

Understanding Technology Facilitated Gender-based Violence (TFGBV) in Uganda

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Technology Facilitated Gender Based Violence (TFGBV) is a growing issue in Uganda as the usage of information and communications technologies (ICTs) widens. These manifest in various forms such as cyber harassment, stalking, hateful messages, discriminatory comments, blackmailing and revenge pornography. TFGBV could have profound social, psychological, and economic consequences. That said, this digital transition could be used as a tool to provide a variety of services electronically. Policy research methods allowed for the study to explore the intricate nature of TFGBV in Uganda, investigate the effectiveness of Uganda's existing legal and policy framework on TFGBV, examine the impact on victims, and propose comprehensive strategies for its effective regulation. The informants were purposively determined to provide technical aspects as well as a holistic lens, these include TFGBV survivors, legal practitioners, academics, legislators, CSOs, and implementers of the relevant laws as the Criminal Investigation Directorate and the gender desk of Uganda Police Force and the judiciary. The results highlight the necessity for a multifaceted approach involving collaboration among various stakeholders, including the Civil Society Organisations, Government, and policymakers such as Members of Parliament, Police Officers, Parents, and individuals, to effectively combat TFGBV. Various factors that facilitate the TFGBV were identified, and everyone will have a role to play in this pressing issue.

Keywords: Technology Facilitated Gender-based Violence, Gender Justice, Women's Rights, Harassment, GBV-policy frameworks.**Introduction**

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have transformed daily life in remarkable ways, offering access to information and connectivity across the globe at minimal cost and convenience. Uganda, like many African nations and global counterparts, aims to embrace ICTs to enhance daily life, albeit at a gradual pace (Centre for Human Rights, n.d.; Ministry of ICT and National Guidance, n.d.; UN Special Rapporteur, 2018; Gillwald et al., 2019). The government's commitment to developing a digital vision underscores the importance of ICTs in building a digitally enabled society, delivering government and private services across various sectors (Gillwald et al., 2019). Despite the promise of ICTs, research suggests that their adoption in Uganda is primarily driven by the need for affordable communication, with social media platforms, dominating internet usage (Nanyonga, 2023). However, along with the benefits of ICTs come challenges, including the rise of technology facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). TFGBV encompasses a range of harmful behaviours perpetrated online and offline, including cyberbullying, harassment, stalking, doxing, sexual harassment, non-consensual exposure of intimate images, hate speech, blackmailing, and impersonation (Sanusi, 2021). These forms of violence target individuals based on their

gender, often exploiting power imbalances, and perpetuating harmful stereotypes. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by TFGBV with at least one in three women who use the internet having experienced TFGBV (Oparinde & Matsha, 2021; Amany, n.d.; African Commission on Human and People's Rights, 2022). These virtual human rights violations pose notable challenges, particularly in countries like Uganda that are slow to implement regulatory measures to protect online users (Centre for Human Rights, n.d.; UN Special Rapporteur, 2018; UN Women, 2015).

The transition from physical to virtual spaces has blurred the boundaries between online and offline violence, complicating efforts to address TFGBV effectively. Perpetrators leverage ICTs to facilitate offline harm, using online platforms to stalk, harass, and intimidate their victims. Conversely, instances of offline violence may originate from online interactions, as seen in cases where online threats escalate into physical attacks (Barr, 2021). This interplay highlights the interconnected nature of TFGBV and the need for holistic responses that address both online and offline manifestations (Barr, 2021).

The pervasiveness of TFGBV underscores the urgent need for comprehensive interventions that address its root causes and provide support to survivors. This study conducted by Brian Kibirango (FIDA Uganda, 2023), explores the landscape of TFGBV in Uganda, including its prevalence, perpetrators, emerging trends, and the urgent need for effective responses to safeguard individuals' rights and well-being in the digital age.

Methodology

The study employed a comprehensive mixed methods approach to gather and analyse data on TFGBV in Uganda. This approach encompassed both secondary and primary data collection methods, including desk research, an online survey, and in-depth interviews with stakeholders. Below a detailed overview of each method and its implementation is provided.

Desk Research

The desk research component involved a thorough review of the literature to gather primary and secondary data relevant to the study. Primary data sources included legal enactments, policy documents, and reports from state institutions such as the Police Force, Ministry of ICT, and Ministry of Gender, Labor, and Social Development. Secondary data encompassed academic literature addressing theories of TFGBV, common challenges in responding to TFGBV, and innovative strategies employed by civil society organizations and youth activists. This literature review provided valuable insights into the nature, prevalence, and impact of TFGBV in Uganda.

Online Survey

Primary data collection also involved conducting an online survey to solicit perspectives on prevalent forms of TFGBV, experiences with law enforcement, and recommendations for enhancing online safety. The survey was designed using SurveyMonkey and disseminated through social media platforms managed by FIDA-Uganda, with further distribution by partner organizations and influencers. Participants were assured of confidentiality, and only designated research team members had access to responses. The survey covered a range of topics, including demographics, knowledge of TFGBV, personal experiences, responses to incidents, and the impact of TFGBV on respondents.

In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with 27 respondents, comprising TFGBV survivors and key stakeholders such as legal practitioners, academics, legislators, and representatives from law enforcement agencies and CSOs. These interviews provided detailed accounts of personal experiences with TFGBV and insights into the regulatory framework and response mechanisms. Survivors shared their stories to enrich the study with personalised case studies, while stakeholders offered technical expertise and perspectives on policy and institutional reforms.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved coding, interpretation, and synthesis of findings from the online survey and in-depth interviews.

Emergent trends were identified and mapped to address key research questions, including the prevalence and circumstances of TFGBV, the characteristics of perpetrators and victims, the effectiveness of legal and policy frameworks, and the role of young people in addressing TFGBV. Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the study, with measures to ensure informed consent, confidentiality, and the protection of participants' rights.

Ethical Considerations

The study ensured free, prior, and informed consent of participants. This included providing the respondents with a clear indication of the potential of the research, associated risks, the voluntary nature of participation, and attendant rights such as to withdraw from the exercise whenever the participant wishes. In addition, the study ensured that any sensitive personal data collected during the study was permanently destroyed shortly after analysis to guarantee the safety of the participants. As a rule, the participants' real names were not used about their experiences. For the survey, identifying information of participants was not required by the survey form as a condition for its submission. Participants were given the option of providing identifying data such as names and contacts if they wished to be contacted to substantiate some aspects of their experience or to receive other forms of assistance and capacity building. None returned such data.

Limitations

The interviews conducted for this study were primarily concentrated in Kampala, resulting in a sample that predominantly represents educated urban dwellers with greater access to economic opportunities and information on online safety. This geographic limitation may skew the findings towards a specific demographic, potentially overlooking the experiences of individuals from rural areas or with lower levels of education and digital literacy. The intention was to complement this limitation with data from the online survey, aiming for a broader representation of Ugandan perspectives on TFGBV. However, the survey encountered significant limitations that hindered its effectiveness.

The survey was exclusively disseminated in English, excluding individuals who are not proficient in the language. This language barrier further exacerbates exclusionary practices within research and fails to capture the experiences of non-English speakers. Additionally, the survey design did not accommodate individuals with visual impairments or other disabilities, further limiting inclusivity and representation within the sample.

Moreover, the survey's reach was constrained, resulting in a low response rate and a restricted dataset. These limitations undermine the survey's ability to capture the full breadth of TFGBV experiences across Uganda and may compromise the generalizability of findings.

Despite these shortcomings, the study's findings, derived from both the online survey and interviews, offer valuable

insights into systemic issues and trends surrounding TFGBV in Uganda. The legal analysis and stakeholder feedback provide nuanced perspectives on challenges and potential solutions, highlighting the need for targeted interventions that address the diverse needs of affected communities.

Moving forward, it is imperative to adopt more inclusive and comprehensive research methodologies that prioritize accessibility, diversity, and representation. This includes employing multilingual survey instruments, accommodating individuals with disabilities, and ensuring broader outreach strategies to capture a more diverse range of perspectives. By addressing these methodological limitations, future research can better inform evidence-based interventions and policies to combat TFGBV in Uganda and beyond.

Literature Review

Effectiveness and Gaps in Regulatory Tools for Addressing TFGBV in Uganda

The research delved into the effectiveness of key regulatory tools for addressing TFGBV in Uganda while identifying notable gaps, challenges, and best practices to enhance effectiveness. It begins by examining the standards set at the international and African continental levels, as they often influence domestic policies and practices.

International and Regional Framework

At the international level, various instruments are relevant to Uganda's approach to TFGBV. These include the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR), the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), among others. Similarly at the African regional level, instruments such as the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (1981, Art. 9) and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, Maputo Protocol (2023), among others, guarantee rights relevant to TFGBV, including freedom of expression, privacy, dignity, and equality.

These instruments provide a basis for challenging any circumstances that impinge on individuals' ability to receive, express, and disseminate information safely, including through digital mediums. Oversight mechanisms have issued guidance on adapting these instruments to emerging challenges such as TFGBV.

Standards Developed by International Mechanisms

The UN Special Rapporteur's report (2018) highlights the transformative potential of core international human rights instruments in addressing TFGBV, emphasizing the need for consistent protection both offline and online. A joint declaration on Freedom of Expression and Gender Justice (2022) issued by various stakeholders recommends critical standards for ensuring gender equality and safety online and offline. These standards include categorizing sex and gender as protected characteristics, prohibiting misogyny, and adopting a 'whole

of society' approach involving states, the private sector, and civil society (UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression et al., 2022).

States are urged to enact legislation prohibiting, investigating, and prosecuting online sexual and gender-based violence grounded in international human rights standards. They are also tasked with training law enforcement officials and supporting services to recognize and respond to the gendered nature of online violence effectively. Private actors, including internet intermediaries and social media platforms, are called upon to adopt human rights safeguards, develop safety tools, and ensure transparency in content moderation (UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression et al., 2022).

Standards Developed by African Mechanisms

African mechanisms have also made strides in facilitating human rights enjoyment online. The Declaration of Principles of Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa outlines principles relevant to online usage and safety (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 2019). It recognizes the right to privacy, including confidentiality of communications, and prohibits laws weakening encryption (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 2019, Principle 40(1), Principle 40(2), Principle 40(3)). States are required to protect personal information, ensure legal recourse for privacy violations, and establish independent oversight entities (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 2019, Principle 42(6), Principle 42(7), Principle 42(8)).

Moreover, states must address the needs of gender minorities, children, and adolescents, promoting their access to information and digital literacy skills while safeguarding their privacy and identity (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 2019, Preamble; African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 2019, Para 1-7). Internet intermediaries are tasked with mainstreaming human rights safeguards, ensuring transparency, and cooperating with law enforcement to identify perpetrators of online violence (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 2019, Principle 39(3)).

The resolution on the protection of women against digital violence in Africa emphasises the need to review legislative frameworks, invest in research, raise awareness, empower women with digital technology, and equip practitioners with the necessary skills (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 2019). It calls for cooperation between law enforcement and internet service providers to identify perpetrators and implement victim-friendly policies.

Effectiveness of Uganda's Regulatory Framework in Addressing Online Gender-based Violence

The research delves into Uganda's existing framework for its effectiveness in responding to TFGBV through the lens of international and continental standards.

GBV Regulation

Uganda's regulatory framework for addressing GBV has evolved over time, with various measures in place to promote gender equality and eliminate discrimination against women. However, challenges persist, including inadequate knowledge of rights among the populace and government officials, as well as institutional capacity constraints within the Ministry of Gender, Labor, and Social Development (UN CEDAW, 2010). The constitution of Uganda guarantees several rights relevant to TFGBV, including the right to access information, freedom of expression, privacy, equality, and protection of women's dignity. The constitution commits to implementing affirmative action measures to address historical imbalances against marginalized groups (Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995, Chapter 4).

Statutory Enactments

Several statutory enactments complement the Constitution, including the Domestic Violence Act (2010), the Penal Code Act, the Children's Act, the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act, and the Employment Act among others. Policies such as the National Gender Policy and the National Action Plan on Women aim to promote equality and curb GBV.

For this study's analysis, only the Domestic Violence Act is discussed. The Domestic Violence Act prohibits domestic violence and encompasses various forms of abuse, including physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, and economic abuse. However, its definition of harassment and omission of specific provisions related to online violence pose challenges in effectively addressing TFGBV. Recommendations include aligning the Act with the South African Domestic Violence Amendment Act of 2022, which addresses online violence explicitly.

Legal Regulation Specific to ICT

Uganda has formulated laws and policies to regulate Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), including the Computer Misuse Act (CMA) (2011) and its 2022 amendment, the Data Protection and Privacy Act (2019), the Electronics Transactions Act, and the Anti-Pornography Act.

The Computer Misuse Act (2011) criminalizes cyber harassment, offensive communication, cyberstalking, and child pornography, among other offenses. The 2022 amendment specifically addresses social media platforms, defining prohibited acts and enhancing access to justice for victims. However, ambiguity in certain provisions, such as those related to malicious information, raises concerns about potential abuse and selective enforcement (Andrew Karamagi & Robert Shaka v. Attorney General, 2016). Additionally, the Act lacks explicit provisions for proactive and gender-sensitive approaches in handling TFGBV cases (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 2019, Principle 39(5)).

The Data Protection and Privacy Act (2019) regulates data collection, processing, and control, ensuring lawful and fair

practices and safeguarding personal data. While it provides mechanisms for complaints and appeals, its effectiveness in addressing TFGBV could be enhanced by including contraventions with a TFGBV element as aggravating factors.

The Anti-pornography Act (2014) aimed to define and prohibit pornography, establish a Pornography Control Committee, and address related matters. Section 13 of the APA prohibits the production, trafficking, publication, broadcasting, and sale of pornography, with penalties of up to 500 currency points or a ten-year prison term. Child pornography carries a harsher penalty of up to 15 years in prison. The Constitutional Court of Uganda declared parts of the APA unconstitutional, citing vague terms like "indecent show" and "by whatever means," which could lead to inconsistent enforcement (CEDOVIP vs. Attorney General, n.d.). The APA also established an Anti-Pornography Committee to detect and prevent pornography, destroy pornographic materials, and educate the public. The Committee's enforcement powers, such as inspection and seizure, were contested, but upheld by the court, although their execution is limited by unconstitutional aspects of the Act. The Act mandates collaboration among various actors to address online violence, requiring facilities and ISPs to control and prevent pornography. However, it falls short of explicitly protecting children from exposure to pornography and addressing issues like revenge pornography and the degradation of women (UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression et al., 2022). There is a need for a gender-sensitive approach to regulating pornography, including protections against the secondary victimization of victims.

Institutional Framework

Implementation of the above laws and policies is done through mechanisms and/or institutions mandated with one or more of these functions: regulation, enforcement, administration, as well as quasi-judicial interpretation and adjudication. In this regard, Uganda has various institutions that have taken appropriate measures to prevent the infliction of violence, investigate and sanction such actions, and provide support for the survivors of the violence. The leading institution in this regard is the Ministry of Gender, Labor, and Social Development (MGLSD). The Ministry is supported by law enforcement institutions including the Uganda Police Force (UPF), the Criminal Investigations Directorate (CID), and the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions. An analysis of the effectiveness of some of these institutions highlighted gaps that impact access to justice for survivors of TFGBV, such as women.

- Law enforcement/Police: Uganda's law enforcement has been criticized for being ill-equipped and unprepared to handle TFGBV due to the lack of modern technology and inadequate investigative skills to handle the cases (Ssenkaaba, 2023). Uganda: Violence against women unabated despite laws and policies. The Uganda Police Force often trivializes TFGBV, and some of the personnel have been involved in victim blaming (Kibirango, 2023).

The majority of the UPF stations do not have a specialized department for the handling of TFGBV (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, n.d.). The reporting process is similar to other crimes, and victims often face challenges due to fear, ignorance, and lack of trust in the UPFs' capacity. Despite official claims of adequate follow-up, limited coverage of cybercrime departments leaves many areas unserved. Efforts to improve include training officers and establishing a department of electronic countermeasures with skilled IT professionals and forensic experts (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, n.d.). However, the UPF still faces significant capacity gaps, such as a high detective caseload ratio (Uganda Police Force, 2023). To address TFGBV effectively, there is a need for full-time cyber-CID specialists at gender desks nationwide and regular, mandatory training. Additionally, the UPF struggles with understanding appropriate GBV terminology, often conflating it with violence against women, which may stem from underreporting of male experiences due to stigma (Oparinde & Matsha, 2021). The few cases of online VAW reported are not reflected in the UPF annual crime reports, indicating challenges in data collection and resource allocation for cybercrime investigations.

- **Judiciary:** The judiciary is a critical institution in TFGBV survivors' access to justice. Under the Constitution of Uganda, courts of law are mandated by the Constitution to administer cases of both a civil and criminal nature (Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995). Victims of TFGBV in Uganda have the option to sue for civil remedies such as damages and/or pursue the criminal route to obtain a conviction from the court. Accessibility to the exact statistics of the number of TFGBV cases that have been handled by the courts of law is an uphill task. In the absence of statistics from the judiciary on TFGBV cases, it is difficult to assess the extent to which the judiciary has addressed TFGBV in Uganda.
- **Private actors: ISPs and intermediaries:** It is noted that ICT companies have formulated policies and mechanisms to control online vices such as TFGBV. For example, Facebook has a victim support hub 'Not Without My Consent' intended to assist people report intimate image sharing while Twitter has a Hateful Conduct Policy which recognizes disproportionate targeting of certain groups of people such as women. However, the fact that these companies are international leaves their applicability and effectiveness in Uganda open to debate. Some of the mechanisms are effectual to an extent. In this regard, the leading social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) provide for reporting of accounts that are in breach of their policies. However, this is sometimes challenging, for instance when perpetrators of TFGBV open multiple accounts through which they continue reaching targets of their violence (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, n.d.).

Uganda's regulatory framework contains commendable provisions aimed at addressing TFGBV, but gaps and challenges remain. Recommendations for improvement include aligning

domestic laws with international and continental standards, enhancing specificity and clarity in legal provisions, adopting proactive and gender-sensitive approaches in handling TFGBV cases, and strengthening data protection laws to address TFGBV-related contraventions effectively. By addressing these issues, Uganda can strengthen its regulatory framework and better protect individuals from online violence and abuse.

Findings and Discussion

Online Survey

The online survey was conducted to explore the experiences and openness of Ugandans, particularly the youth, regarding TFGBV. The survey included 20 semi-structured and multiple-choice questions addressing various aspects such as age, gender dynamics, trends in online platform usage, exposure to and experiences of TFGBV, awareness of protective measures, access to justice, and recommendations for enhancing online protection. The survey engaged 102 participants, with 75 completing the online survey and 27 stakeholders interviewed individually. Women dominated the survey responses (58.67%) of the participants, followed by men (40%), and 1 non-binary respondent. 40% of respondents were aged 23-27, followed by those aged 33+ (32%) and a smaller group aged 18-22 (5.33%). The most used online platforms among respondents were WhatsApp, Twitter, Email, Google, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok and Facebook. Platforms were used for education, entertainment, information, news, social networking, business, and activism, with Google and YouTube being top choices for education and Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram for entertainment.

The majority (58.67%) of respondents were unaware of Uganda's online regulatory framework. Those aware mainly cited the Computer Misuse Act, the Anti-Pornography Act, the Data Protection Act, and the Electronic Transaction Act. However, some respondents mentioned non-existent laws, highlighting a gap in accurate information.

Understanding of and experiences with TFGBV: Respondents showed mixed understanding of TFGBV, with definitions ranging from gender-based negative online interactions to technology-enabled violence against women. The research brings to light the prevalence of various forms of online violence, revealing alarming statistics across platforms, including appropriate sexual comments (88%), bullying/harassment (77.3%), stalking (72%), hateful messages (70%), and unauthorized photo sharing (62%). About 62.7% of respondents had experienced at least one form of TFGBV.

Most TFGBV incidents were committed by strangers (50%), followed by friends (17.19%), authority figures (15.63%), and intimate partners (10.94%). Intimate partner violence often involved the non-consensual release of intimate photos or videos. One of the key trends emerging from the online survey is the limited pursuit of and glaring impediments relating to access to justice. Victims seldom sought justice, with 55.17% taking no action. Reasons included unawareness of possible actions (48.7%), distrust in mechanisms (46.15%), threats

from perpetrators (5.13%), and discouragement from others (7.69%). Satisfaction with justice processes was low, with only 9.76% expressing satisfaction. Based on their experiences, the respondents to the online survey made several proposals which are categorized as follows:

- Legal and institutional reforms: Enact and enforce legislation for better protection, including user identification through IP addresses and establishing a dedicated online policing unit.
- Awareness raising on cyber rights and protective measures through media platforms and influencers to educate users on online safety rights.
- Role of intermediaries: Social media platforms should enforce responsible use and address violations of community standards.
- Mindset change: Conduct continuous sessions to combat TFGBV and address negative attitudes and gender biases, especially in workplaces and media platforms.
- Protection of minors: Parents should regulate children's online exposure and engagement with strangers.

Interviews

The findings from the online survey were echoed in the interviews conducted, providing further insights into the experiences, challenges, and recommendations for addressing TFGBV in Uganda. The results highlight the nature and forms of TFGBV faced by different categories, the circumstances surrounding them, the perpetrators of that violence, the quality of support/responses afforded to survivors, as well as possible interventions to enhance the protection of online users. Emphasis is laid on the following categories: women, young people, political and human rights/civic activists, and celebrities or people with a fair level of popularity.

Women

Uganda is one country where digital inclusion remains a challenge. Marginalised groups such as women are still largely sidelined in access to ICTs. Indeed, digital gender equality lies at the centre of digital transformation campaigns, including the Uganda Digital Vision. The realisation of these aspirations may be further delayed if issues such as TFGBV are not stemmed. Some of the attacks against women have been simply because they stood out to comment on or take the lead on causes that are not traditionally known to accommodate women. Such women are often attacked in ways that entrench the dominance of patriarchy and a misconception that a woman who engages in activism is simply bitter. The patriarchal narrative further connects that 'bitterness' to factors such as a failure of such a woman to find a male partner, or to poverty. The study noted that women who suffer TFGBV often resort to self-censorship in their online engagement as a self-preservation measure. The result of this is that when they retreat, they miss out on the potential benefits of the virtual community. In turn, society misses out on women's contributions to its development (Kibirango, 2023). Yet again, a victim retreating from online engagement at a personal level does not address the issue, especially those whose work involves occasional interaction with online spaces. A respondent who has observed the trends

summarized this dilemma thus "victims generally tend to become less productive in their work if it involves interfaces on social media".

Some of the manifestations of TFGBV identified from this study to be affecting women are highlighted as follows:

- Non-consensual distribution of nude photos: Distribution of women's naked images manifests as one of the worst forms of TFGBV in Uganda. The respondents to this study talked about having heard of people beyond the study's experience. There is a long list of women whose photos and sometimes secretly recorded sex tapes have been circulated, some, unfortunately, being further victimized with attempts or threats of being arrested and charged for the leakage of their nude photos.
- Body shaming: has been used against women. Examples of this abound. A respondent cited some of the online insults hurled at a lady in a video posted on social media, in which she rejected a public marriage proposal. The comments on Twitter, following this event, reportedly happening at a restaurant in Kampala, pondered very little and took many forms, including those which specifically entered judgment on the suitability for marriage of the woman in question, deducted from her body. According to one respondent, this was absurd, especially considering that those commenting "**did not know anything about the context of the rejection**". Various experiences evidence the urgency of interventions that also specifically sensitize women on the need to be sensitive in the way they communicate to or about fellow women, especially those who suffer TFGBV.
- Inappropriate sexual comments disguised as jokes: Some acts of TFGBV appear to be ordinary jokes, which carry sexual innuendos. In many instances, this type of covert violence against women brings about confusion, such that the women sometimes simply laugh about, or ignore the unwelcome comments. Figure 1 is an example of this, which embodies a violent exchange that was first disguised in friendship. This kind of strategy creates a mistaken belief of safety in victims, that the exchange conversation is cordial. After a while, they start to unleash the violence, and when the victim complains, the perpetrator produces the initial cordial conversations as part of their defence; to suggest that they are in genuine relationships with the complainants.
- Other manifestations of TFGBV against women include hacking of devices and trolls. A respondent shared an experience of a friend who "had a 'secret admirer' who hacked her phone by linking his device to hers using WhatsApp web so that he could read her messages, all in the name of finding out if she is lesbian." The respondent reported how this frightened her friend. A male respondent also cited the experience of a female friend who was a target of trolls and hate speech. Her ex-boyfriend "**went on Twitter and claimed that she was cheap, easy to get, and had aborted multiple times**". To date, these allegations are used against her on social media whenever she gets involved in a debate.



Figure 1: Inappropriate comments disguised as jokes

Young People

It was noted from the participants' observation, that like women, young people have also been victims of TFGBV. This comes both from adults and fellow young people. The respondents to this study attribute the escalation of violence among this group to the increasing reliance on ICTs for key services in children's lives, such as education and playing.

Activists and Political Leaders

The other category of people often targeted by acts of TFGBV in Uganda are activists and political leaders. These range from insults to feigned romantic relationships that can allow one's harassers access to exclusive body images for use in blackmail and or pulling one down.

Impact

The impact of TFGBV on victims and their support systems is multifaceted, with consequences that vary depending on the nature and severity of violence. Firstly, the study highlights that TFGBV experiences are profoundly emotionally draining and are closely linked to mental health issues. Even individuals who initially attempt to ignore the violence often find it overwhelming over time. Some respondents noted that colleagues ended up deactivating their social media accounts as a means of escaping persistent bullying. Victims of body shaming, for instance, might continue their online presence,

but cease sharing personal photos. Others, particularly young people, may withdraw from regular social interactions with family and the public, underscoring the critical need for psychosocial support.

In extreme cases, TFGBV can lead to career loss and, in the worst scenarios, suicide or suicidal tendencies. While no specific reports were found of employment termination directly following the leakage of intimate images, the study did include instances where victims felt compelled to alter their lives drastically. For example, one respondent shares a story about a friend who, after her nude photos were circulated, felt too insecure to continue working in Kampala and relocated to a rural area to escape the social stigma. Furthermore, the study found evidence suggesting that some prospective employers are hesitant to hire individuals whose intimate images have been leaked. One male participant recounted the experience of his female friend who, despite completing an interview process at a communications agency, was not offered the job. The agency cited concerns that her past experiences had tarnished her reputation, affecting their decision.

The broad and severe impacts of TFGBV underscore the urgent need for comprehensive support systems, including mental health services and robust legal protections, to help victims recover and rebuild their lives. Addressing these impacts requires coordinated efforts from the government, employers, civil society, and communities to create a safe and supportive environment for all individuals affected by TFGBV. Cultural attitudes and victim blaming

Facilitating Factors of TFGBV

The study identifies and highlights several key factors that facilitate TFGBV in Uganda, such as lack of comprehensive legal frameworks, insufficient legal awareness; cultural attitudes and victim blaming, inadequate institutional support, negative media reporting, and bureaucratic Procedures.

Lack of comprehensive legal frameworks

In Uganda, the absence of robust and comprehensive legal frameworks specifically addressing TFGBV presents a significant barrier to justice for victims. Many respondents pointed out the necessity of enacting laws tailored to address the unique challenges posed by TFGBV. Existing general laws are often insufficient, making it difficult for law enforcement to effectively charge and prosecute perpetrators. This legal gap creates a permissive environment for TFGBV, where perpetrators feel emboldened by the lack of specific deterrents and accountability mechanisms.

Insufficient legal awareness

A notable challenge in combating TFGBV is the lack of legal awareness among victims and the general public. Many individuals do not recognize that the online abuse they experience constitutes a crime. This lack of awareness extends to understanding their rights and the legal avenues available for redress. For instance, when faced with TFGBV, victims

often resort to informal support systems rather than reporting the incidents to the authorities. The hesitation is partly due to a lack of confidence in the justice system's ability to handle such cases effectively and partly due to the social tendency to downplay online violence.

Cultural attitudes and victim blaming

Deep-seated cultural attitudes and stereotypes further complicate the issue of TFGBV. Victim blaming is prevalent, where the responsibility for the abuse is often shifted onto the victims rather than the perpetrators. This mindset discourages victims from coming forward and reporting incidents, as they fear being judged or not taken seriously. Additionally, some law enforcement officials share these cultural biases, which affect their professionalism and empathy when handling TFGBV cases. TFGBV is rooted in patriarchy, mirroring the dynamics of physical forms of gender-based violence. Respondents highlighted that patriarchal and misogynistic tendencies have transitioned to the online sphere, where men continue to assert dominance over women. This entitlement to women's bodies and attention often leads to abusive behaviour when men feel their 'right' is denied. One respondent noted, *"Men have been groomed to believe that they are superior to women and their opinions on women are always welcome."* The anonymity and spontaneity of the online environment exacerbate these behaviours, allowing individuals to express their true views impulsively without the immediate consequences of face-to-face interactions.

Inadequate institutional support

The institutional capacity to address TFGBV is often lacking. While some committed offices are willing to assist, the majority are not equipped with the necessary skills or resources to handle such cases. This includes a lack of training on recognizing and addressing the psychological impacts of TFGBV, as well as technical know-how for investigating both online and offline crimes. The limited capacity of institutions undermines the effectiveness of responses to TFGBV and erodes public trust in the justice system.

Negative media reporting

Media practices in Uganda frequently exacerbate the trauma experienced by TFGBV victims. Sensationalist and insensitive reporting can retraumatize victims and further invade their privacy. For instance, in cases involving leaked intimate images, media reports have often focused on the victims' behaviour rather than condemning the perpetrators' actions. This approach not only stigmatizes the victims but also perpetuates a culture of immunity for the abusers. The media's role in shaping public perception is crucial and irresponsible reporting can have lasting negative impacts on victims' lives.

Bureaucratic Procedures

The bureaucratic nature of reporting and addressing TFGBV also hinders timely and effective action. The process of having harmful content removed from social media platforms can be slow and cumbersome. Victims often face delays as platforms take time to review and act on reports. Additionally, some

intermediaries may require substantial evidence or mass support before taking down harmful content, which leads to further exposure and harm to the victims.

Recommendations

The findings highlight the necessity for a multifaceted approach involving collaboration among various stakeholders, including the government, policymakers such as Members of Parliament, Police Officers, parents, and individuals, to effectively combat TFGBV. Various factors that facilitate the TFGBV were identified, and everyone will have a role to play in this pressing issue. Some recommendations to the government included the provision of capacity strengthening of law enforcers on how to handle and investigate reported cases since they are the first ones to interface with the victims of violence. Advocate for the enactment of comprehensive legislation that specifically addresses TFGBV ensuring that it includes adequate and stringent penalties for offenders to act as a deterrent for potential perpetrators.

Implement victim-centered approaches such as providing support services to victims of online violence such as free legal aid services, free psychosocial support services, and helplines by police to ensure quick services to the victims and assist them in coping with the aftermath of online violence.

Other key recommendations include:

1. Strengthening existing legal and policy frameworks for more specificity on TFGBV and incorporating gender-sensitive regulations to address the unique challenges faced by women and girls.
2. Conduct targeted awareness campaigns and educational programs to enlighten the public on online safety practices and foster responsible digital citizenship.
3. Fostering collaborative partnerships between government bodies, academic institutions, and civil society organisations to jointly address TFGBV, ensuring a holistic and coordinated approach.
4. Encouraging caretakers to exercise vigilance in monitoring and ensuring the online safety of children, recognizing their vulnerability in the digital landscape.
5. Moving forward, it is imperative to adopt more inclusive and comprehensive research methodologies that prioritize accessibility, diversity, and representation. This includes employing multilingual survey instruments, accommodating individuals with disabilities, and ensuring broader outreach strategies to capture a more diverse range of perspectives. By addressing these methodological limitations, future research can better inform evidence-based interventions and policies to combat TFGBV in Uganda and beyond.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study underscores the significant strides and the daunting challenges that Uganda faces in realizing the Digital Uganda Vision. The dual nature of ICTs, serving both as a beneficial tool and a potential weapon for technology-facilitated gender-based violence, reflects the complex reality

of digital transition in the country. On one hand, digital platforms have empowered previously marginalized groups by providing them with economic opportunities and a voice. On the other hand, these same platforms are frequently misused to perpetuate TFGBV, particularly targeting women and youth.

The study's findings highlight the critical role of legal and regulatory frameworks in addressing these challenges. While Uganda has made some progress with laws like the Domestic Violence Act, the Computer Misuse Act, the Data Protection and Privacy Act, and the Anti-pornography Act, the effectiveness of these laws is still limited. The recent amendments and court rulings have exposed gaps that need urgent attention, particularly in aligning these laws with human rights standards and ensuring their comprehensive application.

Key recommendations for the government include revising existing laws to better incorporate digital realities and adopting gender-sensitive approaches to ICT regulation. This involves broadening the scope of harassment definitions, preventing the victimisation of TFGBV victims, and ensuring gender-targeted offences are appropriately addressed. Moreover, the government must prioritize the functionality and responsiveness of judicial processes to avoid delays that hinder justice.

Intermediaries also have a significant role to play. They must enhance user protection through proactive and timely responses to TFGBV and raise awareness about protective measures and the redress mechanisms, leveraging local partners to reach wider audiences.

Academia and civil society organizations are vital in researching TFGBV trends, shaping public discourse, and advocating for stronger protections. They should continue to educate the public on ICT-related rights, promote digital literacy, and support marginalized groups through legal aid and mental health services.

Parents and caregivers must remain vigilant in protecting children from online dangers by implementing age-appropriate controls, fostering open communication, and educating children about online risks and coping mechanisms.

Finally, a multi-stakeholder partnership is essential. Government, academia, CSOs, media, influencers, and artists must collaborate to combat TFGBV and promote responsible internet use. Solidarity and collective action are crucial strategies to protect victims and discourage perpetrators.

In essence, while Uganda has made notable progress, the journey towards a fully realized Digital Uganda Vision, where ICTs are safe and inclusive for all, continues to require concerted efforts and comprehensive strategies to overcome the current challenges.

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Declaration of Conflict of Interest

Following transparency and integrity, I declare a potential conflict of interest as one of the consortium donors of the commissioning organization.

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