

Gender-based hate speech online: A structural challenge for the European Union

Gender-based hate speech online has emerged as one of the most persistent threats to gender equality in the digital era. It refers to online expressions that demean, threaten, or silence individuals on the basis of their gender or gender identity. In the European Union, the phenomenon has expanded in both scale and severity alongside the growing influence of social media platforms in public discourse.

According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, around one in three women in the EU has experienced online harassment, with gender being a key driver. Abuse ranges from sexist insults and sexualised comments to threats of rape or death. Women who are visible in public life—journalists, activists, politicians, academics—are particularly targeted.

Gender-based hate speech has consequences that extend far beyond the digital sphere. Victims frequently report anxiety, depression, and self-censorship. Many withdraw from online spaces altogether, limiting their professional opportunities and civic participation. This silencing effect undermines democratic debate and reinforces structural gender inequalities.

At EU level, the Digital Services Act (DSA) represents a major step forward. It requires large online platforms to assess and mitigate systemic risks, including gender-based violence and hate speech. Importantly, the DSA shifts responsibility from individual users to platforms, recognising that algorithmic amplification often fuels abusive content.

Despite these advances, enforcement remains uneven. Civil society organisations stress the need for better cooperation between platforms, national authorities, and victim support services. Gender-based hate speech online is not a marginal issue; it is a systemic challenge requiring coordinated EU action.