Safe To Be Online?

The State of Tech-Facilitated Gender-based Violence (TFGBV) in Nigeria

Background of study

Described by UN Women as the 'Shadow Pandemic', gender-based violence remains one of the biggest ills plaguing Nigeria today. Widespread reports of various forms of violence against women and girls continue to rise unchecked and without remediation for survivors or consequences for perpetrators. According to UNICEF, one out of every four girls in Nigeria has been subjected to a form of sexual violence, while 10% of boys have been subjected to similar abuse.

Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) refers to instances of GBV, be it intimate partner violence, harassment, revenge porn, bullying, hate campaigns or misinformation campaigns carried out in digital spaces, targeting those who use such technologies.

TGBV is currently under-researched, and expressions of violence against women and girls online continue to evolve as newer technologies emerge. Behaviours are unlabelled, existing laws are ambiguous, and the authorities' refusal to prioritise women's issues means that antisocial activities online remain unchecked.

TechHer is currently researching TFGBV in Nigeria to understand the various forms of digital violence & their manifestations, exploring factors influencing online violence, curating the voices of survivors, and exploring ways for our community to protect themselves. This work will also recommend policy actions for legislators and policymakers.

Some of our findings so far:

1 **Patriarchy and Cultural Norms Reenacts GBV Online**

A The Nigerian society, its leadership and public spaces are dominated by men, as expressed in the formulation and implementation of its laws. These laws, which reflect deeply rooted cultural and religious norms, are often heavily inclined and phrased to promote discrimination against women.

B Girls bear the burden of respectability and honour and are expected to be quiet and modest at home, in public spaces, and even online. These expectations encourage abusers to justify their harassment of women and girls who do not fit this stereotype as it constitutes unacceptable behaviour as far as they are concerned.

C Queer women bear a more significant brunt of these societal beliefs, especially with police arrests. Members of this community are routinely subjected to physical & sexual abuse from law enforcement agencies with no repercussions as there are no laws protecting their rights. Furthermore, Nigeria's Same-Sex Marriage Prohibition Act criminalises the existence of queer people, and its ambiguity provides loopholes for abuse.

2 **The nexus between technology and GBV**

A As more people adopt digital technologies and lifestyles for work & play, it establishes new frontiers for existing problematic experiences women have. Technological advancements have widened the scope of possible avenues of abuse, creating ampliication of well known abusive acts perpetrated within digital tools. behaviours via convenient tools abusers can wield.

B These new forms of abuse include the non-consensual creation of sexual images of women through artificial intelligence (i.e., sexual deepfake videos or virtual reality pornography), the amplification of violent ideas about women and sexual minorities, stalking, online harassment (mobbing), nonconsensual pornography, systemic sexism which is reinforced online.

C Most of these forms of abuse are nnot possible at the scale at which they are perpetrated without technology. They tend to originate from digital spaces and may lead to instnces of offline GBV perpetration as well.

3 Digital rights & legal framework gaps

The state of Nigeria's fragmented legislation on violence against women and girls in general, and crucially, is pitiful. The fact that there are no laws relating to acts of violence against women online, indicates the failure of successive governments to prioritise the protection of their citizens in all arenas.

B Most legislative instruments and standards were drafted with the understanding that sexual exploitation and abuse are perpetrated in the physical world alone. The Cybercrimes Act (2015) caters to cyberstalking and racist & xenophobic remarks which are just two forms of cyberbullying. The phrasing within the Act is insufficient to cover other forms of cyberbullying that occur in digital spaces.

C The law only criminalises the non-consensual distribution of images via computers alone and does not address transferring pictures or videos from one person to another. Still, there are no provisions that support victims, from trauma counselling to survivors' compensation.

D The Digital Rights and Freedom Bill currently before the legislature contains provisions that ensure online privacy protections, freedom of information and rights of assembly and association online.

4 Digital rights & legal framework gaps

A While digital platforms have been heralded as great avenues for citizens to enjoy fundamental rights and freedoms, they also constitute unsafe spaces where a myriad of abuse is perpetrated against women, girls, queer folk and other vulnerable communities.

B On several occasions, tech companies have been shown to fail in their responsibility of protecting users. For instance, Clubhouse, in 2021, was accused of setting up queer Nigerians to be exposed to bigotry, harm and targeted conversations against members of the LGBTQ+ community.

5   The rise of online feminism and its role in fighting GBV

A   A growing response to rising GBV in Nigeria has been driven mainly by feminist groups and figures who have pushed back against gender violence both online & offline.

B   Women have continued to speak up in larger clusters online, decrying the patriarchal attitudes in society. Their outspokenness and bravery to berate various institutions have made them a target of several forms of online GBV, which includes everything from harassment to doxxing, marginalisation and, in many cases, threats of death.

C   Female journalists have been abused and issued death threats, actresses and female diplomats have been cyberbullied for associating with male colleagues or speaking up for queer rights, and activists have also been on the receiving end of immense abuse in digital spaces.

D   According to a Plan International survey, 47% of the respondents revealed they had been attacked for sharing their opinions on gender injustices and feminist issues.

6   Collaborative efforts of NGOs, civil society and law enforcement to end GBV

A   Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are continuing the push for legislation to squarely address TFGBV, with the need to pass the Digital Rights and Freedom Bill underscored.

B   Paradigm Initiative, alongside other stakeholders are painstakingly pushing for the for the adoption of this law, to provide sufficient safeguards against abuse, offer opportunities for redress where infringements occur, and equip the judiciary with the necessary legal framework to protect human rights online.

C   Other organisations have provided awareness and education to the public on the crucial issues linked to TFGBV. These efforts have included proliferating online safety advice for women, youth and children to combat online violence against women.

D   However, these efforts cannot be effective if they remain in silos. The synergy of state actors, civil society organisations and the private sector is increasingly necessary to improve general societal outcomes.

About TechHer

TechHer is a training, coaching, mentoring and research social enterprise for women who are not the primary focus of STEM advocacy. We achieve this via three main strands of work: digital literacy, tech for governance, and community-building. We have a keen interest in reducing inequality and power distances in society by strengthening women's voices and helping them build safe digital communities.