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Harassing, Silencing and Dismissive Attitudes

Women's and Professionals' Experiences of Online Violence Against
Women and the Help-Seeking Process in Finland

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Author: Salla Hakkarainen

Supervisor: Lena Andersson

Abstract

Title Harassing, Silencing and Dismissive Attitudes – Women’s and Professionals’ Experiences of Online Violence Against Women and the Help-Seeking Process in Finland

Author Salla Hakkarainen

Keywords: Violence against women, online violence, social work, women’s rights

The increased use of internet and rapid technology development has created new ways to commit violence against women in online contexts. The aim of this study was to explore women’s and professionals’ experiences of online violence and help-seeking process in Finland.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four women who had experienced online violence. In addition, three professionals were interviewed who had been working with support services for the victims of online violence and further, worked to increase the public awareness and educating other professionals about the topic.

Thematic analysis of the interview data showed that online violence is a continuation of gender-based violence towards women in Finland. Results indicate that online violence is supported by rapid technology development which provides new ways to commit violence against women. Online violence caused negative feelings in the women and further, had silencing effect on them. Online violence led all the women to limiting their online expression to some extent, and further drove them away from online environments. Data showed that the women sought help from informal sources such as friends, family, and communities. Help-seeking from formal sources was either nonexistent or non-successful. The findings indicate that the lack of awareness about the issue and dismissive attitudes towards the severity of online violence were the major barrier for seeking and receiving appropriate help. Therefore, further actions are needed especially in increasing the awareness about online violence against women and the help-measures in Finland.

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1. Introduction

Violence against women [VAW] is one of the most significant human rights abuses because of how common it is and its consequences. Women in every country and in every social class are subjected to it and it affects the political, economic, social, cultural, and civil life of the individual, families, and societies. (GREVIO, 2021, p. 7; Mapp, 2012, p. 260; WHO, 2021; United Nations Secretary General, 2006, p. 2.) Digitalisation and increased technological connectivity have created new ways to commit VAW. Especially since the beginning of 2020, social distancing measures during the COVID-19 pandemic have led to increased use of online platforms and online violence against women [OVAW] has increased to alarming extent. People have spent more time online in relation to work, education and free time activities. (European Commission, n.d.). The rapid increased use of internet has created a fertile ground for OVAW – a rather new form of VAW. Online violence is a continuation of other forms of VAW (GREVIO, 2021, p. 16), and while the technological connectivity is not the root issue itself, rapidly increased use of internet has not necessarily made things easier for women (Hakkarainen, 2019, p. 81, 126). Therefore, the topic of OVAW is especially relevant now.

Even before the pandemic, OVAW has been especially relevant in countries with high access to internet such as Finland (FRA, 2014, p. 104). Further, in the media it has been indicated that OVAW has increased rapidly during the recent years and yet, the data about OVAW is insufficient (UN Women, 2021). During the literature search about the topic, it quickly became evident that there is a lack of research about the topic in Finland and therefore lack of knowledge about the mechanisms behind this violence and how it affects the women exposed to it. This thesis explores the women's experiences of online violence and the help-measures in Finland and further the professionals' opinions. Finally, the thesis suggests strategies to reduce this human rights abuse.

1.1. Problem Statement

Online violence is a continuation of other forms of VAW and therefore, another expression of gender inequalities in our societies. (GREVIO, 2021.) Online violence has multiple negative effects on women's lives. It is important that online platforms would be safe for everyone and free from abusive behaviour, so that women can enjoy the online environments without their

human rights being abused. However, online violence is not taken seriously enough in the Finnish society, as for example it is not defined in the legislation. The legislation and knowledge about online violence is not updated resulting in dismissive attitudes and neglecting the severity of the issue (GREVIO, 2021). Actions and ways to help the victims and prevent the online violence are needed within law enforcement, health care professionals, technology companies and even friends, family members and communities, but it sometimes seems to be a grey area that obscures the responsibility of whom of societies institutions are responsible for actions to be taken. This hampers necessary action. Hence it is very important to address the issue and gain more evidence-based knowledge about experiences from the women who are exposed to online violence to highlight the importance to identify what needs to be improved. Online violence is rather new phenomenon compared to other types of violence's and it became evident during the literature search that there is a lack of information not only about the prevalence of online violence, but also on women's experiences and views on support and prevention in Finland. Furthermore, professionals' efforts on helping the victims and educating other groups about online violence are important to address parallel. This study will contribute with new knowledge that can enhance strategies to protect the women and prevent the violence.

1.2 The Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to explore women's experiences of online violence in Finland, how it has influenced the women's behaviour and what other consequences it has had, their help-seeking behaviour and experiences of seeking for help. Further, the opinions of professionals who work on preventive and helping measures of online violence against women in Finland are explored. More specifically, their opinions about the special features of online violence, help to the victims of online violence and what should be done regarding online violence in Finland are explored.

1.3 The Research Questions

1. What experiences do women in Finland have of online violence?
2. How do women in Finland describe the consequences of online violence?
3. What experiences of help-seeking, care and support mechanisms women in Finland have had after being exposed to online violence?
4. How do professionals in Finland work with online violence?

1.4 Overview of the Thesis

Chapter two presents the background information to the study and comes to the problem statement. Chapter three is the literature review of relevant studies: it presents what is already known about the topic of online violence around the world and in Finland as well as points out the current knowledge gaps. Further, the focus is on the effects of online violence and the possible barriers for reaching and receiving help regarding online violence. In chapter four, the feminist theory that will be used to analyse the data is presented and will later be used further in the chapter six on the analysis. Chapter five describes and justifies the methodology used in the research. It explains how and why the data was collected the way it was and therefore, how the research questions were investigated. The ethical aspects of the study are critically evaluated in chapter six. In chapter seven the findings and analysis will be presented. Finally, the chapter eight presents the conclusions that were made from the study and possible ideas for future research.

2. Background

The background chapter begins by defining violence against women [VAW] and why it is an important issue to be addressed. While online violence is newer form of VAW, it is not separate phenomenon from other types of VAWS. It is something that the development of technology is enabling, but the technology itself is not the issue. Rather, online violence against women [OVAW] is a continuation of other forms of VAW. (Hakkarainen, 2019.) Therefore, it is relevant to first look at the wider picture of VAW and its consequences. The chapter then further explains what, specifically, OVAW is, why it is a serious human rights issue and especially relevant now. Social workers' role in working against VAW will be

discussed. After that, the current legislative framework regarding VAW, and online violence will be explained.

2.1 Violence Against Women

VAW occurs everywhere in the world, and it is one of the most significant violations of human rights (GREVIO, 2021, p. 7). In the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women [DEVAW] (United Nations General Assembly, 1993), article one, the term "violence against women" is defined as

“Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”

VAW has multiple forms, such as physical, sexual, psychological, and economic and it can result even in death (FRA, 2014, p. 7; Mapp, 2012, p. 260). Therefore, it has both immediate and short-term as well as long term effects both for the individual as well as families, communities, and societies. It affects the political, economic, social, cultural, and civil life. The violence has high social and economic costs for the individual and the society. The direct costs include for example the health treatment and support services for the women who are subjected to violence and indirect costs such as the missing employment and efficiency, and of course the distress and suffering for the people. (WHO, 2021; United Nations Secretary General, 2006, p. 2-3.)

The majority of the VAW is committed by men (FRA, 2014, p. 7). VAW is gender-based violence, meaning that females are subjected to violence more than men specifically because they are women (United Nations, 2006, p. 6). One reason for this is, that as women have inferior status in the societies, VAW is frequently seen acceptable (Mapp, 2012, p. 262). Unequal power relations between the genders and the discrimination of women are the major cause of VAW (United Nations, 2006, p. 27). There are some individual features that can influence an individual to commit VAW, such as mental illness or heavy use of alcohol or drugs. However, if VAW was for example simply a result of mental health issues, it could probably be solved by counselling and therapy for the individual. (DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2011, p. 10, 16.) This is not the case and on a larger scale VAW is a product of our societal

systems and abusers are influenced by cultural attitudes about gender-roles (Katz, 2006, p. 28). Aggression that leads to committing violence is not an inherent feature of the individual. The violence is rather learned behaviour often from external sources such as the media and male peers. (DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2011, p. 11-12.) To conclude, VAW is a symptom of unequal power relations amongst men and women, resulting in oppression and inequity of women (United Nations General Assembly, 1993, p. 1).

2.2 Digitalization and Internet: An Additional Risk Factor for Violence Against Women

Digitalisation and rapid increased use of internet has changed the experiences of violence as the development of technology helps committing VAW in new ways in online environments (GREVIO, 2021, p. 8; Hakkarainen, 2019, p. 13-14). There is no commonly agreed definition for online violence in the world. One way to define it is as a phenomenon where a person is in some way harassed by using technological devices, such as smartphones, computers or other electronics that have internet connection (Victim Support Finland RIKU, n.d.). Therefore, it can be for example offensive comments and insults, bullying, threats of violence, stalking, different kinds of harassment, sending unwanted pictures or unwanted contacting and spamming with messages, hate speech, service attacks, violations of privacy and public shaming or threatening with those (Glitch and End Violence Against Women 2020, p. 13, UN Women 2020, p. 3). Just like violence in offline context, online violence can cause women harm in psychological, social, and economic ways and affect their participatory rights in online environments (GREVIO, 2021, p. 9). While the online perpetrators are also women, for example 76% of the women in Plan International's research evaluated that most likely their online abuser was male (2020, p. 27). Therefore, like other forms of VAW, also OVAW is primarily executed by men. OVAW is often gender-based violence, as according to various research, being a female was the most common feature the online abusers targeted. More specifically, the online violence is often not related to what the women post, but the women are attacked simply for being female in an online context. (Plan International, 2020; Glitch and End Violence Against Women, 2020; FRA, 2014.) The VAW that is happening on online platforms is not separate from other forms of violence – rather a continuation of them. Therefore, technology itself is not the issue, the abuse of it is (Hakkarainen, 2019, p. 81). Women can be subjected to psychological, sexual, and economic violence online as well, and therefore the destructive consequences of online violence can be the same as other types of

violence (GREVIO, 2021, p. 9). Violence that starts online can also escalate into violence in offline context, and online perpetrators often use “traditional” methods of violence as well (Hakkarainen, 2019, p. 81).

While comparing to other forms of violence, online violence has its special features too. People often carry technology everywhere. Therefore, online violence can also create women the feeling that there is no escape from the violence. Even geographical distance from the perpetrator does not mean that the victim would be safe from them. Therefore, digitalisation has changed the experiences of violence. (Hakkarainen, 2019, p. 13-14.)

Another speciality about violence within online context is the anonymity it can provide to the perpetrators. Based on the Glitch and End Violence Against Women survey (2020, p. 7) about women’s experiences of online violence, 84% of the respondents had experienced abuse from unknown accounts and the online abuser was mostly unknown to them. When it is difficult to identify the ones committing violence, the perpetrators might feel like it is easier to commit violence as there is less fear of getting caught or punished. The Council of Europe (2022) states, that OVAW limits women’s digital participation in political, social, and cultural life and their freedom of expression. This was especially relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. It forced both work and free time activities online, and the online platforms became even more important places for women to practice their rights, but the most common behavioural change for women after experiencing online violence is to spend less time online. (Plan International, 2020; Glitch and End Violence Against Women, 2020). Therefore, online violence is a huge threat to women’s rights by driving women away from online environments.

2.3. Legislative Framework and Finland Context

Women should be able to enjoy all their human rights within the political, economic, social, cultural, and civil ground and VAW is a huge threat to those rights (GREVIO, 2021, p. 7; United Nations, 1993). The key human rights documents regarding legislation on VAW are the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women [CEDAW] (United Nations General Assembly, 1979), and the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, better known as

the Istanbul Convention (2011). These documents set the framework for the human rights of the women and the equality of women and men. Through ratification, the state parties approve to obtain the needed measures such as legislation to ensure that women can practise their human rights. (UN Women, 2012, p. 5.) Therefore, human rights framework gives guidance on defining, understanding, and expressing women's experiences of violence and holding states and individuals accountable of it (Reichert, 2011, p. 450-451). Further, Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence [GREVIO] monitors the execution of the Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe, 2022). The main principles in the Istanbul Convention aim for the equality between men and women and to stop VAW. The countries of the convention agree on making laws and taking appropriate actions to protect women from the violence and help the women if they have experienced violence. These actions include for example educating the professionals and general public about VAW, providing help-services for the victims of violence and ensuring that the victims know about the help they can get in understandable manner. Further, the Istanbul Convention recognises that sometimes when the victims talk about the violence to the police, they are not encountered in an appropriate way and therefore, become victims a second time. (Council of Europe, 2011.) However, despite most countries approving CEDAW and further the Istanbul Convention in the European Union [EU], VAW is still a human rights issue that women in every country and in every social class are subjected to (Mapp, 2011, p. 260).

Finland ratified CEDAW in 1986 and Istanbul Convention in 2015. In Finland, VAW is an acknowledged human rights issue. According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA] survey (2014), different types of VAW was significantly more common in Finland compared to other EU countries making Finland the second most violent country for women in Europe. In addition, while VAW is a highly underreported crime (FRA, 2014, p. 7), it can still be seen in the crime statistics that overall VAW has increased in Finland during the COVID-19 pandemic (THL, 2021). Online violence is more common within countries that have high-rate internet access such as Finland (FRA, 2014, p. 104) and during the pandemic the internet usage has increased especially in technologically advanced countries (OECD, 2021, p. 3). Therefore, topic of OVAW is currently especially relevant in Finland. Specifically online violence is not covered in the criminal code of Finland (Victim Support Finland RIKU, n.d.). The absence of specific legislative framework regarding online violence in Finland results in the lack of data about online violence as this type of violence cannot be seen in the crime statistics. However, as discussed, online violence is not separate

from other types of violence, and therefore many of the same crimes as in offline context can be made against women in an online context too. These crimes in online context can be for example stalking, or identity theft. (Victim Support Finland RIKU, n.d.)

2.4 Social Work and Help Measures on Violence Against Women

As stated before, VAW is a violation against women's rights and declared as a massive public emergency by World Health Organization [WHO] (2021) as well as United Nations [UN] on the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993). More specifically, for example Plan International (2020, p. 8) states that OVAW is a human rights issue and indicates gender inequality. Leading mission for social workers is to support the vulnerable groups and therefore, human rights of the women (Reichert, 2011, p. 450). Therefore, it is relevant for social workers to contribute protecting women's rights in online environments too.

No entity can deal with VAW alone. Improved results on preventing VAW and protecting the victims are seen when there has been co-operation between law enforcement, NGOs, and other relevant actors. (Council of Europe, 2022.) Social workers can for example act as a connecting bridge between different entities and do advocacy work to increase the awareness each entity has about the topic. Further, in Finland, social services provide help-services for the victims of violence. For example, Victim Support Finland RIKU, Tukikeskus Varjo and The Women's Line offer free help. Victim Support Finland RIKU (n.d.) gives free help and advice for the victims of crime. Tukikeskus Varjo (n.d.) gives information about the violence and further, they have for example safety houses for women. This is relevant, when there is possibility that the online violence escalates into violence in offline context. Further, the Women's Line has *Turv@verkko* -project (n.d.) that provides support services specifically focused on OVAW. These support services are for example peer groups, helplines, and chat services. The Women's Lines professionals also educate other entities, such as other professionals in the field of social services and the law enforcement. Further, in Finland there are also free mental health services and law advice available for the victims of violence. When the violence meets the standards for a crime, women can also be in contact with the police. However, as previously discussed, violence has negative consequences for the women

even when it does not meet the standards of a crime, and further the online violence is not defined in the Finnish legislation. Often, the women's experiences of online violence are not understood or taken seriously, and the women may face dismissive attitudes from friends or professionals. When professionals' actions to work with the victims of violence are inadequate, it might result in retraumatizing the women and they won't seek for help further. (Hakkarainen, 2019, p. 77, 82-84.)

3. Literature Review

This chapter presents what research has been done about OVAW worldwide, in Europe and in Finland. It needs to be noted, that all these studies have been done online and therefore, only those with frequent internet access have been able to participate. One form of OVAW is that someone else is controlling the use of persons online devices (Hakkarainen, 2019, p. 38), therefore, these people may not have been able to participate in the surveys.

3.1 Worldwide Research about Online Violence Against Women

Plan International (2020) conducted worldwide report *Free to be Online* about the experiences of online violence of those who define themselves as a woman or a girl. The report included 31 countries and over 14 000 respondents. The data was collected both through quantitative online questionnaire and qualitative interviews. (Plan International, 2020, p. 8-9.) The women and girls shared their experiences, and 98% of the respondents used social media and over half of the respondents had experienced online violence. While this report did not include Finland, the online violence is a global phenomenon, and this report provides important insights about the tactics of online violence and females experiences. The report emphasises that the future is digital, and internet has become more important during the pandemic, as it has been a way for connecting with the world and for example keeping up with the education. Therefore, it is especially relevant that the internet environments would be a safe space for everyone to participate. (Plan International, 2020.)

The Plan Internationals report (2020) found out that the online violence often fell into two categories: in the first category the girls experienced it simply for being girls, and the harassment was not related to what they posted. The harassment got worse if they were black, disabled or identified as LGBTIQ+. Other category was that the women and girls experienced

more online violence if they were outspoken, such as activists, and therefore the abusers attacked the content the girls and women raised. (Plan International 2020, p. 18.) Further, the report points out that online violence can create an atmosphere of fear that affects women broadly and more than just online. Online violence can also easily turn into violence in an offline context, as for example with the help of technology a stalker can find out the location of the woman. (Plan International, 2020, p. 20-21.) This fear might be especially relevant for example for the activists, as they often organize demonstrations in real life too. According to this report, the online violence also has similar or same consequences as violence in offline context. The respondents felt shameful about the violence they experienced and even somewhat responsible for the violence they experienced. Further, feeling sad and unsafe were common effects of violence and women felt less able to express themselves in online contexts. (p. 29) Finally, Plan International (2020, p. 8-9) states, that the abusers are not held accountable for their actions and often no one takes the responsibility of online violence, and current laws are not effectful.

3.2 Research in Europe

European Institute for Gender Equality, EIGE (2017) conducted desk research about different forms of online violence against women and girls. The main findings are presented in their paper called *Cyber violence against women and girls*. The research raised the issue that there is no EU-wide agreed definition for online violence. This results in not having common guidelines on how to approach and deal with the issue. The institute points out the need for further research and data about OVAW. They state, that as there is not much data about online violence, it is not possible to evaluate well the evolution of online violence or the effectiveness of the prevention measures within Europe. (EIGE, 2017, p. 3, 5.) Currently EIGE (2022) has another ongoing research about OVAW, that will be published in 2022. The current research and literature recognizes the areas of development within the topic of OVAW.

Glitch and End Violence Against Women UK (2020) conducted an online survey *The Ripple Effect – COVID-19 and the epidemic of Online Abuse* about the experiences of online violence from 484 female and non-binary respondents within UK. This research specifically focused on the online violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the results show that the respondents experienced more online violence during the pandemic compared to before.

Especially women from minoritized backgrounds were targeted. (Glitch & End Violence Against Women, 2020, p. 40.) The research concluded recommendations and responsibility for employers, tech companies, government, and civil society to end the OVAW. The research also highlighted the issue with the lack of actions taken by police or other entities when women were reporting the online violence. The research further emphasised the negative impacts of OVAW: psychological, emotional, and social as well as the silencing effect. According to this survey, the most common effect of OVAW was that the women spent less time online. Therefore, the same findings occurred in all these reports: the online violence had silencing effects on women.

3.3 Research in Finland

The pandemic has led to increased use of internet, and this has previously shown to increase the online violence in other countries (see for example Glitch & End Violence Against Women, 2020). While there is no research about OVAW focusing on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in Finland, it is possible that the online violence has grown in Finland during that time.

While Finland has been part of some of Europe or worldwide research (EIGE, 2017), other than that there is not much research about online violence within the context of Finland. However, previously mentioned Women's Line currently have *Turv@verkko* -project, which started in 2018 and will continue until the end of 2022. The project aims to help the women who have been subjected to online violence and they further also aim to increase professionals and general publics' awareness about OVAW. (The Women's Line, n.d.) As part of *Turv@verkko* -project there was a rather small *Verkossa satutetut* -research (Lakeus and Keskinen, 2021) and also another research that resulted in the *Digitaalinen väkivalta parisuhteessa ja sen jälkeen* -guide (Hakkarainen, 2019). These researches are only available in Finnish.

The English translation of *Digitaalinen väkivalta parisuhteessa ja sen jälkeen* (Hakkarainen, 2019) would be *Digital violence in and after a relationship*. The guide is aimed to give information and help for those who have experienced online violence, their close ones, and to professionals who work with the victims of online violence (Women's Line, n.d.). It is based on an online survey of experiences of those who define themselves as woman and are over 16

years old living in Finland. There were 224 respondents in total, but further, only 153 respondents' answers were used in the study: those who had experienced online violence by their current or formal partner. The results indicated that women were unsatisfied with their help-seeking experiences and were not taken seriously, which can result in retraumatizing the victim.

Verkossa satutetut -research can be translated as *Hurted Online* and it gathered 86 women's and non-binary people's experiences about online violence (Lakeus and Keskinen, 2021). The rather small sample size further provides some insights about OVAW in Finland. The results indicated same as the international studies regarding OVAW: most commonly young women were targeted, especially those from marginalized groups or who expressed their opinions and "took space" online such as activists, influencers, reporters, or politicians. (Lakeus and Keskinen, 2021, p. 3.) However, this research specifically aimed for a sample consisting of those females who "have a voice" and actively use it, therefore, results from their study may not be representative of the whole population of Finland. However, as mentioned other studies also indicate that especially those who take their space and use their voice online are targeted. In the study, women had also experienced, that their complaints were not taken seriously neither by the health service professionals or the police. The violence caused many symptoms and even 20% of the respondents said the harassment had led to self-destructive behaviour. The respondents also raised some possible solutions and wishes what should be done regarding the online violence. The women hoped that online platforms would take their responsibility on tackling online violence and that police would have better ways to intervene online violence. Further, OVAW and harassment should be raised more in the public discussion, that the dismissive attitudes towards OVAW would end, and there would be overall zero tolerance for the online violence. The women also wished that the victims would receive more information and support about the criminal process. They also expressed their need to have someone to listen and they would have liked to discuss with experts, get peer support and to receive psychological help. (Lakeus and Keskinen, 2021, p. 3.)

To conclude from all the research presented above, OVAW has serious consequences but is not taken as seriously as violence in offline context. According to Women's Line, this makes the experience of online violence even more harmful to the victim, as the experiences of violence and help-seeking are not taken seriously neither by the health care professionals or the police. (Lakeus and Keskinen, 2021, p. 7.) Hakkarainen (2019) presents in her research,

that many technological devices and online platforms normalize controlling behaviour and therefore, create a grey area what is normal behaviour and what is violence. As an example, through multiple online platforms it is possible to see when the person has been online or even where they are located. Further, Hakkarainen (2019) states that technology and being online is often seen as if it divides the “real” world and online world. This is problematic, as it results in attitudes, that online violence is not seen as serious as violence in offline context. Digital world should rather be seen as integrated into people’s lives and social interaction. (Hakkarainen, 2019.) Already in 1998 Hearn (1998, p. 15) discussed that violence against women is not separate from everyday life. It can be part of simple things such as work, household chores, free-time or even watching television (Hearn, 1998, p. 15). 24 years later we can add technology devices with internet to the list.

3.4 Help-Seeking for Online Violence

In this paper help-seeking is defined as behaviour where a person seeks help from informal sources such as friends and family, or from formal sources from professionals who have the education for providing help (Rickwood et al. 2005, p. 4). The help-seeking experiences of women were similar in all the research presented in the previous parts of the literature review: the women had often faced dismissive attitudes when talking about their experiences of online violence. Believing the victim is the most important thing when helping them to recover from violence (Hakkarainen, 2019, p. 81). DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2011, p. 4-5) raised the issue, that the focus on VAW is still often in the physical violence or sexual assaults that include penetration. They further argued, that by using broader definitions of VAW, the extent of violence would reveal to be much higher than what is seems to be now. A major issue with addressing online violence and helping the victims indeed seems to be that there is no clear definition of online violence. Also EIGE (2017) pointed out, the fact that there is no common definition for online violence and further the lack of specific legislative frameworks, might also result in the lack of reporting the violence that women are subjected to online. Women and the professionals do not necessarily know, in what situations the acts of online violence are crime and what are the women’s rights in these situations. In other words, when the online violence is not clearly defined in the legislation, the victims may not know their rights to report it and seek for help. Having EU-wide definition and proper legislative frameworks for online violence, could reveal that the issue is even larger than estimated. When online violence is not clearly defined in the law, it can influence how seriously it is

taken by people: the general public, law enforcement, policy makers, and politicians. Various research show that women have not been taken seriously when they have asked for help for online violence, which also Lakeus & Keskinen (2021) pointed out in their research that was made in Finland. Therefore, asking for help may have negative psychological costs, as not being taken seriously creates the change of re-traumatizing the victim (Hakkarainen, 2019).

4 Theoretical Framework

This chapter briefly introduces the choice of theoretical approaches that are used in the analysis. Feminist theories and perspectives were chosen to understand why women are subjected to online violence and what deeply rooted attitudes and characteristics affect the experiences of violence. Further, theoretical perspectives on help-seeking were chosen to deepen the understanding of what affects the help-seeking behavior of the women, and how they receive help.

4.1 Feminist Theories and Perspectives

In short, Hughes (2002, p. 35) presents that feminist theories aim for the equality between genders and thus the gender-based violence is one of the inequalities in our societies, and therefore one of the main focuses of feminist theories. Feminist theories focus on how wider social forces affect on VAW, for example patriarchy (DeKeseredy and Schwarz, 2011, p. 12) and emphasize that VAW is extremely widespread and in direct and indirect ways affects everyone's lives (Kilmartin and Allison, 2007, p. 32). Feminist theories recognize and help to understand the effects of VAW and the characteristics and dynamics around it. This section won't present expansive picture of feminist theories, but the purpose is to have a look at few central concepts in them to understand OVAW better. While there are many feminist theories - some of them more radical or critical than others - most of them state that *gender, unequal power relations* between men and women and *patriarchy* are the main factors explaining VAW (DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2011, p. 12-13; Hawkesworth and Disch, 2016, p. 4). Further, the importance of listening to womens' *experience* (Grant, 2002, p. 227) is another key concept which will be used in the analysis.

Rather than biological or physical characteristic, feminist theories see gender as politically constructed, where these specific ways of thinking are privileging some and disfavour others

(Hawkesworth and Disch, 2016, p. 4). Women are mainly seen as having a lower status in the societies because of their gender, which had been an excuse for VAW, as it was previously presented in the literature review. Feminist theories recognise that gender-based violence is supported by unequal power relations where men have more social and economic power than women (Kilmartin and Alison 2007, p. 32). More specifically, one definition for patriarchy is a sexual system of power, where the man has more power and economic advantage than the woman (Eisenstein, 1980, p. 16). Patriarchy is seen as one of the main factors supporting VAW and it privileges men by diminishing women's efforts in the societies. (Dominelli, 2012, p. 64.)

Bunch (1995, p. 11) raised a central feminist question that is still very relevant today: why so many degrading life experiences of women are not seen as human rights issues? As discussed, previous research has shown OVAW being one of these human rights issues women are subjected to today, and according to previous research women's experiences of it are not taken as seriously as they should. Bunch (1995, p. 11) further motivates, that it is necessary to develop policies around the world from a feminist perspective, so that they can better address the global issues of our time. It is evident that one of these current global challenges is OVAW. Skeggs (1997) states that women's experience has been seen as the foundation and starting point of feminism when the women began to speak to each other about their experiences. Bunch (1995, p. 11) discussed, while also women are now taking leading roles in defining many social issues in for example with human rights and democracy, still, women need to be moved further from the margins to the centre. When society ignores women's experiences it is not allowing us to find the solutions that are very much needed in many of these areas. Therefore, by examining the basic underlying concepts in our societies through women's experiences, these concepts can be better adjusted to respond to women's lives and needs. Moreover, by examining the concepts, it can be further demonstrated that problems affecting the women's lives are not considered enough in the global agendas. (Bunch, 1995, p. 11.) Therefore, feminist theories motivate that it is important to listen to women's experiences in research, to understand their abuse (DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2011, p. 12-13). Further, as feminist theory and practice focuses both on individual and collective experiences of violence and fight against it, it helps the understanding of complicated and multidimensional forms of violence, as well as the effects of it (Lokaneeta, 2016, p. 1025). From a feminist perspective in the history, women's experiences and stories have mainly been

seen as less important than men. Therefore, when women speak out their own truth it is a feminist and activist component in practice itself. (Kemekenidou, 2020, p. 236.)

Further, online environments have become increasingly important for feminist practices, as it has allowed women to share their experiences of their abuse that have been previously kept silent in the society (Kemekenidou, 2020, p. 236). Therefore, from feminist perspective, keeping online environments safe for everyone is extremely important to promote equality between men and women. In other ways listening to women's experience also is fundamental for feminist practices through as an example, raising the common awareness about these issues (Hughes, 2002, p. 151). Therefore, to deal with the issue of OVAW, it is essential to listen to the women's voices who have experienced online violence, as well as discuss how feminist practices are implemented to professionals' work to understand the context, motivation, and impact of the OVAW as well as ways to help the women subjected to violence and ways to prevent it.

4.2 Theoretical Perspectives and Frameworks on Help-Seeking

To further understand the women's process of help-seeking, the existing theoretical perspectives and frameworks on help-seeking were investigated. There are several theories and perspectives that have been applied to understand the help-seeking behaviour of individuals, but not one theory that is commonly agreed within the field of help-seeking research. Help-seeking refers to the behaviour where a person seeks help from other people, and it can be divided into two categories. In informal help-seeking the person looks for help from informal sources such as friends, family members or peers. In formal help-seeking, the person seeks help from professional sources: from people who have formal training and education in providing help. (Rickwood et al., 2005, p. 4, 8.)

The social cognitive theory by Bandura (1998) states that people's behaviour is guided by expected consequences. Beliefs in the positive outcomes make people more likely to act (Bandura, 1998, p. 624), and therefore in this case seek for help. In contrast, negative beliefs about seeking for help will likely result in not seeking for help. Self-efficacy beliefs are the main reason for action. They refer to the beliefs the person has about their own capabilities to arrange and implement the actions that are needed to produce certain outcomes. Bandura (1998, p. 624-626) further discusses that the self-efficacy beliefs can be developed or

diminished through four main ways. First, *mastery experiences*, meaning that the person either overcomes or doesn't overcome an obstacle when trying to achieve something. If they overcome it, they are more confident to try it again another time too. Second, through *vicarious experiences* a person can see a person similar to themselves succeed or fail, and therefore is either encouraged or discouraged to similar behaviour as the social model. Third, verbal *social persuasion* by other people can either encourage or discourage the person's actions. Finally, fourth aspect is the person's *somatic and emotional state* – in other words the person's mood. The mood influences how likely they are to act. Positive mood encourages action and negative mood diminishes it. (Bandura, 1998, p. 624-626.) While self-efficacy is concerned with recognised capabilities to produce certain outcomes, there are many things affecting the personal influence. These are how individuals can manage their own personal motivation and thought processes, their actions or if they can influence the environmental conditions. (Bandura, 1998, p. 624.)

Further, Rickwood et al. (2005) developed a framework about help-seeking process during their research about young people with mental health issues that would further help them to understand the people's journey of seeking for help. It can be used as an example to understand and illustrate the help-seeking process. Rickwood et al. (2005, p. 8) divide help-seeking into four steps that are presented below:

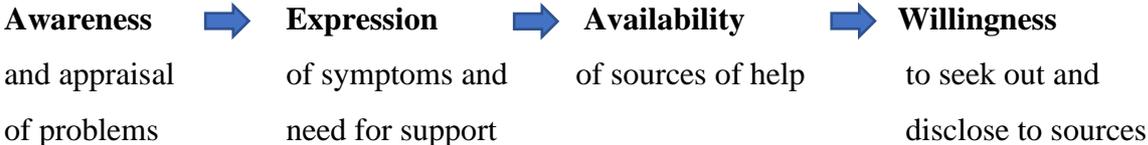


Table 1. Help-Seeking Process. Rickwood, Deane, Wilson and Chiarrochi (2005, p. 8)

Within this framework, the help-seeking process begins when the person first is *aware* of having a problem that causes symptoms and that may require assessment (Rickwood et al. 2005). In this thesis about OVAW, the framework will be used to examine whether the women themselves first recognised the violence and if the online violence caused negative symptoms to them. If a person is not aware that certain thing affects their health negatively, they are unlikely to seek for change (Bandura, 1998, p. 624). While Rickwood et al. (2005) focus on the individuals' help-seeking process, in this research the framework will be used to examine the steps through the women's lens but also formal and informal sources of help.

After identifying the need for help, the second step is *expressing* that there are symptoms and need for support. More specifically, this means that to continue the help-seeking process, the person seeking for help needs to be able to express their problem in a way that they feel comfortable with and that is understandable to the person they are telling about it. (Rickwood et al. 2005.) Many things may affect on how comfortable the person feels and if they are able to articulate their problem in an understandable manner. As Bandura (1998) presented, one of these factors is the persons mood. Further, it is also a matter of the source of help to make the person feel comfortable and if they understand the help-seekers experiences.

Third, the source where the help is sought for needs to be both *available* and *accessible*. To be more specific, this step is about the availability of the source that is giving the help. It can be an informal source of help such as friends and family members, or a formal source of help with official education to provide the help. (Rickwood et al. 2005.) Bandura discusses that the unavailability of resources is a barrier to behaviour that supports health, and therefore the health-supporting behaviour is not just a personal matter (Bandura, 1998, p. 629). Further, barriers to availability and accessibility can be the lack of formal or informal support systems and availability of services. Also, the attitudes the sources have towards OVAW or the women's experiences of it can be encouraging or discouraging. Bandura (1998, p. 631-632) also states that the interventions need to be individual, as those are more effectful. In other words, there needs to be different types of help for different people in order for it to be available and accessible.

The final step in this framework is the willingness of the person who seeks for help. This means that in the end, the help-seeker needs to be willing and able to reveal their feelings and experiences to the source they want to get help from. (Rickwood et al 2005.) Bandura (1998, p. 624) discusses that self-efficacy beliefs are the main reason for willingness to act.

To conclude, Rickwood et al. (2005) notes that help-seeking is not a simple process. In each of these steps there are factors that can intervene the process either by encouraging or preventing the process of help-seeking. Rickwood et al. (2005) recognised multiple barriers and supporting factors in their research, such as the lack of sources of support, previous unsuccessful help-seeking experiences, or negative attitudes towards help-seeking. In contrast, factors that encourage help-seeking are for example positive attitudes and past

experiences on help-seeking, social encouragement, and established and trusted relationships. (Rickwood et al. 2005, p. 13, 21.) Bandura (1998, p. 647) further notes, that contributing to the improvement of health, the perspectives must go further than individualistic level.

5 Methodology

This is a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews to collect data. In this chapter, the research strategy, sample selection and methodological aspects of the study are explained.

5.1 Research Strategy

Hermeneutic research stresses the importance of understanding the view of the social actor (Bryman, 2012, p. 712). In this research the social actors are women who have experienced online violence and therefore, to understand them it was important to ask their perspective through interviews and further deepen the understanding by asking the professionals' point of views both about the phenomenon and help-measures in Finland. Ontological position in this research was constructionism. This means, that the social world is seen as constructed by individuals, in other words created by the social actors (Bryman, 2012, p. 179). The research is based on the women's and professionals' experiences. Therefore, constructionism is an appropriate approach, as online violence doesn't have commonly agreed definition and therefore, the research is based on what the interviewed women and further, the professionals found harmful within online context.

The research approach to the relationship between theory and the collected data was mainly inductive. This means that theory is the outcome of data collection (Bryman, 2012, p. 26) while in contrast, deductive approach would mean that the theory is decided beforehand. In this research the theories were chosen after the data was collected and according to the themes that arose from the interviews. This was done because the research aim was to explore women's and professionals' experiences, and inductive approach and rather broad and open interview questions allowed interviewees to bring up themes the interviewees themselves considered central and important regarding OVAW in Finland. In other words, theories were used to reflect the interview data on the theoretical background rather than having prechosen theoretical framework. However, there was also a deductive element in the research. The three main themes – Experiences of Online Violence, Risk Factors for Online Violence and

The Help-Seeking Process – arose from the data without any prechosen theory but the subthemes of the third theme of the Help-Seeking Process are organized according to the Help-Seeking framework by Rickwood et al. (2005). The framework was found after the themes were chosen, but I focused on finding even more data in the interviews related to the subthemes after I chose to have this framework.

5.2 Literature Search

The literature review was conducted by using SCOPUS, Google Scholar, ProQuest Social Sciences database and by using the literature lists from courses in the University of Gothenburg's Social Work and Human Rights – master's programme. The timeframe for the literature search was January 2022 until May 2022. While there is plenty of material about VAW available, it quickly became apparent, that there is not so much literature specifically focusing on OVAW. However, some research about OVAW can be found from recent years and some upcoming research about it as well. This indicates that the topic has attracted more interest in the recent years. Further, specific organizations that work against VAW both worldwide and in Finland and the material they provide on their websites were investigated, such as UN Women, Amnesty and GREVIO. More specifically, one organization in Finland is focused on OVAW: The Women's Line and their *Turv@verkko* -project. Besides that, especially in the context of Finland as there is not much research done about the topic.

The term *online violence against women* was used in the literature search and other commonly used terms and synonyms such as *online abuse against women*, *cyber violence*, *cyber harassment*, *gender-based online violence* and *digital violence*. Therefore, in the searches AND and OR between the words were used, which allowed to include more search terms at once.

While this research focuses specifically on OVAW, it is not a separate phenomenon from other types of VAW. Therefore, other types of violence against women were examined too including for example the search term *violence against women and girls*. Some of the research that was found and is used in this paper included minors. Other commonly used term is *gender-based violence*, which includes other genders as well. This term refers that the violence is committed to the person because of their gender, usually towards women or non-binary people.

5.3 Sample Selection and Process

In this study persons who were aged 18 or older, defining themselves as women and have experienced online violence living in Finland were recruited. The research sample consisted in total of seven people interviewed. More specifically, four of them were those who defined themselves as women and had experienced online violence. The other standards for the participants were that they live in Finland and are over 18-years old. In addition, the sample had three professionals interviewed. They were invited to give information about OVAW and help-measures within Finland and the context from professionals' perspective. They worked with preventive and helping measures of OVAW or with the research and educating the other professionals about the topic. More specifically, regarding social work, two of them had social work education and had been working with the more practical aspects of OVAW such as help services. One of them was a social scientist and had been working with the women who have been subjected to online violence but was more focused with research regarding OVAW and educating the other professionals about the topic.

Sampling process began by both purposive and gatekeeper sampling. The aim of purposive sampling is to find participants that are relevant to the research questions (Bryman, 2012, p. 418). At this moment, the research questions were only preliminary. The group that was initially tried to be reached was specifically those who have experienced online violence and reached for formal help services. Further, in gatekeeper sampling reaching the participants requires consent from the gatekeeper (Bryman, 2012, p. 147). Here the gatekeepers were Finnish social work organizations that work within the field of VAW. As Bryman (2012, p. 85) states it is not possible to predict if gatekeeper-sampling works as expected and therefore, it is important to allow flexibility in the research timetable. The sampling began in the end of January 2022 by contacting several organizations by email. More specifically, the idea was that the organizations would provide the information about the research on their social media platforms or by email with my university email address as the contact detail. Therefore, those who would be interested in participating the study would be able to be in contact. The aim was to reduce the research pressure on the participants, as the researcher would not be personally approaching them and putting any pressure on any individual that their participation is needed. Personal request for interview could be more difficult or awkward for a participant to decline. Also, the organizations were requested, if they have additional useful

information and could point me to that direction. One of the professionals replied that they unfortunately don't have the resources to help with master level researches. They don't forward interview requests, as they get many students contacting them. The small number of replies from other organizations supports the statement too, that there are small resources within these organizations. Gatekeepers also need to consider what can they gain from the research if they give their resources to it and if the research has possible risks or harm to them such as losing their own time (Bryman, 2012, p. 151).

Contacting the organisations still led to useful results by using snowball sampling. In snowball sampling, the researcher is first in contact with people who are relevant regarding the topic of the research and with their help is in further contact with others wanting to participate (Bryman, 2012, p. 202). One professional from an organization suggested, that while they don't forward the interview requests to the women who have used their services, she and her colleague and a former colleague can be interviewed for the research, if it is helpful. Therefore, three participants were recruited through snowball sampling to get insights of the professional's view. Informants can offer insightful information about the social setting and people (Bryman, 2012, p. 712), here about the OVAW itself and the target group: women who have experienced online violence and further the help-measures.

In the middle of February, the information letter (Appendix 2) was modified slightly, so that it was appropriate for the research focus and to note that the study would also have the professionals' insights on it. Now the participants did not necessarily have to have reached for help services after experiencing online violence. The aim was to find out whether they have and what are their experiences on that or talking about the violence to someone. Further, if they did not tell anyone about the violence, I was interested to find out why not.

Therefore, the purposive sampling continued and was done through different Facebook-groups by posting the information letter to reach the participants. Common characteristic for those groups were that they were aimed for females only and the group members had to be accepted by the admin to get into the group. While it needs to be noted that there might always be men with fake profiles in these groups, I evaluated that majority of the members would still be females and at least there will be much less men in these groups than in those which don't have any similar standards. Initially the four women who had experienced online violence were recruited through both purposive and snowball sampling. Some of the members

of those groups had seen the post and recommended the research to their friends. The women contacted me by Facebook-message or email.

5.4 Interviews

The data was collected during a three-week period in March 2022 through qualitative semi-structured interviews. As the aim was to explore the experiences and the help-seeking behaviour of women who had experienced online violence and the professionals' perspectives, the most appropriate way to do this was to ask the women and professionals themselves through semi-structured interviews. With semi-structured interviews, there is approximate script, but the researcher can also ask clarifying questions (Bryman, 2012, p. 12, 212, 471). This also allows rather open-minded and explorative approach to the data as the themes can emerge out of the interview answers. Two different interview guides (Appendix 3 and 4) were formulated: one for the women who had experienced online violence and one for the professionals working in the field. The interviews followed an interview guide with main themes and support questions. I had some supporting questions in mind, but I didn't want to "push" the respondents to answer more than they felt comfortable with. The questions were different for both participant groups: the women who had experienced online violence and the professionals. The interview guide had rather broad questions for the women who had experienced online violence and the questions were open-ended which allowed the interview flow quite naturally and the women were able to give as much information as they feel the most comfortable with. However, with semi-structured interviews there is a risk that the interview may side-track, and therefore also a risk of gathering irrelevant data. It is possible that this can put unnecessary research pressure and effort both on the respondents and on the researcher. Further, the professionals were interviewed to deepen the knowledge about the tactics of online violence and the help measures. The questions were still rather broad, but bit more detailed than for the women who had experienced violence. I evaluated this to be appropriate as the topic probably is not so sensitive for the professionals as it is for the victims. The approach allowed the professionals to tell as much as they liked but by having more specific questions regarding the help-measures we were using the interview time efficiently.

Due both practical and safety reasons because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted on Zoom instead of face-to-face meetings. As the interviewees

were able to choose any time and place that suits best for them for the interview, it allowed flexibility on the schedule and put less research pressure on the participants. In addition, as there was no need to travel, there was also no financial stress for the participants or the researcher on the travel costs. Aim was also to allow the sample to have wider geographical reach within Finland.

The two interview-guides were translated into English, and they can be found in both languages in the Appendix 3 and 4 of the report. When interviewing the women who had experienced online violence, the interviews took between 15-40 minutes and the professionals' interviews took between 45-60 minutes. The interviews were recorded. This allowed being fully focused on the interview when there was no need to make notes (Bryman, 2012, p. 482). The room for the interviewing was quiet and the recording device – the mobile phone - was checked beforehand. No-one else was around to hear the interviews to ensure the anonymity of the participants. The phone was offline while recording and the interviews were transcribed right after the recording. After that, the recordings were put on a memory stick and removed from the phone. As a memory stick has no internet connection, this was a way to decrease the risk of hacking and someone outside of the research getting their hands on the material. The recordings and transcriptions will be destroyed after the research has passed the examination to ensure that all the data collected about the respondents will be used for the research purposes only.

The interviews were held in Finnish, as the mother language of the participants allowed more detailed answers than a foreign language would. The interviews began by introducing the research and the researcher. It was emphasised, that the participation is completely voluntary, and the participant is allowed to withdraw from the interview and the research at any time, even after the interview is conducted, with no explanation needed. The participants were assured, that it is not possible to identify them from their responses and all the information they give is completely confidential and the recordings will be deleted after the thesis has passed the examination. Participants were asked if they had any questions before the interview begun.

First, personal factual questions were asked. Those provide personal information about the respondents such as their age, education, and profession (Bryman, 2012, p. 253). After that, all the questions were open-ended. This gives the respondents the chance to give the amount

of information they feel the most comfortable with (Plan International, 2020). A feminist approach to the interviews was taken, meaning the aim was to allow women's own voices to be heard and them be able to describe their experiences in their own words (Bryman, 2012, p. 492).

Finally, the interviewed person was asked if they have any questions and if they want to receive the thesis by email once it is finished. After the thesis has passed the examination, it will be sent to those who want to receive it. The thesis will be sent one-by-one to protect the participants privacy so that they cannot see who else participated in the research. The participants were informed, that they can be in contact to the researcher by email if they have any further questions about the research.

The interviews were transcribed first in Finnish and then selective translation into English was used on the most relevant parts regarding the analysis. The transcription style of the interviews can be considered in terms of naturalism and denaturalism. With naturalised transcripts, every detail is captured as carefully as possible including for example involuntary noises that the interviewees make. In contrast, with denaturalism as an example these involuntary noises, nonverbals and pauses won't be transcribed, as the focus is on what is being said rather than how it is being said. However, the researcher doesn't have to choose between those two and the transcription can have elements of both transcription styles. (Oliver et al., 2005, p. 1-2.) Within this research the transcription style was denaturalised, and as an example involuntary vocalisations and laughter were left out to make the text easier to read. Further, it is impossible to translate completely identical way into another language, and there is always the possibility that something is lost in the translation. Denaturalised transcriptions allowed to present the text in more understandable and clear form: the aim was to make the transcriptions as clear as possible by focusing on what is being said rather than how it is being said.

Transcribing the interviews is time-consuming (Bryman, 2012, p. 482, 484), which can be seen as one of the negative sides of using interviews as a research method. Transcribing rather obviously takes away resources from other aspects of the study. The timeframe for the thesis is limited and therefore, it influences on how many interviews it is realistic to conduct within the research schedule. On the other hand, since the data was analysed through thematic analysis, it was possible to start finding themes already while transcribing and start the

analysis simultaneously. The slow space of transcribing can also allow deeper, more detailed look into the material.

5.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts was chosen. It allows finding repetitive themes and similarities as well as differences in respondents answers that are relevant to the focus of the research and therefore, to find answers to the research questions. Thematic analysis therefore allows to find similarities and differences between the respondents' answers and reflect them on theory-related material. (Bryman, 2012, p. 579-580). The analysis began right after the interviews during the transcribing process, where I was able to get familiar with the data while writing each interview transcript on word-document and then reading them through right after. I used colour coding within the word document to identify occurring, repetitive words that were identified as codes. Examples of codes were "shame" and "fear". Further, the repetitive and similar words and synonyms that seemed like appropriate and interesting key words were written down on a paper sheet as notes and therefore thinking about the themes began. As an example, the codes "shame and "fear" were initially placed under the main theme of Experiences of Online Violence and the subtheme Effects of Online Violence

The themes were grouped as three main themes and then divided into subthemes. The three main themes that arose from the data were Experiences of Online Violence, Risk Factors Supporting OVAW, and the Help-Seeking Process. The final theme of Help-Seeking Process was organized according to the Rickwood et al. (2005) framework for help-seeking. The theory was found after the themes, but the subthemes were organized according to the help-seeking framework, which seemed very appropriate. I made a word document, where I copied the quotes that included the colourcoded codewords under each appropriate theme and subtheme. After I read the theme related quotes through, I chose few of them and edited some of them shorter and wrote descriptively between the quotes what had been said in the interviews. Finally, I wrote the analysis into the report and made the connections to the previous literature and theories.

6 Ethical Considerations

The ethical guidelines the research followed were based on the guidelines by Bryman (2012), and The Swedish Research Council (2017). First, there are four main ethical aspects that the researcher needs to consider while conducting social research: whether there is possible harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy, or deception (Bryman 2012: 135). Further, The Swedish Research Councils instructions were used to ensure that the research follows the appropriate ethical guidelines, as the researchers' position is also a student in the master's program of Social Work and Human Rights in the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Finally, generalizability, trustworthiness and the limitations of the study are discussed.

6.1 Four Main Ethical Aspects in Social Research

Harm to participants

The Swedish Research Council points out the challenge of minimizing the possible harm of the research while optimising the positive effects (Swedish Research Council, 2017, p. 19-20). It is important to get the women's own voices heard instead of someone else talking for them. However, OVAW is sensitive topic and can provoke uncomfortable feelings on the respondents. While talking about their own experiences and being heard can be empowering, there is always a possibility of re-traumatizing. The Swedish Research Council emphasises that there needs to be balance between the potential harm and the improvements that the research may bring (Swedish Research Council, 2017, p. 13). As stated in the studies presented on the previous chapters, it is common that women's experiences of violence are not taken seriously. Therefore, it can be important and empowering for the participants that someone is listening to their experiences. The possibility of re-traumatizing deserves to be considered, but participants were also reminded that the participation in the research is completely voluntary, and they can stop participating at any time for any reason even after the interview is conducted. This was a way to reduce the possible harm the topic could cause for the participants. Further, the researcher had to trust the participants own abilities to evaluate if they are comfortable enough to participate. The respondents were informed that as a researcher I'm only able to answer questions about the research but otherwise cannot offer further discussion help for the participants. After the interview each participating woman was informed about the *Turv@verkko* -project websites, where it is possible to get more

information about online violence in Finland or further discussion help anonymously in case they feel like so. The interviews were conducted remotely on Zoom because of the current corona pandemic to reduce the harm both to the participants and the researcher.

My own online safety as a researcher was also considered while finding the participants. More specifically, I thought how to decrease the risk that I would get targeted by the online abusers myself. As violence against women is primarily committed by men, the interview requests were only posted on the groups which names suggested that the group members are females. Only my university email was provided as contact detail and not for example the phone number. After finding the participants I deleted the posts from the online platforms, to protect my own online safety and to decrease the risk of getting unwanted contacting.

Informed consent

Another ethical aspect of the study is that participants should be informed as well as possible about all the aspects of the study, for them to be able to decide whether they want to participate in it (Bryman, 2012, p. 138). The participants received an information letter about the research (Appendix 2) and they signed an informed consent form (Appendix 1). Both information letter and the informed consent form were translated into Finnish to make sure that the participants understand it as well as possible. However, it is difficult to present all the details about the study (Bryman, 2012, p. 139). In this study one of those aspects was how long the interview will take, but it was informed that it would depend on the participants themselves and their answers. It was emphasised, that there is no minimum or maximum length, and the participants can provide as much information as they feel the most comfortable with. While it was possible to provide the aim of the study, the exact research questions were not given to the participants. As the approach was explorative, the research questions also depended on the data collected. Also, according to Swedish Research Council (2017, p. 19), in basic research the researcher does not need to know a specific application for the research, yet it can still lead to important discoveries. The aim to understand something better is usually valid justification for the research (Swedish Research Council, 2017, p. 19). Therefore, to some extent it is only possible to give an evaluation about the research, no matter how well intended it is to give detailed information. However, the participants were also reminded to ask at any point in case they have any questions about the study.

Invasion of privacy

The third aspect that needs to be considered is whether there is an invasion of privacy. The researcher needs to protect the participants identities as well as possible (The Swedish Research Council, 2017) and privacy of the participants is important (Bryman, 2012, p. 142). The participants names had to be asked for the informed consent form. However, those forms will be destroyed after the thesis has passed the examination. Further, interviews were recorded but they were put on a memory stick to reduce the risk of hacking and the recordings will be destroyed as well after the thesis has passed the examination. The interviewed people are anonymous in the thesis and there are no details in the text that would reveal their identity. For example, the professionals and women's occupations or studies were not described in detail to keep their identities protected. The interview questions were kept rather broad and open to give the participants possibility to give as much information as they felt the most comfortable with, which was a way to reduce the invasion of their privacy.

Deception

Fourth aspect is deception which is closely linked to the lack of informed consent. Deception would happen if the research would be presented as something it's not for the participants (Bryman, 2012, p. 143). It is not intentional to give false information about the research, and as Bryman (2012) presents it, deception is simply not a pleasant thing to do and it would affect the reputation of social research negatively. As discussed, some aspects of the research might be difficult to evaluate beforehand. However, the main ideas should be informed to the participants as well as possible and the participants were again informed what the research is about in the beginning of the interview. I also encouraged the participants to ask questions both before and after the interview. The information and consent letter were written in Finnish to ensure the participants understanding, as they all had Finnish as their first language.

6.2 Generalizability, Trustworthiness and Limitations

Generalizability

Generalizability – also known as external validity – means whether it is possible to generalize the study results further than this certain research setting (Bryman, 2012, p. 47). No qualitative study can be generalized completely to the general population. Due to the limitations that the timeframe of the research had, obviously, the number of interviews conducted can't represent the whole population of women in Finland. For example, individuals differ by their personality, ethnicity, or social class (Bryman, 2012, p. 54). With four women who had experienced online violence, it is impossible to include people with all different types of features. Further, as previously discussed, someone else controlling women's devices is one form of OVAW and therefore those whose electronic devices someone else might be controlling, were most likely not able to participate. Therefore, the experiences can't be completely generalized to all the women in Finland.

However, the aim of the study was not to present expansive picture of OVAW within Finland, but rather to get results that can provide valuable insights about the women's and professionals experiences of online violence and help-seeking process in Finland as well as inspire for future research. Further, the professionals who work with OVAW had worked with multiple women who have experienced online violence. Therefore, generalizability of the results was increased by interviewing those professionals and asking their views about common aspects of online violence and help-measures in Finland. The generalizability of the results is also increased by reflecting the results to the previous studies. Many of them show similar results, and further the differences are discussed. Generalizability can be discussed through whether the results can be generalized to different times in the past or future (Bryman 2012, p. 54). For example, this research was made during the COVID-19 pandemic, and previous studies indicate that the pandemic has affected the OVAW in other countries (see for example Glitch & End Violence Against Women, 2020). Therefore, the results of this research could be different before or after the pandemic. Participants of the research are also aware that they are participating in an experiment, which may always affect their responses and therefore, generalizability of the results (Bryman, 2012, p. 54).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is discussed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility of the findings of the research means that the research is carried accordingly to good research practice and the findings will be submitted to those whose social world were studied. (Bryman, 2012, p. 390.) The research followed the ethical guidelines discussed in this chapter and the thesis is sent to the participants and to the University of Gothenburg's thesis database once it has passed the examination.

Second, according to the transferability of the findings, a good description of the culture of the participants and where the research took place is needed (Bryman, 2012, p. 392). This was done through giving the context about OVAW in Finland. Further, it is described where and when the interviews took place.

Third, dependability means that the phases of the research process are recorded (Bryman, 2012, p. 392). This was ensured by keeping track what was done during every step of the research process. Those steps were written both in my personal research diary and explained in this paper.

Finally, confirmability means recognizing that it is not possible to be completely objective in social research, while trying not to insert too much personal values on the research (Bryman, 2012, p. 392-393). It is therefore important to be transparent about the researchers' position. In this research, important aspects are that I am a female and university student in the master's program of Social Work and Human Rights. The position may have affected the interview answers and therefore the results of the study. More specifically, when interviewing the women, my position as a researcher was insider in a sense that I'm a woman too. It is possible that it is easier for the women to talk about their experiences to a female, as it became evident from the data that their abusers were mostly male. Therefore, the data may have been different, in case the interviewer was a male. On the other hand, my position was also an outsider, as me and the women were unknown for each other. For some people it may be either easier or more difficult to open about their experiences to someone they don't know. Further, from the professionals' perspective, I was an outsider because we don't work in the same organisation. On the other hand, I was insider as we are all social workers and therefore, presumably connected with the same values and ethics. The professionals may have felt more

eager or comfortable in participating in the research, if they feel like we are on the same side trying to contribute to protecting vulnerable groups. Further, since I'm on the same field, the professionals may have considered that I have knowledge about certain things. Therefore, it can be considered whether there were aspects that they left unsaid in the interviews thinking that me as an interviewer already have the knowledge of certain aspects regarding for example the help-services in Finland.

Limitations

Every study has their limitations. First, the sensitive nature of the study might have affected on finding the participants. There was also very limited time to conduct the research, and therefore it affected on how many interviews it was possible to conduct.

Second, the research does not consider intersecting features of individuals that could have affected their experiences of violence or other genders than men and female. The choice was made because all the participants defined themselves as female and they discussed their abusers being either anonymous or male. Intersectional features affecting online violence were not further discussed either. Because of the already rather sensitive topic, the decision was made not to ask women specifically about their features and if they felt like they influenced the violence they experienced. However, the women were offered a chance to talk more about themselves in case they felt like so. None of them mentioned any intersecting factors in their identity such as sexuality, race, or disability. Again, it is impossible to cover everything within one research, and the aim was not to get expansive picture of every aspect that affects OVAW, but to rather get important insights of women's and professionals experiences about it in Finland and to inspire for future research.

7 Findings and Analysis

In this chapter the results from the interview data will be presented and analyzed. This is done in reflection to the previous research about VAW and OVAW, feminist theories and perspectives as well as theoretical perspectives and frameworks on help-seeking. More specifically, the reflections are presented after the subthemes to conclude each main theme. In exploring the research questions, three main themes emerged from the data to answer the

research questions. First, *Experiences of Online Violence* are discussed. After that, the findings show *Risk Factors of Online Violence* meaning the factors that enable the violence in online context and further, those features that are making OVAW especially harmful. Finally, the chapter moves to discuss *The Help-Seeking Process* and more specifically the encouraging and preventing factors for seeking and receiving help and recommendations on how to improve the women's experiences of help-seeking.

7.1 Experiences of Online Violence

This main theme identifies what kind of online violence the women have experienced and in what situations and what kind of effects the online violence had on the women. Further, according to the professionals' experience in their work, the professionals explain from their perspective the common characteristics of OVAW and typical effects it can have on the women. The main theme is further divided into three subthemes: *Continuation of Other Types of VAW*, *Begins When Women Take Space*, and *Effects of Online Violence*. Therefore, the chapter answers the first two research questions: what experiences women in Finland have of online violence and how do the women in Finland describe the consequences of online violence.

To be able to understand the women's experiences of online violence, it is necessary to first know how and what for the women use online environments. The women used internet for connecting with friends and family, reading news, and finding information, looking for partner, free time activities such as gaming, expressing themselves on social media platforms, studying and working. Interestingly, from this data no conclusion can be made about the effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the usage of the internet or whether the OVAW has increased in Finland during the pandemic. Two of the women said their internet usage has increased considerably during the pandemic and they had experienced more online violence during this time, while in contrast, two of the women said their internet usage has decreased and they did not see difference in the amount of online violence they had experienced during the pandemic. The professionals were working with preventive and helping measures related to OVAW and were not able to evaluate either if there has been more need for services for the victims of online violence during the pandemic.

Continuation of Other Types of VAW

As online violence is a complex phenomenon and does not have a commonly agreed definition, it was relevant to let the women define themselves, what practices they have been subjected to online, and found harmful. Therefore, the women were able to define themselves what online violence is to them. Overall, the women had experienced multiple forms of online violence, such as mean comments on the social media platforms, hate speech, threatening, picture related violence and one of them identity theft. Further, all the women had experienced sexual harassment in the form of unwanted nude pictures and three of them also in written form as unconsent sexual messages. The abusers were mostly someone the women did not know before. More specifically, in all the cases of online violence, when the abusers accounts were not anonymous, the women recognized that their online abuser was presumably male. This became evident when the abusers sent unwanted pictures of men's genitals, which all the women had received, or when the abuser did the violence presumably with their own profile and picture. Therefore, rather unsurprisingly, it was identified from the data that OVAW in this research was also usually gender-based and committed by men.

Further, all the professionals discussed that it is difficult and often unnecessary to even try to make a difference between online violence and the violence in offline context. Different forms of VAW are often linked to each other, and therefore OVAW is rather a continuation of other forms of VAW than something that necessarily should be spoken as separate phenomenon.

I would begin here by having a look of what violence against women or gender-based violence is, which means that somehow those forms of violence or their prevalence are gender-based. In this case they affect especially the wellbeing of women or in quantitative terms are more targeted to females or otherwise linked more into gender. It is important to know and note, that online violence is linked to other forms of violence. It is not always meaningful to begin to separate whether this is psychological violence, or online violence, or sexual violence. Those go very much hand in hand. For example, photo related violence very often is both online violence and sexual violence. It is, therefore, important to acknowledge that these different forms of violence are very closely linked to each other. When we talk about the online violence, there is this element of technology or internet that is somehow linked to those acts of

violence, but initially it is about gender-based violence – violence against women – that it is the same continuation. (Professional 3)

These days, all those forms of violence are kind of also executed through internet. You can kind of think that it is pretty much the same kind of violence as what is typical gender-based violence. It can be intimate partner violence that is committed online, one way or another, or it can be controlling the use of internet or social media. Or it can be persecuting after a breakup or persecution by someone unknown. It can be sexual, maybe especially with this persecution, that includes so many different kinds of acts. Then the role of technology is emphasised, as there is so much information available about people and then if someone persecutes another person, that is when they want it all or make use of all the available information and the tools available. It can be location technology and that is really diverse. But then sexual violence, sexual harassment, then that is usually connected to photos in one way or another, they are threatening to spread some intimate photo material or sending photos that someone doesn't want to receive. Or it can be silencing some conversations online and this kind of, related to public speaking, that they are harassing and threatening those who influence online or women who use their voice online. It is really, really wide package of all sorts of things. It is difficult to even talk about anything typical. Kind of all the violence against women has the digital dimension. (Professional 1)

However, the professionals recognised, that the acts of online violence can be roughly divided into two categories: intimate partner violence from previous or current partner and online harassment that is mainly done by anonymous people but sometimes with own profiles as well by one or several people. The women in the interviews did not talk about intimate partner violence, but all of them had experienced violence and harassment from anonymous accounts.

I think this is so wide and complex phenomenon, that it is difficult to say anything “typical”. But I would think about it [OVAW] in a way that there is kind of like two wider subdivisions. That it is kind of like the digital violence committed by the former or current partner and then kind of like online harassment, that can be committed anonymously by one or multiple people. (Professional 2)

Furthermore, one of the professionals recognised that there is third category that links between the first two: photo related violence, which all the women in this research had experienced.

One category that kind of links between these two, is photo related violence. It means that photos are somehow used as a tool for the violence, and this is what I have faced in my work incredible amount, that somehow the photos are used as a part of the acts of violence. (Professional 3)

As mentioned all the women had experienced sexual violence in online context. All of them had received pictures of men's genitals that they did not want to receive and further, three of them had experienced sexual online violence in written form.

If I begin from Tinder [online dating platform], kind of the violence on Tinder is always sexual violence, like, on Tinder there has not been any other type of threatening. But what has been on Tinder, for example that the conversations begin with some really nasty way, and I can't kind of have an influence on that. It is not some mutually agreed dirty talk, it is more like for example "*my dick is hard*". That they just send that kind of message. Just while ago, someone started the conversation on Tinder by "*I want to make you pregnant*". (Woman 1)

Furthermore, one of the women spoke about her experiences of sexual, photo related violence, when her photos were used against her will by another person. She was subjected to identity theft and her photos were used in a website where a man pretended to be her and asked money from other men in exchange for more pictures and sexual acts online.

There was this case, that some man abroad had begun to use my pictures on this kind of site and then offered on the site – like – if men send him money he will send more pictures, he was pretending that I'm the one sending the pictures and will sexually submit those men. And there were so many things, he was basically begging money from those men while pretending to be me. And I got so many private messages, that "*hey I didn't know you do this kind of thing*" and it became quite a big mess. (Woman 3)

Begins When Women Take Space

The acts of online violence towards women often began when the women somehow took more space or expressed themselves actively either in offline or online environments. In other words, the women experienced online violence especially when they were somehow more visible.

Maybe the first [experiences of online violence] that I can recall are when I was in that *tv-show* back then, years ago, and that was when I experienced it more. Earlier I was a small factor there [in the online environments], but when my face began to be, like, more on the television, that's when people began to spoke about me, my appearance, personality, laughter. So that's when I remember, that's when I read those online platforms and that made me sometimes feel quite bad. Well, nowadays I have shut down them all in my phone, that I don't read them, because I don't want to make myself upset for nothing. Because I have a sensitive soul. (Woman 4)

Often when you're visible and present yourself bravely in different social medias, it often causes the problems too. (Woman 3)

One woman used to post weekly on Instagram and express herself there. Her story about the online violence she experienced was published in a newspaper, which she said led to even more online violence and mean comments towards her. Further, also gaming platforms are often male-dominant, and therefore being a female and playing games in online game environments can be seen as taking space as well. One woman discussed that this had led to online violence. This woman and all the professionals discussed how common the harassment towards women is in online game platforms, as the women are great minority there. Further, the woman felt like she had to hide the fact of being a woman in these platforms.

Something that comes to my mind is that I play this *online game* and in many videogames there you might get these types of comments that girls can't play and girls don't know anything. I don't have my own name there, but still my username implies that I might be a girl. Then if they ask if I'm a girl, I will reply no. That I just can't deal with that. And then often, if I have gotten to know some people through the game, some have been really nice like "*okay, you're a girl, it doesn't matter*" but then

some people have gotten too excited and asking me to be their girlfriend or bully me and then I will delete them from my friends list right away. (Woman 2)

One subcategory [of online violence] is the harassment that happens in the online game environments. So many women must somehow fade out their gender, or somehow hide it that their gender won't be revealed, because they have to face so much harassment and discrimination in the online game environments. (Professional 3)

Besides when taking their space in online environments, women had also commonly been subjected to violence, when they wanted to keep their own personal space. More specifically, the women had experienced mean comments if they did not reply to the men who approached them in online context or if they had rejected men. As an example, one of the women talked about her experience when she had rejected a man, and it resulted in violent behaviour.

There have been cases, when they have been trying to hit on me or get to know me, and then when I didn't want to, then they have been offended and started more hateful approach. There was some person who had previously tried to ask me out on a date, and I had rejected him. And that's how the show [online violence] began to roll. (Woman 3)

The women had been suggested taking less space online as a solution to reduce the violence. One of the women had been given multiple times the advice to leave social media platforms so that she would not experience violence.

Multiple times, the solution that was offered to the situation was that "*maybe you should shut down your social media and stop using social media completely*". But in my opinion, it is never the solutions, that the victims have to escape. (Woman 3)

Further, all the professionals emphasized, that the violence is only the responsibility of the one doing it, and never the victims' responsibility or fault. While the women are subjected to violence in online environments, for many women these are also the places where they have their supporting networks. Leaving the online environments should never be the answer.

Effects of Online Violence

Online violence affected the women by raising negative feelings and changing their behavior. The dominant feeling that was raised in all the women's answers was shame that the online violence caused.

Surely, I recognize that I usually can speak to my mother about so many things, but then some of those disgusting things, I don't want to tell her those. Like, someone has asked me online how many fingers I can fit to my vagina, and it is so shameful and disgusting in my own head. I start to think that I cannot say that out loud to my mother, even though she's usually the one I want to tell all the things. And also, she doesn't know any of those dick pics I receive. She would probably go behind those men's doors with a hammer. (Woman 1)

With the videogames I have learned that I don't advertise it that I'm a girl. Which is actually kind of sad, because I have also noticed, that I'm ashamed of it. Like, I'm not ashamed of playing videogames, but I don't mention people that I'm a girl. I'm kind of scared of a reaction, like... like any kind of reaction. (Woman 2)

Further, the professionals discussed that shame might even result in the women blaming themselves for the violence they are subjected to.

So many women feel so much shame and guilt about their own situation, and then they might begin to internalize those excuses for the violence. (Professional 3)

Another feeling three of the women raised in the interviews was fear. Online violence caused lack of safety and the women were concerned about the possibility that abuser knows their location. Further, women were also scared of people's opinions about their experiences of violence and more specifically that their experiences about the acts of violence are not believed.

It was so fucking scary when he started to send me messages through [the online market place]. I began to feel anxious that he knows where I live, when he had picked up that wardrobe. (Woman 1)

Well, it makes me feel really unsafe. Especially what people think about me. That many people may not even believe that I have not made this up. So, it makes me feel really unsafe. (Woman 3)

The women also recognized feelings of anger after the online violence. They felt hate towards the abusers and one discussed how online violence has led her to feel hate towards men in general.

At least that time [during that tv-show] I used to talk a lot about it [the online violence] with the people that were on the tv-show on the same season and they had all experienced online violence. And I remember, at that time, we were all together angry at those people who spoke bad about us and showed our middle fingers to them. (Woman 4)

Well, I notice that now I have had for example, more hate towards men. Those things [acts of online violence] have not really helped... Now I kind of feel like men are in some way repulsive, that they don't think anything else than fucking. (Woman 1)

Online violence and the negative feelings it caused had affected all the participating women's behavior. Some of the women had taken more safety measures after being subjected to online violence, such as not using their real name or giving their contact details to anyone. Online violence had led all the women to somehow limiting expressing themselves. This was for example hiding features of themselves from details that would reveal them being a female, or simply not using their own name.

I don't use my own name anywhere anymore – not on the dating platform, Instagram, Facebook or anywhere. I use my nickname. At least regarding the dating platform, I have a feeling that I don't want anyone to know too much about me until I can say they are nice. So, it begins there, I don't want anyone to know my name. (Woman 1)

Further, the women had limited their self-expression as an example by posting less or not being so open about their opinions to protect themselves from online violence.

Before that happened [the act of violence] I used to post every single week on Instagram and such. Now I think it's more like every half a year when I post a new picture. And nothing like, maybe nothing like revealing. Only like really basic life, that no one would be interested to miss-use those pictures, when I kind of don't have any interesting material. Yeah, I think it [the online violence] has limited my self-expression, definitely. (Woman 3)

I avoid being very radical when expressing my opinions, because I don't want to get targeted by bad comments myself, because I'm sensitive. So, then I don't want to get myself into those conversations, where someone can say something back. (Woman 4)

Regarding sexual violence in online environment, a woman also discussed that it has limited her sexual expression.

I also recognize from myself, that I used to respond to that kind of dirty talk easily, but now I'm like I don't care. I will just respond something really cold instead, like *"sorry but with your message you will never get to show that big dick of yours that you're advertising"*. (Woman 1)

The violence also led to some behavioral changes in a form of concrete actions, that the women hoped would decrease the violence. However, two of the women and all the professionals emphasized that the violence is never the responsibility of the victim. Further, another behavioral change that will be discussed in the theme 3, was that all the women had sought help from informal sources and two of them from formal sources. Also, all the women had tried to stop the violence themselves. One of the women had tried to affect the larger public by making an online video about online bullying and published it in a Facebook-group. Other one gave interview to a newspaper about her experience of online violence, after the newspaper had approached her. All the women had also tried to end the online violence by messaging the abuser. However, in most of the cases these actions did not end the online violence, and participants thought that it is better to just try to ignore the violence.

It went so far that about the whole identity theft, that *a Finnish newspaper* made an article about it. And even *the newspaper* had tried to contact him [the online abuser], to make it stop. But when they did the article, many people missed the point and that's

when I also received comments that I'm doing it only for the attention now and pushing myself out there. (Woman 3)

OVAW does not only affect the individual, but also the whole society. Silencing women in online environments is a threat to the freedom of speech and affects what voices we hear in the discussions. Further, the responsibility of the society and inequality between men and women was raised in the answers.

If you're constantly silenced and women must be afraid of harassment online, it also affects the democracy. If one group of people is constantly silenced or they are afraid to say their opinion and use their voice when they are afraid of harassment, it also effects on what kind of conversations we have in our societies. (Professional 3)

Responsibility of it [the online violence] is on that idiot who sends the message, but then again how would he know he is an idiot, then probably how he is raised and how all the gender roles are since childhood – what is the status of men and women. But on society level it [the online violence] should be much bigger deal. (Woman 1)

As presented, the results of the theme Experiences of Online Violence are generally confirmed by previously presented studies by EIGE (2017), Hakkarainen (2019), Glitch and End Violence Against Women UK (2020), Plan International (2020) and Lakeus and Keskinen (2021). As demonstrated, the spectrum of acts of VAW that can be done in online environments is broad and the violence can take many forms. OVAW is often a mixture of different types of violence and based on the women and professionals' responses, it is not always meaningful to separate the violence within online context from other types of violence. Women in all the research had experienced harassing, mean comments, photo related violence and sexual harassment in online contexts. The research further agreed with the main effects of shame, fear, and silencing that the online violence caused. Similarly to Hearn's (1998) statement, it is evident that VAW is not separate from everyday life and can be part of simple everyday things. Online environments are part of the interviewed women's everyday life and therefore acts of OVAW were intertwined in their regular life, when they tried to express themselves, spend free time or connect with other people such as find a partner. It was evident from the interviews, that the participants had been subjected to violence because of their gender, which also the feminist theories recognise as one of the

main factors explaining VAW. Interviews further confirmed, that rather unsurprisingly, in most cases the online abuser was a male. Therefore, the results further confirm what was presented in previous studies as well (see for example Lakeus and Keskinen, 2021), that OVAW is continuation and another expression of gender-inequalities in our society and discrimination of women in Finland.

Online violence often began when the women took their place in the society. The results were therefore the same as in other studies about OVAW (see for example Plan International, 2020 and Lakeus and Keskinen, 2021). As presented within the feminist theories, for example Dominelli (2012) discussed patriarchy as one of the main factors supporting VAW where men have more power than women. When women have lower status in the society, violence can be seen as acceptable. As women in this study had been subjected to online violence when they rejected men in a way, it indicates that the men began to commit the violence when the women were not submitted under the men's will. In other words, in these situations men did not possess power over the women and got violent.

Further, results suggest that causing shame, fear and anger in women is a tool for male dominance. In other words, causing negative feelings for women by abusing them, can be seen as tool for the abusers to try to control women's behaviour in the online environments. The most common behavioural change for the women was to spend less time online, same way as in previous research presented. Because of these negative feelings caused by the abusers, women were either driven away from the online platforms or the women limited their online self-expression. If the victims of violence are forced to leave the platforms, the abusers – usually men – have more power within the online environments. Therefore, as feminist theories present, when the power relations between men and women are unequal, it is the main factor supporting VAW (Kilmartin and Alison, 2007).

As Kemekenidou (2020) stated, the data from the interviews indicates that the online platforms have become more important for feminist practice and sharing women's experiences. All the participants used online environments in some forms to express themselves and take part in the society, from social life to work. As Kemekenidou (2020) discussed, when the women speak out it can be seen as feminist practise itself. The results show that OVAW is a threat to this, as similarly in this research and many others the most common effect of OVAW was silencing the women. Like one of the professionals discussed,

when one group of people are constantly silenced because of the fear of violence, OVAW effects on what kind of voices are heard in our societies. Feminist theories emphasise, that we need to hear the women's voices to make policies that support the fulfilment of women's human rights.

Therefore, the section answered the first two research questions, by showing some of the experiences and consequences of OVAW in Finland. While it was discussed that it is not always meaningful to separate online violence from other types of VAW, it is important to identify what differences online violence has compared to violence within offline context. Therefore, the next theme identifies the main differences based on the data.

7.2 Risk Factors Supporting OVAW

This theme describes and analyses the key risk factors that support violence in online context and risk factors that make OVAW especially harmful. It is relevant to develop further understanding in what kind of special features within online environments allow or support VAW to find better ways to prevent the violence and help the women. Therefore, this theme further answers the research question of what experiences do women in Finland have of online violence, focusing specially on the risk factors identified from the data. The theme is divided into three subthemes: *Rapid Technology Development*, *Geographical Reach* and *Anonymity*.

Rapid Technology Development

The women and professionals discussed that rapid technology development makes it possible to commit new types of violence and creates different tools for committing the violence. Online violence can change its form quickly and development of technology makes it easier to commit for example photo related violence.

Maybe specifically regarding online violence is that it develops all the time. When we have one day learned that it looks like this, that we can use these techniques or tactics... But tomorrow it may look completely different, so we need to understand that also those forms of violence are constantly developing like the technology is developing. That for example these days it is possible to do like videos that look very

real, that are not real, and it was not possible few years ago. And then these things that for example following technologies are constantly developing. (Professional 3)

What also comes to my mind, is that it [the online violence] is kind of also directed by what kind of information internet has or what kind of technical features some technical apps or devices have. They kind of guide that, also the phenomenon of violence. Like for example that, when it became common to use location devices a lot, or that kind of possibility developed and it became part of all of these apps, then it has kind of enabled these kind of acts that develop around the following technology. Or when camera and phone were combined, and suddenly the camera was everywhere with people, then kind of these photo related acts became more common. In this way the development of technology also directs it and changes the phenomenon of violence. (Professional 2)

While the technology development has been rapid, the professionals discussed that the common rules have not been able to adjust to it as fast. It results as unclarity what is allowed behavior and what is not.

Also, what comes to my mind maybe regarding technology wider, is that when the pace of change for technology has constantly increased, then also the formulation of common norms and rules has not kept up with it. That if for example during the times of letters it was kind of clear and also in the law, that there is this thing called letter secrecy, and then these days it is kind of unclear, that how convicted act it is to read your partners messages or search for their phone. There you can notice how there is a lot of unclarity and then there kind of is not enough time to form those common practices. Yes. Or those norms. (Professional 1)

Further, the professionals discussed that when the technology develops rapidly, there should also be more women designing it. The professionals raised the issue, that currently the working field of technology is dominated by men and therefore, it is designed from male perspective. The special features that are needed to protect the women are not considered efficiently – whether this is voluntary or not.

Rapid technology development also enables reaching much larger audience more easily than before. It is easier for the online perpetrators to find like-minded, abusive people without big resources. Professionals discussed that these people get easily support for their hateful opinions about women and they can target women together with a larger group.

Before, without resources, it was not possible to reach so large audience, unless you put it on some newspaper. So kind of, these technical dimensions have had an affect on that, of course these especially internet related things are when people with misogynist attitudes find out support for their thought more easily there. They find similar minded communities where *öyhöttää* [harass] and get support for their view.
(Professional 1)

The women were also concerned about how much a possible abuser can find out about them online due to the technological advancements. The women felt that the availability of information that technological developments allow makes it easier to commit violence within online context.

When someone really decides to have you as their target, they really can find out surprisingly lot about you, things that you really don't want them to find out. Like, these things when someone has threatened me that they will publish my address. In one case, when this happened, when someone had just decided – I don't know what was behind it, threatening or something – he was just like “*I will post where you live*”. Next, I was like okay, surely he does not know where I live, because I had never written it anywhere. So, next he gives me a comment and it was the address of my childhood home. That's where my parents currently lived.
(Woman 3)

This leads to the next subtheme and speciality of online violence: geographical reach.

Geographical Reach

The professionals discussed that it is a problem that *online* is commonly seen as somewhere you go. This is not the case, as internet is so closely tied into all aspects of our lives, and people often carry technological devices everywhere. Therefore, online violence can create

women the feeling that it is with them everywhere they go, and it is not possible to escape from the violence. Geographical reach is another speciality with online violence that the development of technology allows and affects the feelings of safety with the women. One of the women discussed, that through technology, negative feelings the online violence causes can reach her anywhere.

I have sometimes spoken to my friends about it, for example if there are some idiots for example on that online dating platform, that it's insane that I'm in my lovely home in my pyjamas and I feel safe there. But then, I open my phone and it makes me feel sad. That this person is not even close to me, but they still managed to get under my skin. (Woman 1)

The geographical reach also enables the violence, as the perpetrator can be anywhere in the world. It is therefore more difficult to get them responsible for the violence. Further, when the abusers can find out a lot about their target through technology, the online violence has increased chance to escalate into violence in real life. Two of the women raised their concerns that there was a real threat that the abuser would have found them and done something harmful to them in offline context.

Once I was selling a wardrobe through an *online marketplace* and then some man came to buy it. But then he already had my phone number through that *online marketplace* because one can see it from there, so that they can contact me. So, after he had bought the wardrobe, he began to send me messages through WhatsApp, saying that "*I will come and fuck you*". Then he tried to call many times and sent messages like "*you're so hot*" and stuff. This is what comes to my mind. (Woman 1)

... some people have threatened me that they will like, publish my address. And in one case where this happened, someone had just decided, somehow – I don't know why, maybe he just wanted to scare me or something – so he just said he will post where I live. Then I was like okay, surely you don't know where I live, because I have never written it anywhere. But yeah, next he sent me as a comment the address of my childhood home and where my parents were currently living. (Woman 3)

Further, the geographical reach allows different timeframe for the violence, as the abuser doesn't have to be physically present to commit the violence. Professionals discussed that the acts of violence within offline context often have a beginning and ending, but for the online violence there usually is no clear ending. Blocking or deleting the abuser does not always help, as there is for example the chance to create new profiles. The women discussed that they were often left in uncertainty whether the violence has come to enclosure or not.

No, it did not [come to any solution]. At that point, when he said he will publish my address and come to my door himself, which was my childhood home address, then I could not really do anything else than – of course I was scared at the moment – but I think I sent him something like “*oh okay, so you were going to see my parents then*”. Just like, I really don't live there. But after that, I blocked him everywhere and after that I have not heard of him. (Woman 3)

Therefore, geographical reach makes the violence more harmful for the victims and further, provides protection for the abusers. Anonymity was another key factor that can provide protection to the abuser and therefore, helps the abuser to commit violence, which will be presented next.

Anonymity

As presented previously, with most of the participants experiences the online violence came from anonymous accounts. Anonymity was raised as a key issue supporting online violence within all the women and professionals' answers. In online environments it is easy for the abuser to hide behind anonymity. Further, two of the professionals identified that in online environments for some people the threshold to commit violence is lower than in offline context. The abusers may comfort themselves thinking that online is not real life.

Probably one of the relevant things is also the anonymity. That it is so easy to hide behind that, especially when harassing people that they [abusers] don't know. And probably also what often affiliates on people's online behaviour, is that it has been researched that people kind of often separate their true self from their online personality and kind of dissociate from it and act very differently online, like for example more aggressively. So, abusers' kind of lull themselves into the idea that this

is not real life, this is only this online environment. So especially with harassment, I would imagine it [the anonymity] lowers the threshold [to commit online violence]. (Professional 2)

It has been on discussion as well, that kind of if you don't see... If that person for example threatens someone, if they don't see the reaction on the other person, it kind of enables, or somehow lowers the threshold for example to send for threats about killing or raping them. (Professional 1)

Another challenge and concern with anonymity, is also the difficulty to find the ones doing violence. Professionals and women discussed that anonymity protects the abusers, and basically, they can do certain violating things without consequences. The lack of consequences can lower the threshold to commit violence.

Of course, I'm worried [about my online safety] because it is so easy to do everything online, all the time and anonymously, and there seems to be no consequences, and you get help so terribly badly. In those situations, you are really alone with it. (Woman 3)

It is evident through the data, that the development of technology is constantly creating new ways to commit OVAW. The current online safety measures have not been able to keep up with the rapid technology development. Feminist theory recognizes the need for responding and addressing global issues of our time through feminist perspective (Bunch, 1995, p. 11). It is central to listen to women's experiences to understand their abuse in online context. More specifically, as professionals discussed in the interviews, it is important to hold women's opinions as central when designing technology and online environments. Currently, this is not happening. Therefore, it is another evidence that men possess more power over women in online environments. As presented, unequal power relations are one of the main factors supporting VAW (DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 2011).

The previous studies confirmed that geographical reach is an issue with OVAW and further that it is often committed by anonymous accounts. These factors provide the perpetrator a cover and caused the women feeling unsafe. It is easy for abusers to hide behind the anonymity and further, more difficult to trace the abusers and make them accountable of the violence. Due to the geographical reach, the abusers can be located anywhere in the world.

Even if they were found, it needs to be noted that the same policies and legislation on VAW may not apply in their country as in Finland which makes addressing the violence even more complicated.

It often is not possible to know the gender of the abuser behind anonymous account. However, according to the women's evaluations in previous research and women's experiences in this research, online abusers have been mostly male when they have been identified. Therefore, it is reasonable to state that most of the anonymous abusers targeting women are presumably male too. Further, as presented in the first theme, all the women had received pictures of men's genitals from anonymous accounts too, which made the women rather certain that those abusers were male. Therefore, anonymity and further the geographical reach can be seen as another tool for male dominance, as it makes it easier for the abuser to commit violence. It needs to be noted, that the professionals emphasized that the development of technology or internet itself is not the reason for violence, but rather something that allows VAW to have different forms. Still, these special features are important to recognize. As DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2011) and Lokaneeta (2016) discussed from feminist perspective, it is important to listen to women's voices regarding what the women find harmful to understand the complicated and multidimensional forms of VAW. Further, Bunch (1995) noted that by examining the concepts that affect the women's experiences, such as in this case the technological advancements, it is possible to better demonstrate, that these issues are not considered enough in the global agendas.

7.3. Help-Seeking Process for Online Violence

The third theme answers the third and fourth research questions: what experiences of help-seeking, care and support mechanisms women in Finland have had after being exposed to online violence and how the professionals in Finland work with online violence. This section therefore presents the barriers and supporting factors for help-seeking and receiving help. The four subthemes are organized according to steps within the Framework of Help-Seeking: *Awareness, Expression, Availability and Willingness* (Rickwood et al. 2005). The subthemes are closely linked to each other and partially intertwined. The steps are discussed from the women's point of view seeking for help and further, on what ways the formal and informal sources of help can encourage or discourage the help-seeking in these steps.

All the interviewed women had support systems to help them deal with their experiences of online violence. Interestingly, despite their experiences, none of the participants had reached for help from social services. Only two of the women had reached for formal help: the police, from whom they did not receive help. One of the professionals discussed, that there is different threshold to talk about the violence to a friend or a family member than a professional – but it depends on the person, whether it is easier to talk to a formal or informal source of help. In this research, most important and specifically the only support the women received was from informal sources: from family and friends and peer support from other women who had similar experiences. However, also family members' and friends' attitudes towards online violence raised challenges in the women's help-seeking process.

Awareness

As the requirement for the women to participate in this research was that they had experienced online violence – something harmful to them in online context – it was evident that the women were aware there is an issue that causes something negative to them. Awareness of it is the first step of help-seeking (Rickwood et al. 2005). Further, all the women had also told someone about the online violence they had experienced, and therefore, were aware that the issue may require some sort of intervention. However, the women also discussed that they are not aware of whether the issue was serious enough to reach for formal help from police or social services. Further, the professionals discussed, that the online violence is often not recognized as violence both from the side of the women who are subjected to it and from the helping side.

Surely recognizing it is a big question there. That we recognize that A, this is violence, B, there is help available. With technology related violence the challenge might be the difficulty of recognizing the violence and the new concepts. For some, when you say digital violence or online violence it may not mean anything. It is important to recognize and acknowledge the online violence as one form of violence, which – like other forms of violence – has real and deeply hurting effects.

(Professional 3)

Actually, I don't [know enough about online violence and my online safety]. Like, I could easily go to a lecture for hour or two to listen how also I can affect things and

how every single social media page work like Facebook, Snapchat and such. (Woman 2)

Lack of awareness and therefore, knowledge base is a barrier for help. While all the interviewed women were at least to some extent aware that they have been subjected to harmful practices online, they were not aware of what kind of services there are available when they have experienced online violence. Further, none of the women were aware, when does the online violence meet standards for a crime. Interestingly, one of the women also raised the question that she does not know when the experience is “serious enough” to reach for formal help. She considered that there are some standards when it is possible to reach for help from a professional.

I have never told any professional. Like, I don't even know much. Where goes the limit that I can do that? I have not orientated much about that. (Woman 2)

Further, supportive factors for increasing the women's awareness were identified from the data. One of these was friends, who had pointed out that what the woman was experiencing online is harmful and not okay.

It has helped when my friends have said to me straightforward that “*hey, do you realize that it is not okay that they said that to you*”. That is when it clicks to me like ah, that is actually true, that this is not like something to joke about. (Woman 2)

The professionals discussed that while part of their job is to support the women who have experienced online violence, besides that, the main task for them is to increase other professionals' knowledge and public awareness about OVAW by doing advocacy and stakeholder work.

Besides these support services, I do – we do – advocacy work and different kinds of stakeholder work. For example, with THL [Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare] and women's safety houses or with the Police University College. And then we have been part of different research projects to promote the research in the field. Then communication and marketing has had a big role. Our job is kind of like increasing the awareness and influencing the so-called big audience, but also making our services

known requires significant investments on marketing, so that is maybe like that big piece of a puzzle that takes working hours. And then training, I always forget this one of the most significant pieces of the puzzle, which in these days is not done so much, but previously especially training different groups of professionals has had really important role. So, training and having different kinds of speeches, that is what I also do. (Professional 1)

The professional further discussed, that in her point of view the cooperation with the Police Academy has been going rather well in the recent years. This has been possible, as more resources have been put into educating the police. Therefore, the professionals have been doing advocacy work in the academy regarding making the phenomenon of online violence more recognizable, in other words increasing the polices awareness about the topic of OVAW. However, the professional recognized that for example in the field of health services there would be more need for training the professionals about the topic, such as how to talk about the violence with the victim. Currently, not as much resources are put into educating the professionals about OVAW within health-services as in the police. Therefore, there is often lack of awareness about the phenomenon of OVAW also on the side of formal sources of help.

Further, according to the professionals, when there is commonly lack of awareness about the severity of online violence, it can result in dismissive attitudes towards the women's experiences of it. It is not only the dismissing attitudes of the people from the outside, but also the internalized attitudes and lack of awareness of the women who are subjected to violence themselves. The professionals discussed that the women may compare their experiences to others and think that their experiences are somehow less significant than other people's and therefore, feel that they are not worthy of help themselves. The professionals said that this is very common within their client group: the women are not aware that their experience of violence is serious enough to receive help. To be more specific, the women are not aware that their experience is worthy of intervention and receiving help.

What also comes to my mind, is that many think that their own experience is much less significant than someone else's experience, therefore [they think that] "*I don't want to congest their services*". That, somehow, many times during my career I have encountered people kind of finishing the phone call like "*well, I guess there is many*

others who need more help than me, that you don't need to prioritize me in anyways or any of my things". That they kind of have dismissive undertone there. Kind of like *"I feel bad, but surely others feel worse, so I don't want to take away the service from someone else"*. (Professional 2)

The dismissive attitudes and lack of awareness about the severity of their own experiences became evident, when one of the women finished the interview by saying:

I don't know like... I hope I was even some kind of help because I haven't faced such bad... or like faced so much online bullying as some people. (Woman 4)

Expression

Secondly, the help-seeking expression means that women seeking for help would be able to *express* their concern in *understandable manner* (Rickwood et al. 2005). This links closely to recognizing the violence: that it is understood that this is harmful both by the victim themselves as well as by formal and informal sources of help. Therefore, expression is closely linked to the common awareness about the issue in the first hand – it cannot be only the victims of online violence responsibility and only matter of their expression that the issue is taken seriously. Women raised their concern, that they did not always feel like they were being understood.

Some friends understood and they were supportive, but for so many people it was really difficult to understand, that when it [the violence] comes through internet, how can it effect so much. Like *"they are unknown people, what can they do"*. Maybe it was bit dismissive. Like clearly this harassing and bullying that happens online is not taken in any way as seriously as when it would happen face-to-face. (Woman 3)

It was evident, that the women were not always understood the way they intended. The women tried to express themselves in different ways when seeking for help: verbally to friends and family, and in written form to police through a chat service and email. One woman had made a video about the online violence and published it on online platform and expressed her need for help this way. Therefore, variety of different forms of expressions to reach for help was identified from the data. This can be seen as one of the positive sides of

technology, that also women can express their need for help in different forms: verbal, written and further make the use of visual forms of expression.

Availability

Third subtheme is *availability* of the sources of help. All the women had informal support mechanisms in their lives and therefore, help available to some extent. These informal sources of help were friends, family, and online communities. Availability can be seen linking to the professionals and friends' attitudes as well: are they mentally available for helping. As mentioned, none of the women had reached for help from social services. The respondents were not familiar with the support services available in Finland. In all the interviews the women raised their lack of knowledge about the availability of formal help services regarding OVAW. However, three of the women thought that they would most likely find available services by using internet search engines.

The professionals all discussed, that in Finland there are help-services available for the victims of online violence. One of the professionals spoke about her experiences in the client work with OVAW, with chat and phone services. She said that currently she is the only one working there, and while there recently was one week that everyone who reached for their services could not get help, usually there is not too many clients and no rush. Further, rather than lack of availability of the services, the professionals pointed out that there is lack of information and knowledge about the online violence itself. Therefore, also the available help-services for online violence are not yet grounded as common knowledge in Finland. In other words, as OVAW is rather new form of violence compared to VAW in offline context, it takes time to make the phenomenon and its severity as well as the availability of the help services known amongst people.

It is not always that simple, when there is this problem like online violence, that there is this X-amount of people experiencing it. It does not always go hand in hand with who is seeking for help or who feels like they would benefit from that kind of help. This [online violence] is rather new phenomenon, so it will take time that the victims will understand that okay, this is violence, and there is help available. Sometimes it also takes time that the person wants to seek for help, it may not be relevant for them at the time when they find out that these kinds of help-measures exist. From that

moment, it might take a while until they feel like they are ready to reach for help. Even though there may not always be clients in these services, it doesn't mean that there is no need for these services. I think that there is a need for these services and their availability needs to be further increased. (Professional 3)

Availability also means, that there should be different types of help for the individuals. One of the women discussed, that the help-services should be anonymous, as it might be difficult for some people to talk about the violence. The professionals raised same thoughts and discussed the aspects of individual help-services.

Through my job I have noticed that each person who reaches for help, has different needs and it is important to recognize them together with the person, what type of help they would like to have. And then you can forward them to trustworthy places. Those needs might be having someone to listen, like having the urge to talk about their own situation. Then you as a professional can validate to them that this is violence, and it may have this and that kind of consequences: kind of like normalize their reactions and feelings. Then there might be a need to think about safety and make this kind of safety planning. We can think about it together how to increase the online safety. Then there might be need for directing the person to other services, for example to victim support, if they think about reporting a crime. There are many places where to direct the person. Or safety house if there is a need to go to a safety house. There are so many different kinds of needs. Many people benefit, when you recognize together with them those structures in the society that support gender-based violence and the power relations in the society. I worked from feminist approach, and I think it was important part of the job to have that kind of conversations with the clients. Many of them thought it was really empowering. (Professional 3)

One of the women felt that the support she received from friends, family or online communities was enough. Three of the women would have liked to receive formal help as well, either in the form of education about their own rights in the situation or legal help from the police. Feeling scared led two of the women to reaching for police and neither of them received help. One never got any sort of reply, and another had contact with the police but felt that no responsibility was taken from the polices side and she did not receive help to her situation. Therefore, the Finnish police was not available for help.

It was so fucking scary when he [the man from the online marketplace] began to send me those messages. I began to feel anxious that he knows where I live, because he had picked up that wardrobe. So, when he sent those messages and began calling, that's when I called to one of those police advice lines and asked what can be done. But they said it is not a crime. That he is allowed to do that. Like, it doesn't fulfill the crime... Well, it does not fulfill the crime requirements. That's when the police were like "*next time you sell something, do not give your address*". Like that is a really good advice, but what the hell, where do I first bring a wardrobe to... yeah. They [the police] were also talking like, that it was also about that he was foreigner, that they [the police] were like "*these are these cultural differences*". (Woman 1)

Availability of help-sources is also closely linked to responsibility. In the example presented above, the police put the responsibility of the violence on the victim by stating that next time the woman should not give her location to the abuser and further, that the acts of violence are due to "cultural differences". While there is no simple answer on whose responsibility it is to tackle online violence, the professionals discussed that all the entities have their own responsibilities and co-operation is needed to get good results on preventing the violence and helping the victims. Therefore, when some entities are not doing their part and taking their responsibility, it can be seen as lack of availability for help.

I was thinking, how the hell can that be okay, that he [the abuser] can call and send endless amount of messages, and that should be okay. Oh yeah, and then they [the police] said on the phone, that wait for couple of weeks, and usually they [the one harassing] finds someone else they start sending messages. That they [the police] are like "*well, someone else will get those messages next*". (Woman 1)

However, also friends and family members were not always supportive and therefore, were not available for help. A major challenge seemed to be the dismissive attitudes towards the severity of online violence, as presented before. Still, all the women said that they know other supportive women with similar experiences of online violence. Peer support therefore was important factor in the women's help-seeking process. Encouraging examples of the power of available, helping community of other women was raised in couple of the replies.

He agreed to take my photos down, because I put it on such a big platform, that “*hey can you help me to report him*”. And that’s when I also contacted the online police about it, but they didn’t do anything to it. That it was actually only, like, after the pressure from larger audience, that the page [where the identity theft was done] was shut down. They were completely unknown people. I put it on some Facebook-group and asked for help through there, so that they would report the page and also, I asked about what I should do. And then, large group of women went to report that profile and spamming all the messages. (Woman 3)

Willingness

All the women had willingness to reach for informal helping sources. To some extent the women were able to talk about their feelings and experiences to the source they wanted to receive help from. All the women sought for help by talking about the experiences of violence either with a friend or a family member. All the participants had this kind of support systems.

I have told my mom, and to many other people. For example, the man [from the online marketplace] who came to buy that closet, I talked about it to my mother, and she tried to call him back because she was so furious. She just wanted to spoke to him as *a lion mother* she is. But yeah, he [the man from the online marketplace] did not pick up the phone at least that time. And then I have told my friends. Everyone has got about the same experiences as I have, and then we can share it together. Throw gasoline to the flames so to speak! (Woman 1)

Therefore, willingness concludes the Rickwood et al. (2005) help-seeking process. As Bandura (1998) presented in the sociocognitive theory, people’s willingness to act is connected to their self-efficacy beliefs. Through this theory it is possible to identify some ways the women’s self-efficacy beliefs about seeking for help were encouraged. First aspect in Banduras (1998) theory of *mastery experiences* – when a person overcomes an obstacle when trying to achieve something – was not evident in the interview data. Obstacle here would have been first an unsuccessful help-seeking attempt which the woman would overcome by reaching for help-again. One of the women discussed that she had reached for the police twice but did not succeed. All the women mentioned the dismissive attitudes they had faced when reaching for help but did not further discuss whether they approached to those

sources of help again with help-seeking in mind. Therefore, it is unclear whether they overcame this obstacle.

The second aspect of *vicarious experiences* by seeing someone else succeed (Bandura 1998), could be identified from the data. All the women knew other women who had similar experiences of online violence. They had successfully shared their experiences with others and got peer support. Therefore, presumably they also saw other women succeed in help-seeking and did this together.

Third, *social persuasion* by other people (Bandura 1998) was an encouraging factor for help-seeking. The women were encouraged by their friends to first notice that this is real violence what they are experiencing in an online context. Further, the women were encouraged by their friends to talk about their experiences of online violence.

Fourth, Bandura (1998) discussed that the person's *somatic and emotional state* influences on how likely they are to act. The effects the online violence had on the women's mood were mainly presented in the first theme but are relevant to analyze in this part as well since they affect the women's willingness to act and seek for help. Bandura (1998) stated, that when a person is in a positive mood, they are more willing to act. While it is possible, that women felt positive emotions around their friends, family, and community where they reached for help, it is not evident from the interview data. It would require further discussion with the women to make conclusions. Bandura (1998) also presented that negative feelings make people less willing to act. Women felt shame about their experiences, and one of the women and further the professionals discussed that this can affect help-seeking negatively, because the women don't always feel comfortable to talk about their shameful experiences. Therefore, it can be a barrier in the help-seeking process and willingness to seek for help. However, in contrast, the results in this thesis research also suggest that the negative emotions of fear and anger were the starting point for help-seeking and made the women act.

Furthermore, within the help-seeking process, all comes back to the first step and the *awareness* about OVAW. From the data it was evident, that the major barrier in the help-seeking process is the awareness about the issue, that further affected the other steps of the help-seeking process. The women were aware that they are experiencing online violence but, in some cases, lacked the awareness about the severity of it, and that their experiences are

worthy of receiving help. It is difficult for women themselves to demand justice or start help-seeking process, if they are not aware of their rights. Further, friends were not always aware about the severity issue. This resulted in not understanding the women's *expression* of their experiences of online violence. It is evident that all the women were unsatisfied to some extent on the reactions they had received when talking about the online violence and the informal or formal sources of help were not *available* to give appropriate help. Further, the professionals emphasized that help-services exist, but the issue is that many relevant entities lack awareness about the phenomenon of online violence and its tactics and the knowledge about the phenomenon and help-services are not yet grounded.

As Bandura (1998) noted, contributing to the improvements of health, the perspectives must go further than individualistic level. Therefore, it is important to raise both the general publics and professionals' awareness about the harmful effects of OVAW, to tackle it efficiently. It is evident, that the social workers have an important place of action here. It is encouraging, that the professionals already recognize improvements in the awareness about the topic when they have been educating other professionals such as the police. However, the results from this research indicate that these advancements are not yet seen in practice, as the women's help-seeking experiences with the police had been unsuccessful. Also, the results from other studies confirm the dismissive attitudes the victims have had when reaching for help from the Finnish police (see for example Lakeus and Keskinen, 2021). However, it is important to note that the interviewed professionals have only done their advocacy work since recent years, and the interviewed women's experiences in this research were from further. Thus, it is not possible to evaluate from these results, how effectful the training of the Finnish police has been. It is evident that we need to listen to women's experiences and further research is needed within this area, as well as on how other entities respond to women's help-seeking. As discussed, it will take time to ground the common knowledge about the OVAW and its harmful tactics amongst both the public and the professionals.

8 Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to explore the women's and professionals' experiences of OVAW and the women's help-seeking process in Finland. Throughout the paper it was

argued that online violence is harmful continuation of other types of violence's against women and mostly committed by men, therefore, another expression of gender inequalities. The women and professionals in Finland agree, that by taking their space and expressing themselves in online environments women are increasingly targeted to harmful practices in online context. In particular, it was demonstrated that the feelings of shame, fear and anger result in women's limiting their self-expression in online environments.

Several barriers were identified in the help-seeking process. Instead of lack of available services, the results suggest that the major barrier was the lack of awareness about the severity of the issue of OVAW in Finland. This resulted in dismissive attitudes towards the women's experiences of online violence. As online violence is rather new and constantly changing form of VAW, it is currently not seen as severe as other forms of violence. It is evident that further actions such as increasing the publics and professionals' awareness about the issue are needed. It is encouraging, that the professionals recognized good cooperation and improvements as a result of their education work with other professionals, more specifically with the police. However, this could not yet be confirmed by the women's experiences. Interesting propose for future research would be how effectful the advocacy work has been.

It further is evident, that there is lack awareness about the available support services for OVAW in Finland. Another interesting future research that was inspired from this research is how to make the already existing help measures more known amongst the women who are subjected to online violence. Further, it could be researched from the women's perspective, if these help-services are individually tailored enough for their needs.

Until the awareness increases, and the attitudes change, women won't achieve justice and the full enjoyment of their human rights in online environments. It is possible to see advancements when we embrace the social workers knowledge about the topic and cooperate with all the relevant entities. This needs to be done in dialogue with the affected women by holding women's experiences as central.

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Appendix 1. Informed consent form in Finnish and English

Informoitu suostumus

Seuraavassa on esitelty, kuinka haastattelussa kerättyä dataa käytetään.

Tutkimus on osa koulutustani kansainvälisessä Social Work & Human Rights -maisteriohjelmassa Göteborgin yliopistossa, Ruotsissa. Jotta tutkimus saavuttaa eettiset vaatimukset, lupaan noudattaa seuraavia periaatteita:

- Tutkimukseen osallistuvat haastateltavat saavat informaatiota tutkimuksen tarkoituksesta
- Haastateltavalla on oikeus päättää, osallistuuko hän tutkimukseen, myös haastattelun jälkeen
- Kerätty data käsitellään luottamuksellisesti ja siten, että kukaan luvaton henkilö ei pääse siihen käsiksi

Haastattelut nauhoitetaan, sillä tämä tekee haastattelun dokumentoinnin helpommaksi sekä auttaa minua projektin jatkamisessa. Analyysissä osaa kerätystä datasta saatetaan muuttaa siten, että haastateltavia ei voi tunnistaa siitä. Projektin päättyttyä data tuhoetaan. Kerättyä dataa käytetään ainoastaan tässä tutkimuksessa.

Sinulla on oikeus kieltäytyä vastaamasta mihin tahansa kysymykseen tai lopettaa haastattelu ilman, että sinun tarvitsee antaa siihen syytä.

Voit olla yhteydessä minuun tai opinnäytetyöni ohjaajaan, jos sinulle herää kysymyksiä!

Opiskelijan nimi ja sähköposti

Ohjaajan nimi ja sähköposti

Salla Hakkarainen

Lena Andersson

Maisteriopiskelija

Vanhempi lehtori

Göteborgin yliopisto

Göteborgin yliopisto

gushakkasa@student.gu.se

lena.andersson@socwork.gu.se

Haastateltava

Translation of the informed consent form

The following is a presentation of how I will use the data collected in the interview.

The research project is a part of our education in the International Master's program in Social Work at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. To ensure that our project meets the ethical requirements for good research we promise to adhere to the following principles:

- Interviewees in the project will be given information about the purpose of the project.
- Interviewees have the right to decide whether he or she will participate in the project, even after the interview has been concluded.
- The collected data will be handled confidentially and will be kept in such a way that no unauthorized person can view or access it.

The interview will be recorded as this makes it easier to document what is said during the interview and helps in the continuing work with the project. In the analysis some data may be changed so that no interviewee will be recognized. After finishing the project, the data will be destroyed. The data we collect will only be used in this project.

You have the right to decline answering any questions or terminate the interview without giving an explanation.

You are welcome to contact me or my supervisor in case you have any questions (e-mail addresses below).

Student name & e-mail

Supervisor name & e-mail

Interviewee

Appendix 2. Information Letter in Finnish and English

Informaatiokirje

Arvoisa nettiväkivaltaa kokenut nainen tai naisten kokeman nettiväkivallan parissa työskennellyt ammattilainen,

Olen opiskelija Göteborgin yliopiston Social Work & Human Rights -maisteriohjelmassa ja kirjoitan parhaillaan opinnäytetyötäni naisten kokemasta nettiväkivallasta Suomessa.

Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on kerätä naisten kokemuksia heihin kohdistuneesta nettiväkivallasta ja sen vaikutuksista. Haastateltavat naiset määrittelevät itse, mikä on ollut heille väkivaltaa tai vahingollista – riittää, että se on tehty heille internetyhteyden omaavien laitteiden välityksellä. Lisäksi tutkimuksessa kerätään tietoa siitä, millaisia kokemuksia naisilla on – tai ei ole – nettiväkivallasta kertomisesta tai avun hakemisesta. Työhön kerätään myös naisten kokeman nettiväkivallan parissa työskentelevien ammattilaisten kokemuksia naisiin kohdistuvasta nettiväkivallasta Suomessa, heidän auttamiskeinoistaan ja mahdollisista haasteista.

Etsin parhaillaan nettiväkivaltaa kokeneita, itsensä naiseksi määritteleviä, yli 18-vuotiaita henkilöitä sekä naisten kokeman nettiväkivallan parissa työskenteleviä ammattilaisia haastateltavaksi tutkimukseeni. Haastattelut on tarkoitus tehdä maaliskuun 2022 aikana etäyhteydellä Zoomissa tai puhelimesta. Haastattelut ovat puolistrukturoituja, eli niissä on samoja kysymyksiä kullekin osallistujalle, mutta kysymykset mahdollistavat sen, että osallistuja voi muotoilla vastauksensa vapaasti. Osallistujasta riippuen haastattelun kesto on arviolta 20–60 minuuttia. Haastattelut pidetään suomeksi, mutta lopullinen opinnäytetyö tulee olemaan englanniksi. Osallistuminen on täysin vapaaehtoista, ja osallistujalla on oikeus vetäytyä missä tahansa vaihetta tutkimusta.

Osallistujat esiintyvät tutkimuksessa anonymoineina eikä heitä voida tunnistaa vastauksista. Kaikki kerätty materiaali tulee vain tutkimuskäyttöön ja tuhoaan, kun gradu on läpäissyt arvioinnin. Opinnäytetyö julkaistaan Göteborgin yliopiston opinnäytetöiden tietokannassa.

Jos sinulle heräsi kysymyksiä, olet kiinnostunut osallistumaan tutkimukseen tai tiedät jonkun, joka olisi, voit olla minuun tai opinnäytetyön ohjaajaani yhteydessä sähköpostitse

gushakkasa@student.gu.se tai lena.andersson@socwork.gu.se.

Ystävällisin terveisin,

Salla Hakkarainen

Maisteriopiskelija

Social Work & Human Rights

Göteborgin Yliopisto

Lena Andersson

Opinnäytetyön valvoja, luennoitsija ja tutkija

Department of Social Work

Göteborgin Yliopisto

Translated information letter

Dear Participant,

I am a student in the University of Gothenburg Social Work and Human Rights -master's programme and currently writing my master's thesis about online violence against women in Finland. The aim of the study is to gather women's experiences of the online violence they have experienced and whether they have reached for help. Further, the aim is to gather social workers experiences on working against online violence against women and of the support services for the women who have experienced online violence and possible barriers they may face on receiving help.

Currently I am a looking for interviewees for the thesis. The interviews will be conducted during March 2022 through Zoom or via phone call. Duration of the interviews are approximately 20-45 minutes. The semi structured interviews have some standard questions for all the interviewees but are open-ended and therefore, explorative allowing the participant to freely formulate their answers. The participation is completely voluntary, and the participant has the right to withdraw from the study at any point, even after the interviews are conducted.

All the material conducted will be used only for the research purposes only and destroyed after the thesis has passed the examination. The participants will be anonymous in the thesis and cannot be identified from their answers. After examination the thesis will be published in

the University of Gothenburg thesis database.

If have any questions and are interested in participating, or know someone who is, you can contact me by email gushakkasa@student.gu.se.

Best regards,

Salla Hakkarainen
Master Student
Social Work and Human Rights
University of Gothenburg

Lena Andersson
Supervisor of the thesis, Senior Lecturer
Department of Social Work
University of Gothenburg

Appendix 3. Interview Guide 1 in Finnish and English

The original interview questions for the women who have experienced online violence in Finnish

1. Taustakysymykset
 - Ikä
 - Sukupuoli
 - Kaupunki suomessa
 - Opiskeletko, oletko töissä tai jotakin muuta?
 - Haluaisitko kertoa jotakin muuta itsestäsi?
2. Kertoisitko mihin käytät nettiä?
3. Kertoisitko, millaisia kokemuksia sinulla on nettiväkivallasta?
4. Kertoisitko, millaisia seurauksia nettiväkivallalla on tai oli sinulle?
5. Kerroitko jollekin kokemastasi väkivallasta ja miten siihen reagoitiin?
6. Haitko apua? Millaista apua ja tukea sait?
7. Haluaisitko kertoa vielä jotakin muuta?

Kiitos haastattelusta!

The translated interview questions for the women who have experienced online violence

1. Background Questions
 - What is your age?
 - Gender?
 - City?
 - Are you studying, working or something else?
 - Is there something else you would like to tell about yourself?
2. Can you tell what do you use internet for?
3. Can you describe what kind of experiences you have of online violence?
4. Can you tell what kind of consequences the online violence had for you?
5. Did you tell someone about the online violence and how did they react?

6. Did you reach for help and receive it? If yes, what kind of help and support did you receive? What kind of help and support you would have liked to receive?
7. Is there something else you would like to talk about?

Thank you for the interview!

Appendix 4. Interview Guide 2 in Finnish and English

The interview questions for the professionals in Finnish

Taustakysymykset

- Koulutuksesi?
- Missä työskentelet?
- Kauanko olet työskennellyt/ työskentelit naisiin kohdistuvan nettiväkivallan parissa?
- Millaisia ovat työtehtäväsi naisiin kohdistuvan nettiväkivallan parissa?

Nettiväkivalta

1. Kuvailisitko, millaista on tyypillinen naisiin kohdistuva nettiväkivalta?
2. Kuvailisitko, millaisia seurauksia nettiväkivalta aiheuttaa naisille?
3. Syitä naisiin kohdistuvaan nettiväkivaltaan? Onko netissä jotakin erityistä, joka luo otollisen alustan naisiin kohdistuvalle väkivallalle?

Aputoimet

4. Kuvailisitko nettiväkivaltaan olevia aputoimia?
5. Kenen vastuulla nettiväkivaltaan puuttuminen on mielestäsi? (Yksilö, yhteisö, yhteiskunta, sosiaalisen median alustat, muu)
6. Millaisia haasteita näet nettiväkivaltaan vastaamisessa?
7. Millaisena näet sosiaalipalveluiden mahdollisuudet vastata nettiväkivaltaan tai auttaa nettiväkivaltaa kokeneita naisia?

Asiasta kertominen ja avun hakeminen sekä saaminen

8. Arvioisitko, mitkä tekijät vaikuttavat, että nettiväkivaltaa kokenut kertoo asiasta jollekin tai hakee apua? (Haasteet/ mahdollisuudet)
9. Mikä on tärkeää kohdatessa nettiväkivaltaa kokeneen henkilön?
10. Mitkä tekijät vaikuttava avunsaantiin? (Haasteet/ mahdollisuudet)

Muu

1. Haluaisitko kertoa vielä jotakin muuta?

Iso kiitos haastattelusta!

The translated interview questions for the professionals

Background Questions

- What is your education?
- Where do you work at?
- How long have you been working or worked with tasks related to online violence against women [OVAW]?
- What kind of tasks do you have when working with this topic?

Online Violence

1. Can you describe typical features of OVAW?
2. Can you describe the consequences of OVAW?
3. What do you think are the reasons for OVAW? Is there something special about the online environments that creates prosperous ground for VAW?

Help-Measures

4. Can you tell about the help-measures for OVAW?
5. Whose responsibility or in whose power it is to tackle OVAW?
6. What kind of challenges you see in responding to OVAW?
7. How do you see the possibilities of social services on responding to the issue of OVAW and to help the women who have experienced online violence?

Help-Seeking

8. Can you evaluate what factors affect, that a woman who has experienced online violence tells about it to someone or reaches for help? (Challenges/ possibilities)

9. What is important when facing a person who has experienced online violence?
10. What factors influence on receiving help? (Challenges/ possibilities)

Other

11. Is there something else you would like to mention?

Thank you for the interview!