(Re)thinking gender in cyber-violence. Insights from awareness-raising campaigns on online violence against women and girls in Italy

(Ri)pensare il genere nella cyber-violenza. Spunti da campagne di sensibilizzazione sulla violenza online contro donne e ragazze in Italia

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Abstract. Online violence against women and girls, known as cyber-VAWG, is a phenomenon that exacerbates dynamics of discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion of women from society. This is recognized as a form of violence with profound social, cultural, and economic consequences (EIGE, 2017; EU Parliament, 2021; Goulds et al., 2020). Rather than being an isolated phenomenon, cyber-violence is part of the continuum of violence, emphasizing how its various manifestations stem from a common cultural root and are inherently connected to each other. This study, by analyzing various Italian awareness campaigns focused on cyber-violence against women and girls, highlights the essentiality of a media-educational approach that integrates a gender perspective into the creation of media literacy pathways specifically aimed at digital environments. This integration proves fundamental in promoting media-educational strategies that do not just focus on developing skills but also consider the social and cultural context in which digital practices take shape (Cho, 2022; Taddeo & Tirocchi, 2014; Tirocchi, 2013).

Keywords: cyber-WAVG, online violence, gender, social representation, awareness-raising campaigns, sexting.

Riassunto. La violenza online nei confronti di donne e ragazze, nota come cyber-VAWG, è un fenomeno che accentua le dinamiche di discriminazione, marginalizzazione ed esclusione femminile dalla società. Questa viene riconosciuta come una forma di violenza con profonde conseguenze sociali, culturali ed economiche (EIGE, 2017; EU Parliament, 2021; Goulds et al., 2020). Piuttosto che essere un fenomeno isolato, la cyber-violenza si inserisce nel continuum della violenza, sottolineando come le sue varie manifestazioni derivino da una radice culturale comune e siano intrinsecamente collegate tra loro. Questo studio, analizzando diverse campagne di sensibilizzazione italiane focalizzate sulla cyber-violenza contro donne e ragazze, evidenzia l'essenzialità di un approccio media-educativo che integri la prospettiva di genere nella creazione di percorsi di media literacy specificamente indirizzati agli ambienti digitali. Questa integrazione si rivela fondamentale per promuovere strategie media-educative che non si

limitino solo allo sviluppo di competenze, ma che considerino anche il contesto sociale e culturale in cui le pratiche digitali prendono forma (Cho, 2022; Taddeo & Tiriocchi, 2014; Tirocchi, 2013).

Parole chiave: cyber-WAVG, violenza online, genere, rappresentazioni sociali, campagne di sensibilizzazione, sexting.

INTRODUCTION

Far from being safe and accessible, online spaces are imbued with hatred and aggressive practices (Bainotti & Semenzin, 2021; Dunn, 2020; Garrido, 2022; Tirocchi, Scocco & Crespi, 2022). The proliferation of toxic comments against women and girls, the endless attacks directed towards the members of the LGBTQUIA+ community and other marginalized social groups, the use of explicit sexual remarks, the adoption of rude language, the recurrent exercise of anger and hate, and the circulation of menaces and life threats, have all become standard features in online interactions. As a result, in recent years, a large body of empirical knowledge and scholarly work related to cyber-violence has become available to investigate how online practices sustain processes of exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization of specific social groups from the Internet (i.e. Belluati, 2018; Genta, 2017; Navarro, 2016; Hellsten et al., 2021; Hinduja & Patchin, 2017; Macchioni & Santoni, 2022; Menesini, Nocentini & Palladino, 2017; Tirocchi, 2019; Tirocchi, Scocco & Crespi, 2022).

In general, cyberviolence involves acts of aggression and harm perpetrated digitally, with the intent to cause, facilitate, or threaten harm or suffering to individuals (Council of Europe, 2018). While gender was quikly assumed to play a pivotal role in shaping cyber-violence, for many years it was viewed, both within and outside academic circles, merely as one factor influencing vulnerability to violence perpetrated online (World Wide Web Foundation, 2014). Although cyber-violence against women and girls (cyber-VAWG) has very concrete repercussions on the well-being of those subjected to it (Citron & Franks, 2014; Giungi et al., 2019; Gius, 2022; Saltz et al., 2020; Vakhitova et al., 2021), early observers kept online abuses separated from more traditional forms of violence perpetrated against women. In their opinion, cyber-VAWG lacked the urgency and severity usually ascribed to physical harm, thus viewing it as a distinct issue. Similarly, sexist slurs and speech that glorified or trivialized violence against women were mostly normalized in both online and offline commentaries, rarely being labeled as hate speech (Pavan, 2017).

As Elena Pavan (2017) points out, the marginalization of the role played by gender in the discussion of cyber-violence is especially evident in the initial overlooking of the interconnection between the violence experienced by women online and that experienced offline. Gender-based violence is not an isolated phenomenon; rather, it arises from and feeds into a framework characterized by profound inequalities and systematic discrimination. Feminist researchers frequently describe this interconnected framework as the "continuum of violence," which covers a spectrum going from intimate partner and domestic violence to sexual violence, public harassment, wartime rape, and femicide (Cockburn, 2004; Davies & True, 2015; Garrido, 2022; Wibben, 2019). In this context, cyber-VAWG should be intended as an extension of this "continuum," as it represents the use of internet-based technologies to perpetrate violent acts against women within the same system of oppression (Simonovic, 2018). This reasoning gains further support from the observation that, in the era of digital platforms, the boundaries between online and offline dimensions are increasingly intertwined and blurred (Floridi, 2015). As Lumsden and Morgan (2018, p. 129) indicate "the 'virtual' is 'real' and has 'real' implications for women, ethnic minorities and vulnerable groups who more often than not are the victims of various forms of cyber abuse".

Building on emerging literature, the following contribution examines the phenomenon of cyber-violence from a gender perspective. In particular, the paper advocates for a more systematic use of gender analysis both in studying online violence and in designing media literacy initiatives (Buckingham, 2017; Cho et al., 2022), aimed at addressing and mitigating the harmful effects of social media. The central idea it explores is the profound and unresolved societal tension highlightened by cyber-VAWG. While access to cyberspace supports an anticipated expectation for gender equality – or near equality (Capecchi, 2021), online interactions still reflect a persistent gendered double standard supporting the status quo of male domination (Bourdieu, 1998). Consequently, it becomes crucial to design digital literacy initiatives (Buckingham, 2007) that not only emphasize the skills for efficient internet use, promote internet safety, and impart knowledge about digital rights and responsibilities, but also recognizes cyber-VAWG as a distinct form of gendered online violence, addressing its social component and thus "defining it as a social prac-

tice" (Cho et al., 2022, p. 7). Such a perspective is vital to ensure, among other things, that media education efforts do not perpetuate gender stereotypes (Ringrose et al., 2013).

After addressing the main challenges posed by cyber-VAWG and the most relevant research conducted in Italy, the paper offers an exploratory analysis of how cyber-violence against women and girls is represented in awareness-raising initiatives aimed at fostering safer experiences for online users in Italy. These campaings provide insights into the current social construction of cyber-VAWG in Italy, prompting a reflection on the necessity to promote gender-sensitive media education initiatives. Such initiatives are essential in supporting not only women and girls but also the broader public in adeptly navigating the increasingly complex digital landscape. Although conclusions must be considered preliminary, the analysis offers a bridge to enhance the overall understanding of the sociocultural construction of cyber-WAVG in the Italian context and provide a valuable platform to discuss directions for future research and media education initiatives.

(RE)GENDERING CYBER-VIOLENCE

Existing literature suggests that cyber-violence is linked to increasing internet and social media usage (Project deSHAME, 2017). People who spend more time online are more likely to be exposed to, or be harmed by, hate speech and other forms of online violence. Moreover, just as offline abuses or violent acts can be committed by various perpetrators (EU Parliament, 2021), those involved in cyber-violence may have varying levels of intimacy with their victims. Protected by the anonymity or quasi-anonymity offered online, cyber-perpetrators might include relatives, acquaintances, ex or current partners, co-workers, classmates, and anonymous internet users.

Violent or abusive online materials are subjected to the exact characteristics of high reproducibility, customizability, and spreadability (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2006) attached to other online content. Moreover, cyber-violence is linked to social media affordances, security settings, and regulations (Faith, 2018; Faith & Freaser, 2018; Jane, 2016, 2017; Pavan, 2017). Single individuals have little capacity to respond to online harassment and abuses. Similarly, they have insufficient knowledge on how to protect their data or online persona. As a result, victims of cyber-violence are often left powerless in front of their abusers, especially in the absence of proper legislative frameworks and protection systems.

Although gender has often been overlooked when approaching cyber-violence, emerging data suggests that online violence and abuses are highly gendered practices that further amplify processes of discrimination and exclusion of women from society. While online, women are constantly at risk of harassment and humiliation. Recent studies have pointed out that cyber-violence disproportionately affects women and girls (Fansher & Randa, 2019). A 2018 report commissioned by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) estimates that 1 in 10 European women (11%) have experienced some form of cyber-harassment or cyberstalking since age 15.

In particular, young women and girls appear to be especially vulnerable to online violence (Cuenca-Piqueras et al., 2020; CYBERSAFE Project, 2020; EIGE, 2019). The incidence of cyber-harassment among girls aged 18 to 19 is 7% higher than among women aged 30 to 39 (EU Parliament, 2021), a tendency at risk of being further exacerbated by the fallouts of the COVID-19 pandemic (Almenar, 2021; Chayn Italia, 2022). Furthermore, recent studies have pointed out how online violence should be understood as part of a continuum intersecting women's lives online and offline. As a result, women experiencing violence offline are also likely to be targeted by violent online behaviors (FRA, 2018), with ICTs being extensively used to harm, coerce, monitor, and control women and girls in every aspect of their daily life.Several studies reveal that women and girls are often harassed just for being online (Bainotti & Semenzin, 2021; Barak 2005; Eikren & Ingram-Waters, 2016; Goulds et al., 2020; Morahan-Martin, 2000; Salter & Crofts 2015;). Furthermore, cyber-VAWG constantly intersects with racist, anti-LGBT, and transphobic violence targeting the members of racialized, queer and disabled communities (Daniels, 2009; Giungi et al., 2019), perpetuating traditional systems of inequality.

Cyber-VAWG comes in many ways and forms (EU Parliament, 2021). It includes but is not limited to acts of hate speech, body-shaming, slut-shaming, doxing, cyberstalking, sextortion, gendertrolling, technology-facilitated sexual violence, and the non-consensual distribution of intimate images. These practices aim to control women and prevent them from participating and partaking in online opportunities, thus negatively impacting gender equality. Women's online harassment is so systemic that it also affects women and girls who have not directly experienced violence (ElSherief et al., 2017). For example, a 2017 European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) study points out how younger women online are more likely to censor themselves as a preventive strategy than their male counterparts.

CYBER-VAWG IN ITALY

Although cyber-VAWG represents a relatively new social issue, growing recognition has been given to this form of violence in the Italian public discourse, especially concerning episodes of non-consensual distribution of intimate images. As Gius (2022) argues, in Italy, online violence started being discussed within a gendered framework in 2016 after the suicide of Tiziana Cantone, a young woman who had risen to sudden and unwanted notoriety after six videos of her were distributed online without her consent. Possibly, due to the enormous popularity that the woman had gained in the months before her suicide, her story has had a profound impact on public opinion, with "revenge pornography" becoming a significant issue of concern within the Italian public discourse on gender-based violence.

Recent changes in the Italian legislative framework reflect the attention paid to this specific form of cyber-VAWG. In 2019, Italy passed a crucial piece of legislation, commonly referred to as the "Red Code" (Law 69/2019), to meet the standards set by the Istanbul Convention (a treaty proposed by the European Council to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence) that the Italian government had ratified in 2014. Besides stiffening the penalties for existing gender-based crimes, the "Red Code" also introduced a new felony that criminalizes the unauthorized and non-consensual disclosure of sexually explicit images and videos of others, recognizing aggravating circumstances for intimate partners perpetrating this type of violence.

The non-consensual distribution of intimate images has also been the center of several works examining online violence within Italian scholarship. Some researchers have focused on the challenges posed by this type of crime to the legal system, with particular attention to privacy regulations and the right to be forgotten (E.g., Caletti, 2019; Pavan & Lavorgna, 2022; Pietropaoli, 2017; Ziccardi, 2017). Others have investigated the sociocultural construction of this type of cyber-violence within the broader public discourse (E.g., Abbatecola, 2021; Bainotti & Semenzin, 2021; Gius, 2022). For example, Gius (2022) noted how, when episodes of non-consensual distribution of intimate materials are discussed online, users often fail to recognize the systemic dimension of the problem and the interconnections between gender violence and online violence, thus supporting victim-blaming narratives and reinforcing the status quo.

Reflecting on the vocabulary used in public commentaries, Abbatecola (2021) suggested the adoption of the acronym D.I.V.I.S.E. as a possible alternative to the Italian denomination of the crime of non-consensual distribution of intimate pictures/videos in the "Red Code" (Diffusione Illecita di Video e Immagini Sessualmente Esplicite). Besides offering a more manageable and synthetic definition for the crime, Abbatecola underlines how the Italian word "divise" (a gendered word that, concerning the female universe, could be translated in English with "divided") could be used as a reminder of the necessity to overcome the artificial double standards separating, accordingly to a culture rooted in patriarchy, "virgins" from "vamps" (Benedict, 1993).

Italian scholars have also investigated online anti-feminist and anti-women groups in the so-called manosphere. Online groups centered around incel ideology have been studied to better understand their discursive dimension and their relation to sociotechnical affordances (e.g., Bainotti & Semenzin, 2021; Botto & Gottzén, 2023; Cannito et. al., 2021; Scarcelli, 2021). The relationship between gender and online violence has also started to be looked at as part of a yearly research series conducted on online hate speech by Amnesty International and VOX (the Italian Observatory on Rights). In 2019, Amnesty launched a study to observe the online profile of 20 Italian celebrities and opinion leaders (10 females and 10 males) over five weeks. Research shows that hate posts targeted female personalities almost one-third more than their male counterparts. Moreover, 1 out of 3 attacks on female celebrities was explicitly sexist (Amnesty, 2020). Similarly, a study conducted on more than 800.000 tweets by VOX between January and October 2021 has revealed that out of a total of 340.280 tweets talking about women, 240.460 (71%) conveyed misogyny and hate (Vox, 2021). In particular, female journalists and politicians were extensively targeted by insults and threats and regularly shamed for their physical appearance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The data on which this contribution is based are part of an ongoing research project aiming at examining the sociocultural construction of online violence against women and girls in Italy. The study of social representations (Moscovici, 1989) is pivotal to effectively analyze the debate surrounding cyber-VAWG and reach a deep understanding of how gender-based cyber-violence is framed (Goffman, 1974) as a specific social problem (Blumer, 1979; Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). This conceptualization, as it has already been effectively established by previous research on other forms of gender-based violence (e.g., Belluati, 2021; Corradi et al., 2018; D'ambrosi

& Polci, 2017; Giomi & Magaraggia, 2017; Lalli, 2021), is necessary to gain a more comprehensive understanding of cyber-VAWG: an essential prerequisite to support further research, educational initatives and policy measures.

Investigating how cyber-VAWG is understood among different social actors allows exposing the presence of concurring representations linking a hegemonic-institutional discourse (Foucalt, 1972) to innovative instances pressing for a change in power distribution (Hall, 1973; Moscovici, 1998; Swidler, 1984). It grants a deeper comprehension of how cyber-violence against women and girls is problematized or normalized in contemporary Italian society so that opportunities for conservation and/or change could emerge. More specifically, addressing the gendered aspect of cyber-violence effectively is a fundamental prerequisite to meet the growing demand for social media literacy practices that can extend beyond just providing guidance on the essential skills to be online. Cho et al. (2022), arguing for a more holistic approach to media education, note that many social media literacy efforts focus mainly on the development of skills like analysis, evaluation, and content creation, failing to consider the importance of content components. According to their analysis, empowered social media usage requires citizens to recognize the social nature of online interactions, viewing online activities as communal and as a platform for creating and interpreting meanings. Morever, embracing a media-educational approach that addresses social media usage as a social practice is essential to promote a critical and conscious use of media contents and a healthy online experience (Taddeo & Tirocchi, 2014; Tirocchi, 2017).

Subsequently, a qualitative exploratory study was conducted to assess how cyber-VAWG is being framed in Italy's awareness-raising initatives. This specific site of knowledge production appeared to be particularly interesting as it revolves around issues of transformation and change while, at the same time, being subjected to hegemonic discourses on gender relations (Connell, 1987). Awareness initiatives play a strategic role in social marketing and education, aiming to inform and enlighten the public on specific issues or causes and recommend appropriate behaviors and actions (Faucher, Cassidy & Jackson, 2020; Lee & Kotler, 2019; Lefebvre, 2012; Reynolds & Merritt, 2010; Wakefield, Loken & Hornik, 2010). Such campaigns promote the recognition and emergence of distinct social problems at the societal level (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988), while offering a broad perspective on specific issues, benefiting not only those directly affected but also members of other institutions, including families, schools, and political organizations.

Campaigns and initiatives were initially collected in 2022 via online queries. Web searches were conducted on two different search engines (google and duckduck-go) and using several keywords such as: "online violence against women and girls", "cyber-violence against women and girls", "online sexism", "online gender violence", "sexting", "cyber-stalking", "cyber-bulling" and "cyber-violence". The selection of these search strings was made because they were sufficiently broad to yield numerous results, highlighting the three core dimensions of this study: the gender-related aspect, the nature of violence, and the online context. To capture the breadth and depth of data associated with these dimensions, queries were designed with thoroughness. By balancing expansive and focused search terms, a more comprehensive data gathering process was ensured. This approach aligns with the strategies suggested by Jansen & Spink (2006), who emphasize the importance of a judicious mix of broad and specific queries to optimize data collection outcomes.

The results produced by each web query were scrolled until reaching saturation (i.e., until several pages of results did include valuable content for research purposes and the focus of the inputs was too loosely connected with the initial inquiry and scope of the research) and pertinent campaigns where selected and archived. It is worth noting that while awareness-raising campaigns against gender-based violence are relatively common, initatives specifically addressing or tackling cyber-VAWG are notably limited in number. For the purposes of this discussion the corpus was further refined to include only the campaings that responded to the following two preconditions. First of all, the initatives had to compriset some level a focus on online violence. Second, the campaign had to specifically address the gender dimension of the issue explicitly – or have a woman or a girl as their central visual focus.

In the end, 10 awareness-raising initiatives that met the prerequisites were selected for inclusion in this paper and subsequently analyzed, particularly focusing on their central claims, accompanying texts, and visual representations. This process entailed examining the narratives and imageries used by the different initatives to determine their contribution to the discourse on cyber-VAWG, evaluating the communicative strategies employed to influence, define, and address the issue, and appraising the media educational strategy suggested. As a result of the analysis, two different approaches emerged (Table.1), each with distinct strategies and educational implications for addressing and mitigating cyber-VAWG: skill-oriented and critically-oriented.

Table 1. Analysed initiatives.

Campaing's name	Organization	Approach
Otto su dieci (2022)	Fondazione Vodafone "Bright Sky", Cadmi, Polizia di Stato	Skill-oriented
Destalk (2021)	European Network for the Work with Perpetrators of Domestic Violence	Critically-oriented
Stop Sexting and Revenge Porn (2021)	Mete Onlus	Skill-oriented
Youth for Love (2021)	Action Aid Italia	Critically-oriented
Play4 your rights (2020)	Cospe Onlus	Critically-oriented
Responsible Together" sulla CyberViolence (2020)	Work With Perpetrators	Skill-oriented
#isuperrori (2018)	Ministero dell'Istruzione. Save The Children, Telefono Azzurro	Critically-oriented
#Scelgoio! (2018)	Cuore e Parole Onlus	Skill-oriented
#soloperte (2017)	Pepita Onlus, Dajko Comunicazione	Skill-oriented
La ragazza invisibile (2016)	Ministero dell'Istruzione. Save The Children, Telefono Azzurro	Critically-oriented

DISCUSSION

Two istinct approaches to tackling cyber-VAWG emerged from the analysis. On one hand, the skill-oriented framework emphasizes the need for increasing digital literacy and preventative measures to counter online gender-based violence, advocating for the development of essential preventive skills and secure online conduct. On the other hand, the critically-oriented strategy champions media education to foster critical understanding of online violence, challenges the victim-blaming discourse, promotes consent, and supports a comprehensive recognition of gender inequalities and collective accountability in the online environment. A more detailed analysis of the two frameworks will be offered in the next sections.

SKILL-ORIENTED INITIATIVES

Skill-oriented campaigns highlight users' lack of awareness combined with too-easy access to audio-visual technological devices (such as the cameras of mobile devices) and ICTs, as the primary barriers in the contrast of online violence against women and girls. As such they mostly focus on the development of the necessary skills (Van Deursen & van Dijck, 2010) to ensure a safe online presence. These campaigns revolve around the idea that to reduce online gender-based violence it is necessary to educate women, girls and those closer to them (such as, for example, family members or educators) about the inherint risks of cyberspace and instruct them on safe behaviours. As such, skill-oriented initatives primarily adopt preventive strategies, adhering to the principle that it is more efficient, effective, and economical to prevent an issue from arising than to address its aftermath. These strategies are designed to deter risky behaviors from the outset, often providing concise guidelines or easy-to-retain compendiums detailing the do and don'ts for women and girls online.

The main message of skill-oriented campaigns is built on a cause-and-effect principle: to minimize vulnerability, certain behaviours should be avoided. The guidance in these campaigns is predominantly prescriptive, indicating what women, girls, and concerned adults are expected to-do or not-do for a secure online experience. A recurring theme in these campaigns is the notion that women and girls bear responsibility for their own security. Behaviours perceived as potentially dangerous are strongly discouraged, and there is a warining to women who expose themselves online may lose their sense of identity, resulting to severe repercussions over their well-being. The importance of individual behaviors is underscored by slogans that directly address the campaigns'publics. Tag lines such as "#usalatesta" (#useyourhead), or "Io scelgo" (I chose) are examples of how this sense of personal responsibility is conveyed in these initiatives.

In skill-oriented campaigns, sexting, the digital of exchanging intimate and sexually explicit content between individuals engaged in a (supposedly) consensual relationship, is often higlightened as a major concern. A prime example of the emphasis placed on sexting in the discussions about cyber-VAWG within this framework is the 2018 aforementioned "I chose" campaign, initated by the organization "Cuore e Parole" (Hearth and Words). This campaign promoted free online training initiatives for mothers, educating them about the potential risks of sexting. It offeres guidance on how to raise awareness of the dangers of sexting among their daughters and provides advice on actions to take if their daughters' images are shared and exposed.

A similar initiative is the "Stop Sexting and Revenge Porn" (2021) poster campaign promoted by Mete Onlus in partnership with the Sicily Region. This campaign involved distributing anti-sexting posters in numerous Sicilian high schools. These campaigns consistently depict sexting as a potentially unsafe practice and risky behaviour that might pave the way for grooming and other forms of sexual abuse.

Although attempting to offer feasible short-term solutions and hands-on advice on how to react to cyber-VAWG, skill-oriented initiatives present several criticalities. For example, by emphasizing the need for women and girls to abstain from digital practices perceived as risky, skill-oriented campaigns fail to properly address the multiplicity of realities and the multitude of experiences that individuals have through their social media (Cho et al., 2022). Additionally, they overlook the strong interrelations that bring together online and offline relationships and experiences (Floridi, 2015). In particular, the primary prevention approach is criticized as it prioritizes restraining the course of action of potential victims (almost exclusively girls and women) over tackling the social and cultural causes of gender-based violence (Hasinoff, 2012). Moreover these initiatives, by emphasizing users' individual responsibility in their social media activies, contribute to the normalization of cyber-based violence, further exposing victims to risks of additional victimization both online and offline. Lastly, skill-oriented initiatives often operate under the assumption that young individuals lack understanding of their online actions, suggesting they need structured guidance. By adopting this point of view, skill-oriented initiatives tend to overlook that young people are mostly well aware of the risks they face while online (Tirocchi, Scocco & Crespi, 2022) and use a myriad of tactics to navigate cyberspace.

CRITICALLY-ORIENTED INITIATIVES

The second approach adopted to contrast cyber-VAWG focuses on media education initiatives and other educational campaigns designed to support teenagers and young adults in developing a critical understanding of online violence while promoting consent. They seek to equip youngsters with the necessary knowledge to properly recognize gender stereotypes and online violence, question their assumptions, and develop appropriate reaction forms. Crucial to this approach is the idea that, although women and girls often bear the bunt – the ones truly at fault are those who perpetrate the attack and breach others' privacy. Rather of solely focusing on prescribing behaviours that women and girls should avoid online, critically-oriented initiatives provide context for their experiences. This involves understanding the "motivations, choices, networks, and resulting mediated social worlds they construct and manage" (Cho et al., 2022, p. 8). A practical application of this approach can be seen in a series of short graphic motion videos titled "La ragazza visibile" (The Visible Girl). Launched in 2016, these videos were part of a web series specifically aimed at addressing cyber-VAWG as part of a large media education initiative, promoted by the Italian Ministry of Education, Save The Children and Telefono Azzurro, which is the country's leading child helpline.

In "The Visible Girl" viewers are introduced to the story of Silvia, a young girl whose intimate pictures were shared online by her alleged boyfriend. In the videos Silvia recounts her experience, explaining how she came to share her pictures and how she felt when they were leaked and shared online for all to see. However, rather than just presenting her a victim, the video alos shows how Silvia chose to respond to the situation by becoming a YouTuber to help others by sharing her story. While the videos suggest online appropriate behaviours, they make clear that Silvia was not to blame for what happened to her; the person who shared her picture was at fault. In the video, Silvia appears to be in control of her narrative. After initially feeling defeated by her harrassers she gains the awareness that she has no reason to feel ashamed. Empowered by this realization, she decides to act, start a YouTube channel, and serve as a beacon of hope for others. To underscore her journey, Silvia's story is referenced by another character in a subsequent series of animations. While the title of this later series may be regrettable ("#isuperrori – #thesupermistakes", 2018), Silvia's challenges are skillfully woven into the narrative to delve into the nuances of online sharing, reassert responsibilities, and celebrate Silvia's decision to aid others.

In addition to focusing on the consequences of cyber-VAWG for its victims and defining the role of the perpetrators, critically-oriented initiatives also address the bystander effect. Central to this approach is the idea that everyone should take responsibility for their online activites. In this view, cyber-VAWG, is not understood as a private issue but becomes a collective problem requiring shared recognition and changes in culture and society. For istance, the "Play4 your rights" initative promoted in 2020 by COSPE Onlus aims to foster soft skills development and promote awareness against stereotypes and gender-based violence. With a specifically designed deck of cards, this campaign encourages young people to find positive reactions to sexist remarks in online conversations. Action Aid – Italia has launched

a similar initiative. Employing a serious game approach (Stokes, 2005; Zhoneggen, 2019), the organization introduced "Youth for Love" (2021). In this online game, players follows the stories of various characters confronting gender-based cyber violence, peer violence, or bullying whether as potential victims, perpetrators, or bystanders. Players navigate inside the game by selecting which character to play, making decisions that can influence the outcomes of their chosen character's story. As players navigate the game, they can explore various outcomes of given scenarios, gleaning insights from the context. Concurrently, gamers actively contribute to knowledge creation (Lalli & Capelli, 2021), offering a more nuanced understanding of cyber-VAWG and cyber-violence from the perspectives of targeted demographics, such as youngsters and teens.

Critically-oriented initatives have the advantage of addressing cyber-VAWG as a specific manifestation of gender inequality, utilizing digital media as a bridge to raise awareness and reinforce positive behaviors. While critically-oriented initiatives may provide behavioral guidelines, they primarily aim to support cultural change by challenging prevailing norms. Engaging with these campaigns deepens the public's understanding of gender relations, stereotypes, and media practices.

CONCLUSIONS

In 2021 the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of freedom of opinion and expression stressed how "the internet has become the new battleground in the struggle for women's rights, amplifying opportunities for women to express themselves but also multiplying possibilities for repression" (Khan, 2021, p.4). Despite the potentially significant repercussions (EIGE, 2017; EU Parliament, 2021; Goulds et al., 2020) of online violence against women, to date, cyber-VAWG remains an under-researched and under-conceptualized phenomenon lacking a unitary definition and comprehensive policy approach (EIGE, 2017; EU Parliament, 2021). In a 2021 value assessment conducted over cyber-VAWG's financial and societal costs, the EU Parliament emphasized the urgency to bridge the lack of knowledge on the issue to create comparable research findings and effective policies. Online violence against women and girls is a complex phenomenon, intersecting numerous social dimensions, power relations, and social positionalities connected to issues of privacy, intimacy, and the use of technology. Additionally, cyber-VAWG manifests in varied relational contexts, employing myriad of practices to achieve diverse harmful goals (Powell, 2021).

Gender-based cyber-violence also appears elusive due to the evolving nature of digital technologies.

In Italy, although the topic of cyber-violence frequently surfaces in the media and its political significance is growing, the gendered aspects of the issue are often overlooked. Many awareness-raising campaigns present online violence as a neutral, genderless phenomenon. This reflects a broader challenge within Italian society: the reluctance to acknowledge gender-based violence as a pervasive problem affecting all facets of women's lives. Nevertheless, an analysis of various campaigns reveals a tapestry of competing narratives on cyber-VAWG within the Italian public discourse. Some initatives perpetuate traditional gendered notions of 'acceptable' online behavior, suggesting that the responsability is on women and girls to exercise self-control and avoid risky situations to prevent victimization. These initiatives are mainly aimed at providing their target audiences with information and useful advice to guide online behaviors and often have a strongly prescriptive content.

Other campaigns, on the other hand, address cyber-VAWG from a sociocultural standpoint. These initiatives argue that the internet and ICTs perpetuate longstanding societal inequalities (Morahan-Martin, 2000). These initatives promote a media education approch that combines social media literacy with gender education in the understanding that only an integrated approach can pave the way for more discerning and informed media usage and – as a consequence – effectively disrupt all the mechanism that contributes in generating violent digital practices. Given the structural nature of gender-based violence and cyberviolence, it seems desirable to promote initiatives that facilitate cultural change whle challenging the status uo. In this context, as highlighted by Cho (2022), Taddeo & Tirocchi (2014), and Tirocchi (2013), embracing an educational approach that critically recognizes social media usage as a social practice is essential to ensuring a safe digital experience for everyone.

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