibility to helpline initiatives, enhancing their work and accompanying the strengthening of their data policies in order to generate evidence and act on it. This report is a call for us to empower ourselves as feminists, sharing and disseminating the work of helplines and organizations that fight against violence against women and LGBTIQ+ people. As a society, we have a responsibility to ensure that technological advances become tools for equity, security, and justice. By recording and raising awareness of technology-facilitated gender-based violence, we not only validate and give place to the voices of victims but also contribute to the creation of more inclusive and effective legal frameworks, as well as public policies with a gender perspective. Collective work, from helplines to research, is key to transforming the digital world into a safer and violence-free space.

By Ivana Feldfeber

Ivana Feldfeber is a specialist in Data Science with gender perspective. She is co-founder and executive director of the first Gender Data Observatory in Latin America: DataGénero. Ivana holds a diploma in Data Science, Machine Learning and its Applications from the University of Cordoba, Argentina. She is an ambassador for One Young World and was recently recognized by Vanity Fair magazine as one of the 17 leaders working for a better future for the planet.

Introduction

This report details the operations of three digital security helplines in Latin America: the S.O.S Digital Center of Fundación InternetBolivia.org in Bolivia,[1] Maria d'Ajuda of Marialab in Brazil[2] and Navegando Libres por la Red of Taller Comunicación Mujer in Ecuador[3]. he three initiatives provide assistance and response in cases of online gender-based violence and serve women, children, adolescents, members of the LGTBQA+ community, activists, as well as civil society organizations and groups that promote and defend human rights. In a digital security activism space still marked by a male predominance, these helplines are not only led and operated mostly by women and LGTBQA+ people but also operate from a feminist and intersectional perspective.

The objective of this report is to identify the trends observed by the organizations between June 2023 and May 2024 from their helplines. Although this text focuses on insights from the work of three Latin American initiatives with a gender focus, it is important to recognize that they are part of a much broader context that, as Alexandra Haché observes, constitutes the ecosystem of feminist infrastructures.[4] We hope that the recommendations and warnings that can be drawn from the data collected here will serve not only to reinforce the importance of this work but also to strengthen the ecosystem as a whole.

This work is part of Derechos Digitales' Latin American program for resilience and digital defense (LAREDD), which aims to strengthen the resilience of the human rights defense ecosystem in Latin America, through the joint development of capacities and skills of the network of activists and specialists in digital security in the region, from a social justice perspective.

This document is divided into three sections. The first section presents a methodological note that addresses the difficulties encountered in conducting a comparative analysis of the data collected by the helplines. The second section describes the cases addressed and the contexts in which they are developed as narrated by the three organizations implementing their helplines. In a third section, this report seeks to extract some trends on the challenges faced by the organizations that implement helplines, as well as the main forms of aggression registered in this period.

From Derechos Digitales, we would like to express our gratitude to Fundación InternetBolivia.org, Marialab, and Taller Comunicación Mujer for sharing with us their knowledge and experience when managing their helplines. We have a deep appreciation for the work they do in accompanying victims of online gender-based violence, as well as for their efforts to promote feminist principles in their daily work.

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1   Available at: https://sosdigital.internetbolivia.org/ (accessed August 19th, 2024).

2   Available at: https://mariadajuda.org/index-es.html (accessed August 19th, 2024).

3   Available at: https://navegandolibres.org/ (accessed August 19th, 2024).

4   Haché, Alexandra (2022). "Models of Feminist Helplines for people facing Gender-Based Violence in Digital Spaces". Digital Defenders Partnership. Available at: https://www.digitaldefenders.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/VMD_final-EN.pdf (accessed August 19th, 2024).

Methodological note

The main objective of accompanying cases of online gender-based violence is to provide assistance to victims and survivors to increase their technological, psychological, or legal response capacity to the aggressions they have experienced. At a secondary level, this allows us to advance towards a better understanding of the phenomenon of digital gender-based violence, seeking to understand its causes, consequences, and the ways in which it occurs, whether in a specific territory or a specific period. Some of the helplines that integrate this publication have published periodic reports with information on their operations, highlighting trends and concerns.[5] This type of information enables us not only to demonstrate that there is a significant problem affecting a large portion of the population but also to advocate for actions and responses from public and private institutions. Monitoring gender-based violence is key to the national, regional, and global advocacy work of organizations such as Derechos Digitales and many others.[6]

The documentation and construction of such information are based on the specific cases identified and not necessarily on a predefined typology. The three helplines involved in this report have developed, over time and based on their experience, typologies that classify the types of violence identified in their respective fields of action and that can be experienced specifically in the digital environment. Therefore, the comparative analysis between countries, even if they are from the same region, represents a challenge due to the inherent difficulty of generalizing typologies or terminologies constructed in particular contexts.

Although it is tempting to try to generate a regional or universal classification in which we can fit the different cases of gender-based violence, this is not an easy task and requires deep collective reflection. Moreover, this type of violence is recognized and classified in national and international standards and guidelines, since it is the obligation of States to eliminate it, regardless of its form of manifestation -online or offline-.[7]

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5   Some of the reports from the S.O.S Digital Center are available here: https://sosdigital.internetbolivia.org/reporte-sos-2023/, https://sosdigital.internetbolivia.org/reporte-sos-2022/ (accessed August 19th, 2024). Navegando Libres por la Red's publications can be found at: https://navegandolibres.org/publicaciones/ (accessed August 19th, 2024).

6   See for example the inputs and recommendations of Derechos Digitales and organizations allied to initiatives such as the Global Digital Compact. https://www.derechosdigitales.org/wp-content/uploads/feminist_principles-gdc-september2023.pdf and at https://www.derechosdigitales.org/wp-content/uploads/GDC_-Contribucio%CC%81n-Perspectiva-de-Ge%CC%81nero-en-el-Pacto-Global-Digital-1.pdf, as well as Summit for the future: https://www.derechosdigitales.org/wp-content/uploads/Summit-For-The-Future.pdf (accessed August 19th, 2024).

7   OEA. Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women "Convention of Belem do Para". Available at: http://www.oas.org/juridico/english/treaties/a-61.html (accessed August 19th, 2024).

However, gender-based violence has evolved in response not only to rapid technological transformations but also to the strategies of perpetrators to evade different types of controls.[8] These factors, together with the increased knowledge of how gender-based violence manifests itself in the digital environment, have led to a conceptual development that has also been refined and adapted to new modalities.

About helplines, their work is key to supporting policy development by providing up-to-date information on trends. Indeed, civil society has played a pioneering role in creating some of the most widely accepted typologies in the field.[9] Proposals such as Luchadoras MX[10] and SocialTic[11] have been used as a starting point even by some of the helplines participating in this report. At the same time, the classification of cases of gender-based violence must indeed have a local component and, although Latin American countries have similarities in our realities, each of them has its specificities that must be taken into account.

In summary, either at the normative level or to document attention to specific cases, the classification of the different types of gender-based violence must be carried out on the basis of discussions among multiple stakeholders and including the organizations involved in providing accompaniment and rapid response. This is not a purely theoretical exercise, but an effort that has concrete consequences in the lives of thousands of people affected throughout our region.

Finally, we emphasize that the data presented in the following section is based on the work of the helplines in support of a specific population group that voluntarily turns to them and, since it is not an official service, such communication depends on networks of contacts and/or prior knowledge of their existence. Therefore, these data cannot be considered representative of the reality of digital gender-based violence in an entire country or territory, but rather operate as trends indicators that may or may not be generalizable from broader research efforts.

8   Lara Castro, P. (2024). "Combating TFGBV under the Lenses of International Human Rights Law". Derechos Digitales. https://www.derechosdigitales.org/.

9   Luchadoras MX. (2023). "Violencia Digital". Available at: https://luchadoras.mx/violencia-digital/ (accessed August 19th, 2024).

10   Luchadoras MX. (2023). "Violencia Digital". Available at: https://luchadoras.mx/violencia-digital/ (accessed August 19th, 2024).

11   SocialTIC. "Ataques Digitales ¿Cuáles son y cómo identificarlos?". Available at: https://protege.la/ataques/ (accessed August 19th, 2024).

The work of helplines in Bolivia, Brazil and Ecuador

Bolivia: Digital S.O.S. Center

Bolivia: S.O.S. Digital Center

By Lu An Mendez, from InternetBolivia.org Foundation -S.O.S. Digital Center[12]

Brief political context and gender-based violence situation in Bolivia

The situation of gender-based violence in Bolivia is alarming. Reparation and access to justice are almost non-existent, and the anti-rights discourse is growing rapidly in and outside of social networks. At this very moment, Law 348 -Law to guarantee women a life free from violence -is being questioned on the basis of statements made by national authorities.[13]

One of the arguments against this regulation, which recognizes 16 types of violence against women (although it does not include digital violence), is that it serves as an instrument of extortion and blackmail and that it promotes false complaints. However, we know that most cases of gender-based violence do not reach a formal complaint due to excessive bureaucracy and fear of revictimization, without access to the process of investigation, punishment, and reparation.

Although the application of this law faces several problems (budget, training of personnel, generation of data, etc.) and has not resolved the structural problem of impunity and delays in justice, this law is of utmost importance in our context, since it is the result of the struggle for the right to live a life free of violence and constitutes an instrument with which to make visible the different forms of violence that women and girls suffer simply because of being women and girls.

The situation of gender-based violence in Bolivia is overwhelming, from January to May 2024 there were 35 cases of femicide according to the report of the Bolivian Public Prosecutor's Office.[14] During 2023, there were 51,770 cases of complaints of violence under Law 348 and 11450 complaints of sexual violence against women, children, and adolescents (Women's Coordinator, 2023).

Concerning the situation of digital gender-based violence (GBV), which increases in contexts where gender-based violence is questioned, Bolivia does not have official data because it is not recognized in Bolivian regulations and therefore very little is known about the real percentage of victims and the prevalence of the damage it causes. Although the country does have specific regulations that refer to digital, cyber, and/or computer issues such as a) cyber violence in the educational system; b) computer crimes, manipulation and alteration, access and misuse of computer data; c) transmission of data files in the public network and d) electronic documents as evidence and cyber patrol as an institutional responsibility (Quiroz, 2022). These regulations, however, lack a gender perspective and do not include various forms of digital violence such as, for example, sexual abuse through ICTs.

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12   This text had the collaboration of Alejandra Torrez (data analysis) and Lisette Balbachan (editing).

13   ERBOL (2024) "Andrónico pide revisar la Ley 348: dice que está mal aplicada, presume la culpabilidad y se usa como chantaje" https://erbol.com.bo/nacional/andr%C3%B3nico-pide-revisar-la-ley-348-dice-que-est%C3%A1-mal-aplicada-presume-la-culpabilidad-y-se (accessed August 19th, 2024).

14   State Attorney General's Office (2024) https://www.fiscalia.gob.bo/estadistica/feminicidios/feminicidios-reporte-29-05-2024 (accessed August 19th, 2024).

In the absence of specific legislation, the various forms of gender-based violence remain invisible in the statistical records of gender-based violence in the country. For example, on some occasions, the criminal offense of pornography is used to report the dissemination of intimate material without consent. In this scenario, several bills were presented that attempted to address technology-facilitated violence but many of them with no gender perspective, approach to comprehensive reparation of damage (rehabilitation measures, compensation, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-repetition) and criminalized the exercise of online sexuality by attempting to classify sexting as a crime.

Helpline: S.O.S. Digital Center

The S.O.S. Digital Center was established in mid-2019 as an initiative of the Fundación InternetBolivia.org, an organization that has been advocating for the protection of digital rights in Bolivia since April 2018. In light of the naturalization of digital gender-based violence, the S.O.S. Digital Center aims to raise awareness about its real nature and its impact on the bodies and mental health of the people who suffer it and to advocate on the public agenda so that the government and state authorities take measures to address and respond to this problem.

The Center's work is focused on providing psycho-emotional support to victims of digital gender-based violence, advice on digital protection, and facilitating information in the legal field with a feminist and intersectional approach. Through the contact number +591 62342430, women, adolescents, and the LGTBQA+ population can write to us for information and support.

The S.O.S. Digital Center's helpline works along three lines of action:

> – **Emotional support:** A space of trust is created so the person contacting us can tell us what happened without fear of being re-victimized or judged.

> – **Legal guidance:** Information on crimes already recognized by the law that can be used to report digital gender-based violence, as there are no specific regulations and there is a lack of knowledge about the process of reporting GBV.

> – **Technological accompaniment:** Depending on each person's situation, we help them report the content on the platform where the violence occurred and regain control of their accounts and devices.

The lack of official data and information makes it impossible to clearly understand the specificities and types of violence suffered by women and LGTBQA+ people. Therefore, from the S.O.S Digital Center, we intend to highlight the urgent need to respond to this problem by publishing biannual reports accounting for how online gender-based violence is exercised in Bolivia. This data has allowed us to work with authorities and government agencies to influence the implementation of public policies for awareness, prevention, care, and redress pathways for digital gender-based violence.

Another work line is focused on strengthening digital care skills for free and fearless use of technologies, seeking to promote digital autonomy through practical workshops on digital security, conducting digital security audits to diagnose and provide security protocols and information management tailored to each organization, group, or institution.
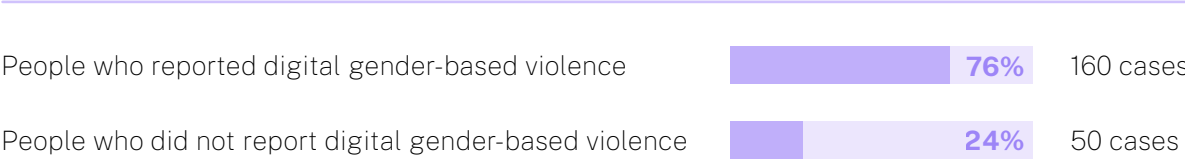
Accompaniment of online gender-based violence cases

What types of cases did the helpline attend?

From June 2023 to May 2024, 210 people contacted the S.O.S. Digital Center, of which 160 reported experiencing some form of digital gender-based violence, while the rest of the requests were for workshops, materials for the prevention of digital gender-based violence, or information about the work of the InternetBolivia.org Foundation.
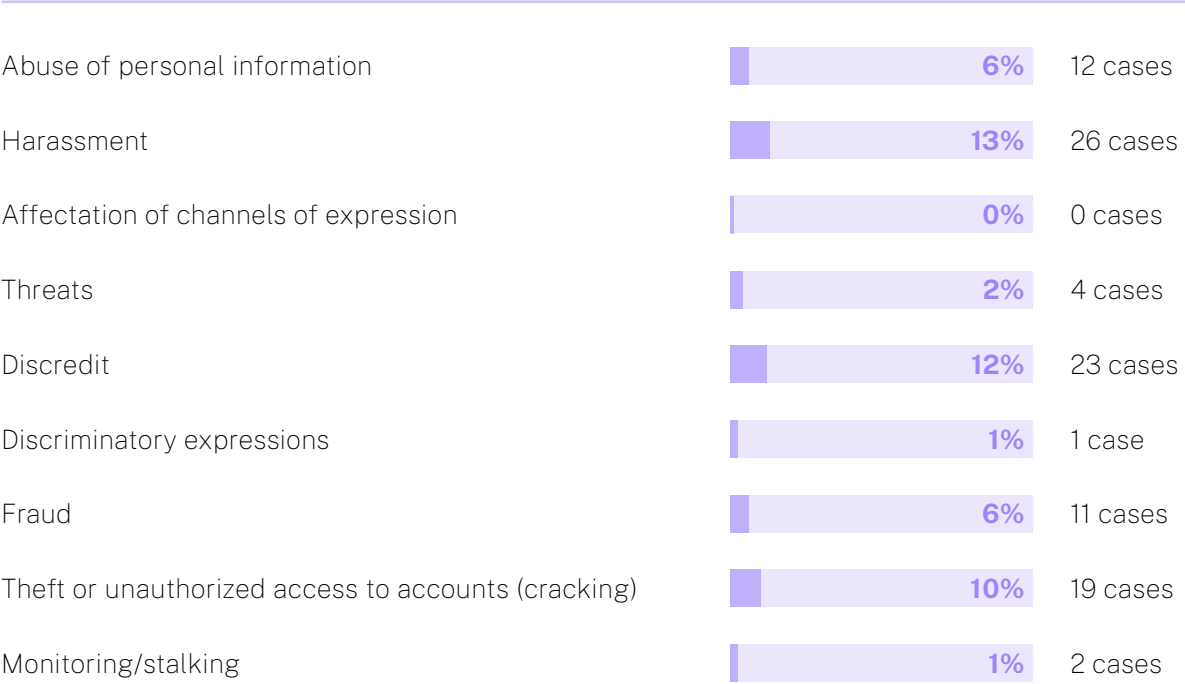
The S.O.S. Digital Center employs a typology of 12 types of digital violence, each of which presents different forms of aggression. This report will show the percentages of both aspects. It is important to note that the helpline employs a strategy of waiting for the person concerned to provide information at their own pace, without requesting personal data. Consequently, the same data is not always obtained and recorded for each case.

Total number of people contacting the S.O.S. Digital Center: 210 cases

People who reported digital gender-based violence	**76%**	160 cases
People who did not report digital gender-based violence	**24%**	50 cases

Graph 1. Number of people who contacted the helpline

Cases handled by type of violence

Abuse of personal information	**6%**	12 cases
Harassment	**13%**	26 cases
Affectation of channels of expression	**0%**	0 cases
Threats	**2%**	4 cases
Discredit	**12%**	23 cases
Discriminatory expressions	**1%**	1 case
Fraud	**6%**	11 cases
Theft or unauthorized access to accounts (cracking)	**10%**	19 cases
Monitoring/stalking	**1%**	2 cases

Loss of control of device	**2%**	4 cases
Omission of authorities	**0%**	0 cases
Sexual abuse through ICT	**43%**	85 cases
Non-digital gender-based violence	**5%**	9 cases

Graph 2. Cases handled by type of violence

The most common type of digital gender-based violence reported to the S.O.S. Digital Center during this period was sexual abuse through ICTs, representing 43% of the total, followed by harassment in second place and cracking in third place. This scenario is similar to that reflected in previous reports published by the Helpline.[15] These data confirm that neither physical contact nor geographical proximity is required to exercise control and commit sexual violence against a person.
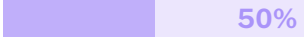
To understand how sexual abuse is exercised through ICTs in the Bolivian context, Figure 3 shows that 29% of the people who experienced this type of violence were threatened with the publication of intimate, erotic, or sexual content while in 21% of the cases, this content was published without their consent, and 7% were extorted with amounts of money to prevent its publication. These forms of aggression indicate that, just as in sexual violence outside the Internet, aggressors reduce women's bodies to objects in order to exert power over them.

Harassment was the second most reported form of digital violence, with 50% of this type of violence involving offensive messages sent systematically (for more than two months) to the complainant and 38% involving the anonymous sending of insulting and threatening messages through fake profiles. These forms of aggression are very difficult to stop, which is why they persist over time. Although many of the people who contacted the helpline had already blocked and reported the accounts from which they were receiving the offensive messages, the ease of creating another account or acquiring a telephone line to continue the harassment allows it to last for more than two months. As a result, those who have contacted us have been forced to resort to self-censorship, to close their accounts or change their phone number, thus altering their digital life to escape these aggressions.

Concerning the theft or unauthorized access to accounts (cracking), 68% of respondents had been victims of account theft in social networks or email, resulting in the loss of access to their digital information and concerns about the potential misuse of that information.

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15   S.O.S. Digital Center (2023) https://sosdigital.internetbolivia.org/reporte-sos-2023/ and S.O.S. Digital Center (2022) https://sosdigital.internetbolivia.org/reporte-sos-2022/ (accessed August 19th, 2024).

Type of violence: Information abuse

Threat to publish personal information	**0%**	0 cases
Extortion using personal data	**8%**	1 case
Modification of audiovisual and text content with personal information	**8%**	1 case
Publication of modified personal information without consent	**50%**	6 cases
Publication of personal information without consent	**25%**	3 cases
Publication of private conversations	**8%**	1 case
Phishing in social networks	**0%**	0 cases

Type of violence: Harassment

Harassment for reporting violence	**8%**	2 cases
Offensive comments or messages addressed to the complainant in a systematic way (more than two months).	**50%**	13 cases
Anonymous sending of insulting and threatening messages through fake profiles.	**38%**	10 cases
Repetitive reception of several phone calls	**4%**	1 case

Type of violence: Fraud

Fraudulent job offer	**64%**	7 cases
Offering large sums of money in exchange for an initial deposit of money	**9%**	1 case
Threats to obtain money	**18%**	2 cases
Malicious applications or programs	**9%**	1 case

Type of violence: Threats

Death threats	0%	0 cases
Threat of death to a family member or close person	11%	1 case
Threat of physical and sexual aggression	68%	3 cases

Type of violence: Discredit

Affectation of the image	22%	5 cases
Insulting comments or content	13%	3 cases
Comments or contents accusing of marital infidelity	4%	1 case
Comments or contents that seek to discredit and defame	30%	7 cases
Publication of false content	22%	5 cases
Use of manipulated information	9%	2 cases

Type of violence: Discriminatory expressions

Insulting comments or content	100%	1 case

Type of violence: Monitoring and stalking

Access to personal accounts from other devices	100%	2 cases

Type of violence: Loss of device control

Device theft	100%	4 cases

Type of violence: Sexual abuse through ICT

Threat of publication of intimate, erotic,
or sexual content — **21%** — 25 cases

Commercialization of intimate images — **4%** — 3 cases

Affective deception to gain the complainant's
trust and ask for intimate content. — **2%** — 2 cases

Deception through job offers to obtain intimate,
erotic, or sexual content — **2%** — 2 cases

Sending intimate content to family and friends — **5%** — 4 cases

Extortion based on consensual sale of
intimate material — **1%** — 1 cases

Extortion by asking for intimate photos or images
using intimate, erotic, or sexual content — **5%** — 4 cases

Extortion asking for money using intimate, erotic,
or sexual content — **7%** — 6 cases

Extortion asking for a physical encounter using
intimate, erotic, or sexual content — **4%** — 3 cases

Text messages with sexual content without the
victim's consent. — **5%** — 4 cases

Modification and publication of intimate content
together with personal data. — **4%** — 3 cases

Obtaining intimate content without consent — **6%** — 5 cases

Sexual proposition to children and adolescents — **2%** — 2 cases

Publication of intimate content without consent — **21%** — 18 cases

Publication of intimate content without consent
together with personal data. — **4%** — 3 cases

Call to action to the detriment of the person using
manipulated intimate content — **0%** — 0 cases

Type of violence: Theft or unauthorized access to accounts (cracking)

Unauthorized access to social networking accounts or email	**21%**	4 cases
Attempted login to social media accounts or email (receive notifications of this)	**11%**	2 cases
Social media or email account theft	**68%**	13 cases
Request for money to recover the account	**0%**	0 cases
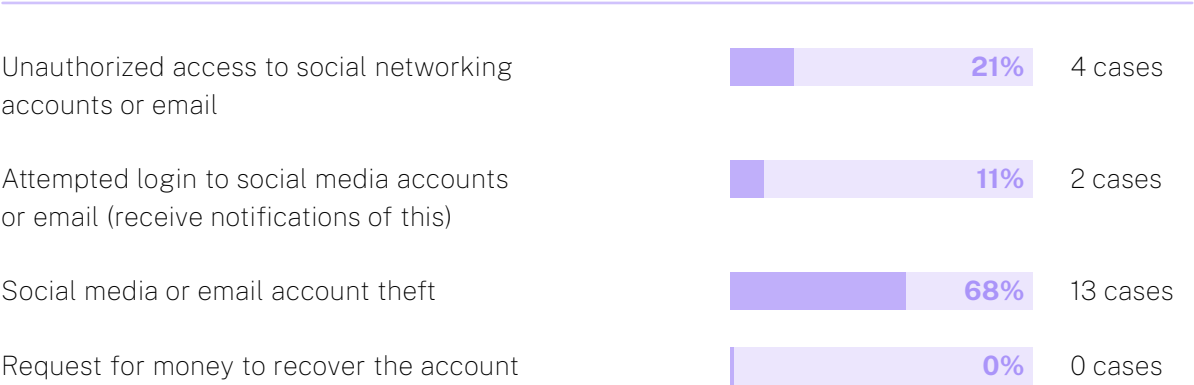
Type of violence: Non-digital violence

Non-digital violence	**100%**	9 cases

Graph 3. Cases handled by forms of aggression

Who are the victims/survivors of online gender-based violence?

During the analysis period, 71% of the people who contacted the S.O.S. Digital Centre for support in a situation of digital violence were women. Considering also that 43% of the people who contacted us did so because of some form of sexual abuse through ICTs, we can say that the digital violence reported to the helpline has a strong gender component, exercising control over women's intimate, private, and public lives. As for the 22% for whom we do not have information about their gender identity, we can say that this is due to the operation of the S.O.S. Digital Center, where the type of information people want to share is respected and they are not pressured to provide any kind of personal information if they do not feel it is necessary.

Victims' gender identity

No information available	**22%**	36 cases
Prefer not to say	**1%**	1 case
Men	**6%**	9 cases
Women	**71%**	114 cases
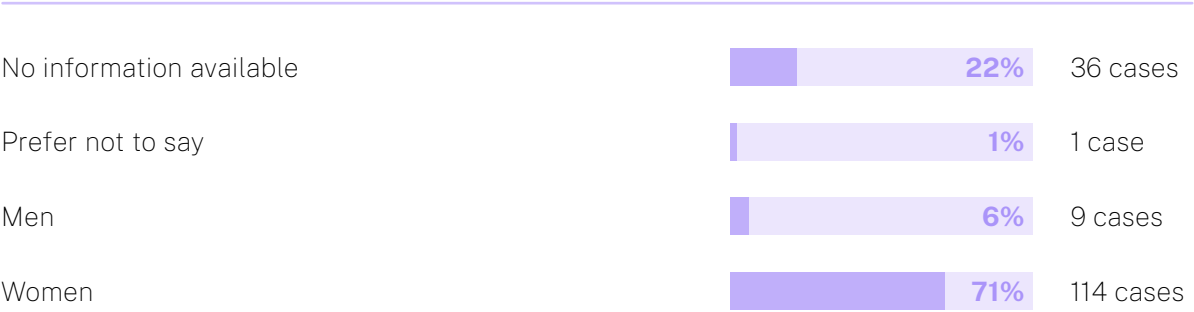
Graph 4. Victims' gender identity

Resolution of handled cases

In terms of case resolution, as mentioned above, the helpline offers three types of response, which are detailed below. It is important to note that more than one type of action is taken when accompanying a person.

Cases handled by type of action

Emotional support	**13%**	26 cases
Legal orientation	**35%**	71 cases
Technological orientation	**52%**	104 cases
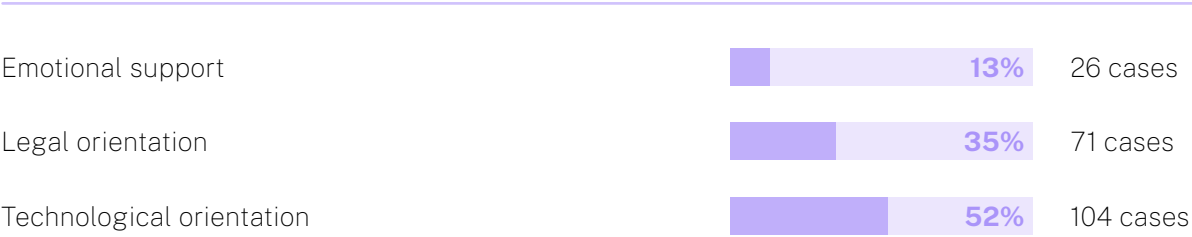
Graph 5. Cases handled by type of action

The S.O.S. Digital Center has found that resolving cases of digital violence is a complex process, as it depends on the response of multiple parties, including the state, platforms, and aggressors. Neither the helpline nor the affected people have control over these actors, which makes this scenario quite distressing and frustrating for victims and survivors as there is no guarantee of redress or justice or that the digital violence will stop or will not happen again. Therefore, the helpline's support model does not include a record of whether the case has been closed or not, but rather of the actions taken to help the person regain control of his or her digital life.

As shown in Graph No. 5, the primary supporting action is technological guidance, which is related to the platforms' reporting processes and data collection to refer the case to the platforms through friendly organizations that have direct contact. Other actions include reviewing the settings and privacy of their devices and social networks to enable the activation of options that provide a greater degree of comfort and control over their information.

The lack of recognition of online gender-based violence by the platforms, which do not consider the reported content to be inappropriate, and their lack of response due to the absence of a direct communication channel with them, make the reporting work of the S.O.S. Digital Center very complex.

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– Quiroz, Eliana. Aproximaciones de la violencia de género en internet durante la pandemia en Bolivia. **https://internetbolivia.org/publicacion/aproximaciones-de-la-violencia-de-genero-en-internet/** (accessed August 19th, 2024).

Brazil: Maria d'Ajuda

Brazil: Maria d'Ajuda

By Daniela Araújo from Marialab-Maria d'Ajuda

Brief political context and gender-based violence situation in Brazil

At the time this chapter is being written, in June 2024, Brazil is experiencing a threat to constitutionally guaranteed reproductive rights. In a flash vote,[16] the president of the Chamber of Deputies, Arthur Lira (Partido Progresista), included in the urgent agenda Bill 1904 (PL 1904),[17] que propone hacer que el aborto después de la 22ª swhich proposes to make abortion after the 22nd week of pregnancy equivalent to the crime of murder, even in cases where the pregnancy was the result of rape.[18]Such as proposed, the maximum penalty for abortion (20 years) would be twice the penalty for rape (maximum 10 years).

The vote in the Chamber of Deputies was followed by an intense mobilization of the feminist movement, manifested in social networks and street protests, obtaining repercussions in various media. The pressure of public opinion led to the bill being known as the "rapist's PL" and the central argument was that girls and adolescent victims of sexual abuse would be the main victims in case of approval since victims of this age group face barriers to access legal abortion in the first weeks of gestation. On the one hand, it is difficult for them to understand and report the violence they have suffered, and even more difficult for them to recognize the changes in their bodies that would indicate the onset of pregnancy. On the other hand, the public authorities fail to help the victims, either by causing long delays in the procedure for the rape of a vulnerable person or by reducing the number of hospitals that perform the procedure.[19]

Faced with the negative repercussions and the risks it could pose to this year's municipal elections, the parliamentarians backed down and the bill was withdrawn from the agenda. However, it has not been discarded and could be debated again in the National Congress. The author of the proposal, Congressman Sóstenes Cavalcante[20] (Partido Liberal, the same extreme right-wing party of former President Jair Bolsonaro), admitted that the emergency vote was mainly a "test" to see if President Lula would speak out against the proposal, contrary to the opinion of evangelical and conservative voters.

This episode demonstrates once again that the rights of women and pregnant women (as well as LGBTQIAPN+, black and indigenous people, among other social minority groups) continue to be a

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16   More information at: https://lupa.uol.com.br/jornalismo/2024/06/14/pl-do-aborto-saiba-o-que-diz-a-lei-considerada-um-retrocesso-por-especialistas (accessed August 19th, 2024).

17   More information at: https://www.camara.leg.br/proposicoesWeb/prop_mostrarintegra?codteor=2425262&filename=PL%201904/2024 (accessed August 19th, 2024).

18   Currently, Brazilian legislation, according to articles 124 to 128 of the Penal Code, only allows abortion to be performed in 3 cases: 1) in case of risk of death of the pregnant person; 2) in cases of anencephalic fetuses, which would not survive outside the uterus, and 3) in cases of pregnancy resulting from rape. In none of these cases is there any gestational time restriction.

19   More information at: https://www.metropoles.com/sao-paulo/ha-sete-meses-sp-aborto-legal (accessed August 19th, 2024).

20   PL 1904 was a response to the lawsuit filed by Psol (Partido Socialismo e Liberdade) before the Federal Supreme Court (STF) in 2017 calling for the decriminalization of abortion in all cases.

bargaining chip in the political game. Even with the legislative advances of recent years,[21] in 2022 there was a sharp increase in all forms of violence against women: "Around 18.6 million women suffered physical, psychological and/or sexual violence in the last year, 50,962 cases per day, the equivalent of a full soccer stadium" (Brazilian Forum for Public Safety & Datafolha, 2022).[22]

In the realm of institutional politics, online gender-based violence represents an obstacle to the candidacy of women and gender dissidents. The 2022 elections saw the highest participation of trans and transvestite candidates (78 registered candidacies). However, according to monitoring carried out by MonitorA,[23] the campaign agendas of these candidates on social networks have been distorted by ideological-partisan conflicts and political violence, reducing the possibility of a debate on the fundamental rights of these groups.

Helpline: Maria d'Ajuda

Maria d'Ayuda is a free service that provides emergency assistance in cases of digital threats, with priority attention to women, gender dissidents, the LGBTQIAPN+ community, and human rights organizations in Latin America.

The development of the helpline began in 2021, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, as a response to the frequent requests for help that we received through MariaLab's official communication channels or personal contacts with members of the organization. The decision to formalize these services through the helpline was the solution found to create a safe space for both the people served and our team.

The assistance is provided by a multidisciplinary team that performs a range of functions, from analyzing vulnerabilities and sending complaints to the relevant platforms to conducting digital security training. We adopt a feminist approach to accompaniment, intending to develop autonomy to solve problems, prioritizing the learning of technologies and digital care, while always respecting the decision of the people we accompany.

Maria d'Ayuda's assistance is not limited to cases of online gender-based violence, as we receive requests for a wide range of digital threats. However, women and LGBTQIAPN+ people are the main groups requesting help. We do not offer legal or psychosocial support, and we refer to other helplines and care centers when the case does not fit what we can and are experienced in dealing with.

All requests are received via e-mail at **sos@mariadajuda.org** and are answered within two days. The request is initially evaluated by one of the people in charge of the classification phase. After this evaluation, which determines whether the case corresponds to the digital security issues addressed by Maria d'Ajuda, an initial meeting is held with the applicant via

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21   Available at: https://www.gov.br/mulheres/pt-br/assuntos/leis-nacionais-e-marcos-legais (accessed August 19th, 2024).

22   Brazilian Forum for Public Safety; Datafolha (2023). "Visível e invisível: a vitimização de Mulheres no Brasil". 4th Edition. https://forumseguranca.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/visiveleinvisivel-2023-relatorio.pdf (accessed August 19th, 2024)

23   MonitorA is an observatory of political and electoral violence against candidates online, a project of the AzMina Institute, InternetLab, and Núcleo Jornalismo that began in 2020. More information at https://monitora.org.br (accessed August 19th, 2024).

videoconference to understand the case and align expectations. Once accepted, the applicant is assigned to a group of two caseworkers who develop the care plan and follow up with support sessions until the case is closed.

In addition to the evaluation and assistance team, Maria d'Ajuda has a group of professionals who provide indirect support for the accompaniments. These include lawyers who offer legal orientation for the cases, as well as psychologists and holistic therapists who provide a space for listening and decompression for the team that deals directly with the accompaniments.

Accompaniment of online gender-based violence cases

What types of cases did the helpline attend?*

From June 2023 to May 2024, Maria d'Ajuda received a total of 49 calls. The most frequent cases were "Account theft and hacking", particularly social network accounts belonging to the Meta company. This is a recurrent problem, with multiple factors. In most cases, there is no known attacker and it is not possible to determine the motivation of the attacks. Cases reported include untargeted fraud attempts that exploit vulnerabilities in random accounts, the hijacking of other people's accounts to commit financial fraud, and cases involving harassment of partners or ex-partners.

Of note, however, are the second and third highest case types among the calls received during this period: basic digital care (six cases) and security consulting for organizations (four cases). Both were classified as "no digital incident identified" and the actions taken were preventive.

*Methodological note on the typology of cases: the typology proposed to classify the cases received by Maria d'Ajuda was established based on a study of the categories used by partner organizations also working in the field of digital security: Taller Comunicación Mujer - Navegando Libres (https://navegandolibres.org/), Internet Bolivia-SOS Digital (https://sosdigital.internetbolivia.org/), SocialTIC (https://socialtic.org/), InternetLab (https://internetlab.org.br/pt/). After studying the typologies most used by these groups, and identifying the similarities and differences between the proposals analyzed, we defined 3 main groups for our categorization:

– Technical incidents/attacks: these correspond to digital threats that require advanced technical knowledge, such as unauthorized access to devices, malware infections, and blocking of content, sites, and web platforms.

– Internet-based actions: no advanced technical knowledge is required, as they exploit known vulnerabilities and/or gaps in legitimate functions of applications and platforms. In this threat model, social engineering and intensive use of social networks are frequently used. Examples include smear campaigns, disinformation, hate speech and incitement to violence, doxing, fraud, and scams.

– Sexual violence/gender-based violence: we have included this type of threat in a separate category because gender-based violence is a specific category of violations committed against women, dissenting genders, and the entire LGBTQIAPN+ community and whose attacks are targeted at these persons based on their identity. Examples: widespread misinformation, dissemination of images or videos of sexual assault, exposure of intimate images, etc.

For each of these groups, specific typologies have been defined, and these were used to classify the cases received by Maria d'Ajuda over the course of two years. In this way, we were able to evaluate which typologies were best suited to the cases and to identify cases that we regularly received but that did not fit into the defined taxonomy. On the basis of this analysis, we created a fourth group of cases in which the occurrence of a digital security incident was neither reported nor verified. It should be noted that this measure was necessary because we often receive requests from both organizations and individuals for help in planning digital security prevention activities.

The group No digital incident identified corresponds to the following typologies:

1. Support with infrastructure/services

2. Information security consulting for organizations

3. Basic digital care (prevention)

4. Individual failure in security settings

5. History/content recovery

6. Others.

Percentage of incidents attended by the MdA
(From May 2023 to May 2024: 49 calls)

Account theft/hacking	**28,6%**	14 cases
Basic digital care (prevention)	**12,2%**	6 cases
Security consulting for organizations	**8,1%**	4 cases
Unauthorized access to devices	**6,1%**	3 cases
Exposure of intimate images	**6,1%**	3 cases
History/content recovery	**6,1%**	3 cases
Identity theft	**6,1%**	3 cases
Individual failure in security settings	**4,1%**	2 cases
Stalking/persecution	**4,1%**	2 cases
Threats	**2%**	1 case
Sexual harassment	**2%**	1 case
Coordinated and massive hate attacks by individuals and/or bots	**2%**	1 case
Content with incitement to violence	**2%**	1 case
Defamation of a sexual nature	**2%**	1 case
Doxing/dissemination of personal information	**2%**	1 case
Extortion of a sexual nature	**2%**	1 case
Fraud	**2%**	1 case
Unauthorized access to stolen device	**2%**	1 case
Attempted (not completed) scam/fraud	**2%**	1 case
Cyberbullying	**2%**	1 case

Graph 1. Percentage of incidents attended

Some particularities of the cases referred to "basic digital care" should be noted. Although no digital security incidents were verified, these cases came to the helpline accompanied by reports of persecution and surveillance. From the initial conversations, we observed that the lack of understanding of how the internet works, coupled with previous contexts of abuse, led these individuals to a constant sense of fear and suspicion of being under surveillance. After the digital care training sessions, we observed a progressive increase in self-confidence on behalf of some of the women assisted, according to their own perceptions. In any case, these aspects point to two important considerations: the need to link digital care with psychosocial care, and the impact of the digital gender gap, which makes it difficult to understand and adopt individual protection strategies.

Who are the victims/survivors of online gender-based violence?

Of the 49 cases received in the period under review, ten requests were sent by civil society organizations, which were distributed among the following areas:

People and organizations attended by the MdA

Lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LBT) women's collectives	**20%**	2 cases
Black movement organizations	**20%**	2 cases
Child and adolescent protection organization	**10%**	1 case
Academic/university group	**10%**	1 case
Feminist, women's rights and LGBTQIAPN+ organization	**10%**	1 case
Collective for the defense of the rights of the homeless population	**10%**	1 case
Collective mandate team (institutional policy)	**10%**	1 case
Art and history museum	**10%**	1 case

Graph 2. Profiles of people assisted

Profiles of people assisted – 39 attendances

Age	Race	Gender	Area Urban or rural
26	White	Cis woman	Urban
52	White	Cis woman	No
30	White	Cis woman	Urban
37	Black	Cis woman	Urban
38	Black	Cis woman	Urban
34	White	Cis woman	Urban
46	White	Cis woman	Urban

Table 1. Profiles of people assisted

Meanwhile, one of the challenges is the categorization of people who have requested help individually, since there is a limitation for collecting sensitive personal data, such as race, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, and political or religious affiliation. According to the General Data Protection Act (LGPD),[24] sensitive personal data refers to data that, in addition to identifying the person, could place him/her in a situation of discrimination. Following the guidelines of the law, in the case of the services we provide, it is necessary to have free, informed, and unequivocal consent by which the holder consents to the processing of their personal data. So far, few people have agreed to provide this data and to complete the consent form sent to them. We emphasize that the follow-up of cases is not interrupted, or even impaired when individuals decide not to authorize the collection of these data.

Cases attended by the MdA

Accepted the consent form **18%** 7 cases

Did not give their consent for the processing of sensitive personal data **15%** 6 cases

Did not respond and/or did not continue with the accompaniment **41%** 16 cases

Cases that were sent to Maria d'Ajuda by partner organizations and the consent form was not applied because there was no direct contact with the data subjects **26%** 10 cases
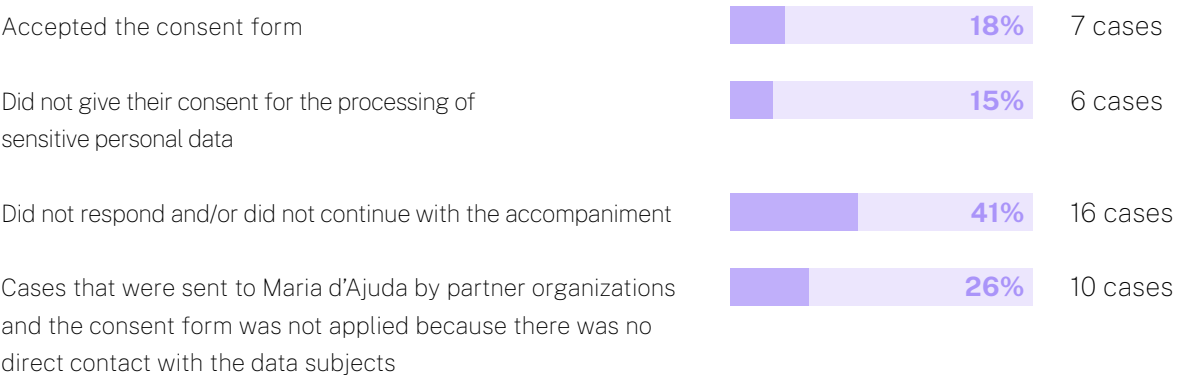
Graph 3. Cases attended

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24   Available at: https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_ato2015-2018/2018/lei/l13709.htm (accessed August 19th, 2024).

Who are the main aggressors?

Maria d'Ajuda does not keep a register of aggressors. Most of the time a possible suspect is reported, but without confirmation of the perpetrator (sometimes the incident has not even been verified). For this reason, we have decided not to keep a register of aggressors or to characterize them, at the risk of creating a picture that does not correspond to reality.

In addition, it is relatively difficult to identify perpetrators of online violence, especially in cases of gender-based violence. West (2014 ap. Taller Comunicación Mujer, 2023) highlights the uniqueness of online gender-based violence due to the ease with which crimes can be committed without advanced technical knowledge, the digital permanence of the content in question, and the difficulty of identifying perpetrators, as attacks via the internet can be committed by anyone almost anywhere in the world.

Resolution of handled cases

Approximately half of the cases received during this period were followed through to resolution and most of the issues initially reported were resolved, including the recovery of stolen or hacked accounts and the removal of infringing content. In cases where there was no proven incident, we adopted the practice of conducting brief digital security training with basic content. The goal was to increase the confidence of the people assisted so that they could make more autonomous decisions when managing digital accounts and devices.

Case resolution

Completed	41%	20 cases
Ongoing	14%	7 cases
No response from the applicant	29%	14 cases
Not attended	16%	8 cases
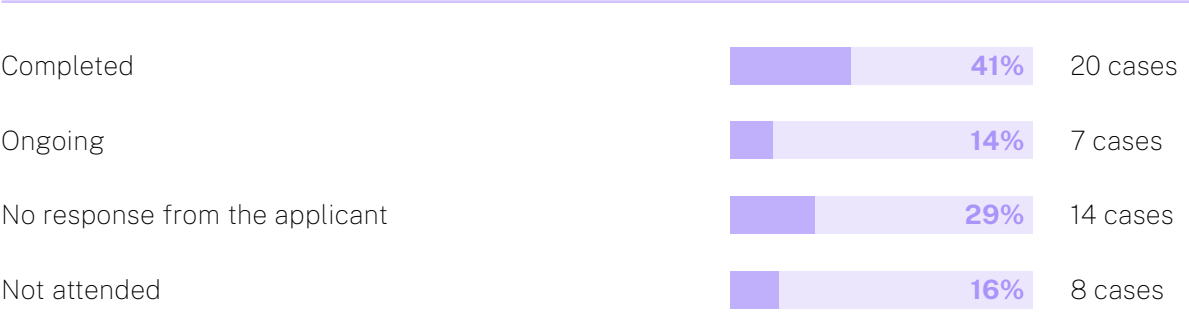
Graph 4. Case resolution

Reasons for non-resolution

Meta refused to eliminate the accounts that
disseminated intimate images   **12%**   1 case

Recovered the account by other means   **25%**   2 cases

Referred to another organization   **25%**   2 cases

Does not fit Maria D'Ajuda services   **38%**   3 cases
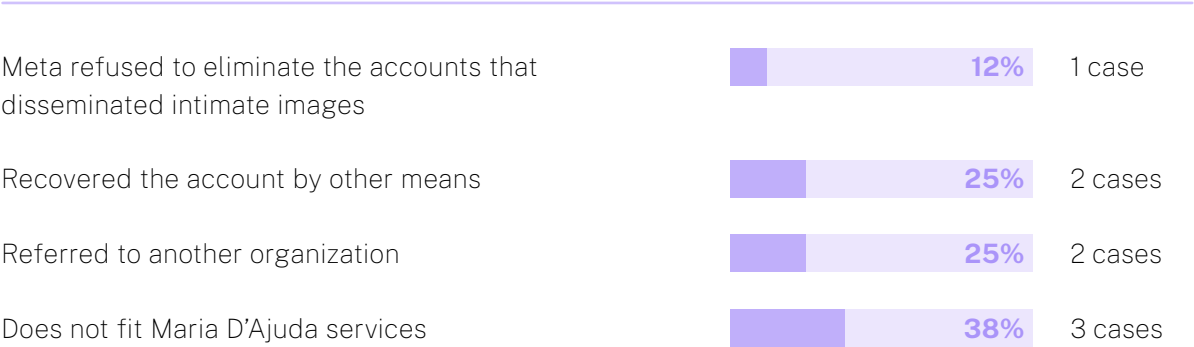
Graph 5. Reasons for non-resolution

Among the cases unresolved, we highlight those that were discontinued due to a lack of response from the requesters. Fourteen open requests did not continue after initial instructions were sent, which is a relatively common behavior.

We also highlight the cases that were not followed up by Maria d'Ajuda: in two of them, the account was recovered through other means, and five cases did not correspond to the services offered by the line and/or were referred to partner organizations with greater possibilities of assistance.

In only one case did we not receive a satisfactory response from the social media platform, stating that there was insufficient evidence to remove the posted content. Even after discussing the violation of community standards and the gender-based violence contained in the post, it was not removed.

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Ecuador: Navegando Libres por la Red

Ecuador: Navegando Libres por la Red

By Mónica Diego and Priscilla Purtschert from Taller Comunicación
Mujer - Navegando Libres Program

Brief political context and gender-based violence situation in Ecuador

Ecuador has been experiencing a series of crises over the past several years. The crises have arisen from the political management of the coronavirus pandemic, the prison crises, which reflect an absent state with indications of corruption, organized crime, terrorism, and drug trafficking, the expansion of the extractive frontier in indigenous territories and natural and water reserves, and the socio-political and economic crisis due to both national and global factors. Collectively, these factors have resulted in Ecuador being one of the most violent countries in the world as of 2023.

From November 2023, Ecuador has a new president for one year, who has inherited a country with power cuts for the entire population, high public debt, and rising rates of insecurity and violence. One of his initial actions was to declare a State of Emergency with curfews in effect for several months, with the option of extension. This, along with recently approved economic measures, such as an increase in the value-added tax and the elimination of various subsidies, indicates that the coming years will be uncertain for most ecuadorians.

In this context, the rates of gender-based violence have increased due to the high crime rate in the country, especially femicides. In the year 2024 until May 31, 108 women's lives have been lost to extreme gender-based violence. Of these, 61 were victims of intimate, sexual, or family femicides, 10 were victims of transfeminicides, and at least 31 were victims of femicides in the criminal system.[25]

Digital gender-based violence is one of the least documented and least known forms of violence. In Ecuador, there is insufficient measurement of this violence due to a lack of statistical operations to show the prevalence of this type of violence at the national and local levels in different population groups, geographical areas, and contexts. However, there are quantitative and qualitative studies that allow us to visualize the seriousness of online violence and its impact on women and girls from various sectors. According to the Ministry of Education and Unicef, in a survey of adolescents and young people under 25 years of age, 37% had experienced situations related to cyberbullying, harmful content, and non-consensual access to accounts and devices, among others. 21.32 % experienced situations of grooming, viral challenges, and dissemination of images. 5.68 % reported having experienced contact for sexual purposes, less than 2 % reported dissemination of images and less than 1 % reported sexual extortion. Despite the relevance of the survey, it lacks a cross-checking of variables that would make visible the specific violence and risks towards young women and girls, as well as LGTBQA+ persons.[26] More recent data on crimes, such as those provided by the Attorney General's Office, show complaints involving the use of ICTs at the national level between January 1, 2019, and August 31, 2023.[27] The highest number of cases relate to identity theft, violence to privacy, and sexual harassment.

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25 More information at: http://www.fundacionaldea.org/noticias-aldea/1ermapa2024 (Accessed August 19th, 2024).

26 Ministry of Education of Ecuador [Mineduc], United Nations Children's Fund [Unicef] (2022). Internet seguro. U-Report. Survey results: https://www.unicef.org/ecuador/sites/unicef.org.ecuador/files/2023-03/Resultados-Internet-Seguro.pdf

27 State Attorney General's Office [FGE] (March 21 and September 20, 2023): Statistical reports Ticket#2023032022001112 and Ticket#2023091322001035. Responses to public information requests issued by TCM.

Regarding the legal framework on technology-facilitated violence, it can be divided into two groups, the first that covers violence in general, and the second that refers specifically to situations of digital gender-based violence. Within the first group, we have the Constitution of the country, since as the supreme and general norm, its rights and principles apply to all cases of violence, including technology-facilitated violence. As for the second group, the Comprehensive Organic Criminal Code (COIP), with the incorporation of new crimes or reforms to others between 2019, 2021, and 2023, extending crimes to digital contexts.[28] For example, the Organic Law to Prevent and Eradicate Violence against Women (2018), which in article 10 recognizes that both psychological and sexual violence can be carried out through technological or digital means.

With all this political, social, and regulatory context, the program Navegando Libres por la Red and its assistance line have observed an increase in digital gender-based violence, mainly against women, girls, LGTBQA+ population and women defenders of human rights and territory.

Helpline: Navegando Libres por la Red

The helpline was created in 2018 as a political commitment to reduce the digital gender gap and make the internet a safe space to be inhabited. It mainly serves women, the LGTBQA+ population, girls, boys, children and adolescents, collectives, and women defenders of human rights and territory. Currently, three members of the technical team are in charge of accompanying the cases received.

The line focuses on three aspects:

– **Comprehensive protection,** working together to reduce violence or respond to attacks. Some of the assistance strategies in this helpline are digital care to prevent violence and protect information in virtual space, support for comprehensive and daily protection habits, actions to respond and seek justice beyond the criminal justice system, building and strengthening regional networks to influence public platforms and policies, among others.

– **Digital self-defense tools** to protect oneself in the digital space by using devices, applications, or privacy and security settings within platforms or by increasing knowledge regarding technology.

– **Agency and autonomy,** as individual and collective capacities to act for ourselves, our lives, and our physical and digital bodies.

In the beginning, the Helpline received cases via secure email and Telegram. Since 2024, the contact channels have been expanded to include a phone number. At the moment, the official channels are:

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28   COIP: Art. 103.-Pornography involving children or adolescents, Art. 104.-Commercialization of pornography involving children or adolescents, Art. 154.1.-Instigation to suicide Art. 154.2.-Harassment Art. 166.-Sexual harassment. Art. 170.- Sexual abuse. Art. 171.-Rape Art. 173.-Contact for sexual purposes with minors under eighteen years of age by electronic means Art. 174.-Offer of sexual services to minors under eighteen years of age by electronic means Art. 185.-Extortion Art. 230.-Illegal interception of data.

    – Contact form on **navegandolibres.org** website
    – Signal: +593 98 920 0476
    – Telegram: @NavegandoLibres +593 98 920 0476
    – Whatsapp: +593 98 920 0476
    – Email: **reportaviolencia@navegandolibres.org**

We also receive cases through other channels:

    – TCM and NL social networks.
    – Personal contacts of the accompaniers.
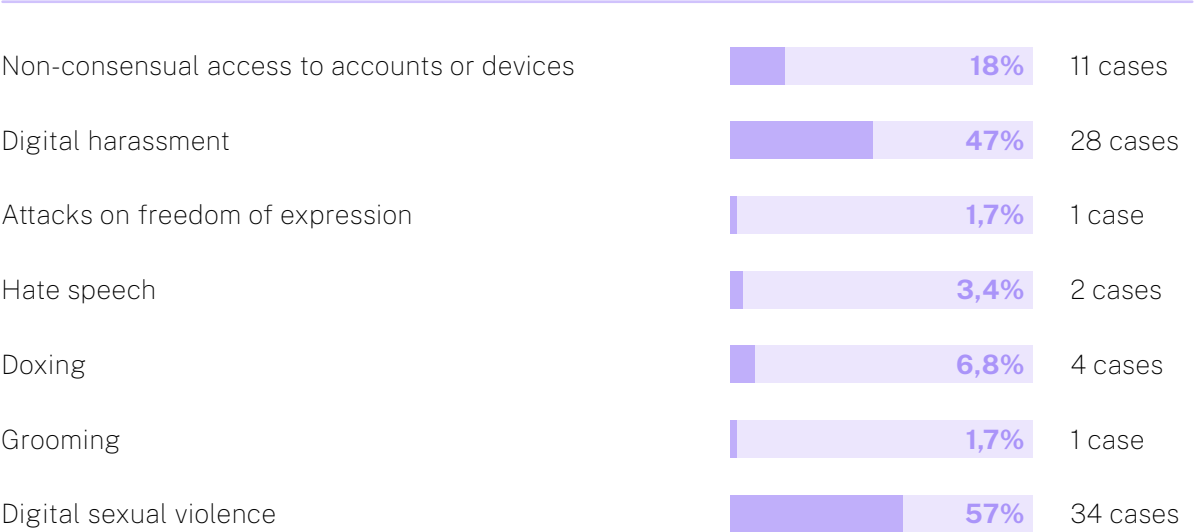   – Referrals from other organizations.

The phases of accompaniment consist of: initial contact; a meeting to document the case, developing the **action plan and response measures; subsequent follow-up, closure and evaluation meetings.** All supported cases are documented in a secure database, with the consent of the persons accompanied, in order to facilitate their follow-up, systematization, and analysis.

Accompaniment of online gender-based violence cases

What types of cases did the helpline attend?

Between June 1, 2023, and May 31, 2024, a total of 59 requests for assistance were received. Of the requests received, 34 involved situations of sexual violence, 28 involved digital harassment, 11 involved non-consensual access to accounts or devices, four involved doxing, two involved hate speech, one involved attacks on free speech, and one involved grooming. In some cases where it was not possible to schedule a meeting, the nature of the digital violence is unknown.[29]

Requests for assistance

Category	%	Cases
Non-consensual access to accounts or devices	18%	11 cases
Digital harassment	47%	28 cases
Attacks on freedom of expression	1,7%	1 case
Hate speech	3,4%	2 cases
Doxing	6,8%	4 cases
Grooming	1,7%	1 case
Digital sexual violence	57%	34 cases

Graph 1. Requests for assistance

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29   Many of the requests received involve more than one type of violence, so the numbers do not necessarily coincide with the number of requests.

Digital sexual violence and digital harassment were identified as the most recurrent types of digital gender-based violence. Within these, the most frequent attacks were: threats and violent language, and the dissemination, processing, or storage of intimate images or videos without consent. The fact that the most common types of violence are digital harassment and digital sexual violence corresponds with the high rates of harassment and sexual violence affecting women offline.
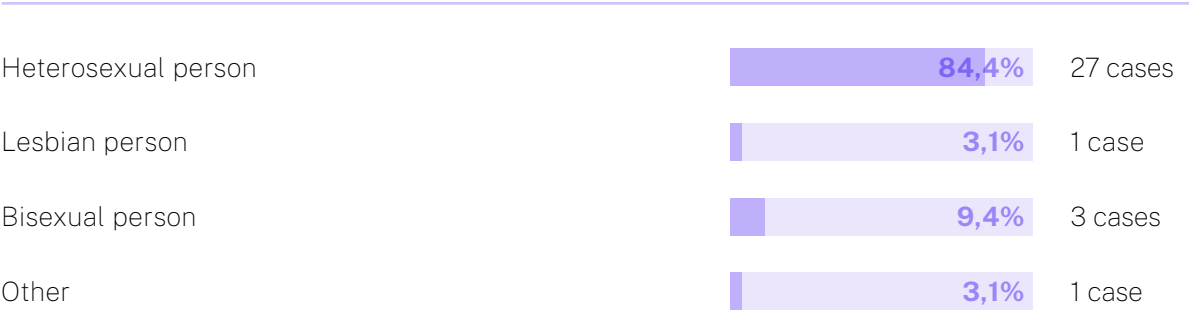
Who are the victims/survivors of online gender-based violence?

Of the 59 registered cases, five correspond to social organizations and the remaining 54 are individual cases. In the cases where it was possible to determine the gender identity of the persons accompanied, 39 were cis women, and in terms of sexual orientation, 27 were heterosexual, three were bisexual, one was lesbian, and one person responded that she did not like to label herself.

Gender identity

Cis women	**72%**	39 cases
Not possible to determine	**28%**	15 cases

In the cases in which it was possible to determine the sexual orientation of the persons assisted:

Heterosexual person	**84,4%**	27 cases
Lesbian person	**3,1%**	1 case
Bisexual person	**9,4%**	3 cases
Other	**3,1%**	1 case

Graph 2. Gender identity

In terms of age, two cases were under 18 years old, 14 were between 19 and 25 years old, 14 were between 26 and 35 years old, and three were between 36 and 45 years old. It was found that the majority of cases occurred in people between 17 and 35 years old.
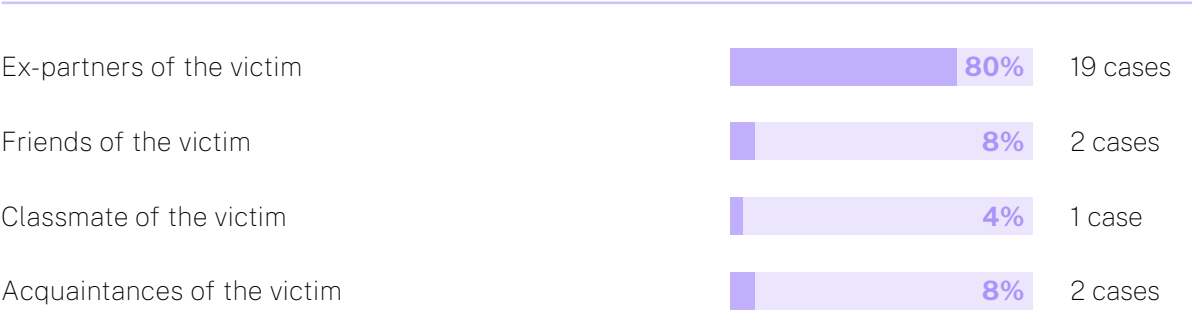
Who are the main aggressors?

Only in 24 cases could the aggressors be identified. It is common for aggressors to take advantage of the anonymity facilitated by ICTs. This not only increases impunity but in some cases makes it difficult to manage response actions.
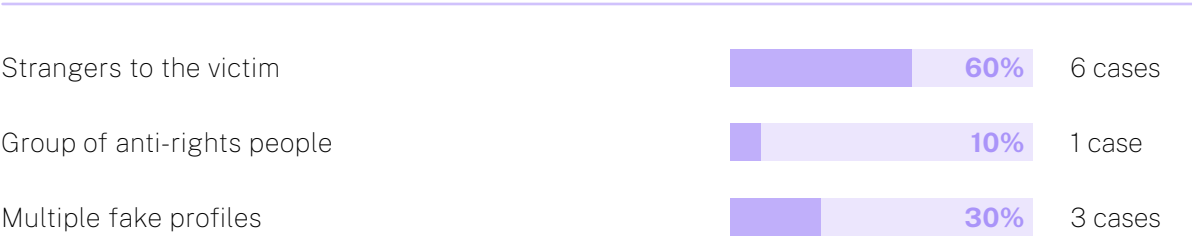
Of the 24 cases where information on the aggressors is available, 19 were ex-partners of the victims, two were friends of the victim, two were acquaintances and one was a classmate. As with other types of gender-based violence, there is a strong pattern of violence suffered by women in their intimate relationships.

In six cases, the aggressors were unknown to the victim. In three cases, the profiles used were fake. In one case, the attacks were carried out by anti-rights groups. In the remaining cases, the aggressors could not be identified. The lack of data on the aggressors is due to the fact that in many cases, they are unknown or use false profiles.

Offenders who have been identified

Ex-partners of the victim	80%	19 cases
Friends of the victim	8%	2 cases
Classmate of the victim	4%	1 case
Acquaintances of the victim	8%	2 cases

Offenders who have not been identified

Strangers to the victim	60%	6 cases
Group of anti-rights people	10%	1 case
Multiple fake profiles	30%	3 cases

Graph 3. Who are the main aggressors

Resolution of handled cases

A total of 59 requests for assistance were received during the period. Of these, 38 cases were accompanied, of which 31 were completed and seven are still in progress. On the other hand, 21 requests were canceled due to a lack of response from the applicants to initiate the accompaniment.

It should be noted that in the cases in which the platforms have been contacted, the response has proven to be insufficient, mainly because there are no prevention routes. In many cases, it is only possible to denounce when violence has already occurred. Their recurrent omissions after reporting these situations account for how digital gender-based violence is still not a priority.

Case resolution

Resolved or closed	**52,5%**	31 cases
Could not be scheduled or were canceled	**35,5%**	21 cases
Still being followed up; in three of these cases, we are waiting for a response from the platforms where the aggression occurred	**12%**	7 cases
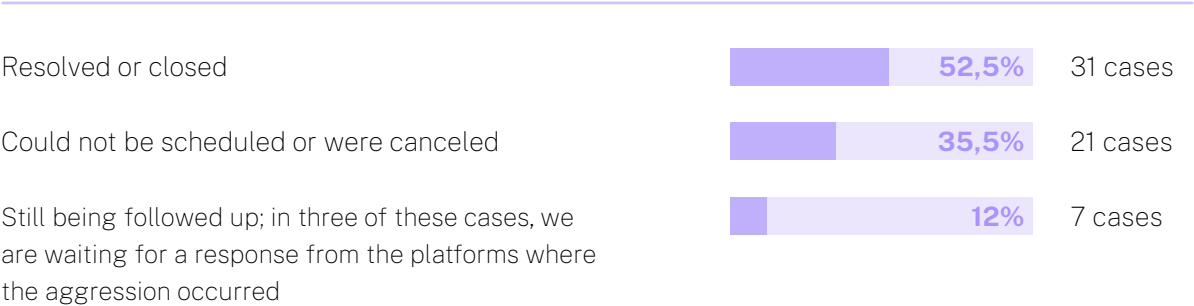
Graph 4. Case resolution

An accompaniment case

Laura* (16 years old) experiences digital sexual violence. In early 2023, she recorded a nude video and sent it to the boy she was dating. Unbeknownst to her, in April of the same year, the video begins to circulate in several WhatsApp and Facebook chats. The situation escalates when her aunt forwards the video to the family chat group, concerned because she has discovered it on her husband's cell phone. Family members who were in the chat room continued to disseminate the video, apparently to alert others to the situation, and it ended up going viral.

Laura's mother went to a comprehensive care center and the social worker contacted us. She told us that they tried to file a complaint, but an official informed them that if Laura had sent the video, there was nothing they could do, that she had done it with her consent, and that she was therefore equally responsible. After this misinformation, they could not file the report and her parents decided to punish her by taking away her cell phone and banning her from using social networks.

From Navegando Libres we are providing them with information on how to implement various measures of protection and digital care. We have submitted a request to WhatsApp to cease the dissemination through their channels but we did not receive a satisfactory response from the platform. With the support of the social worker, we tried to conduct some awareness-raising actions in Laura's school, but the school showed no interest and the process is hindered.

A year later, the video is circulating again among her classmates and others in the community. The mother went to the school for support and was told that in such cases "the best thing to do is to let it go" and that "they will forget about it"; they did not provide any kind of support. This case is currently ongoing and further actions are being planned.

This case was particularly complex because the people around her lacked the tools and knowledge to accompany and contain her. From the beginning, there were several practices of re-victimization, where Laura was blamed and punished for exercising her right to live her sexuality. Negligence on the part of the educational institution, the judicial system, and the platform on which the violence takes place also accounts for the obstacles that survivors of digital gender-based violence face in obtaining redress and justice. These types of cases highlight the urgency of thinking about community-based strategies for self-advocacy, justice, and redress and putting the people who experience violence at the center by addressing their needs and desires.

*We use a pseudonym.

Trends and final remarks

Trends and final remarks

The three chapters narrated by the helplines illustrate a Latin American reality characterized by widespread violence, political contexts in crisis, drug trafficking, and legal frameworks that are inadequate for protecting the population. In this scenario, gender-based violence has a daily place on and offline, and the data collected by the organizations shows that in the face of this situation, there is a dearth of access to justice which consequently results in insufficient or non-existent redress for the victims and survivors of gender-based digital violence.

As indicated in the methodological note, the comparative analysis between the three helplines is limited by the disparate use of case classifications and geographical differences. Nevertheless, it is possible to reflect on the principal trends and commonalities encountered by these services in their work. The main findings are presented below.

Public and private sector response to online gender-based violence

It is the responsibility of the State to guarantee the right to live a life free of violence in accordance with the Belém Do Para Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women,[30] which has been signed and ratified by the American States since the 1990s. Despite this, we can see two consistent trends in the region. On the one hand, aggressions that have gender as a central factor are occurring at serious rates every day, as evidenced by the data collected by the helplines. On the other hand, some governments have decided to implement legal frameworks that criminalize the use of digital media, which, rather than protecting the population groups that have historically been violated, places them in a vulnerable position.[31]

In addition to the deficiencies in the legal frameworks, which at times result in criminalization, helplines have identified difficulties in accessing justice, as evidenced in the case of Laura, exemplified by Navegando Libres por la Red in its chapter. The inefficiency of the State in addressing gender-based violence suggests a pattern of negligence that is contributing to the loss of lives of women, children, activists, journalists, and members of the LGTBQIA+ community. Therefore, the role of the state must focus on creating a regulatory framework capable of addressing gender-based violence-online and offline-as well as providing support to the institutions responsible for enforcing justice.

Furthermore, digital platforms and other private sector actors bear the responsibility to guarantee respect for human rights in digital media.[32] The helplines have shown the critical role that digital platforms play in removing sexual and gender-based violence content. This underscores the

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30   OEA. Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women "Convention of Belem do Para. Available at: http://www.oas.org/juridico/english/treaties/a-61.html (accessed August 21, 2024).

31   Lara Castro, P. (2023). When protection becomes an excuse for criminalization: Gender considerations on cybercrime frameworks. Available at: https://www.derechosdigitales.org/wp-content/uploads/gender_considerations_on_cybercrime.pdf (accessed August 21, 2024).

32   APC, Derechos Digitales and Global Partners Digital. (2024). Gender, Tech & the role of business: APC, Derechos Digitales, and Global Partners Digital submission to the UN Human Rights B-tech Project call for inputs. Available at: https://www.derechosdigitales.org/wp-content/uploads/APC-Derechos-Digitales-and-Global-Partners-Digital-submission-to-the-UN-Human-Rights-B-tech-Project-call-for-inputs.pdf (accessed August 21, 2024).

necessity for these companies to have standards based on a gender perspective that enable them to make appropriate, prompt, and effective decisions when a victim requests the removal or cessation of content that violates her integrity.

Systemic violence brought into the digital environment

It is no coincidence that the offline gender-based violence described in the three chapters and the digital technology-enabled violence addressed by the three helplines are very similar. Gender-based violence is a structural problem that is embedded in the daily dynamics of societies. As such, it must be addressed holistically, with an understanding that aggressions occurring in digital environments will probably have an impact outside them, or vice versa. In other words, when aggression occurs, it may be made up of actions in digital and analog environments, forming part of the same violence.

There are similarities, especially between the Ecuadorian and Bolivian helplines, which have reported that the most prevalent forms of aggression they deal with are digital violence and sexual abuse. These cases are typified by threats to publish sexual content, such as images or videos, or by direct publication without the victims' consent, usually through digital platforms. This form of sexual violence is accompanied by harassment (the second most prevalent type of violence reported by these two helplines) and threats involving violent language. In some cases, people who are victims of this type of aggression are compelled to pay in exchange for the non-publication and dissemination of such sexual content.

Meanwhile, Maria d'Ajuda registered most cases of account theft, which the S.O.S. Digital Center identified as the fourth most common form of offense. These are mostly social network accounts and e-mails, in the case of Brazil the accounts belong to Meta networks. Helplines and victims face the challenge of identifying the aggressors. In those cases where they have been identified, particularly in Ecuador, a number of them come from intimate partner relationships or ex-partners of the victims.

Most common types of violence handled by helpline

Helpline	1st Violence attended	2nd Violence attended	3rd Violence attended
Centro S.O.S Digital	Sexual abuse through ICT	Harassment	Discredit
Maria d'Ajuda[33]	Account theft/invasion	Unauthorized access to devices	Exhibition of intimate images.
Navegando Libres por la Red	Digital sexual violence	Digital harassment	Attacks on freedom of expression

Table 1. Most common types of violence handled by helpline

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33   Maria d'Ajuda received in second and third place requests for digital security consultancy for organizations and requests for prevention (basic digital care), but since these are not considered forms of violence, the following (fourth and fifth) requests are considered, which do correspond to forms of violence: unauthorized access to devices and exposure of intimate images.

Online gender-based violence has a serious impact on the equal exercise of human rights. Online sexual violence not only affects the trust of victims but also directly violates their sexual and reproductive rights, as well as their right to privacy. Similarly, the dissemination of sexual content hurts the reputation of the victims: women have been systematically threatened with control over their bodies,[34] and this social practice, rooted in gender inequality, has been transferred to the digital environment.

Unfortunately, the exercise of sexual and reproductive rights in digital media has been discussed in legal frameworks from a prohibitive and criminalizing perspective, as announced by Fundación InternetBolivia.org. Governments have invoked the argument of "protecting public morality" to justify punitive actions against women and the LGBTQIA+ community for expressing their sexuality. This malpractice superimposes patriarchal standards of "morality," influencing discussions and silencing the voices of affected groups. In this way, these legislations restrict the enjoyment of sexuality, as some of them disregard factors such as the consent of individuals and criminalize acts that are deemed inappropriate or indecent according to moral standards.[35]

Online gender-based violence also has the effect of restricting freedom of expression and access to information. On the one hand, the threats received by victims create fear and may result in structural silencing, which in turn leads to self-censorship on digital platforms and the social exclusion of victims, representing a clear violation of freedom of expression and development. On the other hand, online violence can affect the willingness of victims to use digital technologies and thus access all kinds of information and knowledge.

The exercise of online gender-based violence consequently affects the right to privacy, as individuals' privacy is exposed, resulting in reputational damage concerning online sexual violence. Also, the theft of accounts leaves personal and confidential information in the hands of the aggressors, which can lead to a series of extortions of the victims or discrimination in the public sphere due to the dissemination of sensitive information. Thus, it can be seen that one act of online gender-based violence can lead to many others, which tend to have a negative impact on victims and survivors.

The Internet serves as an enabling medium for the exercise of other human rights, including the right to live a life free of violence; the support and information that victims can receive through the network is an example of this. The right to education, knowledge, development, and many others are benefited by the Internet and other digital technologies, however, when online gender-based violence is exercised, it creates an obstacle to achieving gender equality, as it leaves the victims of this situation in conditions of disadvantage and inequality, especially women, children, people from the LGBTQIA+ community and other historically vulnerable groups. Therefore, this panorama has serious repercussions on the achievement of justice and gender equality.

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34   UN Women. Types of violence against women and girls. Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/es/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/faqs/types-of-violence (accessed August 21, 2024).

35   Lara Castro, P. (2024). Combating TFGBV under the Lenses of International Human Rights Law. Derechos Digitales.

The importance of documenting online gender-based violence

Taller Comunicación Mujer, Marialab, and Fundación InternetBolivia.org have emphasized a lack of official statistics on the number of cases, the types of violence suffered, and the profiles of victims and aggressors. As a result, there is an incomplete perspective of gender-based violence facilitated by digital technologies in Latin American countries, which constitutes a limitation for the creation of programs, projects, and public policies aimed at combating this problem.

In this sense, helplines represent a reliable source of information that contributes to the construction of a national panorama. While their work is recognized for assisting and accompanying victims and survivors, as well as generating content on prevention and digital security practices, these assistance and accompaniment mechanisms also have an impact on the documentation of cases, means, and forms of violence.

Some of these helplines provide periodic reports on the cases they address, which contributes to greater visibility of the situation regarding digital violence. Although its primary task is not monitoring, there are gaps in the information that could be useful for this purpose when dealing with cases, such as the profile of the victims-who, in an effort to respect their choices, guarantee their safety and create trust, are asked for the minimum necessary data-or the profile of the aggressors, who, due to their anonymity, cannot always be identified.

Challenges in accompanying online gender-based violence cases

Accompanying this type of cases involves a great complexity because it means facing the structural problem of gender-based violence. This requires a holistic approach in which the online and analog spaces are conceived as the same and all aspects of the problem are addressed. When gender-based violence occurs online, it is not only enough to pay attention to technological matters, i.e., to activate the corresponding digital security measures or request a digital platform to take action but also to provide emotional support so that the victims receive adequate psychological support, as well as legal advice that allows them access to justice and, subsequently, to reparation of the damage.

The immense work conducted by the helplines is made possible by the multidisciplinary work teams that address these cases daily. It is therefore essential to emphasize the importance of staff self-care, given that supporting victims of gender-based violence is a challenging task that involves a significant emotional and psychological burden.[36] From an operational point of view, helplines must also have an infrastructure that allows them to deal with these situations, such as ticketing systems for case management and an institutional framework based on the development of internal methods and processes that take care of the sensitive information they receive.

Another challenge identified is the limited reach of helplines, especially in the face of inaction by external actors such as digital platforms or government authorities. Despite their crucial role in providing immediate assistance to individuals facing extreme vulnerability or fragility, helplines

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36   In her book Counting Feminicide, especially in chapters 3 and 4, Catherine D'Ignazio tells the story of different people who collaborate in organizations, movements, or collectives in charge of monitoring cases of feminicide, reflecting the emotional and psychological burden of being in constant proximity to information and data on extreme violence, as well as following up and accompanying the families of victims seeking access to justice. D'Ignazio, C. (2024). Counting Feminicide. MIT Press.

frequently lack the necessary institutional support and recognition to offer comprehensive assistance. The absence of comprehensive programs to address online gender-based violence, coupled with the punitive stance of regional authorities in addressing this issue, not only fails to provide an effective response to victims and survivors but also represents a missed opportunity to promote the establishment of expanded support networks between the state, corporations, and civil society.

A related challenge is the financial sustainability of these support mechanisms. We believe it is crucial that regional and international donors acknowledge the efforts of social organizations that implement these helplines and facilitate the flow of resources to maintain them operationally. As these three lines are relatively new, with the first of them becoming operational in 2018, the role of international cooperation is essential for their performance and that of other lines to remain operational. In this sense, more than one-time support, of limited duration or based on the number of cases handled, institutional and long-term funding is necessary to enable organizations to effectively strengthen their operational capacities and meet their own internal needs.

Continuing to reflect on the importance of helplines

Our intention with this report was to highlight the work of helplines and to begin to identify trends based on their work. At Derechos Digitales, we believe it is essential to persist in providing elements that reinforce the discussion on the importance of helplines, but also to promote effective and integrated responses between the State, civil society, and companies that aim to overcome inequalities and violence in our region.

In this regard, the following recommendations are proposed:

– Continue to work on awareness-raising and sensitization of online and offline gender-based violence;

– Encourage preventive actions in digital security and digital care from civil society;

– Foster the flow of international cooperation to ensure the financial sustainability of the helplines that support cases of online gender-based violence in Latin America;

– Promote the creation of comprehensive protection and access to justice programs for victims of online gender-based violence with a multisectoral approach involving the State, companies, and civil society;

– Create legal frameworks to combat gender-based violence that are grounded in human rights and based on an intersectional perspective that prioritizes the protection of historically vulnerable groups and overcomes regulations that criminalize sexual and reproductive rights, as well as freedom of expression;

– Establish effective complaint mechanisms with a gender perspective on the part of digital platforms and strengthen the gender awareness of content moderators working on digital platforms.

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