

# Gender equality and youth: the opportunities and risks of digitalisation

In the EU, young women and men have equal digital skills and access to the internet, but their behaviour online differs. Nine out of ten young women (92 %) and men (93 %) use the internet daily. This generation, aged from 15 to 24, is the most digitally skilled in the EU, with 56 % of young women and 58 % of men holding above-average digital skills.

Despite the same access and skills, young men have more confidence in their digital skills than women. For example, 73 % of young men aged 15-16 feel comfortable installing software by themselves, compared with 49 % of women.

Music, emailing and social networking are equally popular online activities for both young women and men, but, for some other activities, big differences emerge. For example, 67 % of young men play video games, compared with 45 % of women, and 59 % of young women look for health information online, while only 44 % of men do.

## How does the online space look for young women and men?

### Young men are more politically active online

Digital spaces are popular places for youth to socialise and both young women and men actively use social media, but in different ways. More young men (26 %) than women (18 %)

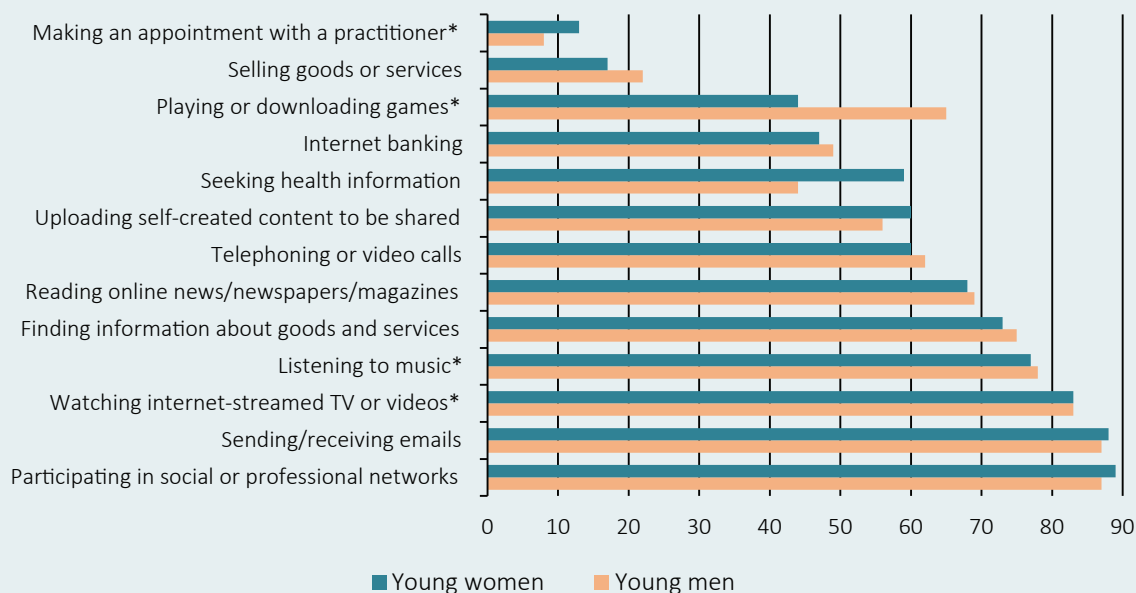


post comments about online articles or through online social networks or blogs. Young men are also more likely to follow debates on social media (55 %), compared to women (46 %). Young women and men also post different types of content. Young women (60 %) upload more self-created content, such as photos, than men (56 %).

Following the same trend, fewer young women than men post opinions on social and political issues or take part in online voting. Young women are more likely to censor themselves, as they take into consideration possible backlash for their online political participation.

*'I also think that it (#MeToo) has become that big because of social media and that's good, because the internet just offers the option to speak publicly.'* (girl, aged 17, Austria)

Figure 1. Online activities performed by young women and men aged 16-24 in the EU-28 (2016/2017)



Source: Eurostat, ISOC (isoc\_ci\_ac\_i)

Note: Percentages are calculated for all individuals in the 16-24 age group; \* refers to 2016 data.

## Online abuse lowers young people’s digital participation, especially for young women

Cyberbullying and violence is a problem, with aggressive online behaviour becoming a regular occurrence for youth. Young men are more exposed than women to material that promotes racial hatred or religious extremism (25 % and 20 %, respectively). However, more young women (9 %) than men (6 %) declare that they have been a victim of online harassment. When it comes to the sharing of images without consent, 9 % of 15-year-old girls report that they have had unflattering or inappropriate pictures of themselves shared without permission, compared with 7 % of boys the same age.



Encountering online abuse changes young people’s on-line behaviour, including their social and political participation. After witnessing or experiencing online hate speech or abuse, one young woman out of two (51 %) and 42 % of men hesitate to engage in social media debates, out of fear of experiencing abuse. This suggests that young women participate less in debates on social media as a preventive strategy against harsh criticism and negative feedback.

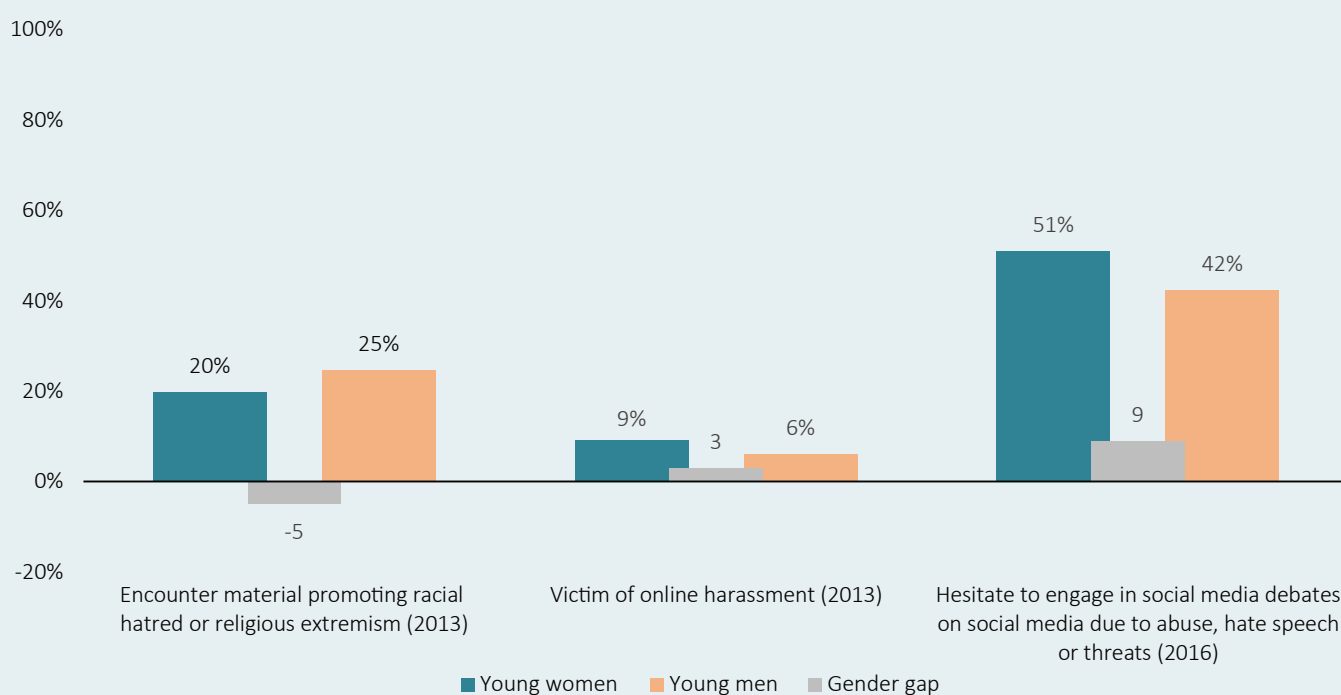
Youth also restrict what they express online. Young women, more so than men, engage in self-monitoring of their social media profiles, physical appearance and opinions. For young men, the tendency is to ignore and minimise the abuse they experience. The expectation that young men should ‘man up’ could also make it difficult for them to speak out about any abuse or cyber violence that they have experienced.

*‘But I think men have more trouble to talk about things. Even if we are abused, we don’t talk about it.’ (boy, aged 16, Sweden)*

## Social media reinforces gender stereotypes

Social media creates pressure for both girls and boys, but in different ways. It reinforces unhealthy beauty standards and puts young women under a great deal of pressure when it

**Figure 2. Issues experienced online by young women and men aged 15-24 in the EU-28 (2017)**



Source: Special Eurobarometer 404; Special Eurobarometer 452

Note: Percentages are calculated for the individuals who have witnessed or experienced hate speech/abuse on social media for the third variable.

comes to their physical appearance. Young women are more likely to be dissatisfied with their bodies than men of the same age. According to the World Health Organization, among 15-year-olds, almost one in two young women thinks she is too fat compared to one in four men.

*'One of my girlfriends always compares herself and I see how bad it is for her, because she has very low self-esteem.'* (girl, aged 16, Hungary)

Young women are expected to meet traditional beauty standards, have romantic relationships and intense social lives, but will be judged negatively if they cross the line by overexposing themselves. As a result, they censor their online profiles, as they juggle the social rewards of self-exposure and the risk of harsh judgement.

Young men are regularly exposed to media that objectifies women and tolerates aggressivity. EIGE's focus groups have shown that young men who do not conform to the ideal of masculinity portrayed online face pressure and risk being mocked by their friends.

Digitalisation also shapes sexual relations and the way young people interact with each other. For some young women and men, sending sexual messages and content is a form of social pressure, but, for others, it can be a fun and exciting way to explore relationships. Young women face double standards. They are being shamed online when they come across as assertive and confident in expressing their own sexual needs and desires. The rules of the game are different for young men,

who are instead praised for their exploits. The peer pressure boys receive to request nude pictures from girls is common. Both girls and boys in the focus groups mentioned cases of girls being threatened with a break-up or physical violence if they refused to send nude pictures of themselves.

## What can be done to make online spaces safer for young people?

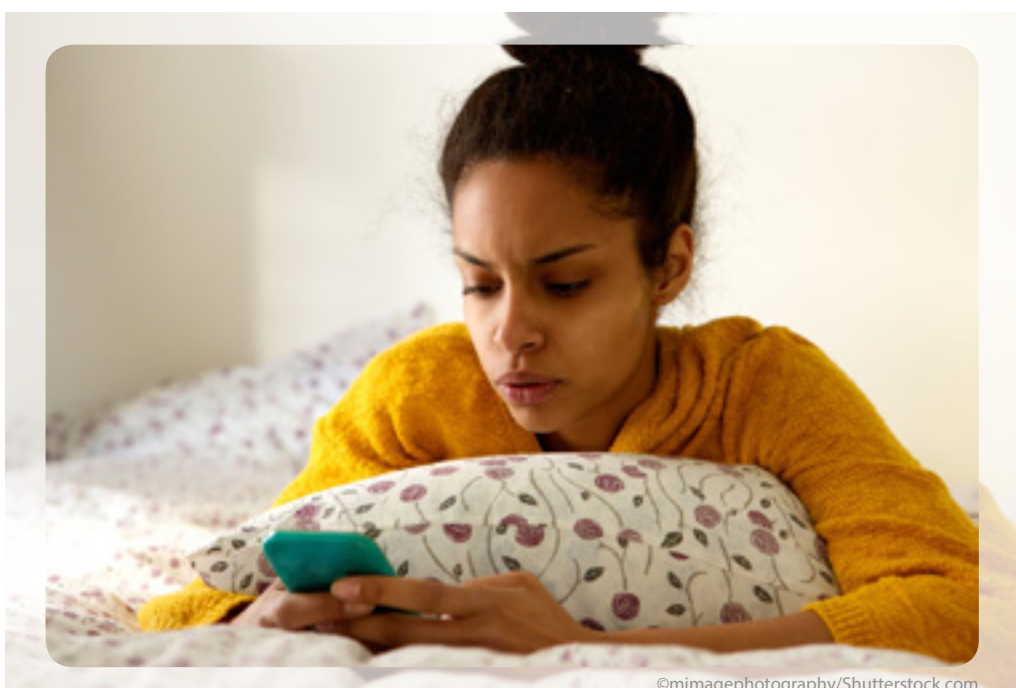
### Strengthen the gender perspective in youth and digitalisation policies

Gender equality must always be part of future EU youth strategy and policies. Including a gender perspective in EU digital policies, such as the Digital Agenda for Europe, the Safer Internet Programme and the Digital Education Action Plan, is necessary to increase the opportunities offered by digitalisation and lower the risks. To make the internet a safer space for both young women and men, it is also important to collect data and evidence in order to design policy measures and evaluate their effectiveness.

### Recognise cyber violence as a form of gender-based violence

Cyber violence needs to be recognised as a form of gender-based violence and the various forms of gender-based cyber violence should be included in the EU definitions of cybercrime.

Designing legal instruments is key to preventing gender-based cyber violence and prosecuting perpetrators. Prevention efforts



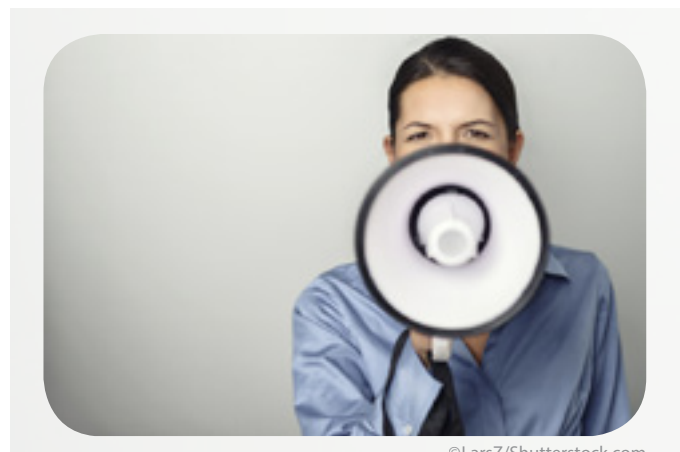
need to be supported through law enforcement and awareness-raising campaigns.

In addition to stronger legislation, we need to support young people, so that they become aware of the risks of digitalisation. This could be achieved through training sessions with teachers about gender inequalities and the gender aspects of digitalisation. It is also important that attention is brought to the impact of gender-based violence and that men and boys are involved in the solution to combat violence against women and girls.

## Support young women's full participation in digital spaces

Digital spaces magnify traditional norms of femininity and masculinity, which has consequences for youth engagement online. To tackle this issue, we need to raise awareness on stereotypes both online and offline, through education and the promotion of a safe and respectful use of the internet.

Boosting women's confidence is also key to supporting their full participation online. Through online learning, exposure to political ideas, debates and activism, women can be encouraged to grow into active citizens.



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EIGE regularly produces reports reviewing different areas of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) or other EU policy priorities, as requested by the presidencies of the Council of the European Union. This factsheet is based on the report *Gender equality and youth: opportunities and risks of digitalisation* (forthcoming), prepared at the request of the Austrian Presidency. It explores how digital technologies can be used to promote gender equality and also focuses on the gender-related risks of digitalisation for young women and men. More information on the data referred to in the text, including exact references can be found in the report.

Other recent publications include:

- Women and men in ICT: a chance for better work–life balance (2018)
- Study and work in the EU: set apart by gender (2018)
- Gender, skills and precarious work in the EU (2017)
- Poverty, gender and intersecting inequalities in the EU (2016)

You can explore all of EIGE's previous BPfA reports and publications at <http://eige.europa.eu/monitoring-the-bpfa>

## European Institute for Gender Equality, EIGE

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) is the EU knowledge centre on gender equality. EIGE supports policymakers and all relevant institutions in their efforts to make equality between women and men a reality for all Europeans by providing them with specific expertise and comparable and reliable data on gender equality in Europe.

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