



WOMEN'S ONLINE PARTICIPATION IN RWANDA

An examination of how Rwandan women participate online and the obstacles they encounter.

User

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I. BACKGROUND

For the past ten years, digital development in many countries has risen, and governments have invested heavily in infrastructures and frameworks to connect as many people as possible. Moreover, despite all the efforts, there is still a large digital divide that largely affects women and sexual minorities.

Challenges such as affordability, accessibility, digital literacy, and content continue to increase the digital gender divide.

It is against this background that the Women at Web, as part of a wider regional network operating in Rwanda, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania in partnership with DW Akademie and German Cooperation, encourages women's participation in online capacity building and raising awareness on cyber violence against women.

Since 2018, Women@Web has implemented various activities to address the issues women in East Africa face to access and navigate the internet. Operating in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Rwanda, through local organisations, it has carried out capacity building, local and regional advocacy campaigns and research.

Acacia Book Cafe has conducted training on digital literacy and digital citizenship for 120 women in media, business owners and students providing them with skills and tools to confidently navigate the online spaces. ABC has also launched two advocacy campaigns nationally to raise cyberbullying and online harassment that Rwandan women face and examine the role of the media institutions in propagating online violence. Along with other countries, the Women@Web network launched a regional advocacy campaign themed **Safe Online Spaces** with the objective of educating calling on Safe Spaces Online for women and everyone.

II. INTRODUCTION

The Government of Rwanda has the ambition of building a robust ICT infrastructure comparable to any other developed country and has made a political commitment to accelerating the promotion of gender equality which the country considers as a factor for sustainable development in the lead up to a knowledge-based economy and a middle-income country by 2020.

The digitalization of government services and facilitation of digital payments such as mobile money has highly contributed to the ICT sector's development. However, with women being the most affected by poverty levels, there is still a large disparity in access to the internet and active participation online.

Rwanda has a population of 13.11 million, of which 50.8% are female, and 49.2% are male, with 17.5% living in urban areas and 82.5% live in rural areas. The infrastructure established has allowed 41.2% internet penetration in the country, with 21.8% internet users. While the female population makes up most of the population in Rwanda, men are the biggest users of the internet, particularly social media. Facebook has the highest

number of female users, with 33.6% vs 66.2% of male, and Twitter has the lowest with only 16.2% compared to 64.3% of male.¹

Online participation:

Despite the efforts of the government and other institutions, the gender digital divide is widened by different factors, commonly:

- o **Affordability of mobile devices and internet:** 54.4% of women own mobile phones and 71.1% of men
- o **Digital literacy:** only 9.7% of women are computer literate compared to 11.4% of men
- o **Content Creators:** male content creators are the majority.²

Despite the rise of internet users in the past years, the attitude on the importance of the internet, particularly social media, differs depending on the demographic.

Some women consider social media informative and admit that it creates envy and comparison because it gives a false sense of perfection. All the journalists and media practitioners interviewed consider the internet as vital for their work and self-development. Many of them admitted to having used it for learning, and career growth and the students admitted that it has advanced their networks and expanded their research. All these women understand that the internet is fundamental, and everyone should be able to access it.

With this background in mind, Acacia Book Cafe through the project Women@Web, conducted a research to study the women's participation online and examine the obstacles they face to access and participate online. The study and the project are supported by Deutsche Welle Akademie and the German Cooperation.

1. Gender based violence

Rwanda recognizes gender-based violence as any act that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering among women and men, including threats of such acts and coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.[1]

According to the Violence Against Women learning network, online violence against women are grouped into the below broad categories:[2]

¹ (Report, 2021)

² (NISR, 2019)

Category	Description
Hacking	Using technology to gain illegal or unauthorised access to systems to acquire personal information e.g. passwords, private emails, etc
Surveillance/Tracking	using technology to stalk and monitor someone's activities and behaviours
Harassment/Spamming	using technology to continuously contact, annoy, threaten, and/or scare someone
Impersonating	using technology to assume someone's else identity to access private information, embarrass or shame the victim, contact the victim, or create fraudulent identity documents
Recruitment	using technology to lure potential victims into violent situations. e.g., fraudulent postings and advertisements
Malicious Distribution	using technology as a tool to manipulate and distribute defamatory and illegal materials related to someone else. e.g., threatening to or leaking intimate photos/video;

[1] (<https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/vaw/v-overview.htm>)

[2] (http://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/our-work/issuebased_newsletters/issue-4/index.html)

III. METHODOLOGY:

This qualitative research used the Focus Group Discussion (FDG) method to interview women comprised of students, journalists, media practitioners and those in business for the study. The methodology also included a literature review, legal analysis and key informant interviews.

The (FDG) was made up of Eighteen women (18) aged 18-45 years, divided into 3 groups made up of 4, 6 and 8 individuals who access and use the internet at least once a week. In addition to these groups, two in-depth interviews were held with women who work in ICT policy and personally experienced online gender-based violence.

The survey and discussion focused on women's participation online, accessibility, experience, and perception around online violence against women and their digital safety practices.

A briefing session about consenting to participate in the FDG was carried out, and the respondents were assured that the contents of the sessions would be in the safe custody of ABC. The discussions were recorded and transcribed, and the critical content analysis method was used to analyse and interpret the data collected during the study.

IV. FINDINGS:

The internet has become an integral part of people's lives and a fundamental communication tool for personal and professional use. WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok and Snapchat are the most commonly used applications used in Rwanda across the different age groups.

To understand more about women's participation online, their age, profession, education and income levels need to be considered. Below is the breakdown of these demographics.

35-45:

This age demographic is the professional woman who is well established in her career and uses the internet daily. Participants who were able to join were from a middle class .

This woman uses the internet for work and communication and spends an average of 1-2 hours on social media to interact with family, friends and source information.

According to Yvonne, who is in her early 40, she shared with us quoting : "i have decided to stop using social media as much as i used to because it was becoming an addictive tools and i was not able to plan my day well ,one of the way i did i stopped using facebook,twitter and Instagram.I have decided as well the time i will check my whatsapp,so that it doesn't dictate me" .

Actually Yvonne prides herself saying: *"With my teenagers sons, they don't own phones and we don't have tv at home; it is a decision that i made for them and they don't complain "* .

With social media being a leisurely activity, there is minimal interest in knowing the details such as privacy settings, setting up accounts beyond or having multiple social media accounts.

Christie as well shared quoting: *"I have decided to be intentional ,i feel like social media can be like à companion which comes to fill an empty heart, yes i still use social media like Instagram and Youtube because of the core of my business but i will be just watching only and getting information that I need "* .

Both Yvonne and Christie don't see the need to share their lives on social media because they think it is not appropriate and they are connected .They take it as a way to stay healthy and have a pure mind without having to deal with what's happening in the social media world.

This group of women will prefer to not share so much about their lives or actively participate in discussions mostly because of the nature of their work.

25 – 35

The women in this age bracket were journalists and media practitioners who rely heavily on the internet for their work and personal lives. The internet is both a resourceful entertainment tool; they can be found on WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat and WordPress, and they can easily spend 5-10 hours a day on these platforms. With the nature of their work, they actively participate in online debates and easily share their opinions. The internet is used as a source of information, research and self-development, such as short courses.

"Before I used to keep quiet and mind my business when I would see someone be harassed, but these days I speak up." Louise, told us when asked about how she deals with online violence. Having experienced bullying and harassment on WhatsApp groups from her male colleagues, she says she has grown a thick skin and doesn't fear responding to them.

Carole has experienced and witnessed sexual harassment physically and online. Her young colleagues are constantly harassed by older men and these men get away with it. *" when young journalists join the industry, they are full of hope but the older male journalists prey on them and if these women stand up for themselves they become the enemies. Most of them do not grow in their career because they refused to yield to these men."* On how she deals with this, Carole says that feminism has given many women confidence to stand up

for each other and it has given her courage to speak up for not just herself but others as well.

20 – 25

This demographic of women, who are mostly university students, spend an average of 7-8 hours on social media. They have a yearning to be connected and are eager to stay updated on what is going on with their friends and use the internet to research for their studies.

According to Kate ,she said *“:i can’t spend a whole day without internet ,because most of the opportunities are happening using internet especially during this Covid times;so it has become very crucial for me “*

These women use Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and LinkedIn, and they are savvy about setting up and updating their accounts. Their participation includes sharing, liking and posting images and videos that they like but rarely share their opinion on social issues as they feel less experienced.

Every woman interviewed has experienced online abuse and/or bore witness to someone else being a victim.

Mary mentioned during the interview *：“Personally ,i have never been personally abused but i have seen other people being abused like shaddy Boo and when i see it ,i don’t like to comment ;sometimes if i can comment but i know later on that i will regret after ,wonder why did i have to comment “*

Liz added *：“Sometimes you post something and people start judging you ,it has happened to my friend;i have noticed that those people are like perpetrators ,they just want to shame people”*

Brenna shared her experience *：“It has happened to me,in a whatsapp group it was a group for applying scholarship ,the admin of that group asked us to introduce us ;we had to share our picture ,name and where you live ,the reason why you want to apply,At the end of the day the admin started to texted me inbox ,he told me that you really want to participate and you could get the scholarship easily.He said that he could help me to get it if i agreed to meet with him and have a dinner together .I wa very angry and upset ,i told him that i could pass the interview without his favor and his caring.*

Nevertheless he didn’t stop,i ended up leaving the group to have a peace of mind “

These acts of violence are performed across all the platforms commonly seen on WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter.

The Types of online violence these women have experienced include:

- Harassment:** a young student saw her friend be harassed online by a group of men and women for sharing her opinion that they thought was controversial.
- Sharing of non-consensual intimate images:** many of the women journalists and students have received non-consensual intimate images from men. Some of them have also witnessed a woman's intimate images being leaked.
- Bullying and intimidation:** Senior male journalists have made it a habit of bullying and intimidating young female journalists on WhatsApp groups and on Twitter.
- Trolling & Stalking:** Young women in university have been stalked online and had suspicious followers who ended up harassing them.
- Use of derogatory messages:** all women interviewed have witnessed women being insulted and defamed online.
- False information shared about them:** one journalist was constantly harassed by her male colleague on WhatsApp groups, accusing her of being a spy and spreading false information about her.
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Their response to online violence is ignoring it to avoid bringing attention to themselves; some reported the harassment to the platforms with no accountability or justice for them.

Because of the violence they have experienced and/or witnessed, it was noted that most women are afraid to express themselves, post some pictures, and some of them have gone as far as leaving certain platforms for finding them toxic. Others, particularly journalists and media practitioners, have opted to confront abusers online and defend each other.

V. DISCUSSIONS:

1. Cultural and religious influence:

Culture and religion have played and continue to play a major role in influencing people's behaviours, in particular women, whether this is done offline or online. Women continue to be censored and are told what to do with their bodies and how to present themselves. Online spaces have exposed and connected women into forming networks that empower them; however, this is not accepted in their local communities. Women are continuously harassed on how they dress, all in the name of culture.

In cases where women have posted their pictures online, the ministry of culture and youth has requested for them to be persecuted because they are breaching Rwandan cultural values. This is despite these images following the community guidelines of the social network platforms.³

Christianity and Islam have highly influenced the Rwandan culture since colonisation, and these have been used to control women. The status quo dictates that the Rwandan woman is meek, subservient and upholds the nuclear family and does not talk over men. However, the internet has challenged this patriarchal norm by offering free spaces for women to share their views, images and solidarity across communities with similar cultures.

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“there is a marriage between culture and religion and the two are often confused. Our culture does not specify on clothing because before colonisation young girls walked around with bare chests, but every day we are condemned for what we are wearing” Elodie mentioned during the interview. Jeanne d’Arc witnessed a woman be harassed on Facebook for posting her pictures wearing a swimsuit at the beach. *“This woman who is a prominent figure in one of the churches posted her picture at the beach and everyone was shaming and insulting her. Men and women flooded her comment section telling her how she has dishonoured herself and the church for wearing shameful clothes. It was only me and another person who defended her and unfortunately she removed the picture and wrote a post apologising. This is how women are bullied into shrinking themselves and adhering to the society’s unrealistic standards.”*

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(<https://www.chronicles.rw/2019/09/19/watch-what-you-post-on-social-media-or-the-government-is-coming-for-you-here-are-10-victims/>)

the internet has challenged this patriarchal norm by offering free spaces for women to share their views, images and solidarity across communities with similar cultures.

Elodie says the internet has exposed many women to different cultures and it has served as an educational tool to break cultural barriers that hinder women's growth.

2. Gender Based Violence Vs Online Gender Based Violence

While there are accounts and statistics on offline gender-based violence, there are no records or accounts on online violence against women or sexual minorities, and the ministry of gender and family does not have it in its mandate.

The majority of people do not consider psychological harm as part of gender-based violence, which is often a mirror of how victims of gender-based violence are treated offline.

In cases where women have fallen victims to online abuse where they were recorded, and their images were shared without their consent, they were punished for sharing images considered public indecency.[2]

There are still many blurring lines on what is considered normal in the Rwandan context and what is imported from the western views to be considered as violence against women.

Traditional norms of men abusing women are still debatable in discussions among Rwandans, and this often affects the way victims are treated.

“Sexual assault, harassment need to be defined according to our content. For example, it is very common for an older man, to inappropriately touch a woman even though it is against her will, this makes it hard to argue that this is sexual harassment because it is traditionally accepted. Women who speak about this are considered sensitive, difficult, exaggerating and so on...” Elodie mentioned during our interview.

In cases where victims are blamed for the way they were dressed when they were sexually assaulted offline, victims are blamed for exposing their bodies or private information in online spaces. Rarely are victims of violence believed when they share their traumatic experiences, which is reflected and amplified in the digital spaces.

“The woman who shared on twitter about her sexual assault accusing a diplomat was mocked, shamed and bullied. Not only was she not believed, she relived her trauma through people insulting her. All this to show that women are never believed and it is worse when popular men are being accused”. Carole said. “When online bullying or harassment it is not considered serious because it is not physical, despite having many witnesses and

proof. But the reason it is not taken serious is that even physical abuse is not taken that serious.”

Feminist groups, activists and women who actively advocate for women’s rights with a focus on sexual reproductive health and rights are abused online for encouraging promiscuity among young girls and discouraging cultural values and the Rwandan family structure. Discussions on abortion, homosexuality, sex work, etc., are still considered taboo, and those leading these conversations have encountered online harassment and bullying.

3. Media and violence against women:

The media in Rwanda is a male-dominated industry where 24.5% of accredited journalists are female compared to 75.5% of male, and women constitute just 14.1% of owners or managers of media houses compared to 85.9% for men.[1] The percentage of women in decision making positions in the media governing bodies, especially the chief editors, stands at 12.4% compared to 87.6% for men.[3]

Women journalists and media practitioners are the primary victims of gender-based violence from their colleagues. The offline abuse, often characterised as insults, mocking, threats, blackmail, sexual harassment, and intimidation, is very common in media houses and newsrooms and are easily manifested online, especially on WhatsApp groups. Some men in the media have built their platforms on harassing and bullying people, women in particular.

“For example, a fellow female journalist was falsely accused of stealing a phone and the person who accused her is a popular journalist known for defaming people especially women and no one holds him accountable. When I see that happen, I talk to my colleagues and we gang up on such people and they keep quiet”. Louise tells us.

“The majority of the media firms do not have a gender policy on sexual harassment and thus creates an opportunity for male journalists to target young female journalists who are often the victims of this abuse. Even the associations and groups we belong to do not help or advocate for us.” Jeanne d’Arc mentions.

The media significantly contributes to the online violence against women by reporting on gender-based violence or women’s bodies, the sexual harassment of the women they interview or degrading women and sexual minorities through their articles and social media posts.[4]

From a study conducted by RMC, it found that 18% of female journalists had been called offensive names online, 66% of items shared online by journalists had the intention to embarrass women; 5% contained threat of physical harm, 26% of the items by journalists obtained from stalking women, 15% were sexual harassment comments, and 15% were seen bullying women.[5]

“Due to this lack of accountability and little opportunity to grow in their careers, women journalists have been discouraged from working with media houses and have ventured into creating their firms. Those who lack the means either drop out or continue to work in such a

toxic environment. The majority of the media houses do not have gender policies; no accountability of gender-based violence.” Says Jeanne d’Arc.

4. Legal framework

The cyber law in Rwanda has been revised and updated to include cyber offenses such as invasion of privacy, cyber-squatting, misrepresentation of persons, the publication of pornographic images, cyber-stalking, spamming, phishing, the publication of indecent images, the publication of rumours, impersonation, human trafficking, among others.[6] Based on the types of cyber violations we have seen above from the VAW learning network; the Rwandan legislation covers 4 out of 6 as seen on the table below:

Category	Cyber Law
Hacking	Article 16, 17,24,26
Surveillance/Tracking	N/A
Harassment/Spamming	Article 35,
Impersonating	Article 19,
Recruitment	Article 40
Malicious Distribution	N/A

Additionally, the Rwandan penal code lists sexual harassment as criminal conduct and can be punished between 6 months to 1 year.[7] A person who publishes pornographic images is liable to imprisonment between 3 to six years, and one who shares indecent information, images, sounds are liable to imprisonment between 6 months to 2 years.

However, Article 34 and 38 which punish the publication of pornographic information and indecent information respectively, have been used to punish victims instead of the primary offenders and sometimes both.

Women whose intimate images have been shared without consent fall under these laws despite them sharing the images privately. [8]

There is no law that provides accountability against surveillance or tracking of people and malicious distribution of information online.

“We are often told to go to the Rwanda Investigative Bureau to report these cases of violence but the truth is that nothing is done. You cannot go and say that your nudes were leaked because you will be punished for it. We have seen how victims are treated online and no one wants to go through that with the authorities.” Jeanne d’Arc tells us when asked about accountability with the authorities.

“Unfortunately the law that we currently have does not protect victims and we need RIB to be more proactive in holding perpetrators accountable. They need to act the same way they do when they see a fraudulent case online, when someone is being harassed online or bullied they need to act. Our law also needs to have clauses about online gender based violence because it is becoming a serious issue.” Explains Marie, who is a specialist in policy and digital justice advocacy.

[1] (<https://www.chronicles.rw/2019/09/19/watch-what-you-post-on-social-media-or-the-government-is-coming-for-you-here-are-10-victims/>)

[2] (Law, 2018)

[3] (NISR, 2019)

[4] (<http://umuryango.rw/ad-restricted/article/supersexy-yicaye-nabi-afotorwa-ikariso-yambaye-iri-hanze>)

[5] (RMC, 2019)

[6] (Law, 2018)

[7] (Law, 2018; <http://rwandafda.gov.rw/web/fileadmin/penalcode2018.pdf>, 2018)

[8] (<https://chimpreports.com/4-women-arrested-in-rwanda-for-posting-nudity-on-instagram/>)

[U1] To keep or not

VI. CONCLUSION

Rwanda has invested in ICT related programs that promote digital literacy and digital skills to advance economic development. The digital divide is still widespread among men and women, and the lack of participation for women in the digital spaces deprives them of many opportunities that can help them develop.

The digital inclusion of women and sexual minorities needs to be considered with a sense of urgency to ensure that gender equality is achieved even in the ICT sector.

As many people integrate the internet into their daily lives, violence is rising, targeting women, and the loopholes in the legislation makes it hard for women to participate actively.

This lack of legal framework has caused many women to adopt a defence mechanism to protect one another online. Active women online, such as feminists, have used online tools from different platforms, such as reporting offences and mobilising others to report offensive accounts and posts.

Female journalists have also joined in on this practice and created supportive communities to defend their fellow journalists. Additionally, they have advocated having a Gender Desk to have gender policies among the constitutions of the media firms and in the Rwanda Media Commission.

Additionally, the RMC has been involved in multiple programs and journalist workshops on SRHR and proper reporting on gender-based violence in collaboration with the Health Development Initiative Rwanda.

Due to the lack of justice and accountability, women who have been victims of sexual assault and harassment have used online platforms to share their experiences and the names of their abusers. This is done with the support of their friends and other women online who amplify their voices to be heard by the right institutions; however, very rarely are the abusers held accountable.

VII. RECOMMENDATION

There is still a long way to go to bridge the digital gender divide, which requires the collaboration of all concerned institutions.

Government:

- The ministry of gender and family and gender monitoring office need to emphasise on the implementation of gender policies which incorporate violence against women, in all institutions
- There is a need for inclusion and implementation of legislation that protects women against violence online
- Capacity building programs are needed across the country that focuses on basic digital literacy and cyber safety
- Active participation needs to happen in holding perpetrators accountable for committing online violence

Media:

- Media institutions need to include gender policies and implement accountability frameworks against gender-based violence
- Media firms need to support and encourage women in leadership positions and their active participation in the newsrooms
- Ensure they do not contribute to gender inequality and violence against women through their reporting

Civil Society Organisations:

- There is a need for continuous advocacy for women's rights and full participation online, and a collective effort is needed.
- Continuous digital literacy and cyber safety programs for women
- Organisations need to create awareness and capacity building for digital rights and sensitise the general public on cyber violence against women and sexual minorities.
- There are needs to be the creation of support systems for victims of online violence