

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING ONLINE GENDER-BASED BODY SHAMING

Based on the research findings from the Elephant Talk project “Our Bodies: Seen, Counted, Respected” and the current EU policy landscape, we present three concrete policy recommendations aligned with the ongoing work of the FEMM and CULT committees:

1_ Strengthen Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) Across the EU as a Strategic Tool to Prevent Online Gender-Based Violence

Alignment:

This recommendation directly builds on Directive (EU) 2024/1385 on combating violence against women and domestic violence, adopted in May 2024^{1,2}; the FEMM Committee’s 2022 study on Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) as a critical part of children’s and young people’s sexual and reproductive health and rights³; and ongoing efforts in the CULT Committee to address the social impact of digital environments on youth.⁴

Policy Recommendation:

The European Parliament should urge the Commission and Member States to:

1_ Guarantee access to inclusive, rights-based, and evidence-informed CSE for all children and young people across the EU, including:

- >> Education on consent, normative and binary gendered power dynamics, and the root causes of gender-based violence (including body shaming).
- >> Clear modules on the psychological and social impact of online hate speech, especially against marginalised gender expressions and body types.
- >> Empowerment of youth as active bystanders and agents of solidarity, rather than passive consumers or perpetrators.

2_ Develop and disseminate CSE teaching materials that are transnationally relevant but also culturally adaptable for:

- >> Educators, youth workers, and school counsellors

>> Including digital education modules covering online harassment, body shaming, and victim-blaming culture

3_ Allocate specific EU funding (under Erasmus+, EU4Health, or CERV) to:

>> Support third sector organisations in Member States where CSE is not yet mandatory or is under-resourced

>> Facilitate transnational exchange and capacity building between NGOs and education professionals working on gender equality, CSE, and digital well-being

4_ Establish an EU-level Monitoring Mechanism to:

>> Track the implementation and impact of CSE programmes in reducing gender-based violence, including online forms such as body shaming

>> Collect and analyse disaggregated data to identify gaps in implementation and effectiveness, especially in relation to the positive participation and engagement of trans* and non-binary people

Evidence from Elephant Talk:

The data reveals that 53% of respondents have engaged in some form of body shaming, with male respondents more likely to perpetrate such behaviours (61% vs 50% female and 45% non-binary). Furthermore, 30% of female respondents and 55% of non-binary respondents perceive body shaming to be very common while only 15% of male respondents perceive the same thing. Additionally, victim-blaming responses were predominantly from male respondents, indicating the need for comprehensive approaches that address both perpetration and support for victims from a gendered perspective that integrates online gender-based bodyshaming into a wider educational framework of structural power dynamics between men, women and non-binary people. **A large majority (86%)** of respondents said something should be done to counter online body shaming, and the **top recommended response was education and training (72%)**. It is fundamental that such education and training centralises a non-normative perspective and addresses the deconstruction of gendered power dynamics in societies.

2_ Establish EU-Wide Gender Mainstreaming Standards for Media Literacy and Digital Education

Alignment:

This recommendation aligns with the CULT committee's work on digital education and media literacy, building upon the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027⁵ and the Creative Europe Media Literacy programmes⁶.

Policy Recommendation:

Develop comprehensive EU standards for integrating gender perspectives into media literacy curricula, specifically addressing online gender-based hate speech and body shaming. This should include:

>> Mandatory gender-sensitive media literacy modules in all EU education systems, covering critical analysis of beauty standards, body image representation, and recognition of gender-based harassment

>> Teacher training programmes that equip educators with tools to address gender-based discrimination in digital spaces and promote inclusive online environments

>> Age-appropriate educational resources that help young people understand consent in relation to respectful online communication, and the impact of body shaming on mental health

>> Cross-border collaboration mechanisms for sharing best practices in gender-sensitive digital education, building on the existing Safer Internet Centres network ⁷.

Evidence from Elephant Talk:

The research shows that 41% of younger respondents (15-18 years old) perceive online gender-based body shaming as “inevitable” when exposing oneself online. At the same time, 86% of respondents think something should be done to address the phenomenon of online gender-based body shaming, suggesting that there is active potential to deconstruct and counteract this problem with the right tools. Since digital communities transcend national borders, European-wide standards are necessary to foster safer online spaces for everyone.

3_ Strengthen Digital Services Act Implementation with Gender-Sensitive Online Safety Guidelines

Alignment:

This recommendation directly supports the FEMM committee’s recent work on “Image based sexual violence in the context of AI and social media”⁸ and builds upon the newly published DSA guidelines for the protection of minors ^{9,10}.

Policy Recommendation:

Advocate for the integration of gender-sensitive provisions within the Digital Services Act’s implementation framework, specifically targeting online gender-based body shaming and harassment. This should include:

>> Mandatory gender impact assessments for platform algorithm design and content moderation systems, addressing how these systems may disproportionately affect women, girls, trans*, and non-binary people

>> Enhanced reporting mechanisms specifically designed for gender-based harassment, including body shaming, with clear de-escalation procedures and victim support

>> Platform liability measures that hold social media companies accountable for systemic patterns of gender-based harassment, particularly body shaming content that creates hostile environments for women, girls, trans* and non-binary people

>> Regular monitoring and evaluation of platform compliance with gender-sensitive safety measures, with specific indicators for addressing body shaming incidents

Evidence from Elephant Talk:

The data shows that there is no major difference between genders when it comes to experiencing online gender-based body shaming (25% of non-binary respondents and 19% of female respondents compared to 19% of male respondents overall), but there are significant country variations (for example Italy showing 36% female vs 6.3% male). This demonstrates the need for gender-sensitive approaches to online safety that respect an expansive understanding of gender diversity.

Implementation Strategy

These recommendations should be implemented through:

- 1_ Joint FEMM-CULT working groups to ensure coordination between gender equality and education perspectives
- 2_ Stakeholder consultations involving youth organisations, women and LGBTQIA+ rights groups, and educational institutions across EU member states
- 3_ Pilot programmes in select member states to test and refine implementation approaches
- 4_ Regular monitoring and evaluation using indicators that measure both online safety outcomes and gender equality progress from an intersectional and non-normative perspective
- 5_ Integration with existing EU initiatives including the Better Internet for Kids strategy (BIK+) ¹¹ and the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 ^{11, 12}

These recommendations provide concrete, actionable steps that build upon existing EU policy frameworks while addressing the specific challenges identified through the Elephant Talk research. They demonstrate how evidence-based policy-making can create meaningful change for young people's online experiences and gender equality more broadly.

1. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cyberviolence/-/european-parliament-and-council-directive-eu-2024/1385-of-14-may-2024-on-combating-violence-against-women-and-domestic-violence>
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4. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOLE_STU\(2023\)733109](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOLE_STU(2023)733109)
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6. <https://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-12/Online%20info%20session%20-%20Call%20for%20proposals%20on%20Media%20Literacy%202024.pdf>
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8. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/image-based-sexual-violence-in-the-conte/product-details/20250619CHE13213>
9. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/commission-publishes-guidelines-protection-minors>
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13. <https://epthinktank.eu/2024/12/06/gender-equality-in-the-eu/>

GRANT NUMBER 101145978 (CERV-2023-CITIZENS-CIV)

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.