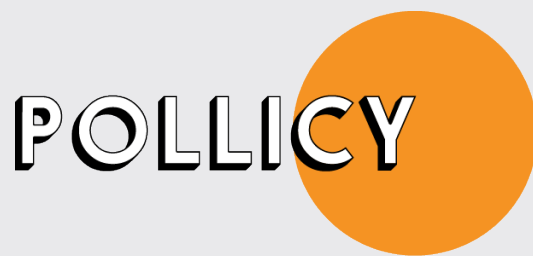


**The Role of Digital Literacy in Combating
Technology-Facilitated
Gender-Based
Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa**

AFRICA DATA GOVERNANCE HUB



The Role of Digital Literacy in Combating Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Introduction

This policy brief examines the role of digital literacy in addressing Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) in Sub-Saharan Africa. It aims to raise awareness of the evolution, forms and impacts of TFGBV, emphasising its disproportionate effect on women and girls, and the barriers it creates to their digital participation. The brief advocates for integrating digital literacy into strategies that empower women and marginalised groups to recognise, prevent, and respond to online abuse. It provides evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, civil society, and technology stakeholders to collaborate in creating safer online spaces and addressing systemic challenges linked to TFGBV.

Historical Context and Emergence of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence in the Digital Age

TFGBV refers to acts of violence directed at an individual based on their gender, which are committed, supported, intensified, or amplified—either partially or entirely—through the use of information and communication technologies or digital media.¹ The intersection of digital technology and gender-based violence (GBV) has evolved alongside societal changes and technological advancement.² The internet, while fostering communication and interaction, has also become a platform for perpetuating harmful norms and facilitating harassment, particularly against women.³ Digital tools provide anonymity and wide reach, enabling perpetrators to amplify abusive behaviours against women.⁴ The historical roots of GBV in systemic inequalities and patriarchal norms have found new expressions in the digital realm, complicating efforts to address this phenomenon.⁵ This has led to a growing recognition of the need to adapt frameworks for addressing GBV to account for the complexities of online spaces.⁶

Forms of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence

TFGBV manifests in numerous forms, each with distinct characteristics and implications for victims.⁷ A 2021 study by the Economist Intelligence Unit found that the global prevalence of online violence against women is 85%, with regional variations, including 90% in Africa.⁸ According to a study by

1 United Nations Population Fund, 'What is technology-facilitated gender-based violence?' <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/brochure-what-technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence>

2 Fransiska Novita Eleanora, Melanie Pita Lestari and Zulkifli Ismail. "Online Gender-Based Violence Study: Analysis Of Violence Against Woman." *Legal Spirit* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.31328/lis.v7i2.4883>.

3 Ana Valentina Medeiros de Araújo, C. Bonfim, Magaly Bushatsky and B. Furtado. "Technology-facilitated sexual violence: a review of virtual violence against women." *Research, Society and Development* (2022). <https://doi.org/10.33448/rsd-v11i2.25757>.

4 A. Duche-Pérez, Ricardo Enrique Grundy-López, O. Gutiérrez-Aguilar, Cintya Yadira Vera-Revilla and Ángela Valeria Mya Pazo Romero. "Silenced Voices on the Net: A Systematic Literature Review on Gender-Based in Social Media Networks." *Journal of Ecohumanism* (2024). <https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v3i3.3386>.

5 Dr. Rachael Yemisi . Amupitan and F. O. Aigbovbioisa. "Gender-Based Violence and Patriarchy: Nigeria's Experience." *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* (2024). <https://doi.org/10.47772/ijriss.2024.806229>.

6 Yuchen Xie. "Cyber gender violence: Gender inequality in a digital world." *Media and Communication Research* (2024). <https://doi.org/10.23977/mediacr.2024.050310>.

7 Robi Koki Ochieng and Dr. Rose Kimani, *An Investigation on the Prevalence of Technology Facilitated - Gender Based Violence (TFGBV) Against Women with Prominent Public Lives* (2023, AMWIK).

8 Sheikh, Md Mamunur Rashid, and Michaela M Rogers. 'Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence and Abuse in Low and Middle-Income Countries: A Scoping Review.' *Trauma, violence & abuse* vol. 25,2 (2024): 1614-1629. doi:10.1177/15248380231191189 [https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10913330/#:~:text=Understanding%20and%20investigating%20TFSVA%20has,GBV\)%20while%20using%20social%20media](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10913330/#:~:text=Understanding%20and%20investigating%20TFSVA%20has,GBV)%20while%20using%20social%20media).

the United Nations Population Fund, nearly 90% of young adults attending tertiary institutions in Nairobi, Kenya have observed incidents of technology-facilitated gender-based violence, and 39% have personally been victims of such abuse.⁹ In South Africa, gender-based violence (GBV) is driven by patriarchy, power imbalances, inequality, poverty, and unemployment—factors that also fuel technology-facilitated GBV (TFGBV).¹⁰ Cyber misogyny suppresses women’s voices while amplifying patriarchal narratives, mirroring offline gender inequalities in digital spaces.¹¹ A 2018 report by Gender Links and the South African National Editors’ Forum (SANEF) found that 30% of women journalists and 9% of men experienced cyberviolence, including cyberstalking, bullying, and violent, often sexualized threats.¹² These attacks aim to silence and discredit women, undermining their participation in public discourse.

Astroturfing which uses coordinated efforts,¹³ often involving bots and fake accounts, to spread damaging content widely distorting public opinion and isolating victims.¹⁴ Cyber-harassment, which affects 66% of women globally,¹⁵ involves sustained online abuse using text or images, often with sexual or misogynistic undertones,¹⁶ leading to psychological distress and silencing victims from digital spaces. Cyberbullying on the other hand targets young people through threats, embarrassment, or humiliation, mirroring physical bullying but in a digital context.¹⁷ Similarly, message bombing disrupts victims’ communication channels by overwhelming them with an influx of messages, causing both technical and psychological harm.¹⁸

Other severe forms include deep fakes, where digitally manipulated images or videos exploit victims’ identities,¹⁹ with 96% being non-consensual sexual content targeting women.²⁰ Doxing which involves non-consensual sharing of personal information to incite harm or harassment²¹ is experienced by

9 United Nations Population Fund ‘Rapid Study on Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) In Kenya’s Higher Learning Institutions,’ <https://kenya.unfpa.org/en/publications/rapid-study-technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence-tfgbv-kenyas-higher-learning>

10 Rutgers International ‘Decoding Technology Facilitated Gender Based Violence, A reality check from seven countries,’ <https://rutgers.international/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Decoding-TFGBV-Report-2024.pdf>

11 *ibid*

12 Centre for Human Rights, Pretoria of University ‘Understanding Online Gender Based Violence in Southern Africa- An eight country analysis of the prevalence of digitally enabled gender-based violence,’ https://www.chr.up.ac.za/images/researchunits/dgdr/documents/resources/FINAL_v_Understanding_oGBV_in_Southern_Africa.pdf

13 Akshata Balasaheb Badade and Rajesh Kumar Dhanaraj. “Investigating Astroturfing Detection: An Overview of its Domains, Mitigation Techniques and Future Perspectives.” 2024 International Conference on Trends in Quantum Computing and Emerging Business Technologies (2024): 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.1109/TQCEBT59414.2024.10545292>.

14 *ibid*

15 The Economist Intelligence Unit. “Measuring the Prevalence of Online Violence against Women.” *Jigsaw infographic*, March 1, 2021. <https://onlineviolencewomen.eiu.com/>.

16 Marvin Iroegbu, Freya O’Brien, Luna Clara Muñoz and Georgia Parsons. “Investigating the Psychological Impact of Cyber-Sexual Harassment.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 39 (2024): 3424 - 3445. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605241231615>.

17 Romy Maranatha Ginting and Muhammad Arif Sahlepi. “The Impact Of Cyberbullying On Adolescents On Social Media.” *International Journal of Sociology and Law* (2024). <https://doi.org/10.62951/ijsl.v1i2.53>.

18 Media Defence, ‘Online Harassment,’ <https://www.mediadefence.org/ereader/publications/advanced-modules-on-digital-rights-and-freedom-of-expression-online/module-4-privacy-and-security-online/online-harassment/>

19 UNFPA, ‘16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence (Digital Violence Terms),’ <https://www.unfpa.org/thevirtualisreal-background#glossary>

20 The Economic Intelligence Unit (n 15)

21 Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, ‘Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence An Emerging Issue in Women, Peace and Security,’ 2024. https://media.licdn.com/dms/document/media/v2/D4E1FAQFx_9CMdAvg3A/feedshare-document-pdf-analyzed/feedshare-document-pdf-analyzed/0/1723035127507?e=1734566400&v=beta&t=Wiz8rFnb88AixaJt5uugHckugln7z9v2AT6diKc3qk

55% of women globally.²² Hacking and stalking incidents have been reported by 63% of women,²³ breaches women's privacy by intercepting data and monitoring victims.²⁴ Image-Based Sexual Abuse (IBSA) involves sharing private images without consent²⁵ has affected 57% of women globally,²⁶ while sextortion uses threats of exposing sexual content to coerce victims,²⁷ with a devastating impact on girls under 16, who comprise 66% of victims.²⁸

These forms of abuse highlight the pervasive and gendered nature of online violence, underscoring the urgent need for global action. Addressing TFGBV demands comprehensive solutions,²⁹ including stricter laws, robust enforcement, digital literacy initiatives, and victim support addressing these issues. Addressing these issues requires global and collective action.

Psychological and Emotional Impact of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence on Survivors

The psychological and emotional toll of TFGBV on survivors is profound and multifaceted. Victims often experience feelings of shame, fear, and anxiety, which can lead to long-term mental health issues such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).³⁰ The public nature of online abuse can exacerbate feelings of isolation and vulnerability, as survivors may feel that their experiences are trivialized or dismissed by society. The fear of further victimization can lead to self-censorship, where individuals withdraw from online spaces to protect themselves, ultimately limiting their participation in public discourse and community engagement.³¹ This chilling effect not only impacts the individual but also has broader implications for gender equality and women's rights, as it discourages women from asserting their voices and participating fully in society.³²

22 The Economic Intelligence Unit (n 15)

23 *ibid*

24 Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (n 21)

25 UNFPA, '16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence (Digital Violence Terms),' <https://www.unfpa.org/thevirtualisreal-background#glossary>

26 The Economic Intelligence Unit (n 15)

27 Thorn, "Sextortion Research and Insights." (blog), 2017. <https://www.thorn.org/sextortion/>.

28 The Economist Intelligence Unit. "Measuring the Prevalence of Online Violence against Women." Jigsaw infographic, March 1, 2021. <https://onlineviolencewomen.eiu.com/>.

29 *ibid*

30 Wendy O'Brien and Marie-Helen Maras. "Technology-facilitated coercive control: response, redress, risk, and reform." *International Review of Law, Computers & Technology*, 38 (2024): 174 - 194. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600869.2023.2295097>.

31 M. J. Riedl, Azza El-Masri, Inga K. Trauthig and Samuel C. Woolley. "Infrastructural platform violence: How women and queer journalists and activists in Lebanon experience abuse on WhatsApp." *New Media & Society* (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448241248372>.

32 M. Otieno. "Gendered Disinformation of Female Politicians on Social Media in Kenya: A Case of Migori Republican Council Facebook Page." *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* (2024). <https://doi.org/10.47772/ijriss.2024.803047>.

Legal and Regulatory Framework on Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence

Existing Laws and Regulations

Legal frameworks addressing TFGBV are evolving, with many jurisdictions adapting existing laws on harassment, stalking, cybercrimes, and defamation to include online behavior. However, enforcement remains inconsistent, and many countries still lack comprehensive legislation specifically targeting TFGBV. The table below highlights a summary of the legal frameworks from three countries in Sub-Saharan Africa:

COUNTRY	LEGAL FRAMEWORK
KENYA	<p>Lacks dedicated law addressing TFGBV.</p> <p>The Constitution guarantees rights to dignity, equality, privacy and freedom of expression.</p> <p>The Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act 2018 addresses cyber harassment and online child exploitation.</p> <p>Evidence Act that talks about admissibility of electronic evidence which is required when reporting incidences of TFGBV.</p> <p>The Data Protection Act 2019 and its regulations protect personal data of data subjects and prohibit non-consensual sharing of information.</p> <p>Children Act 2022 focuses on online safety for minors.</p>
NIGERIA	<p>The 1999 Constitution provides for fundamental rights including rights to life, privacy, and dignity.</p> <p>Cybercrime (Prohibition, Prevention, Etc) Act 2015 addresses cyber offences like cyberstalking, phishing, and the distribution of offensive or threatening messages, prescribing stringent penalties.</p> <p>Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (VAPP) 2015 provides gender-neutral provisions limited to 18 states, which is inadequate for TFGBV.</p> <p>Section 24 of the Cybercrime Act was criticised for misuse against journalists.</p> <p>The federal structure of government complicates the uniform application of laws, necessitating constitutional reforms.</p>

SOUTH AFRICA	<p>The Constitution provides for protection against discrimination.</p> <p>Cybercrimes Act 2021 addresses cyber-related offences but does not explicitly cover TFGBV.</p> <p>Protection of Personal Information Act of 2013 (POPIA) addresses cyber harassment targeting women journalists.</p> <p>Domestic Violence Act - a victim of cyberstalking can apply to a court for interim protection orders even when the identity of the alleged stalker is unknown.</p> <p>Protection from Harassment Act 17 of 2011 - The Act is the first SADC legislation to address sexual harassment, providing a quick and affordable civil remedy, including protection orders for electronic harassment. It extends beyond physical harassment to stalking, driven by increased internet and cellphone use in South Africa.</p>
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Challenges and Gaps in the Current Legal Framework

Legal frameworks addressing TFGBV remain inadequate, with many Sub saharan countries lacking specific laws and existing legislation failing to cover the complexities of online violence, such as anonymity and rapid content spread. Further, enforcing the existing laws is challenging due to limited law enforcement training, resource constraints, and the cross-border nature of online violence. Victims face barriers like fear of retaliation, distrust in authorities, and inadequate support services. To deal with these issues, comprehensive laws are needed to protect survivors in Africa's evolving digital landscape and in addition, countries should establish specialized courts that deal with TFGBV to ensure expertise and cases being handled expeditiously

The Role of Digital Literacy in Addressing the Complex Relationship Between Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence and Digital Rights

Digital literacy plays a critical role in addressing the complex relationship between TFGBV and digital rights. While digital rights such as freedom of expression, privacy, and access to information are fundamental for democratic participation, TFGBV undermines these rights, creating unsafe and exclusionary online environments. Empowering individuals, particularly women and marginalized groups, through digital literacy equips them to navigate online spaces responsibly, safeguard their rights, and mitigate risks such as cyberharassment and doxing. Moreover, digital literacy strengthens the ability of users to effectively engage with reporting tools, advocate for policy reforms, and practice ethical online behavior, thereby supporting social media platforms and internet service providers (ISPs) in fostering safer digital ecosystems. Multistakeholder partnerships between civil society organizations (CSOs), government agencies, academic institutions, and international bodies are pivotal in advancing these efforts. These collaborations promote accountability, transparency, and effective content moderation while integrating digital literacy initiatives to empower women and marginalized communities to engage safely and confidently with digital technologies.

Ethical Considerations in Social Media Content Moderation in Tackling Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence

Digital literacy targeting users, content moderators, and policymakers is essential for addressing ethical dilemmas in content moderation, particularly in the context of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). For users, it provides the knowledge to navigate challenges like subjective interpretations of language and intent, encouraging ethical online discourse and reducing harmful content. For content moderators, it equips them with skills to make informed decisions while balancing sensitivity to survivors' needs with upholding freedom of expression. Policymakers benefit by understanding content moderation mechanisms, fostering transparency, and crafting inclusive frameworks. Across all groups, digital literacy enhances transparency and accountability by enabling users to assess moderation practices, understand appeal processes, and advocate for fairer, more equitable online policies.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

In conclusion, digital literacy is a key strategy for combating TFGBV, requiring a multi-stakeholder approach. Policymakers should integrate TFGBV digital literacy program requirements into ICT regulations, including those that govern tech platforms. Additionally, governments should regionally collaborate with the civil society sector to leverage digital literacy programs, ensuring effective implementation. Collaboration with academia is equally critical, as academic institutions can provide evidence-based research, develop targeted curricula, and evaluate the effectiveness of these programs. Governments and civil society should also work with tech platforms to incorporate TFGBV-specific training into content moderation processes, fostering a comprehensive and sustainable approach to addressing online harm.

