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GENDER DIMENSION OF CYBER ATTACKS AND ONLINE VIOLENCE AMONG SCHOOL STUDENTS

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RESEARCH SUMMARY

The research examines the impact of online violence and cyberattacks on school students, its gender dimensions, influence on young people, and support mechanisms. The study was conducted by **Women Fund “Sukhumi”** and included **192 students from 10 municipalities in Western Georgia**¹. According to the research data, **25% of respondents have personally experienced online violence**, while **gender differences in the forms and intensity of violence are evident**.

- **The most common platforms for online violence** are TikTok (48%) and Facebook (47%) – girls mainly encounter violence on these platforms, while boys (41%) experience it in online games.
- **The most widespread forms of violence are:** Spreading offensive rumors and comments (73%); Mocking comments related to appearance (49%); Sexual harassment, which primarily affects girls (34.35%), while for boys, it accounts for 14.75%.
- **Boys are more frequently victims of:** Hacking attacks (31.15%); Financial extortion (19.67%), which may be linked to their active involvement in online gaming.
- **Online violence has a significant psychological impact:** 77.6% develop anxiety and depression; 56.6% experience self-esteem issues; 42.2% develop fear of online activities.
- **For support, students most frequently turn to friends (56.3%) and parents (49.5%),** but 30.2% have not sought help from anyone. Teachers (14.5%) and school security officers (8.4%) are not perceived as reliable sources of support.
- **Gender analysis shows that girls face victim-blaming more often,** making it harder for them to seek support, especially from parents and teachers.

The research highlights that the scale and impact of online violence require a serious systemic approach, where education, support mechanisms, and legal frameworks must be coordinated.

¹ Tskaltubo, Terjola, Samtredia, Chokhatauri, Kobuleti, Senaki, Zugdidi, Tsalenjikha, Khobi, Vani.

Recommendations

- **Strengthening cybersecurity education** to ensure adolescent safety.
- **Enhancing the role of parents and educators** in creating a safe environment for adolescents.
- **Improving regulations of online platforms and legal frameworks** to prevent violence.

INTRODUCTION

Cyberattacks and online violence are growing challenges in today's digital environment, with particularly severe effects on adolescents. While internet platforms facilitate social communication and education, they also introduce new forms of threats. Online violence manifests in various forms, including **offensive comments, cyberbullying, misuse of personal data, threats, sexual harassment, and other abusive behaviors.**

Online violence has several unique characteristics that make it particularly dangerous:

- **Anonymity:** Perpetrators can act anonymously, reducing their fear of accountability and encouraging aggressive behavior.
- **Sense of Impunity:** Due to the absence of adequate legal regulations or weak enforcement, perpetrators often feel immune from consequences, leading to a rise in violent incidents.
- **Unlimited Spread:** Given the global nature of the internet, online violence spreads rapidly, reaching a vast audience and increasing psychological pressure on victims.

These factors make online violence a complex, multi-dimensional issue that requires a **systematic and coordinated response.** Its **prevention and reduction** cannot be achieved solely through individual efforts. Addressing this challenge necessitates the **integration of digital safety programs in education systems, raising awareness among families about children's online security, and strengthening legal frameworks** to ensure both preventive measures and protection for victims, as well as accountability for perpetrators.

Research Methodology

This **quantitative study** was conducted by **Women Fund “Sukhumi”** in **November 2024**, involving students from schools across **10 municipalities**.

The research aimed to assess the **scale, forms, gender differences, impact, and support mechanisms** related to online violence. Data was collected through an **online survey**, using a **structured questionnaire** that included **open-ended, closed-ended, and multiple-choice questions**.

Age Distribution of Participants

- **Ages 12-14 – 60 participants (Girls: 41, Boys: 19)**
- **Ages 15-17 – 122 participants (Girls: 82, Boys: 40)**
- **Age 18 – 10 participants (Girls: 8, Boys: 2)**

DATA ANALYSIS

1. EXPERIENCE OF ONLINE VIOLENCE, ITS FORMS, AND GENDER-SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS

1.1. EXPERIENCE OF ONLINE VIOLENCE

The research findings reveal that **25% of respondents have personally experienced online violence**, including **bullying, harassment, threats, or cyberattacks**. While the prevalence rates among **girls (25.2%)** and **boys (24.6%)** are nearly identical, the **nature and forms of violence differ** between genders.

“I was personally a victim. My personal data was stolen, and I could no longer access my account. The perpetrator used my profile to message others about games. I was extremely angry and distressed, but I eventually resolved everything with the help of my ‘IT’ friend. The attacker was a foreigner who tricked me with fraudulent promises.”
(Boy, 16 years old)

“It is very difficult when your photos are used without permission. This is an invasion of personal space, and it had a severe impact on my psychological well-being.”
(Girl, 15 years old)

Table 1. Experience of Online Violence by Gender

Response	Total (%)	Girls (%)	Boys (%)
Yes	25%	25.2%	24.6%
No	75%	74.8%	75.4%

1.2. MOST COMMON PLATFORMS FOR ONLINE VIOLENCE

TikTok (48%) and Facebook (47%) are the most frequently mentioned platforms where **girls** experience online violence, while **boys (41%)** mainly encounter such incidents in **online games** (see Table #2).

“Hacking Facebook accounts and misusing them is quite common. I have come across many such cases. There was even an instance where someone took my photo from my relative’s account and used it.” (Girl, 14 years old)

“I have often seen bullying and psychological attacks on children coming from TikTok, which is very unpleasant and has a negative psychological impact.” (Boy, 16 years old)

“In online games, psychological pressure on players happens frequently. It is especially difficult for those who spend a lot of time gaming.” (Boy, 17 years old)

Table 2. Online Violence Platforms by Gender

Platform	Percentage (%)
Facebook	47%
TikTok	48%
Instagram	22%
Online games	22%

1.3. MOST COMMON FORMS OF ONLINE VIOLENCE

The research revealed that the majority of surveyed students have personally encountered **the spread of offensive rumors or comments (73%)**, making it the most common form of online violence. This is followed by **mocking or offensive comments related to appearance (49%)**, where the percentage of **girls and boys is nearly identical** (see Table #3).

“Mocking comments about appearance are very common, especially on TikTok and Instagram. This is particularly difficult for girls because there is more attention on their looks.” (Girl, 16 years old)

“I was once threatened that if I didn’t continue participating in the game, my account would be hacked and deleted. It was a very stressful experience for me.” (Boy, 15 years old)

Table 3. Forms of Online Violence by Gender

Forms of Violence	Total (%)	Girls (%)	Boys (%)
Spreading offensive rumors	73%	74.81%	70.49%
Messages containing physical violence or threats	34%	33.59%	36.07%
Mocking criticism of academic achievements or skills	20%	19.85%	21.31%
Hacking or unauthorized use of personal accounts	30%	29.77%	31.15%
Offensive comments related to appearance	49%	52.67%	40.98%
Unwanted sexually explicit messages	28%	34.35%	14.75%
Persistent, unwanted contact or stalking	8%	7.63%	8.2%
Unauthorized sharing of personal photos or information	18%	16.79%	21.31%
Requesting intimate photos or personal information	17%	16.79%	18.03%
Financial extortion or manipulation through threats	14%	10.69%	19.67%

The gender analysis revealed that **girls are significantly more likely to experience sexual harassment (34.35%)**, whereas this rate is nearly **twice as low for boys (14.75%)**. This trend has deep-rooted social causes: sexual harassment, as a phenomenon, is largely shaped by **cultural norms that place women’s bodies and behavior under public scrutiny**. In the online space, these trends intensify, as **digital anonymity provides perpetrators with greater opportunities to spread harmful narratives about girls**.

A **common form of cyberbullying against girls is appearance-related insults (52.67%)**, whereas **boys encounter this in 40.98% of cases**. This difference can be attributed to **image-driven social media culture, which places particularly high pressure on girls, compelling them to conform to established beauty standards and making them constant targets of criticism**.

Boys, on the other hand, are **more frequently victims of financial extortion (19.67%) and hacking attacks (31.15%)**, which may be linked to **their higher engagement in**

online gaming, where cybersecurity risks are more prevalent. Additionally, messages containing physical violence and threats are more common among boys (36.07%) than girls (33.59%), which could be associated with cultural norms that perceive boys as more resilient and “ready for confrontation”.

2. IMPACT OF CYBER VIOLENCE AND SUPPORT MECHANISMS

2.1. IMPACT OF ONLINE VIOLENCE

According to the research data, online violence has a significant negative impact on adolescents’ mental health and social functioning. The most common effects include:

Table 4: Impact of Online/Digital Violence on Youth

Impact of Online Violence	Total (%)
Mental health problems (anxiety, depression)	77.6%
Low self-esteem	56.6%
Fear of online activities	42.2%
Social isolation	44.8%
Academic difficulties	17.7%

These findings highlight that cyberbullying and online violence are not just isolated incidents but systemic issues that impact multiple aspects of adolescents’ lives. A particularly concerning factor is mental health problems (77.6%), indicating an increase in anxiety disorders and depressive conditions among teenagers.

As one respondent noted:

“Online violence is a serious issue that affects a person’s psychological state and sense of security. People often remain anonymous, making it even harder to address this problem. In my opinion, it is crucial for everyone to take responsibility in online communication and support those who have become victims of violence.” (Boy, 16 years old)

2.2. SUPPORT MECHANISMS

The research findings indicate that adolescents who experience violence most frequently seek support from friends (56.3%) or parents (49.5%). However, 30.2% do not seek help from anyone (see Table #5), which may be linked to stigma, feelings of shame, or the lack of available support services.

Table 5: Whom Do Youth Turn to in Cases of Online Violence

Whom Do Youth Seek Help From in Cases of Online Violence	Total (%)	Girls (%)	Boys (%)
Friends	56.3%	56.49%	55.74%
Parents	49.5%	52.67%	42.62%
Teachers	14.5%	14.5%	13.11%
Law enforcement	9.92%	9.92%	8.2%
School resource officer	8.4%	8.4%	9.84%
Non-governmental organization	9.16%	9.16%	14.75%
No one	30.2%	32.06%	26.23%

The **low rate of students seeking help from teachers (14.5%)** is noteworthy. This may be explained by **teachers’ limited engagement in discussions on these issues**, as well as **students’ fear that their concerns will not be properly heard or believed**. As one respondent noted:

*“Teachers are not even interested in these topics, so I see no point in asking them for help.”
(Girl, 16 years old)*

Gender analysis reveals that **girls are more likely to face victim-blaming**, making it more difficult for them to seek support.

*“Sometimes parents blame us: ‘You provoked it, you’re a girl, be more modest.’ But it is very difficult to deal with an abuser, no matter the space, you feel unprotected.”
(Girl, 15 years old)*

However, some adolescents were able to overcome the problem by **sharing their situation with their parents and receiving support**.

*“I don’t use Facebook often, but one day I decided to check what was going on, and I received a message from a girl saying, ‘Message me, or if you block me, I will send your nudes to your parents.’ I got scared, even though I had never taken any nudes. Of course, I blocked her and showed it to my mom and dad. My parents asked me, ‘Why did you block her? We know you would never take nudes.’ They made me unblock her and reply, ‘Go ahead and send them.’ Then, that girl blocked me instead. I felt immense relief because my parents stood by my side and resolved everything.”
(Boy, 16 years old)*

Table 6: Status of Receiving Support

Status of Receiving Support	Total (%)
Yes, I received support/help	34.4%
No, I did not receive support/help	4.7%
I have never approached school or parents about this issue	60.9%

These data show that **60.9%** did not approach the school or parents for help, which can be explained by various reasons. Adolescents may have **distrust** or doubts that their problems will receive appropriate attention. Some of them may be afraid that by seeking help, they themselves will be **blamed**. As one participant notes:

“Support for girls is, so to speak, less because they are blamed in these cases. Boys, however, are less blamed for similar things.” (Girl, 15 years old)

This highlights that the **quality of support is strongly influenced by gender factors**. **Girls often fear that their experiences may not be taken seriously or that they will be blamed**, which leads them to hesitate in seeking help. This situation may **further exacerbate their vulnerability** and the negative impact of online violence.

According to **73%** of the youth participants in the study, **support is equal when sought**, while **27%** believe there are **gender differences in the quality of support**. These differences are shaped by **widespread stereotypes and attitudes in society**:

Table 7: Gender Differences in the Quality of Support

Gender Differences in the Quality of Support	Total (%)
Yes, both receive equal support	73%
No, there are differences in the quality of support	27%

Support for girls is often less because, due to **widespread societal stereotypes**, they are expected to take more responsibility in cases of violence. As one respondent notes:

“I don’t have an answer... girls are expected to do more. Gender stereotypes still exist.” (Girl, 16 years old)

“There probably is a difference... boys find it comparatively easier, while for girls, it’s harder. In many cases, they don’t have support and it feels like everything is their fault.” (Boy, 17 years old)

3. PREVENTION AND RESPONSE

3.1. AWARENESS

According to the research data, the majority of adolescents are **aware of support services** in cases of online violence, with the **highest levels of awareness** about **police (63.4%)** and **psychologists (60.7%)**. However, high awareness does not necessarily imply **access to these services or their effective use**. Adolescents least perceive **teachers and school resource officers as actors in responding to online violence**. This may be due to the fact that **schools either lack proper response mechanisms**, or students do not perceive them as effective.

Table 8:

Awareness of Support Services	Total (%)
Psychologist	60.7%
Police	63.4%
Non-governmental organization	45.5%
Non-governmental organization	32.5%
Teacher	28.28%

3.2. PREVENTION AND RESPONSE TO ONLINE VIOLENCE

The research also revealed which measures adolescents consider to be the most effective for **preventing and responding to online violence**:

Table 9:

Prevention and Response Measures	Total (%)	Girls (%)	Boys (%)
Strengthening education on cybersecurity	56.8%	65.1%	34.5%
Tightening online behavior rules and regulations	43.8%	50.8%	28.7%
More active involvement of parents	42.7%	52.3%	31.2%
Strengthening psychological support in schools	40.6%	47.6%	24.5%
Conducting awareness-raising campaigns	28.1%	33.2%	17.9%
Tightening legislation	27.3%	38.1%	21.6%

The research shows that **education on cybersecurity (56.8%)** is considered the most important measure, especially among **girls (65.1%)**, which may indicate that they feel more vulnerable in the online space, and the lack of information further increases their fear and risks.

Moreover, **tightening online behavior rules and regulations** (43.8%) and **parental involvement** (42.7%) are the second and third most prioritized measures.

Special attention must be paid to **gender differences**: girls place much more importance on **tightening safety policies** (50.8%), **active parental involvement** (52.3%), and **strengthening psychological support in schools** (47.6%). One reason for their heightened interest could be that girls often face online violence forms like **sexual harassment and appearance-related mocking comments**, making psychological support even more critical for them.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research highlights that **online violence** poses a significant challenge for youth, with a **clear gender dimension**. Various forms of **cyberbullying and harassment** have a significant impact on adolescents' **mental health, social connections, and sense of safety**. Girls are more likely to encounter **sexual harassment and appearance-related insults**, while boys face **threats and hacking attacks**. The use of support mechanisms remains low, indicating both **stigma** and the **ineffectiveness of existing support**. Prevention and response require **raising awareness** and **coordinated action** by families, schools, the **NGO sector**, and **law enforcement**.

- **Digital Education**: Integration of **cybersecurity and online violence prevention** into school curricula, especially for girls who feel more vulnerable.
- **Teacher and School Staff Training**: Strengthening their role so that students are more likely to trust them and view them as reliable sources of support.
- **Parental Involvement**: Organizing **awareness-raising campaigns** and **educational sessions** to ensure that parents are not only seen as “disciplinary authorities” but also as **safe spaces for their children**.
- **Tightening Legislation and Regulations**: Improving policies related to **minor protection online** and strengthening **regulations on social media platforms**.
- **Strengthening Psychological Support**: Expanding **psychological services in schools** and improving their **accessibility**.



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