

Combating Sexist Hate Speech



Council of Europe
Gender Equality Strategy

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

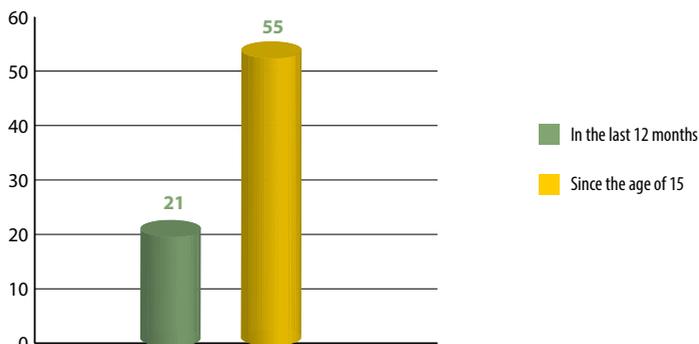
Sexist hate speech is rampant in Europe and women are disproportionately targeted. Sexist hate speech takes place online and offline and in all forms of social interaction: at school, in the family, in social circles, in the public space, at work, via emails, websites and (social) media. Although it has taken a new dimension through the Internet, the root causes of sexist hate speech preceded the technology and are fundamentally linked to the persistent unequal power relations between women and men. Sexist hate speech is a form of violence against women and girls that perpetuates and exacerbates gender inequality. Both knowledge and policy action at all levels need to be developed to combat sexist hate speech.

■ The Council of Europe's Gender Equality Strategy 2014-2017 explicitly includes tackling sexism as a form of hate speech under its strategic objective 1 – combating gender stereotypes and sexism.

Causes and forms of sexist hate speech

■ Sexist hate speech is one of the expressions of sexism, which can be defined as any supposition, belief, assertion, gesture or act that is aimed at expressing contempt towards a person, based on her or his sex or gender, or to consider that person as inferior or essentially reduced to her or his sexual dimension. Sexist hate speech includes expressions which spread, incite, promote or justify hatred based on sex. The true extent of sexist hate speech is partly hidden by the fact that many targeted women do not report it.

Prevalence of sexual harassment among women
(%, European Union, 2014)

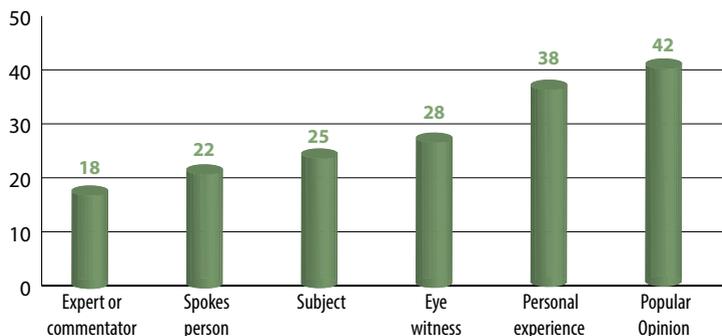




■ Sexist hate speech takes many forms both online and offline, notably victim blaming and re-victimisation; “slut-shaming”; body-shaming; “revenge porn” (the sharing of explicit or sexual images without consent); brutal and sexualised threats of death, rape and violence; offensive comments on appearance, sexuality, sexual orientation or gender roles; but also false compliments or supposed jokes, using humour to humiliate and ridicule the target.

■ Multiple factors contribute to sexist hate speech, including the prevalence of patriarchal societies, the dissemination of degrading messages about women or girls, violent and hypersexualised images, notably in the media, and the expectations about women and men’s sexuality and roles in society. Gender inequalities in the media sector are also part of the problem. In 2015, women made up 25% of the people in the news. This shows that women are seriously under-represented in the media which often presents messages and images of women and men that reinforce gender stereotypes. Social media, education, stereotypical textbooks and toys, the family and social circles, as well as art (cinema, music, videos, books) are all influenced by existing social and cultural norms. They therefore tend to perpetuate gender stereotypes and to contribute to the persistence of sexist hate speech.

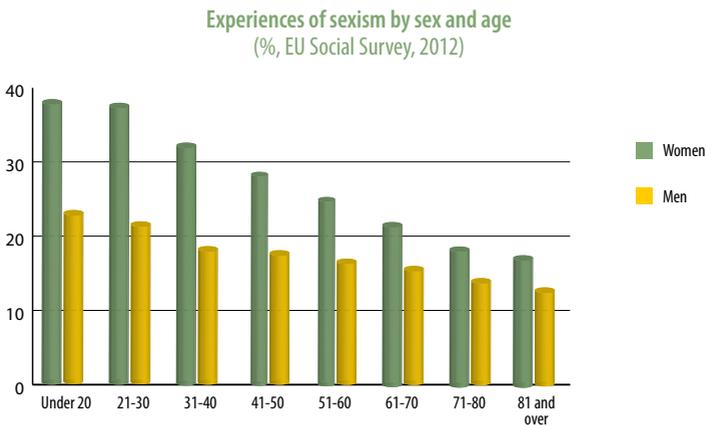
Function of women in news stories
(% Europe, Global Media Monitoring Project, 2015)



■ Lack of awareness, unwillingness (among the public at large, authorities and private stakeholders) to address the issue, gaps in legislation and policies and problems with their enforcement, particularly concerning new media, as well as anonymity online, also contribute to a climate of impunity for abusers. Some ideologies such as extreme nationalism and conservatism, and anti-feminist movements, are fertile grounds to spread hate towards women, especially when they do not conform to traditional gender roles.

Targets of sexist hate speech

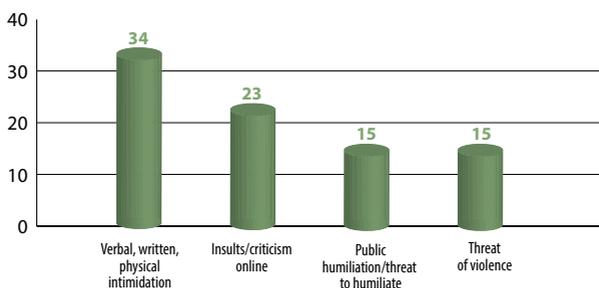
■ Some groups of women are particularly targeted by sexist hate speech, but every woman and girl is a potential target. In addition, some groups of women are confronted with different layers of hate speech combining sexism with other forms of intolerance or discrimination.



■ Young women are particular targets of sexist hate speech. They experience it online, but also offline in a variety of settings, including the public space, schools or public transport. Women who are public figures, in particular female politicians, find that their public status multiplies the hate speech they receive. In the same way, women journalists and bloggers are particular targets of online or offline violence and hate speech. They face sexist hate speech from individuals among the larger public and in their work environment. Women's rights defenders face more attacks than male human rights activists and sexist hate speech often takes place when women stand against discriminatory or traditional cultural and religious beliefs or customs. Video games are another particular platform for sexist hate speech, where female players often face abuse and misogyny.



Prevalence of some forms of intimidation and threats against women journalists (%, global survey, 2014)



Impact of sexist hate speech on women and girls

Sexist hate speech is often treated as a harmless and non-serious issue and women are explicitly or implicitly told to bear with it. However, not only does sexist hate speech undermine freedom of speech for women and girls, but its psychological, emotional and/or physical impacts are real and severe. The aim of sexist hate speech is to humiliate or objectify women, to undervalue their skills and opinions, to destroy their reputation, to make them feel vulnerable and fearful, and to control and punish them for not following a certain behaviour. Sexist hate speech has the effect of silencing women, obliging them to adapt their behaviour and limit their movements and participation in diverse human activities.

Sexist hate speech and freedom of expression

Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right and the increasing accessibility of the Internet has made it easy for users to share their thoughts publicly, instantly and anonymously. Freedom of expression is enshrined in several legally-binding human rights instruments. However, freedom of expression is not an absolute right. It is closely linked to other rights. Like freedom of expression, equality between women and men is an integral part of fundamental rights and of any true democracy. In this context, gender equality and freedom of expression should be seen as intertwined rather than opposing rights. This is why freedom of expression cannot be accepted as a way to silence women and girls.

Taking action against sexist hate speech

■ Sexist hate speech needs to be addressed by all stakeholders, including the public, relevant authorities, international organisations, law enforcement and other actors of the justice system, the private sector and civil society. In doing this, a balance must be found in providing a platform for free speech without tolerating sexist hate speech. A checklist of indicators and actions to eliminate sexist hate speech may include:

- ▶ Eliminate discriminatory laws, tackle gaps in legislation and monitor their implementation to ensure appropriate and effective action against sexist hate speech;
- ▶ Use regulatory powers with respect to the media to combat the use of sexist hate speech;
- ▶ Encourage the media to strengthen self-regulatory mechanisms and codes of conduct to condemn and combat sexist hate-speech and ensure more effective moderation of social media, including by setting clear standards for the industry and putting in place mechanisms to monitor progress;
- ▶ Ensure the integration of a gender equality perspective in all aspects of education and media policies;
- ▶ Promote gender equality and media literacy training and the production of training materials;
- ▶ Encourage all relevant actors (e.g. public institutions, political parties, civil society, sport and cultural organisations) to adopt and implement codes of conducts that address sexist hate speech;
- ▶ Research the phenomenon of sexist hate speech and the different forms it takes, including measuring its extent and the harm that it causes;
- ▶ Provide support, clear policy frameworks and legal remedies for victims, especially women and girls, in cases of sexist and harmful content;
- ▶ Promote civil society initiatives in this area;
- ▶ Join the **No Hate Speech Movement** campaign of the Council of Europe.

Council of Europe standards

- ▶ Article 10 of the **European Convention on Human Rights** (1950) guarantees the right to freedom of expression. However, the exercise of this right carries with it “duties and responsibilities” and might be subject to restrictions, including notably the “protection of the reputation or rights of others”.
- ▶ The **Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence** (Istanbul Convention, CETS No. 210, 2011), is the most comprehensive legally-binding treaty addressing the root causes of violence against women and calling for greater equality between women and men. The convention contains provisions related to eradicating gender stereotypical behaviour, traditions and practices which contribute to inequality between women and men (Article 12), and it encourages the participation of the private sector and the media in the prevention of violence against women (Article 17). The Istanbul Convention also requests parties to criminalise forms of violence that relate to sexist hate speech, notably stalking and sexual harassment (Articles 34 and 40).
- ▶ **Recommendation CM/Rec(2013)1 of the Committee of Ministers on gender equality and media** provides specific guidelines to ensure gender equality and to combat gender stereotyping in the media including in relation to legislation, accountability channels, indicators and media literacy. The Council of Europe has published a **handbook** to support the implementation of the recommendation.
- ▶ **Recommendation CM/Rec (2016)4 of the Committee of Ministers on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors** states that “Female journalists and other female media actors face specific gender-related dangers, including sexist, misogynist and degrading abuse; threats; intimidation; harassment and sexual aggression and violence”, and that “There is a need for urgent, resolute and systemic responses”. The recommendation stresses the need for a gender-sensitive approach for all issues related to the protection of journalists.
- ▶ The **European Commission against Racism and Intolerance General Policy Recommendation No. 15 on combating hate speech** (2015) includes for the first time the grounds of sex and gender in the definition of hate speech (alongside a number of other grounds). The recommendation stresses “the gravity of hate speech targeting women both on account of their sex, gender and/or gender identity and when this is coupled with one or more of their other characteristics”.
- ▶ The **Council of Europe Internet Governance Strategy for 2016-2019** (CM(2016)10) includes an objective about “monitoring action taken to protect everyone, in particular women and children, from online abuse, such as cyber-stalking, sexism and threats of sexual violence”.
- ▶ The **Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child for 2016-2021** includes two priority areas related to sexist hate speech: “A life free from violence for all children” (with a particular mention of violence against girls) and the “Protection of children in the digital environment”.

Detailed sources for all data used are available upon request.



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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 47 member states, 28 of which are members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

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