ONLINE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Understanding individual experiences of women and girls in Botswana

Baseline Survey

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Introduction and background

The baseline survey on online violence against women and girls is a study produced by Gender Links (GL). This work forms part of the *Promoting gender equality, media freedom and digital rights project in Southern Africa*, supported by the **Advancing Rights in Southern Africa Project (ARISA) programme**. The ARISA programme is a five year programme led by Freedom House and is implemented by the PROGRESS Consortium with support from USAID.

It seeks to improve the recognition, awareness, and enforcement of human rights in Southern Africa including protection of the region's most vulnerable and marginalised groups. The programme focuses on four main thematic human rights areas, including; media freedoms and digital rights, women's customary land rights, the rights of indigenous people and the protection of the rights of human rights defenders. GL's ARISA programme work focuses on media freedoms and digital rights.

This study complements a partnership research study conducted in 2021 by Gender Links, Namtshuwe Digital, Meta Public Policy Southern Africa Region, the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria, Policy, Collaboration on ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) and the Internet Society Namibia Chapter. The research mapped the policy and governance provisions, scoped evidence from societal engagements and industry undertakings on Gender Based Violence Online in eight Southern African countries. GL led the research in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa.

This work borrows from, builds on and extends work undertaken by Pollicy on Online Gender Based Violence (OGBV). Pollicy is a feminist collective of technologists, data scientists, creatives and academics working at the intersection of data, design and technology to craft better life experiences by harnessing improved data.

Pollicy's research on OGBV titled *Alternate Realities, Alternate Internets: African feminist research for a feminist internet* was a cross sectional study carried out across Addis Ababa in Ethiopia , Nairobi in Kenya, Kampala in Uganda, Dakar in Senegal and Johannesburg in South Africa. The overall objective of this study was to understand the online lived experiences of women living in the aforementioned countries. The study also sought to document the prevalence, experiences and responses to online gender-based violence against women.

GL conducted a baseline survey to ascertain the extent to which women are experiencing online violence and how this violence affects them in their day to day lives in particular their freedom of expression and opinion as they try to participate in online spaces. This brief survey will be used to inform GL's work on online GBV and freedom of expression.

Objectives

The study aims to collect evidence of the prevalence of online violence against women in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa. It sought to understand the lived experiences and practice women and girls use to respond to online gender based violence. The study employed quantitative methods and qualitative methods through interviews with key informants. The key informants in this study will be women aged between 18 and 60.

Methodology

The study used the purposive sampling method which is a form of non-probability sampling. Purposive sampling is intentional selection of informants based on their ability to elucidate a specific theme, concept, or pheno-menon[1]. Purposive sampling was also used to select participants for the in-depth questions. The women who had the most information rich cases and opted to be interviewed further took part in the in-depth .

The survey focused solely on women. This is because globally women are disproportionately affected by online violence as such it will be paramount for this research to add to that body of knowledge on women's experiences of online violence. The study was conducted in South Africa, Namibia and Botswana aligning to the project target countries. A total of 125 women in Botswana aged 18-60 years, that access and use the internet were surveyed as using a quantitative survey.

Five in-depth interviews with women who self-reported to have experienced online violence and opted to be further interviewed were undertaken. Comments from respondents were also taken from the online survey.

Women were asked questions about their experiences online, their perceptions around online violence against women, their thoughts on strategies that multiple stakeholders could use to contribute to ending Online GBV.

Limitations

The study population is not representative of the population of women in the country. Therefore, the results of the study are not generalisable to the population of women in Botswana. The results serve to give an indication of the occurrences of online violence and how it manifests.

The baseline research was primarily conducted via the internet and distributed via social media and bulk email messaging. This limited access to the survey.

Key Findings

Number of women who participated in the survey: A total number of 125 women from across Botswana took part in this online survey.

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[1] https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_2337#:~:text=Purposive%20sampling%20is%20intentional%20selection,theme%2C%20concept%2C%20or%20phenomenon.

46%   **46%**   **8%**
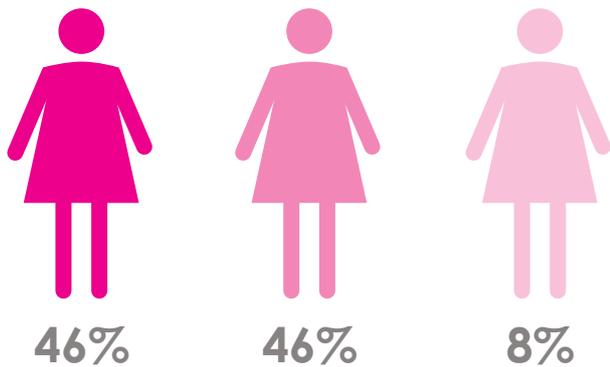
In the survey, 46% women experienced online violence, while 46% indicated that they did not encounter online violence. Some respondents (8%), indicated that they were not sure if they had actually encountered online violence in their life time.

Cyberstalking, online sexual harass-ment and gender trolling are the most common forms of online violence. Respondents identified cyberstalking (46%), online sexual harassment (15%) and gender trolling (15%) as the most prevalent forms of violence.

Respondent comments

Being judged or harassed because of taking stylish pictures and putting them online. Girls should be free to wear whatever and post it without fear of harassment.

Cyber fraud, cyber-attacks, porno-graphic content, stalking, date rape and most Batswana ladies always agree to meet strangers from the social media platforms, only to meet psychotic men who prey on innocent women.

People share pictures and names and physical address of people. Women and girls are afraid to actively participate in discussions, share views and also to comment freely on any subject.

We need to teach women and girls to recognise they too can have a voice in the virtual world to be heard, seen, and felt. They need to learn to recognise their voice online and that it is just as powerful as it is in any space. They need to under-stand that they are needed for the thread of diversity in the world and not shy away from being visible.

Life is hard nowadays, people get excited at the thought of "Easy money" I fear some women and young girls especially those coming from poor economic backgrounds can be lured by human traffickers via the Internet.

Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter are the most unsafe platforms for women

88%   **4%**   **5%**

The survey showed that the most violence is experienced by women is on Facebook (88%) WhatsApp (4%) and Twitter (5%). Women in the sample frequent these platforms more than others. Of the total sample, 7% of women reported using WhatsApp, 86% use Facebook and 7% use Twitter while 2% use Instagram. The least used platforms are news websites (5%), telegram (4%) and snap chat (4%).

Respondents in the survey argued that social media platforms had a role to play and needed stricter regulation. Respondents said:

Social media platforms should ban perpetrators and design software that pick abusive language or threats then send reports to authorities. Mobile phone operators should design panic buttons on mobile phones for whenever women feel unsafe either at home, public or work that can alert the authorities.

Strict laws that are like terms and conditions before one creates an account so that perpetrators may be held to account and so that victims have legal recourse.

Millennials maybe most aware about online violence and are more likely to have personally experienced online violence. Younger women aged between the ages of 25-40 (47%) experienced more online violence compared to any other age group, followed by women aged between 40-50 (26%). Of the women between the ages of 50-60 and 18-25 (11%) experienced violence.

Locality affects experiences of online violence. There are notable differences in how women living in urban and rural settings experience violence. Women situated in urban areas (32%) reported having experienced online violence, compared to those in rural settings at 14%. This may be influenced by lower levels of access to the internet in rural settings.

Journalists, political leaders, activists and business persons are the most affected by online violence: Women who identified their occupation as journalists (6%); politicians (6%); business persons (6%) and activists (5%) experience higher levels of online violence.

Men are the main perpetrators of online violence. Of those identified as perpetrators of online violence 91% were men and 9% were women. Men at 91% are overwhelmingly the main perpetrators of online violence. In terms of the role of men as the main perpetrators survey respondents had this to say:

More men with large platforms need to call out this behaviour because no one takes women seriously when we complain.

Countries must have strict laws on cyber bullying. Things shouldn't be allowed to go on using the excuse "It's just men being men", harassment ruins self-esteem, not everyone is strong to rise above it.

GBV should be part of the education curriculum from primary school so... The boys will also learn the effects of GBV and hopefully steer them away from such behaviours.

Stricter measures should be taken against these males such as giving them permanent blockage from having access to these platforms, as well as public list released and updated monthly, naming and shaming those males so that women and girls are wary when interacting with them and anyone associated with them.

Encourage the practice of feminism amongst males so as to encourage them to be empathetic.

Almost a third of respondents indicated they were very aware that online violence affects women

VERY AWARE	AWARE	SLIGHTLY AWARE	NOT AT ALL	MODERATELY AWARE
35%	29%	19%	11%	7%
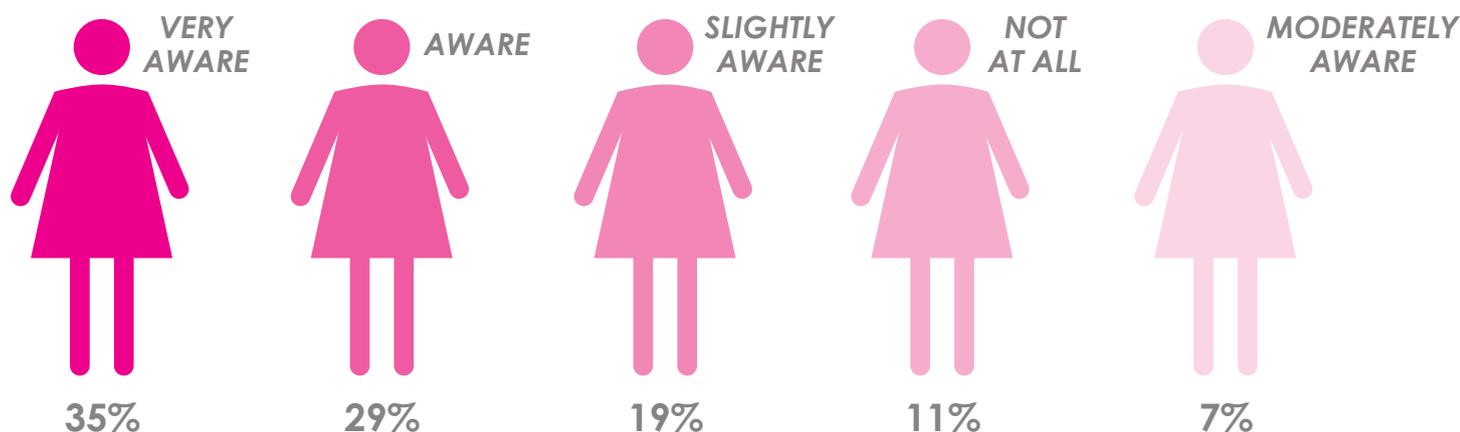
Of the total sample, 35% of women in the survey indicated that they had knowledge on how often women are affected by online violence, while 29% indicated they were slightly aware, 19% indicated they were moderately aware and 11% indicated that they were not aware at all that women were affected by online violence

In terms of the awareness of online violence against women respondents had this to say:

Society needs to be educated on these matters. There should be awareness workshops where a girl child/women are educated on how to use internet/social media safely eg; being selective of what to post, not accepting friend requests from strangers, being professional and limited not disclosing all personal activities about your life Not posting naked /half naked/ too much revealing pictures These workshops should start at primary school level , categorised in ages, knowledge is power, I believe education and awareness can help. Also the use of billboards etc., use of many advertising platforms to educate the society.

People need to be taught more about online safety and sharing information online. There needs to be more education about the channels of reporting online harassment as some people are not aware that such crimes can be reported.

Educate the general public about cyber bullying and create awareness on GBV and forms of GBV whether online or physical.

More should be taught on violence against affected groups and acceptance of those who are different to us.

Society should be made aware of the internet violence and be vigilant when using internet and should not trust people communicating through internet.

Females should be made aware that they shouldn't share personal information with individuals they don't know online and they shouldn't accept any offers without ensuring that the offers are from credible sources.

Our government should have the online gender policy in order to protect those affected. More awareness should be done on online gender violence.

We need to teach our kids and siblings not to share certain information online that could be used to harass someone. Information such as personal names, place of work/residence/schooling, places one frequents, (explicit) photos etc. should not be shared online. Minor children should be strongly discouraged from using the internet, and where they do, parents and guardians should closely monitor the kinds websites they visit. The only way to truly protect one from violence online is to simply not get online.

Strangers/unidentified people perpetrate online violence the most. Respondents noted that they encountered violence from strangers (54%) the most. Acquaintances and friends (19%) as well as previous intimate partners and spouses (8,3%) were also identified as the biggest perpetrators of online violence.

Women are not reporting online violence. Only 35% of the women surveyed in this study who indicated that they had experienced violence had reported its occurence. This finding is consistent with findings of GBV in the offline world that indicate that survivors of violence may not report their experiences of violence for a multitude of reasons.

They should take serious action against those people and should learn to believe that the victim was not at fault because it can spiral overthinking & mental health problems.

The Government should take GBV seriously and educate the public more about the dangers of GBV and encourage them to report such cases.

There should be laws that mandate the internet service providers, to report incidents of violence against women and child exploitation.

Having open discussions about it (online violence) makes it easier for people to open up and feel comfortable without feeling ashamed because they are alone.

Take violence targeted at women and girls more seriously by providing for easy reporting of offences but also supporting victims and protecting them from perpetrators, and following up on reports in meaningful ways.

The biggest challenge is that most of the reported cases relating to the matter are never investigated or end up not reaching the courts of law.

There is a lack of knowledge and information for victims to report and be heard about their plight.

Police are not taking online harassment seriously thus leading to women and girls not relying on them hence exposing us to harm since these males will know they can do as they please without facing consequences.

The most significant effect of online violence on women is reduced online presence participation and engagement. Online violence affects women in various ways. Of the respondents who reported having been affected by online

violence (37%) noted that they had reduced their online presence, participation and engagements, while 50% self-censored. It is also worrying that there are other women who reported having stopped using online platforms by withdrawing from all forms of online interaction (2%). This suggests online violence is affecting women's freedom of expression, opinion and participation in online spaces.

From their observations respondents argued that the effect of online violence was far reaching and had a negative impact on women's day to day lives. They noted the following:

It (Online violence) is becoming one of the main causes of mental health issues among girls and women.

Depression, low self-esteem... may rise due to the continuous bashing and belittling of women.

Women obviously become less confident, feel useless and some get to an extent of giving up on their ambitions

because they no longer want to interact online because of the humiliation they went through.

Women and girls are no longer free to interact or post what they like online because they fear to be bullied online. Their self-esteem has been affected due to online GBV.

Women are reporting violence to technology platforms. In Botswana most women who reported having experienced online violence reported these incidences mostly to social media platforms (66%) as well as to family members (21%) and 6% to their workplaces.

Little is done after women report incidences of online violence. Of the total sample, 38% of women who reported experiencing violence noted that nothing was done to the perpetrator even after the case was reported, while 38% indicated that the perpetrators account was blocked. Women are opening cases against online perpetrators (4%).

Recommendations

Women in sample made the following recommendations to government, society, schools and police about online violence to make the internet a safer space for women and girls to raise their voices and participate:
• There should be stricter regulations that can bring perpetrators to account and criminalise acts of online violence. Harsher and real punishments for perpetrators, not just online noise and backlash followed by inaction. People have taken advantage of others

because currently there is no specific law on the issue.
• There must be awareness creation on the online GBV and its different facets. We need open dialogue to engage with relevant authorities on the issues that affect women online.
• Human trafficking was highlighted by most respondents as an additional risk that women may have as they navigate the online spaces.
• Concerns were raised by respondents on the fear that the online violence can easily spill into the offline world.