Mozilla Leadership Network
Understanding Cyberviolence
Research Paper

1.0 Executive Summary

As women's access online improves, often, so does the online Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) and harassment that can surface in different ways.[1] Abuse online is not limited to women only, but overwhelmingly, cyberviolence is gendered -- about 73% of women have had some exposure or experience of online violence. The [UN Women's VAWG Report](#) estimates that 95% of aggressive behaviour, harassment, abusive language and denigrating images in online spaces are aimed at women and often come from people known to the receiver. Even more vulnerable are those who are racialized and those who identify as lesbian, bisexual, queer, transgender and intersex.

Weak enforcements and anonymity favor the perpetrator until there is strong mobilization to stop this behaviour. In many ways, the fear of attack or surveillance can inhibit women from taking up ICTs in the first place. However, as more women embrace digital technology, there is also potential to tackle the problem of online harassment through first-hand solutions placing women's experiences at the center.

For women to be empowered to challenge cyberviolence, they need to have the right skillset and feel like they have agency and voice in areas of their life. Since the modes of cyberviolence are still evolving as a newer form of gender-based violence, the redress necessitates unique strategies.

Through our experiences and survey of the research, we have developed a distinct approach for remedial action on cyberviolence. The details of perspective are compiled in this report. We feel that the landscape is rapidly changing, and the main players involved have clearly defined roles to play, and Mozilla can take a substantive position on educating women on this important issue.

Introduction: Online Harassment and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)

Online harassment and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) (or cyberviolence) is becoming a more prevalent inhibitor for women's equal participation online. It is a type of misogyny that exists because systems and interfaces are still designed by the

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[1] "Cyber Violence Against Women and Girls." 2015. *UN Broadband Commission for Digital Development Working Group on Broadband and Gender*.

privileged few and often embedded with biases and discrimination. All women who come online face the threat of abusive behaviour that can manifest in different ways. Abuse online is not limited to women only, but overwhelmingly, cyberviolence is gendered -- about 73% of women have had some exposure or experience of online violence. The UN estimates that 95% of aggressive behaviour, harassment, abusive language and denigrating images in online spaces are aimed at women and often come from people known to the receiver. Even more vulnerable are those who are racialized and those who identify as lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex.

Understanding online harassment and VAWG

How does online abuse and harassment translate into the life of a 30-year old journalist and aspiring politician from Nairobi, Kenya? In 2012, upon returning to Kenya after completing her Masters in the UK, Kinca decided to contest the presidential election. Women who have attempted to take public office in Kenya have previously faced varying degrees of physical violence at the hands of those who don't believe in allowing women to have a fair chance in politics.

Using online platforms to build her campaign presented new challenges. Kinca was active on social media to reach out to her audience, where she faced different forms of verbal abuse. She recounts the abuse to Association of Progressive Communications Women's Rights Programme in the [“End Violence: Women's rights and Safety online”](#) research study which shares case studies of cyberviolence across seven countries[2]. Through platforms like Facebook, Kinca says she received "a lot of insults, a lot of rude messages, a lot of hate." This type of reaction made Kinca "doubt her decision to run in the first place" and put her under heavy psychological attack. The online abuse led to debilitating depression, making her miss three months of work[3]. The effects of this type of online harassment are very real and damaging.

Common forms of Cyberviolence[4]:
- Hate speech (publishing blasphemous libel)
- Repeat harassment
- Hacking/Privacy Violations
- Surveillance/unauthorised use/manipulation of personal information/Doxing
- Online stalking
- Identify theft
- Uttering Threats

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[2] IT, Gender. "Cases on Women's Experiences of Technology-Related VAW and Their Access to Justice | GenderIT.org."
http://www.genderit.org/resources/cases-women-s-experiences-technology-related-vaw-and-their-access-justice (April 28, 2016).
[3] "Violence Against Women on the Campaign Trail: A Case Study from Kenya."
http://www.genderit.org/sites/default/upload/case_studies_ken4_1.pdf (May 24, 2016).
[4] "Cyber Violence Against Women and Girls." 2015. *UN Broadband Commission for Digital Development Working Group on Broadband and Gender*.
http://www2.unwomen.org/~/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/librar

> ● Facilitates other forms of VAWG including trafficking and sex trade.

Kinca's case demonstrates just one of the potential categories for women who experience violence against women and girls (VAWG) online: a professional with a public profile involved in public communication[5]. The damaging effects of this type of abuse are traumatic and can severely hinder a woman's ability to do her job. More so, facing this type of duress can strongly prevent women from taking on high-profile or leadership positions.

Cyberbullying among women has taken on a disturbing shape over the last two decades. American journalist Amanda Hess documented the various online threats she and other female journalists received in an article for the Pacific Standard in 2014. From threats of rape to violent death, this type of misogynistic vitriol has become inevitable in the lives of women with public profiles. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) did a comprehensive survey of 149 female journalists noting the disturbing pattern of online harassment with the core objective to silent the recipient. Of these journalists, two-thirds reported experiencing some form of intimidation or abuse in relation to their work[6]. What's more, the characteristic anonymity or pseudonymity of various social platforms like Twitter enables a murky trolling culture without much recourse for the victims. Most often, as Hess recounts, recipients of abuse are expected to quietly "get over ourselves or feel flattered in response to the threats made against us[7]".

While men and women both face intimidation online, the nature of these threats is distinct for a woman, who is already at risk of experiencing some form of violence in her lifetime. Some report estimate that about 73% of women have had some exposure or experience of online violence -- a newer and less researched form of gender-based violence[8]. The UN estimates that 95% of aggressive behaviour, harassment, abusive language and denigrating images in online spaces are aimed at women and often comes from people known to the receiver.

Often, this violence is not just reserved to the virtual space. The threatening messages received online can become physical: Take Back the Tech! found that 11% of the 1126

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[5] IT, Gender. "Infographic: Mapping Technology-Based Violence against Women - Take Back the Tech! Top 8 Findings | GenderIT.org." http://www.genderit.org/resources/infographic-mapping-technology-based-violence-against-women-take-back-tech-top-8-findings (April 28, 2016).

[6] OSCE. 2016. *New Challenges to Freedom of Expression: Countering Online Abuse of Female Journalists*. http://www.genderit.org/sites/default/upload/220411.pdf (April 28, 2016).

[7] Hess, Amanda. 2014. "Why Women Aren't Welcome on the Internet." *Pacific Standard*. https://psmag.com/why-women-aren-t-welcome-on-the-internet-aa21fdbc8d6#.3hjq87b6x (April 21, 2016).

[8] "Cyber Violence Against Women and Girls." 2015. *UN Broadband Commission for Digital Development Working Group on Broadband and Gender*. http://www2.unwomen.org/~/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2015/cyber_violence_gender report.pdf?v=1&d=20150924T154259 (April 21, 2016).

cases they mapped turned into some kind of physical harm, facilitated through online means[9].

In Kinca's case, she did not expect legal routes would help her because she felt she was "the one who put [herself] in this situation and this was something to be expected." She also felt that reporting the cyber abuse would be inconsequential as it did not occupy a physical occurrence, "[it is not like] physical abuse where you can go and report to the police and they understand[10]." Moreover, her avenues were limited: although Kenya is a signatory to the universal declaration of human rights, laws are inadequate to protect victims of cyberviolence, and often lack a gendered perspective. In fact, this is a broader problem across constituencies: one in five female internet users live in countries where harassment and abuse of women online is extremely unlikely to be punished[11].

The APC's cross-country case studies found that victims/survivors of VAWG experienced heightened psychological harm and emotional distress if they could not identify what was happening around these violations[12]. The full spectrum of harms are difficult to categorize for a lot of women. Many of the women who have experienced cyber abuse classify it as something that is "more emotional than tangible", and therefore often difficult to report to authorities. Constantly being made to feel like your experiences exist in a virtual fantasyland makes it very hard for a victim to understand her own fear -- even when the harms resulting from this abuse are very real, and often connected to more recognized forms of VAWG.

Harms resulting from Cyber Violence Against Women[13]:
- Emotional or psychological harm
- Harm to reputation
- Physical harm
- Sexual harm
- Invasion of privacy
- Loss of identity
- Mobility limited
- Censorship
- Loss of property
- Financial loss

[9] "Infographic: Mapping Technology-Based Violence against Women." 2015. *Take Back the Tech!* http://www.genderit.org/resources/infographic-mapping-technology-based-violence-against-women-take-back-tech-top-8-findings (April 28, 2016).
[10] "Violence Against Women on the Campaign Trail: A Case Study from Kenya."
[11] "Cyber Violence Against Women and Girls." 2015.
[12] Onyango, Mary. 2014. "Kenya Country Report: Technology-Related Violence against Women | GenderIT.org." *Association of Progressive Communications.* http://www.genderit.org/resources/kenya-country-report-technology-related-violence-against-women (April 28, 2016).
[13] Athar, Rima, and Inc. Women's Legal and Human rights Bureau. 2013. *End Violence: Women's Rights and Safety Online.* http://www.genderit.org/sites/default/upload/flow_end_vaw_research_design_final.pdf (April 27, 2016).

> ● Isolation
> ● Trauma-related occupational distress

Case two: intimate partner violence takes an online form

Similar to other forms of VAWG, much of cyberviolence is enacted by someone known to the victim/survivor. Take Back the Tech's map found that 40% of the cases reported were by someone known to the survivor. Most often, the perpetrator had some form of an intimate relationship with the woman, or belonged to the survivor's immediate circle[14].

Alejandra from Colombia had an unfortunate encounter with an ex-partner who took nude photographs of her without consent and posted them to a fake Facebook profile he created. This was supplemented with violent emails, phone calls, and hacking into her email account. In addition to the psychological ramifications experienced by Alejandra, she began to feel mistrustful of the internet itself. After much persistence, she was able to seek some justice through legal mechanisms, however, she was left scarred by the experience[15].

In other instances, this fear of infringed privacy and security reinforces a gender-use gap, especially in countries with limited forms of protection[16]. Without comprehensively addressing and solving cyber VAWG everywhere, women will remain at a significant digital disadvantage.

Social networking sites, which are used more often by women than men, are accountable in this perpetuation of abuse. These sites help women connect across borders and seek out social and economic opportunities, but they can also have a dark side. Take Back the Tech's map reports that 82% of social media violence against women reported on Take Back the Tech's map happened on either Facebook, Twitter or YouTube. Half of this violence happens primarily on Facebook[17].

Responsibilities of intermediaries

Intermediaries are asked to take more responsibility to ensure "they are not complicit in, and are combatting, the use of their platforms for the perpetration of

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[14] Communications, Association of Progressive, and Programme. 2015. Communications, Association of Progressive *Technology Related Violence Against Women - Briefing Paper*. http://www.genderit.org/sites/default/upload/hrc_29_vaw_a_briefing_paper_final_june_2015.pdf (April 27, 2016).

[15] "A Relationshop Ends but the Violence Continues." http://www.genderit.org/sites/default/upload/case_studies_col3_0.pdf (May 26, 2016).

[16] "Cyber Violence Against Women and Girls." 2015.

[17] "#WhatAreYouDoingAboutVAW Campaign: Social Media Accountability | GenderIT.org." http://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/whatareyoudoingaboutvaw-campaign-social-media-accountability (April 28, 2016).1

gender-based harassment and incitement to violence against women"[18]. However, legal mechanisms should be the ones taking perpetrators to trial.

While companies have a mechanism to allow victims to report abuse, women often say they receive no response after reporting an incident. Often, it takes a number of signatories to mobilize platforms to remove libelous content, showing the blurred frontier between free speech and hate speech. There tends to be differential standards for what content is taken down and what is not. Fundamentally, this understanding of cyber VAWG is still evolving, as is the full scope of responsibility on the part of intermediaries. The APC found in an exploratory study of intermediary liability across Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa and Uganda that it may have negative effects on freedom of speech and freedom of association. This is a concern as there is a threat of governments using intermediary liability as a means of political control and censorship. There needs to be more effective legal mechanisms that ensure due and fair process in prosecuting libelous cases.

For platforms like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube where this hate often occurs, more community level engagement and teaching need to happen to sensitize users and also provide women the skills that allow them to protect themselves and report vicious content.

Some recommendations for intermediaries[19]:
- Strictly prohibit the publishing of private, confidential, and/or identifying information of others with clear definitions of what constitutes private and publically available.
- Address the English language bias in the reporting mechanism.
- Promote Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT) reform to increase access to justice in cases of technology-related VAW.
- Provide greater transparency and accountability regarding (in)action on content and privacy requests as in many cases women reported either getting a complete lack of response or only an automated response.
- Provide greater transparency and public accountability on the departments and staff responsible for responding to content and privacy complaints.
- Reserve the right to terminate accounts specifically on the basis of repeated gender-based harassment, hate and abuse.
- Ensure systems-wide removal of individual content (photos, videos, tweets) at their source.
- Engage with experts in gender, sexuality and human rights to provide input into policy formation, staff training, and the development of education/ prevention programs.

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[18] Athar, Rima, and Inc. Women's Legal and Human rights Bureau. 2013. *End Violence: Women's Rights and Safety Online*. http://www.genderit.org/sites/default/upload/flow_end_vaw_research_design_final.pdf (April 27, 2016).
[19] Ibid.

The most marginalized:

There is evidence that the most vulnerable -- lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and the intersexed, as well and those from racialized groups -- face more threats online, while also being unable to access the right support offline. Furthermore, people living in low-resource or rural areas may not have the proper know-how or understanding of how to report aggressors or seek redress. In addition, they may undergo more social and cultural surveillance that can result in far greater impact and harm in incidences of online abuse and violence[20].

These are all concerns that appropriate strategies need to consider.

> **Identified enabling factors[21]:**
> ● A lack of awareness and recognition of online abuse and VAWG. Relatedly, there is a lack of awareness regarding available remedies and a lack of digital literacy and awareness of how to protect one's self from harm and how to be safe online.
> ● A tendency to normalize online abuse and VAWG.
> ● Digital divides impacting how women access the internet and the skills of internet users which impacts how women participate online and what behaviour they experience online.
> ● How inequality and sexism in offline environments are reflected/amplified in online domains
> ● Discrimination in education and also discrimination rooted in race, ethnicity, class, disability and status.
> ● Women may also experience abuse that is concurrent with physical abuse and violence.

Best Practices

In all advocacy strategies:
● Importance of taking a rights-based approach (Association of Progressive Communication)
● Need to name and recognize evolving and emerging forms of violence so they can be recognized and better addressed.
● Need to recognize emotional and psychological aspects of abuse when creating and implementing standards as well as their implementation.

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[20] *Internet Governance Forum 2015: Best Practice Forum (BPF) on Online Abuse and Gender-Based Violence Against Women.* 2015. http://www.genderit.org/sites/default/upload/draft_jp_online_abuse_and_gender_based_violence_agains t_women.pdf (April 27, 2016).
[21] *Internet Governance Forum 2015: Best Practice Forum (BPF) on Online Abuse and Gender-Based Violence Against Women.* 2015.

- Need to think about how to reach groups outside North America and Europe

Some applications, like [HarassMap](), that are addressing offline inequalities could be strengthened in more viable ways, made more open with benefits reaching people beyond borders. This can also be used as tool of web literacy, showing innovations that are making genuine impact in people's lives.

Some initiatives:
- [Take Back the Tech's Social Media Accountability]()
- [Reclaim the Internet](): campaign and online forum to discuss ways to make the internet less aggressive, sexist, racist and homophobic.
- [Troll Buster]()
- [Women Action Media]()
- [Kenya ICT Action Network]() (KICTAnet)
- [Boston Safety Hub Collective's]()
- [Peng! Zero Trollerance Campaign]()
- [HarassMap]()

Resources around curriculum and education:
[Digital Citizenship Resource Roundup]() on cyberbullying, digital responsibility, internet safety,
[That's Not Cool:]() Educating teens about dating and online violence
[Project Shift (YWCA Canada):]() Creating a safer digital world for young women

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