

ONLINE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: REPORTS FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

After the pandemic of COVID-19 was declared by the World Health Organization in March 2020, a set of health measures were adopted internationally to control the spread of the virus. Among these, the lockdowns and isolations resulted in the widespread adoption of communication technologies as mediators in all daily situations involving physical contact, from work to leisure. In addition to the several unprecedented conditions that the pandemic brought, this widespread adoption brought about an unparalleled context regarding online gender violence, focusing on women. This study focuses on how women experience the nature, prevalence, and impacts of online violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. By using critical thematic analysis, this qualitative approach resulted from in-depth interviews with 30 women victims/survivors of online violence during the pandemic. The data enabled the identification of 10 types of dynamic and hybrid modalities of online violence against women. The results of this study contribute to deepening the knowledge about this specific period and, above all, to the solidification and typification of a lexicon related to online violence, helping to fill an existing gap in Portugal.

KEYWORDS

gendered online violence, abusive behavior, victimology

VIOLÊNCIA ONLINE CONTRA AS MULHERES: RELATOS A PARTIR DA EXPERIÊNCIA DA PANDEMIA DA COVID-19

RESUMO

Depois de a pandemia de COVID-19 ter sido declarada pela Organização Mundial de Saúde em março de 2020, um conjunto de medidas sanitárias foram adotadas internacionalmente para controlar a expansão do vírus. De entre estas, os confinamentos e isolamentos tiveram como consequência a adoção generalizada de tecnologias de comunicação como mediadoras em todas as situações quotidianas que implicassem contacto físico, do trabalho ao lazer. Para além das várias situações inéditas que a pandemia trouxe, esta adoção generalizada trouxe um contexto sem precedentes no que diz respeito à violência de género online, com particular enfoque nas mulheres. Este estudo debruça-se sobre a forma como as mulheres experienciam a natureza, a prevalência e os impactos da violência online ocorrida durante a pandemia de COVID-19. Com recurso a uma análise temática crítica, esta abordagem qualitativa resultou de entrevistas em profundidade a 30 mulheres vítimas/sobreviventes de violência online durante a pandemia. Os dados permitiram identificar 10 tipos de modalidades dinâmicas e híbridas de violência online contra mulheres. Os resultados deste estudo contribuem, não só para aprofundar o conhecimento sobre este período específico, mas, sobretudo, para a solidificação e tipificação de um léxico relativo à violência online, ajudando a colmatar uma falha existente em Portugal.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

violência online genderizada, comportamentos abusivos, vitimologia

1. INTRODUCTION

The new digital platforms we use daily to access information, communicate and combat physical isolation can be highly emancipating (Amaral & Simões, 2021), particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited face-to-face social contacts. However, the inappropriate, toxic, offensive, and discriminatory nature of online behaviours highlight the digital environment's subversive role. In particular, patterns of violence against women seem to be intensifying while new modalities of offence are emerging.

The COVID-19 pandemic offered, in a way, the first big global test for digitalisation. The new platforms, which we started to use even more intensively, often in a relationship of dependence, to access information, to communicate, to work, for education, for health, to fight isolation, revealed themselves in a double dimension, as a solution and as a problem. While creating new technosocial spaces to mitigate isolation, they were also intensifying as inappropriate, toxic, insulting, offensive, and discriminatory spaces, disproportionately affecting women (Santos, 2022). That is the context from which we study the emerging problem of online violence against women and misogyny.

The evidence collected and analysed by our study firstly points to the need to broaden the conceptual field of violence against women, which cannot be reduced to physical abuse in the private space, homicide committed by an intimate partner, or sexual violence in the public space. For some time now, violence has adapted, migrated to the digital environment and often gone viral. At the same time, it is a phenomenon whose

gendered nature is evident, being inextricably linked to the norms that underpin discrimination and gender inequalities, which always intensify in crisis contexts. Online violence against women integrates the broader continuum of violence (Kelly, 1987), translated into behaviours that express and reproduce gender inequalities, although not always valued.

In Portugal, there is no linguistic and cultural framework to turn to in search of knowledge on how to name, define and interpret what happens when women are the target of sexist hate comments, misogynistic rhetoric, and recurrent insulting attacks. Our study gave a good account of the lack of recognition of online abusive behaviour, including the lack of awareness of victim and/or survivor status. Its relevance is further reaffirmed by the very scarcity of data regarding the analysed context.

Thus, this article aims to understand the prevalence, nature and impact of online violence against women during the COVID-19 pandemic using a qualitative methodological strategy, with 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews with women victims/survivors of online violence during that same time. Thus, the research question guiding this empirical study is: how do women victims/survivors experience the nature, prevalence, and impacts of online violence during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The theoretical framework that underpins this study has two axes that stand in the line of the so-called feminist technology studies: the centrality of the use of online platforms during the pandemic and the various impacts that this use had on the development of these forms of violence. It is to a denser understanding and a clearer delimitation of this still unexplored context that this work intends to contribute, starting from a critical position on how the internet is a space of reproduction and expansion of misogynist dynamics offline.

2. GENDER AND TECHNOLOGY

Almost 30 years have passed since Cynthia Cockburn and Susan Ormrod (1993, p. 1) encapsulated the relationship between gender and technology in the image of the woman car driver making two attempts to park, a situation that implicates material issues, representations and meanings and ultimately creates a gender hierarchy in the face of technology's apparent dominance. Technology is always situated in temporal and spatial contexts, which leads to constant change in the study of these material and symbolic dynamics. Indeed, much has changed in 30 years. Nevertheless, many power structures remain in the social fabric, as this article aims to reinforce.

The relationship between gender and technology emerged and established itself as a field of social science in the last quarter of the 20th century. In a central place, as recently as the 1970s, a deterministic focus was adopted on the effects, particularly, on domestic technology and how advances in this area had not allowed women to spend less time away from domestic tasks (Wajcman, 2000, p. 449).

The following years contributed to a shift in this focus, which would imply a horizon of greater reciprocity between technology and gender. As a mark of this evolution, from the 1980s onwards, a perception gained ground in the literature that "ideas and

[technological] artefacts are social constructions, the result of negotiation between social actors, both individuals and groups” (Cockburn & Ormrod, 1993, p. 9). Constructivist theoretical perspectives, which emerged in the late 1980s, assume, precisely, this process of mutual influence between society and technology. Consequently, we can deepen our views by studying gender from the point of view of technology and vice versa. Or, as Cynthia Cockburn wrote in 1992, “technology permeates gender identity and (...) technology itself cannot be well understood without reference to gender” (p. 29). It is in this dialectical context that we speak of “coproduction” (Bray, 2007).

If in the 1970s, many feminist studies translated a particularly pessimistic position about the potential that technology could have for gender equality, as explained by Wajcman (2000, p. 450), the research techno-optimist who, at the turn of the millennium, anticipated a brave new world brought by the internet, was at its antipodes, giving rise to cyberfeminism that assumed technology as a means of women empowerment (Wajcman, 2000, p. 460). However, outside this cyberfeminist movement, the reference works on the new information society provided little or no sensitivity to gender issues (Corneliusen, 2012; Wajcman, 2000).

At the turn of the millennium, the presence of computers had exploded in the most diverse contexts. In this period, the main challenge, “was not to make women interested in computers, but to ensure that their relations with technology were not constantly undermined by images of femininity, on the one hand, or, on the other, by images of men’s relations with technology” (Corneliusen, 2012, 169).

This explosion of computer use turned out to be one of the first and most decisive steps toward virtual environments and permanent connectivity, with all the implications that the new technosocial dynamics brought to the perception and construction of identity, the body and personal relationships. As emphasised by Wajcman (2000), the works of Donna Haraway, Sherry Turkle, and Allucquere Stone are fundamental in this period to understand how technology promised to challenge the expressions and practices of intimacy, desire and the very notions of gender identity: “cyberspace provides us with new possibilities for choosing a gender identity that does not depend on the material body” (p. 459).

Faced with a permanently connected daily life, we see new critical perspectives emerging in social research on the use of technologies and new communication flows, power and gender relations. In an only apparent paradox, the internet, being able to be a space promoting equality, does not fail to configure a mirror of the past, that is, despite opening new opportunities and offering a space “for fourth-wave feminism, this technology also lends itself to behaviours that constituted second-wave feminist concerns: gender violence” (Walklate, 2017, p. x).

The study of gender-based violence in the digital context took some time to stand out in research due to the trend in observing the positive impacts of the internet. The subversive impacts have, however, acquired increasing visibility in recent years (Pavan, 2017). It is in the light of these other impacts that the dialectic between technology and gender that underlies the study of online violence against women also allows repositioning the mainstream view on the participatory culture itself (Jenkins, 2009):

it is not that individuals have stopped participating, creating or sharing; what we are realising is that such actions are not necessarily encouraging greater engagement, in general, with the world, nor are they inherently more democratic or contribute to a more just and peaceful future. (Massanari, 2015, p. 167)

3. TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIATION OF VIOLENCE

Building on this tradition of feminist studies on technology, the theoretical framework that supports this study has two prevalent dimensions. On the one hand, the specificities of technological mediation during the pandemic period; on the other, the particularities of the online context as a space of continuity of the dynamics of violence existing offline.

Despite the sudden outbreak of war in Europe, at the beginning of 2022, having come to annihilate a certain emotional relief longed for during the pandemic, people are gradually experiencing a return to a life with fewer restrictions. The pandemic was declared in March 2020, precisely the month in which, in Portugal, the first of several confinements and mandatory social restrictions was decreed. Globally, on March 17, 2022, the World Health Organization recorded more than 6.000.000 deaths from COVID-19 (a little more than 21.000 in Portugal) and more than 10.000.000.000 vaccines administered (in Portugal, 90% with vaccination complete, 60% with reinforcement; World Health Organization, n.d.).

The experience of the pandemic can be considered a turning point in several areas, particularly in relation to the use of technology, especially due to the magnitude of what happened and the questions that arose.

Globally, technology has become a medium for almost everything due to the impossibility of physical contact and travel. Television and online sources were significantly more widely used than newspapers, which relied on physical distribution (Newman et al., 2020). Online media, especially social platforms, became a preferred source of information (true, false or misleading), produced and spread in unprecedented quantities, impacting the formation of global discourses (Cinelli et al., 2020). Remote classes have been widely adopted to mitigate the consequences of temporary and repeated school closures around the world (Garbe et al., 2020; Morgan, 2020). Teleworking became mandatory several times during the pandemic, ensuring the necessary social distance and the possibility of continuity of economic activities (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020). Online shopping grew exponentially, forcing people to adopt new behaviours (Eger et al., 2021). Telemedicine itself was rapidly implemented in various contexts (Wosik et al., 2020). This period of technological dependence and ubiquity of screens in everyday life was the first glimpse of what Anderson and colleagues call “tele-everything” to designate a possible near future (Anderson et al., 2021).

The use of online social platforms was already intense before the pandemic, which can be explained by their positive contribution to overcoming space-time barriers and

responding to the constraints that the intense pace of life causes in relationships established offline (Antoci et al., 2015). However, the pandemic changed this dynamic by preventing offline social contact. In this period, the use of social platforms thus saw a huge increase (Newman et al., 2020). Singh et al. (2020) even refer to a “compulsive use of online social media”, where “over-engagement” has become a “psychological necessity, in helping people meet their needs for human interaction and cope with the pandemic” (p. 1). Thus, at a first level, the use of social platforms during the pandemic can be understood as a real need to combat social isolation and relate, interact and belong. It is worth calling upon Maslow’s (1987) theory, which explained how the existence of emotional needs, when unmet, was dominant and led to stability-seeking behaviour.

However, as shown, for instance, in the study by Boursier et al. (2020, p. 1), prolonged exposure also increased anxiety in many cases, creating a cycle that is difficult to break. This dichotomy is, on several levels, prevalent in the results of studies on the impacts of social media use. There are always complex frameworks in which socio-economic and cultural factors need to be considered (Bekalu et al., 2019) and where virtues and dangers are inevitably identified simultaneously (Allen et al., 2014; Radovic et al., 2017, among others). Mental health effects constitute one of the most prolific areas, with research on the effects of addictive behaviours being widely explored (Hou et al., 2019; Marino et al., 2018). Not being unprecedented, this approach to the pandemic has shown an association between social media exposure and mental health (Zhang et al., 2021).

The other line of research that is fundamental to the framework of this study is the one that focuses precisely on online media as spaces of violence, particularly against women and the perpetuation of gender inequalities. It is our conviction, as previously stated, that online violence against women is part of this wider continuum of violence and subjugation (Kelly, 1987).

That is not a new reality, as shown by Barak’s (2005) work on online harassment or Filipovic’s (2007) work on how the online context of bloggers reproduced a structural dynamic. However, only much more recently, with the ubiquity of social media in everyday life, has this area become more prolific in the academy.

When it emerged, the internet brought with it a set of ideas associated with its free and open essence, such as equality, participation, and emancipation. Nevertheless, online environments did not develop exclusively as deliberative forums promoting democracy, as Dahlberg (2001) stated. The work of Papacharissi (2004) on online incivility, a multi-significant concept covering various manifestations, is based precisely on this attack against the core values of democracy. In this sphere are included behaviours that somehow contribute to the removal of women from this deliberative space since what is at stake are the real possibilities of participating and intervening significantly in a space without any type of constraints or fears (Santos, 2022). However, the internet hasn’t been like that for some time. In 2016, *Wired* magazine collectively wrote a letter to the internet saying it was time to end the dynamics generated in those 2 decades: “you were supposed to be the blossoming of a million voices. We were all going to democratise access to information together. But some of your users have taken that freedom as a license to

victimise others” (Wired Staff, 2016, para. 2). The call to action made by Wired was addressed to large corporations since the official discourse and practices of the platforms about the consequences on the perpetrators, do not coincide. Rigorously, while companies claim that they take these instances of online abuse of women very seriously (Wired Staff, 2016), there is evidence to confirm that this is not always the case. A study by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (2022), conducted in November 2021, identified 288 accounts that had spread offensive and violent, misogynistic content directed at several women with public notoriety. After 2 months of the complaint was reported to Twitter by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (2022), 88% of these accounts were still active. A more recent analysis of this second group showed that around half of these accounts not initially blocked by Twitter had reoccurred. On another scale, the experience of Marianna Spring (2021), the BBC’s leading expert on misinformation, is identical after reporting to Facebook the threats she received while producing a documentary about the subject. However, this is a reading that does not go unnoticed by people who are aware of it and are critical of this attitude of the platforms, as shown in the Pew Research Center study, referring to the American reality (Vogels, 2021, p. 5).

This same study provides a set of results that help to make concrete what happens in online spaces (particularly social networks) as spaces of violence. Firstly, it should be noted that the percentage of US citizens who have experienced any kind of online abuse has not increased in the last 4 years, remaining at around 40%. What has changed is the severity and intensity of the situations (Vogels, 2021, p. 4), which implies another reading of the data: in the most severe categories of abuse, physical threats, stalking, prolonged harassment and sexual harassment, there has been a doubling in the number of people reporting having experienced these situations since the 2014 study.

Like others, the Pew Research Center study (Vogels, 2021) shows that this is a reality experienced by both men and women. However, the results also show unequivocally that the type of violence differs between genders: men more often report being insulted or physically threatened. In contrast, women report being more sexually harassed or stalked. Incidentally, this is particularly evident in younger women: a third of women under 35 said they had been sexually harassed online. Broader studies, however, uncover more worrying figures: the Plan International (2020) study, which covered 31 countries, has results showing that more than half of young women (15–25 years old) have experienced such a situation online. The Amnesty International (2017) study, which involved Denmark, Italy, New Zealand, Poland, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States, points to almost a quarter of the sample (23%), although their age group is wider (18–55; Amnesty International, 2017).

The handling of statistics can be misleading and sometimes sterile since there are studies done in the most diverse socio-cultural contexts and with the most diverse methodological designs. In this sense, proceeding to a systematisation that can solidify frames of reference for framing the results is imperative.

Institutionally, besides the respective legislation of each country and the contribution of several Non-Governmental Organisations, there is a relevant international framework

for issues of gender violence through conventions and resolutions of the Council of Europe, the United Nations and the European Union, among other organisations.

Nevertheless, there is no stable conceptual delimitation of online gender violence. Ging and Siapera (2018) address this multiplicity of situations under the broader umbrella of the concept of online misogyny to emphasise the cultural dimension of what goes beyond violence. Here, we also intend to go beyond any delimitation of the legal order. In this sense, like Amaral and Simões (2021), we assume that “online gender violence” encompasses a set of diverse negative manifestations (sometimes even overlapping or related) and is, as a rule, used in the same sense as other references, such as online abuse, being also framed, sometimes, by the very sphere of “incivility”. Since it is not the task of this article to discuss these specificities, we assume here, within the scope of online violence or abuse, a series of diverse manifestations, such as: defamation, falsehood, revenge porn, sextortion, doxing (unauthorised disclosure of private information), unwanted sexual messages, offensive approaches, threats, various forms of hate speech, insult, humiliation, stalking, prolonged harassment, forms of objectification (Nussbaum, 1995) or passive verbal forms (Barak, 2005). These practices, alone or combined, reflect a systemic condition based on gender discrimination.

Besides the enumeration, from which some forms may inadvertently be left out, it is important here to consider two dimensions, as Nadim and Fladmoe (2021) do: the first comprises the level of aggressiveness, which is variable and may range from “name-calling”, to a concrete threat or hateful remark; while the second refers to the target of the remark, that is, the target at which the message is directed, which may range from the single person to the group or its thought or attitude (p. 248). This systematisation leads to a distinction between comments directed at the person (what he or she is and his or her characteristics) and those directed at what he or she thinks or stands for (Nadim & Fladmoe, 2021, p. 248).

When online violence is directed at “who” people are (either in a group or individually), the possibility of this resulting in silencing is greater than when it is directed at what they “think”, and this process is more evident in women (Nadim & Fladmoe, 2021, p. 255). The International Amnesty (2017) study shows this is a very common reality: 58% of respondents who had experienced online harassment said it included racism, sexism, homophobia or transphobia.

The psychological impacts are identified and are significantly mentioned in the various studies available: anxiety, depression, panic attacks, low self-esteem and lack of confidence, sleep problems, inability to concentrate, fear, discomfort and insecurity, feelings of guilt, shame, and vulnerability in online interaction (Amnesty International, 2017; Plan International, 2020). Ultimately, there is a process of silencing, of corrosion of core democratic principles and equality: more than three-quarters of women who experienced such situations in the Amnesty International (2017) study reported that they changed their way of using online platforms, and about one-third of women in that group stopped posting opinion-expressing content on certain topics. This silencing process is well explained by Megarry (2014, p. 46), who clarifies how equality is not achieved only

through mathematics: online equality does not depend only on the possibility of occupying space but on being able to participate in equal measure, to express without fear of threats or violence.

For this study, it is therefore important to characterise the specific context that occurred during the pandemic, with reference to: (a) the increased use of apps and social networks for the majority (if not the totality) of the promotion of personal contacts; (b) the use of technological mediation platforms for the maintenance and development of professional activities due to the social and professional limitations arising from the confinements; (c) the exceptionality of a situation of public calamity, with potential emotional impacts exacerbated by the prolongation of measures, the mandatory confinements, the unpredictability of the situation and the “infodemy” itself, which raged through the networks.

In the online context, an increase in gender-based violence has been reported during these 2 years or so (Berger, 2021). Online violence, as an extension of systemic relations of gender inequality, thus reflects an increase in situations of gender violence during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mittal & Singh, 2020), namely domestic violence (Piquero et al., 2021). Notwithstanding this background, the necessary characterisation of the Portuguese context during this period does not seem easy, given that there are no systematised quantitative indicators to date that respond to the specificity of this study. The context is also built on data collected piecemeal from various reports.

Recently published data confirmed that the widespread perception is that the pandemic led to increased physical and emotional violence against women during the pandemic. The European Parliament (2022) eurobarometer shows that 90% of women in Portugal share this perception, exceeding the European average of 77%. Specifically, in Portugal, the use of quantitative data with statistical expression is made possible by the Internal Security reports, whose most recent editions report that the occurrences of domestic violence recorded by the security forces in 2020 decreased by 6.3% compared to the previous year (Sistema de Segurança Interna, 2021) and by 4% in 2021, totalling 26,520 occurrences in that year¹ (Sistema de Segurança Interna, 2022, 2022). The decrease in domestic violence complaints to the security forces during the months the state of emergency was in force has been explained by the various limitations imposed on individual mobility, as there was an increase after the end of that period. The Portuguese Association for Victim Support has also highlighted another relevant aspect that occurred during the confinements and that the data from the police forces do not discriminate: the increase in psychological violence (Neves, 2021).

With a very strong gender dimension, crimes against sexual freedom and self-determination are significant in this context. That includes several types, namely coercion and sexual harassment or rape. However, there are no quantitative data in the Internal Security reports that allow us to characterise trends in recent years. The data from the National Cyber-Security Centre are also not systematised to respond to this specific context.

¹ In this context, it should be noted that 85% of complaints refer to violence against a partner, 75% of which refer to violence against women.

Although the Portuguese Association for Victim Support data does not translate total numbers for the territory, the association has a social and geographical expressiveness that validates its inclusion. The Portuguese Association for Victim Support (Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima, 2021) registered an increase in requests for help in 2020 (when compared to the previous year). Of the total number of requests for help, 87% were in the context of domestic violence, 61% of which were in intimate relationships, mainly registering threats, coercion, insults, and offences against physical integrity. The remaining 13% of requests, referring to the non-domestic context, register among other crimes of violence against women, insults, and sexual crimes.

Although there were contingency and intervention plans for the pandemic in the most diverse agents, the focus here is on the institutional responses regarding this period. Here, legislative measures stand out, such as the inclusion of situations of displacement and circulation during states of emergency and calamity for the reception of victims. There was also a classification of victim assistance and support services as essential services, which allowed for a support framework for employees. Other responses included opening temporary emergency reception structures and adopting contingency plans in the field of domestic violence support, which included implementing and reinforcing remote means of denunciation, support and management. The Commission for Gender Equality created a new email address (violencia.COVID@cig.gov.pt) and a free and confidential SMS line, 3060, in addition to the existing permanent phone service. The BrightSky App was launched with various information, a risk perception tool, and a covert mode feature. The management of vacancies for victims' reception was also centralised online, which allowed for more agile management of the processes (Comissão para a Cidadania e Igualdade de Género, 2020). In June 2021, the Plan for Strengthening the Prevention and Fight against Domestic Violence was launched, reinforcing dissemination campaigns, strengthening contacts with signalled victims and providing new tools for police forces and specialised agents. Although it was not a response driven by the pandemic context, it is important to mention that during this period, several actions began to take shape resulting from the approval by the Council of Ministers of a resolution (No. 139/2019), which included, among other aspects training of security forces, improvement of protection measures and data processing. This resolution originated in the "recommendations presented by the Multidisciplinary Technical Commission created in March, after the high number of homicides in the context of domestic violence earlier this year" (Comissão para a Cidadania e Igualdade de Género, 2019, para. 2).

4. METHODOLOGY AND CRITICAL ISSUES

This study is part of a larger project whose objectives are (a) to produce knowledge about an emerging theme that has been little studied in Portugal, namely to know the prevalence, nature and impact of online violence against women during the COVID-19 pandemic, mapping the experiences and perceptions of these practices; (b) to promote gender equality in the field, with actions that raise awareness about the responsible use

of media and digital technologies; and (c) to contribute to guiding social and institutional responses aimed both at preventing and combating violence and misogyny in digital contexts. As a result of these objectives, in this article, we seek to answer the following research question: how do women victims/survivors experience the nature, prevalence and impacts of online violence during the COVID-19 pandemic?

4.1 CRITICAL ISSUES IN PANDEMIC TIMES: CHALLENGES OF INVESTIGATING ONLINE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Doing victimology research during the COVID-19 pandemic will undoubtedly mark the most experienced researchers. Of course, fieldwork that focuses on painful experiences is always complicated for those who report these experiences and for those who investigate them. However, the isolation measures to contain the pandemic of COVID-19 had, and still have, a complex and significant impact, both on those being investigated and on those investigating. It is undoubtedly the case when studying through qualitative methods online violence against women, which has become a pandemic within the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this study, we conducted in-depth interviews to understand how women targeted for harmful online practices during the COVID-19 pandemic make sense of these practices. We spent several months trying to gather volunteers willing to participate in a research project based on a personal data collection method. Subsequently, for about 6 months, we conducted 30 1-hour semi-structured interviews with victims/survivors of online violence using videoconferencing applications. All formal interviews were recorded, focusing on the participants' contexts, nature of the harmful experiences lived, their impacts and perceptions of their social consequences.

The practical, ethical and legal issues faced in adapting fieldwork to digital research were key challenges. However, we also faced unique problems regarding the identification of victims with their negative experiences as targets of little-known deviant behaviour in pandemic times. Hundreds of informal interactions and conversations, mainly through social networks and instant messaging platforms, preceded these interviews to find potential volunteers: women aged 18 years or older living in Portugal during the pandemic and with a history of negative online experiences. These informal contacts served to describe how the interviews would take place and the non-financial compensation for participation in the study, namely contributing to a research focused on an emerging social problem.

In particular, the project's qualitative methodology, with unquestionable value in capturing people's everyday experiences, accounts for several of the difficulties we faced. In Portugal, there is no common linguistic and cultural framework to draw on for ideas on how to name, define and interpret what happens when women are the target of sexist hate comments, misogynistic rhetoric, abuse or murder threats on the net. Thus, the lack of recognition of abusive behaviour in digital environments, including the lack of self-understanding of being a victim of those, was a sometimes difficult obstacle to

overcome. During the interviews, we also saw survivors struggling to put into words situations of great suffering not disconnected from admittedly wider issues but nevertheless distant from public conversation and the cultural imaginaries with which we all make sense of reality.

Furthermore, even though the technology makes it possible to do fieldwork in real-time and hold interactive conversations, despite the demands for social distance, it is not conducive to empathetic expressions by researchers to mitigate the risks of participants feeling negative emotions. Notably, with the increasing use of digital technologies in response to the confinement measures enacted by the government, there remains no discussion of the wave of critical issues related to technology, which has embodied new social and political relationships, often increasing the burden on the most vulnerable groups.

Remembering painful experiences can cause suffering. We believe this was mainly why many volunteers left us waiting in vain, without any justification, in the scheduled videoconferences. On other occasions, justification came with the participant's regret that she had consented to the interview, realising how verbalising what happened would make her relive what she just wanted to forget. Standard research ethics, such as ensuring that participants were in control and could stop their participation, aimed to protect survivors. However, there is evidence that survivors participating in non-anonymous data collection methods can benefit emotionally from sharing their stories (Campbell et al., 2004). Notably, capturing the stories of those who suffer from deviant behaviour is a way of giving them a voice and shaping the issue being studied on their own terms. Finally, the interviews were also emotional for the project team. It was not easy to provide participants with the opportunity to introduce impactful topics and ideas when we heard: "I started to mutilate myself because it was too much for me. I wanted another kind of pain to stop feeling what I was feeling". We found it difficult to attend to the personal narratives of the still fresh and damaging experiences without sounding too condescending. Furthermore, given the personal and professional limitations arising from the pandemic, it was not always possible to have more than one researcher for each interview to talk to about the emotions felt from the stories being told.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had and continues to impact how we conduct research, requiring old concerns about the participation of trauma survivors and new ethical reflections regarding informed consent and reflexivity to address objects in the context of profound mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2018).

4.2. METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGY

The methodological strategy mobilised in this work is anchored in the feminist phenomenological approach (Butler, 1988; De Beauvoir, 1949/2014;) and articulated with a new feminist materialist perspective (Haraway, 2006; Lupton, 2019). In this sense, we start from the idea of being a woman and her historical structure, considering her place of speech in multiple dimensions that do not focus exclusively on biology. In a feminist phenomenological logic, we considered lived experiences as gendered and non-neutral

articulating them with the new feminist materialist perspective that holds that the dynamics of people's engagement with other people and objects through technology is deeply productive. It follows that the use of technology not only promotes the consumption of dominant ideologies but directly affects how people are feeling and thinking (Lupton, 2019).

As mentioned above, from October 2020 to March 2021, we conducted 30 in-depth interviews lasting about 1 hour, using videoconferencing applications, with victims/survivors of online violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. For corpus analysis, using MAXQDA software, we used critical thematic analysis to identify and analyse patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a first step, the analysis process involved coding the text and identifying patterns, repeated discourses and critical themes. In the second stage, based on the victims' lived and perceived experiences and following Lawless and Chen's (2019) proposal, we identified the modalities of online violence suffered by the participants in the critical themes and patterns.

4.3. PARTICIPANTS

The survivors we interviewed are young women, aged between 18 and 44, who are engaged in a diverse range of professional activities, including teaching ($n_i = 2$), health ($n_i = 2$), technology ($n_i = 2$), architecture and arts ($n_i = 2$), administrative services and sales ($n_i = 7$), students ($n_i = 6$), among other professions ($n_i = 6$). There are also three unemployed persons among the interviewees. Most of the victims/survivors have completed secondary education ($n_i = 13$), a degree ($n_i = 8$) or a master's degree ($n_i = 5$). There are also four persons with other qualifications. At the regional level, there is a predominance of the Lisbon metropolitan area ($n_i = 16$) and the northern zone of the country ($n_i = 12$). Only two interviewees are from the centre of Portugal.

5. RESULTS

The results of this research allow us to understand that online violence is a real social problem that takes place in dynamic modalities, often interconnected, integrating a continuum of violence against women (Kelly, 1987) that cannot be separated from the offline context. In this sense, we perceive that violence occurs indiscriminately, affecting women in different contexts and a multiplatform logic. The evidence collected and analysed by our study immediately points to the need to broaden the definitory field of violence against women, which cannot be reduced to physical abuse in the private space, homicide committed by an intimate partner, or sexual violence in the public space. Violence has adapted, migrated to the digital environment and often gone viral. At the same time, it is a phenomenon whose gendered nature is manifest, therefore, inseparable from the norms that underpin discrimination and gender inequalities, which always deepen in crisis contexts.

Online violence against women is, therefore, part of the broader continuum of violence, translated into behaviours that express and reproduce the gender inequalities of a

patriarchal society based on traditional gender roles that translate how men and women should be and behave. As the scientific literature shows, online violence against women is dynamic and can fit into a broader picture of online misogyny (Ging & Siapera, 2018). However, our data show that violence modalities go beyond misogynistic rhetoric or incivility (Papacharissi, 2004), translating into varied abuse behaviours with harmful consequences for victims (Amaral & Simões, 2021).

Based on the critical thematic analysis, the data collected allowed us to identify 10 modalities of online violence (Figure 1), all of them integrating some diversity of behaviours and dynamics and, therefore, in constant transformation. We systematise them below to contribute to the establishment of a specific lexicon for these situations in Portugal.



Figure 1 Modalities of online violence

5.1. ONLINE HARASSMENT

Online harassment encompasses a diverse set of abusive behaviours that involve the intentional imposition of emotional distress through digital discourse. Examples of

online harassment include: offensive teasing on social media, chats and forums; threats of physical and/or sexual violence via email, mobile messages or online platforms; hate speech that is sexist or based on gender identity and other characteristics, such as nationality and sexual orientation.

One of them even sent me a picture of a woman all beaten up. Telling me to be careful in the street. When that could happen to me. Just for the simple fact that I was a woman giving my opinion. (Student, 20 years old)

5.2. STALKING ONLINE

Online stalking involves the repeated hampering of victims' freedom of determination, harassing them and causing them distress in the private, professional and social spheres. Examples of online stalking practices are: repeatedly sending offensive or threatening emails, mobile phone messages or instant messages; systematically and harassingly posting offensive comments; repeatedly sharing intimate photos or videos on the internet or via mobile phone.

I think he started to put pressure that he didn't even know, so that at the end, in the more aggressive message he sent, he said: "I don't know what's special about you, but I know I will not stop bothering you". (Unemployed, 30 years old)

5.3. CYBER MOBS

Cyber mobs are collective online harassment practices aimed at attacking a particular person, often in competition with other online groups. Examples of collective harassment include online groups posting offensive, humiliating, and destructive content with the aim of creating a negative image around someone.

Some saying that I had no place in politics. Others saying I had no right to be there. They also started taking screenshots of my Twitter feed and started posting them in groups. Groups that are openly right-wing extremist. And now, with the presidential elections, that's happening again. (Student, 20 years old)

5.4. DOXING

Doxing is the term used to describe the unauthorised theft and publication of private data. Examples of doxing are the theft and unauthorised online disclosure of personal information from the private, financial, and family spheres.

It was in Gmail. It was in Gmail spam. I went to check my spam, the junk box, I looked twice and “What is this?” And I went, “No, no”. But, as I saw it and it actually had a password that had already been mine, I got a bit worried. (Educator, 40 years old)

5.5. IDENTITY THEFT

Online identity theft involves practices of illegitimate appropriation of other people’s identities or personal information for illicit purposes and to commit crimes. Online identity theft often occurs through the appropriation of online profiles after the theft of login data and passwords from email or social network accounts, which are subsequently used by another person. Identity theft may also result from the creation of fake profiles of the victim by third parties.

“So what this person did was create several fake accounts in my name. On Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook and Tinder. At least, as far as I know” (Administrative, 41 years old).

5.6. SEXUAL ABUSE THROUGH IMAGES

Sexual abuse through images includes the non-consensual dissemination of intimate photographs or videos of others. Examples of sexual abuse through images are the non-consensual online dissemination of photographs or videos that may have been recorded consensually or captured non-consensually.

Pictures of me without my consent have been spread since I’ve known myself as a woman, literally. I was 12, 13 years old, and it was pictures, posts on my Instagram, my Facebook in other groups asking if there were pictures of me and videos of me. When I barely knew what sex was. And my friends would come to me and say, “look, they’ve put photos of you here, and they’re here talking about you” (...). Now, this last time, it was intimate videos of me. (Unemployed, 23 years old)

5.7. CYBER-FLASHING

Cyber-flashing corresponds to the reception of unwanted images of a sexual nature.

“Besides harassment in terms of non-consensual images, there were also disgusting messages that I preferred not to read. (...). Either they send a dirty message or a photo that nobody asked for” (Sex worker, 21 years old).

5.8. SEXTORTION

Sextortion involves extortion practices of money or other demands in exchange for not disclosing sexually explicit photographs or videos involving the victim online.

The worst thing they can do to me is to send me, like this guy who sent me an email (...), saying: “Look, either you transfer me, I don’t know how much into my account, or I will send your friends a video or some indecent photos of you”. (Educator, 40 years old)

5.9. IMAGE MANIPULATION AND DEEP FAKE

Practices of sophisticated manipulation of images of a person and their illegitimate disclosure. The term deep fake refers to the use of technology that manipulates real photographs or videos, generating fake but technically credible content of a person, often of a sexual nature. One of the most common practices is to change the face of people involved in sexual practices.

“I don’t know where those photographs of mine went, ah, ended up, ended up” (Student, 20 years old).

5.10. HARASSMENT IN TELEWORK

Repeated practices of moral or sexual harassment compatible with situations of harassment in the workplace and carried out with the technological mediation of digital platforms and tools used in a teleworking context.

“A lot of the pressures are more over the phone. They’re more in video conferencing, which was not recorded. And you end up not having proof to go forward” (Administrative, 39 years old).

6. DISCUSSION

The presentation of this systematisation of forms of online violence can only be properly understood in its context, so it is important to place it in the broader context provided by thematic analysis. It happens, however, that in Portugal, there is no common linguistic and cultural framework to which to turn in search of knowledge on how to name, define and interpret what happens when women are the target of sexist hate comments, misogynist rhetoric, and recurrent insulting attacks. In this sense, our study brings to the fore the need to equate a common nomenclature for these behaviours and phenomena, which, although dynamic, are perpetuated and often normalised for occurring online.

The results of this study suggest that the violence that occurred during the pandemic situation tends to be normalised by the victims and excused, given the massive use of technologies and the tendency to vent through them the frustrations, anguish and other emotional pressures developed or exacerbated during the confinements. One aspect to underline is that our study clearly showed the lack of recognition of abusive behaviours online, including the lack of awareness of the victim and/or survivor condition, which even made it difficult for women victims/survivors to get involved in the study.

Particularly because they would have to come forward in formal interviews to talk about a subject far removed from the public conversation.

During COVID-19, the digital platforms most used by the study participants were essentially social networks and social media. The lived and perceived experiences of violence occurred indiscriminately in these spaces, in the form of private messages, comments, and shares, among other practices. As in domestic violence, where, notwithstanding the existence of risk factors, victimisation knows no boundaries of class, education, region of belonging, colour or creed, the transversality of online violence must also be acknowledged. The diversity of socio-professional profiles of the women victim-survivors we interviewed reveals this picture. Women students, unemployed, administrative assistants, teachers, health professionals, and technology and fashion professionals report the routine prevalence of online violence in their lives, which is never an isolated practice, but a persistent experience.

In most cases, unknown male profiles, acting individually or in organised groups, are identified as the perpetrators of various forms of online violence against women. Other cases reported by survivors involve unknown female profiles, integrated into communities and organised groups, whose action is recognised by the victims as being amplified by the sense of anonymity and impunity offered by the internet.

The experiences of violence lived or witnessed that involve known perpetrators are also significant. They are predominantly men with whom the victim has had an intimate relationship in the more or less recent past.

Only three situations involving women in the role of perpetrators known to victims, acting individually, were reported. Most situations involving women in the role of perpetrators were described as the result of the action of communities and organised groups, as mentioned above. The fact that there are female perpetrators does not negate the widespread nature of the phenomenon. On the contrary, it shows that the repeated reproduction of norms that favour traits associated with masculinity and disparage things codified as feminine, particularly women, is a widespread practice in society. The harm caused by this practice further produces and reproduces social subordination and denies or restricts equal opportunities to participate in social and political life for women and other marginalised and stigmatised groups.

For survivors of online violence, the consequences could be dramatic, both online and offline. Online, the impact contemplates self-censorship, self-discipline and silencing and even abandonment, albeit temporary, from the social media where the experiences of violence took place. Offline, online violence also has severe consequences, including stress and anxiety, isolation, feelings of insecurity, loss of self-esteem or self-harm.

7. FINAL NOTES

Online violence against women, in its multiple expressions, has not been sufficiently worked on or discussed, particularly in Portugal, where there is no generalised ethical-social recognition of its seriousness nor a normative model to address it. That

explains why the reactions of the victim-survivors who participated in the study are overwhelmingly limited to responding in the same space where the violence occurred, blocking profiles, for example, or leaving the digital platform. Only a minority is seeking help from non-governmental organisations or security forces. It is therefore important to emphasise the need, starting with the academy, legislators, and other organisations and public figures, to promote awareness and a generalised ethical and social recognition of this reality. Currently, given the existing type of recognition and support, it must be acknowledged that the family and network of friends are the first lines of support for these women.

The situation during COVID-19 was exceptional, not only for how technology mediated almost all social interactions in the most diverse contexts but also for the enormous emotional pressure that uncertainty and isolation caused. What the results of this study show concerning how women experience online violence practices illustrate the continuum of misogyny and gender violence to which they are exposed in their daily lives. This reading implies that we continue to look at the online realm as a space of power networks and inequalities. By facilitating the scrutiny and policing of women's behaviour, online violence has inhibiting effects on women's participation in public space, reinforcing gender injustice. Therefore, online violence affects not only women's dignity but also the freedom to participate fully and express opinions in public space without fear of harassment. It conditions the right to freedom of expression, limiting professional opportunities and recreating a space of inequality that already exists offline. Ultimately, online gender violence persists in eroding a pillar of democracy that is equality and continues to demonstrate that being present in equal numbers does not always imply equality.

Translation: Cristina Félix

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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