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# WOMEN AND ONLINE VIOLENCE IN KENYA

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# ABOUT

The iHub, founded in 2010, is a globally recognized organization deeply steeped in the local tech innovation culture.

The iHub is both the main catalyst for regional tech acceleration and a role model for tech hubs across emerging markets. We serve the tech community, by connecting organizations and people, building market relevant solutions and being ahead of the curve of innovation.

The role of the iHub going forward is to be the best African support system for ICT focused tech entrepreneurs and individuals who aspire to create great companies address the unique challenges in the African market.

iHub Research supports the iHub's overall mission through;

- surfacing insights on the use of and the approach towards technology in Africa
- Experimentation towards knowledge creation, and sharing insights for improved decision making by technology stakeholders.
- Studying the impact of ICT-based tools and platforms to improve decision-making by stakeholders in the technology ecosystem.



**WE CULTIVATE A  
COMMUNITY OF  
INTEREST AROUND  
RESEARCH AND  
TECHNOLOGY IN  
AFRICA.**

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# KENYA'S ICT LANDSCAPE

Kenyans are increasingly using the Internet to exercise their democratic right of expression by interacting with other citizens as well as engaging with country leaders. These interactions are key to promote national cohesion within countries, enhancing integration within the region, conducting civic education, and promoting transparency through surfacing of public interest information.

According to the (CAK) Communications Authority of Kenya, the country recorded 36.1 million internet users as of March 2018, while mobile penetration stood at 95.1%. The growth of ICT access in Kenya has been attributed to massive investments in infrastructure by telecommunications service providers as well as aggressive promotions to entice users. In 2014, the Kenyan government launched The National Optic Fiber Backbone which has now resulted in a steady increase in the subscribers. In the March 2018 the amount of international internet bandwidth available in the country grew to 3.2 Million Gbps {CAK2018}.

However, as the number of Internet users in the region continue to increase, there are numerous threats, key among them, unawareness and digital illiteracy. As a result of threats encountered, many people either opt out of using the Internet or face other direct risks such as fraud, cyber bullying, threats of physical harm, doxxing and even extra judicial arrests {Standard0718}. While the Internet should be a right for all, some groups are more vulnerable online than others.

Notable digital safety awareness, training programs and tools in East Africa, organised by organisations such

as AMWIK, KICTANet and ARTICLE19, have predominantly targeted journalists and bloggers, as well as LGBTQI groups.

However, several events and discussions have highlighted missing gaps in digital safety assessments, training and awareness raising among teenagers, reporting mechanisms of online gender-based violence for women, as well as mechanisms to report direct threats faced online (beyond using report features on social network platforms).

Through our growing network of ICT Research practitioners in the continent, this project sets a benchmark for similar work and methodologies to be deployed in other countries as well.

Prioritising women, journalists and bloggers during the project implementation, addressing identified gaps in previous and ongoing work in the region, all while promoting Internet Freedom in the country will ensure we are not reinventing the wheel but moving closer to having a safer online space, more diverse, inclusive and more informed online interactions. This will promote free flow of information and subsequently promote more women's uptake of online spaces.

In upholding human rights, iHub was awarded a grant by Ford Foundation to undertake a research study to enhance Internet Freedom for women online.

The research is aimed at assessing to understand digital safety and literacy. This will surface insights on the challenges that prevent women from fully participating online.

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# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As part of the study, two hour long focus group discussions were held with female internet users to enable the researchers understand the nature of the challenges they faced online, and their general experience online.

A comprehensive questionnaire prepared by our researchers of approximately 15 questions, was utilised to guide the conversation, and we were careful to ensure that it did not disrupt the flow, but encouraged the conversation to take unplanned directions that were on topic by utilising open ended questions.

During the series of the focus group discussions the profile of women was very specific and included:

- Hypervisible
- Working women
- University College going women

For the purpose of the study, the social media platforms we explored were Facebook, Twitter and Instagram which have 7.1 M, 1M and 4M Kenyan users respectively, as of September 2017 according to a study conducted by Nendo, a Kenyan digital strategy, research and training agency {iFree2018}.

## PARTICIPANT PROFILE

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### **High Profile Women**

These are also known as hyper-visible women. They have a big following on their social media platforms, have a level of 'celebrity' status, are well known on social media for a specific thing e.g., feminists, political leadership activists, fashion/body positivity icons, writers, film producers, educators etc of which these experiences are the ones they discuss about often. These women generally use their social media profiles to promote their work beyond the offline realm.

### **Working Women**

These are women between the ages 25 to 40 relatively active (with more than 1,000 followers and frequently post online) on social media and are gainfully employed online or offline part-time or full-time.

### **University/College Students**

These are young women between the ages 18 to 24 relatively active on social media and also enrolled in a tertiary level education course.

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# FINDINGS



The respondents revealed that they encountered a number of violations when using online platforms.

The most common violations include doxxing, verbal abuse, revenge porn, hacking of accounts, subtle silencing, stalking and harassment.

Some of the interviewees felt that by simply being online or posting personal information e.g., photos online, it opened them up to unwanted attention including getting solicited for sexual purposes or being spoken to inappropriately by some men.

One specific respondent mentioned:

"just because I talk about sex on my timeline men think they can send me unsolicited dick pics, these days I avoid talking about sex to prevent this".

Another respondent talked of how she received calls from men who were seeking sex from her because someone had non consensually published her phone number and location on a site that sought to connect sex workers and their clients.



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# EFFECTS

## CHALLENGES AND EFFECTS OF ONLINE VIOLENCE

One of the effects of the online attacks is **self-censorship**. This comes as a result of **emotional trauma**, the **lack of comfort and freedom** and elements of **paranoia** and **anxiety** when using social media platforms. Women who after facing an attack or who fear being attacked online (especially after observing others facing attacks / harassment online), consequently prefer to limit their activities on social media and adopt certain practices.

These include: not uploading personal pictures, avoiding controversial conversations, preemptive blocking on social networks (this is when you block a person without having interacted with them but from observing their behaviour online), avoiding posting altogether or curbing posting about personal topics or information; muting notifications especially when engaging in controversial subjects e.g. the state of Kenyan political leadership, feminism, gender based violence, gender roles, etc. and completely avoiding tagging/ disclosing locations and so on.

Others also wean themselves from social media and use it on a limited basis e.g. for the professional lives, or make their social media profiles 'private', while others abandon social media, "**go offline**" completely as a means to minimise the risk of harm.

Unfortunately, this is the extreme end where some women who have suffered online harassment or viewed it second hand when others have experienced it, choose to leave social media platforms altogether which is devastating but understandable especially when considering the severity of attacks online. Scores of women worldwide have quite often felt not only vulnerable due to past attacks but also helpless when it comes to cases of online harassment, and left to their own devices. It is for these reasons that organisations such as Take Back the Tech exist to equip women with the tools and resources to stay online in the face of tech based violence.



**"I WANT TO LEARN HOW TO STAY ON TWITTER AFTER HARASSMENT, I DO NOT WANT TO LEAVE TWITTER, HOW DO I STAY ON? I CAN'T BE PRIVATE FOREVER."**

Some who continue to use social media do resort to using **pseudonyms** or having **separate online identities** for their personal and professional lives as a means to maintain personal safety and limit the individual scrutiny. However, balancing such approaches especially for the professional profiles, where the use of the real identity is desirable, operating under pseudonyms can lead to loss of public trust in the work and attribution of ownership.

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# EFFECTS

## CHALLENGES AND EFFECTS OF ONLINE VIOLENCE

Another aspect worth noting is the ability of attackers to link online profiles and offline activities. It was reported that some online perpetrators have been able to pursue their victims offline aka **stalking**. Applications such as Foursquare, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat all which have the seemingly harmless 'location tag' feature, where it is possible to find one's location and continue the attacks offline after getting close to a victim online.

One of our respondents mentioned that a stranger approached her at a physical location claiming to 'know her' from social media, and she mentioned feeling like her safety was threatened and her social media activity surveilled due to her public facing profile on Twitter.

Some of the common terms reported include: bitch, malaya (prostitute), females, hoes, slut, feminazi, cunt, feminist and militant feminist. Others such as dyke or faggot were used against outright or suspected LGBTQI users online.

More recently, the term '**slay queen**' has been used to shame, embarrass or show displeasure against women based on their perceived outward looks and behaviour online or offline.

It was also evident during this process of analysing online harassment, the importance of incorporating a gender lens, which revealed that when women are on the receiving end, it has a sexually abusive nature, this is evidenced by words such as hoe, slut, malaya (prostitute) among others.

**"...I USED TO SHARE EVERYTHING ON FACEBOOK UNTIL MY DAD HACKED ME, THEN SAW THAT I DID NOT NEED TO SHARE ALL THESE ..."**

A recent phenomenon, some men, especially those who are prominent personalities online, have shown their ability to rapidly metamorphosize from abusers to would-be 'defenders' of rights, which contradicts their previous positions. Their comments or views continue to get wide viewership and praise online, despite their earlier positions. Our respondents mentioned that as a real sign of change/growth it would be more constructive for these men to use their online platforms and clout to directly confront abusers online, educate other men on harmful behaviours, rather than regurgitate the same words women facing harassment online had been saying on these platforms but getting harassed for.

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# EMERGING THEMES

## **INADEQUATE REPORTING MECHANISMS**

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While availing interventions that prevent online harassment is important, it is also critical that those facing violence online have available to them fast and transparent mechanisms to report.

Currently, women and girls who have experienced violations and abuse online do not have adequate remedies. Those interviewed stated that the reporting mechanisms on social media were inadequate. For example, the Twitter reporting mechanism is not robust because accounts of perpetrators of violations were usually reinstated or were able to create new accounts and continue violations unchecked.

Additionally, the need to have critical mass reporting an account for online abuse (to have the desired outcome of banning of the perpetrator) is also a huge challenge for victims seeking recourse.

Further, that law enforcement e.g. police, were not adequately equipped nor are some of them aware of cyber crimes. In addition, the bureaucracy when they take in complaints leave the victims in despair further discouraging them from using online platforms.

## **INTERGENERATIONAL SISTERHOOD**

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While talking to these women there was a distinct difference in how younger women (those in university) as compared to the other profiles of hyper-visible and working women responded to online harassment.

While older women would usually already have established women-only networks who could support them online against the face of attackers, respond to

attackers 'clapback', threaten perpetrators with legal proceedings, reporting attackers to employers etc, younger women are more vulnerable and lonely in the face of online harassment and thus the hardest hit because would be more inclined to not only self censoring but also leave social media platforms all together.

It is clear that older women present an opportunity to support, educate and inspire younger women to deal with online harassment in a manner that strengthens an informal form of sisterhood.

The importance of intergenerational linkages exploring online experiences amongst women cannot be stressed enough in learning how to navigate online spaces today.

## **THE LINK BETWEEN OFFLINE AND ONLINE VIOLENCE**

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In the course of this study it was evident that the major difference between online and offline violence is the medium used to perpetrate the attack. Online violence is also referred to as technology assisted violence which happens via online platforms and devices.

However, online violence has the ability to cross over to the offline realm, where one assists the other.

A common example is cyberstalking women and using key information they post online to track their activity offline and show up in the physical locations where they are.

Offline and Online violence also have some similar effects such as emotional degradation.



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# EMERGING THEMES

## DIGITAL SKILLS GAP

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Beyond income inequalities signalling the disparity in online access amongst men and women, the lack of technical ICT/Digital skills also put women at a greater disadvantage, making them more vulnerable to online harassment.

Furthermore, not knowing how to protect themselves online puts women at a greater risk and discourages them from being active online for fear of harassment.

Currently there's a global campaign to having more women online and bridging the gender divide online, technology assisted violence greatly cripples these efforts. It is important to ensure we customise interventions that target women and minorities to ensure they do not get left behind.

These efforts could include: online safety trainings that target women, developing curriculums and resources for women in politics and journalism, hosting events to raise awareness of online safety and inviting women as speakers and attendees.

Beyond knowledge resources, it is especially necessary that financial resources be set aside to enable organising efforts and initiatives to directly impact the increase of women and minorities online.

Research studies commissioned are also vital in ensuring that interventions have a much higher chance of being effective, because they ensure that we have insight into women's lives and their needs and how to successfully integrate them to having enriching experiences online.

## CULTURAL NORMS

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Tackling the problem of online harassment has exposed the similarities to the insecurity that is rife in offline spaces, clearly the two are entangled in a complementary web.

Kenya referred to as largely a patriarchal society {ICJ}, still excludes and socialises girls and women to believe their role revolves solely around domestic confines and socialises boys and men to be 'natural born leaders' in all other spaces outside the home. Due to patriarchy online {WWW15}; it is no surprise therefore that more women than men face more online harassment due to these structural systems that exist in society.

Inequalities in access spanning priority, affordability and education (including digital skills) are the reason for the gap of the number of women accessing the internet as compared to men and making online spaces male dominated, further upholding patriarchal norms.

We are left with the question of how to make the internet safe for women and other minorities who exist today. To cultivate a safer space means acknowledging the humanity of every single person that exists in that space, and understanding they deserve to be treated with dignity, respect and honesty.

A great policy to adhere to is, by making sure the most vulnerable feel safe, then it makes it so that everyone feels safe.

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# EMERGING THEMES

We could probably recite off the top of our heads the interventions proposed to 'fix' online spaces and make them safer for minorities, namely policy, education, campaigns, better technology etc.

However, without discussing how to effect the appropriate behavioural change from all these interventions we will not result in a sustainable shift.

The question we need to tackle is how to sustainably instigate a cultural shift, where we can adopt a change in value system that views women and minorities as equal members of society who can participate online and offline without being relegated to a specific role or treatment.

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## HEIGHTENED POLARISATION ONLINE

During key events in the Kenyan Landscape, for example the National Elections in 2017, Kenyans took to social media to keep up to date and opine periodically on the current happenings which increased the level of activity online. These conversations often took abusive turns with social media users' heightened emotions.

In the past, instances of hate speech have been common on social media in Kenya, especially during political and national security events.

With an increase of users online during these highly polarised events, cases of online harassment also increased, with women especially those in politics and the media facing personal attacks for the views they share online.



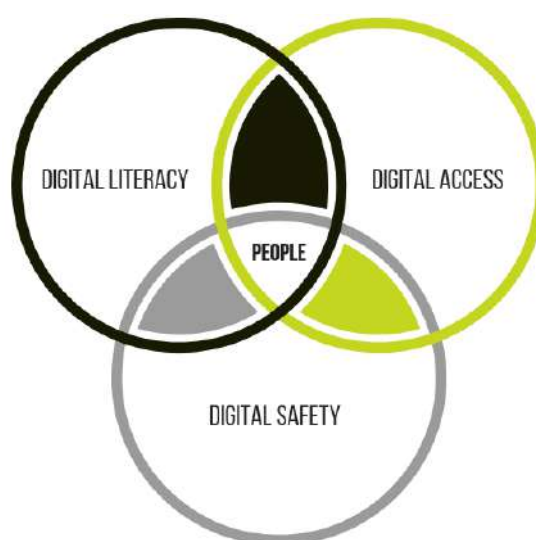
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# CONCLUSION

Digital access is just one problem we are facing in Kenya, from the findings in this study whereas Digital Safety is the silent challenge being faced especially by women and minorities in Kenya. The relationship between Digital Literacy, Digital Access and Digital Safety should be sustainably tackled concurrently, by efficiently allocating resources and incorporating a multi-stakeholder approach in addressing the challenges being faced in each of these components. This should be implemented by involving: legislative actors, civil society, law enforcement, telecommunication and technology firms and centering the users (Kenyans) in the interventions proposed.

The iHub, Nairobi's Innovation Hub through the Research Initiative conducted this study with the support of the Ford Foundation. In the past year we have been committed to raising awareness of online safety for women and minorities, developing curriculums for training women and creating spaces tailor made for women to access resources and information on how to be safer online.

As we go to the next phase of our work we are keen to tackle the cultural perceptions that make online spaces less safe for women and minorities; and continue equipping young people with resources on how to stay safe online.



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**QUESTIONS?**

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