



Joint Stakeholder Submission to the Fourth Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the Republic of Rwanda

For the 51st Session of the UPR Working Group of the United Nations Human Rights Council

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About the Submitting Organisations

Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA)

The Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) is one of two centres established under the Catalysing Access to Information and Communications Technologies in Africa (CATIA) initiative, which was funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DfID). CIPESA focuses on decision-making that facilitates the use of ICT in support of good governance, human rights and livelihoods.

CIPESA's establishment in 2004 was in response to the findings of the Louder Voices Report for DfID, which cited the lack of easy, affordable and timely access to information about ICT related issues and processes as a key barrier to effective and inclusive ICT policy making in Africa. As such, our work responds to shortage of information, resources and actors consistently working at the nexus of technology, human rights and society.

Association for Progressive Communications (APC)

The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) was established by seven founding organisations in 1990 as an international membership-based network working to mobilise emerging electronic information and communication networks for social justice and development. APC has grown into a respected network with a total of 73 organisational members.

APC's strength comes from the experience, expertise and credibility of the people who make up the network and the organisational culture of feminist values, commitment to human rights, belief in collaboration and respect and care that APC brings to its relationship within the APC community.

Introduction

1. This stakeholder report focuses on key issues relating to human rights in the digital context in Rwanda, including digital connectivity and inclusion, freedom of speech and expression online, online surveillance, transnational repression and right to privacy, and technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV).
2. This review marks the fourth cycle for Rwanda in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism. During the third cycle, the importance of issues relating to freedom of speech and expression and freedom of the press was demonstrated by Rwanda receiving 32 recommendations related to these issues, including 24 relating to free speech and expression (with a focus on the need to revise legislative provisions which unduly restricted free speech), and 17 recommendations relating to protecting journalists and human rights defenders from attacks and intimidation.¹

II. CONTEXT OF THE SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS ONLINE IN RWANDA

3. Rwanda has made progress in expanding its digital infrastructure. Access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) has improved significantly in recent years.² However, the situation of human rights online in Rwanda has deteriorated since the last UPR review in 2021, particularly leading up to the 2024 general elections in July 2024.³ Incumbent President Paul Kagame's bid for re-election for a fourth term was accompanied by heightened government's authoritarianism and censorship of online criticism.⁴ The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), led by President Kagame, which has been in power since ousting forces responsible for the 1994 genocide, was elected for a fourth term in July 2024 with 99.17% of the vote. While the RPF regime has provided stability and economic growth in Rwanda, it has suppressed political dissent through tactics such as arbitrary detention, torture, and suspected assassinations of exiled dissidents.⁵
4. Violations of user rights, strict censorship, increased surveillance and infrastructure limitations have contributed to Rwanda still being declared as 'Not Free' by Freedom House, which gave Rwanda a score of 36/100 in 2024,⁶ reduced from its 2021 score of 38/100.⁷

¹ Human Rights Council (2021, 25 March). Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Rwanda, 11-17, A/HRC/47/14.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/rw-index>

² Paradigm Initiative (2025, April). Digital Rights and Inclusion in Africa: LONDA 2024. <https://paradigmhq.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Londa-2024-1.pdf>

³ Freedom House (2024). Freedom on the Net 2024: Rwanda. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/rwanda/freedom-net/2024>

⁴ Reporters Without Borders (2025). Country: Rwanda. <https://rsf.org/en/country/rwanda>

⁵ Freedom House (2024). Freedom on the Net 2024: Rwanda. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/rwanda/freedom-net/2024>

⁶ Freedom House (2024). Freedom on the Net 2024: Rwanda. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/rwanda/freedom-net/2024>

⁷ Freedom House (2024). Freedom on the Net 2024: Rwanda. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/rwanda/freedom-net/2024>

III. DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY AND INCLUSION

5. Rwanda's digital infrastructure expansion in recent years has been impressive, but its internet penetration rate remains low, with 4.93 million internet users reported in January 2025, translating to an internet penetration rate of 34.2% at the start of 2025.⁸
6. Relative to other African countries, Rwanda has strong foundations to make digital access affordable, but there is gender imbalance in internet access and use.⁹ DataReportal figures indicate that of 1.3 million active social media user identities in January 2025, only 38.2% were female.¹⁰ In a 2021 study commissioned by APC, women cited price as one of the main reasons for why they do not use the internet.¹¹ Another major barrier is the lack of the appropriate devices. While these challenges are not unique to women, Rwandan women are affected more due to fundamental gender disparities, particularly in education and income.¹²
7. Rwanda's national ID with a unique identifier number not only satisfies daily identification needs, but is also becoming popularly used as a key to access services and effect transactions electronically. However, there is a need for an effective legal and institutional framework to regulate current and future uses of the national ID, especially online.¹³

IV. FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND EXPRESSION ONLINE

8. Despite constitutional protections for freedom of expression, there is a continued clampdown on real or perceived opposition to government policy.¹⁴ Rwandan laws still contain provisions which unduly restrict free speech and expression, contrary to the recommendations received during the third cycle of the UPR, including the following provisions of the 2018 Penal Code which provide fines as well as imprisonment as sanctions:¹⁵

⁸ Simon Kemp (2025, 3 March). Digital 2025: Rwanda, DataReportal. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-rwanda>

⁹ Research ICT Africa (2022, 7 February), Gender norms, gendered work and intersectional digital inequalities in Rwanda. <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/gender-norms-gendered-work-and-intersectional-digital-inequalities-rwanda>

¹⁰ Simon Kemp (2025, 3 March). Digital 2025: Rwanda, DataReportal. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-rwanda>

¹¹ Research ICT Africa (2022, 7 February), Gender norms, gendered work and intersectional digital inequalities in Rwanda. <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/gender-norms-gendered-work-and-intersectional-digital-inequalities-rwanda>

¹² Research ICT Africa (2022, 7 February), Gender norms, gendered work and intersectional digital inequalities in Rwanda. <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/gender-norms-gendered-work-and-intersectional-digital-inequalities-rwanda>

¹³ Binda, E.M. (2021). Digital Identity in Rwanda: Case study conducted as part of a ten-country exploration of socio-digital ID systems in parts of Africa (Towards the Evaluation of Digital ID Ecosystems in Africa: Findings from Ten Countries) [Case study]. Research ICT Africa (RIA). <https://researchictafrica.net/publication/digital-identity-in-rwanda-case-study-conducted-as-part-of-a-ten-country-exploration-of-socio-digital-id-systems-in-parts-of-africa/>

¹⁴ Paradigm Initiative (2025, April). Digital Rights and Inclusion in Africa: LONDA 2024. <https://paradigmhq.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Londa-2024-1.pdf>

¹⁵ Human Rights Council (2021, 25 March). Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Rwanda, paras 134.50; 134.53; 134.55; 134.57; 134.58; 135.40; 136.31; 136.32; 136.33; 136.34; 136.35; 136.37; 136.39; 136.41; 136.43; 136.44; 136.45; 136.46, A/HRC/47/14. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/rw-index>

- 157 (publication of comments or images after editing):

This article expressly prohibits the dissemination of edited or modified words or images. Although it may be aimed at combating disinformation or the malicious manipulation of images, its broad application may target the independent press, investigative journalists or citizens sharing critical analyses, even with objectivity. Video or photo editing is a common practice in media production to illustrate a point of view or clarify a message. This seriously compromises freedom of expression, as it discourages individuals from sharing audiovisual content, including in an informative or critical context.

In the absence of a clear definition of what constitutes prohibited ‘editing’, this article opens the door to arbitrary interpretation. It could be used to punish anyone disseminating information deemed embarrassing to the authorities, on the pretext of intentional modification.

- Article 164 prescribes up to seven years’ imprisonment for using “speech, writing or any other act” to instigate divisions among people or cause civil unrest on the basis of discrimination.
- Article 194 prescribes up to 10 years’ imprisonment for spreading false information or harmful propaganda with intent to cause hostile international opinion or “public disaffection” against the government.
- Article 233 prescribes up to two years’ imprisonment for humiliating “national authorities and persons in charge of public service” including through verbal gestures or threats, in writing or through cartoons. These penalties are doubled if the offence takes place during a Parliament session or if it is directed at any top-ranking authorities.
- Article 253 criminalises a refusal to answer “questions by intelligence or security officers in the exercise of their duties” or deliberately providing false answers to such questions. It effectively forces journalists and bloggers to disclose their sources, or face a penalty of up to six months’ imprisonment.

9. The government uses these laws to crack down on journalists and human rights defenders. For instance, political commentator Aimable Karasira was arrested in May 2021 on allegations of inter alia inciting division and public disorder through social media commentary,¹⁶ remains in detention and his trial is still ongoing in June 2025.¹⁷ In September 2021, Youtuber Yvonne Idamange, who published content critical of the government led by Paul Kagame, was convicted under article 194 and sentenced to 15 years’ imprisonment.¹⁸ In late 2021, eight members of Development and Liberty for All (DALFA-Umurinzi), a political opposition party, were arrested for allegedly distributing a book which promotes non-violent resistance against authoritarianism, along with journalist Théoneste Nsengimana who was planning to cover the event.¹⁹ In October 2021 Theophile Ntirutwa and his colleagues, spokesperson of the DALFA-Umurinzi, were arrested and they are currently standing a trial before the high court of Kigali, seven years’ imprisonment for allegedly tarnishing the country’s image.²⁰

¹⁶ Voice of America (2025, 13 January). Rwandan court orders Aimable Karasira to begin defense. <https://www.radiyoyacuvoa.com/a/7934984.html>

¹⁷ Committee to Protect Journalists (2024). Aimable Karasira Uzaramba. <https://cpj.org/data/people/aimable-karasira-uzaramba/>; KT Press (2025, 5 June). Aimable Karasira Defends Himself in Court: “I Was Just Expressing My Views”. <https://www.ktpress.rw/2025/06/aimable-karasira-defends-himself-in-court-i-was-just-expressing-my-views/>

¹⁸ The East African (2021, 1 October). Rwandan YouTuber jailed for 15 years after anti-govt posts, The East African.

<https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/rwandan-youtuber-jailed-for-15-years-3568970>; Rédaction Africanews (2021). Rwandan govt critic on YouTube sentenced to 15 years. <https://www.africanews.com/2021/10/01/rwandan-govt-critic-on-youtube-sentenced-to-15-years/>; The Coalition for Women in Journalism (2021, 1 October). Rwanda: CFWIJ is Concerned At Yvonne Idamange’s Conviction. <https://www.womeninjournalism.org/threats-all/rwanda-yvonne-idamanges-conviction>

¹⁹ <https://srdefenders.org/rwanda-criminal-prosecution-and-detention-of-journalists-and-human-rights-defenders-theoneste-nsengimana-and-dieudonne-niyonsenga-joint-com-munication/>; Amnesty International (2024, 5 December). Rwanda: Authorities must immediately release detained journalist and members of political opposition. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/rwanda-authorities-must-immediately-release-detained-journalist-and-members-of-political-opposition/>; Paradigm Initiative (2025, April). Digital Rights and Inclusion in Africa: LONDA 2024. <https://paradigmhq.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Londa-2024-1.pdf>

²⁰ Human Rights Watch (2023, 18 January). Politician Convicted for Harming Rwanda’s Image. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/18/politician-convicted-harming-rwandas-image>

10. The Rwandan journalist John Williams Ntwali, a leading investigative journalist and editor of the newspaper The Chronicles, who was regularly threatened due to his work as a journalist exposing human rights abuses in Rwanda, died in January 2023 under suspicious circumstances.²¹ The matter was closed after a hasty trial behind closed doors,²² and no independent investigation was conducted despite appeals from civil society organisations and press associations.²³ In March 2024, local administration officers assaulted Ndahiro Valens Pappy, a private TV station journalist, while he was reporting on demolition of homes in the Kicukiro District.²⁴
11. Self-censorship is widespread among journalists as well as non-journalists due to social pressure to support the government, and fear of reprisals for those who criticise authorities.²⁵
12. Rwanda has not implemented recommendations received during the third cycle of the UPR to guarantee independence from government interference for the Rwanda Media Commission (RMC), or to broaden the definition of ‘journalist’ in its 2013 Media Law.²⁶ Protections under the law are not extended to citizen journalists, freelance journalists and bloggers.²⁷
13. Disinformation is a multifaceted and complex issue. Any solutions, particularly policy and regulatory measures, should apply the three-part test of legality, necessity and proportionality to any measures taken, considering that attempts to curtail information disorders may significantly impact on freedom of expression and opinion.²⁸ Rwanda does not have specific legislation to counter online disinformation, but the 2018 Cybercrime law contains restrictions on disinformation. The provisions are characterised by broad and vague definitions, and prescribe long periods of imprisonment as sanctions.²⁹ This is contrary to the principles of legality, necessity and proportionality, allowing for arbitrary or discretionary application and resulting in legal uncertainty, presenting serious dangers to the exercise of fundamental rights due to their criminalising effects which, in turn, deepen inequalities.³⁰ In June 2025, the Supreme Court of Rwanda rejected a challenge to the 2018 Cybercrime law for violating the constitutional guarantees of free speech.³¹

21 <https://forbiddenstories.org/collision-course-an-investigation-into-the-death-of-a-journalist-hated-by-rwandan-authorities/>

22 Lewis Mudge (2023, 9 February). No Clarity Over Journalist’s Death in Rwanda. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/09/no-clarity-over-journalists-death-rwanda>; Lewis Mudge (2023, 9 February). Questions Remain Over Rwandan Journalist’s Suspicious Death. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/18/questions-remain-over-rwandan-journalists-suspicious-death>

23 Human Rights Watch (2023, 31 January). Rwanda: Ensure Independent Investigation into John Williams Ntwali’s Death. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/31/rwanda-ensure-independent-investigation-john-williams-ntwalis-death>; UNESCO (2023, 30 January). Director-General urges investigation into the death of journalist John Williams Ntwali in Rwanda. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/director-general-urges-investigation-death-journalist-john-williams-ntwali-rwanda>

24 Tuyishimire Raymond (2024, 12 March) Kigali : Dasso iravugwaho gukomeretsa umunyamakuru. Umuseke. <https://umuseke.rw/2024/03/kigali-dasso-iravugwaho-gukomeretsa-umunyamakuru/>

25 Freedom House (2024). Freedom on the Net 2024: Rwanda. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/rwanda/freedom-net/2024>; Paradigm Initiative (2025, April). Digital Rights and Inclusion in Africa: LONDA 2024. <https://paradigmhq.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Londa-2024-1.pdf>

26 Human Rights Council (2021, 25 March). Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Rwanda, para136.29, 136.30, 136.36, 136.38; A/HRC/47/14. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/rw-index>

27 Human Rights Watch (2021, 30 March), Rwanda: Arrests, Prosecutions over YouTube Posts. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/30/rwanda-arrests-prosecutions-over-youtube-posts>; The Chronicles (2020, 16 April). It Was a Threat, Now its Policy: Rwanda Government Comes Down Hard on Social Media “Lies”. <https://www.chronicles.rw/2020/04/it-was-a-threat-now-its-policy-rwanda-government-comes-down-hard-on-social-media-lies/>

28 Association for Progressive Communications (2021, 30 August), APC Policy Explainer: Disinformation. <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/apc-policy-explainer-disinformation>

29 Lexota (July 2022). Country Analysis: Rwanda. <https://lexota.org/country/rwanda/>

30 Derechos Digitales and Association for Progressive Communications (2023, October), When protection becomes an excuse for criminalisation: Gender considerations on cybercrime frameworks. https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/gender_considerations_on_cybercrime_0.pdf

31 KT Press (2025, 7 June). Supreme Court Upholds Law Which Petitioners Said Violates Free Speech. <https://www.ktpress.rw/2025/06/supreme-court-upholds-law-which-petitioners-said-violates-free-speech/>

V. ONLINE SURVEILLANCE, TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION AND RIGHT TO PRIVACY

14. Rwanda has signed and ratified the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection (known as the Malabo Convention). In addition to dealing with cybersecurity, the Malabo Convention recognises the right to privacy and requires countries to establish data protection authorities and ensure that personal data is collected, processed, and stored securely. Rwanda still has some way to go in ensuring that domestic laws and policy on data protection and cybersecurity are in line with the Malabo Convention and international human rights standards.
15. In October 2021 the Rwandan Government enacted a law on Protection of Personal Data. This law lacks a public-interest exception for digital and traditional media outlets and has very strict data localisation requirements that are of particular concern. Further, the National Cyber Security Authority tasked with overseeing implementation of the law is not an independent body.³²
16. Mass surveillance is institutionalised within Rwanda, with Article 7 of Law 60/2013 regulating interception of communications, requiring service providers to ensure that systems are technically capable of supporting interceptions at all times.
17. Digital technologies have ushered in an era of unprecedented mass and individualised surveillance. Despite the privacy protections for Rwandan citizens in the Constitution, there are credible reports of the government having acquired and deployed Pegasus (a powerful spyware) against political opponents and human rights defenders, including members of the diaspora.³³ Evidence uncovered by an international investigative media consortium in July 2021 revealed that Rwandan authorities used NSO group's Spyware to potentially target over 3,500 activists, journalists and political dissidents.³⁴ An October 2023 report highlighted patterns of extra-national control, surveillance, and intimidation of Rwandan refugee and diaspora communities.³⁵

³² Freedom House (2024). *Freedom on the Net 2024: Rwanda*. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/rwanda/freedom-net/2024>; Article 19 (2021, 15 June). *Rwanda: Draft data protection bill must incorporate freedom of expression and information safeguards*. <https://www.article19.org/resources/rwanda-data-protection-bill-must-incorporate-free-speech-safeguards/>; Shao, D., Ishengoma, F., Nikiforova, A. and Swetu, M. (2025). *Comparative analysis of data protection regulations in East African countries*. *Digital Policy, Regulation and Governance*, Vol. 27 No. 4, pp. 486-501. <https://doi.org/10.1108/DPRG-06-2024-0120>

³³ Freedom House (2024). *Freedom on the Net 2024: Rwanda*. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/rwanda/freedom-net/2024>

³⁴ Amnesty International (2021, 19 July). *Pegasus Project: Rwandan authorities chose thousands of activists, journalists and politicians to target with NSO spyware*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/07/rwandan-authorities-chose-thousands-of-activists-journalists-and-politicians-to-target-with-nso-spyware/>

³⁵ Human Rights Watch (2023). *"Join Us or Die": Rwanda's Extraterritorial Repression*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/10/10/join-us-or-die/rwandas-extraterritorial-repression>

VI. TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED GENDER BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

18. Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV)³⁶ – such as cyberstalking, online harassment and doxxing, for example – encompasses acts of gender-based violence that are committed, abetted or aggravated, in part or fully, by the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as phones, the internet, social media platforms and email. TFGBV has the same roots as other forms of gender-based violence and is part of the same continuum. Online and offline gender-based violence do not happen in vacuums separate from each other, as women and gender-diverse people's lives online intersect frequently and in various complex ways with other areas of their lives, and violence in any one domain can often produce harm across other domains.³⁷
19. Rwanda's 2018 Cybercrime Law aims to address some forms of TFGBV, but fall short in its implementation, especially compared to the national Gender based violence law which is more effective in terms of enforcing GBV victims' protections and safeguards. Additionally, there are concerns about the law being misused, for instance, criminalising TFGBV survivors themselves where content is created and shared without consent.³⁸
20. Gendered disinformation is a subset of TFGBV that uses false or misleading gender and sex-based narratives against women, aimed at deterring them from participating in the public sphere. It combines three defining characteristics of online disinformation: falsity, malign intent, and coordination. Gendered disinformation targets not only women and LGBTQ+ people, but feminist struggles and gendered discourse. In practice, it is used to silence women, to push them to self-censorship, and to restrict their civic space.³⁹ The content represents direct attacks on women or gender-diverse individuals, generally based on gender bias, stereotypes and expectations.⁴⁰
21. Gendered disinformation in Rwanda has been used as deterrent for young women interested in a political career. Women politicians are targets of image-based disinformation, to sexualise them and create false narratives to shift the public focus from the main political discourse. In May 2024, Victoire Ingabire Umuhiza, a Rwandan opposition leader, faced an aggressive online harassment campaign following a public disclosure of her intended candidacy for the presidential elections.⁴¹ Similar patterns⁴² are observed in attacks on women human rights defenders.
22. Rwanda does not criminalise consensual same-sex relations, but the Rwandan society is still conservative and online and offline attacks based on gender identity and sexual orientation are prevalent. Online harassment, government surveillance and posting of images without consent appeared are widespread concerns.⁴³ For instance, Rwandan designer Moses Turahirwa was the target of homophobic comments after sharing a photo of his passport on Instagram, later on he claimed that his passport was changed to reflect his new gender. They were subsequently arrested on charges of forgery.⁴⁴

³⁶ In this submission, we primarily use the term "technology-facilitated gender-based violence" (TFGBV), while many other terms, such as "online gender-based violence" or OGBV, are in use in international human rights spaces. Since our early research in this area, we have understood that technology-related GBV includes a broader scope of harms to be addressed, including violence in so-called "offline" or on-ground lives facilitated by technology, rather than just violence that happens in an online space.

³⁷ Association for Progressive Communications (2017, November), Online Gender-based Violence.

https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/APCSubmission_UNSR_VAW_GBV_0_0.pdf

Association for Progressive Communications (2023, January), Feminist Principles of the Internet: Advocacy Brief on Violence.

<https://genderit.org/FPI-paper-on-violence#sdfootnote1sym>

³⁸ Rutgers International (2024). Decoding Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: A Reality Check from Seven Countries.

<https://rutgers.international/resources/decoding-technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence-a-reality-check-from-seven-countries/>

³⁹ <https://www.apc.org/en/project/placing-gendered-disinformation>

⁴⁰ Paula Martins (2024, 3 May). Placing "gender" in disinformation. Association for Progressive Communications. <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/placing-gender-disinformation>

⁴¹ Victoire Umuhiza (2024, 22 May). Rwanda's Undemocratic Election. Foreign Policy

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/05/22/rwanda-kagame-undemocratic-election-victoire-ingabire/>

⁴² <https://ascleiden.nl/news/ascleiden-seminar-neoliberal-authoritarianism-rwanda-feminist-analysis>

⁴³ Association for Progressive Communications (2023). The case for an online gender-based violence framework inclusive of transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse experiences. <https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/the-left-out-project-report.pdf>

⁴⁴ Jade Natacha Iriza (2023, 27 April). Moshions' Turahirwa under probe for forging document. The New Times.

<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/7023/news/crime/moshions-moses-under-investigation-for-document-forgery>; Africa News (2023). Rwanda: LGBTQ fashion designer charged with passport forgery. <https://www.africanews.com/2023/04/28/rwanda-lgbtq-fashion-designer-charged-with-passport-forgery/>

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

23 We recommend that the Government of Rwanda take the following measures to uphold human rights in the digital context:

Digital Connectivity and Inclusion

- Invest in infrastructure to extend broadband internet access to rural areas, including through partnerships with private sector providers and community-based networks.
- Sustain efforts to create enabling policy and regulatory environments for the development and sustainability of community-led networks.
- Ensure transparency of the Universal Service Access Fund, especially in regard to allocation of funds, disbursements and operations. Expand the pool of potential beneficiaries and invest in projects addressing the gender digital divide.
- Implement programs on early digital rights education and awareness activities, including prioritising digital literacy education in public junior and secondary schools to empower people with skills to navigate the digital space safely and critically.
- Offer targeted training programmes for adults, especially women, to equip them with the necessary digital skills for employment and participation in society. Implement mentorship programmes to increase the number of girls taking up ICT related courses in school.
- Implement subsidy programmes or partnerships with service providers to improve access to devices for low-income households.
- Conduct regular assessments of connectivity availability and usage patterns to identify underserved areas and inform targeted interventions.
- Ensure that digital access is inclusive and equitable for all; address barriers to access technology and the internet for marginalised communities, including rural communities, women and persons with disabilities. For this, the government should establish institutionalised bottom-up participation and multi-stakeholder decision-making processes to promote inclusive participation of communities in policy making concerning access and digital inclusion.

Freedom of Speech and Expression Online

- Repeal provisions which unduly criminalise free speech including articles 157, 164, 194, 233 and 253 of the 2018 Penal Code;
- Amend the 2018 Cybercrime law to ensure that all provisions comply with international human rights standards relating to free speech and expression.
- Withdraw all cases against individuals facing harassment, intimidation and prosecution from state authorities for legitimate expression and dissent against the government.
- Conduct robust independent investigations into attacks targeting journalists and human rights defenders.
- Promote healthy information systems that include robust access to public information; plural, accessible and diverse media contexts; independent and qualified journalism; and the possibility of expressing ideas safely to counter disinformation.⁴⁵ This includes encouraging social media platforms to take proactive measures to address disinformation and provide transparency on their algorithms and content moderation policies.
- There is a need to stop jamming broadcast signals and the official ban on foreign Radios such as the Kinyarwanda service of the BBC
- Work with civil society organisations and community leaders on public awareness campaigns to promote tolerance, inclusivity and respect for diversity.
- Ensure independence of the RMC from government interference.
- Amend the 2013 Media Law to broaden the definition of ‘journalist’ to extend its protection to citizen journalists, freelance journalists and bloggers.

⁴⁵ Association for Progressive Communications (2021, 30 August), APC Policy Explainer: Disinformation. <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/apc-policy-explainer-disinformation>

Online surveillance, transnational repression and right to privacy

- Ensure that the National Cyber Security Authority can act with complete independence in accordance with standards in the Malabo Convention.
- Encourage companies operating in Rwanda to implement robust cybersecurity measures to protect personal data and prevent cyberattacks, in line with the government's obligations under the UNGP-BHR.
- Refrain from or cease the use or transfer of new and emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence applications and spyware, where they are impossible to operate in compliance with international human rights law or that pose undue risks to the enjoyment of human rights, unless and until the adequate safeguards to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms are in place.⁴⁶
- Refrain from using cyber security-related laws, policies, and practices as a pretext to violate human rights and fundamental freedoms. Cybersecurity related policies must provide security in a way that reinforces human rights.⁴⁷ Amend regulatory provisions such as Law 60/2013 which enables state surveillance of content without adequate safeguards.
- Set up an independent judicial oversight of the state surveillance apparatus in order to ensure that those mechanisms are competent and adequately resourced to monitor the legality of surveillance measures.
- Guarantee adequate independent oversight mechanisms which operate on principles of transparency and accountability, provide redress mechanisms to victims, and control state surveillance practices to ensure they are limited and proportional in accordance with international human rights standards.
- Strengthen independence and accountability of the Rwanda Data Protection Office.

⁴⁶ UN Human Rights Council (2025, 25 March). *New resolution on human rights defenders* (A/HRC/58/L.27/Rev.1); Francia Baltazar and Paula Martins (2025, 23 April). *A digital milestone: New resolution on human rights defenders and new technologies adopted by the UN Human Rights Council*. Association for Progressive Communications. <https://www.apc.org/en/news/digital-milestone-new-resolution-human-rights-defenders-and-new-technologies-adopted-un-human>

⁴⁷ Association for Progressive Communications (2020, November). *APC policy explainer: A human rights-based approach to cybersecurity*. <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/apc-policy-explainer-human-rights-based-approach-cybersecurity>

Technology-facilitated Gender-based Violence Against Women Public Figures, including Human Rights Defenders

- Enhance measures and policies to prohibit, investigate and prosecute TFGBV. Engage with specialists in TFGBV, including civil society organisations, survivors and academics for such law reform. Ensure that legislative responses to tackle TFGBV are gender-responsive and in line with international human rights standards.
- Amend the 2018 Cybercrime law to ensure that restrictions to freedom of expression as a response to TFGBV are necessary and proportionate, not overly broad or vague in terms of what speech is restricted, and do not over penalise.
- Provide redress and reparation as an effective, efficient and meaningful way of aiding victims of TFGBV and ensuring that justice is achieved. Such measures should include forms of restitution, rehabilitation, satisfaction and guarantees of non-repetition, combining measures that are symbolic, material, individual and collective, depending on the circumstances and the preferences of the victim.
- Train judiciary, lawyers, police and law enforcement officials and frontline workers to ensure their ability to investigate and prosecute perpetrators, and foster public trust in obtaining justice for cases of TFGBV, in conjunction with broader sensitisation on addressing gender-based violence.
- Ensure that online platforms comply with their responsibilities under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs-BHR). Develop appropriate and effective mechanisms of accountability for social media platforms and other technology companies focused on ensuring company transparency and remediation to ensure that hate speech and TFGBV is addressed on their platforms, there is appropriate response to such instances, and safeguards and redressal mechanisms are available for those affected.
- Promote the development of TFGBV lexicons in different local languages to be used in training AI algorithms and individuals for effective content moderation to curb TFGBV.
- Proactively facilitate collaboration between various stakeholders, including technology companies, women's rights organisations, researchers and civil society, to strengthen policy making and implementation aimed at preventing and addressing TFGBV



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