



Joint Statement by EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, and UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Pramila Patten, on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict

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Conflict-related sexual violence is a scourge deeply rooted in inequalities and rigid gender norms. This is why, on the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict, the United Nations and the European Union join forces to call for more decisive action to prevent and eliminate sexual violence, and to advance gender equality as a political priority. We are alarmed by the growing use of sexual violence as a cruel tactic of war, torture, terror and political repression, and threat to collective security.

The risk of becoming a target of sexual violence today is heightened by the fact that these crimes can also be facilitated and promoted online, utilizing digital channels. At the same time, digital platforms can play an important role and be a powerful tool to improve gender equality and empower women and girls, contributing to building their resilience in times of crisis. They can also aid in the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence, and the needed response, through early warning and linking survivors with referral pathways for services, and facilitating reporting.

However, today such platforms are too often being misused to spread hate, and provoke gender-based violence and discrimination. Gender-based hate speech is increasingly used to silence human rights defenders and political activists by inciting the perpetration of sexual violence. In conflict-affected settings, digital platforms are being used to traffic women and girls for the purposes of sexual exploitation. Sex traffickers are using the internet as a tool to carry out the recruitment of women and children, in particular, and to advertise exploitative services. In extreme cases, women and girls are also sold and traded online, as documented in territories under ISIL control. Moreover, deliberate information manipulation and censorship through disinformation campaigns is disrupting the ability of states to protect civilians and address sexual violence. The weaponization of the internet in conflict zones also prevents survivors of conflict-related sexual violence from accessing information about life-saving services and accessing online assistance such as psychological support.

Current safeguarding mechanisms to prevent and tackle digitally-encouraged sexual violence are inadequate, and their application in conflict contexts is insufficient or non-existent. Therefore, we call for safe digital platforms compliant with international law, so that survivors of conflict-related sexual violence and those supporting them may use these platforms to fight impunity and demand improved accountability. It is critical to foster a protective environment,

both online and offline, that deters and prevents sexual violence as well as enabling safe reporting and adequate response.

We stand together determined to protect the victims of conflict-related sexual violence, to end impunity of perpetrators, and to guarantee access to justice, reparations and redress for survivors. The international community must fight together the ever-increasing threat posed by digital technology and bridge the gender digital divide to allow survivors to access resources and fight impunity, with a focus on creating gender equality as we prevent and respond to sexual violence in conflict. By addressing the gender digital divide, we can create a world where women and children can live free from fear and violence.

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