Internet should empower, not harm women and girls

Hashtag, share, scroll, like and comment…is the inescapable reality of how we navigate through the digital landscape. A landscape that is often referred to as a web and at times likened to a labyrinth that inspires, challenges and connects us.

It is in the intricacies of connection that some find entertainment, education, health and wealth, while others also taste the different forms of human kindness.

In Uganda, however, digital platforms are a forbidding snare for many women and girls. The web to them is a paradox; invisible strings that besides empowering, also greatly endanger them by interlacing into a noose that throttles their freedoms online and ultimately turns into abuse.

From licentious harassment and breach of privacy to scurrilous minatory posts that prick one's conscience. With biased algorithms, digital blackmail, extortion, disinformation and manipulation, the consequences that women and girls suffer remain far-reaching.

Every year, the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence invites the world to confront old and new forms of violence that are the source of indignity to millions of women and girls all over the word. The 16 Days of Activism help us to further see and know the sadnesses that come from the traditional forms of violence, and to also see and know the pains that come from stereotypical attitudes towards women and girls.

This year's theme, "Unite to end digital violence against all women and girls, is a bold step toward ending the emerging forms of violence that are being perpetrated in online spaces. Digital violence refers to any form of exploitation or abuse that is perpetrated through digital technologies like social media platforms, messaging apps and other digital tools.

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Violence against women

the invisible hands of perpetrators, who navigate the web to harm survivors and expose them to the intangible cloak of shame and ridicule. They intrude on privacy and instil fear, doubt and disgust in the survivors.

In Uganda, at the start of 2025, when online penetration stood at 28 percent, studies indicated that 14.2 million Ugandans use the internet, with 2.4 million social media users, 37.6 percent of them being women and 62.4 percent being male.

In a population of over 51 million people with women being more than 50 percent, they remain largely left out from digital platforms, yet even the fraction of those who are engaging online, must deal with a very hostile environment. The most vulnerable women are the public figures, entertainers, students and activists.

Repeatedly they must confront malicious narratives that are peddled against them and are pervasive in their online encounters. Women are largely targeted because of the deeply rooted misogynistic and patri-

archal societal attitudes, and a legal regime that has enforcement inconsistencies and gaps. They commonly must deal with cyberbullying and harassment, exposure of private information, digital blackmail and extortion, unsolicited explicit messages, revenge pornography, online stalking, creation of fake accounts, and sexist hate speech and slurs which are all crafted to abuse and harm.

As many women are caught in the webs of their screens, they are heavily harmed, with little options to extricate themselves from online violence. These actualities are an eloquent call for all stakeholders to work toward implanting fidelity to human centric and rights-respecting online practices.

Government, through the available legal frameworks should liquidate online abuse against women by taking a sterner approach toward implementation of the laws available. Tech companies should improve content moderation and diligently and promptly respond to threats or abuse that involve minors and sexual content.

Civil society organisations can also cause a step change in harmful attitudes through literacy initiatives, because everyone should know that the web should not be a trap but an instrument of empowerment and freedom.

As we commemorate the 16 Days of Activism, we should never forget that online violence against one woman is violence against all women and everyone else.

Digital spaces should not be spaces that provide perpetrators with the opportunity to abuse, exploit or harass survivors rather they should be spaces that amplify voices, safeguard dignity and offer meaningful opportunities to all women and girls as they pursue their life goals and aspirations.

Every individual, and sector; government, tech companies and civil society must provide insurance against online violence for women and girls.

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