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DIGITAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN NIGERIA: STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTION

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Abstract

This study investigated digital violence against women in Nigeria, and the strategies for prevention. The study was conducted in Cross River State, with two objectives viz; to examine the types of digital violence prevalent in Nigeria and the strategies for combating these violence. The study revealed different types of violence perpetrated against women digitally, including cyber bullying, cyber stalking, doxing, cyber harassment etc. Some of the strategies for combating these violence included engaging young people, digital campaigns, multisectoral partnerships etc. Based on the above, it was recommended among others that; laws should be put in place to curb online gender-based violence against women and girls; violators should be held accountable to minimize these violence at all levels; there should be changing attitudes, gender roles and stereotypes that make violence against women acceptable, and raising awareness of different types of violence and preventive actions should be taken within the education system, among professionals working with victims and in cooperation with NGOs, the media and the private sector in order to reach out to the public.

Keywords: Digital violence, Women, Strategies, Prevention, Nigeria.

Introduction

“Prevention, they say is better than cure”. It simply means the act of stopping something from happening or the act of stopping someone from doing something. Digital violence against women is preventable. Any act of violence performed, aided, or made worse by the use of information and communication technology (such as cell phones, the Internet, social media, computer games, text messaging, email, etc.) against a woman only because she is a woman is referred to as digital or online violence against women.

Given that technology "mirrors the societies that create it," a major conflict surrounding the digital revolution and the adoption of online information and communications technologies (ICTs) is the possibility of both good and harmful gendered effects. On the one hand, digital technologies and online platforms can make it easier for women and girls to access vital information and services, opening up new career and educational options. They can be used to coordinate movements such as those for gender justice and equality. ICTs can be beneficial for women and girls in promoting creativity, community, and leisure in addition to facilitating increased social, economic, or political agency. However, even though the gender digital divide keeps many women and girls from taking advantage of these potential advantages, there is mounting evidence that the digital revolution has made gendered oppression and inequality worse and even given rise to new forms of it for those who do have access to the internet. Indeed, as feminists and women's organizations have long argued, the offline world is closely tied to a variety of digital tools and modalities, which exacerbates its power dynamics and inequities. To put it another way, men continue to dominate the design, governance, control, and access of this world and its resources, while women, girls, and gender minorities' viewpoints, experiences, and needs are generally ignored (Harris & Vitis, 2020); UN Women, 2022).

However, because of the rising use of new digital technologies and the ongoing connectedness of Web 2.0, cyber violence is frequently referred to as a new kind of violence (EIGE, 2022). Furthermore, because of its remote location, it is frequently regarded as less dangerous. Given that it is more of an ancient issue, this is a complete misconception. As a result, it can originate from or directly result in bodily injury. It can also begin online and continue offline or offline and continue online (Esposito & Breeze, 2022). It may be a prelude to abuse that will be sought in the real world, or it may represent physical forms of abuse and victimization that are portrayed digitally. Furthermore, theory suggests that a perspective based on continuum thinking might assist alleviate the suffering caused by cyber violence, and the EU has highlighted the duration of violence and the connection between gender-based violence committed online and offline (EUCACEOWM, 2020).

Our everyday lives are increasingly being mediated by digital technology, which is also making it easier for gender-based violence to take on new and more extreme forms. Although it is not a new phenomena, cyber violence against women and girls has increased significantly in recent years, posing serious risks to women's safety and wellbeing both online and offline. This emphasizes how crucial it is to defend and preserve women's rights in the digital age. The advancement of gender equality initiatives is threatened by violence against women, especially. The foundation for developing fresh and creative approaches to address the problem of online violence should be a particular focus on the distinct experiences of girls and young women on the internet. The emergence of the metaverse offers an interesting change in the way that digital spaces are used for communication, education, and service provision, according to Oladokun, Ajani, Oloniruha, Ilori, Nsirim, and Egbe (2025). By offering users immersive virtual settings where they may interact, communicate, and work together, the metaverse goes beyond the confines of the real world.

It is critical to identify the different types of online abuse as they emerge, the most likely targets and vulnerable groups, and the damages to which they are subject. Legislative reform must be achieved through

appropriate data collection and reporting techniques to address online abuse against women, even though many incidences of online violence in Nigeria go unreported. To safeguard women online, the comprehensive implementation and updating of laws related to online privacy and protection, including the Nigeria Data Protection Regulation (NDPR), Data Protection Bill, Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) law, Cyber Crimes Act (2015), Penal Code, Criminal Code Act, and Digital Rights and Freedom Bill, are essential. As technology continues to advance, this effort must also include the creation of current policies. In addition to delivering a message to the entire community that Online Gender Base Violence (OGBV) is not tolerated, offenders must get the proper punishment. Governments, media outlets, civil society organizations, and digital corporations must work together and take action if comprehensive change is to take place at both the individual and systemic levels. Digital environments must be secure and empowering for all users if digital rights are to be considered human rights. Information is a vital tool for the advancement of social development and human civilization. Information systems have been developed to address the unique requirements of the various sectors of endeavor in acknowledgment of this. Since information is composed of concepts that are combined to provide consumers, meaning, each piece of information is created with a certain goal in mind (Ogunjimi, Eyong, & Offon, 2022).

For billions of individuals globally, digital technology has transformed numerous aspects of their lives. The internet is the pivotal technology of the Information Age, and with the proliferation of wireless communication in the early 21st century, it can be concluded that, despite notable inequalities in bandwidth, efficiency, and cost, humanity is now almost entirely interconnected. At now, 47% of the global population—exceeding 3.5 billion individuals—possess mobile internet connections. Particularly in developing nations like Nigeria, having access to the internet opens up a world of social and economic potential. In poor nations, men are up to 52% more likely than women to be online, according to the World Wide Web Foundation. The digital gender gap is concerning given the advantages of the digital economy, particularly as the digital sphere has been identified as a tool for rescuing women from poverty in developing nations. Access-blocking factors like online violence against women must be removed if women are to fully benefit from the opportunities. Unfortunately, a large portion of the offline violence experienced by women and girls has shifted online as the world becomes more connected. Women in conflict areas are more likely to experience gender-based violence, according to research. Despite the prevalence of gender-based violence in many locations, it is crucial to remember that conflict also undermines protective systems and fosters environments that can result in abuse, exploitation, and violence (Care International, 2020). As the COVID-19 epidemic causes economic or psychological stress, women are more vulnerable to violence (John, Casey, Carino, & McGovern, 2020).

Statement of the problem

Observations indicate that one in three women will encounter some sort of violence in her lifetime, and despite the recent proliferation of internet connectivity, it is predicted that one in ten women have suffered a type of cyber abuse since the age of 15. Internet access is rapidly becoming essential for economic prosperity and is increasingly regarded as a fundamental human right; thus, it is imperative to guarantee that this digital public sphere is a secure and empowering environment for all, particularly for women and girls. This study sought to examine digital violence prevalent against women in Nigeria and also to suggest strategies for prevention.

Objectives of the study

1. To examine the types of digital violence prevalent against women

2. To examine the strategies for prevention of digital violence against women

Types of digital violence against women

Cyber stalking

Intentional repeated activities against women and/or girls due to their gender, or a combination of gender and other variables (e.g. race, age, handicap, sexual orientation, occupation, or views), constitute cyberstalking against women and girls. It involves the use of ICT tools to harass, intimidate, persecute, surveil, or initiate unwelcome communication, participating in detrimental behaviours that render the victim feeling intimidated, upset, or unsafe. The most commonly recurrent types of behaviour include: threatening, intimidating, harassing, initiating unwanted conversation, monitoring, spying, pursuing, following, sharing intimate photographs without consent with obsessive intent, and sending or posting derogatory words, insults, slander, and denigration. This is a threat to women and girls and should be discouraged at all cost, because it can affect self-esteem and can also lead to depression, create sadness, this poses a risk to women and girls and should be avoided at all costs.

Cyber harassment

Cyber harassment of women and girls occurs when one or more individuals within a "network" utilise information and communication technology (ICT) to harass, impose upon, or intercept communications, with the aim or effect of establishing an intimidating, hostile, demeaning, humiliating, or offensive atmosphere for the victim. The most often occurring sorts of activity encompass harassment, stalking, pursuit, interception, misuse of personal data, dissemination of inappropriate communications, sexual remarks, and defamation. Cyber harassment encompasses actions directed against victims based on their gender or a mix of gender with other variables such as race, age, handicap, career, personal beliefs, or sexual orientation. Cyber harassment is characterized in literature as the transmission of abusive messages, the delivery of unsolicited presents, persistent unwanted communications—including phone calls, text messages, or other online interactions via social networking platforms—prematurely terminating phone calls, theft, or the unauthorized reading of correspondence. Despite the significance of criminalizing it, cyber harassment appears to be less severe than cyberstalking in terms of frequency, aggression, and the obsessiveness of perpetrators because the latter involves the stalker's behavior being repeated and the victim being continuously threatened or unsafe in any way (Polyzoidou, 2024).

Cyber bullying

Sending or publishing offensive or malicious content or participating in various types of social aggression using the internet or other digital technologies is known as cyberbullying. "The deliberate and conscious desire to harm another and put him/her in a situation of pressure" is what we see in classic bullying. As a result, the victim is "repeatedly exposed, when negative acts occur" and just happens to be there. Cyberbullying differs from traditional bullying in that it is more public and its consequences are more severe due to the fact that a higher number of individuals have access to the internet. However, the educational context is the main cause of this behavior (disagreements among students, a fun attitude, strictness and poor grading of teachers, parents' discontent with their children's friends, and anonymous threats). Cyberbullying typically encompasses the harassment of individuals through persistent texts, instant messages, or chats; trolling; dispatching threatening or distressing messages; mocking; teasing; offending; insulting; impersonating; disseminating embarrassing or humiliating videos on platforms such as YouTube or Vimeo; or transmitting threatening or otherwise malicious messages via social media, gaming websites,

text, or email. Even while cyberbullying is generally thought to be far less harmful than the previously described "cyber-behaviors," its effects can range from simple discomfort and annoyance to the most severe situations, such as self-harm and suicide. Anyone who is made to feel vulnerable by cyberbullying or other personal circumstances may have to deal with this (Polyzoidou, 2024).

Non-consensual sexting

Distributing explicit texts or photographs without the recipient's consent is referred to as non-consensual sexting. Adolescent sexting is characterized in both scholarly and societal discussions as either a normative behavior indicative of intimacy and sexual interest among peers in the digital era (normalcy discourse) or as a detrimental behavior associated with severe adverse consequences such as depression, self-harm, or suicide (deviance discourse). The results of certain studies looking at the connection between sexting and depression have been mixed. According to a number of research, sexting and depression symptoms are positively correlated (Gasso, Klettke, Agustina, & Montiel, 2019), while other studies found no significant association (Del, Ojeda, Casas, Mora-Merchán, & Elipe, 2019). When sexual behavior, age, gender, race/ethnicity, and parent education were included as control factors, the relationship between depression and sexting ceased to be significant in a sample of 938 teenagers between the ages of 14 and 18.

Clancy et al. (2021), indicate that sexual preoccupation, characterised by heightened interest in sexual fantasies, thoughts, or activities, serves as a positive predictive factor for adolescents' engagement in nonconsensual sexting, as those who exhibit sexual preoccupation appear susceptible to involvement in such behaviour (Touloupis, 2024). In this context, another sex-related element that may lead to teenagers' non-consensual sexting is sexual self-concept, specifically individuals' positive (sexual esteem) and negative perceptions and emotions (sexual anxiety) regarding themselves as sexual beings. This assumption is grounded in the observation that individuals with elevated self-esteem and reduced anxiety around life appear to be less susceptible to engaging in sexting (Fannin, 2020). Thus, it may be asserted that both the positive and negative aspects of sexual self-concept (sexual esteem and sexual anxiety, respectively) may render teenagers less susceptible to non-consensual sexting behaviours. Aggravated sexting represents a novel manifestation of detrimental and hostile digital conduct linked to adverse psychological consequences for victims, whereas consensual sexting is regarded as a statistically and developmentally typical expression of adolescent sexuality, unassociated with negative effects such as depression or self-harm.

Doxing

Doxing, sometimes referred to as "doxxing" or "doxing," is a cyberattack technique in which personal data is gathered and shared with malevolent purpose. By making sensitive information, such as social security numbers, addresses, phone numbers, credit card numbers, and other private information, publicly available, doxing attacks aim to humiliate or hurt the target. The victim is threatened by doxers using this information, either by extortion or blackmail. Since doxers have traditionally used internet databases, such as public records websites and social media platforms, to gather personal information about their victims, the name "dox" is derived from the colloquial word for "documents" (or doc). By reaching out to outside sources, like those close to the victim, doxers may also attempt to obtain further information on their target. They will either post the information directly online or through a link-sharing platform once they have acquired sufficient details about their target.

Personal jokes like disclosing someone's phone number without their consent or more serious crimes like fraud and identity theft are examples of doxing. Attackers can now more easily identify possible victims on the internet, even if they are not actively seeking attention, thanks to technological developments. In order to prevent doxing attacks, many firms increasingly invest in strong cybersecurity measures like firewalls

and encryption software that assist in protection against possible threats posed by doxers. Doxing is an illegal online activity that harms individuals, businesses, and sometimes entire countries. IT teams and cybersecurity experts can take precautions to shield their networks from any dangers by being aware of the various doxing tactics that are accessible.

Strategies for prevention of digital violence against women

Mitigating violence in the digital era is essential for achieving gender equality. The detrimental effects of technology-facilitated violence can be extensive and profound; hence, prioritising measures to avoid it and guarantee safe participation in the digital realm for all individuals, irrespective of gender, is imperative.

Engaging young people

Global research indicates that the majority of women report experiencing social media harassment for the first time between the ages of 14 and 16. One study (Del, Ojeda, Casas, Mora-Merchán, & Elipe, 2019), found that 58% of young women and girls has reported experiencing some kind of online harassment. In order to address these intricate kinds of abuse that disproportionately affect young people, UN Women works directly with young people. The 30 for 2030 regional youth cohort in Asia and the Pacific developed a social media-friendly toolkit to empower young people, increase awareness, and provide specific recommendations on how to prevent technology-facilitated gender-based violence for schools, the private sector, women and youth-led organizations, and governments. A combined UN International Youth Conference in Africa identified strategies to combat violence against women and girls that is fuelled by technology. According to Del, Ojeda, Casas, Mora-Merchán, and Elipe, (2019), young participants demanded greater reporting, more women in decision-making, legal reforms, and more pressure on digital service providers to improve protection.

Pushing for more accountability and female representation

In the development, application, and regulation of technology, women and girls continue to be underrepresented. Women make up less than one-third of IT sector employees worldwide, only 28% of engineering grads, and 22% of artificial intelligence workers. This impedes both the revolutionary potential of technology and the digital empowerment of women and girls. The majority of new digital technologies are still unregulated. It is crucial to take effective steps to address the issues raised by the usage of these technologies, especially those that could negatively affect gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. Online service providers should prioritize ethics, safety, and privacy during the design phase of their products and proactively reduce the danger of technology misuse against women and girls (Gasso, Klettke, Agustina, & Montiel, 2019).

Digital campaigns

In order to combat online and technology-facilitated violence on the platforms where it flourishes, innovative digital solutions can be very helpful. By giving women and girls a safer online environment, the Fireflies campaign raised awareness globally and established an international support network. In order to educate and engage audiences about technology and violence, UN Women (2023), has also started a series of videos that include statistics, animations, and women from all around the world. A brief movie called "Amira: A day in the life of a woman victim of online violence" serves as an example, explaining the effects of online violence against women and girls as well as how to respond to such assaults.

Multisectoral partnerships

Generation Equality, the foremost global initiative to enhance finance and execution of gender equality, was launched by UN Women in 2021. By 2026, governments, civil society organisations, and corporate partners have pledged to establish legislation, remedies, and initiatives to combat technology-facilitated gender-based violence. The Global Partnership for Action on Gender-based Online Harassment and Abuse, launched in 2022, is likewise coordinated by UN Women. These efforts aim to advance gender equality and empowerment by empowering women, bridging the digital gender divide, and enhancing online safety (UN Women, 2023).

Strengthening legal and policy frameworks

It is important to create and implement laws that address gender-based violence, such as those that define and forbid all types of harassment and abuse. It is also critical to guarantee survivors of gender-based violence have access to justice and support services like counseling, legal assistance, and healthcare.

Conclusion

Even if technology, digital tools, and the internet offer a lot of potential, they have also created new forms of oppression for women and girls and maintained gender inequality. Although the term "technology-facilitated gender-based violence" is novel to many, the phenomenon itself is not. Cyberbullying, online harassment, hate speech, doxing, trolling, deepfakes, and abuse of intimate images are just a few examples of the various ways that technology facilitates gender-based violence. Because of their gender, women, girls, and people who identify as gender non-conforming are more likely to be targeted and face more serious and long-lasting repercussions. Since everyone is created equal and men are not more equal than women, measures should be taken to stop this threat so that women and girls can go about their daily lives without fear or intimidation.

Suggestions

The following suggestions were put forward for this study:

1. Laws should be put in place to curb online gender-based violence against women and girls. Violators should be held accountable to minimize this violence at all levels.
2. The prevention of digital violence against women involves altering attitudes, gender roles, and stereotypes that normalize such violence, as well as enhancing knowledge of its various forms.
3. Preventive measures must be implemented within the educational framework, among professionals assisting victims, and in collaboration with NGOs, the media, and the commercial sector to effectively engage the public.
4. Perpetrators must be arrested and face judgement appropriately, which will prevent people from engaging in digital technology-aided gender-based violence in Nigeria.

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