



In Search Of Safe Spaces Online: A Research Summary

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Background

Efforts to improve digital rights and digital literacy among more women in Africa should be supported by a thorough understanding of the online and offline social structures that influence the extent to which women can be active participants in the digital arena. This is key to realising Goal five of the Sustainable Development Goals which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, who have historically been in a position of disadvantage for various reasons including cultural norms, lack of economic opportunity, and low literacy.

Across Africa, various discussions continue to reiterate how obstacles such as unequal access to finance, education and tech devices inhibit many women from participating in the digital society. However, beyond governments, additional efforts are required by other stakeholders including civil society, the tech community, academia, and the private sector to address these gaps. It is against this background that the Women At Web Alliance was initiated in October 2017 with an aim to improve digital literacy among African women, with a focus on Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Uganda. With support from DW Akademie, in Uganda an alliance of five organisations is working to strengthen the skills of women through digital security workshops, raising awareness on digital rights, and building digital literacy skills. As part of this work, Chapter Four, the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), the Defenders Protection Initiative (DPI), Not your Body and Unwanted Witness conducted research into the nature of challenges faced by Ugandan women who are active online, and manifestations of cyber Violence Against Women (VAW). The results of the study are intended to be used to address these challenges, including through the improvement of digital literacy among more Ugandan women, policy development, and informing responsive safety mechanisms.

Women in Uganda face various challenges that undermine their use of the web and other Information and Communications Technology (ICT). These challenges mirror the impediments which women face in the offline world, be it in access to education and economic opportunities, participation in civic processes, or in claiming their freedom of expression and assembly.

As of June 2018, there were 56 phone connections for every 100 individuals (a total of 21.6 million mobile subscriptions), 22.7 million mobile money subscriptions, and 18.5 million internet users, representing a 47% internet penetration rate.¹ However, research conducted in 2015 by the Web Foundation showed that only 21% of the female respondents in Uganda had accessed the internet in the six months prior to the survey, compared to 61% of their male counterparts.² This was attributed to issues such as unequal access to finance, poor reporting on gender issues by the media, and social norms which disenfranchise women and girls.³

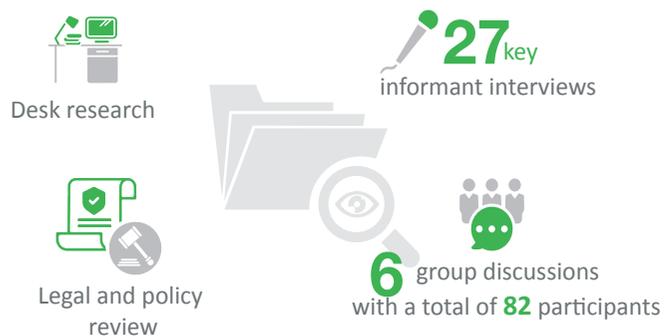
Despite this disparity in access, more women face various forms of online violence than their male counterparts, which has continuously undermined their participation online. The absence of laws designed to specifically address the various forms of digital violence (such as revenge pornography, trolling, and threats) and the lack of sufficient in-country reporting mechanisms, exacerbate these challenges and often result in many women being forced to go offline or resorting to self-censorship. Additional consequences of cyber VAW mentioned included psychological, emotional and the physical abuse.

¹ UCC, Post, Broadcasting and Telecommunications Market & Industry Q2 Report, 2018, <https://www.ucc.co.ug/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Communication-Sector-Performance-for-the-Quarter-ending-June-2018.pdf>

² Web Foundation, Women's Rights Online: Translating Access into Empowerment, <https://webfoundation.org/research/womens-rights-online-2015/>

³ Web Foundation, Uganda urgently needs to prioritise gender equality online, <https://webfoundation.org/2015/09/uganda-urgently-needs-to-prioritise-gender-equality-online/>

The Research Approach



Respondents in the research came from a diversity of backgrounds and included random selections, referrals and specifically targeted individuals as participants in the discussions. The profile of individuals ranged from activists, technologists, law enforcement officials, legal professionals, university students, politicians, women who have experienced public cyber VAW and journalists.

Can Safety Be Found Online?

Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram are among the most popular social media platforms in Uganda. However, it is also in these platforms that women are facing the most challenges when engaging online.

Cyber stalking, online sexual harassment, blackmail through the use of private and often sexualised information, photographs and videos, and the forwarding of content that depicts, promotes and normalises violence against women, are increasingly experienced by women and girls who use the internet in Uganda.⁴ However, these remain difficult to quantify due to several inhibitions including the culture of silence.⁵

Some documented cases include reports of intimate partner abuse, such as instances where women are tracked by abusive partners using geolocation, or when their online activities are monitored against their will. As far back as December 2008, before the rise in the popularity of social media, there were two reports of Ugandan men who murdered their wives after accusing them of receiving what the media termed “love SMSs”.⁶ Since then, the ways in which women are victimised as a result of using technology have evolved. Meanwhile, laws such as the Anti-Pornography Act, 2014 have skewed media and public scrutiny to often focus on castigating victims rather than perpetrators of the crimes such as leaking of nude images and videos.

Women must effectively be present online so that they participate in shaping and informing the social, economic and political agendas which are increasingly traversing the online and offline spheres of interaction. Potentially, online groups offer promise for increased women’s participation. As noted by the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), Facebook groups (and many other networked platforms) were designed for secure collaboration, and have served to bring together people with a common interest for the purpose of communicating, sharing news, and collaborating on projects.⁷

Facebook has three types of groups – open, closed and secret groups.⁸ Indeed, many Ugandan Facebook and Whatsapp users have taken to initiating a diversity of groups online, including those on politics, entertainment, business, education, community affairs, social interests, media, activism and topics of interest to women.

However, while such online spaces may serve as avenues for engagement with “like-minded” individuals, they are also avenues for more targeted attacks on individuals. As a respondent in the current study stated, “there are those groups where you can’t post a thing” due to the fear of reprisals. indeed as noted by the EFF, such groups may be vulnerable to sabotage or surveillance by other, malicious Facebook users or governments.

It is crucial therefore to document the challenges women face in getting and staying online, in order to meaningfully promote the online participation of more Ugandan women. Their participation serves to ensure that their voices are heard, their needs are addressed, and they actively shape the development agendas of their communities.

This research focused on documenting the nature of challenges faced by Ugandan women who are active online, manifestations of cyber Violence Against Women (VAW), and how online groups can be leveraged to enhance women’s participation. Below are some key insights emerging from the research.

⁴ CIPESA, *State of Internet Freedom in Uganda 2015*, http://www.cipesa.org/?wpfb_dl=209

⁵ CIPESA, *The Challenge of Tackling Online Violence Against Women in Africa*, <https://cipesa.org/2015/10/the-challenge-of-tackling-online-violence-against-women-in-africa/>

⁶ *New Vision*, *Man kills wife over love SMS*, https://www.newvision.co.ug/new_vision/news/1174832/kills-wife-love-sms

⁷ EFF, *Facebook Groups: Reducing Risks*, <https://ssd.eff.org/en/module/facebook-groups-reducing-risks>

⁸ *Lifewire*, *Using Facebook Groups*, <https://www.lifewire.com/facebook-groups-4103720>

The Threats Women Find Online

Various threats were found to be prevalent for women online. These threats are present across the platforms but were only recognisable by some participants as affronts to their online presence and activity. Further, anonymity, the scale of content directed at some respondents and the capacity for affronts to traverse across platforms was also noted. Meanwhile, some respondents could not recognise some of the forms in which cyber violence occurs and in some cases participated in attacks on others.⁸

Types of Aggression Found Online

- Trolling
- Hate speech based on sexual identity, religious identity, political affiliation
- Mansplaining and antagonism due to content advocating for feminism
- Catphishing
- Online harassment eg receipt of unsolicited images and messages mostly of a sexual nature
- Body shaming
- Online Stalking
- Blackmail/extortion based on illegally attained content
- Use of derogatory remarks in comments on Facebook, Facebook messages, Whatsapp and on Twitter
- Revenge pornography and non-consensual dissemination of personal information
- Lack of ownership – *when a spouse/significant other makes purchase of a device but continues to demand control or access to it to monitor online contact and activity ie Unauthorised tracking of online activity*

Table 1: Respondents listed the above as the typical types of gender based violations they have witnessed or experienced online

Perceptions of the law and women online: The Computer Misuse Act, 2011 and the Anti-Pornography Act, 2014 shape most women's perceptions about being online. However, there is limited knowledge of how these laws, or any other laws, provide redress to victims of cyber VAW. Moreover, there is a strong mistrust of law enforcement agencies, particularly the police, in addressing cyber violence against women. Notably, both laws have repeatedly been applied by law enforcement to charge vocal women online or to arrest and detain women whose intimate images had been leaked. In many cases, former lovers and financial extortionists have been responsible for leaking the images.

It was noted that mainstream media has largely overlooked reporting on the online dynamics women face in Uganda, and that often when reports appeared in mainstream media, they were in dismissive or flippant language. This, according to many respondents, contributed to low knowledge about laws that can be used to tackle cyber VAW, and the largely unsupportive attitude of law enforcement agencies.

Social Media Activity and Digital Security Practices: While the short form and immediacy of Twitter was appreciated by some, a common concern raised was the quick way in which users of the platform could also just as easily and quickly turn against one based on the content they have posted.

For many who have faced some form of cyber VAW, there appears to be limited use of the reporting mechanisms on the various platforms with most opting to ignore online attacks. Many respondents were unaware of how to use these mechanisms. More savvy users blocked content from appearing on their timelines or blocked perpetrators from engaging with their accounts - but did not report aggressors. Limited digital literacy and digital security skills also impact on the poor use of content moderation tools.

Responses to Online Abuse: The responses to online abuse vary depending on the nature of the abuse and the person they are directed at. However, recourse to the law is rare, due to low levels of awareness about requisite laws, poor trust in Ugandan law enforcement to take action, and a perception that it is complicated to report abuses to platforms. Common responses include changing the nature of content shared, increased levels of self-censorship, and total withdrawal from some platforms and groups. The attacks hence limit women's civic engagement and undermine their efforts to create online content. It is not only those to whom abuses are directed whose participation is affected. Some women who witness abuses against others are often forced to practice self-censorship themselves, and to limit their online engagement.

Pushing Back Against Online Aggression: Women who advocated for gender equality, feminism, and sexual minority rights appeared to face heightened levels of cyber VAW. A great deal of the violence that such women experience is personal and involves their close friends and family, particularly where issues of sexual orientation are concerned. As a result, many women, including those who belong to sexual minorities, are self-censoring the content they post, or have resorted to posting only content that they deem "safe". However, even such content has resulted in trolling for some users. Further, a segment of mostly digitally literate women readily faces online backlash and online attacks head-on. Increasingly, many such women are

⁹ Gender IT, *Understanding Technology Related Violence Against Women*, https://www.genderit.org/onlinevaw/faq/?fbclid=IwAR1OulWLKsPO3BaWeoQPD-PVLH_7wmKr5xZqHmumEvnY-xeS8uikPRgFm0

assisted by a community of supporters who come to their aid online in pushing back against trolls and attacks, particularly when the matter at hand resonates with these supporters. In many instances, this community has faced similar threats and experiences and built a readily contactable network including through the use of closed online spaces.

Mixed Perceptions on Civic Participation: Online groups offer promise for increased women’s participation as they are often designed for secure collaboration. However, it was found that even in cases where groups on Facebook and WhatsApp had been created to serve a particular purpose, many women found themselves being targeted for sharing content consistent with such groups’ objectives. Often, this was because of the nature of views one expressed, or the nature of their work - with politicians being among those who often received repeated abuse.

However, social media platforms have served as sources of information, avenues for social justice mobilisation and engagement, as well as forging alliance on shared civic concerns. Social media has enabled more women to participate in these narratives and in voicing their opinions despite the negative consequences they potentially face – in particular, pushback based on the grounds of ‘morality’ or ‘religion’ and often in defence of misogyny and patriarchy.

The Myth of “Safe Spaces” Online: In the various social media groups on Facebook and Whatsapp, while some reported various perception levels of safety and freedom in participating in online discourse, others noted that even in these “closed spaces” there is “infiltration” by perpetrators of online affronts such as trolls and stalkers, which has created a continuum of cyber violence that promotes self-censorship or withdrawal due to the heightened targeting that can sometimes occur.

Meanwhile, there is also uncertainty on the authenticity of people engaging online due to the proliferation of fake accounts. This also contributed to a sense of mistrust online in both open and closed spaces. While anonymity was recognised as a tool for inclusion as well as an enabler of civic participation, it was also noted that the anonymity of the harasser furthered the trauma faced by victims.

Further, the ease with which users are added to Whatsapp groups without prior consent of members was raised as a concern. *The platform has since introduced the function that prevents users from adding one to a group if they are not a contact in your address book.

Some respondents noted that moderators did not always adequately ensure that the groups adhered to their purpose nor were there always adequate measures to protect and maintain the integrity of the group, for instance by sanctioning antagonistic commentators or removing legitimately abusive content from the group. There were also reports of partial group moderators that offered preferential treatment to some members, whose issues addressed or their antagonistic content maintained in the groups.

Recommendations

- For many users, reporting and security channels of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp are still not easily understood, which requires more effort in creating awareness of the mechanisms offered by the platforms to manage the content that users are interested in engaging with, and in reporting abuses.
- There should be more multi-stakeholder efforts to promote gender-sensitive laws, including those that specifically promote and protect women’s online participation and punish online violence against women.
- Existing laws which can be used to address cyber violence should be promoted by civil society, the media, law enforcement and academia.
- More efforts should be made by the government to ensure that law enforcement structures are well versed in addressing cybercrime and cyber VAW. This includes ensuring that police posts have the necessary skills and equipment, but also physical facilities where safe reporting can be made.
- Government should fast-track the operationalisation of regulations for the Data Protection and Privacy Act, 2019. This will serve to ensure the security of cases reported but also provide a legal recourse in cases where data is illegally sourced and shared.
- Affordable legal services need to be encouraged to support reported cases of cyber violence. The costs associated with legal processes are often prohibitive and restrict the escalation of cases to court.
- Public perception continues to be largely informed and influenced by the media. Thus, it is fundamental that journalists/media houses are objective in their reporting in particular when gender is involved. This includes ensuring that more women are sources of information and that cyber VAW is not trivialised or sensationalised.
- Media houses should more actively follow and report on emerging bills and regulations which impact on women’s digital rights including on issues of online safety, data affordability, data privacy, freedom of expression and access to information.
- Administrators of online groups need to ensure that they maintain the integrity of these spaces including by eliminating members or content that detracts from the purpose of the groups. Further, they should better utilise the resources offered by platforms to ensure the safety of group members while maintaining an avenue for online discourse.