

Adapting NATO's WPS Strategy for the Rise of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence

Author: Kristine Baekgaard

“We believe that NATO has the responsibility and opportunity to be a leading protector of women’s rights.”

—Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary General, and
Angelina Jolie, co-founder of the Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative¹

Introduction

Advances in technology have added complexity to the global security landscape, introducing new opportunities and risks, especially for women. Technological progress has contributed to women’s empowerment and security by improving access to education, employment, finances,

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and platforms to organize social movements.² Simultaneously, new threats in the form of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) pose substantial challenges to the objectives of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda and international peace and security more broadly. Eighty-five percent of women globally experience or witness online violence.³ Twenty percent of women who have experienced online violence reported that these attacks led to offline violence.⁴

The prevalence and impact of TFGBV require the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to integrate considerations of TFGBV into WPS efforts. As the Alliance moves to adopt the next iteration of its WPS Action Plan, it must consider how TFGBV affects its core tasks, missions, and operations.



Despite an ever-changing global context, NATO's core tasks have remained the same over the past 75 years: deterrence and defense, crisis prevention, and security management and cooperation. In 2007, in recognition of women's critical contributions to international peace and security, the Alliance adopted a common policy on the WPS Agenda.⁵ The Alliance's WPS efforts are led by the Secretary General's Special Representative for Women, Peace and Security, whose role is to ensure gender mainstreaming across the three core tasks.

NATO's approach to WPS is framed around three principles: integration—making gender an integral part of NATO's work; *inclusiveness*—increasing women's representation across NATO forces; and integrity—addressing systemic inequalities.⁶ The efforts to integrate gender across NATO include the Bi-Strategic Command Directive 40-1 (Bi SC Directive 40-1), which delineates the roles of NATO's gender advisors, and Gender Focal Points (GFPs) to ensure consistent gender training and mainstreaming.⁷ The NATO Science for Peace and Security Office (SPS) serves as a “force multiplier” for WPS implementation, tracking progress and supporting research on the issue.⁸ The Alliance has also developed a specific policy on conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), which outlines how NATO forces and countries should respond to CRSV and the actions needed to prevent it from occurring in the first place.⁹ This brief identifies four key policy areas where NATO can take action to ensure that the forthcoming update to the WPS Action Plan is equipped to deal with the challenges presented by TFGBV.

Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: An Emerging Threat to WPS

As discussed in “Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence,” a recent report from the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (GIWPS), TFGBV presents significant challenges to the objectives of the WPS Agenda and international peace and security in three primary ways.¹⁰ First, TFGBV can be used to exclude women and diverse voices from positions of power and influence through the harassment of highly visible women, such as politicians or activists. This may limit what issues they speak on, silence them, or cause them to leave these leadership positions. Second, digital violence exacerbates existing threats of gender-based violence, such as when perpetrators film CRSV and use it for propaganda or blackmail, and facilitates new types of violence, such as the AI generation of sexually explicit deepfakes. Third, TFGBV can be used to drive radicalization and violent extremism through the recruitment of young men into far-right groups.

As NATO works to improve WPS implementation, the Alliance must also contend with the impacts of TFGBV on these efforts. Foremost among those impacts are the following.

- **Harassment and silencing of women with influence.** Targeted harassment of prominent women on digital platforms is one of the most visible manifestations of TFGBV. Women in politics, parliamentarians, journalists, activists, and peacebuilders experience high levels of TFGBV. A survey by the Inter-Parliamentary Union found that 81 percent of women parliamentarians in

39 countries experienced online violence.¹¹ As a result, women frequently withdraw from their positions or decide not to pursue these roles. TFGBV also discourages young women from engaging in social and political life; Plan International finds that one in five young women have withdrawn from politics due to fears of online violence.¹² NATO's efforts to achieve gender equality by promoting women's leadership in its own ranks and participation in its missions could be undermined by TFGBV.¹³ If NATO is to achieve gender equality internally and in its areas of engagement, it must contend with how TFGBV affects women in leadership positions and the incentives for those who seek these roles.

- ***Exacerbation of CRSV.*** While more research on the impacts of TFGBV in conflict contexts is needed, initial evidence suggests that digital tools can exacerbate CRSV. In Myanmar, social media drove the widespread raping and killing of Rohingya in 2017,¹⁴ and led to the targeting, sexual harassment, and in some cases arrests of women activists by the junta.¹⁵ In Iran, sexual assaults of protesters have been filmed and used to blackmail the victims.¹⁶ As such evidence continues to emerge, it will be necessary for NATO to adapt its work on CRSV to account for digital dimensions of sexual violence.
- ***New iterations of extremism and instability.*** Online misogyny and TFGBV are key drivers of radicalization and violent extremism.¹⁷ The last few years have witnessed a rise in terrorist attacks motivated by extreme misogyny.¹⁸ Far-right groups around the world use sexism and antifeminist misogyny to draw in and mobilize new members, adding to an evolving terror threat landscape.¹⁹ As NATO works to combat terrorism and prevent and manage crises, considering how TFGBV creates new patterns of violence and facilitates radicalization and recruitment will strengthen these efforts.

Policy Recommendations

TFGBV poses substantial threats to the security of women around the world, hindering progress on WPS implementation and jeopardizing international peace and security. Work across NATO's three core tasks must account for how technology shapes the global security landscape and impacts the Alliance's missions and strategies, including on WPS. As NATO looks ahead to the next iteration of the Alliance's WPS strategy, it is necessary to address how TFGBV does and will affect these objectives. Drawing on findings from the GIWPS report, "Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence," the following recommendations are intended to help NATO address the emerging threat of TFGBV.

Integrate a Gender Lens into NATO's Internal Digital Transformation

Part of NATO's core task of deterrence and defense includes expediting the Alliance's digital transformation through investment and innovation. Although this effort is already guided by the principles of responsible use and respect for human rights, it should be further informed by a gender-sensitive approach. More specifically, NATO should:

- Analyze potential gendered implications of various technologies used by the Alliance for internal and external purposes—for example, evaluating artificial intelligence tools and autonomous weapons systems for gender biases.
- Adopt principles that explicitly commit to protecting and promoting women in the digital realm, in addition to existing commitments to human rights.
- Adopt a “safety by design” principle. This proactive and preventive approach would require embedding safety and equality into any tools and technologies used or designed by NATO and private sector partners.²⁰ Abiding by the safety by design principle might mean, for instance, automatically setting devices used by personnel to the highest privacy settings.

Address the Different Ways Technology Can Exacerbate CRSV

NATO’s policy on CRSV aims to provide a framework for the Alliance’s prevention and response efforts. The CRSV policy should be updated to address digital dimensions of sexual violence. In particular, NATO should:

Adopt language in existing CRSV policy and prevention efforts to include digital threats. Doing so would allow NATO to identify risks of TFGBV in NATO missions, develop operational documents to prevent and respond to TFGBV, protect survivors from potential online backlash when CRSV is reported, and provide technological assistance to victims as needed—for example, by offering guidance on how to report and remove harmful or illicit content from various online platforms.

Integrate TFGBV into existing efforts to educate and train NATO personnel on the drivers of CRSV. This would include mandatory pre-deployment and in-mission training on TFGBV, tracking of member countries’ implementation of standardized CRSV and TFGBV training, and an emphasis on TFGBV in training provided by NATO to host nations.

Ensure that considerations of victims’ privacy and rights extend to the digital realm. NATO’s existing guidelines on preventing and responding to CRSV should be updated to include language on the digital safety and privacy of survivors.

Recognize and Respond to the Threats Posed by Online Misogyny and Radicalization

Countering terrorism is crucial to NATO’s core task of deterrence and defense. To address the role TFGBV plays in the recruitment of young men into extremist groups and attacks motivated by misogynistic ideology, NATO and its members should:

- Identify and label misogynistic terrorist attacks as such to recognize patterns and prevent future attacks. Efforts to counter this type of terrorist activity must be targeted both within and outside of member countries.

- Account for how misogyny drives extremism in programs designed to prevent radicalization. NATO's mandate already extends to the prevention of terrorism and can be updated to account for dynamics of misogyny, particularly in online spaces.
- Foster cooperation among member countries to facilitate the prosecution of TFGBV. The transnational nature of TFGBV presents challenges to identifying and punishing perpetrators of online violence. Member states should adopt common definitions of TFGBV and accompanying laws, facilitate information sharing, and support transnational prosecution efforts.

Support Data Collection and Research on TFGBV in Conflict Contexts

NATO is positioned to help address the gap in understanding how TFGBV manifests in conflict contexts by expanding existing practices to include digital violence. NATO should:

- Extend sex-disaggregated data collection efforts by Mixed Engagement Teams (METs) and Gender Mixed Teams (GMTs) to include experiences of TFGBV. Many questions remain about how digital violence is used in conflict contexts, and METs and GMTs can play a key role in answering these questions and deepening understanding of how TFGBV can drive CRSV broadly.
- Survey women within the organization to identify to what extent TFGBV shapes their decisions to pursue leadership positions and if it poses a threat to their participation or safety. Understanding if and how digital barriers prevent or deter women from taking up leadership roles will strengthen NATO's efforts to promote integration, inclusion, and integrity.
- Facilitate collaborative research through the NATO Science for Peace and Security Office with other multilateral organizations, such as the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, to document the threats of TFGBV in conflict contexts and support the development of countermeasures.

Endnotes

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