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DEMOCRATIZING DIGITAL

COUNTERING DIGITAL THREATS TO DEMOCRACY GENDER REPORT



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Introduction

Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries are undergoing unprecedented digital transformation. In just two decades, digital technologies have reached nearly half of the Global South's population.[1] This ongoing digital transformation raises many opportunities, as well as unique risks, for women and girls. While access to technology can mean improvements in health, education, and economic opportunity, women and girls have disproportionately less access to online platforms and other digital tools. This exacerbates the gender digital divide. Women and girls with access to the internet are more likely than men to experience technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV).[2] This risk is compounded for those with intersecting marginalized identities, like women in the LGBTQI+ community or women who belong to ethnic minority groups.

Digital transformation brings with it the risk of digital threats to democracy. National governments and non-state actors are increasingly using digital technologies to censor, surveil, mislead, and persecute their citizens. While individuals and civil society members can use digital tools to advocate, organize, and communicate for social good, malign actors can manipulate these same technologies to undermine the ability of citizens to exercise their fundamental rights and hold their governments accountable.

Digital threats to democracy have a unique effect on women and girls, who report social and psychological impacts ranging from trauma, paranoia, and anxiety to self-censorship. This may cause them to become more cautious and isolated and to limit their online communications. Digital threats to democracy may cause women and girls who have access to digital technology to withdraw from the internet and political participation altogether. This could expand the gender digital divide and lead to greater inequality.

The *United States Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally* states a commitment to "strengthen U.S. government efforts to advance digital rights and democracy-affirming technology to include an intersectional gender lens, accounting for the misuse and abuse of technology by individuals, state, and non-state actors."[3] In line with this approach, the USAID Conflict, Peacebuilding and Governance (CPG) Division in the Africa Bureau commissioned this report to highlight how digital threats to democracy (see below) have a disproportionate impact on women and girls in SSA and to demonstrate how USAID can help mitigate the gendered risks of digital threats to democracy in its programming. To illustrate how digital threats to democracy have affected the lives of individual women from SSA, this report also provides real-world case studies of censorship, digitally-enabled targeted persecution, social manipulation and disinformation, surveillance, and internet shutdowns.

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1 "The age of digital interdependence," UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation, 2019, https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/DigitalCooperation-report-for%20web.pdf.

2 "2023 Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy report," USAID, 2023, 43, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-03/2023_Gender%20Policy_508.pdf.

3 "United States Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally," USAID, 2022, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/GBV-Global-Strategy-Report_v6-Accessible-1292022.pdf.

USAID and its implementing partners can counter gendered digital threats to democracy by identifying potential risks against women and girls—especially those with intersecting marginalized identities—in its programming and integrating strategies to actively avert those risks at the project, activity, and intervention levels. Collecting, collating, and sharing evidence across USAID about successful, high impact strategies to counter gendered digital threats to democracy is an important corollary to this work.

WHAT ARE DIGITAL THREATS TO DEMOCRACY?

Digital threats to democracy refers to the use of digital tools and technology by the government, the private sector, or individuals to violate human rights. These include surveillance, censorship, social manipulation and disinformation, internet shutdowns, and digitally-enabled targeted persecution, as noted in the 2022 Democratizing Digital Landscape Assessment. While digital threats to democracy are common under authoritarian regimes, democracies have also used these techniques.

Digital threats to democracy are not limited to government actors. Non-state and international actors such as private sector and religious groups can also deploy these techniques for political, social, and economic reasons. The use of surveillance cameras, commercial malware, social media botnets, and access-blocking firewalls are all examples of digital threats to democracy. Censorship and surveillance circumvention technologies (e.g., virtual private networks (VPNs) and encrypted messaging applications) are examples of mitigation techniques.

DIGITAL THREATS TO DEMOCRACY AND TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

What are gender-based violence (GBV) and technology-facilitated gender based violence (TFGBV)?

According to the 2022 update of the *US Strategy to Prevent and Respond to GBV Globally*, "GBV is any harmful threat or act directed at an individual or group based on actual or perceived sex, gender, gender identity or expression, sex characteristics, sexual orientation, and/or lack of adherence to varying socially constructed norms around masculinity and femininity."[4] USAID's 2023 *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy* builds on this wording to define TFGBV, stating that "TFGBV is carried out using the internet or information and communication technologies by one or more people to harm others based on their actual or perceived sex or gender identity. This can include, but is not limited to, online harassment, cyberstalking, child sexual exploitation and abuse, online gendered disinformation and misinformation, and nonconsensual image-based abuse."[5]

Digital technologies have immense potential to increase participation of women and girls in the social, political, and economic space, but they have also contributed to the emergence of TFGBV. According to an Economist Intelligence Unit study in 2020, 38 percent of surveyed women reported personal experiences with online violence, with an 85 percent overall prevalence rate of online violence against women globally.[6] These percentages were as high as 98 percent in the Middle East, 91 percent in Latin America

4 "United States Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally," USAID, 2022, 8, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/GBV-Global-Strategy-Report_v6-Accessible-1292022.pdf.

5 "2023 Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy," USAID, 2023, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-03/2023_Gender%20Policy_508.pdf.

6 "Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women," The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020, https://onlineviolencewomen.eiu.com/.

and the Caribbean, and 90 percent in Africa.[7] Perpetrators of TFGBV—including individuals, organized groups, and even national governments—can take advantage of the anonymity of digital spaces to evade consequences. An integrated, coordinated, and consistent global, transnational, and multi-sectoral approach is essential for protection (including survivor support), prevention, and prosecution.

While women activists and leaders have often faced the threat of GBV throughout their lives, digital technology has broadened the space for such intimidation because of its scale, speed, and reach. Women activists, politicians, and journalists are at especially high risk, as are women with intersecting marginalized identities. A 2020 Amnesty International survey showed that one in seven tweets about women politicians in India were "problematic or abusive," but that Muslim women politicians received almost 100 percent more ethnic or religious slurs than women from other religions, and that those in historically marginalized castes received nearly 60 percent more caste-based abuse than those in other castes.[8] As the *US Strategy to Prevent and Respond to GBV Globally* notes, "Experiencing online harassment and abuse can cause survivors to self-censor or limit online activity and step back from leadership roles, opportunities, and civic participation, leading to broader political, social, and economic exclusion." Because of the high likelihood that TFGBV will prompt women to leave public life, it represents a digital threat to democracy. In USAID's efforts to promote women's political participation, it must safeguard women from these threats as it works to increase their influence in politics.

DIGITAL THREATS TO DEMOCRACY AND INTERSECTIONALITY

What is intersectionality?

According to USAID's 2023 Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy, "Many aspects of a person's identity affect how they experience the world. Women and girls, men and boys, and gender-diverse individuals are shaped by their sex and gender identity as well as a range of other characteristics including age, marital status, class, ethnicity, race, disability status, geographic location, and sexual orientation. This is particularly relevant for individuals who experience overlapping marginalized identities, and therefore experience overlapping inequalities."[9]

Digital threats to democracy affect women and girls with overlapping marginalized identities at high rates and in destructive ways. Recent research from the #ShePersisted Campaign found that "women with intersecting identities (for example, Dalit and Christian women in India or Black, transgender and indigenous women in Brazil) are the target of some of the most violent, vicious gendered disinformation and online hate campaigns which have racist, in addition to sexist, undertones."[10] Research conducted in 2019 by online newsletter Salty found that social media platforms censored the content of women of color and members of the LBGTQI+ community more frequently than content posted by the general population.[11] While digital threats to democracy can cause untold harms for women and girls with overlapping marginalized identities, one of the most destructive effects is the loss of safe, affirming online communities. Removing access to these safe spaces—either by cutting off these platforms or actively making them unsafe for participants—harms women and girls with overlapping marginalized identities. USAID is committed to countering digital threats to democracy for all women and girls.

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7 Measuring the Prevalence. The Economist.

8 "Troll Patrol India: Exposing Online Abuse Faced by Women Politicians in India," Amnesty International, 2020, https://decoders.blob.core.windows.net/troll-patrol-india-findings/Amnesty_International_India_Troll_Patrol_India_Findings_2020.pdf.

9 "2023 Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy," USAID, 2023, 13, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-03/2023_Gender%20Policy_508.pdf.

10 Lucina Di Meco, "Monetizing Misogyny: Gendered Disinformation and the Undermining of Women's Rights and Democracy Globally," She Persisted, February 2023, 19, https://she-persisted.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/ShePersisted_MonetizingMisogyny.pdf.

11 "An Investigation into Algorithmic Bias in Content Policing on Instagram," Salty, n.d., https://www.saltyworld.net/algorithmicbiasreport-2/

Censorship

According to USAID's Democratizing Digital Landscape Assessment, censorship is the "suppression of free speech by governments or private institutions based on the assumption that said speech is objectionable or offensive."[12] Gendered online censorship can take several forms, such as the removal of explicitly feminist content. In China, Weibo took down 14,000+ posts, suspended 8,000 users, and permanently banned 1,000 users for violating its policies against "inciting gender conflict" and "attacking state policy and the political system," two days after a video of several men assaulting a woman went viral in 2022. It also censored colloquialisms that describe gender discrimination, including #MeToo.[13] Instagram announced in 2019 that it would limit the reach of "inappropriate" content on its Explore page. However, Instagram's sample images suggested that women's bodies were sexually suggestive, whereas all photos of men in its sample included lewd or obscene gestures.[14] Trans women face additional censorship-related challenges for their gender expression. A government official in Malaysia threatened to ban a trans influencer on X (formerly Twitter) for her choice of clothing,[15] and non-binary TikTokers in Latin America report high levels of content removal due to their gender identity.[16]

In response to online attacks, self-censorship is often a key form of online censorship for women and girls. Thirty percent of respondents in a 2020 survey of more than 900 women journalists from 125 countries reported that they self-censored on social media in response to online violence.[17] In a 2019 survey of women journalists in Pakistan, this percentage was 80 percent.[18] Self-censorship is especially prevalent among women with intersectional identities. LGTBQI+ community members in Indonesia report that they no longer share photos of LGBTQI+ couples kissing or use the words "lesbian" and "gay" on social media for fear that they could run afoul of the Government of Indonesia's censors and thus lose the ability to create safe and affirming online spaces.[19]

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12 "Democratizing Digital Landscape Assessment," USAID Digital Frontiers, September 27, 2022, https://www.digitalfrontiersdai.com/resources/democratizing-digital-landscape-assessment/.

13 Han Zhang, "The Censorship Machine Erasing China's Feminist Movement," New Yorker, August 29, 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-censorship-machine-erasing-chinas-feminist-movement.

14 Erika Hallqvist, "How Instagram censors could affect the lives of everyday women," USA Today, June 8, 2019, https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2019/06/08/how-instagram-censors-could-affect-lives-everyday-women/1329016001/.

15 Jakub Dalek, Nica Dumlao, Miles Kenyon, et al., "No Access: LGBTIQ Website Censorship in Six Countries, University of Toronto Munk School The Citizen Lab, August 31, 2021, 51, https://citizenlab.ca/2021/08/no-access-lgbtiq-website-censorship-in-six-countries/.

16 Florencia Goldsman, "Non-binary TikTokers in Latin America Sharing Debates and Circumventing Censorship," CGI, 2021, 12, https://www.cigionline.org/static/documents/SaferInternet_Paper_no_3_coverupdate.pdf.

17 Julie Posetti, Nermine Aboulez, Kalina Bontcheva, et al., "Online violence against women journalists: a global snapshot of incidence and impacts," UNESCO Digital Library, 2020, 3, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375136.

18 Hija Kamran, "Hostile Bytes: A study of online violence against women journalists, "Media Matters for Democracy, October 2019, 6, https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Hostile-Bytes.pdf.

19 Jakub Dalek, Nica Dumlao, Miles Kenyon, et al., "No Access: LGBTIQ Website Censorship in Six Countries," University of Toronto Munk School The Citizen Lab, August 31, 2021, 30, https://citizenlab.ca/2021/08/no-access-lgbtiq-website-censorship-in-six-countries/.

Online censorship in SSA is rapidly increasing as countries like Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea restrict access to news websites[20] and as countries like Ghana move to hold internet services providers liable for certain content hosted on their websites, such as LGBTQI+-related information.[21] The following case study illustrates how censorship affected the life of one woman in Ghana.

CASE STUDY: GHANAIAN JOURNALIST

Online censorship can include the forced removal of digital content to prevent a news story from going viral. On May 11, 2021, seven heavily armed security officers entered a television station in Accra, Ghana, to arrest a journalist. According to the Media Foundation for West Africa, she was targeted because her colleague had forwarded her several videos that he filmed earlier in the day outside a government building as part of his investigative reporting.[22] After the security officers chased the journalist through the building—at which point at least one officer cocked his gun—she was arrested and taken to a local police station for interrogation. Her mobile phone was seized, and before she was released, she was made to delete the photos and videos that had been sent to her earlier in the day, as well as some of her own personal photos and videos.[23] Forcing the journalist to delete the forwarded footage on her mobile phone to prevent her from reporting on a high profile story is an important example of how governments threaten democracy through censorship of digital tools and materials.

GHANA'S DIGITAL OVERVIEW



Internet penetration/ Ghanaians using the internet (2020)*





Mobile Phone Ownership (2020)*





Internet Freedom

According to Freedom House, as of 2023, Ghana's Internet Freedom status is "partly free."

* *https://statsghana.gov.gh/gssmain/fileUpload/pressrelease/Household%20Survey%20on%20ICT%20in%20Ghana%20(Abridged)%20new%20(1).pdf*

The attempt to silence this journalist demonstrates the continued intimidation and threats to which women journalists are subjected. While censorship can take several different forms ranging from online self-censorship to banning specific websites within national borders and blocking profiles on social media, the example of this journalist's ordeal shows how national governments can censor women journalists by seizing and manipulating their digital devices.

20 "How Internet shutdowns undermine journalism in sub-Saharan Africa," Reporters Without Borders, September 28, 2023, https://rsf.org/en/how-internet-shutdowns-undermine-journalism-sub-saharan-africa.

21 "Freedom on the Net 2023: Ghana," Freedom House, 2023, https://freedomhouse.org/country/ghana/freedom-net/2023.

22 "Arrest of Citi FM/TV Journalists Adds to a Growing Trend of Press Freedom Embarrassment in Ghana," Media Foundation West Africa, May 12, 2021, https://www.mfwa.org/arrest-of-citi-fm-tv-journalists-adds-to-a-growing-trend-of-press-freedom-embarrassment-in-ghana/.

23 "The Citi FM raid story: Caleb Kudah and Zoe Abu Baidoo Addo speak," YouTube, n.d., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QCd1Zs2uL4.

Digitally-enabled Targeted Persecution

Digitally-enabled targeted persecution refers to the offline repercussions of online activity, such as arrests for social media posts. According to Freedom House, over 50 countries charged, arrested, convicted, or imprisoned people for their online speech in 2021 and 2022.[24] Although it can affect anyone, digitally-enabled targeted persecution can disproportionately affect women or affect them differently than men, especially women with intersectional identities. Women can be arrested for posting about feminist issues, as in the example of a Lebanese tourist arrested for "spreading false rumors harmful to society, attacking religion, and public indecency" because of her Facebook video describing pervasive street harassment.[25] They can also be arrested for posting content that may violate local social norms, such as when the Egyptian government arrested some 12 women in 2020 for "violating 'public morals' and 'undermining family values'" because they posted videos of themselves singing and dancing while fully clothed.[26] A woman in Samara, Russia was arrested for "propaganda of nontraditional sexual relationships in front of minors" because she reposted Facebook content from a pro-LGTBQI+ account, including a Guardian article about gay marriage in the United States.[27]

Following their arrests, women can also be punished more harshly for their online behavior. In 2022, Saudi Arabian courts sentenced two women activists to 34 and 45 years in prison for their social media posts, which were thought to be the longest-ever prison sentences in Saudi Arabia for non-violent activists.[28] A 19-year-old Uyghur[29] activist in China was convicted of "advocating extremism" in 2023 after posting a WeChat video about a recent protest movement. While other women were arrested for actually joining the protests, Human Rights Watch issued a statement saying "Kamile Wayit's case is unique in that she has been arrested for a particularly severe crime, simply because she is a Uyghur, and simply for sharing a video about the protests."[30] As shown by these examples, digitally- enabled targeted persecution is an important tactic that governments can use to silence and punish their online critics, particularly women.

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24 "Freedom on the Net 2021: The Global Drive to Control Big Tech," Freedom House, 2021, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/FOTN_2021_Complete_Booklet_09162021_FINAL_UPDATED.pdf; Adrian Shahbaz, Allie Funk, Kian Vesteinsson, "Freedom on the Net 2022: Countering an Authoritarian Overhaul of the Internet," https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2022/countering-authoritarian-overhaul-internet.

25 "Egypt to free Lebanese woman imprisoned for sexual harassment claim on Facebook," Middle East Eye, September 10, 2018, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-free-lebanese-woman-imprisoned-sexual-harassment-claim-facebook.

26 "Egypt: Spate of 'Morality' Prosecutions of Women," Human Rights Watch, August 17, 2020, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/17/egypt-spate-morality-prosecutions-women.

27 "Interview with an Activist: Evdokia Romanova Faces Charges in Russia for Pro-LGBTQ Posts on Facebook," SaferVPN, September 15, 2017, https://medium.com/@SaferVPN/interview-with-an-activist-evdokia-romanova-faces-charges-in-russia-for-pro-lgbtq-posts-on-social-e4fb1cb8bca4.

28 David Gritten, "Nourah al-Qahtani: Saudi woman jailed for 45 years for social media posts," BBC News, August 31, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-62736118.

29 Uyghurs are an ethnic minority group in the PRC.

30 Amy Hawkins, "Uyghur student convicted after posting protests video on WeChat," The Guardian, June 8, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/08/uyghur-student-convicted-posting-protests-video-wechat-kamile-wayit.

As SSA governments begin more closely policing the online behavior of their citizens, digitally-enabled targeted persecution is a growing threat on the continent. The following case study illustrates how digitally-enabled targeted persecution has affected the life of one woman in Uganda.

CASE STUDY: QUEER UGANDAN SCHOLAR AND POET

On April 7, 2017, a queer Ugandan scholar and poet was arrested and detained on charges of cyber harassment and offensive communication for a Facebook post in which she called Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni "a pair of buttocks" and his First Lady/Minister of Education "empty-brained"[31] for reneging on a campaign promise to provide menstrual pads to Ugandan schoolgirls.[32] As a result, she spent over one month in a maximum security prison, and the Ugandan government tried to force her to undergo a psychiatric evaluation.[33] She was again jailed the following year for a poem she posted on Facebook about President Museveni's mother and her body. During the trial, the police officer in charge of investigating her case described taking the woman's SIM card registration details from her mobile network operator in Uganda and using it to authenticate her Facebook account and social media activity.[34] The trial resulted in a conviction of cyber harassment and a sixteen-month high security prison stay.[35] Though the court eventually overturned her conviction on procedural grounds,[36] she eventually moved her family to Germany in part to escape the offline repercussions of posting on social media.[37]

UGANDA'S DIGITAL OVERVIEW



Internet penetration/ Ugandans using the internet (2020)*





Mobile Phone Ownership (2019)*





Internet Freedom**

According to Freedom House, as of 2023, Uganda's Internet Freedom status is "partly free."

* *https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf*

** *https://cipesa.org/2021/07/uganda-abandons-social-media-tax-but-slaps-new-levy-on-internet-data/#:~:text=Introduced%20on%20July%201%2C%202018,Facebook%2C%20Twitter%2C%20and%20WhatsApp*

This case shows the degree to which some governments will manipulate their own cybersecurity laws to penalize critics for their online activity, as well as the different offline tactics—including arrests, long prison stays, and mental health evaluations—that they use to punish activists, particularly for members of Uganda's highly persecuted LGBTQI+ community. The case also illustrates the types of issues women are more likely to protest online, such as the need for free menstrual hygiene products, and the different ways in which they protest online, such as with graphic descriptions of the female body. This demonstrates how digital threats to democracy manifest differently among men and women.

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31 Nicola Slawson, "Fury over arrest of academic who called Uganda's president a pair of buttocks," The Guardian, April 17, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/apr/13/stella-nyanzi-fury-arrest-uganda-president-a-pair-of-buttocks-yoweri-museveni-cyber-harassment.

32 Toussaint Nothias, Rosebell Kagumire, "Digital Radical Rudeness: The Story of Stella Nyanzi," University of Pennsylvania, Annenberg School for Communication, January 29, 2020, https://www.asc.upenn.edu/research/centers/center-on-digital-culture-and-society/the-digital-radical/digital-radical-rudeness.

33 Nicola Slawson. Fury over arrest.

34 Vivian Aita, "Stella Nyanzi Trial Brings To Fore Government's Infinite Access To Personal Data," Unwanted Witness, 2019, https://www.unwantedwitness.org/stella-nyanzi-trial-brings-to-fore-governments-infinite-access-to-personal-data/.

35 "Uganda's Stella Nyanzi bares breasts in protest at jail sentence," BBC News, August 2, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-49210281.

36 Samuel Okiror, "Stella Nyanzi marks release from jail in Uganda with Yoweri Museveni warning," The Guardian, February 21, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/feb/21/stella-nyanzi-marks-release-from-jail-in-uganda-with-yoweri-museveni-warning.

37 Lizzie Davies, "'I'm free at last': Uganda's rudest poet on prison, protest and finding a new voice in Germany," The Guardian, January 27, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/27/im-free-at-last-ugandas-rudest-poet-stella-nyanzi-on-prison-protest-and-finding-new-voice-in-germany.

Social Manipulation and Disinformation

Social manipulation and disinformation refers to "false information that is deliberately created or disseminated with the express purpose to cause harm."[38] While the global trend of gendered disinformation can affect any woman, it encourages online harassment and abuse of women politicians and journalists in particular, particularly those with overlapping marginalized identities. Comments and social media posts often emphasize their appearance, personal lives, and marital status, rather than their work or the point of contention.[39] Civil society organization Witness identified four forms of gendered disinformation specific to African elections: sexist and misogynistic content, pseudoscience that marginalizes women, distorting sexualized content, and attacks on feminism.[40] Globally, this trend discourages women from entering politics and threatens democracy and safety by putting women interested in leadership, politics, and governance at risk. This is especially true for women of color, with research about the 2020 US Congressional election showing that "women of color candidates were twice as likely as other candidates to be targeted with or the subject of mis- and disinformation."[41] Women journalists are also a frequent target of gendered disinformation, with 41 percent of respondents reporting that they had been "targeted in online attacks that appeared to be linked to orchestrated disinformation campaigns" in a 2021 UNESCO survey.[42]

With malign actors seeking to further their own narratives in combination with generally low levels of information literacy across the continent, social manipulation and disinformation have the potential to rapidly reshape the information landscape across SSA. The following case study illustrates how social manipulation and disinformation have affected the life of one woman in South Africa.

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38 "Democratizing Digital Landscape Assessment," USAID Digital Frontiers, n.d., 7, https://www.digitalfrontiersdai.com/resources/democratizing-digital-landscape-assessment/.

39 "Women in Politics and the Media," iKNOW POLITICS, 2022, https://www.iknowpolitics.org/en/discuss/e-discussions/women-politics-and-media.

40 Nkemakonam Agunwa, Temiloluwa Alalade, "Understanding the Dangers of Gendered Disinformation in African Elections," WITNESS, August 5, 2022, https://blog.witness.org/2022/08/dangers-of-gendered-disinformation-in-african-elections/.

41 Dhanaraj Thakur, "Women of Color Political Candidates in the US Endure Most Severe Online Abuse, Mis- and Disinformation," Center for Democracy and Technology, October 27, 2022, https://cdt.org/insights/women-of-color-political-candidates-in-the-us-endure-most-severe-online-abuse-mis-and-disinformation/.

42 Julie Posetti, Nabeelah Shabbir, Diana Maynard, "The Chilling: global trends in online violence against women journalists; research discussion paper," UNESCO Digital Library, 2021, 13, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377223.

CASE STUDY: SOUTH AFRICAN JOURNALIST

A South African legal journalist has long been subject to online disinformation campaigns for her reporting on controversial topics, like South Africa's nuclear deal with the Russian Federation. According to a 2021 Amnesty International report about online abuses of South African women on Twitter (now known as X), she has received tweets saying that she "must be raped and murdered…and necklaced."[43] Similarly, her sister received a tweet from an account called "Death to KM," stating that the user had killed her.[44] The gendered disinformation campaign against the legal journalist ramped up in late 2022, after she was accused of publishing former South African president Jacob Zuma's medical records without permission, in collusion with the state prosecutor. Though disseminating private medical information can itself be considered a threat to democracy, documents filed with South African courts are deemed public records unless a judge instructs otherwise. In its judgment for the defendant in June 2023, South Africa's Pietermaritzburg High Court deemed that Zuma's medical records were already public by the time she published them.[45] In parallel with a formal court case against the legal journalist and state prosecutor, Zuma's family and supporters have run a disinformation campaign, including using doctored videos and images aimed at silencing and undermining her work. Another tweet—from Mr. Zuma's daughter—to the legal journalist referred to journalists being beaten up in Sri Lanka, with the threat "....come look here."[46] The state prosecutor has also been criticized by the Zuma family and supporters, but that criticism bears no comparison to the online abuse leveled at the legal journalist.

SOUTH AFRICA'S DIGITAL OVERVIEW



Internet penetration/ South Africans using the internet (2019)*





Mobile Phone Ownership (2019)*





Internet Freedom

According to Freedom House, as of 2023, South Africa's Internet Freedom status is "free."

** https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2019.pdf*

The case of the legal journalist demonstrates how prominent female journalists, especially those reporting on highly sensitive stories, can become the target of orchestrated disinformation campaigns that deploy gender stereotypes and gendered threats to cut down and demean their work. This is especially true for women with overlapping marginalized identities, like racial or ethnic minorities and disabled women. Anyone can be subject to coordinated disinformation campaigns on social media platforms, but the type and intensity of the threats against the legal journalist demonstrate the gendered impact of this tactic.

43 Necklacing refers to a tire forced over one's shoulders, doused in fuel, and set alight.

44 "Twitter Scorecard: Tracking Twitter's Progress in Addressing Violence and Abuse Against Women Online in South Africa," Amnesty International, 2021, 8, https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/AFR5347222021ENGLISH.pdf.

45 "South African court prohibits former president's private prosecution of journalist Karyn Maughan," Committee to Protect Journalists, June 8, 2023, https://cpj.org/2023/06/south-african-court-prohibits-former-presidents-private-prosecution-of-journalist-karyn-maughan/.

46 Marianne Thamm, "Zuma's still-mysterious 'medical condition' weaponised to prosecute journalist accused of disclosing it," Daily Maverick, September 23, 2022, https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-09-23-zumas-still-mysterious-medical-condition-weaponised-to-prosecute-journalist-accused-of-disclosing-it/.

Surveillance

Surveillance refers to observing, listening, monitoring, or recording to track a citizen's movements, activities, conversations, communications, or correspondence.[47] It is often state-sponsored, but not exclusively. Individuals can also use surveillance technology to monitor the digital and physical actions and communications of others.[48] In a 2021 survey of 10,000 adults from 10 countries, seven percent of respondents who had been in a romantic relationship admitted using an app to monitor the partner's text messages, phone calls, direct messages, emails, or photos.[49] Anecdotal evidence shows the impact of this type of intimate partner violence on women's lives. In 2014, a Pakistani woman alleged that her husband had placed a tracker inside her body so he would know where she was at all times.[50] Women domestic workers (particularly migrants) are especially vulnerable to surveillance, with research from Singapore showing high rates of employer-led closed circuit television (CCTV) surveillance of their household employees.[51] In addition, members of the LGBTQI+ community face outsize risks and potentially deadly harms related to online surveillance. Egyptian police arrested more than 60 women and men in a 2017 crackdown on the LGBTQI+ community, enabled, in part, by monitoring social media for posts about attending a concert where Pride flags were openly displayed.[52] One woman committed suicide after her arrest and torture.[53]

In terms of state-sponsored surveillance, gendered impacts include:

- Increased fear of state-backed digital surveillance, such as when a member of the LGBTQI+ community from the United Arab Emirates feared searching "how to know I am a lesbian" in case it outed her to government authorities;[54]

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47 "Democratizing Digital Landscape Assessment, " USAID, n.d., 8, https://files.digitalfrontiersdai.com/media/documents/Democratizing_Digital_Landscape_Assessment_16MAR23_1.pdf. Definition adapted from Roberts, T. (ed.) (2021) Digital Rights in Closing Civic Space: Lessons from Ten African Countries, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies.

48 "Surveillance technology is used to monitor individuals' digital and physical actions and communications," /thoughtworks, n.d.,https://www.thoughtworks.com/en-us/insights/decoder/s/surveillance-technology#:~:text=Surveillance%20technology%20is%20used%20to,in%20smart%20security%20camera%20systems.

49 "2022 Norton Cyber Safety Insights Report: Special Release – Online Creeping," Norton LifeLock, 2022, 26, https://www.nortonlifelock.com/us/en/newsroom/press-kits/2022-norton-cyber-safety-insights-report-special-release-online-creeping/.

50 "International Women's Day: How surveillance is used to assert control," Privacy International, March 6, 2015, https://privacyinternational.org/news-analysis/1483/international-womens-day-how-surveillance-used-assert-control.

51 Laura Vitis, "Surveillant assemblage: Overt, covert, movement and social surveillance in domestic and family violence in Singapore," ScienceDirect, January-February 2023, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277539522001054?via%3Dihub.

52 "Online Surveillance, Censorship, and Discrimination for LGBTQIA+ Community Worldwide," Recorded Future, 2020, 16, https://go.recordedfuture.com/hubfs/reports/cta-2020-0714.pdf.

53 Online Surveillance.

54 Amie Bisho, Arturo Filastò, Maria Xynou, et al., "NO ACCESS: LGBTIQ Website Censorship in Six Countries," The Citizen Lab, 2021, 108 https://citizenlab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/LGBTIQ-censorship-Final-1.pdf.

- Increased likelihood of digital surveillance due to intersectional identities, with UN Women reporting that racially marginalized migrant women are subject to "high levels of surveillance relative to the national population;"[55]
- Increased exposure to threats of gender-based violence (GBV), such as when Colombian security agents surveilling a journalist were told to threaten her and her daughter with rape;[56]
- Increased risk of digital surveillance for reporting GBV to authorities, such as when an Indian woman was tracked with Pegasus spyware after reporting a Supreme Court staffer for sexual harassment[57]; and
- Increased risk of blackmail and online abuse, resulting in a Bahraini human rights defender no longer taking her hijab off at home after finding Pegasus spyware installed on her phone.[58]

By targeting and harassing women with surveillance technology, ex-partners, competitors in the political space, and the state widen historically unequal power relations between men and women. [59]

Online surveillance is a growing concern across the continent, with countries including Nigeria, Ghana, and Zambia each purchasing over $350M in "safe cities" technologies from the People's Republic of China.[60] Nigeria has spent more than $2.5B on surveillance technologies like internet and mobile interception tools and social media monitoring technologies.[61] The following case study illustrates how online surveillance has affected the life of one Rwandan woman.

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55 Sarah Hamilton-Jiang, "Racially Marginalized Migrant Women," UN Women, 2022, 5, https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/Racially-marginalized-migrant-women-en.pdf.

56 International Women's Day.

57 Saumya Kalia, "Pegasus Surveillance Is 'Deeply Concerning' For Women Who Speak Up Against Powerful Men, Activists Say, "The Swaddle, July 30, 2021, https://theswaddle.com/pegasus-surveillance-is-deeply-concerning-for-women-who-speak-up-against-powerful-men-activists-say/.

58 Marwa Fatafta, "Unsafe anywhere: women human rights defenders speak out about Pegasus attacks," Access Now, January 17, 2022, https://www.accessnow.org/women-human-rights-defenders-pegasus-attacks-bahrain-jordan/.

59 Amie Bisho, Arturo Filastò, Maria Xynou, et al., "NO ACCESS: LGBTIQ Website Censorship in Six Countries, "The Citizen Lab, 2021, 108 https://citizenlab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/LGBTIQ-censorship-Final-1.pdf.

60 Tony Roberts, Judy Gitahi, Patrick Allam, et al., "Mapping the supply of surveillance technologies to Africa: case studies from Nigeria, Ghana, Morocco, Malawi, and Zambia," Institute of Development Studies, 2023, 5, https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/18120/ADRN_Surveillance_Supply_Chain_Report.pdf?sequence=26&isAllowed=y.

61 Tony Roberts. Mapping the supply, 7.

CASE STUDY: RWANDAN ACTIVIST

Although the Government of Rwanda (GoR) has repeatedly denied it, they allegedly placed Pegasus spyware on a prominent Rwandan activist's phone starting in January 2021 according to the findings of an Amnesty International forensic examination.[62] This occurred a few months after her father was kidnapped, forcibly taken to Rwanda, and put on trial in 2020. Before she discovered that she was under surveillance, she noticed that GoR representatives seemed to know where she was going and who she was speaking with, and that GoR officials contacted some members of Belgium's Parliament shortly after she had spoken with them about her father's case.[63] The spyware also allowed the GoR to listen in on her discussions with US, EU, and British officials;[64] it was apparently turned on as soon as she sat down for a meeting with Belgium's foreign affairs minister.[65] She testified in front of the US House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence about her experience in July 2022, saying that she was mortified and terrified by the experience and that no one was safe until the creators and users of this technology were punished.[66]

RWANDA'S DIGITAL OVERVIEW



Internet penetration/ Rwandans using the internet (2022)

16.6% **11.2%**



Mobile Phone Ownership (2022)

52.9% **43.1%**



Internet Freedom

According to Freedom House, as of 2023, Rwanda's Internet Freedom status is "not free."

** https://www.statistics.gov.rw/publication/main_indicators_2022*

This case demonstrates the invasive nature of digital surveillance, and the impact it can have on the daily lives of its targets. Being aware that they are under surveillance, as in the case of the activist, can engender pervasive fear among women who are being tracked either by the state, their intimate partners, or their rivals. This is especially true for women with intersectional identities, who may face an increased risk of surveillance due to their gender in combination with their sexual orientation, migrant status, racial or ethnic identity, socio-economic status, or other facets of their identity. As a result, women may change their behavior and self-censor, even in their private conversations on their personal mobile phones.

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62 Stephanie Kirchgaessner, "Hotel Rwanda activist's daughter placed under Pegasus surveillance," The Guardian, July 19, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/jul/19/hotel-rwanda-activist-daughter-pegasus-surveillance; "Pegasus Project: Rwandan authorities chose thousands of activists, journalists and politicians to target with NSO spyware ," Amnesty International, July 19, 2021, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/07/rwandan-authorities-chose-thousands-of-activists-journalists-and-politicians-to-target-with-nso-spyware/.

63 "Israeli Spy Tech Used Against Daughter of Man Who Inspired 'Hotel Rwanda,'" OCCRP, July 19, 2021, https://www.occrp.org/en/the-pegasus-project/israeli-spy-tech-used-against-daughter-of-man-who-inspired-hotel-rwanda.

64 Stephanie Kirchgaessner, "Hotel Rwanda activist's daughter.

65 Antoaneta Roussi, "Daughter of imprisoned Rwandan dissident: Governments must be 'accountable' for spyware use," Politico, July 28, 2022, https://www.politico.eu/article/carine-kanimba-rusesabagina-daughter-imprisoned-rwanda-dissident-government-accountable-spyware-use/.

66 Nomaan Merchant, "Victim of private spyware warns it can be used against US," Associated Press News, July 28, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/technology-africa-genocides-rwanda-72ecb6eb631c021004c3a017e7aeb2ce; Lorenzo Franceschi-Bicchierai, "Woman Tells Congress What It's Like to Be Hacked by NSO's Pegasus," Vice, July 27, 2022, https://www.vice.com/en/article/y3pvaj/woman-tells-congress-what-its-like-to-be-hacked-by-nsos-pegasus.

Internet Shutdowns

According to Global Voices, an internet shutdown is "an intentional disruption of internet or electronic communications, rendering them inaccessible or effectively unusable, for a specific population or within a location, often to exert control over the flow of information."[67] Internet shutdowns affect everyone within a specific geographic area, but they create unique challenges for women because of the ways in which gendered social norms interact with women's usage of the internet. They erode women's sense of physical security because they can no longer share their locations or remain in close contact with friends and family when in public.[68] Shutdowns also restrict their access to information and educational resources, including information about sexual and reproductive health or online GBV services, a harm amplified in scenarios where it is already difficult or considered inappropriate for women to leave their homes.[69] This is especially true for women with disabilities, who may rely heavily on the internet if they are not physically able to leave their homes, or for members of the LGBTQI+ community, for whom online anonymity and encrypted messaging services can equate to safety when expressing their gender or sexual identity.[70]

Internet shutdowns also mean that many women who sell their goods on social media sites and messaging apps experience a steep drop in their sales, which materially affects their livelihoods.[71] Shutdowns also deny women their political right to organize and their ability to interact with others online from their homes.[72] Collectively, the gendered impacts of internet shutdowns can have major negative effects on women's mental health and well-being.[73] As one member of Iran's LGBTQI+ community stated, "If I were to describe the experience [of internet shutdowns] in one word I would say, suffocating...The internet shutdown cut off the minority from a source of information and moral support. Everyone was affected by the blackout but queer people were more panicked. They were feeling a sense of isolation…"[74] This is also true in the SSA context, where anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric, attacks, and legislation are rapidly increasing as of 2023.[75]

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67 "Internet disruption: different terms for different tactics," Global Voices, January 8, 2020, https://advox.globalvoices.org/2020/01/08/internet-disruption-different-terms-for-different-tactics/#:~:text=An%20internet%20shutdown%20is%20defined,the%20flow%20of%20information.

68 Deborah Brown, Allison Pytlak, "Why Gender Matters in International Cyber Security," APC, April 2020, https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/Gender_Matters_Report_Web_A4.pdf.

69 Deborah Brown, Allison Pytlak, "Why Gender Matters in International Cyber Security," APC, April 2020, https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/Gender_Matters_Report_Web_A4.pdf; Sophia Ngassa, "The Damage Caused by the 93-Day Internet Blackout in Cameroon," Slate, August 17, 2017, https://slate.com/technology/2017/08/the-damage-caused-by-cameroon-s-93-day-internet-blackout.html.

70 "End Internet Shutdowns to Manage COVID-19," Human Rights Watch, March 31, 2020, 10, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/31/end-internet-shutdowns-manage-covid-19; https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/Gender_Matters_Report_Web_A4.pdf

71 Deborah Brown, Why Gender Matters.

72 Aceng Sandra, "Internet Shutdowns: An Evaluation of Women's Online Expression and Participation in Uganda," Global Network Initiative Blog, December 15, 2020, https://medium.com/global-network-initiative-collection/internet-shutdowns-an-evaluation-of-womens-online-expression-and-participation-in-uganda-8a4cac7bc479.

73 Deborah Brown, Why Gender Matters.

74 Deborah Brown, Why Gender Matters, 10.

75 x"Africa: We are facing extinction: Escalating anti-LGBTI sentiment, the weaponization of law and their human rights implications in select African countries," Amnesty International, January 9, 2024, 5, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr01/7533/2024/en/.

Internet shutdowns affected nearly 85 million internet users and caused close to $1.75B in losses across SSA in 2023.[76] They are a huge impediment to growth on the continent. The following case study illustrates how internet shutdowns have affected the life of one individual woman in Ethiopia.

CASE STUDY: ETHIOPIAN DOCTOR

During the recent civil conflict, Tigray was subject to an internet and phone shutdown from November 2020 through February 2023,[77] a period of nearly 2.5 years. According to a doctor from the Tigray region, the shutdown had huge impacts on women's health in Mekelle. It was not possible to call ambulances for pregnant women and women in labor, resulting in the deaths of some women patients who made three-hour journeys on their own to the medical facility where the doctor works.[78] This doctor felt the effects of the shutdown personally. She was enrolled in a PhD program, but she had to stop attending when she could no longer contact the university or her professors, and her project was terminated.[79] The psychological effects of the shutdown also took a toll on the doctor because of the medical-related suffering she witnessed at the hospital and because it is now much harder for her to remain in contact with her family on a day-to-day basis.[80]

ETHIOPIA'S DIGITAL OVERVIEW

Internet penetration/ Ethiopians using the internet (2021)*

20% 14%

Mobile Phone Ownership (2016) *

54% 27%

Internet Freedom

According to Freedom House, as of 2023, Ethiopia's Internet Freedom status is "not free."

* *https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/DDD/ddd_ETH.pdf*

https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/AS83/AB27.pdf

This case demonstrates several impacts of internet shutdowns on women, ranging from mental health difficulties to the impact on educational plans. The doctor's story shows the disproportionate impact of internet shutdowns on women as a group, highlighting its impact on maternal and child health.

76 Abdullah Ajibade, "Sub-Saharan Africa lost $1.74 billion in 2023 due to government-induced Internet shutdowns," January 8, 2024, https://techpoint.africa/2024/01/08/africa-2023-internet-shutdowns/.

77 Carolyn Tackett, Felicia, "After years in the dark, Tigray is slowly coming back online," Access Now, February 1, 2023, https://www.accessnow.org/tigray-shutdown-slowly-coming-back-online/.

78 Jiyeon, Felicia, Teklehaymanot, "Stranded, suffocated, and in pain: 15 stories from Tigray's internet siege," Access Now, March 17, 2023, https://www.accessnow.org/15-stories-from-tigrays-internet-siege/.

79 Jiyeon, Stranded, suffocated, and in pain.

80 Jiyeon, Stranded, suffocated, and in pain.

Recommendations

The following recommendations address specific ways that USAID, its implementing partners, civil society groups, and local communities can address the gendered impacts of digital threats to democracy in their work. Supporting these actors in identifying digital threats to democracy with disproportionate impact on women and girls through trainings and custom tools is a critical first step to countering TFGBV. With this information, USAID and its partners can integrate mitigation measures across its digital development programming, while also funding and designing activities that focus specifically on countering digital threats to democracy with disproportionate effects on women and girls (including those with overlapping marginalized identities). This can include a wide range of activities, including working with traditional GBV service providers to incorporate TFGBV services into their offerings, collaborating with technology companies to develop digital tools that deliberately minimize opportunities for TFGBV, and supporting women survivors of TFGBV. With information from these activities, USAID and its partners can collect evidence from, publish research on, and measure the impact of programming focused on countering digital threats to democracy for women and girls. This will increase awareness and amplify knowledge of TFGBV globally. The causal chain graphic below shows how these recommendations lead to outcomes that mitigate the effects of digital threats to democracy on women and girls, which in turn will lead to increased gender equality and women's empowerment in USAID partner countries.

Figure 1: Recommendations, Outcomes, and Impacts of Mitigating the Effects of Gendered Digital Threats to Democracy

FOR USAID

- Align with the *US Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally* and participate in key initiatives to close the gender digital divide such as the Women in Digital Economy Fund
- Train USAID staff on the gendered implications of digital threats to democracy, including strategies to identify and mitigate its impact on women and girls with overlapping marginalized identities.
- Develop and disseminate simple and practical tools for USAID staff to determine specific vulnerabilities to digital threats to democracy—with a focus on their potential impacts on all women and girls—in current and future programming.
- Fund activities that counter digital threats to democracy for women and girls, including those with intersectional identities. Integrate mitigation strategies to counter digital threats to democracy for all women and girls in all digital programming.
- Pilot regional projects to raise awareness of TFGBV and improve the online environment for all users.
- Develop and implement indicators that measure the impact of USAID programming focused on countering digital threats to democracy for women and girls, including women and girls with overlapping marginalized identities.
- Collate evidence from programs that mitigate the impact of digital threats to democracy on women and girls to determine successful, high-impact strategies for new programming. Disaggregate the evidence to look at marginalized groups such as women with disabilities or women migrants.
- Participate in the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse and the White House Task Force to Address Online Harassment and Abuse.
- Engage with tech companies to support the design of new technologies that minimize opportunities for TFGBV and establish new norms and policy reforms against TFGBV.

FOR USAID IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS (IPS)

- Identify potential digital threats to democracy with disproportionate impact on women and girls (including those with overlapping marginalized identities) and implement mitigation measures when designing digital activities or interventions,
- Integrate digital literacy programming into all digital interventions, with a focus on specific tactics to mitigate digital threats to democracy such as information literacy to counter social manipulation and disinformation.
- Fund culturally sensitive and appropriate trainings, workshops, and communication campaigns about how digital threats to democracy disproportionately affect women and girls, with a focus on how women and girls with other marginalized identities can minimize the risk and impact on their daily lives.
- Integrate TFGBV preparedness into the digital tool development process by co-designing tools with GBV experts and survivors and by incorporating GBV reporting mechanisms per USAID CARE-GBV's Addressing GBV through Technology Programs brief.
- Design and implement interventions that support women survivors of digital threats to democracy, including legal redress. This includes adapting existing GBV services to include support for TFGBV survivors.
- Strengthen partner capacity for safeguarding by implementing "safety by design" principles to prevent TFGBV and data security/privacy protections for survivor data per USAID CARE-GBV's Addressing GBV through Technology Programs brief.
- Increase the evidence base on the intersection of TFGBV and digital threats to democracy by developing and integrating relevant indicators. Disaggregate targets by marginalized groups in alignment with the US Strategy to Prevent and Respond to GBV.

FOR DIGITAL-FOCUSED CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS

- Build coalitions with other national, regional, or international civil society groups to amplify the issue of gendered digital threats to democracy on the international stage and among the donor community.
- Build the capacity of civil society groups not focused on digital issues to understand how digital threats to democracy impact all women and girls to cultivate a broader stakeholder network,
- Conduct advocacy campaigns pushing governments to pass and enforce laws that minimize digital threats to democracy for women and girls, including women and girls with intersecting marginalized identities such as ethnic or religious minorities.
- Publish research that explores and exposes cases of intersectional digital threats to democracy against women and girls in their home countries. Align research to the US Strategy to Prevent and Respond to GBV Globally. This could include studies on the link between TFGBV, disinformation, and violent extremism, or TFGBV experienced by women in the public arena.
- Convene culturally sensitive trainings, workshops, and communication campaigns about how digital threats to democracy affect all women and girls, with a focus on minimizing the risks and impact on their daily lives.
- Adapt existing service offerings on TFGBV for GBV service providers. Collaborate with other GBV service providers or advocacy organizations to share best practices and develop more effective programming for TFBGV survivors.

Annex I

IN THEIR OWN WORDS: THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL THREATS TO DEMOCRACY ON WOMEN IN SSA

From October-November 2022, researchers interviewed 16 women in 11 countries—including digital rights activists, human rights advocates, businesswomen, journalists, and women in organizations that support women— about digital threats to democracy in their home countries and their personal experiences with digital threats to democracy tactics. The following quotes from those interviews demonstrate the gendered impacts of digital threats to democracy within multiple SSA contexts.

> **"We have also seen increased circulation of non-consensual intimate images of both genders, but of course for women and girls [they] have been more prominent. Besides that, we see self-censorship where ordinary women internet users are leaving social media, because they have been bullied while others, it is just out of fear- of potential bullying attacks…. So you find that you either discontinue the use of certain social media platforms or silently be on the platform as a spectator...." –** ***Public policy professional from Zambia focused on digital rights and inclusion***

INTERNET SHUTDOWNS

> **"Social media was down for about 48 hours. It affected everyone, however for women, a lot of women lost out on business, the majority being women who use social media to advertise their clothing, fashion accessories, etc. and make their living off that. The two days made them lose income, which ultimately affected their livelihoods. Similarly, during the election period... it did affect every woman: students, businesswomen, politicians, journalists, etc., in that they were not able to access information or communicate, not able to participate in civic matters, especially election- related content, not able to contribute to democratic processes." –** ***Public policy professional from Zambia focused on digital rights and inclusion***

SOCIAL MANIPULATION AND DISINFORMATION

> **"A lot of women politicians are online. They see what other female politicians have been subjected to online; around threats, mischaracterization, manipulated photos and videos. In the next general election cycle for 2024, what is most likely to happen is that because of disinformation, less women are likely to run for public office, there [are] less women online, which is a form of silencing. Women journalists are the ones most subjected to disinformation, followed by women politicians. Doctored videos, doctored posts, influence operations against specific journalists, attacks. What this does to them is that it silences them, especially when they cover politicians who have been involved in corruption. It takes a great toll on their mental health." –** ***Disinformation expert from South Africa***

TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

"…Increasingly, there has been a wave of online gender-based violence. It comes in many forms, commonly cyber bullying… there is really a lack of online etiquette to a point where females are being forced to self-censor. So you find that if you are a female activist, very vocal on specific issues or if you are a female politician, you get attacked based on your online posts. During the elections campaign period, when you post about you visiting your constituency, community sites, or speak to specific political issues etc., people will not interact with the subject matter of your posts. They would rather speak about your personal life. So we're noticing a level of self-censorship, so you find that even female politicians are not as active and engaged online as the male politicians… with the male counterparts, there will be some level of engagement with the subject matter or content of their post, whereas the female counterparts, it gets personal, for example, their marital status, who they have dated, or bringing up certain scandals that they may have been involved in." – *Public policy professional from Zambia focused on digital rights and inclusion*

INTERSECTIONALITY AND DIGITAL THREATS TO DEMOCRACY

"But most importantly is to take an intersectional approach, particularly to gender. That we are thinking about women, we should realize that there are women in different sectors and with different statuses and as a result of that, they've got different needs. This will help to identify the specific needs for specific women. For instance, there are women in the rural communities that do not see the need to be online. They do not see the need to own smartphones. So there is an opportunity to start making digital technologies relevant or to start programs to help women in the different sectors to appreciate how digital technologies can be of benefit to them or in what sense they are being left behind." – *Digital rights and digital inclusion advocate from Zimbabwe*

Annex 2
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Annex 3
ADDITIONAL READING

- The Impact of Information Communication Technologies on Gender-Based Violence
- Addressing GBV Through Technology Programs
- USAID 2023 Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy
- LGBTQI+ Inclusive Development Strategy
- MarketLinks GDD Risk Mitigation Technical Note
- United States Strategy to Prevent and Respond to GBV Globally
- TFGBV as an Attack on Women's Political Participation: Review of Global Evidence and Implications
- TFGBV: Making All Spaces Safe
- Landscape of TFGBV: Findings from the Asia Region



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