



Tackling gender-based cyber violence against women and girls in Malawi amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

AUTHOR: Donald Flywell Malanga | COUNTRY: Malawi

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence against women and girls remains a global threat to the public health of women and girls during emergencies.¹ As the COVID-19 pandemic deepens the economic and social stress, coupled with restricted movement and social isolation measures, gender-based violence against women and girls is increasing exponentially. Prior studies suggest that one in three women world-wide have experienced some form of gender-based violence in their lifetime.²

Likewise, during COVID-19, as more women and girls turn to the use of the internet, mobile phones, social media and other digital platforms for sharing information, these technologies have also become a weapon against them. Emerging data shows that women and girls are subjected to various forms of gender-based cyber (online) violence. This refers to online behaviour targeting women and girls, intended to intimidate, to coerce, or to cause fear, anxiety, humiliation and extreme emotional distress.³ A United Nations (UN) report indicates that cyber violence is just as damaging to women and girls as physical violence, and estimates that 73% of women have endured cyber violence and are 27 times more likely than men to be harassed online.⁴

While efforts to tackle gender-based cyber violence during COVID-19 are at a larger scale globally, it remains an extensive and widely under-reported

1 WHO. (2020). *COVID-19 and violence against women: What the health sector/system can do*. <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331699/WHO-SRH-20.04-eng.pdf>

2 UN Broadband Commission for Digital Development. (2015). *Cyber Violence against Women and Girls: A world-wide wake-up call (Executive summary)*. <https://www.broadbandcommission.org/Documents/reports/bb-wg-gender-discussionpaper2015-executive-summary.pdf>

3 Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2015). *Countering cyber violence against women*. <http://archive.ipu.org/splz-e/csw15/cyber.pdf>

4 Maundu, C. (2020, 29 May). Online violence in times of COVID-19. KICTANet. <https://www.kictanet.or.ke/online-violence-in-times-of-covid-19>

online human rights violation in African countries, including Malawi. Besides, most available literature is limited to developed countries, while similar studies are lacking in Malawi. Therefore, drawing on the Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence Framework,⁵ the key objectives of this report are to document the form(s) of gender-based cyber violence behaviours that women and girls experience during COVID-19, and identify responses/strategies available to tackle this type of violence during the COVID-19 pandemic.

COUNTRY CONTEXT

Malawi gained its independence from Great Britain in 1964. The country has an estimated population of 17.7 million people, of which 85% live in rural areas.⁶ The gross domestic product per capita is USD 411.⁷ Most women work in the agricultural sector, which is a backbone of Malawi's economy. Of those in non-agricultural waged employment, 21% are women and 79% are men, and the numbers have remained the same over the years. The overall mobile penetration is estimated at 45.5% while internet penetration is 6.5%.⁸ About 34.5% of women own a mobile phone, 0.6% own a desktop computer, 1.8% own a laptop, while just 4.7 % of them have access to the internet.⁹ The low rate of information and communication technology (ICT) penetration in Malawi is attributed to the country's weak economy, high value-added tax (VAT) imposed on importation of ICT gadgets, and other contextual factors.¹⁰

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE SITUATION IN MALAWI

Section 24 of Malawi's constitution stipulates that "women and girls have the right to full and equal protection by the law, [and] have the right not to be discriminated against on the basis of their gender or marital status."¹¹ These rights are also operationalised in Malawi's Gender Policy (2015)¹² and National Action Plan to Combat Gender-based Violence in Malawi (2014-2020).¹³ Despite such

5 Hinson, L., Mueller, J., O'Brien-Milne, L., & Wandera, N. (2018). *Technology-facilitated gender-based violence: What is it, and how do we measure it?* International Center for Research on Women. https://www.svri.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2018-07-24/ICRW_TFGBVMarketing_Brief_v8-Web.pdf

6 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL>

7 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>

8 Malawi Communication and Regulatory Authority. (2015). Survey on access and usage of ICT services in Malawi: Report. http://www.macra.org.mw/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Survey_on-Access_and_Usage_of_ICT_Services_2014_Report.pdf

9 Ibid.

10 Malanga, D. F. (2019). Framing the impact of artificial intelligence on protection of women rights in Malawi. In A. Finlay (Ed.), *Global Information Society Watch 2019: Artificial intelligence: Human rights, social justice and development*. APC. https://giswatch.org/sites/default/files/gisw2019_web_malawi.pdf

11 <http://www.malawi.gov.mw/images/Publications/act/Constitution%20of%20Malawi.pdf>

12 https://cepa.rmpportal.net/Library/government-publications/National%20Gender%20Policy%202015.pdf/at_download/file

13 <http://www.togetherforgirls.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/National-Plan-of-Action-to-Combat-Gender-Based-Violence-in-Malawi-2014-2020.pdf>

policy intervention, gender-based violence remains high in Malawi. The root causes point to culture and unequal power relations between men and women, which ensure male dominance over women. The unequal status of women is further exacerbated by poverty and discriminatory treatment in the family and public life. Malawi is ranked 173 out of 188 countries on the UN's Gender Inequality Index.¹⁴

Like other countries in the world, Malawi has not been spared of the COVID-19 pandemic. As of 12 June 2020, Malawi had registered 481 cases: four deaths, 65 recoveries and 412 active cases in 24 districts.¹⁵ In response to this pandemic, the Malawi government developed the National COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan.¹⁶ As a result, restrictive measures were imposed, such as physical and social distancing, and closure of schools and universities.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher adopted a survey design employing a multi-method approach. A total of 67 women and girls aged between 15 and 45 years responded to a survey questionnaire, while 10 women and girls were personally interviewed as a follow-up. Women and girls who participated in this report owned and/or had access to various online/digital platforms such as social media, laptops, smartphones, basic phones, online personal accounts and the internet, among others. Additionally, a panel discussion of was conducted with eight experts, comprising representatives of a civil society organisation dealing with gender-based violence, law enforcement such as the police (Victim Support Unit), the ICT regulator, the parliament, and academia. This was crucial for the author to appreciate their understanding of gender-based cyber violence in Malawi before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and suggest possible strategies to combat the problem. Consent to collect the data was obtained from the participants. Data collected was analysed descriptively and thematically.

FORMS OF GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE WOMEN AND GIRLS EXPERIENCE

Awareness of cyber violence

The first question asked to respondents was to understand their awareness of gender-based cyber violence. It was found that 98.1% of participants agreed that they knew about the existence of the problem, even before COVID-19, while 2.4% of them did not know. This implied that the vast majority of sampled research participants knew about gender-based cyber violence.

14 <https://www.usaid.gov/malawi/fact-sheets/malawi-gender-equality-fact-sheet>

15 <https://covid19.health.gov.mw>

16 https://malawi.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/National%20COVID%2019%20Preparedness%20and%20Response%20Plan_08-04-2020_Final%20Version.pdf

Form(s) of cyber violence

Data showed that cyber stalking (92.5%), cyber bullying (83.6%), cyber harassment (76.1%), and online sexual exploitation (71.4%) are major forms of gender-based cyber violence behaviours that women and girls experience during COVID-19 pandemic. This was also confirmed by some of the participants interviewed:

I am a nurse by profession, and since the coming of COVID-19, I have been receiving abuse and bullying messages on my mobile phone and social media relating to COVID-19. All this was online misinformation trending on social media stating that nurses are at high risks of contracting COVID-19. (Respondent 4)

I am a young female lecturer but what we get from social media is terrible. Women are regarded as video shows. People just post all sorts abusive words, nude images, portraying women as useless. I think the authorities need to make perpetrators circulating such type of online abuses be punished. (Respondent 7)

A few respondents also experienced online hate speech, non-consensual pornographic materials, and online defamation as presented in Table 1. It was further corroborated by interviews that each act of cyber violence was repeated in varying frequency: "These attackers do these things sometimes during lunch time, during night, and at any time of the day and week. So, it is very disappointing" (Respondent 5). The majority of participants also conceded that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, they continued to suffer in silence from gender-based cyber violence.

Table 1: Forms of gender-based cyber violence women and girls experience

Women and girls' experience(s) of gender-based cyber violence	Frequency (multiple response)	Percentage
Cyber harassment	51	76.1
Cyber bullying	56	83.6
Cyber stalking (e.g. false accusations, threats, etc.)	62	92.5
Online hate speech	31	46.3
Online sexual exploitation	48	71.6
Non-consensual pornography	36	53.7
Online defamation	29	43.3
Others	13	19.4

Frequency of occurrence

Participants were asked to state the frequency with which they usually experienced cyber violence from the time COVID-19 restrictive measures were put in place

in Malawi on 23 March 2020. Respondents were given five options to choose from: daily, weekly, fortnightly, monthly, and do not know. The findings showed that 67.1% of respondents stated that they experienced one or more form of gender-based cyber violence daily, 26.4% indicated that gender-based cyber violence occurred weekly, while 4.5% of respondents indicated that they did not know. This was also corroborated by an interviewee who had this to say:



← Smartphone camera
Source: Donald Malanga (Author)

We women are regarded as cartoons in our society. With the coming of COVID-19, when you try to open WhatsApp or emails you find messages about women being abused daily, at work, at home, during conferences and even when we have boarded minibuses or any other mode of transport. So, online violence against women has become a norm. It is very disappointing. Sometimes, the attackers take them as jokes, yet we get traumatised. (Key informant 2).

ICT mode and tactics used

Research participants were also asked to state the ICT mode that attackers or perpetrators use to commit cyber violence behaviours. The majority of participants indicated that social media (62.5% or 42) such as Facebook and WhatsApp and personal online accounts (31.3% or 21) were the digital platforms most frequently used by perpetrators to commit these acts. On the other hand, entertainment and dating sites were the least frequently used. These findings were not surprising, considering the fact that in Malawi, the number of women and girls accessing social networking sites via smartphones is growing significantly. It was also revealed that perpetrators used hacking (19.7%), gender trolling (54.2%), fake accounts (33.1%), doxing (12.3%) and communication threats (4.2%) as main tactics to gain entry into women's and girls' online spaces.

The results were further corroborated by follow-up interviews and key informants. This is what some had to say: "I just came to know someone had posted a porno image to my email account. Yet, I did not know where he/she got my email account?" (Key informant 3); "They just invaded my WhatsApp and

posted all sorts of images and abusive words relating to my political affiliation and my former husband. I was threatened that if I continued supporting this political party, I should check my movement” (Key informant 5).

Relationship between the perpetrator and the victim/survivor

Prior studies indicate that gender-based cyber violence is informed by the connection or relationship that exists between the victim/survivor and the attacker/perpetrator.¹⁷ In this study, participants stated that the relationships that existed between them and the perpetrators varied from personal (56.2%) such as relatives and ex-boyfriends, to organisational relationships (39.5%) such as co-workers. Only 7.8% of participants indicated that perpetrators were impersonating them.¹⁸

Perpetrators’ motivation for committing gender-based cyber violence

Perpetrators’ motivation refers to the emotional, psychological, functional or ideological drivers behind the perpetrators’ behaviour. The motivation can be informed by political and ideological agendas, or driven by revenge, anger, jealousy, sexual desire or other similar factors.¹⁹ As shown in Table 2, participants indicated that perpetrators’ motives were inspired by revenge (83.1%), anger (76.4%), jealousy (69.3%), sexual desire (59.7%), and political agenda (32.8%). From the perpetrator’s motivations, comes intent or intention. This is a determination of the perpetrator or attacker to harm someone. It was found that perpetrators’ intentions were to psychologically (61.8%) and physically (38.5%) harm the victims or survivors.

Table 2: Motivations behind gender-based cyber violence

Motives	Frequency (multiple responses)	Percentage (100%)
Jealousy	46	69.3
Sexual desire	40	59.7
Revenge	56	83.1
Political agenda	22	32.8
Anger	51	76.4
Monetary desire/agenda	14	21.5
Maintain social status	12	17.9
Ideological agenda	8	12.1

17 Hinson, L., Mueller, J., O’Brien-Milne, L., & Wandera, N. (2018). Op. cit.

18 Definition of some of the terminologies used in this report: Cyber bullying means intentional act of online or digital intimidation or embarrassment; cyber harassment means distributing unwanted sexually explicit emails, text (or online) messages; cyber stalking means repeatedly sending emails, text messages or online instant messaging platform messages that are offensive or threatening; non-consensual pornography involves the online distribution of sexually graphic photographs or videos without the consent the individual in the image; and doxing refers to the online researching and publishing of private information on digital platforms to publicly expose or shame the person targeted.

19 Hinson, L., Mueller, J., O’Brien-Milne, L., & Wandera, N. (2018). Op. cit.

IMPACT OF GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE ON WOMEN AND GIRLS

Prior literature suggests that every victim or survivor is impacted in some way by their cyber violence experience. Those impacts may include harms to their physical and mental health, social status and economic opportunities, even death. As Table 3 indicates, findings revealed that sampled participants withdrew from online activity (68.7%), lost reputation (17.2%), and cut down on social activity (9%).

Table 3: Impacts of gender-based cyber violence on women and girls

Impact of gender-based cyber violence on women and girls	Frequency (N-67)	Percentage (100%)
Social		
Harm reputation	12	17.9
Withdrew from online activity	46	68.7
Isolated from family, friends or co-workers	2	3.0
Cut down on social activity	6	9.0
Moved out of the community	1	1.5
Psychological/emotional		
Anxiety	6	9.0
Living in a state of fear	33	49.3
Depression	2	3.0
Self-image damaged	21	31.3
Self-harming behaviours	1	1.5
Thoughts of suicide	1	1.5
Negative impact on job/school performance	3	4.5
Economic/financial		
Loss of income	51	76.1
Loss of educational opportunities	4	6.0
Loss of home	5	7.5
Inability to get a new job	6	12.0
Loss of property	1	1.5
Physical		
Self-harm	3	4.5
Physical abuse exacerbated by online violence	36	53.7
Physical harm and injury resulting from online violence	23	34.3
Physical illness	5	7.5

Participants were also abused online (53.7%) and harmed online (34.3%), which to some extent led to physical illness (7.5%). Furthermore, the findings showed that cyber violence has negatively impacted women and girls through consequences such as living in a state of fear (49.3%), self-image damaged (31.3%), and anxiety (9%). Other women stated that gender-based cyber violence has led them to loss of income (76.1%) and inability to get new employment opportunities (12%). Overall, this implies that gender-based cyber violence was socially, physically, psychologically and economically impacting women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic.

RESPONSES/STRATEGIES TO TACKLE GENDER-BASED CYBER VIOLENCE

Prior studies indicate that victims/survivors of gender-based cyber violence can report their experiences to the police, seek health/psychological counselling or legal support services, and get help from their social networks.

Seeking social support

As indicated in Table 4, the study found that women and girls blocked perpetrators on digital platforms (50.7%), left the digital platform (26.9%) or confronted the perpetrator physically or digitally (10.4%). The findings were further augmented by follow-up interviews. It was established that culturally, seeking social support because of gender-based cyber violence is not viewed as a serious matter. As a result, most victims never bother to seek counselling. As one respondent reported:

I broke up recently with my ex-boyfriend. He threatened me and posted images and photos in a WhatsApp group. So what I did was just to leave the WhatsApp group and block the guy in all my online social networks. Reporting this issue to a counsellor? Our culture does not allow us to do that and it is not even taken seriously by the members of the community. (Key informant 8, respondent 5)

Table 4: Responses/strategies for tackling gender-based cyber violence against women and girls

Responses/strategies	Frequency (N=67)	Percentage (100%)
Seeking social support services		
Confronted attacker/perpetrator(s)	7	10.4
Blocked attacker/perpetrator(s) on digital platforms	34	50.7
Publicised personal information of attacker(s) online	1	1.5
Left the digital/online platform(s)	18	26.9
Exposed the attacker/perpetrator(s) to their family, friends and employers	2	3.0
Shared information through the media (newspapers, blogs, TV, radio, etc.)	-	-
Left to a transition place/house/refuge	1	1.5
Sought health/social counselling services	4	6.0
Seeking legal support services		
Reported to the police, attacker/perpetrator(s) arrested	2	3.0
Reported to the police, police took no action	21	31.3
Filed civil law suit against the perpetrator/attacker	1	1.5
Reported to the police, attacker/perpetrator convicted	1	1.5
Never reported to police/community leaders	42	62.7
Seeking Intervention from digital/online platform (Facebook, YouTube, pornography site, etc.)		
Digital/online platform blocked the attacker/perpetrator from using the platform	2	3.0
Digital/online platform removed the content	5	7.5
Appealed to digital/online platform but platform took no action	9	13.3
Never sought intervention from the digital/online platform owners	51	76.1

Seeking legal support services

The findings showed that 62.7% of the respondents never reported the incidents to the police or community leaders, while 31.3% of respondents reported the incidents to police, but unfortunately the police took no action. Corroborating the findings with the key informants, it was revealed that in Malawi, gender-based cyber violence is an emerging concept. As a result, it has not received much attention compared to physical violence in most gender policy documents:

In Malawi, cyber violence is a new form of gender-based violence. As a result, it is not recognised as important. In fact, you can see even in our National Gender Policy and National Action Plan to Combat Gender-Based Violence, there is nowhere in these documents where you find gender-based cyber violence is mentioned. (Key informant 3, respondent 5)

From this analysis, it was clear that Malawi does not have adequate laws that women and girls can appeal to for protection from gender-based cyber violence.

Seeking intervention from online digital platform(s)

The results show that 76.1% of surveyed participants never sought any intervention from the online platform companies, while 13.3% appealed to online platforms, but the online/digital platform took no action. To further understand the situation, the participants interviewed conceded that they were not even aware of the procedures for victims of cyber violence to launch a complaint or seek intervention from the online companies such as Facebook. Consequently, they never took any action with the companies. This is what one participant had to say:

At this time there is chaos on social media. Anyone can post whatever he/she wants. Although these postings tend to target us women and girls because of gender identity. So when it comes to reporting, I do not think we are aware of reporting such cyber violence to the social media companies or mobile operators. But, if we can be informed how this can be done, I think this can be a good idea. (Respondent 7, key informant 6)

Level of gender-based cyber violence during the COVID-19 pandemic

Emerging data shows that the prevalence of sexual and domestic gender-based violence against women and girls has increased significantly since the COVID-19 outbreak. In this case, gender-based cyber violence against women and girls is not exceptional in Malawi. In the current study, participants were asked to choose on a scale from 1 to 5 (lowest to highest), and determine the level of cyber violence. The majority of respondents (65.1%) indicated that it was low (26-49%), 27.4% of respondents stated it was the lowest (1-25%), 5.2% of respondents stated that the level of gender-based cyber violence is high (50-74%), and 2.5% of respondents stated that it was the highest (75-100%). Few of the respondents (1.5%) indicated that they were not sure (0%). This implied that in general, the study found that gender-based cyber violence is low but it is rising steadily.

CONCLUSION

Although not detailed, this report has demonstrated that women and girls experience various forms of gender-based cyber violence in Malawi, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. These include bullying, defamation, stalking, sexual exploitation, hate speech, and non-consensual pornographic videos and images, among others. Perpetrators use digital platforms such as social media, online personal accounts, dating sites, and smartphones to carry out their acts of gender-based cyber violence against women and girls. The majority of sampled women and girls had both personal (ex-boyfriend) and institutional (co-workers) relationships with the perpetrators.

The report has also revealed that perpetrators' motives to commit such acts of cyber violence were involved revenge, anger, jealousy, sexual desire and

political agendas, with the intentions to psychologically and physically harm the victims. To this effect, gender-based cyber violence has socially, physically, psychologically and economically impacted women and girls. Consequently, these acts of cyber violence infringe on principles of the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms such as gender equality; protection of marginalised groups and groups at risks; fostering security, stability and resilience of the internet; and privacy and personal data protection.²⁰

When it comes to responses to tackle gender-based violence, the findings show that the sampled women and girls use individual coping measures, such as confronting and blocking the attacker or leaving the online platform. This is an indication that women and girls avoid online spaces for fear of experiencing gender-based cyber violence.²¹ The sampled women and girls never bothered to seek for social/community and legal aid services due to lack of awareness of such supportive services. Furthermore, in Malawi, like other African countries, the majority of women and girls are often reluctant to report their online victimisations for fear of social repercussions. The principles of African Declaration also emphasise that women and girls should have the right to access to information online, the right to access to affordable internet, and the right to due process. Yet, from this report, it is clear that the majority of women's and girls' digital rights were violated.

Most importantly, it was also revealed that although Malawi has a National Gender Policy (2015), a National Action Plan to Combat Gender-based Violence (2014-2020), and the newly developed National COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan (March-June 2020) in place, these policy documents just mention gender-based violence in generic terms without due considerations to cyber violence against women and girls. Besides, a review of Malawi's National COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan shows that gender-based violence is mentioned twice in the 84-page document. However, there is no policy statement regarding the gender-based cyber violence against women and girls. This can be attributed to the fact that the cyber violence phenomenon is an emerging concept that has not gained much individual, social, community and legal support in the country. Therefore, the findings from this report have implications for the role of government, civil society, academia and technology companies in tackling gender-based cyber violence against women and girls in the country during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

20 <https://africaninternetrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/African-Declaration-English-FINAL.pdf>

21 European Institute of Gender Equality (2017). Cyber violence against women and girls. https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/cyber_violence_against_women_and_girls.pdf

RECOMMENDATIONS

The actions steps to consider include, but are not limited to, the following:

- The government should formulate cyber violence policy in recognition of the fact that cyber violence against women and girls is a form of gender-based violence. Strategies for addressing cyber violence against women and girls must also include the voices of women who are victims of the phenomenon.
- There is a need to integrate gender-based cyber violence prevention measures into the National COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan. This will pave the way for the adoption of regulatory standards to tackle the harmful effects of acts of gender-based cyber violence against women and girls.
- Civil society organisations dealing with gender-based violence should lobby the government for awareness-raising campaigns and educating women and girls about gender-based cyber violence during this time of COVID-19. This awareness and training will increase women's and girls' safety and privacy online, and further empower them to make decisions to protect their online safety.²²
- Online human rights advocates/defenders in the country can use the evidence generated from this report to inform supportive campaigns and call for legal protection of women and girls against gender-based cyber violence during and after COVID-19.
- The internet and online platforms such as Facebook should create clear options for getting images or abusive content removed. They should also respond immediately and effectively to complaints from victims of online abuse, and finally establish genuine consent for terms of use.

22 West, J. (2014). *Cyber-Violence Against Women*. Battered Women's Support Services. <https://www.bwss.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/CyberVAWReportJessicaWest.pdf>