



By Annmarie Mirembe

Online spaces meant to connect and empower young people have of late become a source of fear and vulnerability for many, especially girls.

A 2023 United Nations Women Africa report estimates that one in 10 women have experienced a form of cyber violence since the age of 15.

Samalie Mirembe, 23, a resident of Kasubi in Rubaga division, Kampala, says when she was a university student, she decided to sell an old digital camera that was gathering dust in her room via the Internet.

Little did she know that this decision would expose her to a harrowing

Online spaces: Why young people should tread carefully

experience of online harassment that would leave her feeling vulnerable and scared.

Mirembe says she posted the photo of the camera online, and got a male buyer who offered her a good price. However, what surprised her was that she started receiving sexual advances from the potential buyer.

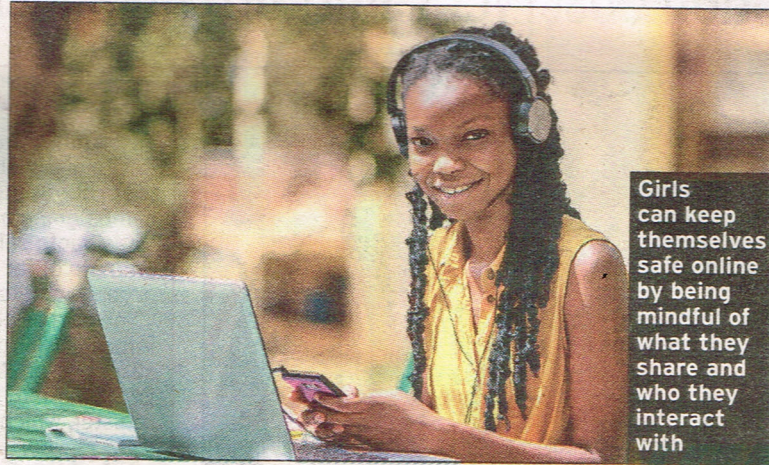
"I told him to stop, but he told me that he could always get any girl he wanted and proceeded to narrate his sexual conquests," narrates Mirembe.

Gripped by fear, Mirembe realised she had to protect herself from the man's escalating aggression, and she had to block him.

Mirembe says these memories still linger in her mind as a stark reminder of how quickly a seemingly professional interaction can turn into sexual harassment.

Elizabeth Nakanjako, 28, a nursery school teacher in Kalagi, Mukono district, also narrates how she received nude photos and videos from an unknown number. "On opening my phone, I couldn't believe my eyes; 30 images of my friend naked," she says.

Not knowing what to do next, Nakanjako tried to ask the sender who



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he was and why he was posting such information. But the sender ordered her to spread the images.

"When I reached out to my friend, he refused to take my calls. Maybe she was ashamed of what was spreading about her," Nakanjako says.

Later, Nakanjako learnt that the pictures were from a random person who had hacked into her friend's phone, and demanded for money so as not to spread her photos.

Esther Nansubuga, 24, a make-up artist in Kampala, says when she broke up with her boyfriend last year, he threatened to spread her nude pictures.

"At first, I thought he was making empty threats because I knew he had nothing like a nude picture of me. I had never shared anything with him. But everything took a horrifying turn when he sent me samples," she narrates.

Nansubuga says she informed her friends about the impending disaster,

EXPERT ADVICE

Lucy Banda, a mother of teens and a teacher of information communication technology at Mengo Senior School, says girls can keep themselves safe online by being mindful of what they share and who they interact with.

She says personal information such as names, addresses, phone numbers, school details and passwords should always be kept private.

"It's important to use strong passwords, change them regularly and avoid clicking on suspicious links or downloading unknown files. Girls should also think carefully before posting photos or messages, remembering that once something is shared online, it can be difficult to remove completely," Banda advises.

She urges educators, parents and all carers to sensitise children on protecting themselves online.

asking them not to judge her. "For three months, it felt like I was on tenterhooks," she narrates.