

Her body, her data, her danger: Digital violence against women and girls

As the world marks the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, the urgency to confront violence against women and girls in all its forms has never been clearer. Pursuant to UN General Assembly Resolution 75/161 which calls for intensified efforts to prevent and eliminate violence against women, Uganda must confront not only the brutality occurring in homes, workplaces, and communities, but also the growing wave of harm unfolding across digital spaces.

Technology has opened doors for women and girls to learn, lead, connect and innovate. Yet the same platforms that promise empowerment have also become breeding grounds for misogyny, harassment, and exploitation. As digital spaces expand, so too does the reach, scale, and anonymity

of many perpetrators and secondary abusers contribute to the cycle; downloading, resharing, and amplifying harmful content in pursuit of likes, humour, or relevance.

Yet despite the rise of online harm, Uganda lacks a unified definition of technology-facilitated violence, mirroring a global struggle to keep pace with the rapidly evolving digital crimes. Existing laws such as the Computer Misuse Act (2011, amended 2022), the Data Protection and Privacy Act (2019), and constitutional protections against cruelty and invasion of privacy offer some recourse. But they remain insufficient for the emerging threats we now face.

We need immediate future-proofing of policies, recognizing new and emerging crimes like deepfakes and gendered synthetic content. Laws must anticipate evolving forms of digital violence rather than remain reactive. Clear reporting pathways must be widely communicated: Where does one report online stalking? How long does the process take? Which agencies are mandated to respond?

Efforts to combat offline violence through police, health services, shelters and justice systems must now be matched with equally strong virtual policing units trained to monitor, respond to, and investigate digital violence, survivor-centred digital support services, investment in digital forensic capacity, and collective skills-building to help women secure their online presence. Online harm inflicts psychological, social, reproductive, and even economic consequences.

As a country, we cannot afford complacency. The “brutal bytes” keep multiplying, taking on new disguises each day.

Every woman with a smartphone, social media account, or digital footprint is a potential target. This is a national issue; one that calls for government leadership, community awareness, stronger digital literacy, and collective responsibility. The fight against violence cannot be divided between online and offline spheres.

These spaces are intertwined, and our responses must reflect that reality. All hands must be on deck for policymakers, law enforcement, technologists, civil society, educators, and citizens alike.

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Patience Poni Ayikoru
Rights

of online violence.

Online violence is not separate from offline abuse, it exists on a continuum, a term I like very much, used by the United Nations to explain how multiple and interrelated forms of violence intersect across physical and digital environments.

Intimate partner violence has found new life through tracking apps, digital surveillance, and non-consensual sharing of private information. The metaverse and virtual reality platforms are creating entirely new frontiers for sexualised harm. The manifestations of digital violence are multiplying: extortion, doxing, impersonation, online harassment, deepfakes, non-consensual image sharing, and coordinated trolling campaigns.

On social media, both pri-