

HOW TO REPORT ONLINE VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT

Arise Reporter

In July 2018, something unprecedented happened in Uganda. A 25-year-old student, Brian Isiko, was sentenced to two years in jail for cyber harassment by Buganda Road Court Magistrate, Gladys Kamasanyu.

This was after Isiko pleaded guilty to sexually harassing the Kabarole District Woman Member of Parliament, Sylvia Rwabwogo. According to the legislator, Isiko, then a student at YMCA, Jinja campus, started by sending her unsolicited love text messages and making repeated calls claiming undying love for her.

'I love you so much and want to

protect you. My love is for you alone and since there is no one taking care of you, I will do it,' read one of the messages sent to the MP. Besides being grounded in patriarchy – 'I want to protect you, no one is taking care of you, I will' – these were unsolicited persistent messages and a form of harassment of the legislator.

Rwabwogo took up the matter with the police at Parliament, which assigned a guard and advised her to set up an appointment to meet the stalker. The meeting was held on 11 June 2018 at Java House, Lugogo and Isiko showed up. It was where he was arrested.

It was after the intervention of the

police and later the courts of law that Rwabwogo got her peace back. Though thousands of women are victims of online violence, how many people report these cases to the police, and how can one do it anyway?

How do you report online harassment?

Bill Ndyamuhaki, the Deputy Assistant Superintendent of Police, a cybercrime investigator and forensic analyst with the Uganda Police Force, says that the process of registering OVAW is more or less the same as that of reporting other crimes. The offended party reports to the



nearest police station, where a case is registered and a reference number issued. Investigations commence and the person who reported the case is supposed to follow up on the investigations with the police or the police must keep her informed of the progress.

In case the police officer undermines, or does not understand or give due diligence to the matter being reported, Ndyamuhaki advises, one should seek someone higher in the police hierarchy, particularly the OC CID. He says almost all CID officers have a good understanding of OVAW and will, therefore, pay the necessary attention to the matter.

Why many cases remain unreported?

Deputy ASP Ndyamuhaki concedes that not many cases of online violence against women are reported to the police. 'We do register a few cases, but the biggest number of women suffer in silence,' he says. He attributes this to fear and ignorance. 'People just don't know how to go about it. Those who know do not want to come out and speak about it; they worry about how the community will perceive them because oftentimes they who report

are criticised, judged by the public despite being victims of violence,' Ndyamuhaki says.

Some people doubt the police's capacity to handle such cases, which notion Ndyamuhaki refutes as untrue. 'Those who report receive the help they need; we have followed up all these cases to the letter.'

The challenge with cybercrime

Not all police stations handle cyber crime. It is a new phenomenon and not all police officers know the laws or have the capacity to handle online violence against women and girls due to its complexity and the technology around it.

'Cybercrime departments are mostly stationed at regional police stations such as Kampala Metropolitan Police stations, leaving a big chunk of the country uncovered, and because of this, people don't often report cases to the police because they know there is no one to handle their cases,' Ndyamuhaki says. He, however, says that the police are stepping up efforts by training and equipping officers with the information and skills necessary to handle cybercrime.

'We have a full department of electronic counter measures, which deals with technical investigations of cybercrimes, and these are skilled IT professionals, forensic experts, certified ethical hackers trained in Egypt, India, China. This is in addition to sensitising the public on cybercrime. October this year was for example, our cyber crime sensitisation month,' says Ndyamuhaki.

The other challenges are inadequate regulations governing online communications, government bureaucracy and the complexity of cybercrime. 'People disguise and use different identities, which complicates or makes it incredibly hard to apprehend perpetrators,' says Ndyamuhaki, further cautioning the public on the use of social media, and urging them to find a good balance between communication and the need to maintain a level of privacy.