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**BULIZIMI ONLINE (CYBERBULLYING) I GRAVE NË MEDIAT  
SOCIALE**

**ОНЛАЈН МАЛТРЕТИРАЊЕ (CYBERBULLYING) НА ЖЕНИТЕ  
НА СОЦИЈАЛНИТЕ МЕДИУМИ**

**ONLINE BULLYING (CYBERBULLYING) OF WOMEN ON  
SOCIAL MEDIA**

**Abstract**

This research paper examines the pervasive issue of online bullying of women on social media, highlighting the unique patterns, impacts, and potential strategies to mitigate this form of digital harassment. With the rapid expansion of social media platforms, women increasingly face targeted harassment, including gender-based hate speech, threats, body shaming, and cyberstalking. This study explores the scope and nature of such bullying, focusing on how societal stereotypes and anonymity on these platforms exacerbate online hostility toward women. Utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data from surveys and social media analyses, the research identifies patterns in online bullying behaviors, the psychological and emotional impacts on female victims, and their social implications, such as silencing and self-censorship. Lastly, the study proposes recommendations for creating safer online spaces through improved digital policies, community guidelines, and awareness campaigns that support women's well-being and empowerment online. The findings underscore the need for collaborative efforts between social media companies, policymakers, and users to foster an inclusive and respectful digital environment.

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## **1. Introduction**

With the proliferation of social media platforms, online spaces have become central to personal expression, communication, and community-building. However, these platforms also provide a fertile ground for cyberbullying, especially targeting women. Cyberbullying is a form of harassment conducted via digital means, and women, particularly those with a visible online presence, are disproportionately affected. The anonymity afforded by the internet often encourages negative behaviors and gender-based harassment, which can take various forms, from verbal abuse and defamation to threatening messages and image-based abuse.

This paper will delve into the causes and manifestations of cyberbullying against women, examine its psychological impacts, and review existing and proposed interventions to combat this pervasive issue. Our primary goal is to highlight the urgency of addressing cyberbullying against women on social media and discuss actionable steps that can foster safer online environments.

Cyberbullying has emerged as a prominent social issue in the digital age, characterized by harassment, threats, and other abusive behaviors conducted via electronic communication platforms. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying is pervasive and persistent, reaching victims at any time and in any place (Kowalski et al., 2014). This form of bullying is unique in its anonymity and reach, allowing perpetrators to target victims across geographical boundaries without face-to-face interaction (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Among those disproportionately affected by cyberbullying are women, who frequently experience online harassment in gendered forms, such as threats of violence, sexual harassment, and objectification (Jane, 2014).

The phenomenon of cyberbullying is exacerbated by the unique psychological dynamics of online interaction. The "online disinhibition effect," which Suler (2004) describes as a reduction in self-control in digital spaces, enables individuals to engage in behaviors they might avoid in face-to-face situations (Suler, 2004). This effect, combined with societal norms around gender and power, creates an environment

where women, especially young women, are targeted more intensely and in more personal ways than other groups (Bauman, et al.,2013). Research by Duggan (2017) highlights that women on social media platforms report higher rates of abuse and harassment, often feeling unsafe to fully participate in online communities or express their identities openly (Duggan, 2017).

The consequences of cyberbullying for women are far-reaching, affecting mental health, social well-being, and professional life. Victims often report heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, which can lead to diminished self-esteem and avoidance of online platforms altogether (Tokunaga, 2010). This not only impacts individual well-being but also limits women's voices and contributions to online spaces, perpetuating gender imbalances in digital participation (Lindsay & Krysik, 2012).

This paper will explore the prevalence, forms, and impact of cyberbullying on women, providing insights into how social media platforms and societal norms facilitate such behavior. By examining these dynamics, this research aims to underscore the importance of developing effective interventions to create safer digital environments for all.

### ***1.1 Prevalence of Cyberbullying Against Women***

Cyberbullying is a widespread issue on social media platforms, affecting women at disproportionately higher rates than men. Studies indicate that women are more frequently subjected to online harassment, including insults, threats, and sexualized bullying, which often targets their appearance, gender, and social identity (Duggan, 2017). According to a report by the Pew Research Center, 41% of Americans have experienced online harassment, but women, especially those under 35, face more severe forms of abuse, including stalking and sustained harassment (Duggan, 2017).

Social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram have been cited as frequent sites of cyberbullying against women. Female journalists, activists, and public figures are particularly vulnerable, facing threats of violence and misogynistic slurs aimed at silencing them and undermining their credibility (Jane, 2014)). Research by Hinduja and Patchin (2018) notes that young women who are active on social media are more likely to be targeted with personal attacks and harassment due to a combination of factors, including societal gender norms and the perceived anonymity of online spaces (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018).

Research shows that the intersection of societal stereotypes and the anonymity afforded by social media exacerbates these behaviors, creating an environment where perpetrators feel empowered to engage in targeted harassment (Citron, 2014).

The prevalence of gendered cyberbullying is especially pronounced in discussions around feminism, politics, and social justice, where women frequently receive hostile messages that attempt to intimidate or shame them into silence (Mantilla, 2015). These interactions can lead to severe emotional distress and even cause women to withdraw from digital spaces altogether, thereby reducing their online participation and presence (Henry & Powell, 2015). The emotional toll of online harassment on women is profound. Victims frequently report symptoms of anxiety, depression, and feelings of vulnerability, with some studies linking prolonged exposure to PTSD (Felmlee & Faris, 2016). Research highlights the impact of online abuse on self-esteem, with victims often internalizing the derogatory messages they receive (Brody, 2020). Marginalized groups, including women of color and LGBTQ+ individuals, face heightened risks of targeted harassment, exacerbating existing inequalities (Bailey et al., 2021). Furthermore, the normalization of misogynistic behavior in online environments perpetuates broader cultural attitudes that devalue women's voices and contributions (Citron, 2014).

### ***1.2 Forms of Cyberbullying Against Women***

Cyberbullying against women takes various forms, often driven by gender-based stereotypes, misogyny, and power imbalances in online spaces. Some of the most common types include sexual harassment, doxxing, image-based abuse, and trolling. Each form has distinct characteristics, but all contribute to a hostile environment for women on social media platforms.

*Sexual Harassment* is one of the most pervasive forms of cyberbullying targeting women. This includes unsolicited sexual messages, derogatory comments about women's appearance, and the sharing of explicit content without consent. Women, especially those active in public-facing roles like journalism and activism, are often subjected to sexualized comments and propositions aimed at silencing them (Mantilla, 2015); (Jane, 2014) . Such harassment reflects broader societal misogyny and is intended to degrade, intimidate, and control.

*Doxxing* involves the public sharing of private information, such as addresses, phone numbers, or workplace details, with the intent to

harass or threaten the victim. Women who speak out on controversial issues are often doxxed, which can lead to offline stalking and harassment. According to Citron (2014), doxxing is a powerful tool of intimidation, meant to create fear and discourage women from participating in digital discourse (Citron, 2014).

*Image-Based Abuse*, also known as “revenge porn,” is the non-consensual sharing of private images to humiliate or blackmail women. This form of cyberbullying is particularly damaging as it directly affects the privacy, reputation, and emotional well-being of victims. Henry and Powell (2015) highlight that image-based abuse often targets young women, exploiting societal judgments around female sexuality to shame and silence victims (Henry & Powell, 2015).

*Trolling* involves posting inflammatory or off-topic messages to provoke emotional responses. For women, trolling often takes on a gendered tone, using derogatory language and personal attacks that are explicitly misogynistic. This behavior is aimed at driving women out of public conversations, often on topics like politics, gaming, and social justice (Cole, 2015).

*Threats of Physical or Sexual Violence* are also disturbingly common in cyberbullying against women. Women often receive direct threats, ranging from sexual violence to death threats, especially when they express opinions on gender or social issues. This type of cyberbullying goes beyond mere harassment, instilling fear and self-censorship, with many women reducing their online presence as a protective measure (Duggan, 2017).

Each of these forms of cyberbullying has a profound impact on women’s mental health, safety, and willingness to participate in online spaces, underscoring the need for targeted interventions and stronger policies to combat gendered abuse online.

### ***1.3 Causes of Gendered Cyberbullying***

Gendered cyberbullying against women arises from a combination of social, psychological, and technological factors. These causes are often interwoven, creating a hostile environment for women in online spaces. Key factors contributing to gendered cyberbullying include societal gender norms, the online disinhibition effect, misogyny, and the anonymity enabled by digital platforms.

*Societal Gender Norms and Power Dynamics* are foundational to the issue of gendered cyberbullying. From a young age, gendered

expectations often portray women as passive or submissive, while men are encouraged to exhibit dominance (Connell, 1987). When women challenge these norms—by engaging in public discourse or taking on visible roles in fields traditionally dominated by men—they may be targeted by those seeking to reinforce traditional power structures. As Mantilla (2015) notes, women who voice opinions in male-dominated online spaces are often “genderrolled,” a form of cyberbullying that relies on sexist rhetoric to belittle and intimidate (Mantilla, 2015).

*The Online Disinhibition Effect*, as described by Suler (2004), enables individuals to act in ways they might avoid in face-to-face interactions. In the relative anonymity of online spaces, people may feel emboldened to express hostile or aggressive behaviors, including gender-based harassment (Suler, 2004). This disinhibition reduces social constraints that would normally prevent sexist or misogynistic comments, allowing for the proliferation of harmful behaviors without immediate consequences (Suler, 2004).

*Misogyny and Gender-Based Hostility* are also critical drivers of cyberbullying against women. Cyberbullying often reflects broader cultural attitudes toward women, including deeply ingrained sexism and misogyny (Jane, 2014). This is evident in the language and threats used in gendered cyberbullying, which frequently involve objectification, sexualization, or threats of physical violence. According to Bailey and Steeves (2015), the language of online harassment is often rooted in sexist beliefs, suggesting that cyberbullying against women is not only an individual act but a reflection of systemic misogyny (Bailey & Steeves, 2015).

*Anonymity and Lack of Accountability* on social media platforms contribute significantly to the persistence of gendered cyberbullying. The anonymity provided by these platforms allows users to avoid repercussions for their actions, which can increase the severity and frequency of attacks (Citron, 2014). When perpetrators feel shielded by anonymity, they may engage in more extreme forms of harassment, knowing that it is difficult for victims to hold them accountable. Social media companies often lack strict policies or enforcement mechanisms for addressing gendered harassment, which only exacerbates this problem.

Gendered cyberbullying is driven by a complex interplay of social expectations, psychological factors, and structural issues within digital platforms. Each of these factors not only fosters an environment conducive to cyberbullying but also reflects broader societal attitudes toward gender and power, making it a challenging issue to address.

## 2. Psychological impacts of cyberbullying on women

The psychological effects of cyberbullying on women are profound and multifaceted, often leading to long-term emotional distress and behavioral changes. Women who experience cyberbullying report heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, which can severely impact their overall well-being (Tokunaga, 2010). Unlike face-to-face bullying, cyberbullying can occur at any time and place, creating a pervasive sense of vulnerability and isolation. This constant exposure to harassment has a significant impact on mental health, leading many women to experience a decreased sense of safety both online and offline (Bauman et al., 2013).

One major psychological effect of cyberbullying is the development of *anxiety disorders*, which can manifest as social anxiety, fear of public spaces, or reluctance to engage with online communities. Women who have been repeatedly targeted by cyberbullying often express concerns over their personal security and privacy, leading to hypervigilance and heightened stress responses (Duggan, 2017). Studies by Patchin and Hinduja (2006) reveal that the mental health impacts of cyberbullying may be particularly intense for young women, who are in vulnerable developmental stages and may lack the coping skills necessary to handle such persistent harassment (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006).

*Depression* is another common consequence of cyberbullying for women. The persistent nature of online harassment, combined with the often-gendered and sexualized nature of attacks, can lead to feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and self-doubt. Research by Lindsay and Krysik (2012) indicates that cyberbullying targeting women can lead to low self-esteem and self-worth, particularly when harassment is directed at personal attributes, appearance, or sexual identity. Repeated exposure to negative comments or threats can lead to a negative self-concept and increase the likelihood of depressive symptoms over time (Wright, 2018).

*Social withdrawal* and *isolation* are additional impacts often seen among women who experience cyberbullying. To protect themselves from harassment, women may limit their online activities or avoid social media altogether, which can lead to feelings of loneliness and disconnect from peer groups and professional networks (Henry & Powell, 2015). This withdrawal can be particularly damaging for women in public-facing roles, such as journalists or activists, who may feel compelled to reduce their visibility or self-censor due to fear of harassment

(Mantilla, 2015) In severe cases, the psychological toll of cyberbullying can even contribute to suicidal ideation, particularly for those who feel they have no escape from the persistent abuse (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018).

The psychological impacts of cyberbullying on women are severe and lasting, affecting mental health, self-esteem, and social engagement. These impacts highlight the need for comprehensive interventions and support systems to protect women from gendered cyberbullying and foster safer online environments.

Cyberbullying can lead to various mental health disorders in women, resulting from prolonged exposure to online harassment, threats, and degrading messages. These mental health issues are exacerbated by the constant accessibility of digital platforms, which means that cyberbullying can occur at any time, often with no immediate recourse or relief. Below are some of the most common mental health disorders that cyberbullying can trigger or worsen in women

### ***1.1 Anxiety Disorders***

Cyberbullying often leads to significant anxiety in women, including social anxiety, generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), and panic disorders. Social media platforms, by design, amplify these behaviors through algorithmic structures that reward provocative content, including hate speech (Nakamura, 2015). Moreover, anonymity plays a critical role; perpetrators leverage pseudonyms or fake profiles to evade accountability while engaging in persistent harassment (Barak, 2005). Patterns of online abuse also reveal that public figures and activists, particularly those advocating for gender equality, face heightened levels of vitriol, further silencing their voices (Matias, 2019). Women who experience ongoing harassment online may develop heightened anxiety, particularly when using social media or even when thinking about going online. Research shows that cyberbullying, especially when it includes threats or invasive behavior like doxxing, contributes to hypervigilance and avoidance behaviors, where individuals actively avoid online interactions to protect themselves from further attacks (Bauman, Cross, & Walker, 2013). The persistent fear of encountering bullies or being retraumatized by their actions can increase anxiety levels, making everyday tasks and social interactions more challenging (Tokunaga, 2010).



### ***1.2 Depression***

Depression is one of the most common and serious mental health consequences of cyberbullying. The targeted harassment and often deeply personal attacks that women face online can lead to feelings of helplessness, worthlessness, and a loss of self-esteem. Repeated exposure to negative comments, especially those that target physical appearance, social status, or personal attributes, can cause lasting damage to self-worth and lead to depressive symptoms (Wright, 2018). Depression brought on by cyberbullying is also associated with sleep disturbances, low energy, and withdrawal from social interactions. Women who experience this type of abuse may find it difficult to enjoy activities they previously found fulfilling or engaging, impacting their overall quality of life (Duggan, 2017).

### ***1.3 Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)***

Cyberbullying, particularly when it includes extreme forms like doxxing, threats of violence, or image-based abuse, can lead to symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Victims of severe cyberbullying may relive the trauma repeatedly, experiencing flashbacks or intrusive thoughts triggered by certain words, images, or platforms associated with the bullying (Henry & Powell, 2015). PTSD symptoms can include nightmares, emotional numbness, irritability, and a persistent sense of fear. For some women, PTSD from cyberbullying may require long-term psychological treatment, as the recurring digital harassment often means the trauma remains fresh and unresolved (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010).

### ***1.4 Suicidal Ideation and Self-Harm***

In severe cases, cyberbullying can lead to suicidal thoughts or self-harm. Women who endure continuous harassment, especially when it is intensely personal or threatening, may feel trapped or unable to escape the abuse. Studies indicate that cyberbullying is a significant predictor of suicidal ideation, with women reporting higher rates of suicidal thoughts and self-harming behaviors after enduring sustained online harassment (Bailey & Steeves, 2015). The sense of social isolation and despair caused by cyberbullying is a strong risk factor for self-harm and suicide, underscoring the severe psychological toll cyberbullying can have on women.

### ***1.5 Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD)***

Cyberbullying that focuses on physical appearance, weight, or perceived flaws can contribute to Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), a condition where individuals become obsessively preoccupied with perceived physical defects. Women who are frequently harassed about their appearance on social media may develop an unhealthy fixation on their appearance, seeing flaws that others may not notice or exaggerating minor imperfections (Lindsay & Krysik, 2012). This can lead to compulsive behaviors, such as excessive grooming, and avoidance of mirrors or social situations. BDD can be a particularly damaging disorder, as it affects a person's self-perception and often requires therapeutic intervention to manage.

Mental health disorders associated with cyberbullying, such as anxiety, depression, PTSD, suicidal ideation, and body dysmorphic disorder, highlight the urgent need for interventions to address cyberbullying. Women experiencing these issues often suffer in silence due to stigma or lack of access to mental health support. This reinforces the importance of support systems, both social and professional, to mitigate the impact of cyberbullying and promote mental well-being for women in digital spaces.

## **3. Recommendations**

To effectively address cyberbullying against women on social media, a multi-faceted approach is essential. The following recommendations aim to mitigate the issue through policy reform, platform responsibility, legal interventions, and educational initiatives.

### ***3.1. Strengthening Social Media Policies and Moderation***

Social media platforms need to take a proactive stance by strengthening their harassment policies and improving moderation practices. Automated detection algorithms can help identify abusive language, while enhanced reporting systems can offer quicker responses to reports of harassment. Research shows that comprehensive anti-harassment policies can reduce the incidence of cyberbullying by setting clear boundaries and penalties (Duggan, 2017; Citron, 2014). Platforms should also introduce stricter controls for anonymity features, which are often exploited in cyberbullying incidents, without compromising privacy rights (Henry & Powell, 2015).

### ***3.2. Legal Reforms and Support Systems for Victims***

Countries should consider updating or introducing laws to address online harassment specifically, making cyberbullying a punishable offense with enforceable consequences. Clear, enforceable laws would provide women with legal recourse against online abusers and act as a deterrent to potential harassers (Citron, 2014). Additionally, support systems, including free legal aid, mental health counseling, and dedicated helplines for cyberbullying victims, should be established to aid those affected by severe cases of harassment (Bailey & Steeves, 2015).

### ***3.3. Digital Literacy and Empathy Education***

Education programs focused on digital literacy and online empathy can play a critical role in preventing cyberbullying. Schools, workplaces, and community organizations should implement training programs that address respectful online communication and emphasize the impact of cyberbullying on mental health (Bauman et al., 2013). Programs that raise awareness of gender-based cyberbullying are particularly valuable, helping both men and women understand how stereotypes and misogyny can manifest online and how they can contribute to a safer digital culture (Jane, 2014).

### ***3.4. Support for Women in Public-Facing Roles***

Women in public-facing roles, such as journalists, activists, and public officials, are frequent targets of cyberbullying (Mantilla, 2015). Organizations employing or supporting women in these roles should provide resources for managing online harassment, such as training on digital safety, psychological support, and assistance with online reputation management. Social media platforms could also offer verified accounts or additional protections to such individuals to reduce the intensity of targeted attacks (Duggan, 2017).

### ***3.5. Promoting Bystander Intervention***

Bystander intervention programs can empower users to stand up against cyberbullying by reporting abuse and offering support to victims. Studies indicate that when bystanders intervene, cyberbullying incidents are more likely to decrease, as it disrupts the cycle of abuse (Tokunaga, 2010). Social media companies could encourage bystander reporting and educate users on the importance of intervening when they witness harassment online.

## Conclusion

Cyberbullying against women on social media is a pressing issue that reflects broader societal challenges around gender, power, and the evolution of digital spaces. The pervasive nature of online harassment, particularly as it targets women with threats, sexual harassment, and other gendered forms of abuse, underscores the need for both awareness and actionable change. Women, especially those in visible public roles or engaging in discourse on controversial issues, are disproportionately affected, often experiencing severe mental health impacts like anxiety, depression, and, in extreme cases, suicidal thoughts.

This issue demands a multi-pronged approach. Social media platforms must take greater responsibility by implementing stricter anti-harassment policies, enhancing reporting mechanisms, and enforcing clear penalties for abusers. Additionally, legal systems can provide more robust protections and avenues of recourse for victims, ensuring that cyberbullying has real consequences. Educational programs that promote digital literacy and empathy can play a preventive role, fostering more respectful online behavior from a young age.

Addressing cyberbullying against women is essential to creating a safer, more inclusive digital landscape where all voices can be heard without fear of harassment. By prioritizing policies and practices that protect women, society can ensure that social media fulfills its promise as a platform for free and equal expression

### Reviewers:

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