INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

Adolescent Girls in the Digital Spaces: Technology-Facilitated GBV Risk Assessment

Kharkivska oblast

September 2026



Key Findings and Recommendations on
TFGBV Prevention and Response for Adolescent Girls

01

Context

Kharkivska oblast remains one of the regions of Ukraine most affected by the full-scale war. Protracted insecurity, regular shelling, population displacement, and limited access to safe offline spaces significantly affect the daily lives of children and adolescents. Under these conditions, the digital environment plays a particularly important role in the lives of adolescent girls as a space for learning, communication, socialization, leisure, and access to information.

In most communities across the oblast, education is delivered either remotely or through a combination of online and in-person learning. Even where underground schools operate and in-person learning has been partially restored, digital technologies remain an integral part of the educational process. At the same time, due to limited opportunities for safe leisure and social interaction, online spaces are increasingly serving functions previously provided by offline environments.

The growing role of digital technologies is also associated with risks of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). Despite actively using digital technologies, adolescent girls do not always have sufficient knowledge and skills to protect their privacy, recognize different forms of TFGBV, and safely seek support. In this context, assessing TFGBV risks is important for understanding the current challenges faced by adolescent girls in Kharkivska oblast and informing effective prevention measures.

During the implementation of activities under the IRC Women Protection and Empowerment (WPE) program, a number of trends were identified that indicated the need for a more in-depth analysis of TFGBV risks among adolescent girls. The most systematic program observations were obtained through the Safe Space to Learn program, which focused on developing digital literacy and safer online practices. The initial assessment showed that most girls were confident users of digital technologies and social media but had limited knowledge of how to protect their privacy, use privacy settings, recognize online violence, interact safely in digital environments, and access available support. Similar issues regularly emerged during other program activities, including Girls' Camps, where girls raised concerns related to privacy, social media, online dating and other digital risks. These highlighted gaps in adolescent girls' knowledge of digital safety and reinforced the relevance of conducting a dedicated TFGBV risk assessment.

The IRC WPE program conducted a TFGBV risk assessment in Kharkivska oblast to identify the key risks faced by adolescent girls, contributing factors, barriers to seeking and accessing support, and opportunities to strengthen prevention and response. The findings are intended to support IRC and wider GBV, child protection, education and other relevant actors in designing and adapting coordinated, gender-responsive and adolescent-friendly interventions. They also inform practical recommendations on TFGBV prevention, digital safety, engagement with caregivers and professionals, and access to safe, confidential support and referral pathways, while contributing to sector learning and coordination.



02

Methodology

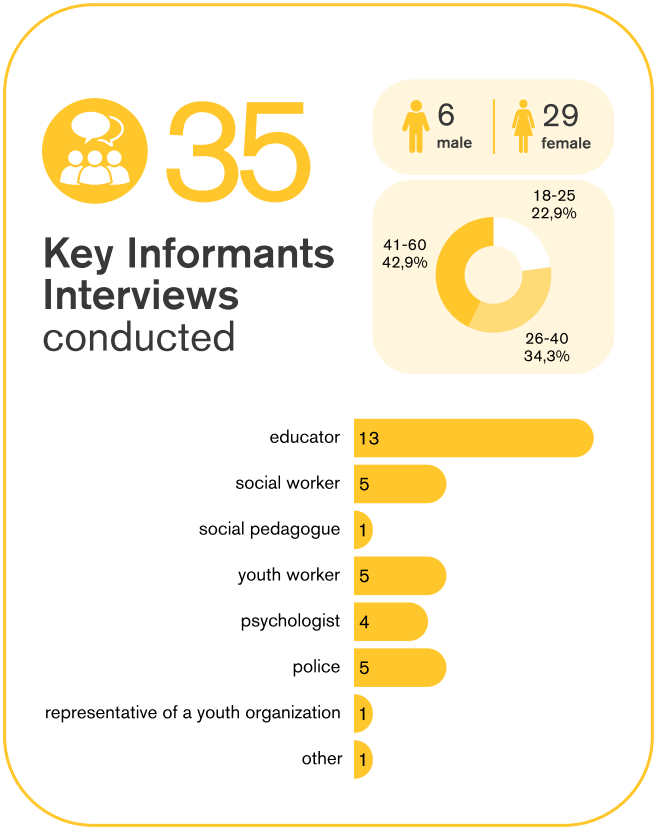
The assessment used the following data collection methods:

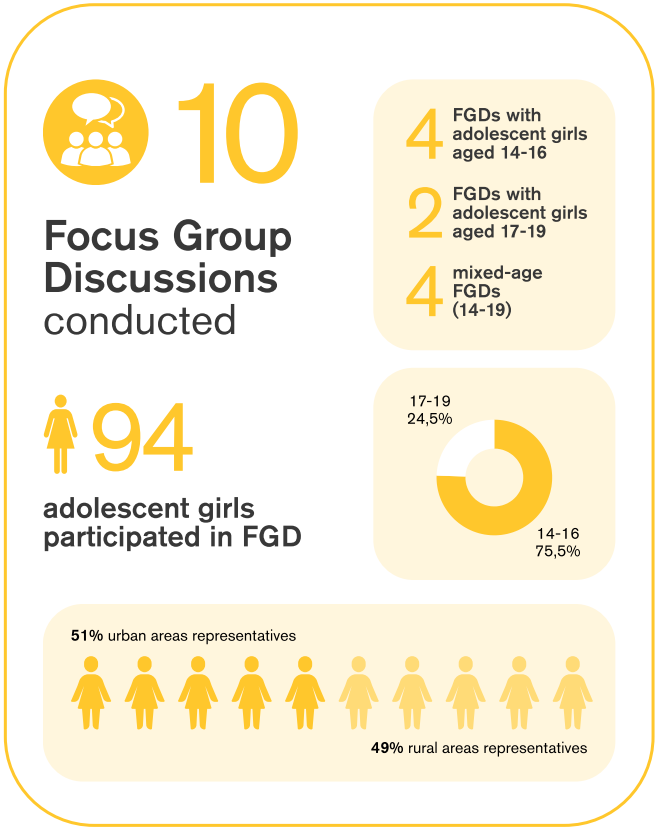
Focus group discussions (FGDs) with adolescent girls. A total of 10 FGDs were conducted with 94 girls aged 14–19. Discussions explored the use of digital environments, perceptions of online risks, forms of TFGBV, safety strategies, and barriers to help-seeking. The sample included internally displaced girls and girls with disabilities. FGDs were conducted with girls aged 14–16 and 17–19, as well as in mixed-age groups.

Key informant interviews (KIIs). A total of 35 interviews were conducted with representatives of the education sector, social services, law enforcement agencies, psychologists, youth workers, and community representatives. The interviews explored TFGBV risks, existing response mechanisms, and gaps in the protection of adolescent girls. Informants work with girls from diverse backgrounds and facing different protection risks, including internally displaced girls, girls with disabilities, and girls living in rural and conflict-affected communities.

The assessment covered five raions of Kharkivska oblast and included urban, settlement, and rural communities, including Kharkiv, Chuhuiv, Valky, Lozova, Savyntsi, Solonytsivka, Dokuchaievske, and Vysokyi.

Data collection and processing were carried out in accordance with established ethical and safety principles for GBV-related data collection, including confidentiality and the do-no-harm principle. Informed consent was obtained from all participants aged 18 and above. For participants under 18, informed assent was obtained from the girls alongside informed consent from their parents or caregivers. Interviews and discussions were conducted in safe and confidential settings. Particular attention was paid to inclusive participation and to avoiding barriers to participation for internally displaced persons, persons with disabilities, people with diverse SOGIESC, LGBTQ+ people, and people from marginalized groups, including national minorities.





03

Key findings

1 Limited access to safe offline opportunities increases the role of the digital environment in the daily lives and socialization of adolescent girls

The digital environment is one of the key spaces for learning, communication, leisure, and maintaining social connections for adolescent girls. Smartphones were the main devices used daily, while laptops, computers, and tablets were primarily used for remote learning. The most commonly used digital platforms included social media (Instagram and TikTok), messaging apps (Telegram), video-sharing platforms (YouTube), online gaming platforms and educational platforms. Girls used these platforms primarily to communicate with friends, search for information and access entertainment.

The importance of online spaces has increased in the context of prolonged remote learning, displacement, and limited opportunities for safe offline socialization. Key informants noted that displacement may be accompanied by the loss of established social networks and difficulties integrating into new communities. In these circumstances, digital platforms allow girls to maintain social connections, continue their education, and partly compensate for limited opportunities for in-person interaction with peers.

Access to safe offline activities remains uneven across communities. In some locations, girls have access to youth centers, safe spaces, clubs, and sports activities, while in others such opportunities are limited due to limited availability, cost, distance, or security constraints. At the same time, in most FGDs, girls reported spending 8–12 hours or more per day using digital devices, with a substantial amount of this time related to education.

Thus, the significant amount of time adolescent girls spend online is related not only to personal preferences but also to remote learning conditions and limited opportunities for offline socialization. This makes the digital environment a critically important space in their daily lives, while also increasing girls' exposure to digital interactions in which TFGBV risks may arise.



Adolescent girls reported spending

8-12 hours or more

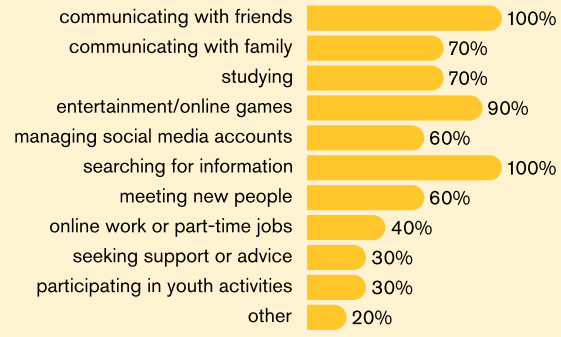
per day using digital devices

Smartphones were identified as the primary devices used daily

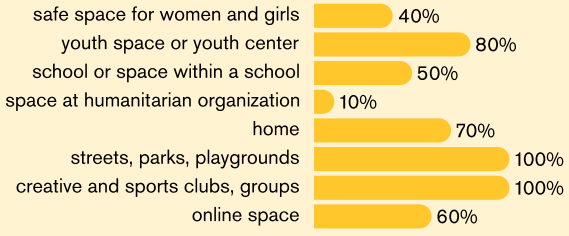


Of this time, an average of **4 hours** is spent on studying

What do girls most often use digital platforms for (FGDs)



Spaces where Adolescent Girls can spend their free time in their communities (FGDs)



2 Adolescent girls experience interconnected forms of TFGBV, with cyberstalking, image-based abuse and online harassment most consistently reported

FGD analysis indicates that TFGBV against adolescent girls predominantly occurs through a combination of several forms of violence rather than as isolated incidents. Cyberstalking, image-based abuse and online harassment were the forms most consistently reflected in girls' responses. Cyberstalking was reported in all 10 FGDs, and image-based abuse in 9 of 10.

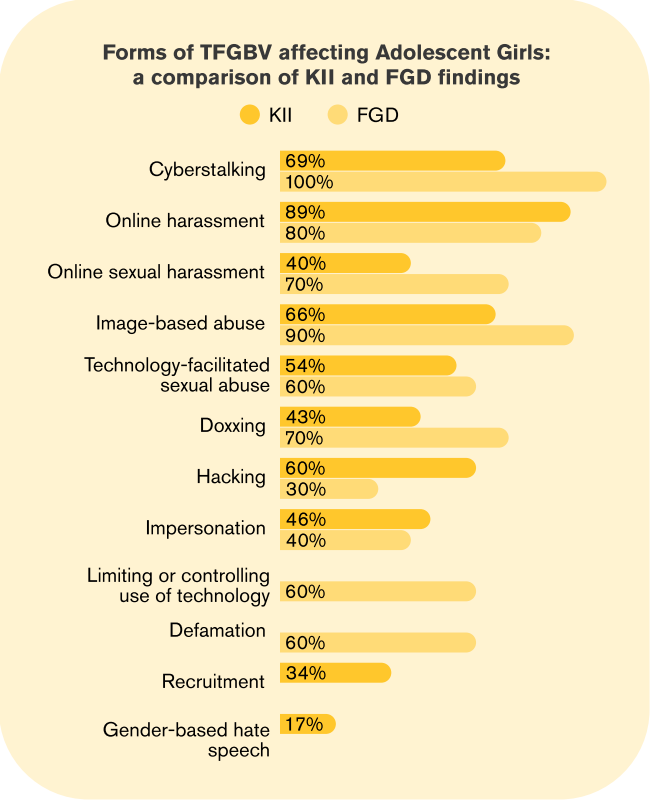
Cyberstalking included repeated unwanted messages and systematic monitoring of online activity, contacts, and geolocation. In romantic relationships, it was often combined with limiting or controlling the use of technology, including checking phones and messages, demanding passwords, or requiring confirmation of whereabouts. FGD data also indicate that such practices may become normalized: some forms of control may be perceived as jealousy, care, or a sign of a close relationship, making it more difficult to recognize them as violence. Image-based abuse included sharing intimate photographs without consent, threats to share them, covert photography or video recording, and the creation of sexualized images using artificial intelligence. The cases described indicate that such materials may be used for humiliation, revenge, pressure, and blackmail. Their dissemination through group chats and local Telegram channels may further increase the scale of harm and extend the consequences of violence into the school environment and wider social settings. Online harassment and online sexual harassment included insults, humiliation, threats of physical violence, gender-based insults in online games, as well as unwanted messages, photographs, and sexual propositions. Defamation, including the spread of rumors and false information, and doxxing - the disclosure or threatened disclosure of an address, phone number, place of residence, or other private information, were also reported. In some cases, these forms were combined and used to intimidate, exert greater control, or further escalate violence.

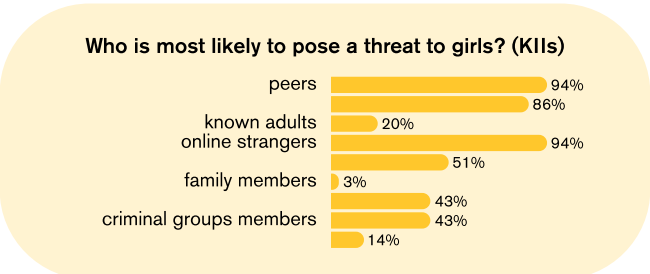
KII data broadly confirm a wide range of TFGBV but demonstrate differences in which forms are most visible to adults and to girls themselves. Key informants most frequently identified online harassment, while cyberstalking, digital coercive control, and image-based abuse were more clearly reflected in FGDs. This may suggest that some controlling and stalking behaviors remain less visible to adults or formal response mechanisms until they escalate. At the same time, risks of recruitment and involvement through online communication were more frequently reported in KIIs and were discussed much less often in FGDs.

Another finding highlights the online–offline continuum of TFGBV. In 9 of 10 FGDs, participants noted that harm beginning in the digital environment can continue in real life. Online harassment and defamation may continue as bullying and social exclusion at school, digital threats as stalking or physical conflict, and online dating as unsafe in-person meetings. At the same time, conflicts that began offline could continue through group chats, anonymous accounts, humiliating posts, and edited images. In the most severe cases, key informants reported isolation, discontinuation of school attendance, self-harm, and suicide attempts.

Assessment findings show that forms of TFGBV differ depending on the type of relationship between the girl and perpetrator. Peers were most often associated with online harassment, defamation, and image-based abuse; current and former partners with cyberstalking, limiting or controlling the use of technology, image-based abuse, and sextortion; and unknown users with online sexual harassment, impersonation and technology-facilitated sexual abuse, including grooming. According to KII data, peers, unknown users, and older adolescents were most consistently identified as perpetrators.

Assessment findings indicate that TFGBV against adolescent girls is complex and interconnected, and that different forms of violence may occur simultaneously or sequentially, or may reinforce one another. The normalization of certain forms of cyberstalking, control over technology use, and online sexual harassment in everyday digital communication and romantic relationships is particularly significant. This may limit timely recognition of violence and delay help-seeking.





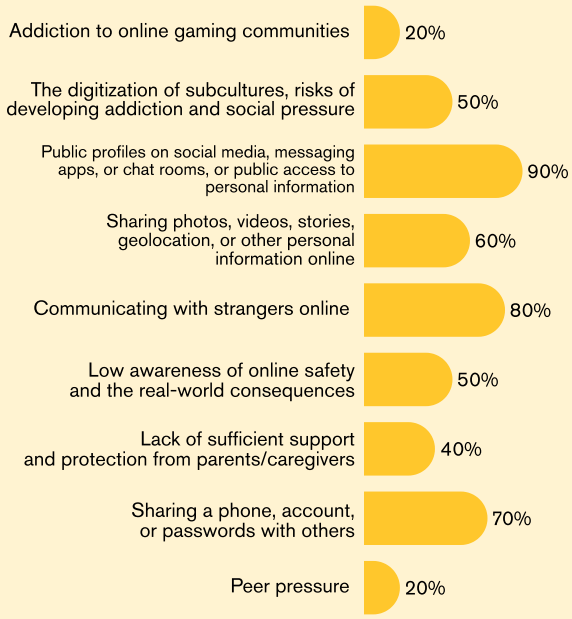
3 TFGBV risks are compounded by a combination of individual gaps in digital safety, social normalization of violence, and insufficiently adapted response mechanisms

Assessment findings indicate that TFGBV risks for adolescent girls are shaped by interconnected individual, social, and systemic factors. At the individual level, risks are linked to intensive use of digital technologies combined with uneven knowledge and practical digital safety skills. In FGDs, girls described difficulties verifying the real age and identity of people they communicate with online, recognizing manipulative or controlling behavior, and assessing the risks associated with sharing passwords, geolocation, personal information, or personal content. Public profiles, interaction with unknown users, and sharing personal content may create additional opportunities for unwanted contact, stalking, or misuse of personal data.

At the social level, TFGBV risks are compounded by gender norms, peer pressure, pressure to gain social acceptance, and the normalization of controlling behavior in close relationships. An additional factor is the underestimation of the seriousness of online violence, especially when similar behavior is common among peers. Limited discussion of digital risks with parents and other adults trusted by adolescents may also reduce opportunities for early recognition of harmful behavior. Taken together, these factors contribute to a social environment in which certain forms of TFGBV may become normalized.

At the systemic level, the assessment identified gaps in the adaptation of existing prevention and response mechanisms to the specific nature of TFGBV. Communities have access to general GBV, child protection, psychosocial, and legal support services, but TFGBV is generally not integrated as a distinct area of prevention and response. Prevention activities more often cover general digital safety and cyberbullying, while knowledge of specific forms of TFGBV, reporting mechanisms, preservation of digital evidence, and safe referral pathways remains uneven among professionals. This may limit early identification of cases and timely responses adapted to the needs of adolescent girls.

Factors contributing to an increased risk of TFGBV for Adolescent Girls (FGDs)





4 Existing support mechanisms provide a basic response but remain insufficiently adapted to the specific nature of TFGBV

In the assessed communities, basic support mechanisms are available for adolescent girls, including psychological and psychosocial support, case management, legal support, hotlines, youth and safe spaces, child protection services, police, and Cyber Police. At the same time, most of these services are part of the general response system for GBV and violence against children rather than specialized TFGBV services.

FGD data show that parents or caregivers and friends remain the primary sources of support for girls. Psychologists, teachers, youth workers, and specialized services were mentioned less consistently, while the police and Cyber Police were generally seen as the next step in cases involving threats, blackmail, account hacking, or dissemination of private materials.

A significant gap is the insufficient capacity of some professionals to effectively recognize and respond to TFGBV. In particular, responses from education representatives indicate that their understanding of digital risks is largely focused on cyberbullying and online fraud, while the nature of TFGBV and forms such as cyberstalking, digital coercive control, image-based abuse, sextortion, and online sexual harassment are less consistently recognized. Prevention work in educational institutions also mainly addresses general online safety rather than TFGBV as a distinct form of gender-based violence.

Existing response mechanisms primarily rely on general GBV, child protection and bullying protocols, while the practical aspects of responding to TFGBV remain insufficiently integrated. Thus, the key gap lies not so much in the absence of services as in their insufficient adaptation to the TFGBV context and the uneven capacity of professionals to effectively recognize and respond to different forms of TFGBV.

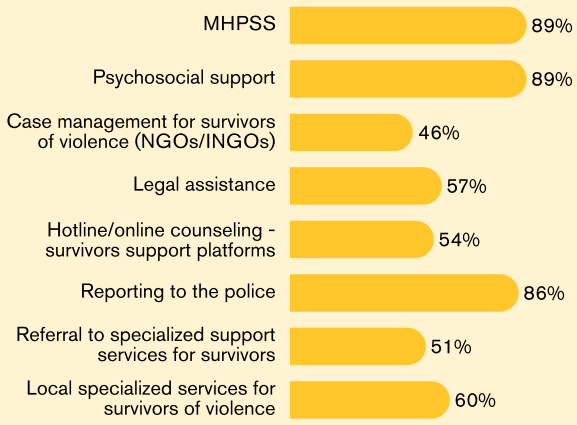




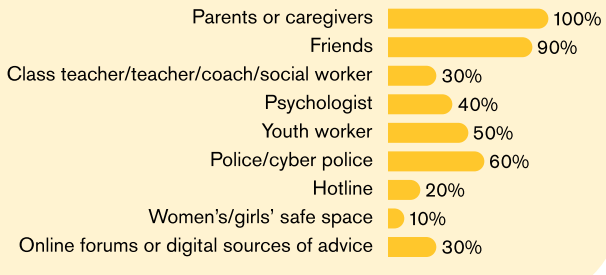
Key points

- Professional capacity to recognize and respond to TFGBV remains uneven
- TFGBV is not systematically integrated into school-based prevention, which remains focused mainly on general online safety

Services available in communities to Adolescent Girls affected by TFGBV, according to KIIs



Who Adolescent Girls would turn to for support in case of violence (FGDs)



5 Shame, fear of negative reactions, and distrust of support mechanisms are the main barriers to help-seeking among adolescent girls in cases of TFGBV

FGD and KII findings indicate that adolescent girls' decisions to seek help in cases of TFGBV are constrained by a combination of interconnected social, family, and institutional barriers. Shame, fear of judgment, and fear of being blamed for what happened were mentioned most consistently across all 10 FGDs. Participants noted that responsibility may be shifted onto the girl because of her online communication, posting photographs, or sharing personal materials, reflecting victim-blaming norms and potentially discouraging girls from disclosing experiences of violence.

An important family-level barrier is fear of a negative or punitive reaction from parents. Girls fear that after disclosing the situation they may be scolded, have their communication restricted, have their phone taken away, or be prohibited from using social media. Under these conditions, help-seeking may be perceived not only as an opportunity to receive protection but also as a risk of losing access to important channels of communication and social interaction.

Another significant barrier is a lack of confidence that a girl's experience will be taken seriously and that seeking help will lead to meaningful support. Participants feared that online threats, control, or harassment may be dismissed as happening "only online." Concerns about confidentiality further reduce willingness to seek help, especially in small communities, where girls may fear that information will become known to parents, peers, or the wider community.

Other barriers include insufficient awareness of available services and how to access them, fear of retaliation or escalation of violence by the perpetrator, and, in some cases, emotional dependence on the perpetrator. Limited knowledge of where to seek support safely, confidentially, and without blame may lead girls to try to resolve the situation on their own or seek support primarily from friends or anonymous online sources.

Taken together, these factors help explain why girls are more likely to share their experiences with friends or seek anonymous advice online than to approach professionals or formal services directly. This underscores the need to develop adolescent-friendly support mechanisms that ensure respectful treatment, confidentiality, a non-judgmental and non-blaming response, and a clear response process.

Barriers to help-seeking among Adolescent Girls (FGDs)





04

Recommendations



For educational institutions

- Institutionalize regular TFGBV prevention and response activities for adolescent girls within school-based safeguarding, life-skills and extracurricular programmes. Interactive sessions should strengthen girls' understanding of TFGBV, digital privacy and consent, controlling and manipulative behaviour, practical online safety strategies and available support options. Relatable scenarios, group discussions and practical exercises should be used to help girls recognize risks and make informed safety decisions. As a complementary component of school-wide prevention, boys should be engaged in age-appropriate activities that promote respectful and equitable relationships, responsible digital behaviour and reflection on how technology can be used to exert pressure or control in relationships.
- Strengthen the capacity of relevant education personnel to prevent TFGBV. Teachers, school psychologists, social pedagogues and other relevant staff should receive practical training on forms of TFGBV beyond cyberbullying and online fraud, age-specific risks, non-blaming communication and the delivery of adolescent-friendly prevention activities. Teachers and other school personnel, including male educators, should be supported to facilitate these activities and model respectful, equitable and accountable behavior. Trainings should also include basic guidance on safe support, GBV Guiding Principles and referral when concerns are identified. Students should have access to a school psychologist, counsellor or designated safeguarding focal point with relevant TFGBV knowledge when concerns arise or incidents occur.



For parents and caregivers

- Foster open and trusting communication with adolescent girls about their online experiences, relationships and digital safety. Parents and caregivers should discuss risks and agree on safety measures together with girls, encourage them to seek support when concerns arise, and respond without blame or punishment. Confiscating devices, restricting internet access or increasing surveillance should be avoided, as fear of these consequences may discourage girls from sharing harmful online experiences. As part of broader family-based prevention, parents and caregivers should also engage boys in age-appropriate conversations about equality, consent, respectful relationships and responsible digital behaviour, reinforcing their role in creating safer online and offline environments.



Specialized GBV and Child Protection Services in the Social Workforce

- Integrate age-appropriate TFGBV prevention into existing programming for adolescent girls and their caregivers. Activities delivered through safe spaces, group sessions and community outreach should address the specific risks experienced by girls of different ages and provide practical strategies for recognizing and reducing those risks.
- Provide technical expertise for TFGBV prevention activities and materials. Specialized services should support the development and review of content for adolescent girls, parents, educational personnel and other frontline professionals to ensure that messages are gender-responsive, survivor-centred and do not place

responsibility for preventing violence on girls.

- Strengthen practitioners' knowledge of forms of TFGBV. Activities should be accompanied by concise information on confidential, adolescent-friendly support and safe referral options.



For humanitarian organizations

- Strengthen parents' and caregivers' capacity to prevent TFGBV within families by organizing and resourcing structured awareness sessions, in coordination with specialized GBV and child protection services. Sessions should cover TFGBV forms, age-specific risks, warning signs, supportive communication and practical prevention measures. Particular attention should be given to avoiding blame, punishment, confiscation of devices and restrictions on girls' internet access.
- Develop targeted digital awareness campaigns for adolescent girls using short, accessible and age-appropriate content on social media. Campaigns should use relatable situations to explain TFGBV risks, warning signs, practical safety measures and steps girls can take if an incident occurs. Adolescent girls, trusted young professionals and verified influencers should be involved in developing and disseminating the content.
- Provide educational institutions, youth spaces and community-based actors with practical tools and capacity strengthening to deliver consistent and evidence-based TFGBV prevention activities, with particular attention to identified gaps in professionals' understanding of its gendered and less visible forms.
- Support adolescent girls' participation in TFGBV prevention by providing mentoring and resources to girl-led initiative and peer groups developing activities on digital safety and TFGBV. Girls' participation should remain voluntary and should complement, rather than replace, the prevention responsibilities of institutions and service providers.



For Local Governments

- Expand and sustain adolescent girls' access to safe youth and girls' spaces, prioritizing communities where safe offline leisure and development opportunities are limited. These spaces should be accessible and inclusive, protect girls' privacy and provide regular activities on digital safety, healthy relationships and TFGBV prevention.
- Integrate TFGBV prevention into relevant local GBV, child protection, education and youth action plans and allocate appropriate resources for its implementation.
- Coordinate relevant local actors to ensure consistent and adequately covered prevention activities. This should include educational institutions, social services, specialized GBV and child protection services, humanitarian organizations and, where appropriate, law enforcement agencies.
- Create opportunities for adolescent girls to participate in community-level decision-making and support the inclusion of girl-led digital safety and TFGBV prevention initiatives in relevant local programmes.



For Law enforcement agencies

- Strengthen the capacity of juvenile prevention officers and other relevant personnel to contribute safely to TFGBV prevention. Training should cover different forms of TFGBV, their gendered nature and age-appropriate, non-discriminatory and non-blaming communication with adolescent girls.
- Contribute to school- and community-based prevention activities in coordination with GBV and child protection specialists. Law enforcement representatives should provide clear information on harmful or unlawful online behaviours, protective actions and available reporting options, while avoiding fear-based messaging or recommendations that restrict girls' access to technology.