



HOW THE **INTERNET** IS BEING USED TO PERPETRATE **VIOLENCE** AGAINST WOMEN

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Violence against women (VAW) and girls is one of the most rampant human rights violations worldwide. The World Health Organisation estimates that globally at least 35% of women experience violence in their lifetime and 30% experience intimate partner violence (IPV).

The rise in the use of the internet and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) has led to the emergence of new forms of violence against women and girls, in online spaces. Online VAW (OVAW) encompasses acts of gender-based violence that are committed, abetted or aggravated, in part or in

full, by the use of ICTs such as social media platforms and emails.

In Uganda, online violence against women and girls is exhibited in a number of ways, including non-consensual sharing, revealing or posting of sexually explicit images or videos of a person, cyberstalking, unsolicited sexual advances, or unsolicited touches. It also includes sharing of degrading images or material, false accusations, defamation and slander.

Susan Atim, Programme Officer, WOUNET explains that cyber stalkers could, for instance, use an

email to tamper with another person's computer by uploading a tracking device without their consent. Cyber stalkers also trace a person's emails, internet use or other electronic communications or otherwise and keep them under surveillance without their consent, including giving offensive material to a person or leaving it where it will be found by a person intentionally or recklessly doing something that would physically or mentally harm them or make them fear for their lives or the safety of another person who could be their loved one.

Online sexual harassment also happens when a perpetrator sends unwanted, abusive, threatening, or obscene messages to a victim via e-mail or instant messaging, or uses any communication device to regularly contact the victim. Atim says this happens more often than is reported. 'The case of Kabarole Woman Member of Parliament who was cyber harassed by Brian Isiko only got public attention because she was an MP, but many ordinary women go through this daily,' she asserts.

The United Nations estimates that 95% of aggressive behaviour, harassment, abusive language and denigrating images in online spaces are aimed at women and come from current or former male partners.

Many survivors say online violence is intended to shame, humiliate and intimidate women, undermine their character and silence them so that they don't express their opinions. This usually happens when women's voice express opposing views on politics and women's rights, particularly in relation to sexuality and reproductive health among others. The motives vary from blackmail to extortion of money from the victims.

'These newer forms of violence and abuse are a manifestation of existing discrimination and violence in society,' says Patricia Nyasuna, Programme Officer, Gender and ICT at Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET). 'They are rooted in the same systems of patriarchy, oppression and gender inequalities, which are underpinned by unequal power relations and discriminatory social norms.'

Impact

Online violence results in psychological, physical and emotional harm to the

victims. 'It affects their health and wellbeing, as well as their ability to voice their opinions and participate in public life,' says Atim. 'Many women victims report feeling threatened, drained, anxious, angry, sad, insecure and fearful about their physical safety and have a sense of helplessness and powerlessness.'

Atim illustrates how online violence drains the victims thus: 'The victims, who most times are women, say they have to feel mentally prepared before accessing online spaces as they find themselves using a lot of energy to engage or 'fight' in online spaces and conversations, either for themselves or on behalf of other women.'

It also leads to self-censorship. Women victims are forced to change their ways of using technology and in some cases withdraw from the debate or online spaces altogether. This affects their right to participate in public life and also their freedom of expression.

A WOUGNET research study conducted in 2017 showed that 71% of women victims said the threat of online violence and abuse affected their participation on social media. The respondents reported having become less willing to engage in public discourse, speak up or voice their opinions on matters they would otherwise be willing to comment on. Some withdrew from certain conversations – thereby not expressing their opinions on these issues – while others withdrew from the internet or social media altogether.

'On certain days, I want to speak about something but I choose not to because of the backlash,' reported one victim. 'It changes how I engage, what I choose and choose not to say. I want to speak a lot more about rights but I pull back. I can speak about women

in development and women's leadership but when I speak about other issues it has to be on a day when I'm ready to fight.'

Challenges to fighting online violence

The challenges hampering the fight against online violence against women vary from an overwhelming sense of impunity to the anonymity of perpetrators. This is fuelled by the inadequate response from ICT companies in dealing with reports of online violence and abuse against women. Amnesty International's #Toxic Twitter research found that despite having policies in place to act on online violence and abuse, Twitter appears to be inadequately enforcing these policies.

'Mechanisms for recourse of online violence are insufficient. I reported two users on Twitter and they decided the language wasn't abusive. Twitter doesn't understand my context and doesn't understand what gender abuse is and how it takes place,' one survivor was quoted as saying.

There is also inadequate law enforcement for, despite setting up a cybercrime unit, observers argue that the Uganda Police personnel do not have the right training, skills or resources to protect women from online violence and abuse or bring the perpetrators to justice. The police are also accused of trivialising online violence and abuse against women. This negative attitude, coupled with limited capacity, undermines access to justice for women.



The existing law enforcement mechanisms are either gender-insensitive or the enforcement is weak and biased. The State Minister for Ethics, Fr. Lokodo, for example, has in the past threatened to arrest women victims whose nudes leaked on social media, rather than focusing on the perpetrators. In addition, the Uganda Computer Misuse Act (2011), which would be a good tool to curb OVAW, does not describe OVAW or how it could be handled in explicit terms but generally, which make it hard to pin down culprits. This is aggravated by ambiguous interpretations of existing legislation addressing gender-based violence, data privacy and cybercrime.

Where is the remedy?

Women's rights campaigners contend that curbing violence against women and girls requires a multifaceted approach and the involvement of everyone, both the traditional and non-traditional actors.

Gender equality and women's rights campaigners are taking the message to the exclusive group of the richest nations, the G7. The recent G7 meeting in Biarritz, France featured discussions on gender equality. The G7 Gender Equality Advisory Council recommended 79 good practices in gender equality laws, urging the G7 and other countries to commit themselves through the 'Biarritz Partnership' to addressing all forms of inequalities. The call included ending gender-based violence and ensuring full equality between women and men in public policies. 'We are not only asking you to be brave, we are asking you to be the great generation of leaders who will take bold steps. We call upon you to pronounce 2030 as the expiry date of gender inequality,' the UN Women Executive Director, Phumzile Mlambo, urged leaders of the seven richest countries.

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