

ONLINE HARASSMENT IN FOCUS: THE DEVASTATING EFFECTS ON SURVIVORS

Arise Reporter

On 24 July 2017, an online publication, Chano8, had a screaming headline: Desire Luzinda Unleashes Fresh Nudes. This was after the singer's nudes leaked to the media again.

A couple of months before, another online publication, Xclusive, on 13 December 2016, had labelled her a 'nude star' who 'for years has been one of the most lusted after female Ugandans'.

Luzinda is only one celebrity whose nudes have leaked to the media. Others are Judith Heard, Martha 'Kay' Kagimba and Sanyu Mweruka. In the case of Joy





Kihuguru, a popular city pastor, it was not her nudes that leaked to the media but rather a man who stalked her, duping her into agreeing to marry him. However, after she had introduced him to her parents, she found out that he had done the same thing to several other women.

In a June 2018 interview with Pastor Mugisha Mondo on online channel SuperNatural TV, Kihuguru narrated her ordeal: 'I have a Facebook page... This is a gentleman who reached out to me. He used to follow me. He wanted me to pray for him. One day he decided to come. He said, "I am in Uganda. I would like to meet you." Like many others do. So many people call and ask to meet me and beautiful relationships have developed. I agreed to see him. He said he had issues with his land. I went and prayed for the land on Entebbe Road and then he seemed to be interested in me. He told me he was not married. He was interested in settling down with

somebody...'

The effect

With a cruel media and public reaction, one can only imagine the severity of the impact that online harassment has on survivors. 'I was devastated,' Luzinda revealed in a 4 March 2015 interview with the New Vision. 'I did not eat for over four days. I didn't know I would recover; I was so devastated at the time that I wanted to leave the country.' The incident also affected her relationship with her daughter, 'My daughter was taken away from me by her dad. But some people talked to him and he brought her back. He didn't even want to speak to me for some time and it was understandable.'

'I paid very heavily,' Kihuguru said in the SuperNatural TV interview. 'Naturally I am a very reserved person. I don't just allow anybody into my private space. I allowed this gentleman in, believing what he said. And another

mistake I made was not to ask anybody "Do you know this man?" He took advantage of that because he realised "she is a very quiet person, she keeps to herself, she won't ask anybody about me". I felt betrayed. This man was married; he lied to me he was not married...I ran to God in prayer. I cried...'

For three years, Kihuguru was hurting. 'I didn't come out three years ago because the pain was too much. I was in shock. I did not believe that was the man I had brought into my inner circle,' Kihuguru told Pastor Mondo.

For Judith Heard, a socialite, leaking of her nudes to the media felt like being 'stabbed'; while for Martha Kay, that was 'probably the most challenging three months I have ever had to face.' Martha claimed, however, that it was the most empowering experience at the same time. 'I have been

learning, unlearning and relearning a lot of things so as to grow into a much better, wiser and stronger version of myself,' she said on her Facebook page.

While there is always a road to recovery as the storm calms, the torment does not seem to end even when the incident is long happened. The media oftentimes finds a way to bring it back. On June 7, 2019, years after Luzinda's incident, Mabonga Christopher, a reporter with an online publication found a way to bring it back. 'As we are still in the aftermath of Martha Kay nude experience, we bring you some of Desire Luzinda's jaw dropping pictures that broke the internet,' he wrote. In the article, Mabonga did not only post again Luzinda's photos but described her as the 'pioneer of the nude industry in Uganda.'

Recovery

How then do survivors recover from such a horrendous experience? 'First, I had to accept that it had happened,' Luzinda said in the New Vision interview. 'That was a very big challenge. I got support from my family, friends and management team. I am also a very strong person and that is a trait I think I got from my mother. I was calm throughout, in spite of the hurt. It took me about four days to come to terms with what had happened. My family is very religious, very dignified people, but they understood and still loved me the same. They also understood that it was out of revenge (that someone leaked my photos). A lot was concocted about me and my family (but) my dad was very supportive. Around that time, we even attended a party together and he held my hand throughout.'

Luzinda also had to talk to her daughter about it. 'I discussed it with her dad.

“ ‘I have healed, I am stronger and I want to help someone else. I want to tell them “Be careful; see what happened to me. If that could happen to Joy, what about you, a young girl out there on social media? It is very dangerous. Talk to people before you make certain decisions. You can actually find love online, but...”’ Kihuguru stated in a June 2018 interview with Super Natural TV.

We realised that she was bound to hear about it from someone else and it would be distorted or exaggerated. We took her to a counsellor and broke the news to her. I needed her support so badly.'

On 29 May 2018, Heard told the Eagle, an online publication: 'In life we all have past experiences and it should not be used to define what we have become today.' She added, 'I can't stop devil's tongues but at least if I am to feed with them, I must use a long spoon.'

Kihuguru's Christian faith was the healing pillar she leant on. 'It is very important to have a relationship with Jesus Christ. Because of my relationship with Jesus, I ran to God (in prayer). I had my parents who were there for me...,' she told Pastor Mondo.

Advice

'I advise the women to, first of all, seek protection. It is also important to prove your innocence. In my case, I was lucky to have the police intervene. As a celebrity, chances that you will be misjudged are high, that's perhaps the price you pay for being in the limelight. To date, there are people who still think that I leaked my own pictures for popularity and, try as I may, there is nothing I can do about them. Try to live your life and pray. Nothing moves mountains like prayer. You need to pick up the pieces and face the situation,' Luzinda told the New Vision on 4 March 2015.

'I hope that people learn from my mistake and I hope that the fans forgive me. Someday, we'll forget the hurt, the reason we cried and who caused us pain. We will finally realise that the secret of being free is not revenge, but letting things unfold in their own way and own time. After all, what matters is not the first, but the last chapter of our life which shows how well we ran the race. So, smile, laugh, forgive, believe, and love all over again,' Sanyu Mweruka told the Big Eye on 5 February 2015.

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