Alternate Realities, Alternate Internets

African Feminist Research for a Feminist Internet

Neema Iyer, Bonnita Nyamwire and Sandra Nabulega
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For the past decade, internet connectivity has been praised for its potential to close the gender gap in Africa[1]. Among the many benefits of digitalization, digital tools enable groups that are marginalized across the intersections of gender, race, sex, class, religion, ability and nationality to produce and access new forms of knowledge and conceive counter-discources[2]. However, the internet, once viewed as a utopia for equality, is proving to be the embodiment of old systems of oppression and violence[3]. In order to understand experiences of African women in online spaces, this violence must be viewed on a continuum rather than as isolated incidents removed from existing structural frameworks[4]. Discriminatory gendered practices are shaped by social, economic, cultural and political structures in the physical world and are similarly reproduced online across digital platforms[5]. In this paper, we research the online lived experiences of women living in five sub-Saharan Africa to illustrate that repeated negative encounters fundamentally impact how women navigate and utilize the internet. This in turn, strengthens the argument for a radical shift in developing alternate digital networks grounded in feminist theory.

[1]Wagacha, W. (2019). Access to information as a driver towards closing of the gender equality gap: the emerging scene in Kenya.

[2]Shaw, A. (2014) The Internet Is Full of Jerks, Because the World Is Full of Jerks: What Feminist Theory Teaches Us About the Internet, Communication and Critical/ Cultural Studies, 11:3, 273-277.

[3]Kovacs, A., Padte, R. K., and SV. S. (April 2013) 'Don't Let it Stand!': An Exploratory Study of Women and Verbal Online Abuse in India. Internet Democracy Project. p.7. https://internetdemocracy.in/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Internet-Democracy-Project-Women-and-Online-Abuse.pdf

[4]The Women's Legal and Human Rights Bureau (WLB). (2015). End violence: Women's rights and safety online: From impunity to justice: Domestic legal remedies for cases of technology-related violence against women. Association by Progressive Communications. https://www.genderit.org/resources/impunity-justice-domestic-legal-remedies-cases-technology-related-violence-against-women-0 Accessed on May 10th, 2020

[5]Kee, J. (2006). Cultivating Violence Through Technology? Exploring the connections between information communication technologies (ICT) and violence against women. APC www.genderit.org/sites/default/upload/VAW_ICT_EN.pdf Accessed on May 10th, 2020

BACKGROUND

Online spaces both resist and reinforce hierarchies of gender and race

Even though digital technologies can provide new possibilities for being and knowing, it is important to be attentive to how power is shaped, embedded and wielded in these technologies and discourse[6]. Discriminatory impulses based on misogyny, racism, sexism, homophobia, or transphobia are not only amplified by the cultural norms of the internet, but even supported, defended, and valued in an ever growing demand for 'clout'[7]. Instead of becoming an equalizer, the same constraints that bind women in physical spaces are appearing in digital spaces.

The continuum of violence has blurred the gap between online and offline spaces, whereby violence that begins online can be continued offline and vice-versa. An example of this is in the case of online dating, particularly during adolescence. In a study among 5,647 youth in the US, victims of sexual cyber dating abuse were seven times more likely to have also experienced sexual coercion[8]. Furthermore, these kinds of online harassment can further contribute to an overall culture of violence where this kind of violence is normalized and deemed inevitable and as such, tolerated both in online and offline spaces[9].

Women from different contexts interact with technology differently

Among the many ways women relate to technology, here are two that define their experiences online. The first lies in how diverse groups of women are affected by digital advancements. For some women, digital spaces are a space for entertainment, while for others it is a source of economic stability or exploitation. The way a company CEO utilizes the internet is different from how their household staff might make use of the internet. For women who have been traditionally marginalized or silenced, the internet is a new space to collaboratively convene and push for the betterment of their communities.

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[6]Chun, W. (2006). Control and Freedom: Power and Freedom in the Age of Fiber Optics (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 30.
[7]Shaw, A. (2014) The Internet Is Full of Jerks, Because the World Is Full of Jerks: What Feminist Theory Teaches Us About the Internet, Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies, 11:3, 273-277.
[8]Zweig, J. M., Dank, M., Yahner, J., & Lachman, P. (2013). The rate of cyber dating abuse among teens and how it relates to other forms of teen dating violence. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 42, 1063–1077.10.1007/s10964-013-9922-8
[9]Fraser, E. and Martineau-Searle, L. (2018). Nature and Prevalence ofCyber Violence against Women and Girls. VAWG Helpdesk Research Report. No. 211. From https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c597613ed915d045f3778a2/VAWG_Helpdesk_Report_211_CyberVAWG.pdf

The mobile phone and recent innovations such as mobile money, notably M-Pesa in Kenya, have been heralded as revolutionary for the advancement of women's rights and equality[10]. Overall, diverse groups of women react differently to, benefit differently from and are fundamentally treated differently on technology platforms.

The other issue in how women interact with technology is how they self-identify on online platforms. There are two ways to look at this: whereby one can disembody on the internet or one can question the need for disembodiment. There is a view that the internet can create utopian space devoid of gender identities, one where we can re-embody through the use of new symbols such as avatars. As far back as 1995, Sherry Turkle[11] proposed that technology enables multiplicity and the ability for people to enact identities which may not be available in offline spaces. The other viewpoint raises the question, why does the need to disembody exist in the first place? For example, what do we aim to achieve by switching genders or ungendering ourselves in online spaces? If for some women, the answer is to escape existent oppressive structures that dominate our relation to others and the world, then this in itself is a sign of the failure of our utopian dreams.

Even if we wanted to access digital spaces in a manner detached from our gender, intentional design poses an increasingly impenetrable barrier. Nick Couldry explains that in both offline and online spaces, we perform our identities and develop public or quasi-public profiles within the constraints of the platforms we choose[12]. Norms of gender continue to shape how we present ourselves and how others perceive us in online spaces. Furthermore, if we were to consider changing one's gender identity, just like offline, this reinforces a binary understanding of gender[13]. Through conscious design practices, the internalized cultural beliefs of developers are reproduced and in turn, identities and social relations are forcefully established and codified[14]. These practices are vital to social media and similar platforms because this sorting of users by gender is essential for digital monetization and targeted advertising. This constant feedback loop, enforced through ubiquitous surveillance, ensures that we conform to our gender identities by perpetually conditioning us via suggestions or recommendations in our newsfeeds, timelines and inboxes[15].

[10]Ndaye, O. 2014. "Is the Success of M-Pesa 'Empowering' Kenyan Rural Women?
[11]Turkle, S. (1995). Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet. New York: Simon & Schuster.
[12]Couldry, N. (2012) Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice (London: Polity), 57.
[13]Bornstein, K. (1994). Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us. New York. Vintage Books.
[14]Balsamo, A. (2011). Designing culture: The technological imagination at work. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
[15]Cheney-Lippold, J. (2011). A new algorithmic identity soft biopolitics and the modulation of control. Theory, Culture & Society, 28, 164–181.

Knowledge and technology have been deemed as Western/Northern

For several hundred years, entire communities have been judged or perceived as progressive only based on their knowledge of Eurocentric science and technology[16]. Furthermore, the association of women's role in technology has frequently been sidelined based on the assumption that the understanding of technical or scientific content can only exist within Northern or Western-style formal education systems, such as industrial-style classroom structures[17].

When changes were made from using indigenous technologies to those designed and produced in the global North, this introduced a challenge to the gender division of labour. The adoption of these new technologies, often brought by colonialists, meant that in some cases, women lost control of both the technological process and the resulting end product[18]. This process is evident even within Western societies as illustrated by how computer programming shifted from a field dominated by women in the 1950s/60s to the contemporary male-dominated landscape[19]. This shift can be attributed to the introduction of aptitude and personality tests that weeded out women by selecting for stereotypically masculine traits, as well as advertisements that promoted computers and video games as toys for boys. This shift from female-dominated to male-dominated included an increase in pay and prestige, and the sidelining of women from the field of computer science globally is evident till today.

Finally, the portrayal of African women has oftentimes been oversimplified and depicted as stagnant or monolithic, thus erasing the multiplicities of women's identities[20]. There is a denial of voice and agency from African women, strengthened by a lack of nuanced discussions about the role of colonial power and western imperialism on marginalised people, as well as the long-standing history of the exclusion or suppression of women's intellectual contribution to the professionalisation of technological knowledge[21] [22].

[16]Crewe, E. and Harrison, E. (1998). Whose development. An ethnography of aid.
[17]Sweetman, C. (2003). Gender, Development and Poverty.
[18]Everts, S. (1998). Gender & Technology: Empowering Women, Engendering Development.
[19]Abbate, J. (2012) Recoding Gender: Women's Changing Participation in Computing (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press)
[20]Sanya, B. N. (2013). Disrupting patriarchy: An examination of the role of e-technologies in rural Kenya. Feminist Africa 18 e-spaces: e-politics, 12-24.
[21]Wajcman, J. 2004. Techno Feminism. Cambridge: Polity Press.
[22]Collins, Patricia Hill (2000). Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. Routledge. p. 13.

Existing Movements - Cyberfeminism and Afrofuturism

Cyberfeminism provides a framework to explore women's lived experiences in virtual or digital spaces. There are several definitions of cyberfeminism, and in particular, black cyberfeminism, which is built both on black feminist thought as well as feminist technology studies[23]. The overall consensus, however, establishes that black cyberfeminism provides an intersectional approach to resist oppressive gender structures and achieve equality in digital spaces. With growth in access to technology and the internet, there are new spaces for women across the world to convene and counter repressive norms propped up by patriarchy.

Cyberfeminism thus offers a space for feminist thinking to critique, imagine and re-create a radically open internet. The recently published Data Feminism Manifesto exemplifies the second wave of the cyberfeminist movement through the refusal of harmful data regimes and a commitment to new data futures that "interrogate the biopolitical implications of data with a keen eye to gender, race, sexuality, class, disability, nationality, and other forms of embodied difference.[24]"

Kishonna Gray-Denson provides three main themes towards a critical black cyberfeminist framework, namely 1) social structural oppression of technology and virtual spaces, 2) intersecting oppressions experienced in virtual spaces, and 3) the distinctness of the virtual feminist community[25]. The first deals with concepts previously discussed above, on how the inherent maleness and whiteness of the internet reinforces harmful stereotypes, discrimination and unequal power structures. The second encourages diverse ways of perceiving and knowing the lived experiences and struggles of women online. The third theme celebrates the new spaces where marginalized voices can be heard and respected.

[23]Daniels, J. (2009). «Rethinking cyberfeminism (s): Race, gender, and embodiment.» WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly 37.1: 101-124.

[24]Feminist Data Manifest-No. From https://www.manifestno.com/

[25]Gray-Denson, K. (2015). Race, Gender, and Virtual Inequality: Exploring the Liberatory Potential of Black Cyberfeminist Theory.

On the other hand, Afrofuturism is a transdisciplinary cultural movement and school of thought, grounded in creativity, that explores the intersection between African diaspora, and technology and science fiction[26]. It provides a lens enabling the imagination of alternate realities and futures, not necessarily bound to constraints of linear time progression. This creativity can manifest as literature, music, visual art, performances, etc. Afrofuturism also provides a space for black women to further explore the intersection of gender, sexuality and race. A notable example is the work of Nnedi Okarafor, which centers women as protagonists in technology-dominated Afrofutures[27].

Responding to the needs of African women against online gender-based violence has been slow and inefficient

Most countries across the continent do not have specific legislation or strategies against online gender-based violence. Existing preventive measures to specifically target online gender-based violence are lacking[28]. Even in terms of data capture, for example, the Uganda Demographic and Household Survey 2016 (UDHS) reported that 22% of women experience domestic violence[29], but no data on online gender based violence was reported.

There is a major gap in data on the prevalence of all types of online violence against women and girls in low and middle-income countries. Furthermore, where this evidence is available, the data is not gender-disaggregated or does not take into account the intersectional impact on class, women with disabilities, refugee situations or traditionally marginalized areas. For example, the South Sudanese organization Access for All conducted research showing that urban refugees in Uganda were disproportionately targeted with online violence. Interviews conducted with urban refugees in Uganda showed that three in four of the respondents had experienced some form of online violence including abuse, stalking, unwarranted sexual advances and hacking of social media accounts[30].

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[26]«(PDF) The Languages of Afrofuturism | Adriano Elia ....» https://www.academia.edu/20375748/The_Languages_of_Afrofuturism. Accessed 27 May. 2020.
[27]Okarafor, N. (2018). Slate. Retrieved from https://slate.com/technology/2018/02/mother-of-invention-a-new-short-story-by-nnedi-okorafor.html on May 20th, 2020.
[28]Smit, DM. (2015). Cyberbullying in South African and American schools: A legal comparative study. South African Journal of Education, 35(2), 01-11. https://dx.doi.org/saje.v35n2a1076
[29]Uganda Bureau of Statistics and ICF. (2017). Uganda Demographic Health Survey 2016: Key Indicators Report. UBOS and Rockville,Maryland: UBOS and ICF.
[30]Kalemera, A. (2019). Building Digital Literacy and Security Capacity of Women Refugees in Uganda. Retrieved from https://cipesa.org/2019/12/building-digital-literacy-and-security-capacity-of-women-refugees-in-uganda/ on May 7th, 2020

Other gaps include a lack of a gendered analysis of online harassment, a lack of a comparative analysis of online versus physical violence against women and lack of documented perspectives of online GBV experienced by women[31]. Data alone cannot lead to appropriate response and the role of data must be contextualized, rather than perceived as a panacea. Furthermore, it is important to consider re-victimization and laying the onus of documentation upon victims. However, understanding the online experiences and preferences of women is a fundamental building block towards creating a feminist internet.

In terms of response, violence against women online is often trivialized with poor punitive action taken by authorities, further exacerbated by victim blaming[32]. While some countries, mostly outside Africa, have attempted to address online violence, through legal and other means, the enforcement of such measures has proven tricky due to a lack of appropriate mechanisms, procedures and capacity[33]. In some instances, women, who have had their information shared without their consent, have even been punished by the law. One such victim in Uganda, Desire Luzinda made a public apology after an incident in 2014, and was charged with exhibition of pornographic material contrary to section 13 of the Anti-Pornography Act[34].

Attempts by online platforms to provide remedial measures for victims of online gender-based violence are proving to be ineffective[35]. This report, Toxic Twitter, by Amnesty International claims that social media platforms, in particular Twitter, are failing in their responsibility to protect women's rights online by "inadequately investigating and responding to reports of violence and abuse in a transparent manner."[36]For example, in 2017, Jack Dorsey, the CEO of Twitter said, "We see voices being silenced on Twitter every day. We've been working to counteract this for the past 2 years. We prioritized this in 2016. We updated our policies and increased the size of our teams. It wasn't enough."

[31]Lewis, R., Rowe, M. and Wiper, C. (2017). Online Abuse of Feminists as An Emerging form of Violence Against Women and Girls, The British Journal of Criminology, Volume 57, Issue 6, November 2017, Pages 1462–1481, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azw073

[32]Women's Legal and Human Rights Bureau, Inc. (2015). From Impunity to Justice: Domestic Legal Reminders for Cases of Technology Related Violence against Women. Available at https://www.genderit.org/resources/impunity-justice-domestic-legal-remedies-cases-technology-related-violence-against-women

[33]Abdul Aziz, Z., & Moussa, J, (2013). Due Diligence Framework: State Accountability Framework for Eliminating Violence against Women. International Human Rights Initiative. www. duediligenceproject.org/ewExternalFiles/Due%20Diligence%20 Framework%20 Report%20Z.pdf

[34]Sullivan, G. (2014). Ugandan official wants to arrest victim of revenge porn: 'She should be locked up and isolated'. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/11/12/ugandan-official-wants-to-arrest-victim-of-revenge-porn-she-should-be-locked-up-and-isolated/ on May 7th, 2020

[35]Amnesty International (2018). Toxic Twitter - A Toxic Place for Women https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-1/. Accessed 8 Apr. 2020.

[36]«Toxic Twitter - A Toxic Place for Women | Amnesty International.» 15 Mar. 2018, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-1/. Accessed 27 May. 2020.

INTRODUCTION

Defining the Experience of Women Online

Online gender-based violence is commonly defined as an action facilitated by one or more people that harms others based on their sexual or gender identity or by enforcing harmful gender norms, which is carried out by using the internet or mobile technology. This includes stalking, bullying, sexual harassment, defamation, hate speech and exploitation, or any other online controlling behavior[37] [38].

According to the United Nations, 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."[39]

Types of Online Gender-based Violence, according to the Violence Against Women Learning Network[40]

Types of Online Gender-Based Violence

Hacking	The use of technology to gain unauthorised or illegal access to systems and information, e.g. accessing private emails, passwords, call logs.
Impersonation	The use of technology to assume the identity of someone else e.g. creating fake profiles on social media platforms, sending messages from someone else's account.
Surveillance/ Tracking	The use of technology to stalk and monitor a someone else's activities e.g. tracking web browser content, GPS locations.
Harassment/ Spamming	The use of technology to repeatedly contact, annoy, threaten, and/or scare a person.
Recruitment	The use of technology to lure persons into potentially violent situations eg. using chat rooms for human trafficking purposes.
Malicious Distribution	The use of technology to manipulate and distribute personal and/or defamatory content related to someone else, e.g. doxxing, non-consensual sharing of personal images.

[37]Badenhorst, C. (2011). Legal responses to cyberbullying and sexting in South Africa. Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention.
[38]Hinson L et.al. (2018). Technology-facilitated gender based violence:what is it and how do we measure it? Washington: International centre for Research on Women.
[39]United Nations. Violence against women. https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/vaw/v-overview.htm. Accessed 8 Apr. 2020.
[40]«Issue 4: Technology-related Violence Against Women» http://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/our-work/issuebased_newsletters/issue-4/index.html. Accessed 8 Apr. 2020.

There are a number of characteristics that amplify the impacts of technology-facilitated violence against women[41]:

Amplification of the impacts of technology-facilitated violence against women

Anonymity	perpetrators can remain anonymous and unknown.
Action-at-a-Distance	abuse can be committed from anywhere in the world.
Automation	abuse can be committed using technologies which take less skill, time and effort.
Affordability	low-cost technologies are readily accessible to perpetrators.
Propagation/ Perpetuity	rapid multiplication makes abuse difficult to track or stop further circulation.

The unregulated nature of social media platforms and other online spaces amplifies the growth of online gender based violence and increases risk for women to be victimised.

Women's experience of the internet is limited by negative encounters

Online gender-based violence has been found to be just as damaging to women as physical violence[42]. Women are more likely to be repeat victims of online gender-based violence and are more likely to experience it in severity than men[43]. In a widely circulated report that has since been retracted, UN Women claimed that women are 27 times more likely than men to be harassed online[44].

Online gender-based violence like any other form of gender-based violence infringes on women's fundamental rights and freedoms, their dignity and equality, and impacts on their lives at all levels[45]. Previous research conducted in seven countries including Kenya, Democratic Congo, Mexico, Bosnia, among others showed that women who were targets of online gender-based violence suffered a continuum of consequences that range from depression, mental and emotional stress, to anxiety[46].

[41]Fialova, K. and Fascendini, F. (2011). Voices from digital spaces: Technology related violence against women.
[42]UN Broadband Commission. (2015). Urgent Action needed. Cyber Violence against Women and Girls. From http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2015/9/cyber-violence-report-press-release
[43]Woodlock. (2017). The Abuse of Technology in Domestic Violence and Stalking. Violence against women, 584-602.
[44]UN Women (2015). Cyberviolence against Women and Girls: A World-wide wake-up call.
[45]Van der Wilk, A. and Niosi, M. (2018). #HerNetHerRights. From https://www.womenlobby.org/IMG/pdf/hernetherrights_report_2017_for_web.pdf
[46]GenderIT. (2014). GenderIT.org on technology-related violence against women. https://genderit.org/onlinevaw/about/. Accessed 8 Apr. 2020.

Women, especially in public positions such as journalism and politics oftentimes bare the brunt of online harassment and violence. Connor Friedersdorf, an American journalist for the Atlantic reported that after years of hateful feedback in the form of harassment, stalking and threats of violence, rape or death, his female colleagues "left the blogosphere" by either quitting writing for the public altogether or shifting to more traditional formats.[47] Looking at the intersection of gender and race, out of a sample of 778 women, Amnesty International researchers found that black women journalists and politicians in the US and UK were 84% more likely to be the target of hate speech online compared to their white counterparts[48]. Overall, women of colour were found to be 34% more likely to be targeted with abusive language on Twitter.

Furthermore, researchers exploring online violence against women, problematic representations of women, or other forms of discrimination based on sexism, racism, homophobia or transphobia on digital platforms or videos games have also become the target of vicious assaults and violence. For example, Anita Sarkeesian, who started a project to document how the portrayal of women in video games could be damaging, received rape and death threats, videos and other simulations[49].

Women, especially in public positions such as journalism and politics oftentimes bare the brunt of online harassment and violence

[47]Friedersdorf, C. (2014). When Misogynist Trolls Make Journalism Miserable for Women. https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/01/when-misogynist-trolls-make-journalism-miserable-for-women/282862/. Accessed 8 Apr. 2020.
[48]«Women abused on Twitter every 30 seconds - new study ....» 18 Dec. 2018, https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/women-abused-twitter-every-30-seconds-new-study. Accessed 8 Apr. 2020.
[49]Adrienne Shaw (2014) The Internet Is Full of Jerks, Because the World Is
Full of Jerks: What Feminist Theory Teaches Us About the Internet, Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies, 11:3, 273-277, DOI: 10.1080/14791420.2014.926245

OBJECTIVE

The overall objective of this study was to understand the online lived experiences of women living across 5 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, namely Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Senegal and South Africa. The study also sought to document the prevalence, experiences and responses to online gender-based violence against women.

METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional study was carried out across Addis Ababa, Nairobi, Kampala, Dakar and Johannesburg. Both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were used. Three thousand four hundred and six (3306) women aged 18-65 years, that access and use the internet at least once a week were interviewed face-to-face as part of a broad-based semi-structured quantitative survey.

Five focus group discussions of 10 women were conducted as well as five in-depth interviews with women who self-reported to have experienced online gender-based violence. Women were asked questions about their experiences online, their perceptions around online violence against women and their digital safety practices.

Convenient sampling was used to identify respondents for the quantitative survey, while purposive sampling was used to select participants for the focus group discussion and in-depth interviews. These cities were chosen for the survey based on the high density of internet users and cost implications for the study design.

Ethical Challenges

One of the issues we often ran into was the terminology for online gender-based violence. There is currently no universally accepted definition of online violence and similarly, translating and discussing this content into local languages such as Amharic lead to challenges in the research. The other issue that arose was a tendency for respondents in the in-depth interviews to under report on the extent of the violence they experienced or to disclose information on perpetrators. This may have been because respondents felt that they were revealing sensitive information, which also made them feel uncomfortable or embarrassed.

This also contributes to the issue of re-victimization and the risk of traumatisation for both respondents and researchers, as violent experiences were recounted during the course of the research. Some of the participants we spoke to in our in-depth interviews said that they felt that being able to answer our questions was therapeutic or cathartic, and that it was relieving to have someone to talk to about their experience. As human subject protections strengthen over time, concern about potential harm in research on emotionally distressing topics has become increasingly important, especially in the context of no benefit for participants. These concerns include psychological risk, anxiety, trust issues, shame, fear, frustration, inconvenience, but more so a feeling of a lack of support. While it is expected for some participants to report unexpected distress, some research has actually shown that more numbers report gains from participation, recognizing that while it is difficult, it is also helpful.

Limitations

The study population is not representative of the population of women in each country, since enrollment in the study targeted women who lived in either the capital city or a large metropolitan city, and access and use the internet at least once a week. Therefore, the results of the study are not generalizable to the population of women in each country.

Furthermore, convenience sampling of individuals in the city could overestimate or underestimate the prevalence of online harassment. Victims of gender-based violence might be more or less willing to talk to enumerators about their personal experiences.

Given the situatedness of the researchers in Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia, the data in this paper is skewed towards experiences, interviews and policies from Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia, compared to the other two countries in this report. Hence, the knowledge produced may not be representative and can be partial in our arguments and feminist politics.

However, this study does contribute to the limited research published on this topic and it provides a basis for additional research that further explores online violence, as well as broad studies that employ more diverse sampling methods and techniques.

RESULTS

Descriptive Results

Across the five countries, 3,306 women responded to the quantitative survey. For all countries, even though the sample included women aged 18-65, the majority of respondents were aged between 18-35 years. This may be attributed to higher internet usage amongst younger age groups. There were wide differences in education levels between the different countries. While only 0.2% of participants in both Ethiopia and South Africa had received no education at all, this number was at 16.8% for Senegal. Similarly, large differences were also found between employment status. In Senegal, 33% of respondents were unemployed as compared to 6.2% and 7.1% in Ethiopia and South Africa, respectively. Uganda had the highest proportion of women reporting self-employment (36.9%).

Demographic information for Senegal, South Africa, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda

Age	Kenya (%) N=850	Senegal (%) N=701	Ethiopia (%) N=498	Uganda (%) N=720	South Africa (%) N=536
18-25	32.2	34.4	45	47.6	70.5
26-35	37.6	36.5	43.4	40.1	19.0
36-45	23.1	20.3	9.0	9.0	8.0
45+	7.1	8.8	2.6	3.2	2.4
Education	**Kenya**	**Senegal**	**Ethiopia**	**Uganda**	**South Africa**
Post graduate	5.8	3.4	6.2	3.6	6.5
Bachelor's degree	26.5	9.3	40	37.8	18.3
Diploma/Vocational	30.8	9.6	23.3	21.3	10.6
Secondary education	28.1	34.7	26.7	26.8	63.6
Primary education	6.8	26.2	3.6	7.6	0.7
No education	2.0	16.8	0.2	2.9	0.2
Occupation	**Kenya**	**Senegal**	**Ethiopia**	**Uganda**	**South Africa**
Casual/Informal	12.9	29.2	9.4	11.1	4.1
Formally employed	24.9	6.1	37.8	28.2	20.9
Retired	3.3	0.4	-	0.8	-
Self-employed	33.3	10.3	28.9	36.9	4.3
Student	12.2	20.4	17.7	13.9	63.6
Unemployed	13.3	33.5	6.2	9.0	7.1

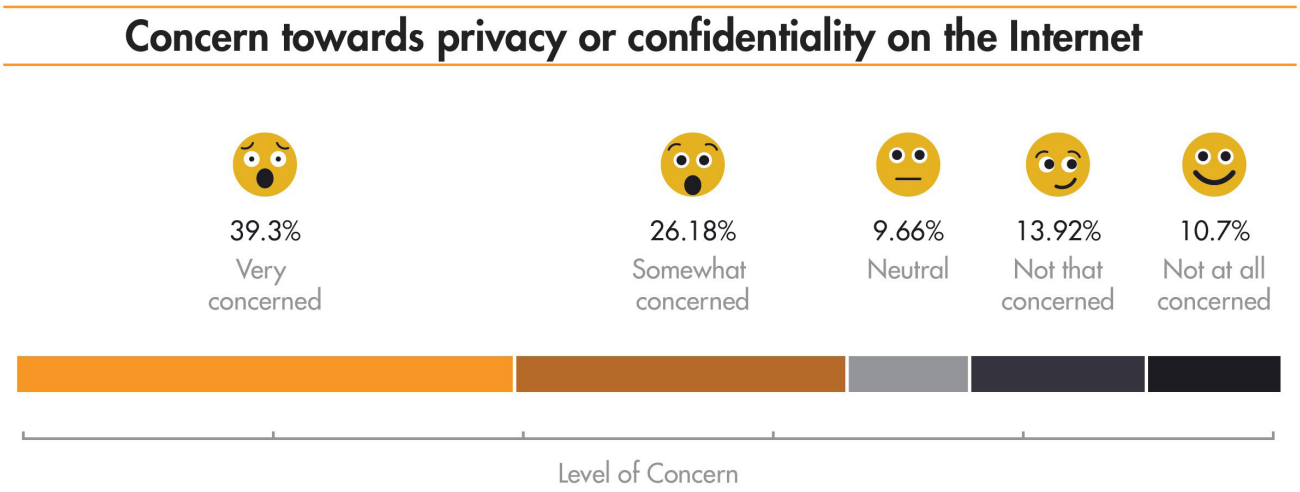
Perceptions of Safety Online

Thirty-nine percent (39.3%) of respondents were either somewhat concerned or very concerned about their safety online. Twenty-eight percent (28.2%) of the respondents reported having become more concerned with their digital safety over the past 5 years, with 51.6% attributing this change to either having experienced or witnessed accounts of online violence and attacks. This further exemplifies how the normalization of aggression -micro or macro- and violence in online spaces affects the perceptions of safety amongst women users.

> *"I personally think most people are subject to this violence or harassment but we either don't know it or we normalize it. I haven't considered my case as online violence related to gender until you told me so."*

- IDI 002, Ethiopia

Chart 1. Concern towards Privacy or Confidentiality on the Internet



In terms of perceptions of safety online, the women we spoke with discussed the role that patriarchy plays in the acceptance of online gender-based violence, and particularly how the technology-aided processes of automation, action-at-distance, anonymity, and affordability amplify these actions and negatively impact the digital experiences of women.

"The misogyny. There are no consequences. Patriarchy is the structure that all other structures stem from. We get social tools. Now, they are able to access women they didn't think they could access. The whole idea of how women are seen, or expected to be in society, is still very much present."

"There has to be a reason why someone hurt her. A woman has to have done something wrong. Social media is opening up our eyes, this is what society is. This is the way people think, social media just amplifies it."

"Sometimes, I get really shocked. How deep are we all in this socialization? How much power does patriarchy really have? It's now started making sense to a lot of people, the way this has been handled is wrong. Women being violated is still perceived as an absolutely OK thing."

- IDI 002, Kenya

"Our society is deeply rooted in the cultural and religious perspective, where both of them undermine and discriminate against women. This is what we are going to see in online spaces. We have seen the type of backlash the feminist movements face online. There is no constructive criticism. It's all about slut shaming, image tarnishing, and body shaming. Even though the movement is growing and defending each other or standing in solidarity with one another, it is sometimes very tiring."

- IDI 004, Ethiopia

Similarly, another participant in Kenya stressed how control has been an overarching theme predating the internet, and how the internet has promoted novel methods of control through surveillance and tracking.

"Someone called for a consultancy job. He said my number was already stored on his phone. When I asked him how, he said he had synced all his wife's contacts. It is so much easier to control and survell women now. Control has always been the norm, only the tools have changed. You can access the minute details in peoples' lives."

- IDI 001, Kenya

These thoughts exemplify how constant assaults as well as invasive and aggressive behaviours against women in online spaces wears them down, through these pervasive structures of patriarchy, dominance and surveillance. This further impacts their perception of safety on the platforms. This is especially important when considering the digital gender gap across Africa. According to the GSMA, in 2019, the digital gender gap in mobile internet use for sub-Saharan Africa was 41%, with safety and security ranking third among the single most important barrier to owning a mobile phone, as identified by non-mobile phone owning women[50]. As mentioned earlier, the responses to this recurrent violence against women in online spaces has often trivialized women's experience, but it has far reaching consequences in how women fundamentally access the internet. This divide in internet use further expands when urban versus rural populations are compared, and in turn has serious implications for already widening disparities in income levels, education levels and accessing social services.

[50]GSMA (2019). The Mobile Gender Gap: Africa. Retrieved from https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-in-Africa.pdf on May 7th, 2020

Behaviour Change Related to Perceptions of Safety Online

In terms of self-reported behaviour change over the past 5 years, only 36% responded that they had taken concrete steps towards increasing their safety online and for 80% of respondents, the major action was to frequently change their passwords. A much smaller proportion reported blocking or unfollowing suspicious persons (8.4%), using VPNs (3.6%) or updating their applications (3.6%). Respondents who did not take any concrete steps to increase their safety online attributed their behavior to "never having thought about it" (25.7%) or "no one would take the time to hack my account" (34.6%).

Several of the women in the focus group discussions reported taking more stringent measures such as changing passwords frequently, keeping passwords confidential or using pseudonyms on digital platforms. Two interviewees explained this change in behaviour.

> *"...before I knew about digital security and all that, I was naïve. So, I was like, yeah, let me use my real name. There is no harm. But then, I saw there was some kind of harm so I decided to change. The other accounts that have my real name, I rarely use them. I don't post. If am posting, I post not really sensitive things"*

- IDI 004, Uganda

> *"On my profile, I use a pseudonym, so they don't really know who I am. But they don't know who exactly I am, because I am trying to protect my privacy."*

- Focus Group Discussion, South Africa

Accessing Information on Digital Safety and Self-Care

A significant proportion (29.2%) of respondents did not know where to turn for information on online safety and security. Thirteen percent (13.4%) said that they would research the information on Google and another 14.6% said that they might go to local authorities such as the police. For those who reported that they would turn to the local authorities such as the police for further information on how to stay safe online, the situation is further compounded by the fact that most local authorities are not trained on tackling these issues, much less from a gender-sensitive perspective.

Twelve percent (12.5%) reported that they would turn to a friend for assistance. The lack of a clear source for appropriate information on digital safety illustrates that the current reach of organizations working on digital rights and safety remains limited. There is an ongoing need for resources to be made more readily available, adapted to local languages, and further mainstreamed in the educational curricula of schools and other academic institutions.

A respondent to the in-depth interviews described her predicament, and explained that despite her educational background and access to resources, it was still unclear to her on what measures to take to ensure her safety and privacy online.

> *"To tell you the truth I don't know what measures are available. I don't know what to do other than blocking people who talk to me without my consent and asking for information from others. People I have talked to also didn't tell me relevant measures. Even though I am a law practitioner, I don't know the legal remedy or other available measures. One of the best solutions was to change my contact but still I didn't want to change it as I use it for work purposes. So, I try to properly talk to those people who call me, choose to block or avoid picking up unknown calls."*
>
> **- IDI 003, Ethiopia**

"Before, it was terrifying and I would stay away from social media. But, that's what they want. If I feel the need to respond, then I do. Otherwise, I ignore. I've become a bit hardened. I would cry and get depressed about the hate. I don't bother with reporting any more. A lot of these hacks happen to us as individuals but I ignore. I only just keep changing my password to avoid being hacked"

- IDI 004, Kenya

Experiences of Online Gender-Based Violence

Phone ownership and mobile networks have been growing rapidly across Africa. For example, Ethiopia reported a growth of 200% in internet subscription from just 10,000 users in the year 2000 to 20.5 million by 2019, even though this still means an internet access rate of only 18.9% for the country. These figures indicate the potential for further growth, including the number of women first time users of the internet across the continent. Correspondingly, across all countries surveyed in this study, respondents reported a high prevalence of online violence against women.

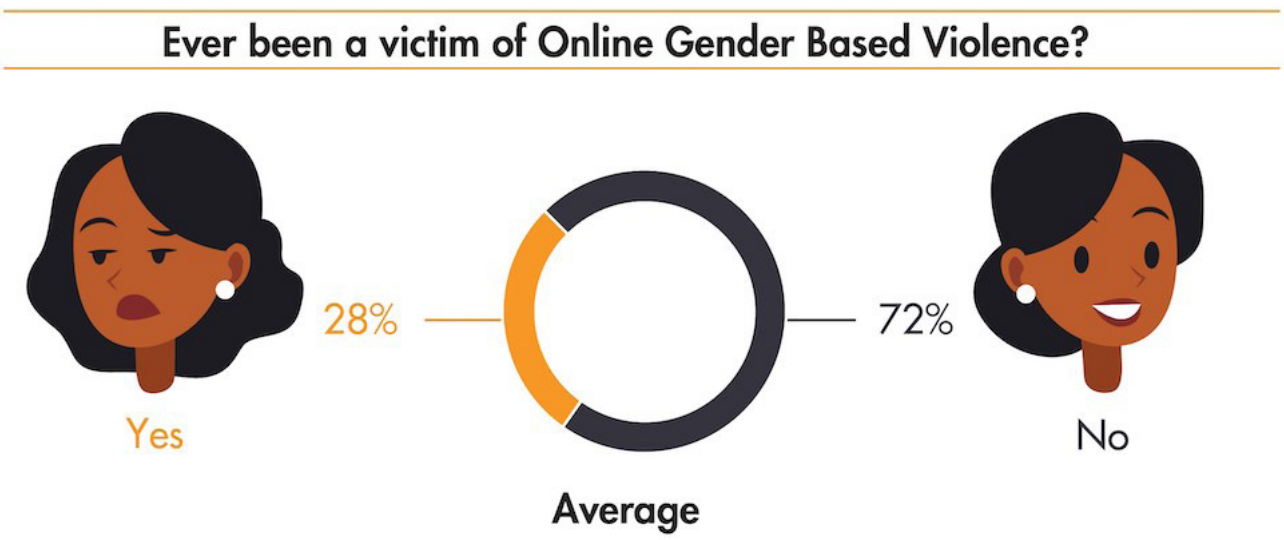
According to our in-depth interviews (IDI), this violence is widespread and common in their communities.

"Technology has opened up spaces for women to speak out openly where previously they were not able to. So, the more we try to enter this space further, the more violence we get from some men."

- Focus Group Discussion, South Africa

"Without question (online gender-based violence is common in Ethiopia). Even I heard a lot of cases around my area. Especially in universities and high schools, the problem becomes out of control...."

- IDI 001, Ethiopia



Country		Yes (%)	No (%)
Ethiopia	N=487	31.2	68.8
Kenya	N=850	28	72
Senegal	N=701	25.5	74.5
South Africa	N=536	23.3	76.7
Uganda	N=720	32.8	67.2

In terms of self-reported experiences of online gender-based violence, twenty-eight percent (28.2%) of the women interviewed reported having experienced some form of online violence. These incidents manifested as sexual harassment (36%) such as unwelcome sexual advances, offensive name calling (33.2%) and stalking (26.7%) such as repeated contact and doxxing.

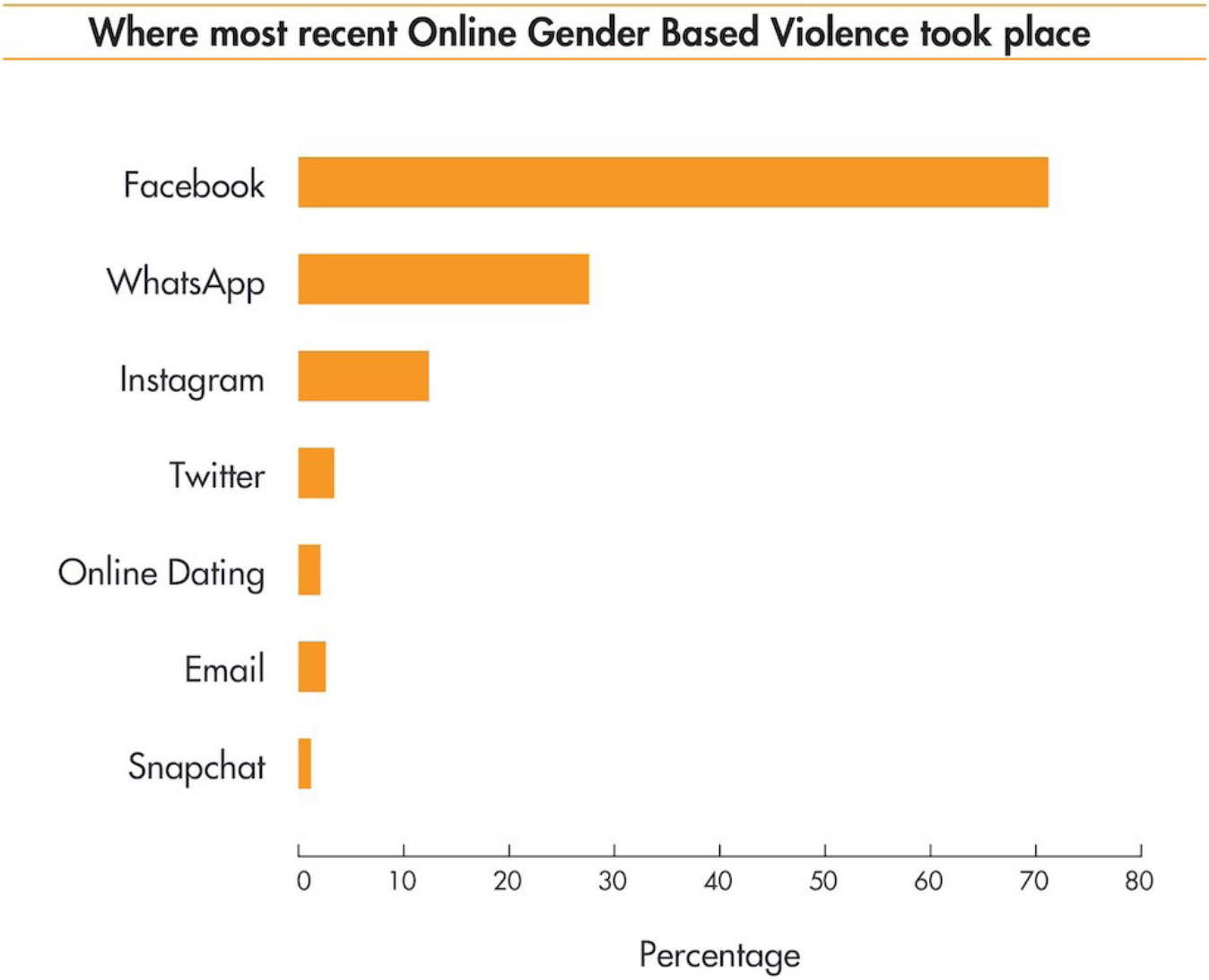
These results are consistent with those of other studies. A multi-country study in the global north, conducted by Amnesty International in 2018 (n=4009), on abuse and harassment on social media platforms found that 23% of women surveyed had experienced online abuse at least once[51]. Similarly, a 2016 study by the African Development Bank group revealed that one third of respondents interviewed had experienced harassment online, with 7% having had their intimate information shared without their consent. It should be noted that the latter study was not disaggregated by gender and though no methodology was presented, authors claimed a majority of participants were women[52].

[51] «Amnesty International Report 2017/18.» 1 Feb. 2018, https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/POL1067002018ENGLISH.PDF. Accessed 27 May. 2020.

[52] «Policy Brief on Gender Based Cyber Violence in Kenya.» 1 Mar. 2016, https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Generic-Documents/Policy_Brief_on_Gender_Based_Cyber_Violence_in_Kenya.pdf. Accessed 27 May. 2020.

Common Platforms where Online Gender-Based Violence Occurs

A majority (71.2%) of all the incidents of online gender-based violence against the respondents occurred on Facebook. In Kenya, Uganda, Senegal and South Africa, this violence happens primarily on Facebook and Whatsapp.



In Ethiopia, Facebook, and additionally, Telegram were the main platforms where women experienced online violence. The prominence of Facebook and chat platforms such as Whatsapp and Telegram can be due to two main reasons 1) Facebook does not require the verification of users on signup (such as providing a phone number), making it easier for one to hide their identity while using the platform, 2) there are no evident community standards on closed platforms such as Telegram with sole authority resting on the administrator of these large groups. While respondents suffered from offensive name-calling and threats on Facebook, they were often doxxed on Telegram and were unable to remove this content.

"From my stand, I would say Telegram is unmanageable communication media. It is worrying and out of regulation. You can't do anything about it. We can say the Facebook community standard is weak...but the good thing is it has a regulatory system. Revenge porn on Facebook takes 0.05 micro seconds until AI recognizes it after that it immediately taken it down. If your porn is posted on Telegram, you can't do anything, they wouldn't take it down as far as I know."

- FGD Participant, Ethiopia

The power of the administrators and the perpetrators, and the lack of agency amongst the platform users, are of particular importance in this case. Administrators continue to uphold the ideals of patriarchy, which places power in the hands of men in cultural, social, and political spaces, with little recourse for justice afforded to female victims. In the latter situations, abuse can be "performative"[53], and a source of social clout to build up the status and identity of the perpetrator. In both situations, the final outcome is the silencing of women and their dismissal from digital spaces. Looking deeper, the perpetrators use three overlapping strategies, namely intimidation, shaming, and discrediting to limit the voices, power, and influence of women in digital spaces[54].

[53]Lewis, R., Rowe, M. and Wiper, C. (2017) Online Abuse of Feminists as An Emerging form of Violence Against Women and Girls, The British Journal of Criminology, Volume 57, Issue 6, November 2017, Pages 1462–1481, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azw073

[54]Sobieraj, S. (2018) Bitch, slut, skank, cunt: patterned resistance to women's visibility in digital publics, Information, Communication & Society, 21:11, 1700-1714.

Coordinated Assaults and Violence in Online Spaces

For 57% of the respondents who had experienced online gender-based violence, only one specific person was responsible for the incidents. However, in 23% of the cases, multiple people were involved in the online attack. Organized trolling has been on the rise, especially against women with public-facing careers such as journalists, media personalities, activists and politicians.

> *"Online threats are mainly organized trolling. I've received death threats. They come up with campaigns or a hashtag, so they rant at me all day. These insults are based on me as a woman, my anatomy, my family. They will use parts of the female body. The insults are so personal. There is a time I considered leaving Facebook and Twitter because the trolling became so bad. They use money and people to troll me online."*

- IDI 004, Kenya

Convention has recommended ignoring online harassment, eg. "Don't feed the trolls"[55], however, there is a growing sentiment around the inefficacy of this approach[56]. This sentiment is in line with victim blaming in the physical world where women are reprimanded for their choices and are urged to take defensive stances. The advice of "Don't feed the trolls" limits women's freedom of expression and activates self-censorship[57].

However, amongst multiple women that were interviewed, this coordinated trolling organized around physically hurting women, some going so far as to call for the murder of the targeted women. These calls for violence happened both on open platforms such as Twitter, whereby they could be reported, but also on closed platforms such as Whatsapp where moderation is not possible.

> *"I have seen those kinds of threats that make you feel frightened for your life. Imagine this gives a power for some jobless teenagers. Actually it is like giving an order "go and kill her"!*

- Focus Group Discussion Participant, Ethiopia

[55]Sanfilippo, M.,Yang, S.,and Fichman, P. (2017). Managing Online Trolling: From Deviant to Social and Political Trolls. HICSS.
[56]Golf-Papez, M. and Veer, M. (2017) Don't feed the trolling: rethinking how online trolling is being defined and combated, Journal of Marketing Management, 33:15-16, 1336-1354.
[57]Lumsden, K. & Morgan, H. (2017) Media framing of trolling and online abuse: silencing strategies, symbolic violence, and victim blaming, Feminist Media Studies, 17:6, 926-940

For women occupying public spaces, their daily lives were a constant stream of online aggression and violence against them. An in-depth interview respondent reported experiencing online gender-based violence because of her profession in journalism, where she had been a repeat victim of harassment:

"Woman journalists, when they post or write stories that some other people do not like, they are harassed, they are insulted. To make them feel so useless. They get insults below the belt, which is obviously sexual harassment. To humiliate a woman, they must go below the belt. Women journalists and politicians. It is terrible. You find in most times women opt out of social media. At least in Kenya. Including myself, that's why I opted out of Facebook."

- IDI 003, Kenya

This experience is representative of that of many women who occupy public digital spaces such as journalists, activists, academics and politicians. A study in the UK found that women journalists were targeted by hateful comments on Twitter three times more than their male colleagues[58]. In a study of online violence against women who are journalists in Pakistan, results showed that 8 out of 10 women self-censor in an attempt to counter online violence, and 3 out of 10 experience more serious crimes such as incitement to violence offlin[59]. Similarly, International Women's Media Foundation and Troll Busters reported that among those surveyed, 40% of women journalists avoided reporting on issues or topics that would result in experiences of abuse[60]. This in turn impacts the diversity of information, news and stories the public receives due to the censorship and silencing of women.

[58]Demos, 2014, Misogyny on Twitter, available at https://www.demos.co.uk/project/misogyny-on-twitter/
[59]Kamran, H. (2019) Hostile Bytes: A study of online violence against women journalists https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/95-women-journalists-say-online-violence-has-an-impact-on-professional-choices-77-self-censor-study-finds/. Accessed 19 May 2020.
[60]Ferrier, M. (2018). Attacks and Harassments, The Impact on Female Journalists and their Reporting, Troll Busters, International Women's Media Foundation https://www.iwmf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/At-tacks-and-Harassment.pdf

Impact of Online Gender-Based Violence on Women

Women who have experienced online violence have also reported about its impact on their mental health, including but not limited to suffering from depression, anxiety, fear, and an overall sense of powerlessness[61]. In Senegal, 53% of women surveyed reported suffering from mental stress and anxiety. In Ethiopia, 20.4% reported problems with friends and family, 14.8% damage to reputation and 9.2% problems at their workplace.

In a report from the High Council for Equality from the French Government, online violence was reported to cause long-term impact on a woman's mental and physical health including avoidance and control behaviours, which may be accompanied by anxiety, depression, sleep difficulties and damage to social, emotional and sexual life. This mental anguish can be severe and there are a number of cases in which women and girls have committed suicide due to their experiences with online violence[62]. In 2014, UNICEF reported that the risk of suicide attempt is 2.3 times higher for a victim of cyber harassment compared to non-victims[63]. Prevalent distinctions between online and offline spaces thus do not hold water, and it is important to acknowledge the interlinkage between our online and offline identities and lives.

> *"I didn't have self-esteem and confidence because I felt like everybody was staring at me because of this incident. Maybe some students in the university are members of that group. Can you imagine what people are thinking about me after they saw the post? OMG, that was the hardest time I ever had in my life."*

- IDI 005, Ethiopia

[61]The Women's Legal and Human Rights Bureau (WLB). (March 2015). End violence: Women's rights and safety online: From impunity to justice: Domestic legal remedies for cases of technology-related violence against women. Association by Progressive Communications.
[62]Muriel Salmona cited in Haut Conseil à l'Egalité (2017), "En finir avec l'impunite des violences faites aux femmes en ligne : une urgence pour les victimes", available at http://www.haut-conseil-egalite.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/hce_rapport_violences_faites_aux_femmes_en_ligne_2018_02_07.pdf
[63]UNICEF France (2014), Ecoutons ce que les enfants ont à nous dire, Consultation nationale, available at https://www.unicef.fr/sites/default/files/userfiles/Consultation_2014.pdf

"I lost all the self-esteem I have and stayed at home. One day I heard my classmate gossiping about me. How fake I am relating my behavior and the fake Facebook account. I withdrew from the university at that time and stayed at home. My family saw how this affected me mentally so they contacted some agencies to apply to universities in Europe. I got accepted to February intake so I went there. There are no counseling services. For instance, my parents tried to take me to psychiatric service back then because I tried to commit suicide. But there is no one specialized in this particular issue."

- IDI 003, Ethiopia

"My first experience was with my divorce. My ex-partner was harassing me with messages. I ended up admitted in the hospital. Second experience was when I met a guy online. When I put messages he didn't like, he would start insulting me. I didn't let it go and the relationship went really violent. SMS, Whatsapp messages, my pictures on the web. I tried to fight him but I didn't have positive feedback. I finally ended in a psychiatric hospital"

- IDI 003, Senegal

The in-depth interviews as well as quantitative data both illustrate how online violence affects mental health, and the interviews further go on to show that there is an immediate need for appropriate counselling tailored to the needs of women who have experienced online violence. It is important to highlight that while research and legislation can be helpful in tackling online gender-based violence, recourse measures such as psychosocial support remain vital in supporting women who have experienced online violence.

"Whenever OGBV happens, that woman will go through psychological problems that she might don't want to speak about. So being there and telling her you got her back is one thing. Counseling is another thing. The government needs to develop a law and policy that is specific to online gender-based violence."

- IDI 004, Ethiopia

This online violence is different from offline violence due to the tendency of the content to endure online. Even years after the initial incidents, women would continue receiving phone calls and messages related to the attack. Because "the internet never forgets", these violent incidents enter a permanent domain and are able to resurface repeatedly to re-victimize the women who have experienced them.

Responding to Online Gender-based Violence

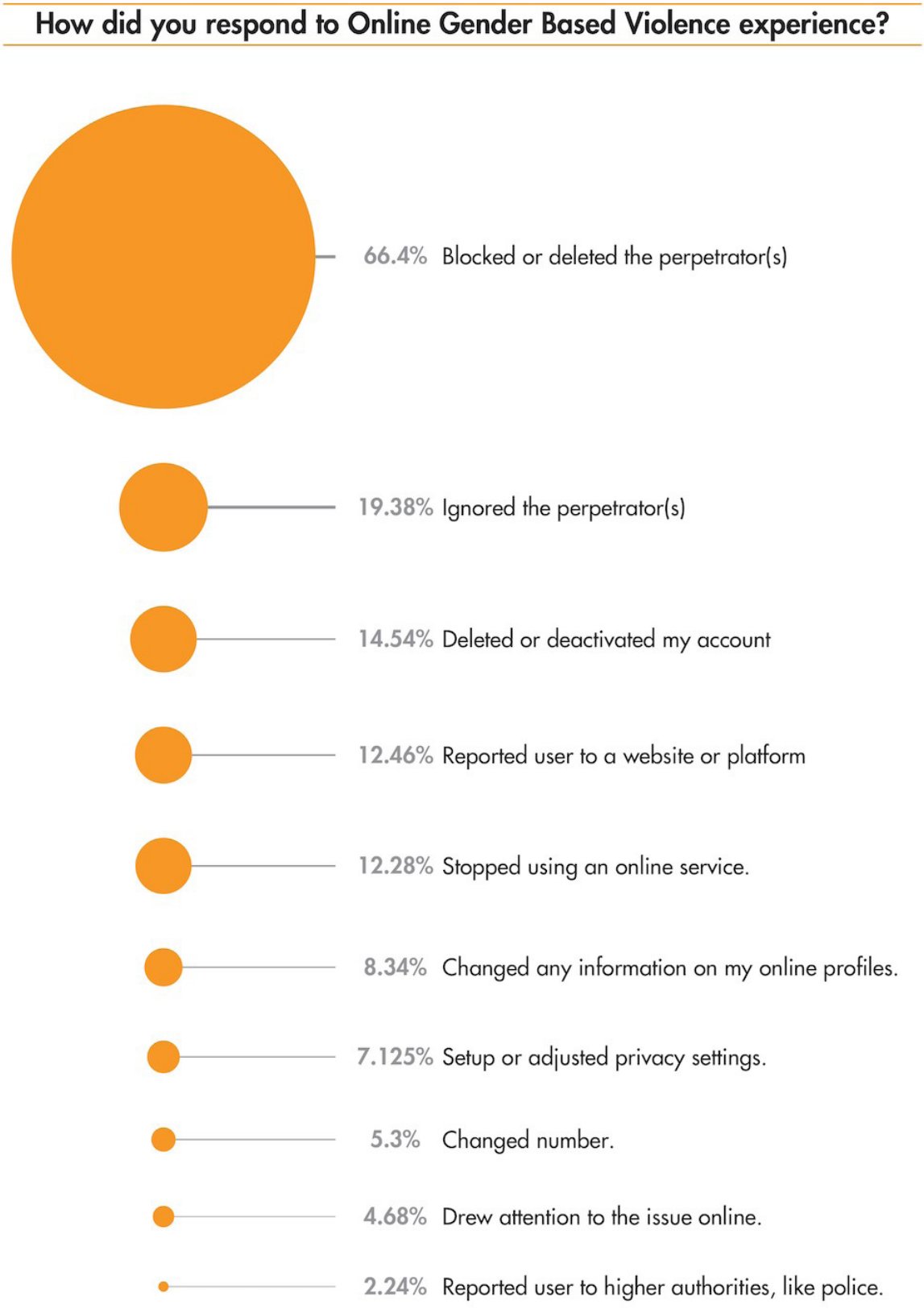
Similar to the digital gender gap of mobile phone ownership published by the GSMA, reports by the International Telecommunications Union show that the global proportion of women using the internet is 12% lower than that of men. This gap widens further in countries in the global south, reaching up to 32.9%. While some women respond to violence online by blocking perpetrators, others choose to leave online spaces (and offline spaces) completely. Some women who would have been new users choose not to access the internet at all out of fear[64].

Sixty-six percent (66%) of the women we interviewed reported blocking perpetrators as means of responding to online violence. More disturbingly, 14.5% of women deleted or deactivated their accounts whereas 12.2% stopped using a digital service after experiencing online violence.

This is not only another form of self-censorship and restrictions on the freedom of expression of women, but also the complete erasure of their digital identities and presence. This is further evidence for the fact that a single negative experience, or repeated adverse interactions, in online spaces can severely impact the engagement and participation of women on digital platforms, leading in some cases to their complete absence.

[64]Web Foundation. (2015). Womens Rights Online. http://webfoundation.org/docs/2015/10/womens-rights-online21102015.pdf Retrieved on December 4th, 2019

Chart 4. Response to Online Gender-based Violence Experience by Women



The respondents below exemplify how these experiences of online gender-based violence leads women to exit online, public spaces.

"It's getting worse, the humanity on Twitter, for example, is lost. People just say things. The number of people who like the status of the person who sent the tweet. I decided to get off Twitter, because on the phone you just post without thinking that it's a human being you are attacking. Dehumanising people and people just post and especially where people like the tweets and I ask myself who would like such things."

- Focus Group Discussion, South Africa

"After that incident, I immediately stopped using social media especially facebook for around a year ...The other women in my country, I think most of the time they stop using social media because it is so hard to describe to others, even if we are victims. The problem is still ours. Nobody wants to defend to us, nobody wants to stand with us. Even I heard some cases these days those young high school teenage girls committed suicide because of online GBV. Everybody is there to blame you...nobody wants to understand you, it is up to you. Thank god I have a boyfriend that actually understands me but what if my family members found that post first? They were going to kill me."

- IDI 005, Ethiopia

"Online GBV is very hard and we sometimes don't consider it as violence. We simply advise women to stop using online spaces to avoid violence. But claiming that space is her right too. Whenever OGBV happens, that woman will go through psychological problems that she might not want to speak about. So, being there and telling her you got her back is one thing. Counseling is another thing. The government needs to develop a law and policy that is specific to online gender-based violence."

- IDI 004, Ethiopia

These experiences also illustrate the lack of support that women face in tackling online gender-based violence. Fear, shame and anguish can lead women to taking drastic actions such as suicide. In response to these growing concerns, women are either themselves staying offline, or advising one another to avoid digital spaces altogether.

Addressing Online Gender-Based Violence

In Ethiopia, ninety percent (90%) of the respondents who experienced this online violence either did not know the identity of the perpetrator or found the perpetrator to be a stranger. Because of the anonymity, propagation and perpetuation of online gender-based violence, it is difficult to identify both the primary perpetrator, i.e. the person initiating the violence, and the secondary perpetrators, i.e. the persons who negligently or recklessly downloads, shares or likes offending data or information. By sharing content through screenshots, likes, retweets, and even comments, simultaneously, everyone and no one becomes the perpetrator. Serene Lim concisely explains how even though the law may have a response to the primary perpetrator, there is a weak legal response to the "structural inequality and the gendered power dynamic, or a culture that is predicated on hatred, discrimination and violence against women and queers."[65]

In the case of Uganda, in 76% of the cases, the perpetrator was male, and in 68% of the cases reported, only one specific perpetrator was involved. In Kenya, for up to 16.8% of women, their harassment lasted for more than a month. Forty percent (40.7%) of these respondents believed that their gender was a primary reason for these attacks.

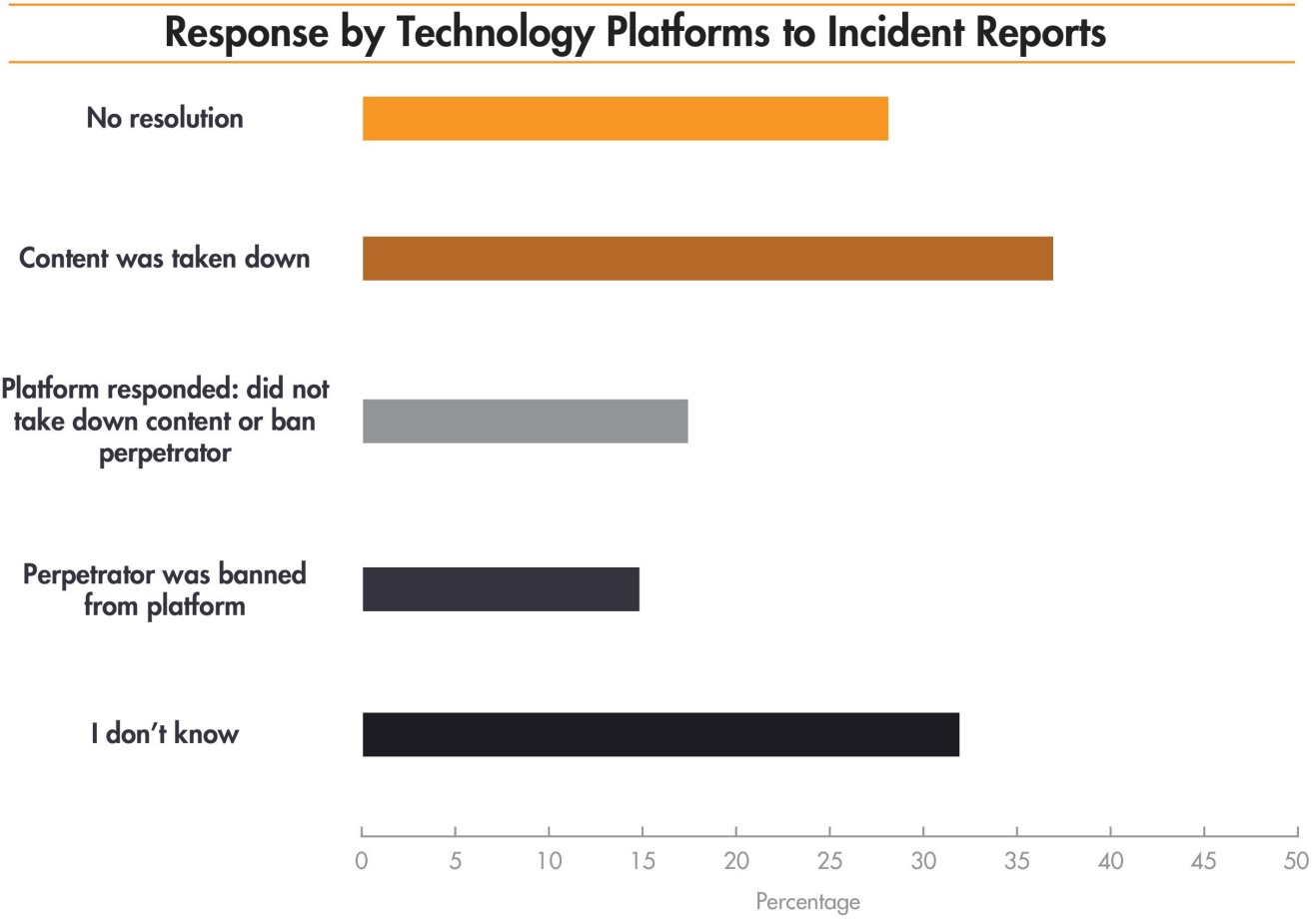
> *"The anonymity of the discussion allows for certain people with the tendency to abuse you. Gender is a weakness they perceive. Especially, with the macho men."*
>
> **- Focus Group Discussion, South Africa**

[65]Lim. S. (2018). Breaking Online Gender-based Violence. GenderIT.org. Accessed from: https://www.genderit.org/articles/breaking-online-gender-based-violence

Response by Technology Platforms to Incident Reports

As indicated earlier in Chart 4, only 12.4% of the women who had suffered from online violence reported the incident to the website or online platform. In Senegal, though the number of respondents who did report to online platforms was very small, up to 75% respondents reported that the offending content was taken down. Unresolved incidents across all five countries were around 28.2% on average. This figure reached as high as 57% in Uganda and 35% in South Africa. Thirty-three percent (33%) of respondents in Kenya who reported to the platform received a reply, but no action was taken in terms of pulling down the content or penalizing the perpetrator. This shows that few women turn to technology platforms for mediation and even fewer of those who do so get desirable results. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have historically ignored African markets and spend fewer resources in contextualizing their products to these diverse markets, including processing African languages and attempting to grasp nuance and convention. Despite serving a population of 1.2 billion, the number of staff within these companies dedicated to and working from Africa is negligible.

Chart 5. Response by Technology Platforms to Incident Reports



This dearth of representation from the African continent was further explained by a FGD participant from Ethiopia:

> *"As well, Facebook has no office in Ethiopia and there is only one Ethiopian woman assigned for this purpose in Ethiopia. Facebook in Ethiopia gives priority and focuses on ethnic-based hate speech. Lets say if there is more than one person and if we have an Ethiopian team, there will be more human power who could read and understand the content."*

- FGD Participant, Ethiopia

Comparative Legal Analysis

Policymakers tasked with addressing gender-based violence at a regulatory level are required to reconcile both the common and exceptional characteristics of online gender-based violence. Gender-based violence is not unique to the internet, but laws have to be designed to accommodate the unique capabilities of online spaces in furthering gender-based violence both online and offline. The effective achievement of these demands reflects an appreciation of the role of the internet in the social, economic, and political lives of women and the different ways in which different women interact with it. However, research on the existence and impact of online gender-based violence is outpaced by the frequency with which it occurs, raising the question of whether national-level regulatory frameworks are at all equipped to protect women's rights online.

To fully understand the legal frameworks in these five countries (Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal, South Africa and Uganda), we partnered with Internews to draft a comparative analysis. The report can be found here. The authors recognize that legal frameworks are rarely fully representative of the practical realities in any country[66]. South Africa, for example, boasts "progressive" gender-based violence laws yet maintains one of the highest gender-based violence incidence rates in the world[67]. Specific laws addressing online gender-based violence are not the ultimate solution to a systemic problem and need to be adopted in conjunction with other measures, such as socio-economic upliftment, awareness-raising programs and counselling services.

[66]Nwaodike, C., and Naido, N. (2020). Fighting violence against women online. A comparative Analysis of Legal Frameworks in Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal, South Africa and Uganda. Internews.
[67]Saferspaces (2020). Gender-based violence in South Africa. Retrieved from https://www.saferspaces.org.za/understand/entry/gender-based-violence-in-south-africa on August 10th, 2020.

According to the report, "all five countries have ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which explicitly requires states to ensure that both men and women have equal enjoyment of the rights set out therein[68]. Article 26 asserts that the law must prohibit discrimination on the basis of, among other grounds, sex, and guarantees equal and effective protection from such discrimination. The ICCPR also recognizes the right to privacy, as well as the protection of honor and reputation[69].

The African Charter on Human and People's Rights, to which all studied countries are party, also affirms equal enjoyment of fundamental rights regardless of, among other grounds, sex[70].

All five countries have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). However, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda have not ratified the CEDAW optional protocol, which grants authority to the CEDAW Committee to hear complaints from individuals and groups relating to violations of the CEDAW by a State Party.

CEDAW requires all signatories to adopt gender equality laws. Although it does not mention online GBV specifically, in 2017, the CEDAW Committee issued General Recommendation No. 35, which recognized the following:

[68] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1996), Article 3.
[69] Ibid, Article 17.
[70] African Charter on Human and People's Rights (1981), Article 2.

> Gender-based violence against women occurs in all spaces and spheres of human interaction, whether public or private. These include the family, the community, the public spaces, the workplace, leisure, politics, sport, health services, educational settings and *their redefinition through technology-mediated environments, such as contemporary forms of violence occurring in the internet and digital spaces.* [emphasis added]".[71]

The report states that a lack of will to address online gender-based violence dilutes any potential deterrence effects that criminal laws may have on the perpetration of online violence. The ineffectiveness of ambiguous laws is a further problem. While commendable and questionable laws may exist, such as placing the duty on ISPs to assist courts, underreporting and trivialization by law enforcement still remains a challenge. The authors go on to report, "the limited portfolio of civil remedies means that the governmental strategies for eliminating online GBV are not survivor-centered. Instead, online GBV is mostly left up to a criminal justice system designed on philosophies of punishment—a system in which women are often the victims."

[71]UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (2017) CEDAW General recommendation No.35 on gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No.19, Article 20.

Laws Are Not Working For Women

As an example of the types of laws drafted to tangentially tackle online harassment, we can consider the case of Ethiopia, whereby in 2020, as of the writing of this report, the Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation was presented to Parliament for discussion and possible enactment.The proclamation defines "hate speech" as speech that promotes hatred, discrimination or attack against a person or an identifiable group, based on ethnicity, religion, race, gender or disability. It goes on to state the following.

The objectives of the Proclamation are to:

1. Ensure that in their exercise of freedom of expression, individuals will not engage in speech that incites violence, is likely to cause public disturbance or promotes hatred and discrimination against a person or an identifiable group or community based on ethnicity, religion, race, gender or disability.

2. Promote tolerance, civil discourse and dialogue, mutual respect and understanding and strengthening democratic governance.

3. Control and suppress the dissemination and proliferation of hate speech, disinformation and other related false and misleading information.

The law stipulates that social media platforms must remove harmful content within 24 hours. It goes on to state, "Ethiopian Broadcast Authority (EBA) shall monitor compliance by social media providers with the duties stipulated under sub article (1-3) of this Article and publish a report." Furthermore, it is unclear what the EBA can do after this report is published if the giant social media platforms refuse to comply with the regulations.

This proclamation is problematic for a number of other reasons as well. Firstly, there are major doubts on the capacity of the EBA to monitor all online communication and hold large social media enterprises to account. Additionally, this proclamation is likely to disproportionately affect local technology platforms such as social media services like EthioTube, an indigenous Ethiopian video streaming service.

It should also be added that while gender is mentioned in the proclamation, this document was not drafted with intersectional issues of gender, social and political issues in mind. There still remain questions on the actual mechanisms of the process of reporting this hate speech and seeking justice. There is also no mention within the document of the education and gender-focused sensitization law enforcement personnel, who are the gatekeepers to this entire process. As such, despite the efforts towards curbing hate speech, the implementation is unclear and questionable.

Further issues of lack of redress mechanisms or culpability of both government bodies and technology companies are also highlighted through the experiences of our interviewees in Ethiopia.

In reference to a case of non-consensual sharing of information on Telegram:

> *"Among the measures, I talked with people who work at EthioTelecom. They told me they couldn't do anything, as the admin is not known and as he changes his user name. I also sought the advice of people with expertise in computer science and personnel from Information Network Security Agency (INSA). But it is not solved in any way. I am educated, I have access to talk to expertise and take legal measures but yet I couldn't find any solution. So, imagine how it could be for uneducated/unprivileged women or primary or high school students, how could they take measures?"*
>
> **- IDI 003, Ethiopia**

Eighty-six (86%) of the women in Senegal were not aware of any policies and laws in place to protect them against online gender-based violence in their country. In Uganda, this figure was 95%. Under the Computer Misuse Act (2011) in Uganda, a person faces a fine,imprisonment, or both if they are found to produce, make available, distribute, procure, or unlawfully possess child (under 18 years of age) pornography. Perpetration of cyber harassment, cyberstalking, and "offensive communication" also incurs a fine, imprisonment, or both. Section 25 of the Act states that any person who willfully and repeatedly uses electronic communication to disturb or attempt to ***disturb the peace, quiet***, or right of privacy of any person with no purpose of legitimate communication commits the offence of offensive communication. There are, however, no clear definitions of what constitutes indecent, disturbing of peace and quiet, or legitimate communication.

This lack of clarity effectively renders the law a device to repress dissenting voices and a tool of censorship rather than a mechanism to protect women. Those who did have knowledge of the Computer Misuse Act in Uganda (5%) reported that it is impartially applied:

> *"A person can report, it's so easy. But, the law about online harassment is very silent. It is not helping us much except for Stella Nyanzi when she attacked the President. People are wondering maybe the law worked because she had attacked the President. If this law is there, let it be activated so that it not only helps the President but also other people. The law shouldn't only favor a few but all the people. The law is there but it is silent, most of us are not aware of it. We report so many cases to the police but they tell us that they don't know which law this kind of case falls under."*
>
> **- Focus Group Discussion Participant, Uganda**

The justice systems of the countries surveyed provide little support. Most respondents are either unaware of the laws that exist to protect them or have tried to approach law enforcement staff unsuccessfully. Some respondents who tried to approach police were insulted, laughed at, or told to come back if the case escalated further.

> *"Women are not reporting even the domestic violence because of the culture and the norm. Imagine going to report online GBV, they are going to make fun of you and tell you to come when the real violence happens."*
>
> **- FGD Participant, Ethiopia**

> *"As all we know we can't even tell to the police. There is no law to arrest them. They know about the law very well so, they make it with a full of confidence."*
>
> **- IDI 001, Ethiopia**

"Online harassment has been a conversation for the longest. It's only right now that it's starting to gain traction. Nothing against perpetrators, but now awareness. I don't think there is any law or policy. People are left to take it upon themselves, to decide how to protect themselves. Either you report, or you deal with it on your own. Women who were talking were completely being silenced, derailed. It's so hurtful. If you report it to people who are supposed to take action, they ask ***where were you hurt?"***

- IDI 002, Kenya

"I tried to report to the police and they even didn't understand what I told them and they told me to go and look for the person who did this to me. Let me tell you what happens when I left to Europe to study. My parents report to the police station for protection because many guys were coming to our house. So they sent to officers to look out for our home. They were there for 2 days and report to the station head, the house doesn't need protection because there is no threat. So they left. After 2 days, 2 guys knocked our door and housemaid opened the door... there was no one inside (the house). They actually tried to rape her but she shouted and our neighbors came."

- IDI 002, Ethiopia

In other instances, cyber laws have been purposefully used to harass, silence and ultimately punish outspoken women, as evidenced by the case of Dr. Stella Nyanzi in Uganda. Arrested in 2017, she was formally charged under sections 24(1), 24(2)(a) (cyber harassment) and 25 (offensive communication) of the Computer Misuse Act, 2011 (Act) in relation to Facebook post she had created regarding President Museveni, in particular a post whereby she refers to him as "a pair of buttocks." The High Court of Uganda finally overturned Stella Nyanzi's convictions in early 2020 on the grounds of lack of jurisdiction and fair hearing, but by then she had already spent 16 months in imprisonment.

"..they are there but they are not being used for the benefit of the people. The Computer Misuse Act for instance, I was like "What? It only works for the government to stop Freedom of Expression, ofcourse!" Stellah Nyanzi is a victim of the Act. So the Computer Misuse Act is used as a tool for oppression then the other tools that are used, the Anti-pornography Act is against women. Yeah, when I share, because the Act says pornography is creating and dissemination of porn, but what we see now is that the law incriminates the woman but not the perpetrator. For me, what I would advocate for is a specific act, You see how we have the Domestic Violence Act, the Female Genital Mutilation Act. What I would advocate for is, lets see Digital Rights Online Act. It should be for both men and women. You see, it seems so much, but it will protect women online"

- IDI 003, Uganda

The analyses of cyber laws and general laws such as criminal and penal codes make it apparent that the five countries covered in this study do not have strong laws to protect women online. Most references in cyber laws relate to child pornography, but no longer afford protections after a girl turns 18 years of age. A majority of the laws use general terms like gender, without taking into consideration the intersectional needs of different minority groups. The cyber laws are generally weak, and can further silence women through unfair application.

DISCUSSION

Digital Self-Care

Despite notable proliferation in the offerings from technology platforms, social media, and civil organizations on digital hygiene and security tools, they remain limited. Across the countries surveyed, a large number of respondents did not know where to access information related to digital security. There is an urgent need for digital security resources to be adapted to local contexts and languages and mainstreamed in educational curricula. As reported in our qualitative interviews, online harassment and attacks on high school girls are on the rise. In countries such as Ethiopia and South Africa, these have led some young women to end their own lives[72].

The majority of existing digital hygiene training programs leave women to fend for themselves. Both in Africa and globally, there is lack of information on what actually helps prevent online gender-based violence. Current solutions rely on encouraging women who have experienced online violence to share and document their experiences or provide psychosocial support in select cases. Overall, research shows that few interventions are aimed at preventing primary and secondary perpetrators from acting violently in the first place.

Legal Approaches

Policy advocacy and legal approaches in strengthening online harassment laws remain viable methods in preventing perpetrators from committing online gender-based violence through an increased focus on law enforcement authorities. However, there is a fine line between appropriate regulation and stifling of freedom of expression. Law enforcement personnel must be trained on a gender-sensitive digital safety curriculum to address complaints of online gender-based violence and to provide timely technical assistance, counseling and support to women who do choose to report. Along with this, there is a need for countries to adopt data protection and privacy laws and put committees and mechanisms in place to implement these laws. A year after Uganda passed its Data Protection and Privacy Act (in 2019), the Data Protection office in charge of implementing the law has still not been established[73].

[72]eNCA (2019). Cyber bullied teen commits suicide. Retrieved from https://www.enca.com/news/cyber-bullied-teen-commits-suicide on May 7th, 2020

[73]Unwanted Witness. One Year On, what has Uganda's Data Protection Law Changed? Retrieved from https://www.unwantedwitness.org/one-year-on-what-has-ugandas-data-protection-law-changed/ on May 7th, 2020

Technology Platforms and Private Sector Approaches

Rates of reporting perpetrators to technology platforms remain low and responses to these reports have not been encouraging. Technology platforms have few representatives across Africa and in general, do not recognize the needs of African users. This becomes evident considering the low amount of resources and funding invested in Africa. The products are often not contextualized to African markets, including processing African languages, appropriate content moderation or adapting to patterns/constraints in internet usage. Social media platforms need to increase the number of indigenous content moderators as well as promote the efficacy of reporting harassment and violence experienced on their platforms.

Further Research

Increasing evidence from previous studies shows that offline violence and online harassment are closely interlinked but evidence from African countries is still limited. A study conducted in the USA found that participants in the study who had experienced repeated offline harassment were seven times likely to experience repeated online incidents[74]. This may provide information that may be useful in designing more contextually informed violence prevention approaches. Additionally, there are instances where violence that begins online spills into real world consequences. Threats of rape and violent assaults are commonly made against women. An example of such a case was described by one of our in-depth interviews:

> *"Threats started coming to me. People were saying online publicly, the next time this woman gets in a cab, she shouldn't come out alive. They would send me pictures of weapons. This is what you deserve. This is your medicine. This is the only way to control you. There were threats .It was so bad. Terrible. As someone who is living a very public life, my work is very public. You don't know what someone who reads this content on Twitter will do with it. Of course, I use cabs! I would think, is this the last cab ride I'm going to take?"*
>
> **- IDI 001, Kenya**

[74]Juvonen, J. and Gross, EF. Extending the school grounds?—bullying experiences in cyberspace. Journal of School Health. 2008;78:496–505. doi: 10.1111/j.1746-1561.2008.00335.x.

Similarly, further research is needed to focus on the vulnerability of people with disabilities in online spaces. Disabled people face hostility and harassment in most of the environments they are in and online spaces create a context that further encourages hostility. Such research may highlight the magnitude of the issue and experiences of disabled people with online harassment, the impact they have on them, and ways of mitigating these.

Additionally, research on the institutional response to online gender-based violence from both governmental bodies and the private sector agents, such as social media platforms, is lacking. There are limits to the impact that "victim-focused" research alone can achieve, and there a need to move the needle on responses by government bodies (eg. African Union, iNGOs) and social media platforms to prevent online gender-based violence and deal with perpetrators and aggressors in an appropriate manner. Lastly, there is little to no research on these topics from Francophone and Lusophone African countries. The information available on West and Central Africa is sparse in general. It is important to understand the experiences of women from these countries.

AFRICAN WOMEN NEED AN INTERNET THAT SERVES THEIR NEEDS

When thinking of our afrofeminist future, we need to think of an internet where both the developers and users understand the intersectionality of the lived experience of an African woman. One where African women are not seen as a homogenous group of the voiceless/oppressed, as is commonly depicted in "ICT for Good" initiatives across the continent, but rather considered for all the innovations they themselves can contribute to a better internet. The very nature of a general-purpose technology (GPT) which has the capability to alter societies, such as the internet, is that they must be capable of ongoing technological improvements; improvements supported by and that benefit all users including African women . With talks of a Web 3.0 based on "decentralised architecture, open protocols and community governance", this is an opportunity to re-design an internet based on afrofeminist thinking and philosophies.

It is difficult to imagine an internet that caters to the needs of all people across the world at this moment. However, we can begin to think more creatively about this radical shift away from an internet that is developed and governed largely by the corporate global North and patriarchal, heteronormative bodies to one that celebrates, encourages, and gives voice to the full spectrum of identities. In order to create a feminist internet that challenges gender, race, age, and class stereotypes, Faith Wilding ascertains that we need to draw ***"feminism as a browser"*** from research, strategies of feminist history, and the critique of institutionalized patriarchy[75]. This thinking extends further to embedding these feminist values into the ethos of technology companies with regards to how they design, develop, market, and create value from their products. This includes creating opportunities for African women to lead these types of initiatives.

[75]Wilding. F (1998). Where is the Feminism in Cyberfeminism? n.paradoxa vol. 2

Another question that arises is whether we need internets that are exclusive. Patricia Hill Collins notably stresses the importance of the relationship between empowerment, self-definition and knowledge. Considering epistemology, i.e. the theory of knowledge and how we come to understand things, the politics of gender and race are vital in acknowledging the ways the internet is and can be exclusive[76]. The internet, through an African feminist epistemological lens, can only thrive with the creation of safe spaces allowing for the self-definition of identities empowering those who choose to be a part of that space such as AfricanFeminism.com, HOLAAfrica etc. From another perspective, people have been found to seek digital spaces that "affirm and solidify social identities along axes of race, gender and sexuality"[77]. For example, identities can be formed through online interactions on social networking sites, or persons with similar life experiences, identities or hobbies can connect on platforms such as Reddit, Facebook, health support groups or sites like BlackPlanet.com, QueerSisters, etc. Thus, it is worth considering what role these spaces play in the ideation of identities.

In conclusion, this paper sought to describe online gender-based violence experienced by African women in online spaces. Our findings show that around 1 in 3 women interviewed had experienced some form of online gender-based violence. These continual, regular and perpetual acts of aggression manifest in different, but very visceral ways. Given the lack of transparency in how social media companies handle issues related to online gender-based violence, this moment in time presents an opportunity to re-think the entire internet rather than trying to repair broken systems. For many women across Africa, social media is the internet. And, perhaps social media has been a failed experiment altogether. With that in mind, we can continue to think critically about how we can co-create an internet that celebrates, encourages and provides safe spaces to a spectrum of identities.

[76]Collins, P.H. (2006). Patricia Hill Collins : Intersecting Oppressions.
[77]Daniels, J. (2009). Rethinking Cyberfeminism(s): Race, Gender, and Embodiment. Women's Studies Quarterly, 37(1/2), 101-124.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

NEEMA IYER

Neema Iyer is an artist and a technologist. She is the founder and director of Pollicy, a civic technology organization based in Kampala, Uganda. Pollicy uses data, design and technology to improve how citizens and government engage around public service delivery. She has a Masters in Public Health from Emory University and has worked on large-scale mobile and digital projects across Africa as part of TTC Mobile (previously Text to Change) and Viamo (previously VOTO Mobile). She currently leads the design of a number of projects focused on building data skills, on fostering conversations on data privacy and digital security, and on innovating around policy.

BONNITA NYAMWIRE

Bonnita Nyamwire is the Research Manager at Pollicy. Bonnita previously worked as a research associate in Social & Behavioral Research and Program/Project Evaluation with various institutions like PSI Uganda, USAID, Makerere University School of Public Health, ABT Associates, and Social Economic Data Centre among others. Bonnita received a Master of Science in Health Services Research (MHSR) from Makerere University, and a bachelor's degree in Arts of Arts, BA (Arts) from the same university.

SANDRA NABULEGA

Sandra Nabulega is a Junior Researcher with Pollicy. She has a Statistics degree from Makerere University. She is enthused about data, research and women empowerment. Her passion for data and research has seen her take part in various research projects as Create Your Kampala and Better Migration Management. Sandra also moderates and participates in various trainings that equip youth with data and research knowledge and skills. She is a Data Science Fellow under the Innovation Village Fellowship, which seeks to promote Software Development, Product Design, Data Analysis, Social Entrepreneurship, Technology Commercialization, Project Management, Business Finance, Operations and Creative Arts of the fellows. She is also passionate on how technology can be used for women empowerment. She co-runs the Contraceptive Google Map, a map that displays information about available contraceptive services in health centers around Kampala. Her heart is for young people and women, she will never hesitate around it. Sandra enjoys reading and believes through reading, she is able to live more than one life, in more than one place.

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