A Dark Place for Women Journalists & Women Human Rights Defenders

Documenting the Experiences of Online Violence in Anglo & Francophone Countries

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

DRC: Democratic Republic of Congo
FGD: Focus Group Discussion
HRDs: Human Rights Defenders
ICTs: Information Communication Technology
LGBTQIA+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Asexual+
OGBV: Online Gender-Based Violence
SMADAV: antivirus that is effective in protecting computers from virus attacks.
WHRDs: Women Human Rights Defenders

Working Definitions

Online privacy: the natural expectation to have individual personal data protected and behaviour not tracked when one is connected to the Internet without explicit consent.

Online safety and security: refers to being safe on the Internet and the knowledge of maximizing users' personal safety and security risks to private information and property.

Perpetrator: someone who performs single or multiple acts of violence directed at another person, through persecution, intimidation, harassment, ridiculing others using the Internet and electronic tools.

Woman human rights defender, woman journalist: any individual who presents as a woman in these two fields of work and have been raised or socialized in the four target countries and have been systematically oppressed as ciswoman or gender minority, including transgender, non-binary and intersex people.

Top Findings at a Glance

- All respondents had experienced online violence.

- Misogynistic hate speech, sexists' comments, body shaming as well as slut shaming was common among the women journalists and WHRDs interviewed. These threats were also extended to their families, friends, relatives and networks. Another frequently mentioned attack was the attempted hacking into women's email.

- Most of the women interviewed reduced their online activity and presence in response to online violence whereas others deactivated some of their online accounts.

- The story theme most often identified in association with increased attacks was gender, followed by politics and elections, human rights and social policy.

- Anonymous or unknown attackers are the most frequently noted source of attacks according to the women respondents.

- Facebook was mentioned as the least safe among social media platforms/apps used by women participants, with most of the respondents saying it was "very unsafe" compared to Twitter.

- Most of the women journalists did not report incidents of online violence to their employers or security personnel.

This report is part of a broader Internews Project called Fem-Tech Africa, a 24-month program to empower women human rights defenders and journalists in Cameroon, Congo, Senegal and Uganda to fully and safely participate in increasingly digital societies. Fem-Tech Africa will build on Internews' successful Safe Sisters pilot programs and more than two years of methodology development. The project's model offers both immediate digital safety training and long-term systemic policy and advocacy support to help women survive—and thrive—in a digital world. Fem-Tech Africa consists of two mutually reinforcing objectives:

01 Empower women HRDs and journalists to take digital safety into their own hands and keep themselves and their communities safer online; and

02 Promote safeguards for women's safety online through public awareness raising

This includes targeted advocacy for rights-focused policies and the examination of the incidence, impacts and responses to online violence against women journalists and women human rights defenders in four countries. The research emphasizes on online gender-based violence (OGBV), online safety measures used by women and their current safety and security needs.

Background

For many women, the advent of technology and the Internet presents opportunities to engage in discourse and advocate for their social, economic and political needs.[1] Digital platforms, including social media, have reshaped the communication landscape, enabling the easy sharing of text, image, and video to large audiences across geographical boundaries.[2] Over the recent years, the Internet has been a key channel for activism for both women HRDs and journalists. Computers, mobile phones and other digital tools are used extensively by WHRDs and women journalists to communicate, network, and seek and provide protection.[3]

While women human rights defenders and journalists have used online spaces to advance their work, these spaces have also become arenas for women to be attacked in evolving ways.[4] Common forms of attack online include cyberstalking, privacy breaches, abusive comments, name-calling, body shaming, trolling, sexual violence, intimidation, threats of violence, and doxing.[5, 6] About eighty five percent of women worldwide experience or witness online abuse – with higher incidence in the global south.[7] A global survey conducted by UNESCO in 2021 found that nearly seventy-five percent of women journalists have experienced online harassment and often suffer mental health-related consequences. The same report found that as a result of this harassment, about thirty percent of those who experienced online harassment subsequently self-censored on social media.[8] Women rights defenders are also the targets of rising cases of online surveillance, as the same tools that facilitate their ability to spread their messages are used against them to create fear, isolation and prosecution.[9]

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[1] Conseil Sante, Digital4Women: how to enable women's empowerment in Africa through mainstreaming digital technologies and services in EU development programmes report, 2020.
[2] Chadha, Steiner, Vitak, and Ashktorab , Women Responses to online harassment, 2020
[3] Liesbeth Hermans Maurice Vergeer, Internet in the Daily Life of Journalists: Explaining the use of the Internet by Work-Related Characteristics and Professional Opinions, 2009
[4] APC, Mapping Research in Gender and Digital Technology, 2018
[5] Chadha, Steiner, Vitak, and Ashktorab, Women Responses to online harassment, 2020
[6] Doxxing is the publishing of sensitive personal information online—someone's home address, email, phone number, or national ID number to harass or intimidate a person.
[7] Lucina Demeco, Kristina, Wilfore, Canadian Women Leaders' Digital Defence Initiative, White Paper, 2021.
[8] Julie Posetti, Nermine Aboulez, Kalina Bontcheva, Jackie Harrison, and Silvio Waisbord, Online violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidence and Impacts, 2021
[9] Irene Khan, Women Journalists speak out. A collection of essays on personal experiences with harassment, 2021

The fight of Women Human Rights Defenders is two-fold on the web: first for human rights and against hatred, harassment and second the increasing gendered and political threats online.[10] This means that women journalists are targeted online for their activism, and content as well as their gender.[11] For women in both of these roles, *"the threats they face are highly sexualized, focused on their physical features, ethnicity, or cultural background, rather than on the content of their work."*[12] Persistent online threats not only diminish well-being and cause psychological trauma but undercut career prospects and the ability to function effectively.[13] The inability of women to feel safe online is an impediment to their freedom of expression online, their basic human rights, their ability to safely participate online, their safety offline, and exacerbates existing gender disparities in political and economic participation.[14]

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[10] Ephrem, Chiruza, Celebration of the Women Human Rights Defenders Day in DRCongo, 2021
[11] Edison Lanza Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression, Women Journalists and Freedom of Expression. Discrimination and gender-based violence faced by women journalists in the exercise of their profession, 2018
[12] Ibid
[13] Neema Iyer, Nyamwire Bonnita and Nabulega Sandra, Alternate Realities Alternate Internets, 2020
[14] Ibid

Introduction

Online Gender-Based Violence among Women Journalists across the African continent

Across the African continent, women's participation in journalism is low, although this varies considerably. For example, women's underrepresentation is especially pronounced in the Democratic Republic of Congo (15%), Malawi (27%) and Zimbabwe (27%).[15] Within East Africa, the percentage of newspaper, television, and radio reporters that are women were 29 per cent in Kenya, 37 per cent in South Sudan, 35 per cent in Tanzania and 20 per cent in Uganda.[16] The sector thus remains male-dominated and women remain a marginalized group, making up only one-third of the total media workforce.[17]

Media practitioners rely on the Internet to source and share information. However, the online environment for African journalists remains fragile and hostile as online violence against women journalists becomes increasingly common and goes unpunished.[18] While men are also subjected to online violence, online abuse directed towards women journalists tends to be severe.[19] Women journalists have experienced online gender-based violence, harassment and intimidation that threatens their ability to do their professional work.[20] Online attacks targeting women journalists are generally misogynistic, with sexualized content mainly attacking their gender and visibility in the public arena.[21]

According to a UNESCO research study on online violence, women journalists are four times more likely to experience online attacks than their men counterparts.[22] Safety for women journalists continues to be a major concern and it silences women in media and public debate, where women and their stories, perspectives and expert knowledge are already underrepresented.[23] In turn, the unsafe environment has made women journalists ask to be less visible on air, self-censor on social media, and maintain pseudonyms.[24]

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[15] IWMF (International Women's Media Foundation), Global Report on the status of women in the news media, 2020
[16] African Women in Media (AWiM), Impact of Covid-19 on Women Journalists, 2020
[17] Ibid
[18] UNESCO, Half the story is never enough, Threats Facing Women Journalists, 2020
[19] Julie Posetti, Nermine Aboulez, Kalina Bontcheva, Jackie Harrison, and Silvio Waisbord, Online violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidence and Impacts 2021
[20] Special Rapporteur for freedom of expression, Women Journalists and Freedom of expression, 2018
[21] Ibid
[22] Ibid
[23] IMS, Virtual but real: online violence against women journalists, March 08, 2021
[24] Sania, Farooqui, Alarming Crisis of Impunity for crimes against journalists in DRC, 2021

A report on changes in media freedom, pluralism, independence and safety of journalists revealed that most frequent forms of online violence faced by women journalists include monitoring and stalking, posting personal data, trolling, smearing, defamation or disparagement, and viral hatred.[25] Other forms of online abuse related to their work include online sexual harassment as well as sexist speech, deep fakes and coordinated smear campaigns leveraging misogyny, graphic imagery sent to women journalists' inboxes and on their social media platforms as they go about their workday and other forms of hate speech.[26] Such threats have led women journalists to withdraw from public discourse as they rarely see justice and often struggle to have their complaints taken seriously and properly investigated.[27] Attackers range from misogynistic mobs seeking to silence women journalists, to state-linked networks aiming to undercut press freedom and chill critical journalism via orchestrated attacks.[28] Women journalists are further confronted by the gender stereotypes entrenched in most of the African community.[29] Advancing gender justice is critical in our offline society and within the media and among journalists. We move a step closer to achieving just societies when women journalists are secure and safe from violence.[30]

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[25] UNESCO, World trends in freedom of expression and media development: special digital focus, 2015

[26] OSCE , New challenges to Freedom of expression: Countering online abuse of female journalists, 2016

[27] Global voices, Platform regulation of online threats to expression in Africa, 2020.

[28] Sandra Safi Bashengezi,Stigma and stereotypes prevent women from succeeding as journalists in the African Great Lakes Region, 2020

[29] Ibid

[30] AMWIK and Article 19Women Journalist's Digital Security, 2016

Online Gender-Based Violence among Women HRDs across the African continent

Women human rights defenders use the Internet for advocacy and awareness-raising in a more detailed and informative manner and to a wider community.[31] WHRDs have integrated digital activism into physical grassroots activism while leveraging benefits like wider coverage and anonymity for victims of violence. Despite these benefits that digital connectivity has delivered, it has also opened the door to new forms of oppression and violence. WHRDs frequently face harassment and intimidation online that spills over into the real world and seeks to silence them. Online campaigns against women rights defenders and their organizations aim to damage their credibility and restrict the already limited online space afforded to women activists.[32]

According to the UN Special Rapporteur, the situation for human rights defenders in most African countries remains extremely concerning.[33] They face frequent online attacks including the dissemination of doctored pictures, usually of a sexualized and gendered nature; spreading of information designed to discredit them, often full of harmful and negative gender stereotypes, violent hate messages and threatening messages online, including calls of gang rape and murder, and breaches of privacy which has hindered their rights to freedom of assembly and of expression.[34] Women human rights defenders who work to denounce sexual violence, impunity for international crimes, women's poor working conditions, unequal position of women in society peacebuilding and reconciliation, as well as the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community, ethnic and religious minorities and challenging gender norms among others have continued to be vulnerable to threats and attacks online and offline.[35] This is because most of these issues require changes in structures and redistribution of power.[36] WHRDs are also attacked because of their identity as women; in some cases they are labelled as "bad women" and perpetrators say that they are attacking these individuals as "punishment" for fighting for change.[37] Attackers

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[31] Ibid
[32] OHCHR, Human Rights council discussion on online violence against women human rights defenders,2018
[33] Ibid
[34] UNESCO, World trends in freedom of expression and media development: special digital focus 2015,
[35] Fem Defenders The hatred against women human rights defenders – online and offline, 2015
[36] Ibid
[37] Ibid

strategically design fake profiles to attack human rights defenders with spyware and expose them to surveillance and fraud. Abuse against women is gendered: whether it is body-shaming, character assassination, threats, or harassment. As a result, women start self-censoring or leave the online space altogether.[38]

The role of the state

While social media usage has grown throughout Africa, this development has its downsides. There has been a significant increase in cyber-attacks against women and at-risk groups across the continent. In response to these growing cyber issues, African governments have enacted, updated or are working on legislation that targets online harassment. By adopting cyber security as a flagship program of Agenda 2063, African states demonstrate strongly that they do not only need to incorporate rapid changes brought about by emerging technologies in their development plans, but also to ensure that these technologies are used for the benefit of African individuals, institutions or countries by ensuring data protection, security and safety online.[39] Various African countries including South Africa, Zimbabwe and Ghana, have updated cyber laws that include provisions that criminalise some acts of online gender-based violence including non-consensual pornography commonly known as revenge porn and cyberbullying.[40] As of June 2020, 8 out of 55 AU members (Angola, Ghana, Guinea, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda and Senegal), had ratified the African convention on Cyber Security and Data Protection (Malabo Convention), while 14 countries have signed but not ratified it.[41]

Meanwhile, most redress mechanisms for cybercrimes are largely insufficient in most African states as most national legal frameworks safeguarding security online are broad, and do not pay special attention to intersectional issues women experience thus, offer limited personal protection of victims of online violence. The limitation in the legal system begins with how laws are framed to address "national security,'" technical forms of security, and rarely the socio-political aspects of our environments that facilitate OGBV. Due to this disabling environment, most cases of online gender-based violence experienced by

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[38] OHCHR, Human Rights council discussion on online violence against women human rights defenders, 2018
[39] Ibid
[40] Ephraim Percy Kenyanito & Raman Jit Singh Chima,Room for improvement: Implementing the African Cyber Security and Data Protection Convention in Sub-Saharan Africa, 2016
[41] African Union, African Union Convention on Cyber security and Personal Data Protection, 2014

women go unreported leaving victims with limited legal resources to seek justice. This situation is part of a general context that renders justice systems ineffective to addressing gender-based violence.

Online sexual harassment, body shaming, misogynistic hateful content and slut shaming are common features of African cyber space.[42] Such violence hinders women's full participation in online discourse as well as undermines their ability to embrace and meaningfully use digital technologies as they self-censor and in some instances totally withdraw.[43] Additionally, states do not have the qualitative and quantitative information they need to adopt normative frameworks, public policies and other actions aimed at addressing the obstacles that prevent women from having effective access to justice in the face of acts of violence and discrimination against them.[44] A recommendation by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on online violence against women emphasized the need for African governments and intermediaries to develop structures that deal with systemic online discrimination and violence against women.[45] Some of these structures need to be proactive programs or independent institutions whose purpose is to work and collaborate with multiple stakeholders within communities, educational spaces, policymaking spaces, technology designers to address online violence.

The role of women HRDs and CSOs

Civil society organizations (CSOs) raise awareness, conduct capacity building and advocacy, and support victims of online gender-based violence across the African continent. They have also become essential pillars in the implementation of effective strategies to eradicate illicit trafficking and other illicit activities of organized criminal groups, including online harassment among women.[46] In West Africa, the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) supports grassroots organizations through capacity building, security provision and financing, so they can better respond to cyber and transnational crime. In East Africa, Women@web has partnered with individuals and civil society organizations to develop a curriculum and also provide training to women on digital

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[42] Uchenna Jerome Orji, Multilateral Legal Responses to Cyber Security in Africa: Any Hope for Effective International Cooperation? 2015
[43] Neema Iyer, Nyamwire Bonnita and Nabulega Sandra, Alternate Realities Alternate Internets, 2020
[44] Uchenna Jerome Orji, Multilateral Legal Responses to Cyber Security in Africa: Any Hope for Effective International Cooperation? 2015
[45] Special Rapporteur for freedom of expression, Women Journalists and Freedom of expression, 2018
[46] DHN, Civil Society: Social media code of conduct, 2020

safety and security with an aim of increasing digital literacy among women and empower them to remain resilient online.[47]

CSOs are perfectly positioned to work as a bridge between the community and the state. States need information from communities to inform holistic responses against cybercrime. However there is less engagement of CSOs as well as updating laws and policies regarding online harassment. CSOs must be actively involved in the development of strategies and the implementation of international, regional and national tools for the fight against the various forms of cybercrime.[48]

Nonetheless, various civil society organizations have also identified problems in the response of private intermediaries to online gender-based violence in the region. These problems include the lack of reliable, easy-to-use, and transparent complaint mechanisms for the procedures to be followed after a complaint is received.[49] Many of the complaints filed by social network users go unanswered, are not addressed promptly, or are dismissed on the grounds that the reported acts of online gender based violence do not violate community standards.[50] There is also no clear information on who makes these decisions, which makes it difficult to determine whether algorithms or moderators are used to resolve these complaints and, if so, whether the moderators are adequately trained in women's rights and have a good understanding of the contexts in which violence occurs.[51]

Civil society organizations continue to push for stronger human rights protections, despite operating under increased threats of arbitrary arrests, unlawful searches and raids or funding restrictions. CSOs in South Africa, Kenya and Zimbabwe have challenged government legislation around cyber security through petitions in court challenging restrictive cyber laws and policies that seek to control online spaces, especially social media.[52] Restrictive cyber laws and controlling social media does not imply online safety and security but infringes on the people's freedom of expression.[53] Civil society voices must be included

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[47] Johanna Rieb, Women@Web: A regional network fights for women's digital rights, 2020
[48] FemDefenders, The hatred against women human rights defenders – online and offline, 2015
[49] UN Women, Safe Digital spaces: Protection of women and girls from Technological violence
[50] Ibid
[51] Ibid
[52] Media Legal Defense Initiative, Mapping digital rights and online freedom of expression in east, west and southern Africa, 2018
[53] Ibid

in cyber security initiatives, from conception all the way through to implementation. Yet these examples show this is often not the case, and that the valuable contributions of these groups are being excluded from the process. By including civil society, and therefore building in human rights protections from the outset, governments could avoid the kind of challenges that ultimately send initiatives back to the drawing board.

The role of media houses

Online gender-based violence against women journalists is compounded by the fact that media houses do not adequately support in responding to the violence.[54] Various media organizations and employers as well as Internet intermediaries across the world have few or no policies and mechanisms in place to address online violence, and that leaves women journalists unprotected from attacks. It is an issue because the consequences of the online violence are so severe that they should not be reduced to the individual journalist's problem or brushed off as just bare threats.[55] In a study conducted by UNESCO on online violence among women journalists, complaints on online harassment made to media houses and employers by survivors did not receive helpful and effective attention, in most cases there would be no response or gender insensitive advice like "grow thick muscle" "toughen up.[56] Research on women journalists in Uganda documented that women journalists "handle" online sexual harassment on their own and prefer not to take the matter up with management.[57]

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[54] Journalism and the Pandemic: A global snapshot of the impacts, Julie Posetti, Emily Bell and Pete Brown, 2020
[55] Virtual but real: Online violence against women journalists, IMS, 2021
[56] Online violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidence and Impacts. Julie Posetti, Nermine Aboulez, Kalina Bontcheva, Jackie Harrison, and Silvio Waisbord, 2021
[57] Arise, Gender Stereotypes Impeding Women's acceleration to top media echelons,

The role of tech companies

Women journalists and WHRDs have to adapt to the current trend of working online while simultaneously not being equipped with digital measures to protect themselves online.[58] The role of Internet communications companies as vectors for online attacks against women journalists cannot be underestimated.[59] The top five platforms or apps according to usage, including Facebook, Twitter; WhatsApp, YouTube, and Instagram have always attracted disproportionately higher rates of formal complaints relating to online violence, as well as being identified as the least safe of high-use platforms.[60] There is increasing pressure on these companies to respond swiftly and effectively to online violence targeting women journalists, as both a press freedom problem and a journalism safety issue. This involves the companies acknowledging that they have created the environment for platform capture and accepting international human rights laws and norms that require the same rights and protections afforded to women in journalism offline to be replicated online.[61] There is a need for more investment in effective, collaborative solutions to the online violence crisis that make a material difference to the lived experience of women in these digital communities operated by rich and powerful companies, which have the capacity to do much more to protect the users.[62]

[58] DHN, Social Media Hate speech Mitigation, 2021
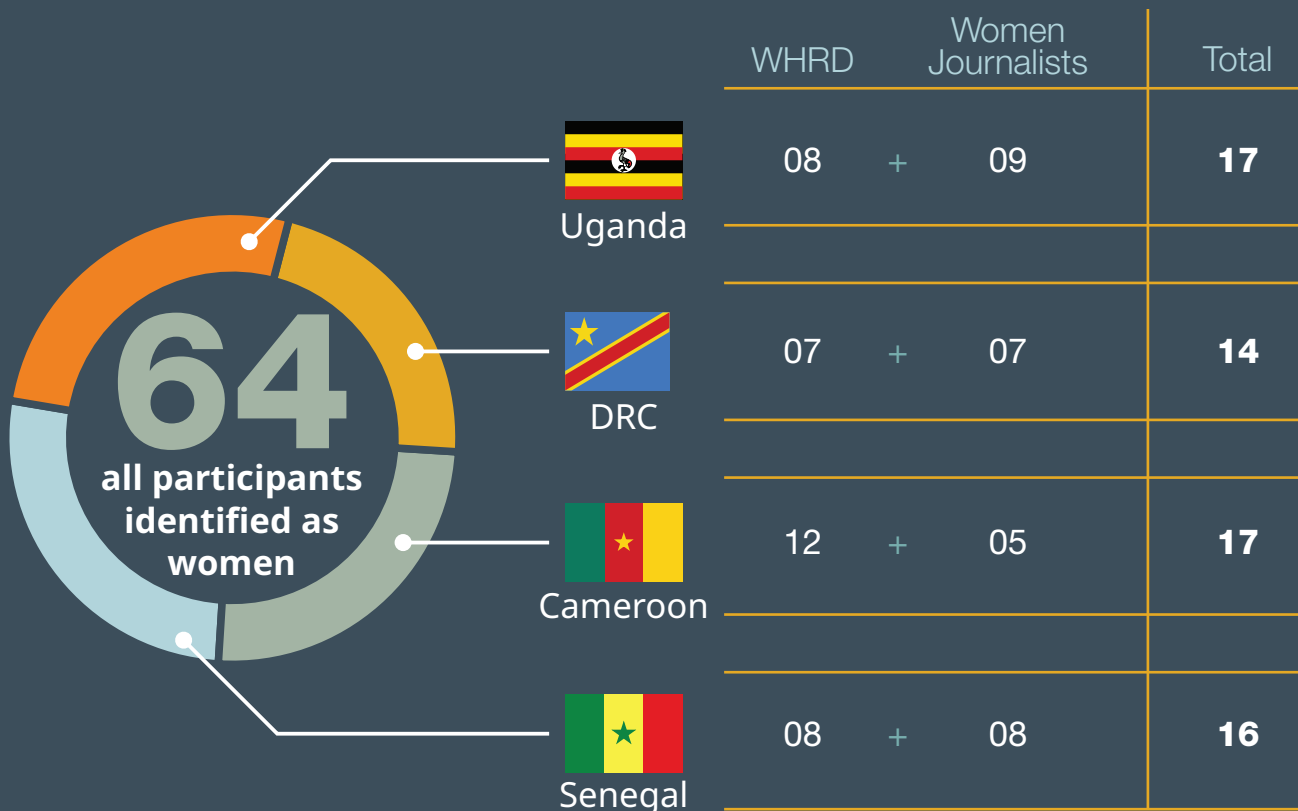[59] Ibid
[60] Women Journalist's Digital Security, AMWIK and Article 19, 2016
[61] Online violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidence and Impacts
Julie Posetti, Nermine Aboulez, Kalina Bontcheva, Jackie Harrison, and Silvio Waisbord, 2021
[62] Online violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidence and Impacts
Julie Posetti, Nermine Aboulez, Kalina Bontcheva, Jackie Harrison, and Silvio Waisbord, 2021

Methodology

To understand the impact of online gender-based violence as well as the experiences of women journalists and HRDs, we conducted a mixed methods study, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods. Four countries were selected including Cameroon, DRC, Senegal and Uganda. This selection was based on the gender inequalities entrenched in religious and cultural norms as well as repressed freedom of expression and inefficient laws to combat and address online gender-based violence. Similarly, cases of online violence in most of the research's locations were rarely documented in an extensive manner, hence our rationale to focus on these countries.

64 all participants identified as women

	WHRD		Women Journalists	Total
Uganda	08	+	09	17
DRC	07	+	07	14
Cameroon	12	+	05	17
Senegal	08	+	08	16

Participants per Interviews Category

22
Google Form Survey

20
Focus Group Discussion

22
Case Study

This research was conducted in English and French. Purposive sampling complemented by snowballing techniques were used to select respondents. Most of the participants were selected from closed networks of Pollicy that included women from civil society organizations and media. The research locations are not homogeneous, thus, the results are not generalizable, although there are comparable patterns that may have a wider applicability.

Data was collected from 22 women who participated in case studies, 20 women in focus group discussions and 22 women responding to a survey digitally sent through Google Forms. The data collection process ran from April to June 2022. For the purpose of this report, the data was disaggregated along professional lines and a subset of respondents who identified as women journalists and women human rights defenders were distinguished and compared through a narrative analysis.

Given that the data collection process involved a focus group discussion, some of the ethical issues we considered are the power dynamics that may affect responses in the room, differing opinions that may be controversial, and our inability to ensure full proof confidentiality since there were other participants in the space. We addressed this by ensuring that the process was explained to each participant through consent and information sheets, and verbally during the conversation. We also created engagement guidelines that considered ways to facilitate conversations that may be controversial. In addition privacy and confidentiality on the researcher's part were noted during data collection.

Limitations

Some of the limitations included time, which required the research to be conducted with a smaller sample size than initially anticipated. More time would have been key in facilitating sufficient follow-ups where necessary. Further, we experienced delays in some potential participants responding to interview requests which slowed the data collection process. However, these issues were addressed through collaboration with Pollicy and Internews networks in the research's location to reach study participants.

Findings

We collated findings from respondents from Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Senegal and Uganda in order to understand common trends that women journalists and human rights defenders report across countries and regions in Sub-Saharan Africa. While contexts, including legislative environments and social norms, differ throughout the study countries, we pulled out common trends of experiences from respondents to illustrate the wide reach and harmful effects of online gender-based violence. We recognise that women's experiences are not monolithic, and that memories and experiences recorded here do not express the full breadth of challenges and opportunities that women journalists and human rights defenders face in their work across the continent.

Internet access and use

All women we spoke to use the Internet daily and for more than three hours a day, using WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat, as well as search engines like Google and web-based email services like Gmail. All participants mentioned using both mobile phones and computer laptops to access the internet. One participant from Uganda explained that the use of a laptop and mobile phone to access the Internet interchangeably is because there are some digital features and applications that can be easily accessed and used when using a computer compared to a mobile phone.[63]

Digital activism has helped propel women's rights to the forefront, bringing attention to issues often underreported by mainstream media.[64] Similarly for women journalists, findings revealed that access to the Internet has led to the proliferation of digital journalism as they author and file stories on location from a phone or laptop, allowing organizations and the general public to get breaking news on their websites within minutes. Both WHRDs and women journalists in all countries use the Internet to do research and acquire new knowledge and information regarding their work as well as access content on women's and feminist-related issues to share with the women they represent.[65] Facebook and WhatsApp were mentioned as the commonly used digital platforms. Women journalists across all countries also mentioned the use of Twitter in addition to

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[63] Case Study 5_Uganda
[64] The Guardian, Women's rights activists use social media to get their message out, 2015
[65] Case study 5_Uganda

Facebook and WhatsApp. A WHRD from Congo mentioned that many WHRDs are currently using Facebook for advocacy as several women's groups come together to engage in collective activism on gender-based violence and sexual reproductive health issues for women.[66]

Additionally, participants use digital platforms like WhatsApp to share contacts. They further use these digital platforms to contact each other, especially when they receive threats and need security as well as to keep in solidarity. They believe the end-to-end encryption of WhatsApp provides more secure messaging compared to other digital platforms. Other digital platforms they use include meeting platforms like Zoom, Google, Teams, or Signal.

Further uses of digital platforms included interacting with survivors of rape and domestic violence to get them resources or help, including counselling, linking them to other organizations for psychosocial support, shelters and legal support. Additionally, women with a larger online presence use digital platforms to fundraise to keep shelters for survivors of domestic violence or rape open, as mentioned by a woman journalist from Uganda:

> *In most cases I have women approaching on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, when they are situations like they have been raped, domestic violence victims when they are looking for help like shelters where they can go and stay, legal support, counselling. I also use my platforms to do crowd funding for sustainability of shelters of victims of domestic violence and rape.*
> - Case study 3_Woman Journalist_Uganda

For women journalists we spoke to, digital platforms provide easy ways for them to express themselves. They mentioned being able to quickly source news, write and author their own stories through blogs that can then be shared on different social media platforms. They also said they use social media to interact and share stories that are trending and also point out areas that need further research.[67] Other uses were conducting interviews for news stories, online meetings and discussions, promoting themselves and their work as well as searching for new knowledge and information.

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[66] FGD_DRC
[67] Case study 2_Cameroon

A woman journalist in Senegal mentioned that for women in the media, digital platforms have become amplified spaces where they write, publish news and stories, conduct interviews with potential respondents for stories and promote their work.[68] However, one focus group of WHRDs in Congo noted that despite meetings and other engagements shifting to online platforms, most WHRDs do not attend. One participant attributed this to many women not being used to the culture of meeting online but also their lack of training on how to use digital platforms.[69] Similarly, women journalists in Congo also shared that some of them do not often use online platforms because of the misogynistic attacks they experience online. For example, one woman journalist who participated in the focus group discussion noted that most women journalists do not like to use online platforms in their work and are afraid of engaging and being active in online platforms because they are attacked online in hateful comments and social media posts about the opinions they shared in public.[70]

Safety online for women journalists and women HRDs

With social media and the Internet integral to journalistic and advocacy practices for journalists, respondents noted that there is a higher risk for attack, exposure or vulnerability through their work online. Journalists increasingly use social media and other digital tools in ways that inadvertently blend their personal and professional identities, such as finding sources and story ideas, creating and distributing content, and engaging with audiences. This, in turn, exposes them to threats. Women journalists noted that they worry about their safety online because the day could come when one has been hacked online, their Facebook page is flooded with their private pictures and negative comments from anonymous people.[71] Unfortunately, most women journalists tend to go offline or reduce online engagement, which negatively affects their professional growth and income.[72] Freedom of expression, press freedom and access to information can only be enjoyed when journalists and media practitioners are free from intimidation, pressure and coercion and surveillance.[73] One woman journalist in Cameroon mentioned that she is always worried about her safety online due to the various scams that she receives. This makes her feel like she is always being watched.

[68] Fgd _Senegal
[69] Fgd Participants_DRCongo
[70] Fgd Participants_DRCongo
[71] Fgd participant_Cameroon
[72] Fgd participant_Cameroon
[73] Lies Hostetter, Independent Journalism in Developing countries is severely lacking, 2018.

> **"** *I think security on this basis is quite a cause for concern, because as I said, you don't know who is watching you. And I have been a victim of so many scams. Like not just really a victim because they never got their way to me. I've been called so many times on WhatsApp, or directly on the phone, by people who claim to be separatist fighters and want financial contributions from us. I've also been called so many times by people who claim that they are acquaintances in the diaspora. I cannot tell where they got my contact from.* - FGD_Cameroon

Participants working in journalism perceived their safety online at much greater risk. They said they experience harassment, abuse and assault online on both their lives and work. They are concerned with the information they share online in the context of their activities. They say they are not certain if identifying information they share in their work is protected, which highlights the need for robust training online protection mechanisms for women journalists. They are then forced to reserve some information they share with their audiences, withdraw from front-line reporting, thus removing themselves from public online conversations or self-censor.[74] One Congolese woman mentioned that:

> **"** *It is better to wait a little or to not put everything online; it's an inconvenience in everything we do as an activity. Truly the fear is there and we do not know what to do.* - Case Study 2_DRC

In Senegal, participants were wary about posting and interacting online because they do not know what happens to the information they put out online: including photos and videos, where they are stored, and who can access them.[75] One Senegalese journalist mentioned they have always seen their information circulating online. However, she also shared that most of these posts were altered, and does not know who altered them and how they accessed them.

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[74] Case Study 2_DRC
[75] Fgd_Senegal

> *"You post something, in 24 hours it disappears like on WhatsApp, Instagram, and you don't know where those photos are stored, or the videos you posted. We are all vulnerable to our information being accessed by people we do not know online. There are very many videos and photos on Instagram here in Senegal of women rights activists and journalists we have seen circulating online but when they have been doctored from the original, we shared, wo don't know who doctored them; someone could have doctored it, we don't know, but they were shared widely. We are not safe on the Internet.* - FGD_Senegal

Women journalists further noted that they do not feel safe to express themselves online because when they do, especially when defending other women, they become targets of attacks.[76] In Uganda, journalists felt they are at the epicentre of online risks and threats due to their work. For example, one woman working as a radio presenter mentioned that they often appear on the radio or television which they believe increases their vulnerability to online attacks.[77] This vulnerability does not allow them to safely voice their opinions and views online because they do not know how the public will receive the message.[78] Women participants identifying as journalists also noted Facebook as the most prolific enabler of online gender-based violence within the social media ecosystem, and they expressed substantial dissatisfaction with platform responses to abusive content flagged for investigation.

Similarly, women human rights defenders do not feel secure online due to a lack of knowledge and skills on online protection. Many also are not aware of how much private and sensitive information may be publicly available online. Additionally, the uncertainty of safety of documents they share online. One Congolese WHRD mentioned that she is not sure if the documents that she signs electronically using e-signature tools are safe. She says, "*...even for me personally in order to secure my Facebook account I had to be helped by another person; but I don't really know if it is safe because with the social networks WHRDs are using them but not exposed to the safety rules,*" (Case Study 4_WHRD_DRC).

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[76] Fgd_Senegal
[77] Case Study 1_Uganda
[78] Fgd particpant_Uganda

Similar to journalists, human rights defenders mentioned that socially distanced advocacy and communication methods necessitated by the pandemic have caused them to rely on social media channels for both sharing information and engaging with their audiences. These increasingly toxic spaces are the main enablers of viral online violence against WHRDs. Thus, WHRDs we spoke to felt their work was growing more dangerous.[79]
As another WHRD in Uganda elaborated:

> *The work that we do [as women human rights defenders] puts us into the spotlight and it is actually very common that we are attacked [or] threatened online. So, there is a certain level of fear that we have towards the people that we interact with online about what information we are giving away, and we are not sure if they will use it against us. So, you feel that you are not free to safely voice your opinions in online spaces such as social media platforms.*
> - Case study 3_WHRD_Uganda

A leader of a civic-tech and digital advocacy organization in Uganda revealed that because she is very concerned about her safety online, she self-censors. Her social media pages do not have her personal information to keep the public from knowing who she is and thus less vulnerable to online attacks. However, she understands that self-censorship is a violation of one's rights online.[80]

In all countries, both women journalists and WHRDs further mentioned the risk of encountering online violence or being exposed to unsafe online scenarios as they receive threats of harm, trolling, and stalking on digital platforms. This therefore highlights the need for online protection programs and measures that take into consideration the needs of WHRDs and women journalists, family members and close contacts. Both categories of women may be re-traumatized and stigmatized if accused of putting their family members and close contacts in danger and exposing them to harm. These realities need to be taken into account and in addition to online safety measures, psychosocial support may also be extended to WHRDs and women journalist family members and close contacts to help them process an online environment with increased risk.

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[79] Case Study 4_DRC
[80] Case Study 4_Uganda

Challenges for women journalists and women HRDs online

Both groups of respondents in all the four countries experienced similar challenges online. This section describes the overall challenges that women face in online spaces, then delineates particular issues that are further disaggregated.

One of the key challenges faced by all respondents (both WHRDs and women journalists) from the four countries was the use of gender and sexuality stereotypes to harm them online. One Congolese WHRD said that she has witnessed fellow WHRDs in her community being attacked online because of their gender or sexuality. She went on to say that society regards women as defying the societal expectation of women staying at home and staying silent.[81] WHRDs in Congo and across the continent face these challenges because they may defy a patriarchal culture and a hegemonic notion of sexuality that places women in an unequal position in the public and the private spheres.[82] This puts women at a disadvantage and impairs the full recognition of their rights in online spaces. Additionally, WHRDs and women journalists face online abuse by being judged for their work. They are intimidated and threatened because of their expressed opinions. Some women have decided to abandon social media, and even abandoned activism, fearing that they will be threatened or that they will suffer other injuries due to this activism and some of these online threats turn into physical threats directed towards these women. All these challenges can discourage even young girls and women of the next generation of activists and journalists.[83]

Another key challenge highlighted by participants was the lack of privacy online. One woman journalist noted that they do not have privacy to the extent that even when they share their photos online, they are pulled down and criticized publicly.[84] Another woman journalist shared her sentiments that she feels they are not safe online, they have no privacy because they are more exposed because of the nature of their work. She went on to say that media persons are known by many people whom they do not know and so they tend to approach them with what looks like appreciating their work at the beginning

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[81] Fgd Participant
[82] Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), Our Right To Safety: Women Human Rights Defenders' Holistic Approach to Protection, 2014
[83] Case Study 5_DRCongo
[84] Fgd participant_DRCongo

and then later changes to asking for sex, sending them nude pictures and videos and these are even those who want to write and publish information about women journalists that may not be correct but to tarnish their names[85]. Such actions online against WHRDs and women journalists portray some of the challenges they face while using the internet and it affects the performance of these women especially women journalists in a way that they begin not to share information online because of fear of being attacked. Both WHRDs and women journalists said that they are subjected to surveillance and their privacy rights are persistently violated as they are forced to reveal personal information and geographical location. These actions make them not entirely free to express their opinions on digital platforms as one Congolese journalist elaborated:

> *As we do our work in digital spaces, we never know what is going to happen. First of all, we are a country- even if the Constitution gives us freedom of expression, but on the level of the authorities there is still a problem; you can't freely express yourself, for fear of being exposed to tough situations. We do our work but we surveilled to see our personal information, where we live and work from, we face intimidation, threats, they tell you, you reported this story, why did you say this, you risk being arrested. So, you know these challenges make you feel you no longer feel free to express your opinions, you get depressed, also some women decide to abandon social media, abandon activism. We try just to express ourselves to our best but with a lot of reservation.* - Case Study 4_Woman Journalist DRC

Online insecurity makes both women journalists and WHRDs feel unable to freely voice their opinions in online platforms as well as affecting their visibility online. One Cameroonian WHRD added that when an activist is not visible online, her work will also not be visible and not of any value to activism.[86]

Indirect exclusion from expressing their views and contributing as well as publishing on certain topics was another challenge mentioned by respondents. One Senegalese WHRD mentioned that both women journalists and WHRDs are not able to freely express themselves online and offline. She noted that they live in a very patriarchal system where women

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[85] Case Study 2_DRCongo
[86] Case study 1_Cameroon

cannot freely express themselves only on some topics. She laid out that according to society, women can freely express themselves only on certain topics such as sexual and reproductive health, employment issues, education, marriage, infidelity or childcare. When it comes to topics regarding politics or national security, feminism, and financial independence for women, their views are not really considered and they may receive a lot of backlash.[87]

Experiences of online gender-based violence

Online gender-based violence may compromise users' privacy, force them to choose when and where to participate online, or even pose a threat to their physical safety. Depending on whether one is affected directly or indirectly, it may lead to significant self-censorship to avoid experiencing such harassment again.[88] All women we spoke to experienced at least one form of online gender-based violence.

One form of online gender-based violence mentioned was slut shaming, a form of online harassment where women and girls are targeted on social media and bullied through ridicule, degradation or humiliation for their sexuality, looks, and their presumed level of sexual activity.[89] Online gender-based violence often focuses on personal or physical characteristics, with political views, human rights activism, gender, and physical appearance being the most common. One Cameroonian participant mentioned that women often take their pictures down from social media after negative comments are posted about body size, skin colour, height, and her general appearance. One Congolese woman journalist shared how she was the target of body shaming when a photo of her was taken from her Facebook and bombarded with comments criticizing her body.[90] Another Senegalese respondent had her personal photos and videos accessed, edited with fabricated content and posted on Instagram by an anonymous hacker, resulting in additional inappropriate comments and threats (FGD_Senegal). For women journalists, nude pictures and sexualized insults have been sent to them by anonymous individuals even as they were on air, including for live call-in programs. Study participants also mentioned that their previous chats and personal information had been circulated without their knowledge or consent, with the intention of damaging their reputation. One human rights defender noted that:

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[87] Case study 2_Senegal
[88] Media Defense, Advanced Modules on digital rights and freedom of expression online in Sub Saharan Africa, Module 4, Privacy and Security online, 2020
[89] Sherri Gordon, What is Slut shaming? A Form of bullying that affects teen-girls for their sexuality 2022
[90] Case study 1_RDC

> *Some people disclose the private lives of WHRDs in public on social media platforms. For instance, one of us had a child outside marriage, and perpetrators looked for this information and circulated it on various social media platforms, exposing her. The public then reacted with threats, hate speech, and negative comments.*
> - Case study 7_WHRD_Senegal

If a woman speaks confidently, perpetrators often attack them through body shaming and slut shaming the woman in question and seek to humiliate and silence outspoken women online (Case Study 2_WHRD_Cameroon). Women's own nude images have been published without consent on various websites for the purpose of extortion, blackmail or humiliation and destroying their credibility. The respondent went on to say this is one of the most common online harassments that both women journalists and WHRDs experience.[91] Besides being sexualized online, women often receive nude images of men accompanied by sexual texts, video and images. One woman journalist in Senegal received unsolicited nude photos from a man while sitting amongst her colleagues. She immediately blocked him but he used another profile to send another friend request (Case Study 1_Woman Journalist_Senegal).

The toll of online gender-based violence is often unbearable, leading some women journalists and WHRDs to limit their online activity and presence, whilst others remove themselves from online spaces completely which in turn limits their ability to work or conduct their activism respectively.[92]

The other online violence experience shared by women in all the four countries was threats and attacks online. They mentioned that these come in whenever women rights activists share information online and offline spaces regarding topics they referred to as sensitive like topics on violation and discrimination of women on aspects like female circumcision, child marriages, violence against women and other cultural and religious doctrines that subjugate women.[93] A woman will receive threats of death, rape, physical assault, and general negative criticism. When a woman tries to bring an issue or situation

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[91] Case study 4_Cameroon
[92] Julie Posetti, Nermine Aboulez, Kalina Bontcheva, Jackie Harrison, and Silvio Waisbord Online violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidence and Impacts, 2021
[93] Fgd_Senegal

to light, they are often automatically stigmatized. Threats come into their inboxes, public pages, and defamation and taking quotes of context occurs (FGD_Senegal). Further, when women journalists publish their work online, there are always indecent and annoying comments, often not directed towards the piece of work that has been published but rather on their gender. Women seeking to express their views freely online are met with threats, harassment and often violence. Threats often arise from the content they share online that is directed towards ending online violence and dismantling patriarchy in online spaces (Case Study 5_Woman Journalist_Uganda). In most cases, said one woman journalist, they are forced to delete a lot of these comments and sometimes the actual piece or post.[94] Such threats were said to increase the likelihood of these women retreating from the use of online platforms.[95]

Hacking was a common way for perpetrators to threaten or harass women journalists and human rights defenders. Hacking often occurs through spam emails or suspicious links sent to the victims. A woman journalist in Uganda shared her hacking experience wherein she received unsolicited emails with spam links that look credible (Case Study 5_Woman Journalist_Uganda). Other hacking experiences of online violence were impersonated as another Ugandan woman mentioned how she was impersonated by a hacker on Twitter and TikTok where users stole her image to create fake profiles, including two Twitter accounts and several TikTok accounts (FGD_Uganda).

Physical attacks

Online violence may escalate into offline violence. Even if harassment begins as violent messages and posts online, it may translate into physical violence against women journalists and human rights defenders. Several respondents in Cameroon mentioned that they were followed in real-time by formerly online perpetrators who then threatened them with rape, death and physical harm. Perpetrators may identify victims from their social media profiles and they stalk them in their communities. If a woman uses her real name or any other identifying information on her profile, a perpetrator may track her down and seek to enact harm, thus putting her at risk (Case Study 3_WHRD_Cameroon).

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94 Case study 5_Senegal
95 Fgd_Senegal

In another case, a Ugandan journalist shared that she was attacked online for sharing dissenting views especially on political issues. Online attacks follow women offline, putting them, their families and friends at risk. People may follow women to work, where they live, and track their movements. As a result, women have to be conscious of their physical and virtual movements. One journalist in Uganda noted that online attacks continue to follow them offline, physically and their families and acquaintances as one woman journalist narrated (Case study 2_ woman Journalist_Uganda). Similarly, a woman human rights defender in Uganda also had online attacks quickly turn physical regarding content she posted. "I was speaking about content that a woman HRD can share online like building capacity about a sensitive topic, like dismantling patriarchy. That's going to raise eyebrows, and [then] you're going to have a mobile call come after you and ask you all sorts of questions, immediate threats in your inbox, unknown people following you physically" (FGD_Uganda). Women end up feeling unsafe and insecure in physical and virtual spaces.

Causes of online gender-based violence

Causes of online violence are both universal across the studied countries but particular to each context. In Cameroon, a major cause of online harassment among WHRDs is when they talk about feminist and women's rights issues, such as ending all violence among women or equality for women. The harassment does not come from one particular party but often from several attackers. Participants further mentioned that they are attacked online because of directly confronting issues on violence of women, or seeking legal redress for victims of online gender-based violence. They are then harassed or threatened online. Harassment is exponentially increased when women become more visible online talking about these issues. One Cameroonian human rights defender mentioned that "…if you find yourself working on a very sensitive subject which could affect the authorities or other powerful people, it could even extend as far as pirating your mailbox, pirating your Google account, it could be Google photographs, in order to get to you" (Case Study 2_WHRD_Cameroon). Women human rights defenders are accused of destroying African values, promoting homosexuality, and subjugating men, despite seeking to promote gender equality and empowerment. They are thus threatened and harassed in their work and personal lives.

Politicians were cited as one of the groups initiating online violence against women journalists if they did not publish stories in a way that suited their political needs. One Congolese focus group discussion participant shared her story on how she published a story of a prominent Congolese politician who ordered a certain election not to take place, against constitutional law. She was ordered to remove the story from the online newspaper where it was published but refused to comply. She received several threatening and violent messages but she withstood the harassment and did not remove the story.[96]

Similar to other countries, Congolese respondents notice that their experiences with online harassment are rooted in African culture, where various traditional beliefs are upheld by society and are used to control the status and sexuality of women. A WHRD mentioned that in her community, women are supposed to be silent and not talk or share their opinions.[97] She added that with the evolution of technology, women and girls are linked to the rest of the world just like men. However, men seem to take women's empowerment as the favouritism of women and thus do not accept that women can be influential online. Participants expressed their concern over men attacking them online and see it as a method of men trying to keep women out of spaces that men feel belong to them, to silence women's voices and to stop women's participation in an increasingly important sphere.[98]

In Senegal, journalists and human rights defenders often came up against stereotypical and entrenched social and cultural norms that believe women should always stay home and take care of the family and not occupy public spaces or professional careers.[99] One Senegalese respondent noticed that men do not want to see women occupying high-level positions in workplaces, believing instead that women should remain at home. When women get jobs and become well known on social media, they are targeted and harassed (FGD_Senegal). WHRDs and women journalists are then attacked online because of the information they share in relation to their work as women's rights activists as media personnel, respectively. WHRDs use their activism as an opportunity to promote the equality of women in society, to see that there are gender inclusive laws and institutions, and increase women's participation in political and social spaces.[100] Journalists are

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[96] Focus group discussion_DRC
[97] Fgd _DRC
[98] Case Study 4_DRC
[99] Fgd_Senegal
[100] Case study 4_Senegal

attacked when they publish stories on political issues, particularly on the violation of women's rights.[101] Both groups are similarly attacked for championing these issues. In Uganda, human rights defenders and journalists mentioned that one of the primary reasons they are harassed online is related to their work. For instance, one human right defender shared that when she helped a survivor of intimate partner violence find psychosocial support and legal redress, the survivor's partner attacked her for her actions. She was using social media to help the survivor find psychosocial support and community, yet the perpetrator was able to find the human rights defender and attack her in addition to his former partner.

Often the cause of online violence is solely by virtue of being a woman. Perpetrators feel entitled to send abusive messages to women online.[102] Throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, and worldwide, society has constructed levels for women that usually connotes a derogatory and negative position. Online gender-based violence, like other forms of gender-based abuse and discrimination, can be sanctioned or tolerated by a society that perceives it as a means of teaching "women to be obedient."[103] Online spaces, like physical reality, are often dominated and controlled largely by men. As a result, they feel they can do anything to claim these spaces and use them the way they want.[104]

Responding to online gender-based violence

Our discussions with journalists and human rights defenders suggest that women deploy various defensive strategies while navigating online spaces to safeguard themselves from and respond to online gender-based violence. This ranges from identifying the online risk, maintaining online boundaries to responding to threats and attacks in more defensive ways. Several Cameroonian women said that they try to respond to the violence at first but this often results in more harassment in the form of threats, abusive messages and insults. They later block the attackers from accessing their account or information online.[105] However, blocking often does not help because the attackers find or create other accounts and begin attacking the women again. Thus, women who experience such a scenario mentioned ignoring the attackers until they stop the harassment themselves. One Cameroonian journalist narrated:

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[101] Case study 6_Senegal
[102] Fgd_Uganda
[103] Raviendra Madugalle, The social construction of womanhood, 2014
[104] Case study 5_Uganda
[105] Case study _3_Cameroon

> *Initially, I responded then later on, I realized that [with] more insults and abusive messages, it would drag on.... So as of now, what I'm doing is to just ignore, and I have realized that ignoring is working for this particular group of people. I know at any time when I post and one of the people writes something or insults or does something, I will not respond. And I'm so happy that this is working. I have blocked them before but these people create new accounts and follow you to attack you.*
> - Case Study 3_WHRD_Cameroon

Blocking often feels as the only viable option for most women. Respondents wanted to avoid continuous confrontation with the perpetrator. Most women, both WHRDs and journalists, use defensive actions such as blocking the perpetrator, deleting the posts and withdrawing from social media use. One journalist noted that "*...it is not enough because the person will do it again to other people. But I do not respond to provocative messages; instead I read and delete them so as not to continue in the conversation*" (Case Study 1_Woman journalist_DRC).

However, as mentioned earlier, one Senegalese journalist mentioned that the blocked perpetrators created other online accounts to harass them. This prompted the woman to be more cautious on which online invitation requests she accepts.[106] Ugandan respondents also used blocking as a common strategy. They mentioned that this strategy is not used immediately to respond to the harassment but rather, the victim would first ignore the perpetrator[107] or try fighting back.[108] Some Congolese respondents mentioned how they ignored the messages and just kept silent and waited until the perpetrator was tired of posting and stopped by themselves. When perpetrators persist, they are blocked. One Ugandan WHRD explained:

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[106] Fgd_ Senegal
[107] Case study 1_Uganda
[108] Case Study 3_Uganda

> **" *I fought back.... I am a strong believer that when someone comes at you respond to them and when you respond to them in most cases, they don't expect you to do that so it is a bit shocking. So, when I responded some of them stopped, some of them persisted with comments then later I blocked them because I knew they were looking for attention.* - Case study 3_WHRD_Uganda**

A Senegalese respondent also fought back with a counter attack, "*...because when a person attacks me on something and I counterattack or give an argument, the attacker can retreat. I think it is a strategy that can be used to respond to online abuse, although it does not always work*" (FGD_Senegal). Senegalese respondents also mentioned that they kept silent and ignored the posts targeting them. They added that they would block the perpetrator if he or she did not stop the harassment. A few women mentioned reporting the perpetrators to the authorities. However, it was revealed that there are no clear government structures in Senegal to lodge complaints about online gender-based violence.[109]

Other women reported these incidents to the relevant social media platforms to have abusive posts or comments removed. Other attackers that were reported to social media platforms had their accounts blocked.[110] However, respondents were concerned that social media platforms need to recognize abusive posts and harmful content and take it down before it circulates. A Cameroonian journalist who experienced online harassment on several occasions expressed her concern to social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook to take the content down before it circulates into the public but this was not achieved.[111] One Ugandan journalist mentioned that she "tried to get the account reported, but nothing was working. The account was not taken down because they said I had failed to prove to the social media platform site that the person was impersonating me" (Case study 5_Woman Journalist_Uganda). Lastly, many respondents did not do anything when they were harassed online because they did not know what to do and where to report such a case.[112]

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[109] Fgd_ Senegal
[110] FGD_participant_Cameroon
[111] Case study _5_Cameroon
[112] Ibid

Lack of reporting structures for online gender-based violence

While WHRDs and women journalists experience many threats and attacks online during their work and communication in online spaces, there is a distinct lack of places and methods to report online attacks, threats and other incidents. One Senegalese participant explained that whenever they experience online attacks, they want to report the cases to places other than social media platforms but they do not know where to go or what policies and legislation may protect them or provide retribution for what they have faced. Journalists and human rights defenders do not know what organization can receive complaints or whether the police can process their case. One respondent in Senegal remembers that *"...recently I was added to a pornographic group on WhatsApp. I don't even know the person who added me. I wanted to report the group but I did not know where to go. Automatically I exited and reported the group on the platform"* (FGD_Senegal).

Awareness of cyber laws and policies

When online gender-based violence happens, it is important that there are effective laws and ways of reporting so victims can access justice. Violence against women online is often trivialized with poor punitive action taken by authorities and exacerbated by victim-blaming. Additionally, most African countries do not have specific legislation or strategies against online gender-based violence, existing preventive measures to specifically target online gender-based violence are flimsy.[103]

In Cameroon, fourteen of seventeen respondents (82%) reported that they were not aware of any laws or policies to protect them against online gender-based violence. Only three participants were aware of any laws related to cyber-crime; one mentioned the law on personal data protection,[114] while the other mentioned the Penal Code (2016) geared towards fighting cybercrime.[115] None mentioned whether existing laws or policies could directly protect them against online gender-based violence. Both of these women additionally voiced their concern about the failure of the Cameroonian government to implement these laws, as they never see any attackers being held accountable on counts

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[113] Amanda Lichtenstein, Towards a cyber-feminist future: a new study centers African women as pratagonists online, 2020
[114] Case study 1_Cameroon
[115] Case study 5_Cameroon

of online gender-based violence. Participants believed that people are not aware of these laws and thus they are not reporting online gender-based violence to hold attackers accountable.

In the DRC, only two of fifteen respondents reported any awareness of laws in Congo that protect individuals against online gender-based violence. Both were not sure of specific laws and could only reference documents they had seen online on laws to protect human rights defenders (which was signed in Goma and adopted in 2021).[116] One of the two women that were aware of cyber-related laws and policies mentioned that the DRC has a number of laws concerning telecommunications networks. In 2002, the government passed a bill which created a supervisory body for posts and telecommunication. The most recent was passed in 2020, focused on telecommunication and information technology and is the same one used for Internet governance. These protect internet users but are not sufficient and need to be improved.[117] Congolese journalists and WHRDs mentioned they do not know how to apply these laws and policies when they are harassed online. For instance, there is no clear pathway of where one can report cases and to whom.[118] They further mentioned that these laws they are aware of seem not to be applicable in their country because no one is enforcing them. They suggested the need for women human rights defenders and journalists to have capacity building on these laws and policies.

Only three Senegalese participants were aware of cyber laws that exist in Senegal and they mentioned the law which protects personal data and the cyber law that protects web users. However, they said they were not sure which law can protect an individual from online gender-based violence.[119] Additionally, participants mentioned that the public is not aware of these cyber laws and policies. One WHRD mentioned:

" *I really don't know a lot about the cyber laws but I know that the laws exist; but how are these laws applied, and when? Maybe that's why they are not even very well-known. Probably if there is a way of popularizing them so that internet users can know and understand them and also use them when necessary.*
- Case study_WHRD_Senegal

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[116] Case Study 1_DRC
[117] Case Study 3_DRC
[118] Fgd_DRCongo
[119] Case study 1_Senegal

Conversely, Ugandan respondents were largely aware of laws and policies that protect Internet users from online harassment. Fifteen of seventeen (88%) respondents recognised the Computer Misuse Act, the Anti-Pornography Act and the Defamation Act. However, the policies are generalized and do not explicitly address the pervasive problem of online gender-based violence. The Computer Misuse Act, for example, is not clear on this kind of harassment, it does not specifically address OGBV, and it addresses general cyber harassment, stalking and offensive communication.[120] Other forms of online gender-based violence are not mentioned in the Act, neither are women mentioned in the Act. Yet it is the same Act that law enforcers refer to for guidance on OGBV cases.[121] Additionally, respondents mentioned many WHRDs in Uganda are not aware of these laws. For instance, one WHRD mentioned that most people in Uganda are not aware that one can actually report online bullying, slander, stalking among others like how domestic violence is reported. "That bill [Computer Misuse Act] kind of feels like it is more for the politicians and less for the local people. like if I really go to the police and I report that I have been bullied online they don't take it seriously like if it was a rape case or domestic violence case" (Case study 3_WHRD_Uganda). Some civil society organizations working on women's digital rights, like the Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET), work to advocate and raise awareness. However, more effort is needed in this area.[122]

In all countries surveyed, there are no robust mechanisms for accountability. As a result, most perpetrators escape without punishment. Most women fear coming forward for fear of judgment, and so they keep silent. Most of the time the survivor is blamed rather than the perpetrator. A call to action was made by participants to advocate for the restructuring of these policies; so that articles specifically addressing online gender-based violence against women are included within the relevant country's Acts.[123]

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[120] Laws Africa, Computer Misuse Act 2011
[121] Owen Owebagaza, Why Online violence among women is persistent in Uganda despite existing laws and policies, 2020
[122] Case Study 2_Uganda
[123] Case Study 4_Uganda

Digital safety and security

Respondents were asked to rate their knowledge of digital safety and security in their online presence. The answers illustrate the marked gaps in women's knowledge base on more sophisticated measures of protection and safety measures while working online, both personally and professionally.

In Cameroon, participants rated their knowledge base as average (10) and below average (7). The average knowledge encompasses basic actions such as using different passwords for different online accounts, not opening suspicious links or websites, changing passwords frequently, not sharing passwords with other people and also using two-factor authentication (2FA). Below average knowledge indicates the use of the same password for different online accounts, and these respondents have no other measures they employ to protect themselves online.

Similarly, most (11) Congolese respondents rated their knowledge as below average. Only four of the fifteen participants rated their knowledge as average and they said this was because of the digital security measures they employ to ensure they are safe online. This includes using 2FA to access email,[124] changing passwords more frequently (six months or less), and the use of strong, secure passwords that include numbers and symbols.[125] Other measures mentioned included not sharing passwords with others, avoiding checking email and social media accounts on insecure digital devices to be less vulnerable to hacking.[126] Participants who rated themselves as average attributed this from prior digital security training. Participants with below average knowledge only used basic security techniques. They also had less secure digital practices, including using public Wi-Fi, sharing digital devices and accounts, not backing up data, and using outdated anti-viruses.[127]

In Senegal, only four (25%) of participants rated their digital safety knowledge as average and attributed this to avoiding the use of the same password for all accounts and changing passwords frequently, being conscious of information they post online as well as limiting the people who read or comment on what they post online, blocking and muting suspected online attackers and being conscious of people they accept as friends on social networking

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[124] Case Study 1_DRCongo
[125] Fgd Participant_RDC
[126] Case Study 4_DRCongo
[127] Case Study 2_RDC

sites. The other twelve participants rated as below average due to a lack of knowledge of online safety measures aside from blocking, muting and deleting suspected online attackers.

In Uganda, two (11%) of participants rated their knowledge as excellent, five (29%) as average, and ten (60%) as below average. The majority with below average knowledge mentioned that they only have basic digital security practices, including checking the content of their posts[128] and not sharing personal details online. Participants who rated their knowledge as average mentioned using security measures such as only commenting or responding to comments when necessary and not sharing contacts online,[129] not posting location details, using 2FA, the use of VPNs, and reading privacy policies of social media platforms.[130] Other measures mentioned were the taking and storage of screenshots of violent or threatening messages, as well as blocking suspicious followers and reporting perpetrators on online platforms.[131] They attributed their knowledge on digital safety and security to prior digital training.

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[128] Case Study 1_Uganda
[129] Case study 2_Uganda
[130] Case study3_Uganda
[131] Fgd_particpant Uganda

Discussion & Conclusions

This research has by far demonstrated that online gender-based violence is an existing and rapidly evolving issue in Francophone and Anglophone countries among women journalists and human rights defenders alike. A previous report on online gender-based violence conducted by Pollicy in 2020[132] found that online gender-based violence was increasingly designed to silence women, and has grown in its technological sophistication and collaborative coordination.[133] Online gender-based violence poses a threat to diversity in the media and the work of WHRDs. The more visible women are online, the more they are exposed to online attacks.[134] Findings further showed that the socio-political environments of a country influenced how online gender-based violence is carried out. As explained in this report, women human rights defenders and journalists have the right to use online platforms for their work and other practices. However, to ensure that they experience the pleasure of online spaces, digital media and services would have to be free from discrimination and gendered violence. Legal and policy measures should not only involve state action, but also the cooperation of the media, online and tech companies' platforms, human rights defenders and civil society organizations. It also requires intersectional proactive programs and interventions that complement laws because currently laws and policies are usually further steps behind our rapidly evolving world. This means that when the law or policy is introduced, it is probably too late.

Violence against women journalists online, although often neglected and overlooked, is an issue that is embedded in the patriarchal hegemonies and systems that design and carry out other forms gender-based violence.[135] Meanwhile, prevention and protection strategies and policies are lagging. Many human rights defenders are unable to tell how much of their sensitive information they share online. Part of this is because many people are unaware of the sophisticated tactics used against them, and do not have the space and privilege to ensure their 'safety' in every dimension. Given that a significant number of threats women human rights defenders and journalists face are gendered, protection in this case would mean to self-censor or stay offline entirely. Staying safe becomes almost impossible to achieve without systematically challenging and undoing violence.

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[132] Neema Iyer, Nyamwire Bonnita and Nabulega Sandra, Alternate Realities Alternate Internets, 2020
[133] Julie Posetti, Nermine Aboulez, Kalina Bontcheva, Jackie Harrison, and Silvio Waisbord Online violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidence and Impacts, 2021
[134] African Center for Media Excellence. Threats-that-silence-violence-against-women-journalists, 2022
[135] Kim Barker and Olga Jurasz, Online Misogyny: A Challenge for Digital Feminism?

Protection and security for WHRDs in this area would mean being able to use and interact in online spaces without fear of surveillance, data retention, threats, intimidation or violence.[136] To ensure protection online, national legal frameworks that regulate the use of internet and digital technology must address the intersectional nature of online violence which is gendered, based on sexuality, state-facilitated, and contextual. This would also require independent implementing and oversight institutions to enforce, and ensure that women human rights defenders and journalists are safe. The need for independent bodies to enforce, and govern legal protection frameworks come at a time where the threats human rights defenders and journalists face is also state facilitated. In addition, when religion or a society that is also patriarchal plays a significant role in our governance frameworks, we can no longer rely on our structures as-is, to facilitate the creation of just, and safe online environments.

Women journalists should also be well supported by editorial teams who need to signal that these forms of online gender-based violence exist and therefore need to be responded to decisively, including with legal and law enforcement intervention when appropriate. Editorial teams need to also have structures and resources that support women journalists who are targeted and threatened as a result of their work.

This research focused on the complex problem and lasting harm of physical and online attacks against women journalists and WHRDs. Women journalists and WHRDs face an added scrutiny and threat because of their gender. Misogynistic attacks and retribution are swift and coordinated. The fear of future harassment and attacks changes the behaviours and actions of WHRDs and women journalists. Women who experience abuse report self-censoring, and long-term concerns about their professional choices. As argued, many of them deactivate their account and decide to remain offline. Yet, the problem still lacks effective responses when violence is reported to law enforcement.

Law enforcement institutions' inability or lack of care on online violence communicates sentiments that online violence is more 'trivial' and the space is less real. They also borrow responses from other forms of gendered-violence offline, where survivors rarely receive the adequate care and are further victimized by the process. Misogyny, which is an influencing

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[136] Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), Our right to Safety: Women Human Rights Defenders' Holistic Approach to protection. 2014

factor on online violence are a real threat to women's lives, participation in journalism and activism in the digital age. Technology has presented a complicated reality to gendered violence, inequalities and freedom of expression. The capacity and work of key stakeholders need to evolve and acknowledge these complications when addressing the issue.

Women human rights defenders and journalists are attacked online for existing as women, and as people who actively fight for a more just society. Protecting these women from exposure to such violence online relies on the cooperation and collaborative efforts of newsrooms, civil society organizations, policymakers, social media companies and the legal and judicial communities to live up to their responsibilities within international legal frameworks that are explicitly designed to protect women from violence and secure their safety online. While WHRDs and women journalists have the right to free speech and expression online, online gender-based violence could also interfere with other fundamental rights entrenched in countries' constitutions, including the right to equality, the right to dignity and the right to privacy.[137] Therefore, understanding existing legal frameworks that can address online gender-based violence is important for WHRDs and women journalists.

The responsibility of addressing online gender-based violence should be on governments, foreign and national donors, international technology regulatory bodies and technology companies. Similarly, the perpetrators should face some form of consequences for their actions. Yet, WHRDs and women journalists carry the burden of ensuring their own safety while putting themselves at risk as they advocate for better spaces and systems. Proactive measures need to be taken, and education, training and sensitization on the consequences of harassment and violence online need to be fully communicated across users and communities. Technology companies also need centre inclusive and contextual safety and security in their design. Women human rights defenders and journalists require extensive support, protection, justice and solidarity which does not leave them to have to bear the cost of 'protecting' themselves, especially when most of the threats they face are out of their control.

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[137] Uganda's Constitution of 1995 with Amendments through 2005

Recommendations

To women's rights organizations and media houses

There is a need to support WHRDs and women journalists with mental health programs that help them work through the effects of online gender-based violence and the risks of their work as front-line defenders. For women journalists, mental health services will also go a long way to curb re-traumatization they deal with by listening to stories of online harassment of other women survivors they document.

Women directly affected and marginalized by online attacks are capable of solving their own problems better than anyone else. However, for them to be effective in their responses to attacks, there is a need to provide them with adequate resources, information, support and finances.

More training needs to be done on how women journalists and WHRDs can continue to carry on their work in a political, patriarchal and misogynistic society that seems to be the main root cause of online gender-based violence among these women.

Additionally, there is need to continuously train WHRDs and women journalists on how to use social media platforms to report online abuse since reporting creates a trail of documentation for the tech platform and can result in important consequences for an online perpetrator, including the removal of harmful content or even the deactivation of the perpetrator's online account.

Findings consistently showed the need to do more to develop digital literacies for WHRDs and women journalists with a particular focus on extending digital literacies across different contexts. Digital literacies can also be used to explain the process by which WHRDs and women journalists learn how to behave on/in platforms that datafy them as well as giving the platforms authority to inscribe their ways of learning, knowing and behaving. And topics that cover data literacy, personal data literacy and digital infrastructural literacy can be covered during the training.

There is a need to continuously raise awareness in society about online gender-based violence against women human rights defenders and women journalists as attacks on freedom of

expression, and disseminate clear information about where to report and seek redress in case of violence. This may encourage many to report cases to the authorities.

To the state

There is a need to raise awareness of the existing laws and policies that protect women from online gender-based violence in all the states. Most of the participants indicated their lack of awareness and knowledge of these policies. Raising their awareness on laws and policies will educate women about these laws thus encourage them to use them as well as to motivate them to participate in advocating for use of these laws to combat online gender- based violence.

Sufficiently educate public officials, including security forces, and law enforcement personnel about the right of women journalists and WHRDs to carry out their work free of online gender based violence. Additionally make known to public officials that subjecting these women to online gender based violence is a violation of their right to freedom of expression.

The state should work hand in hand with media houses and women CSOs to promote a favourable working environment so that women journalists and WHRDs can practice online without fear of being victims of OGBV because of their work. In particular, States must ensure, through the law and policies in existence, address OGBV and they are effectively applied. In order to strengthen cybersecurity, African governments can take a number of steps to improve their capacity to prevent and respond to cybersecurity vulnerabilities.

Policymakers need to define a medium and long-term cybersecurity policy and strategy to integrate cybersecurity into government initiatives and to specify the resources needed to achieve this. This requires setting up national authorities or agencies with sufficient financial resources to implement the strategy and strengthen the country's cyber-resilience.

Additionally, governments must promote a responsible societal cybersecurity culture in order to strengthen the confidence of citizens and organizations in the cyber economy, digital services, and the broader internet. States must set up awareness-raising and training programs in cybersecurity for the public, private, academic, and civil society sectors in order to equip them with the skills and knowledge necessary to respond to cybersecurity risks.

Ensure that there is an adequate legal framework in place that is specific to online gender-based violence for the effective punishment of online gender-based violence against women journalists, women human rights defenders and that it enables the authorities to act effectively in response to OGBV complaints. Governments must also establish the legal frameworks that are key to regulate the use of cyberspace and to sanction cybercrimes.

To telecommunications companies

IT experts from large organizations in the private sector, such as telecommunications operators possess a good understanding of cybersecurity threats and risks and the application of the respective policies and laws that exist in these states. Small and medium-sized organizations under which the women who participated in this study have limited awareness of the cyber security laws.[138] There is thus a need for coordinated awareness-raising or campaigns to cover all groups in society on cyber security risks, threats, safety online as well as the existing laws to address them.

The other recommendation is for tech companies to continue engaging in dialogues with women and WHRDs and journalists about more ways the companies can continue to invest in protecting women from online gender-based violence. By engaging in such dialogues, telecom companies will demonstrate that they are listening to women and their call to make digital platforms safer spaces for them to freely express themselves without fear.

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[138] Global Cyber Security Center, Cyber Security Capacity Review of the Republic of Senegal, 2014.

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