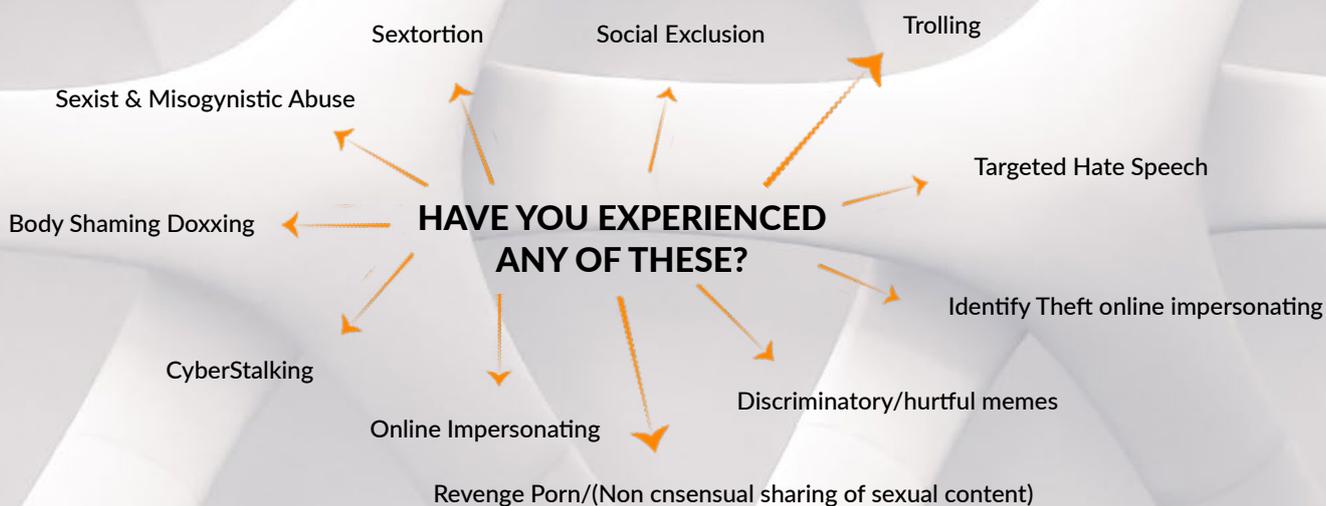


# ONLINE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN NAMIBIA

- A country situational assessment

## VARIOUS FORMS OF ONLINE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS



# **Online Violence Against Women and Girls in Namibia #OVAW**

## **A country situational assessment report**

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## Key Terms and Acronyms

DMS	Direct Messages
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GBVIU	Gender-Based Violence Investigation Units
ISOC	Internet Society
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
R&D	Research and Development
MICT	Ministry of Information and Communication Technology
NBC	Namibia Broadcasting Corporation
NCIS	Non-Consensual Image Sharing
NYC	National Youth Council
VAWG	Violence Against Women and Girls
OVAW	Online Violence Against Women
OGBV	Online Gender-Based Violence
UNAM	University of Namibia
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children’s Fund (formely known as the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund)
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organisation
<b>LGBTIQ+</b>	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning
<b>UN WOMEN</b>	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

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# Overview

Technological developments and the spread of the internet continue to be celebrated as tools that enable social change and advancement. They are responsible for creating greater equality by breaking down barriers for members of society, who were previously disadvantaged as a result of their class, gender, geographical location, and other, related factors. Because of the internet, a “digital public sphere” has been created, where ideas, access to information and opportunities, as well as collaboration are abundant.

This sphere has also reproduced social structures, similar to those in the physical realm. While on the one hand, the internet is a space of endless opportunity and expansive human freedom, on the other, it has facilitated harmful behaviours online, which are characterised by hate speech, misogyny, dark forms of participation, information disorders and others. Of predominant concern is the violence that targets women and girls, accustomed known as online violence against women (OVAW). This vice, now a global phenomenon, has the development sector worried, especially concerning its impact on the psychosocial development of women – who are left behind the world over.

The UN agency responsible for women affairs UN Women (2021), pointed out in

a report about online and ICT-facilitated violence against women that; *not only were women and girls disproportionately affected, but women in politics and the media were at higher risk due to their public personas and nature of work. This kind of abuse often becomes worse when women belong to LGBTIQ and other disenfranchised groups.*<sup>1</sup>

As with other forms of violence facing women, the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to the worsening situation of online violence, according to the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, who in 2020 said: *“From domestic violence to sexual exploitation, trafficking, child marriage, female genital mutilation and online harassment, violent misogyny has thrived in the shadow of the pandemic.”*

Additionally, a global research by UNESCO found that online violence against women journalists is designed to belittle, humiliate, shame, induce fear, silence and retreat; discredit, undermine accountability journalism and trust in facts; and chill their active participation (along with that of their sources, colleagues and audiences) in public debate. The report also highlighted that the violence online amounts to an attack on democratic deliberation and media freedom, encompassing the public’s right to access information, which can never be normalised or tolerated as an inevitable aspect of online discourse, nor contemporary audience engaged journalism<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> UN Women 'Online and ICT facilitated violence against women and girls during COVID-19' <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/Brief-Online-and-ICT-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-during-COVID-19-en.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO 'The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists' 2021 <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377223> (accessed 3 November 2021).

Further, the research pointed to the absence of reporting mechanisms that contribute to the unavailability of data on the actual impact. The lack of data is also a challenge in Namibia, where both government and social structures on violence online where both government and social structures do not possess any statistics in this regard. However, general evidence shows that the vice of online violence against women and girls has become a common occurrence in Namibia, manifesting in various forms.

As a result, some social systems, most commonly set up by non-state actors, have begun to engage on this issue, with the emphasis squarely placed on raising awareness levels. In locating evidence addressing online violence against women and girls in Namibia, the Internet Society (ISOC) Namibia Chapter led a discussion on 'Mitigating Effects of Online Violence against Women' in March 2018. The session, which formed part of the annual Women In Tech Conference, drew 50 participants, according to the organisation.

“ Interactions from this panel discussion revealed a deeper need to continue advocacy on the safety of women and children online – which are global best practices on Internet Governance. The chapter seeks to continue engagement and further discussions with other stakeholders, on the extent and kinds of violence and identify ways to fill the existing gaps, as well as formulate strategies to deal with online violence.”<sup>3</sup>

Ahead of the 2019 General Elections in Namibia, ISOC held a high level Women's Digital Forum, aimed to empower women in politics and those in prominent positions with skills on how to manage their presence online as well as protecting themselves on online platforms. Ultimately, the forum called on the Namibian government to create legislation to safeguard and authorise the prosecution of perpetrators of violence against women who use online platforms.

An article by The Namibian newspaper on the forum highlighted the following:

*The ideal legislation should clearly define the rules of engagement as well as what constitutes online violence and how internet users can report and take action against perpetrators. Women holding or aspiring for political office experience online abuse, bullying and other violence differently compared to their male counterparts, it has been argued. Violence against women and children online is a major cause of concern for Namibia's government. The executive director in the ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, Wilhencia Uiras said statistics on gender-based violence in Namibia were shocking. She emphasised the importance of the law to protect women against online violence.*<sup>4</sup>

For Namibia, as a country where gender-based violence and femicide are among the most common forms of violence,<sup>5</sup> the internet and its accompanying digital platforms, have amplified the afore-mentioned violence and dark forms of online participation.

<sup>3</sup> ISOC Namibia <https://isocnamibia.org/news/raising-awareness-on-online-violence-against-women-endovaw/> (accessed on 5 August 2021)

<sup>4</sup> Call for anti-online bullying law' Namibian 10 October 2019 <https://www.namibian.com.na/194046/archive-read/Call-for-anti-online-bullying-law> (accessed on 5 August 2021)

<sup>5</sup> UNFPA Namibia <https://namibia.unfpa.org/en/topics/gender-based-violence-3> (accessed on 5 August 2021)

Offline acts of violence against women and girls in Namibia are intertwined with acts committed online. A notable example of gender-based violence bearing evidence of online effects, took place in October 2020, when the body of 21-year-old Shannon Wasserfall was discovered in a shallow grave in the dunes near her home town of Walvis Bay. The Namibian newspaper wrote an article in December 2020, stating that “that” a source revealed to The Namibian that searches on ‘how to dispose of a body’ were found on the **personal computer** of the main suspect in Wasserfall’s murder”<sup>6</sup>.

Though the incident was not directly caused by events that solely unfolded on the internet, its repercussions exposed new wounds in how women and girls in Namibia are subjected to various forms of violence, which are frequently facilitated through online.



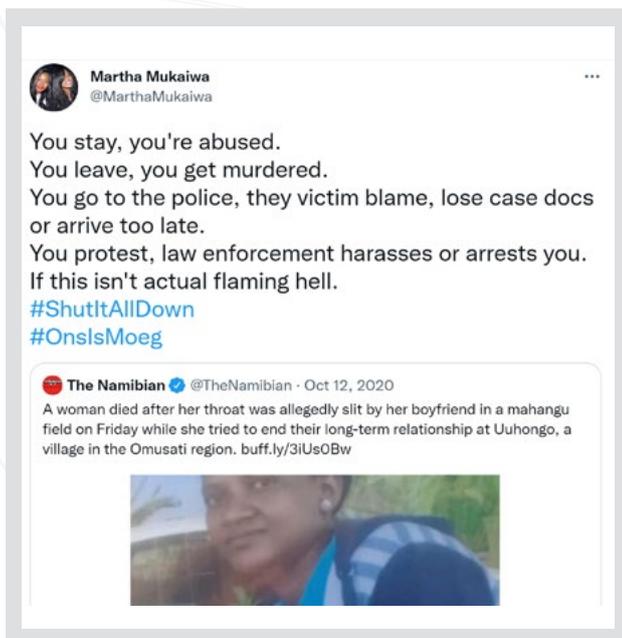
“ Words cannot truly explain how **TERRIFIED I am to exist as a woman in NAMIBIA**” Tweet during 2020 #ShutItAllDown protests in Namibia”.

The above quote was extracted from a tweet posted during the 2020 #ShutItAllDown protests in Namibia, which, at the time marked a new form of locally established activism and dialogue. The movement was led by the youth and the campaigning and activism was coordinated and carried out **on various social media platforms**.

CIVICUS, a global coalition of civil society organisations and activists, spoke with Namibian activist Bertha Tobias, who noted that #ShutItAllDown as a movement was able to grow organically because Namibia has a fairly young population with tremendous **digital abilities**.

In response to the #ShutItAllDown protest that had followed the Wasserfall murder, President Hage Geingob met with young people who led the protest in October of 2020 and affirmed their efforts, saying:

“ It would be wrong to assume that we are at war against each other, we have to address this issue together. Gender-based violence is something we have to address together as a nation”, (President Hage Geingob)<sup>7</sup>



<sup>6</sup> 'Wasserfall murder suspects internet history reveals grim searches' The Namibian 22 December 2022 <https://www.namibian.com.na/207348/archive-read/Wasserfall-murder-suspects-internet-history-reveals-grim-searches> (accessed on 5 August 2021)

<sup>7</sup><https://theconversation.com/shutitalldown-in-namibia-the-fight-against-gender-based-violence-14880>

President Geingob's meeting with youth leaders in an effort to curb gender-based violence did, however, not mark the first time a Namibian head of state addressed the issue. In 2014, then President Hifikepunye Pohamba and his Cabinet called on all Namibians to join them for a National Day of Prayer against Gender-Based Violence<sup>8</sup>. Previously, Namibia had also convened a National Conference on Gender-Based Violence in response to the country's high rates of this social ill. The country's first-ever National Conference on Gender-Based Violence drew over 300 participants<sup>9</sup> and produced an action plan<sup>10</sup>. Unfortunately, both the conference and action plan did not acknowledge the danger of online violence at the time.

## Research Aims And Main Questions

Considering the impact of GBV in general, as well as the emerging forms of violence perpetrated against women and girls that are visible online, the purpose of this research is to attain a better understanding of online violence against women and girls in Namibia by examining existing data. A second analytical tool has also been employed in this research, namely an online survey aimed at documenting first-hand experiences of Namibian women and girls online. The research is inspired by a hypothesis, which sets out to prove that there is a tangible relationship between violent and harmful internet behaviours and the causal effects on Namibian women and girls. In general, this research seeks to collect and ultimately disseminate information regarding the prevalence of violence online in Namibia.

## Research Methodology

This research surveyed the online experiences of women and girls in Namibia. This was done by deconstructing and extracting relevant data from news media texts and articles as well as related policies. A qualitative content analysis method was applied, focussing on a period of five years (2016 to 2021).

Additionally, an online questionnaire was distributed to better comprehend

<sup>8</sup><https://neweralive.na/posts/national-prayer-day>

<sup>9</sup><https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en/countries/africa/namibia/2007/national-conference-on-gender-based-violence-2007>

<sup>10</sup>National Action Plan on Gender Based Violence - [https://www.na.undp.org/content/dam/namibia/docs/womenempowerment/undp\\_na\\_womenempowernt\\_National%20Plan%20of%20Action%20on%20GBV.pdf](https://www.na.undp.org/content/dam/namibia/docs/womenempowerment/undp_na_womenempowernt_National%20Plan%20of%20Action%20on%20GBV.pdf)

how women and girls from different backgrounds experience and deal with acts of online violence committed against them and their peers.

## Research Limitations

Namibia does not have available data on acts of online violence against women and girls in the country. As a result, the research had to rely on secondary data extracted from news articles. This was done because most Namibian news agencies report acts of violence on their various online platforms. This study found that through the comments made under such articles, further acts of violence against women could be observed, allowing the researchers to better understand how sexism manifests in the digital sphere when internet users engage in the comment sections of women/girls-related news stories.

While no statistics on online gender-based violence are available at the national level, the research was partially informed by a quote from the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, who explained in June 2021 that...

“Full data will take time to collect and assess, but the trends are clear. In twelve countries tracked by the United Nations, the number of cases of violence against women and girls reported to various institutions increased 83 per cent from 2019 to 2020, and cases reported to the police grew by 64%.”<sup>11</sup>

To delve deeper, the research sought to fully grasp the extent of online violence against women and girls in Namibia by analysing acts of violence carried out offline as a baseline. This analysis contributes to the research's primary aims and provides answers to important issues about online violence against women and girls in Namibia.

This research recognises that the phrasing of “online violence” is not part of the everyday language that policy makers and citizens use in their daily engagement. The research findings and interpretation nonetheless rely on various manifestations of this vice.

Additionally, it needs to be acknowledged that the research baseline was primarily conducted via social media due to the restrictions that were introduced at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a consequence thereof, the research recognises the challenges that come to the fore with internet surveys.

<sup>11</sup><https://namibia.un.org/en/133845-global-model-tackle-violence-against-women>

# Gender-Based Violence In Namibia

Namibia is a considerably patriarchal society, though 43.9% of the national households are headed by women<sup>12</sup>. Namibia's female population between the ages of 25-29 amounts to 8.9% of the female population<sup>13</sup>.



The Namibia Demographic and Health Survey of 2006-2007 found that 1 in 3 women age 15 - 49 report ever having experienced physical, sexual, and/or emotional violence from their spouse<sup>14</sup>.



<sup>12</sup><https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.HOU.FEMA.ZS?locations=NA>  
<sup>13</sup><https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.REG.DTHS.ZS?locations=NA>  
<sup>14</sup>[https://ippr.org.na/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/GBV\\_WEB.pdf](https://ippr.org.na/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/GBV_WEB.pdf)

Between 2006 – 2010 a total of 47 910 GBV cases were reported to the Namibian police<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, Namibia Media Holdings' we.com reported that 50 000 crimes related to GBV were reported to police stations around the country between 2012 and 2015. This averages about 45 cases per day<sup>16</sup>.

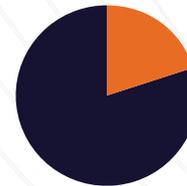
The 2020 Afrobarometer (which conducts public surveys on democracy, governance, the economy and society in 30+ countries on a regular cycle) ranked Namibia 10th in Africa, indicating that 46% of Namibian women regularly use the internet, compared to 39% men.<sup>17</sup> The report further revealed that Namibia is the only African country with a digital gender access gap in favour of women, at -7%, but also has a much higher overall population of females<sup>18</sup>.

Additionally, Namibia does not have an open database on death registration with cause-of-death information to help the public explore data on cause of death over periods of time, making it harder to trace acts of femicide as an example<sup>19</sup>. Nonetheless, this research draws from the latest statistics measured by UN Women on different forms of violence against women and girls in Namibia. The UN agency provides an overview below of GBV in Namibia<sup>20</sup>

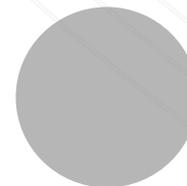
Lifetime Physical and/or Sexual Intimate Partner Violence :26.7 %



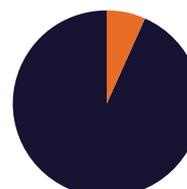
Physical and/or Sexual Intimate Partner Violence in the last 12 months : 20.2 %



Lifetime Non-Partner Sexual Violence: Official National Statistics Not Available



Child Marriage :6.9 %



<sup>15</sup><https://www.mewc.org/index.php/gender-issues/violence-against-women/2151-namibia-men-urged-to-tackle-gender-violence>

<sup>16</sup><https://www.we.com.na/news/a-history-of-violence-2020-10-27>

<sup>17</sup><https://www.afrobarometer.org/blogs/african-women-have-less-access-internet-african-men-do-thats-problem>

<sup>18</sup><https://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/review-measuring-digital-divide-why-we-should-be-using-women-centered-analysis>

<sup>19</sup><https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.REG.DTHS.ZS?locations=NA>

<sup>20</sup><https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en/countries/africa/namibia#1>

Namibia has, over time, ensured that legislation is in place to protect women and girls, however none of these laws contain specific prohibitions addressing violence online. The following are the policies that are now in effect in Namibia aimed at protecting women and girls.

- The Child Care and Protection Act of 2015
- The Prevention of Organised Crime Act of 2004 (entered into force in May 2009)
- The National Gender Policy (2010-2020);
- The National Gender Plan of Action (2010-2020);
- Combating of Domestic Violence Act (2003)
- Combating of Rape Act (2000)
- The Gender Responsive Budget Guidelines approved by Cabinet in 2014.

## Compliance With Legal Frameworks

Namibia is among the ten (10) African countries that have ratified<sup>21</sup> the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection. Ratification of the Convention however has not led to the country complying with the convention's requirements. Accordingly, Namibia remains without a cyber-security or data protection law, leaving citizens in this regard generally unprotected, even in their private spaces. The absence of a comprehensive legal protection framework has exposed the country to a high level of cyber-criminal activities<sup>22</sup>.

Namibia has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>23</sup> and further acceded to articles 2 and 3 of the UN Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography. The country has also ratified<sup>24</sup> the African Charter on Human and People's Rights commonly known as the Maputo Protocol. Moreover, it is a party to various other international human rights instruments such as the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities amongst others.

To a certain extent, elements of people's protections, especially those related

<sup>21</sup> AU (2020) "African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection" last accessed at <https://au.int/en/treaties/african-union-convention-cyber-security-and-personal-data-protection>  
<sup>22</sup> The Namibian (2020) ISACA talks cyber security in Windhoek available at <https://www.namibian.com.na/192858/archive-read/Isaca-talks-cyber-security-in-Windhoek>  
<sup>23</sup> UN Human Rights 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx> (accessed on 5 January 2021)  
<sup>24</sup> Namibia ratified the Maputo Protocol in 2004 <https://www.maputoprotocol.up.ac.za/index.php/namibia> (accessed on 5 January 2022)

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to children, are reflected in both the Communications Act (2009) and the draft Cybercrime Bill, seek to address online violence. Another such instrument is section 117 of the Communications Act of 2009 that identifies general offences, in subsection (1) (c) and (2) (b), prohibiting among others the creation and circulation of indecent material(s), using telecommunications devices.

The section specifically stipulates that any person who knowingly makes, creates and solicits; or initiates the transmission of, any comment, request, suggestion, proposal, image or other communication which are obscene, lewd, luscious, filthy or incident with the intent to annoy, abuse, threaten or harass another person commits an offence. The provisions further set a punishment of not more than 5 years in prison and a fine not exceeding N\$20 000.

It is important to note, however, that the measures of this section are not well publicised and hence there is a continued lack of awareness from the public.

The latter has caused the situation to allow violence online to continue in the country.

Further, the Communications Act (2009) was under review during the period of this assessment, providing an opportunity to put in place clear protective measures for women and girls across all spheres of society, but for politicians, activists and journalists who are at increased risk of violence and abuse.

While additional provisions concerning the protection of the girl child in particular have been noted in the draft Cybercrime bill, gender-sensitive language and clearer provisions could be considered too in the draft Data Protection Bill as propagated in a stakeholder call with 12 other organisations in September 2021.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> <https://twitter.com/ISOCNamibia/status/1443880059585155072?s=20&t=RUAwEOzjwCFXcsmqTlJ30A>

# Women's Online Rights In Namibia

In 2020, the Internet Society Namibia Chapter in partnership with the Web Foundation launched Namibia's Women Rights Online, which set out to assess the gender divide, relevant content online and women empowerment<sup>26</sup>, using specifically designed 14 indicators across the following 5 categories.

- Internet Access and Women Empowerment
- Affordability
- Digital Skills and Education
- Relevant Content and Services for Women
- Online Safety

Furthermore, the assessment considered the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) approach and sought to provide an alternative to "reverse growing digital inequality". It based the assessment under this global framework, with the aim to:

- **Develop evidence and monitor country progress towards closing the digital gender gap**
- **Support the development and implementation of policy measures to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on women and technology, including:**

**Goal 1.4:** Ensure equal access to basic services [and] appropriate new technology for all women and men by 2030;

**Goal 5b:** Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology (ICT), to promote the empowerment of women;

**Goal 9c:** Achieve universal, affordable Internet access in least developed countries by 2020;<sup>27</sup>

Across indicators on **Internet Access and Women Empowerment, the Women Rights Online Report** concluded that less than 50% of women in Namibia have access to the internet. Further, there is no national policy or ICT instrument that recognizes ICTs as a tool for fighting gender inequalities or one that has set clear time-bound targets, to overcome gender and poverty divides in internet use. Gender specific documents, such as the 2010–2020 National Gender Policy,<sup>28</sup> do not recognize the gender gap in access to technology, digital knowledge and ICT skills and fail to set clear targets to use ICTs to empower women. Across the board in the ICT sector, Namibia does not collect sex-disaggregated data regularly, which is openly available. In essence, this means that the extent to which the internet empowers women is unknown.

Additionally, there was no evidence showing that data on women in technology and engineering research and development (R&D) fields is regularly collected.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.nbc.na/news/online-violence-against-children-and-young-women-cause-concern.34654>

<sup>27</sup> Web Foundation "Digital Gender Gap Audit Scorecard Toolkit" <http://webfoundation.org/docs/2016/12/WRO-Digital-Gender-Gap-Audit-Toolkit.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> [http://www.africanchildforum.org/cfr/policy%20per%20country/namibia/namibia\\_gender\\_2010-2020\\_en.pdf](http://www.africanchildforum.org/cfr/policy%20per%20country/namibia/namibia_gender_2010-2020_en.pdf)

In regards to **affordability and access to the web, official data in Namibia showed that** 1GB<sup>29</sup> of data costs over 8% of the average monthly income.<sup>30</sup> The Affordability Driver Index of 2019 ranked Namibia at 47<sup>31</sup> citing evidence contributing to low internet connectivity<sup>32</sup>. Another piece of evidence backing up this ranking is the government's establishment of multi-purpose community centres<sup>33</sup>, of which many are not functioning at optimal capacity,<sup>34</sup> while also commonly unknown by community members<sup>35</sup>. Equipment breakdowns and lack of connectivity have also become frequent concerns. On the other hand, public libraries are increasingly providing ICT access, but data indicating how many women access these facilities is not publicly available. Additionally, data on outlined budget allocations for the ICT sector as well as the gender deliverables are not available to the public.

**Regarding Digital Skills and Education,** only 30% of Namibian schools have access to the internet<sup>36</sup>. This situation worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>37</sup>, where particularly gender dimensions<sup>38</sup> in accessing education and technology increasingly came to the fore. This resource inequality countrywide makes digital education uptake a challenge.

For years, the situation of ICTs in education has made the policy on ICT (2015) in education (currently under review) difficult to fully implement. Among others, the

policy promotes usage of ICT in schools and compels universities to integrate ICTs into teachers' training. To this, universities have responded by making it compulsory for every student teacher to go through an ICT skills education. Most worrying about this, however, is that ICT skills education remains to be a promotional subject, which could be discouraging for girls, who would wish to concentrate on ICT and technology education in general.

**Moreover,** very few institutions, including civil society organisations maintain websites that **provide information and services related to reproductive and sexual health services.** Among the websites of the eight (8) organisations polled, there was no discussion on access to sexual health for lesbian and transwomen. With abortion illegal in the country, this made it hard to engage on the issue of abortion as a choice, also excluding various methods of contraception that could have been debated. Considering these realities, it is evident that a lot still needs to be done to ensure that women and girls have access to meaningful content online in Namibia, which assists them in making safe choices and empowering them in general.

While digital financial means are on the increase, impact of these on Namibian women are not clearly determined. However a report from the World Bank revealed that only 15% of the connected population of women, personally used

<sup>29</sup> [https://a4ai.org/extra/mobile\\_broadband\\_pricing\\_usd-2019Q2](https://a4ai.org/extra/mobile_broadband_pricing_usd-2019Q2)

<sup>30</sup> [http://160.242.7.86/fmi/webd/Mobile\\_Price\\_Analyser](http://160.242.7.86/fmi/webd/Mobile_Price_Analyser)

<sup>31</sup> [https://a4ai.org/affordability-report/data/?\\_year=2019&indicator=A13&country=NAM](https://a4ai.org/affordability-report/data/?_year=2019&indicator=A13&country=NAM)

<sup>32</sup> <https://thepatriot.com.na/index.php/2018/05/18/crans-plan-to-make-internet-cheaper/>

<sup>33</sup> <https://allafrica.com/stories/201302050847.html>

<sup>34</sup> <https://neweralive.na/posts/multi-purpose-youth-centres-underutilised>

<sup>35</sup> <https://neweralive.na/posts/theofelus-wants-visible-ict-centres>

<sup>36</sup> <https://allafrica.com/stories/201910080121.html>

<sup>37</sup> <https://allafrica.com/stories/202101140526.html>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.namibian.com.na/206504/archive-read/3-300-schoolgirls-pregnant-after-Covid-lockdown>

mobile financial services by February 2020.<sup>39</sup>

**Regarding safety** as a pivotal factor related to women's rights online; data from Namibia shows no evidence of the Namibia Police Service and the Gender-Based Violence Investigation Units (GBVIU) receiving any training on ICT-based violence against women and girls. While some cases of non-consensual sharing of personal media, widely known as "revenge porn", have been reaching the courts and were reported in the media, Namibia has no law in place that criminalises online violence specifically.

Overall, Namibia scored 29% in the afore-mentioned Women Rights Online report, which also published the following key findings:



Only 47% of Namibian Women had access to the internet.



Only about 15% of women personally use mobile financial services.



The Namibia Police and the Gender-Based Violence Investigation Units (GBVIU) have not received comprehensive training on how to deal with ICT based violence against women.



The country has no specific laws criminalising online cyber violence<sup>40</sup>.

At the launch of the Women Rights report, Namibian First Lady Monica Geingos stressed the need to train parents, teachers and police officers on how to identify and manage online violence<sup>41</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> <https://tradingeconomics.com/namibia/account-female-percent-age-15-w2-wb-data.html>

<sup>40</sup> <http://webfoundation.org/docs/2020/08/GenderReport-Namibia.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.nbc.na/news/online-violence-against-children-and-young-women-cause-concern.34654>

# Understanding Online Violence Against Women And Girls

In August 2020, a petition circulated online, seeking to force lawmakers in Namibia to legalise abortion. In an article titled *Why women's rights and digital rights go hand-in-hand on Namibian Twitter*, Journalist Lisa Ossenbrink writes:

“As part of the campaign, feminist activists launched and disseminated an online petition calling for the legalization of abortion, gaining more than 61,000 signatures as of August 14. With about 2.2 million citizens, this is nearly 3 percent of Namibia's population”<sup>42</sup>

Ossenbrink further adds that “improving access (to the internet) is the first step, but online safety must be guaranteed for women to close the online gender gap”. The article goes on to reveal the extent to which the internet can be used to fight against systems that seek to oppress women and girls in Namibia. The act of petitioning itself reveals that women and girls want to take ownership of their bodies and the internet is playing a crucial role in aiding this call.



The online space was also the place that young Namibian women and activists chose to create agency and take back their power from sexual offenders. It all started with one tweet that turned into hundreds and eventually **#MeTooNamibia** was trending. This vibrant social media-driven activism calling out offenders using twitter erupted into a growing movement and the Namibian Me Too sub-movement was eventually born.<sup>43</sup>

Today, the movement frequently uses social media to raise awareness on sexual harassment and abuse; advocates against rape-culture and refers survivors to legal assistance as well as psycho-social support services.

<sup>42</sup><https://globalvoices.org/2020/08/25/why-womens-rights-and-digital-rights-go-hand-in-hand-on-namibian-twitter/>

<sup>43</sup><https://www.reuters.com/article/us-namibia-women-harassment-idUSKCN1SG15Z>

## Revenge Porn: Not Your Whore!

Revenge Porn has become a preferred term for the concept of non-consensual image sharing of explicit or sexual photographs or films without the approval of all people in the image/video. Over the years, this act has become a regular practice in Namibia, with videos of revenge porn circulating on social media and frequently featuring popular female personalities and vulnerable populations, including women and girls from diverse backgrounds.

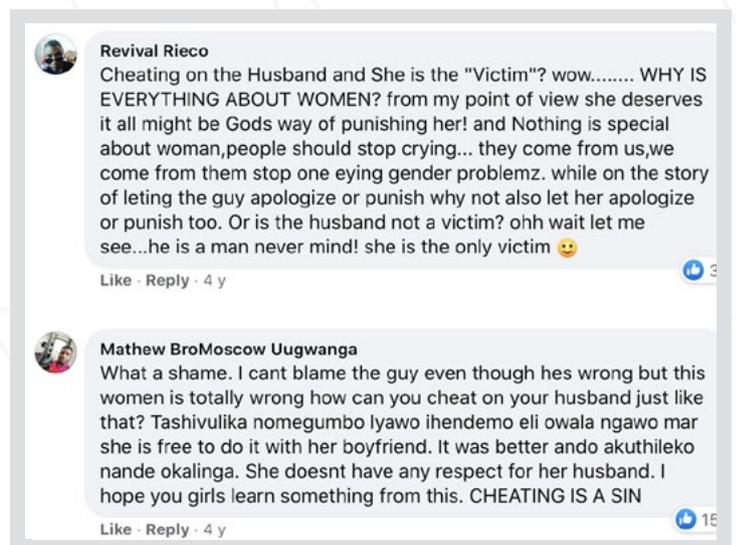
Addressing 'Revenge Porn' in Namibia, legal academic Ndjodi Ndeunyema describes the vice as follows:

“ Using pictures and videos is a method that is used to perpetuate the old harm of objectifying women and violating their dignity. It is imperative that the law keeps abreast with rapid technological developments. It is incumbent upon society to robustly debate these issues in order to introduce workable solutions that are not only legal, but multidisciplinary”<sup>44</sup>.

Over time, a series of revenge porn incidents has been reported in the Namibian media, receiving considerable online engagement:

In January 2020, Namibian Sun ran a story under the headline *Revenge porn or the exposure of sexual activities*. This story was published after yet another man released intimate images of a former intimate partner.<sup>45</sup> The footage was recorded and reportedly leaked after the man failed to extort money from the woman<sup>46</sup>.

The *Namibian Sun's* story was shared on the newspaper's Facebook' account and generated over 400 comments. The excerpts below sum up the general attitude of Namibians about this form of online violence.



Even though the video defamed the woman involved, both comments favoured the man and placed the blame on the woman for cheating on her partner.

The news article further revealed that although no law exists that specifically deals with this kind of violence committed against women and girls, arrests in this case as well as some others in the past,

<sup>44</sup> <https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/addressing-revenge-porn-in-namibia/>

<sup>45</sup> [https://www.namibiansun.com/news/sex-tape-causes-outcry/2utm\\_source=Namibian%20Sun%20Mobi%20Newsletter&fbclid=IwAR0AKJtgI7cBikoMEdE20mM9EILD5nEph7svkVep0-YNdsbDh4j5d12uuGc](https://www.namibiansun.com/news/sex-tape-causes-outcry/2utm_source=Namibian%20Sun%20Mobi%20Newsletter&fbclid=IwAR0AKJtgI7cBikoMEdE20mM9EILD5nEph7svkVep0-YNdsbDh4j5d12uuGc)

<sup>46</sup> <https://neweralive.na/posts/witbooi-condemns-publication-of-revenge-porn>

are an indication of the serious impact of the act on the dignity of women. However, the general trend has been that most perpetrators who are directly involved and those who circulate such content are easily let go with nothing more than a mere warning – if any.

In September 2020, a man was arrested at Ondangwa on charges of defamation of character after he circulated a video on social media that showed his ex-partner performing an intimate act. He was charged with defamation of character under the provisions of the Communications Act, addressed earlier in this report.

In the same month, JB Tjivikua, a then major general of the Namibian Police wrote an opinion piece for *The Namibian Newspaper*, titled *The Evil Nature of Revenge Pornography* in which he states that “writing something defamatory about someone on Twitter or Facebook is classified as defamation or libel under common law”.

In 2017, the then Deputy Minister of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, Lucia Witbooi made pronouncements on the publications of image-based sexual abuse, when intimate videos began circulating on various social media platforms after couples broke up.<sup>47</sup>

Justice Minister, Yvonne Dausab, later echoed the same sentiments when she discussed “revenge porn, cyber bullying, and Namibian laws” in a video released on YouTube by the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (MICT) in September 2020. The Justice Minister addressed and acknowledged the challenge and detailed future strategies to combat revenge porn in the country.<sup>48</sup> With public admissions and engagements ongoing, few violators have been prosecuted to this day and often get away with a warning or a price to settle, bringing little recourse to the victims.

<sup>47</sup> Witbooi condemns publication of revenge porn' New Era 3 February 2017 <https://neweralive.na/posts/wit-booi-condemns-publication-of-revenge-porn> (accessed 3 November 2021).

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fujo8CulDrM>

# Indigenous Women, Vulnerable Groups And Minorities On The Internet

Violence against indigenous women is often overlooked in Namibia. However, OvaHimba and KhoiSan women and girls are some of the most photographed in the country, with their images circulating on the web. A quick search by our research team revealed severe misuse of their images, causing further harm to this minority group of women and girls and their online image.

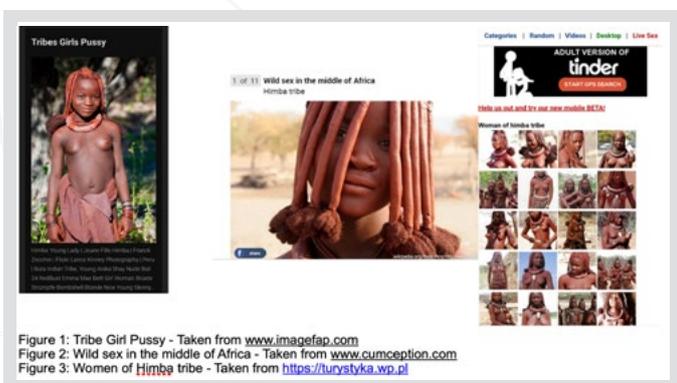
An internet search on images of OvaHimba people on search engines such as Google, reveals algorithmic placement of these images of women at the top with their breasts mainly being the focus. This forms part of cyber misogyny, which keeps reinforcing patriarchy as indigenous women are often subjected to sexual objectification on digital platforms.

While social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram try to restrict images of OvaHimba women's breasts, on blogs and various websites, fetishism is gaining traction. The OvaHimba women's images - mostly taken by tourists - are posted online and circulated, whereas at times, they end up on porn sites. (See captioned images).

In analysing how vulnerable women are portrayed across the web, it appears clear that their dignity when it comes to how and where they are portrayed is increasingly negated on platforms they often do not even access themselves.

From 2014 to 2015, images and videos of 'Aunty Vii Vii' were shared widely on Facebook.<sup>49</sup> 'Aunty Vii Vii, a woman from Namibia's Omusati region, who appeared to be in her 50s at the time of the recordings, was filmed by patrons who were getting her drunk as a way to keep them entertained by the vulgarity that came with her intoxication.<sup>50</sup>

As a result, different patrons through media-supported coverage created fundraising campaigns under the disguise of finding sustainable means of living for 'Aunty Vii Vii'. A merchandise<sup>51</sup> bearing her catchphrase (Ondazeketa - meaning I



<sup>49</sup> Images of Aunty Vii Vii  
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=798437536912784&set=a.129862133770331>  
<sup>50</sup> Images and video of Aunty Vii Vii still available on facebook  
<https://www.facebook.com/mapeni/videos/742026672587543/>  
<sup>51</sup> Aunty Vii Vii merchandise - displayed at  
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1080046245470397&set=gm.1487432638052102>

am a ratchet) was created as one of the fundraising means as well, ultimately making the patrons more visible as content creators than changing her living situation.

Unfortunately, 'Aunty Vii Vii' died in 2018 and despite her untimely passing, her videos and images are still available online<sup>52</sup>. This raises further concerns about the right to be forgotten in the digital world, beyond death.



Various forms of violence online have also been observed targeting other members of the minority groups. One such case was that of a young San boy, who came to be known as "Irivari" on social media platforms. The minor became an online sensation<sup>53</sup> after travellers encountered him begging at Oshivelo (a transit town in the north of Namibia) where he lived. His unique voice and his attempt to speak the Oshiwambo language intrigued travellers, who began recording him in an exchange for food and other items.

Even though Irivari had no access to social media nor a personal presence online, he became an internet sensation, with his videos and pictures being shared across major social media platforms - making him most visible in that town.<sup>54</sup> As a result of his trending online, education officials from the region located him and offered to integrate him into formal schooling, where he was constantly teased by fellow students.. The situation was short lived due to the lack of psycho-social support for him.

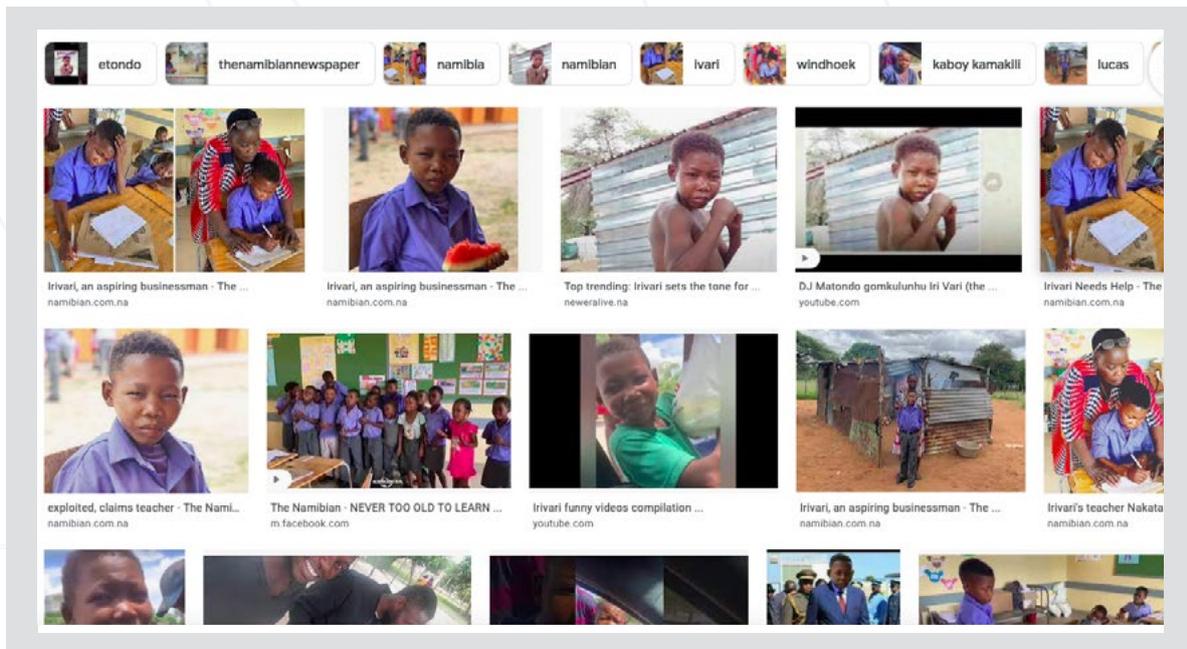
Just as with the OvaHimba women and girls projection online, pictures and video of Irivari remain online, thus violating his rights and most importantly portraying him in his most vulnerable moments - on platforms he never asked to be on.

<sup>52</sup> Video of Aunty Vivii - <https://www.facebook.com/ShipiFM/videos/552475345131206/>

<sup>53</sup> Irivari trending on social media - media report <https://newerlive.na/posts/top-trending-irivari-sets-the-tone-for-the-new-year>

<sup>54</sup> Videos of Irivari on Facevook

<https://www.facebook.com/thomasbean.shangula/videos/2714089638630285/>



*A google search result of Irivari's videos, revealing his digital ID.*

Members of the LGBTIQ+ community, who are legally stigmatised offline in Namibia, are also subjected to online violence. Social media posts by media houses regarding LGBTIQ+ members receive high volumes of comments, of which many are misogynistic. A case in point are frequent reports on comedian Xuro Milton,<sup>55</sup> who in February 2021 suffered an assault at the hands of security officials at his residence during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. When mainstream media shared the reports via their social media platforms, they attracted even more negative comments.<sup>56</sup>

Another isolated case that received a myriad of negative comments via news stories posted on social media, centred on twins born via a surrogate and fathered by a gay couple in neighbouring South Africa. While the media tried to highlight

the legal challenges regarding the case (in particular why the Ministry of Home Affairs seemed reluctant to confer national identity documents to the twins, who have one Namibian father), reactions on the social media stories went into a frenzy with homophobic comments.<sup>57</sup>

Further, in 2019, television personality Leonard Witbeen, was taken off air by the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), following the circulation of pornographic video content in which he featured. Again, misogynistic comments dominated the story wherever it was shared online.<sup>58</sup> It became clear that online misogyny usually affects those who are vulnerable and those without an established voice in society.

<sup>55</sup> R Iguar 'Namibian comedian Xuro Milton beaten in homophobic attack' Mamba Online.com 18 February 2021 <https://www.mambaonline.com/2021/02/18/namibian-comedian-xuro-milton-beaten-in-homophobic-attack/>  
<sup>56</sup> The Namibian 'Oc Ebs opens up about alleged homophobic attack' <https://www.facebook.com/TheNamibianNewspaper/posts/namibian-comedian-host-and-presenter-xuro-milton-better-known-as-oc-eps-says-he-/4301952223167582/>

<sup>57</sup> Informanté News 'Surrogate twins will arrive today' <https://m.facebook.com/informantenam/photos/a.277814335618867/4030080963725500/> (accessed 3 November 2021).

<sup>58</sup> The Namibian 'NBC Presenter off air over sex clips' <https://www.facebook.com/TheNamibianNewspaper/posts/television-personality-leonard-witbeen-has-been-taken-off-air-by-the-namibian-br/2654582371237917/> (accessed 3 November 2021).

## Misogynistic Abuse Online Against Prominent Women And Girls

Cyber misogyny is defined by scholar Nicole Etherington as various forms of gendered hatred, harassment, and abusive behaviour targeting women and girls on the Internet<sup>59</sup>. Cyber misogyny has become one of the biggest challenges highlighted over the past year by Namibian women, both off – and online.

In March 2021, Namibia's First Lady Monica Geingos released a video via her social media platforms, calling out acts of cyber misogyny.<sup>60</sup> The First Lady highlighted harmful and sexist social media posts that were directed towards her, (see images):

In the video, Geingos said she chose to stand up against online bullies as part of the theme of the International Women's Day of that year titled #Standup.



Another case of cyber harassment and misogyny online has been the constant subjection of presidential appointee to parliament Emma Theofelus, who became the Namibian Deputy Minister of Information, Communication and Technology in March 2020. Then 23-year-old Theofelus's appointment made her the youngest person to ever hold the position and also turned her into a victim of various forms of cyberbullying, with users comparing her looks to a donkey in some cases, calling her Coronavirus in others.



<sup>59</sup> Cyber Misogyny <http://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/our-work/briefs/brief-28.html>

<sup>60</sup> First Lady Monica Geingos says she has been "slut-shamed" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5TVQW156XRI>

Another female politician constantly subjected to violence online, has been the Secretary General of the ruling political party, Sofia Shaningwa. Like Theofelus, violence towards Shaningwa is mostly distributed on social media networks and is rife around election periods and related events. The pictures and videos of her are frequently violent and dehumanising, constantly comparing her to animals or objectifying her as less than human.



The vitriol-laden online attacks and campaigns appear to be specifically targeting female politicians, who are particularly vocal in Namibia. Former Minister of Education and Culture, Katrina Hanse-Himarwa, was also previously targeted by online violence. Personal photos that she had posted on her facebook page in beachwear were used to devalue her work.

In November 2020, online bullies and misogynists attacked the then new councillor for the City of Windhoek Sade Gawanas. about her choice of clothing during her swearing-in ceremony. A picture of Gawanas in her off-shoulder attire attracted misogynistic comments on how she should have dressed instead. Gawanas later used social media to express her disappointment over the insults hurled at her. She claimed in a tweet that the majority came from women and asked commentators to do better.<sup>61</sup>



In 2021, Gawanas was elected as Mayor of the City of Windhoek. Online abusers once again had a field day, as this time around she was pregnant during her inauguration. A filtered comment section of her twitter post<sup>62</sup> on the eve of her inauguration now shows supportive well wishes only.

Generally, the violence online seems to affect women at different levels of society. In addition to those in politics, and those vulnerable in status, women in the beauty industry appear to be subjected to the violence that happens online too. One

<sup>61</sup> SS Gawanas <https://twitter.com/sadegawanas/status/1334757912061861889?s=12> (accessed 3 November 2021).

<sup>62</sup> <https://twitter.com/SadeGawanas/status/1467136196853878801?s=20&t=y6ocPwXBxphSgctQHkOog>

case in particular was that of the 2019 Miss Namibia contestants. This group of contestants, faced a series of cyber violence incidents when the names and images of contestants spotting their natural look were released on social media platforms without disclaimer on why they were presented this way.

Various contestants, including Rejoice Marowa (whose story we read in the section below),<sup>63</sup> suffered the abuse online, reported the effects of this incident to their confidence and self worth.



## Reflections From The Ovaw Awareness Campaign

While the internet has come to be known as a platform that provides visibility as well as opportunities for women to assemble in virtual spaces, evidence obtained in this research shows that the same platforms have exposed them to the dark side of the internet.

As part of this project, the research team engaged four (4) young women to be called champions of the campaign, with the aim to communicate online violence's impact and effects through anecdotal experience to the larger public given their reach. The composition of the women include a journalist, a former Miss Namibia finalist, an Entrepreneur/Singer/Technical Expert in the political offices and a female music artist.

Through this approach, the campaign champions engaged the public via multimedia means by engaging on the following guiding talking points;

- Personal experience online
- Tips on how to deal with OVAW
- Most effective ways to prevent OVAW
- Defining the internet they would like to be on

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=432277011780626>

Altogether, the champions of the campaign shared common factors related to the violence online. i) they believe they suffered violence online mostly at the hands of men and boys ii) is that they believe there are no easily accessible means of seeking recourse to the violence suffered online.

Blanche Goreses, a journalist from the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) whose daily work involves covering the president's work; highlighted the violence associated with politically related events. As per one of her experiences, she recounts an incident around the 2019 elections when upon posting a Facebook status related to her work, she received a threatening message reading *"If my uncle Dr Itula wins the elections, I will rape and assassinate you because you are very beautiful"*.

Upended as a compliment, this violent threat was followed by the same user sending a message to both her work and private numbers as a confirmation that it was not difficult to trace the journalist.



Goreses's experience online confirms the findings of UNESCO's 2021 publication<sup>64</sup> that *"Online attacks against women journalists have political motives, where Political actors, extremist networks and partisan media are identified as instigators and amplifiers of online violence against women journalists"*.

In her case, Goreses took steps to report the incident through her supervisors at work and a police case was opened. Investigations showed that the profile was fake with the last location associated to its set up being the northern town of Tsumeb.

For Goreses, this has been just one of the many incidents of violence she has experienced online, saying that much more needs to be done to protect women in general, and female journalists online in particular adding that she and her colleagues in the media are constantly bashed on social media.

**“** *I think the motive is to shut us up and take away both our professional and personal voice. Its worrisome. "I know that you also know that as journalists we'll never please people. One minute, you are viewed as a friend, the next minute you are viewed as an enemy."*

Goreses also highlighted the increased importance of the online space after the emergence of COVID-19, saying *"Whether it's for work, whether it's just to communicate, whether it's just for business - for every little*

<sup>64</sup> UNESCO (2021) "The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists" <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/the-chilling.pdf> (accessed on 28 September 2021)

*thing, it's no longer a thing of just walking into an office".* She added that journalists are often asked by sources to reach out to them via social media. This highlights an additional layer to the intersection of the newsgathering processes and increasing usage of social media platforms. *"You may be finding this person telling you, 'reach me on or contact us on our social media pages"* Goreses said.

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**Maria-Lisa Immanuel**, better known as "ML", is a musician who spent the years prior to coming on to the stage as a promoter, entrepreneur and policy analyst, who served in political offices. Immanuel too is worried about the violence online targeting women and girls, noting that efforts must be made to halt violence inflicted on women and girls by boys and men.

She shared many incidents of violence she encountered online, confirming that these had happened at the hands of boys and men. Immanuel remembered a specific incident where a man told her online, she



*"needed to get tested for testosterone because her voice is too deep"*

She also had to handle comments, such as,



*"Oh ML sings very nice(ly) but she behaves like an insect".*

Immanuel believes the motive behind the abuse is the patriarchy offline, which dictates that women have to sound or behave a certain way. Said unrealistic and patriarchal expectations are sadly reflected online.

Like Goreses, Immanuel expressed that the situation regarding violence leaves her feeling hopeless especially in the face of inadequate laws, saying *"one can control and try to be safe, but on the internet expect to be attacked from anywhere by anyone. Especially if you are in the public eye."* In this regards she said *"its sad that we have to endure the violence and abuse in the first place"*.

Overall, Immanuel, bemoans the inaction of law enforcement agencies which she wishes to offer more protection.



*"When someone is abused on the internet, the local Namibian police should be able to really take up this because these social media platforms are from far away. When someone is abused or mocked on the internet, why is it not taken serious by the law?"*

She advises the local law enforcement to take action and protect women especially,

“because social media abuse really goes a long way and people get traumatized, it causes mental breakdowns, people become depressed or even grow up to become monsters to abuse people physically because of the anger, as they are abused online on the internet.”

Immanuel further warns that the abuse happening online is undoing all the positive development that internet access has brought about to the benefit of women in categories in which they were previously left behind. She acknowledges that the music industry is male-dominated. However with the internet this has changed – to a certain extent at least.

“If I have an Instagram account, I can get more followers. In business, most of the businesses you find are women-run and owned and that did not exist in the past. Even now you don't find many shops owned by women physically, but there are more women-owned shops online.”

“So the internet in that sense has really brought that opportunity to women to equalise participation in the economy, and that's why it should be safe”.

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After careful consideration, **Yvonne Marowa** entered the Miss Namibia 2019 pageant was elated to be selected as one of the top thirty participants out of over 1000 entries received nationwide. “I was

lucky, Or at least that is what I thought.” Of the process that followed thereafter, she said “After getting a brief call and being told I was selected we were notified that our entry photos would be used to make the announcement on the Miss Namibia social media platforms which I agreed upon.”



What Marowa and her colleagues were ready however was the amount of backlash we received from online abusers. “The comments section under my photo specifically was derogatory and plain hate speech. Men, women and young children telling me how much I didn't deserve to be selected and how I wasn't good enough to represent Namibia on any platform.”

In acknowledging the prevalence of the violence online, Marowa is usually first to say:

“ I have never experienced it nor have I been exposed to that extreme until the day of the announcements it et on for about two weeks, thousands of comments of shaming and constant bashing from people who conformed my whole being into a single image, people hiding behind their screens and justifying their actions. Experiencing something to this magnitude is painful and emotionally damaging for event the bravest of us.”

To make matters worse, Marowa pointed that the Miss Namibia organisation did not defend them via the same platforms where the photos were posted. While this opens up discussion on issues of third party on issues related to women and beauty treatments online, Marowa feels the increased prevalence of online violence against women in Namibia is compounded by the lack of effective measures to prevent and contain it. To this she calls for the ensuing impunity to be addressed as part of the struggle to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls.

Marowa also bemoans the lack of laws to protect women and girls against online violence saying, there is a need for laws that address the violence as well as the ability of the courts and legal systems to enforce compliance and punitive consequences for perpetrators. Furthermore, she calls for the establishment of necessary legal principles as a starting point, towards effective implementation. This she says must be foregrounded by sensitization of cyber violence against women and girls

(VAWG) which must include educating the next generation of ICT users, both boys and girls, through their parents, teachers and wider communities, as well as police authorities and the justice systems.

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Musician **Monica Pinehas** better known as ‘Top Cheri’, is another champion involved in the awareness campaign on Online Violence against Women and Girls of this project. Her experiences online resemble those of her peers on the campaign. In brief, she narrated her experience, by saying:

“ “On the internet I have been called a boy. I have been questioned whether I bath. I have also been questioned why I don't wear a wig or foundation, or why I wore an outfit twice during a pandemic”

This, she indicates, are just some of the violent and abusive things she has been subjected to on the internet, which she believes is

“not okay because these people won't ask me these (questions) in person”

Pinehas also laments the lack of boundaries of the violence online, compared to the offline world, where she believes one can try to protect themselves even when one is in the public eye.



*"Sometimes, I try to console myself that I am also in charge of myself on the internet, what I post and also the features that allow me to block or to report as that offers some help, but the violence can come out of nowhere really. One guy went to my Instagram, screenshotted a picture of my hair and then brought it on twitter to discuss it, saying 'Oh this madam, is this the only hairstyle she knows?' So it was all about my hair and what he thinks of it."*

She is also disillusioned with the legal systems and how they deal with the violence online. In her explanation, she spoke about how the "national legal ecosystem" is pricey, which makes it hard to seek recourse on violence online. "Once you start going to that level, you definitely need money, because you need to start interacting with lawyers. It's again an inaccessible step. It can be achieved, and certain people have done it but it goes far and costs a lot."



The dilemmas in dealing with the violence online are worsened by what Pinehas calls the "ownership" of social media platforms. She raised the fact that these are not Namibian, nor African, and so they belong somewhere far, largely lacking context

on local issues and understanding of social dynamics on the ground. This allows perpetrators to come back with a different account once their accounts are suspended. In regards to seeking remedy, Pinehas said the "remedy in the national context is limited", calling for speedy action to catch up on how to protect citizens as a country.



*"The digital world also urgently requires safety measures to keep up with a rapidly evolving Internet. This will necessarily require resources, attention and active participation of industry (digital gatekeepers), civil society and governments."*

The champions all highlighted the following as challenges faced online in regards to Online Violence in Namibia.

### **What are the challenges with dealing online violence :**

- If you seek remedy in the national law enforcement system, be prepared to have time and money as you have to start interacting with lawyers. It becomes an inaccessible step, it can be achieved, a certain people went but its costly
- Social platforms are not Namibian, nor African, and so they don't understand the local issues entirely. In the case of abuse, unfortunately an account can be suspended, and that person can form another one with a different name.
- Laws are outdated and need need to catch up on how to protect citizens online.

- Namibian law enforcement officers do not take it seriously. When someone is abused on the internet. When someone goes to the police to open a case, many times, one is mocked also by the same people who ought to protect you.
- People are not forced to register with real names on social media platforms, this will make holding cyberbullies to account difficult.
- Local laws don't fine Cyberbullies for instance to perform community work or do time in prison if they are constant offenders.
- There are no bodies to act on incidents of cyber bullying that would ensure that offenders are punished for cyber crime and keeps record of offences.
- Social media accounts of cyberbullies aren't taken down indefinitely or for a specific period as a way to deal with offender.
- Policies to protect citizens against all sorts of violence or harassment, intimidation online are yet to be implemented to the maximum.
- Policies and legislation remain in the pipeline for so long rendering their promises useless
- Public users of online space, render themselves as standby spectators on online violence instead of calling out abusers whether they are friends and fans through reporting them on platforms and blocking them.

## Gendered Misinformation

*In Digital misogyny: Why gendered disinformation undermines democracy*, the term gendered misinformation is defined as



*“a subset of online gendered abuse that uses false or misleading gender and sex-based narratives against women, often with some degree of coordination, aimed at deterring women from participating in the public sphere”<sup>65</sup>.*

Words like 'slut' or 'whore' have been used to downgrade women and girls for centuries. This can be mainly attributed to societal norms that have grouped women and girls in a certain manner, while more recently, those terms have been used to demonise their presence in the media altogether.

An incident of sexual objectification and targeted hate speech was recorded in 2021, involving a male political leader and spokesperson of the Independent Patriots for Change, Immanuel Nashinge, who made defamatory remarks about Namibian socialite Beata Siteketa. She filed a defamation suit and he was ordered to pay N\$60 000 for his slandering comments<sup>66</sup>.

Siteketa became another Namibian woman with means to pursue justice. Even though Nashinge paid a fine, on social media, people supported him in his acts nevertheless, cheering him on online (see image below) without having to fear being

<sup>65</sup> Digital Misogyny - Blog <https://www.mediasupport.org/blogpost/digital-misogyny-why-gendered-disinformation-undermines-democracy/>

<sup>66</sup> Nalebrity <https://nalebrity.com/drama/betty-davids-sues-immanuel-nashinge-for-calling-her-a-prostitute>

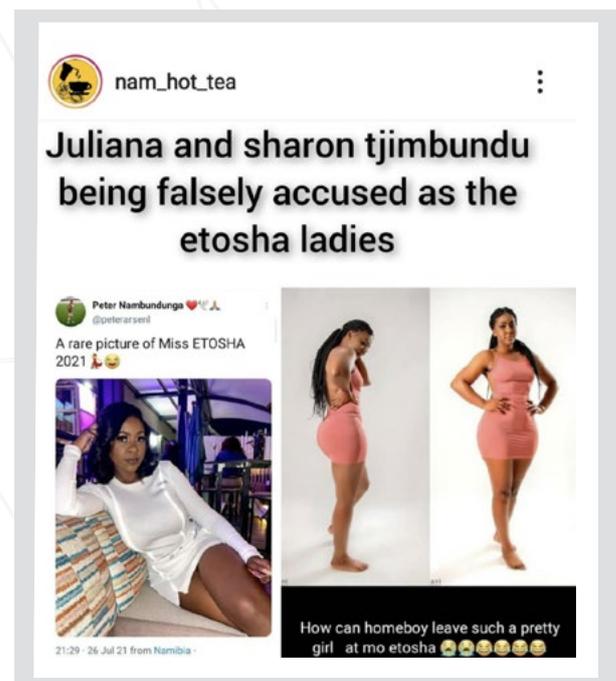
prosecuted. It is known that, neither training nor clear guidelines are provided to the police or the judiciary on how to deal with gender-based violence, which is carried out using ICT tools.



A more recent gendered misinformation episode that occurred in Namibia took place on the relatively new audio-based social network Clubhouse. There, a man said he took a woman to Etosha National Park for a weekend retreat, whereas the woman then refused to have sex with him and so he left her without paying the bill.

Immediately, a wave of social media posts appeared, blaming the woman for being a 'gold digger' and speculating about her identity. What followed was a series of gendered misinformation posts on various social media pages, with some news organisations writing about the story and posting articles on their official social media pages, with some later removing them.

The main target ended up being NBC sports presenter Sharon Tjimbundu as reflected in the series of following posts:



While these are only a few of the incidents that took place, this research reflects on events during the period under review, with dis- and misinformation gendered intentionally increasing everyday.

## Online Violence Against Women – Whose Agency Is It?

In response to the general violence manifesting online through cyber misogyny, some women are opting to use the social media platform Twitter to drive their activism, calling themselves (women) cabals. The below posts extracted from Twitter bear testimony.



Different media outlets in the country have also begun engaging on the issue of OVAW. The Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) interviewed Dr Sadrag Panduleni Shihomeka, a Senior Lecturer at UNAM on cyber misogyny on their breakfast show Good Morning Namibia (GMN).

Dr Shihomeka explained that the concept is not new in Namibia and confirmed that the usage of social media platforms to bully women has become dangerously

common. He highlighted the lack of laws and policies in Namibia that protect women and girls online.<sup>68</sup>

Organisations such as the National Youth Council (NYC) are also tackling misogyny as well as other forms of violence, which take place online. In April 2021, the NYC held a national youth week under the theme 'Youth ignites zero tolerance against GBV'. As part of the events for the week, the organisation scheduled a "Slut Night" ,intending to respond to GBV online and offline by being intentional about the intersectional consensus on feminism, embracing womanhood through sisterhood<sup>69</sup>. However, the reactions on social media turned into a cyber-fraction.

The local Slut Shame Walk movement founder Nsozi Mwazi told The Namibian newspaper that the word slut shame is a deliberate move:

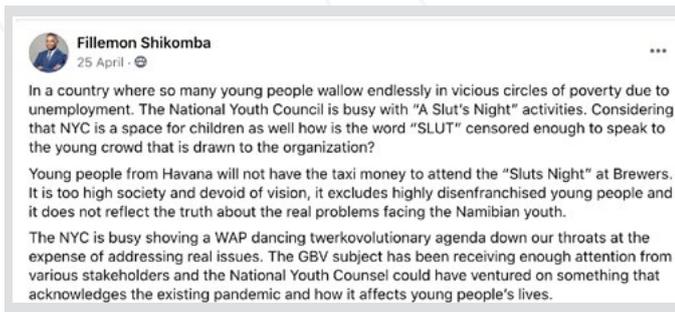
“The Slut Shame Walk focuses on freeing the mind from the mental slavery of rape culture. Rape culture is entrenched in our values, culture and tradition, and the Slut Shame Walk is here to challenge that,” - Slut Shame Walk (SSW) activist and founder Nsozi Mwazi<sup>70</sup>.

However the true meaning behind the wording was often ignored and sexist posts began to surface, as seen in the following post.

<sup>68</sup> Expert engage on cyber misogyny <https://www.nbc.com/news/dr-sadrag-panduleni-shihomeka-senior-lecturer-unam-talking-about-cyber-misogyny-42341>

<sup>69</sup> Slut shame Namibia profile <https://twitter.com/slutshamewalk>

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.namibian.com.na/210359/archive-read/Taking-Back-the-Word-Slut--as-the-Slut-Shame-Walk-returns-to-Windhoek-this-Saturday>



In Namibia, the link between violence against women and girls and data protection came to the fore during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was corroborated by an exploratory study on data protection<sup>71</sup> conducted by ISOC Namibia, which revealed instances of data exploitation, targeted advertising and harassment of women. This study also highlighted widespread evidence of data breaches, abuse and theft, concluding that the lack of cybercrime and data protection laws puts women at risk of online blackmail and sexualised hate speech.

Furthermore, the study found that 80% of respondents opted to use fake names and pseudonyms when filling up registers at public and private entrances during the contact tracing blitz in 2020. In an opinion piece,<sup>72</sup> as well as a blog post,<sup>73</sup> digital analyst Nashilongo Gervasius, reflected on the challenges that women faced in dealing with a 'double pandemic'. She argued that there was a need for deeper public education on privacy matters and the dangers of data exposure, particularly for women and girls.

Also in 2021, Gervasius penned a blog<sup>74</sup> for the Open Internet Leadership Democracy in which she asked a pertinent question: Can Online Violence against Women and Girls in Namibia be addressed through legislation?

She urged policymakers to ensure that the proposed Data Protection Bill should include specific provisions to deal with OVAW and OGBV. Through ISOC Namibia and ten partner organisations, Gervasius then led the formulation of recommendations<sup>75</sup> submitted to the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare and Ministry of ICT. In their submission, they called for the draft Data Protection Bill to put in place appropriate safeguards to curb OVAW.

In a quest to protect other vulnerable members of society against online violence, UNICEF and Lifeline Childline launched an online portal<sup>76</sup> to report abusive content targeting children. The portal was meant to address the production and circulation of child sexual abuse materials. Meanwhile, in February 2021, UNICEF released a report on keeping children safe online during the pandemic,<sup>77</sup> highlighting the need for parents to be vigilant on what their children are reading, watching and engaging with online.

<sup>71</sup> ISOC Namibia 'Data Protection and Privacy in Namibia: An exploratory study in the context of COVID-19' <https://isocnamibia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Data-Protection-During-COVID-19-Study-in-Namibia.pdf> (accessed 3 November 2021).

<sup>72</sup> N Gervasius 'Data Protection and Privacy in Namibia through COVID-19 lenses' New Era 28 January 2021 <https://newera.live.na/posts/opinion-data-protection-and-privacy-in-namibia-through-covid-19-lenses>

<sup>73</sup> N Gervasius 'Surviving a double pandemic: Online violence against girls and women' 7 June <https://plussocialgood.medium.com/surviving-a-double-pandemic-online-violence-against-girls-and-women-daf-d295a8127>

<sup>74</sup> N Gervasius 'Can legislation address online gender-based violence in Namibia?' Open Internet for Democracy 30 September 2021 <https://openinternet.global/news/can-legislation-address-online-gender-based-violence-namibia>

<sup>75</sup> ISOC Namibia <https://twitter.com/ISOCNamibia/status/1443880059585155072?s=20>

<sup>76</sup> Internet Watch Foundation 'Namibia launches IWF reporting portal for online' namibia-launches-iwf-reporting-portal-for-online-images-and-videos-of-child-sexual-abuse

<sup>77</sup> UNICEF 'How to keep your child safe online while stuck at home during the COVID-19 outbreak: 5 ways to help keep your child's online experiences positive and safe' 4 February <https://uni.cf/3KL2cpD>

## Government Response To Online Violence Against Women And Girls

Given the evidence showcased in this report, it is clear that online violence is on the rise in Namibia. This concerning situation has forced public officials and politicians to make official statements regarding this phenomenon. Because of the mass permeation of the internet and social media platforms in people's everyday lives, the Ministry of ICT has been warning the public against the production and distribution of sensitive materials.<sup>78</sup>

Former Director of ICT in the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology, Henry Kassen, was quoted in the media in 2015<sup>79</sup> as having said that the ministry would provide legal remedies aimed at punishing those found posting insensitive content, especially graphic images of GBV victims. At the time, the Director of ICT was referring to the Electronic Transaction and Cybercrime Bill, which has since been revised and unbundled into two separate laws. Kassen was quoted as having said:

“the bill once enacted into law would allow parties to apply for defamatory content to be removed from internet sites to prevent further publication. Currently there is very little that law enforcement agencies can do to police social networks”.

As discussed above, the bill was split in 2018, with the Electronic Transaction Act being passed in 2019 and the Cybercrime and Data Protection Bill remaining in draft format. In 2017, then Deputy Minister of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, Lucia Witbooi, condemned the practice of publishing image-based sexual abuse materials, referring to intimate videos which were posted on social media platforms after couples broke up.<sup>80</sup>

In February 2020, then Minister of ICT, Stanley Simataa, confirmed to the media that the government had approved a proposal to regulate social media.<sup>81</sup> According to him, the “reason for this was to protect the girl-child from falling pregnant in school.” He explained that regulations would follow “in instances where social media is being used to transmit messages that encourage young girls to “indulge in activities that will lead to them falling pregnant in schools.” These proposed regulations have not yet been introduced to the public and hence the extent to which they aim to protect the girl-child is not known

A social media policy and implementation plan for civil servants has been in preparation since 2017.<sup>82</sup> However, the policy and implementation plan does not speak about online gender-based violence in the workplace or provides guidelines in this regard. This is despite the fact that social media platforms for government offices/ministries/agencies are managed by women and other marginalised groups in society.

<sup>78</sup> 'MICT warns public against distributing sensitive material' New Era 14 October 2015 <https://neweralive.na/posts/mict-warns-public-distributing-sensitive-materials>

<sup>79</sup> 'New social media law in final stages of review' New Era 20 April 2015 <https://neweralive.na/posts/social-media-law-final-stages-review>

<sup>80</sup> Witbooi condemns publication of revenge porn' New Era 3 February 2017 <https://neweralive.na/posts/wit-booi-condemns-publication-of-revenge-porn>

<sup>81</sup> S'likela 'Namibia: Gvt targets offenders on social media' 6 February <https://allafrica.com/stories/202002070405.html>

<sup>82</sup> Social media use policy and implementation plan for Namibia (2016/17-2019/20) [http://www.nied.edu.na/assets/documents/05Policies/NationalCurriculumGuide/Social\\_Media\\_Policy.pdf](http://www.nied.edu.na/assets/documents/05Policies/NationalCurriculumGuide/Social_Media_Policy.pdf)

The Minister of Justice, Yvonne Dausab, has become one of the most senior members of cabinet to speak out about online violence. In September 2020, during an interview<sup>83</sup> with the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (referred to earlier in this report), Dausab voiced concern that with more Namibians becoming active on social media, cyberbullying was increasingly becoming a worrying trend. She sounded particularly alarmed about 'revenge porn', calling for progressive ways to end this scourge.

Despite public pronouncements by senior members of government and politicians, the laws that have been passed or are in draft format have not recognised OVAW as an issue requiring urgent attention.

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<sup>83</sup> Minister of Justice Talk, Revenge Porn, Cyberbullying, Namibian Laws <https://youtu.be/Fujo8CulDrM>

## Case Study: Online Violence Personal Experiences Of Internet Users

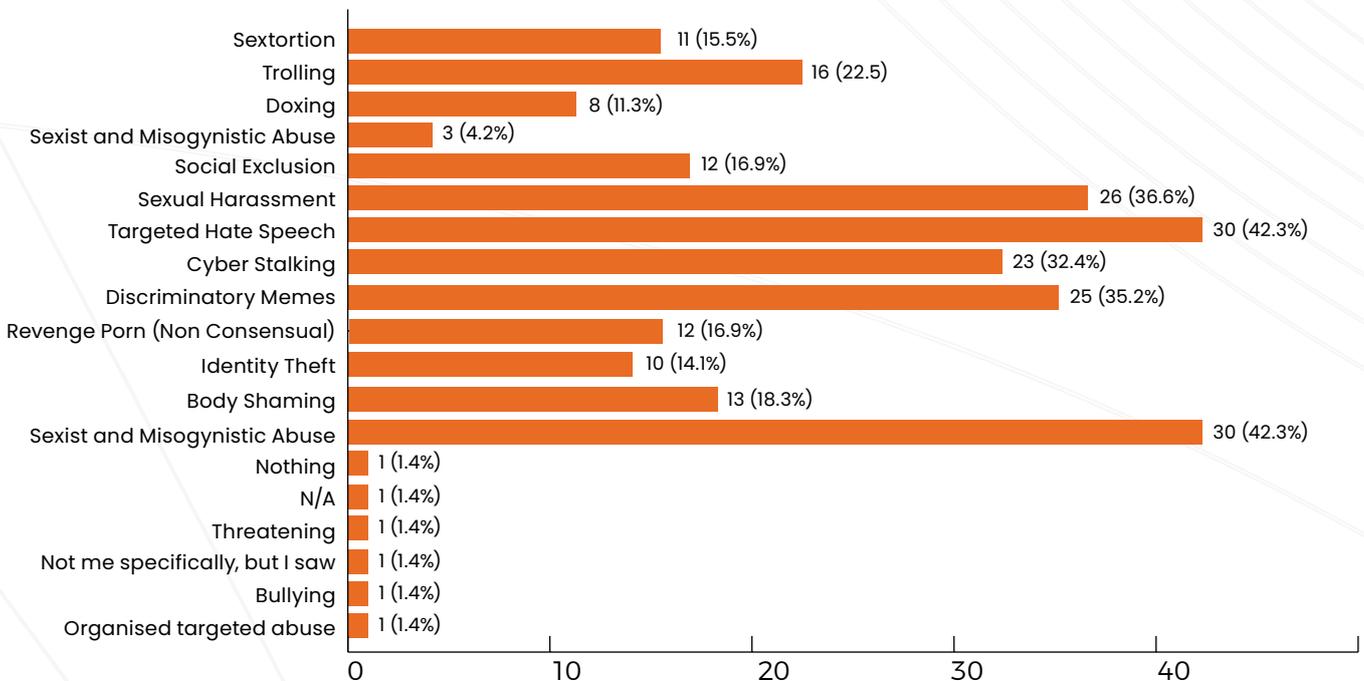
As part of gathering generic evidence for this research, the research team disseminated a questionnaire online as a means to collect firsthand data and further quantify internet violence in Namibia. A total of 71 respondents completed the questionnaire and out of these:

**91.5%** Identified as female

**8.5%** Preferred to self-identify

Of these participants 61% reported having encountered online violence or abuse, whereas 29.6% did not encounter any violence online, with 9.9% not being able to recall such incidents.

Participants were asked to identify the incidents of violence they encountered online and below are their responses, with each participant allowed to choose more than one form of violence.



To allow respondents to share details of their experiences online, willing participants were invited to share further details:

“Because I work in politics, I am frequently criticised for my views on numerous issues. I've been cursed at and referred to as a slut and bitch. I've been accused of having a large, loud mouth and being unstable. I have a dog with a pussycat that smells and bleeds. That I am a ghetto queen and a kill queen. I've received threats for defending myself, to the point where I'm concerned for the safety of my children. I am in a public area. I recently removed all of my information and stopped posting photos of my baby. I've arrived to safeguard my own space”

“Stranger stole my pictures and made a fake account and identify off of it flirting with random people and God knows what else. Found out who and they simply proceeded to gaslight and make me look crazy.”

“I've been cyber bullied by a man who photoshopped an image of mine to make me bald, a large number of people joined in on the “fun”. I've also been publicly accused of cyber bullying a POB after simply sharing my opinion which just so happened to be in disagreement with her's. I'm not entirely sure if the latter is online violence, but I was attacked simply for having an opinion different from hers. I've experienced so much more, including targeted harassment (which I almost opened a case for), cyberstalking from men who supposedly hated me, or my guts, but felt they deserve access to me. It's a lot”.

“Called an annoying woman when I question political”

“I've had stalkers sending me messages and downloading my pictures and sending them back to me with inappropriate captions. And making collages of his pictures combined with mine as a perfect match. I warned him to stop and I blocked him immediately. Another was a woman who just called me names for no apparent reasons, I had to block her too.”

“Homophobic, sexist, and misogynistic abuse. Death, corrective rape, and rape threats. Misogynistic “jokes”. Sexual harassment. Unsolicited photos of genitalia. Gender-specific insults. Victim blaming. Slut shaming.”

“Someone stole my identity, and used it to get money from victims who believed I was selling a phone. That still shocks me to this day and puts me in fear of whoever it was impersonating me.”

“I've been called derogatory names in public discussions immediately after revealing my gender”.

“A man from twitter threatened to find me and beat me up for calling him out on a violent tweet.”

“Organised targeted abuse by friends of a particular person who I called out and also just random abuse by a well known toxic person and their so called human rights friends”.

“Received unsolicited nudes from men and being called names and other unkind words when someone you don't want to interact with tries to communicate with you online.”

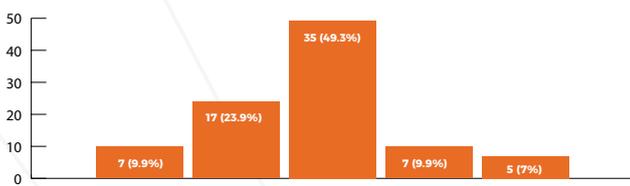
In an attempt to better understand the experiences of respondents, the research team inquired from respondents about the gender of the perpetrators of violence online. To this they responded that

- 53.5%** 53.5 % experienced online abuse perpetrated by men.
- 11.5%** 11.3 % experienced violence perpetrated by women.
- 29.6%** 29.6 % reported that both men and women were responsible for the online aggression they encountered.

As violence online is a key cause of lack of safety online, the research attempted to ascertain the degree of safety women and girls feel when getting online. To this, only 7% of respondents stated that they felt safe online, while 49.3% stated that they felt somewhat safe and partially unsafe. Finally, 23.9% of respondents indicated that they do not feel secure online.

Altogether, how safe do you feel online? (1 being least safe and 5 being most)

71 RESPONSES



Given that social media users experience online platforms differently, there was a need for this research to ascertain where the violence online mostly happens and ultimately which of the major social media networks felt secure for users. The following social media platforms were included due to their popularity in Namibia: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp groups, and TikTok.

Social Media platforms have prided themselves in availing safety information to their users. The research team gauged the respondents' confidence in reporting incidences of violence. The graph below illustrates respondents' confidence in reporting incidences of abuse against women and girls online.



**Facebook** was the most **unsafe platform** according to 29 respondents = 41%



**TikTok** is the **safest** according to 32 respondents = 45%



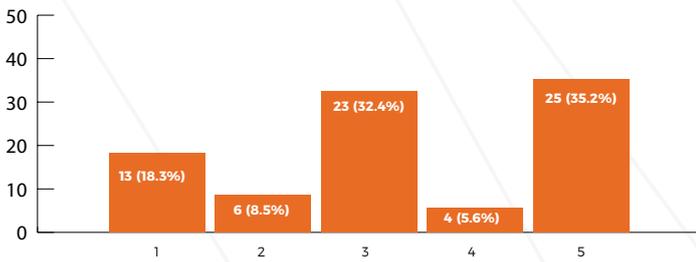
**On Twitter**, highest score was 34% who felt neither safe nor unsafe



**WhatsApp and Instagram** was the platform that respondents indicated that they neither felt comfortable nor unsafe using, recording equal distribution of percentages across the 5 indicators.

In general, how confident do you feel regarding reporting acts of violence against women and girls online (affecting yourself or others online)? (1 being least confident and 5 being most)

71 RESPONSES



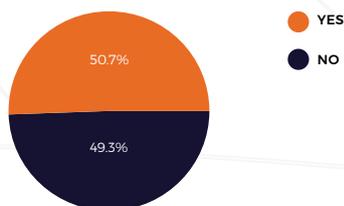
In support of the question on the awareness of reporting mechanisms on social media platforms, 50.7 % of respondents indicated that they never report any cases of violence online, despite knowing what to do, while the remaining 40.3 % of respondents said they reported online violence directed against them or other women/girls on social media sites. Altogether, reporting online violence is a complex issue and this experience by one of the respondents helps to put the lack of reporting in perspective:



*The violence comes from people you know, over some things that you particularly hold different views about. Many are hung strung on being right or protecting a certain person. It's tricky to report."*

Have you ever reported online violence perpetrated against you or other women/girls on any social media platform?

71 RESPONSES



Further, only 2.8 % of respondents believed that reporting procedures on social media platforms are totally effective, while 42% felt indifferent about the effectiveness of reporting channels and related procedures. Respondents to these research questions went beyond the issue of effectiveness, writing that *"Sometimes reports are ignored or downplayed, and perpetrators of violence get away with no repercussions and there are so many examples of this"* and another saying *"People don't always believe the victim as they insinuate that the victim called the violence on themselves"*.

Varying experiences on online platforms also shape users' perception of how effective online platforms are. A respondent narrated how *"A group of people intentionally reported her account so that the system can delete it"* while another wrote *"Posts that educate women about the female body are being taken down because they 'violate community guidelines'"*.

As part of the general observations online, respondents cited in detail the key issues in regards to their encounters online.

Constant *"threats of rape"*, *"body shaming"*, *"stalking"*, *"extortion"*, *"sextortion"*, *"blackmail"*, *"slut shaming"*, *"harassment"*, *"shaming"*, *"bullying"*, *"threats of sexual violence"*, *"homophobic abuse"* are amongst the high listed forms of violence

online by respondents. "Sexism", "Colorism", "being sexualised", "sexualisation of young girls", "scammers", "derogatory words", "funny names" and "memes", were other top of the unsettling experiences online, in addition to "misogyny", "targeted hate speech" "online victimisation" and "violent speech".

Multiple respondents also cited, "cyber bullying and creepy invasive boys and men in DMS who ask for numbers" and "insulting you after days of going mute on them" as some of their most distasteful experiences online. Also related to the DMS the respondents listed "constant unsolicited nudes and dick pictures by weird men looking for sex", "men showing themselves masturbating in online chats".

Some respondents felt hopeless about the abuses online, especially considering that they affect vulnerable women, who do not have access to social media"and also seeing a "lot of media and hate speech directed towards minorities" .

Other negative experiences highlighted were "transphobia directed at trans women, "men who feel entitled to women's engagement online" as well as "having random strangers use profile picture for dating profiles", "Men don't give women a chance to speak... especially on clubhouse"

Survivors of online violence reported resorting to a number of ways to deal with the violence they face. For this research,

the following are some of the coping mechanisms that respondents mentioned in response to the violence online.

“ I refrain from using female pronouns online because when I do, men contact me privately and send me unsolicited pictures or threats.”

“ I deleted Facebook due to the fact that there was a disturbing video of a child suffering from skin condition, after seeing this video I developed an allergy the whole body.”

“ The fear of not being taken seriously or being targeted stops me often from voicing my opinions online. I am very aware of the violence happening and thus extremely careful.”

“ As you get older, you learn to not engage the online abusers.”

Resigning to current circumstances, these respondent primarily propose:

“ I think unless people are able to change the adolescent boys mind there will be no true signs of success.”

“ Misogyny, prejudice when I give an opinion and I'm called names just because I'm a woman but it's fine for men to say whatever they wish.”

“ I think it's quite hard to voice your discomfort if those online don't even understand or consider something like stalking a crime.”

Another respondent expressed total exhaustion writing "As a woman I feel judged no matter what I do."

# Key Findings

This study found that in regard to **Gender-Based Violence**, a strong relationship between offline gender-based violence and online violence against women and girls exists. This is mainly so, because the lines have become blurry over time. The online space's power to amplify offline behaviour makes it difficult to separate the two in a causal effect relationship of violence online.

While the country has a number of laws in place, aimed at curbing gender-based violence as well as a national gender policy, none of the instruments recognises ICTs as tools to empower women nor as tools that facilitate gender-based violence.

## - Women's rights online in Namibia

Women's rights online are not clearly guaranteed by the laws of the land. Namibia has no specific policies and laws that aim to protect women and girls on the internet. The country has no specific laws criminalising online cyber violence either. The state does not collect gender-specific ICT data to give gender-specific meaning to national deliverables and monitoring purposes. There is little to no training happening within the judiciary and law enforcement sector on digital rights and the protection of women and girls online in particular.

No gender-specific digital skills training countrywide has been reported, while the cost of data in the country remains unaffordable by the majority of households. ICT-related laws have adopted a gender-neutral language, which can be viewed as lacking in urgency to address the development of women and girls in technology.

## - Understanding Online Violence Against women and girls

The online space has become the go-to place for organisation and activism (including of self) against the violence perpetrated against women and happening online and offline. Further, non-consensual image sharing (NCIS) also known as revenge porn, has become one of the most visible forms of violence against women and girls online in Namibia, leading to the shaming of women and girls, due to cultural practices and societal norms.

Indigenous women are sexualised by algorithms and the cultural tourism market that is made up of digital natives. A woman, vulnerable socially and economically, had her later life pawned with alcohol and a meal by online users and content creators, turning her into a viral sensation whose lifestyle remains alive on facebook, years after her death.

A young boy from a minority tribe received the same internet fame through begging for survival. He 'managed' all of this without owning a phone or even consenting to be online. His internet presence remains large at the expense

of his social economic circumstances.

Ostracised by century-old laws, members of the LGBTIQ community experience violence online rather than in person, perpetuated by the anonymity assumed online and what is perceived as cultural

norms among others. Women in politics as well as those in prominent spaces such as journalists, artists and those in the beauty industry are subjected to a lot more violence as a result of their prominence, a form of misogynistic abuse.

Gendered insults and misinformation have also become regular in Namibia. Off late those with, necessary means to access the justice system are pursuing recourse under common law.

Various organisations, individuals and officials of government have begun engaging on the subject matter, prominently urging for clear interventions as well as attempting for viable solutions.

Meanwhile, the government has made pronouncements on this issue and also ensured some provisions in existing laws, whereas the practical enforcement is yet to bear fruits for women and girls who are surviving online violence.

## - Social Media Users' Experiences

Generic data for this research reveals the endemic nature of the violence with over 60% of the respondents indicating to have experienced violence and abuse online, being primarily targeted with hate speech and cyber sexism.

Despite being aware of community guidelines and reporting tools, only 7% of respondents reported feeling safe online. In ascertaining safety levels across social media platforms, Facebook, with about 800 000 Namibian subscriptions, came up at the top as the most unsafe platform, according to 41% of the respondents, with the remaining percentages distributed across Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and WhatsApp.

Further, 53.5% of the respondents reported having experienced violence perpetrated by men, while 29.6% reported that both men and women were responsible for the online aggression they encountered.

Finally, the respondents demonstrated clearly the lack of trust in the effectiveness of reporting processes used by internet platforms, with only 2.8% of respondents believing that reporting procedures on various social media platforms are totally effective. Respondents to this research cited *"reports being ignored or downplayed and letting perpetrators of violence get away with no repercussions"* as well as *"posts that educate women about the female body being taken down because they violate community guidelines"* as possible reasons behind the lack of trust in processes currently in place.

## Conclusion And Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of online violence against women and girls in Namibia. The research was inspired by a hypothesis that sought to explore how Namibian women and girls are affected by internet behaviours. As a result of scarcity of data to track online violence against women and girls, the study relied on existing data available in the public domain through news articles and policies, among others.

Additionally, the study examined the prevalence of offline violence against women and girls in Namibia, thus, key topics about internet assault on women and girls in Namibia are addressed in this document. The study intended to ascertain the most frequently encountered forms of violence on social media. As an example, cyber sexism has been a point of contention for Namibian women both offline and online over the last years. This research went about investigating how such laws are dealt with by the courts but also reflecting on the nature of engagements online. The ideal law would spell out the rules of engagement, define what constitutes online aggression, and provide a mechanism for internet users to report and penalise violators, however such is yet to be in place.

In summary the impact of online violence against women and girls in Namibia is far reaching, unseen by the everyday eye but vividly lived by the survivors. The most visible effects manifest in survivors deserting the online platforms, moving offline and withdrawing from participation in current discourses as well as economic and social development.

Should the current state of affairs be left unattended, it could set back the progress attained in promoting gender equality that the country prides itself in, and consequently contradicts the idea that technology can ensure inclusive development. The absence of disaggregated data by gender in ICT makes it even harder to advocate and lobby for legislative and policy reforms in Namibia.

As UN Women<sup>84</sup> observed, with the increase in internet use during COVID-19, more girls and women have fallen victim to online violence, while in the state of inaction in Namibia this has become a danger to society in general, as women make up half of the population. Given that the Namibian government has established safety and protection units across the country to deal with gender-based violence, there is an urgent need to capacitate these centres with both soft and technical skills.

<sup>84</sup> UN Women 'Online and ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls during COVID-19' <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/brief-online-and-ict-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-during-covid-19> (accessed 3 November 2021).

The following recommendations are proposed to adequately deal with online violence in Namibia:

## **Government**

- Must pass all the pending laws that will ensure perpetrators of online violence are dealt with immediately and proportionally to send a message across the nation.
- Pending legislation such as the Data Protection and Privacy Bill could be used to meet commitments, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, promoting increased access to the internet and fighting online violence as well as national development plans.
- Must constitutionally recognise digital rights as human rights.
- Must explore means to provide credible statistics accessible by various to effectively deal with OGBV.
- Regulator must ensure an accessible legal framework dealing with online violations by engaging with social media platforms to disempower violators' use of the platforms.
- Must support cross-sectoral capacity building workshops on OVAW.

## **Civil society**

- Must co-create national awareness and education campaigns with stakeholders, using all languages possible to educate the public on various forms of online violence.
- Must work together with the government to ensure monitoring of violations on social media platforms, which will go a long way in curtailing OVAW.

- This might require working to create a public listing of offenders close to the sexual offenders list, providing no safety for violators, so that violators know they have nowhere to hide.
- There is a need to come up with local initiatives that deal with social media violations complementing and working with the Namibian Police. This could help with education and prosecutions related to online violence but also provide education and counselling to ensure that such actions are not repeated.

## **Media**

- The media can provide education on online violence by articulating clearly prevention, or prosecution, as well as meaningful engagement online.
- A media training on digital rights and social media safety is needed to develop local guidelines that complement work done by UNESCO and other partners in the region and globally.
- Investigative reporting on how cases of OVAW are dealt with and their detrimental effects on society is needed.

## **Social media networks**

- Must work with local stakeholders to ensure that the online rights of individuals are upheld.
- Must work with local actors to understand the local nuances and textures of OVAW.
- Must work with regulators to disempower violators' use working on local stakeholder.



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