

# Not Just a Trend:

# Assessing the Types, Spread, and the Impact of Online Gender Based Violence in Uganda

Policy Brief, August 2021

## Executive Summary

Women of Uganda Network in partnership with Makerere University School of Women and Gender Studies conducted nationwide research to study the types, spread, impact, and methods of dealing with online gender-based violence.

The research team conducted desk reviews, Key Informants Interviews, and Focus Group Discussions to collect data. Quantitative Data was analyzed in the spreadsheet while the Qualitative Data was analyzed based on emerging themes and sub-themes in line with evaluation objectives.

The study noted various types of OGBV and these included sharing of non-consensual intimate images (“revenge pornography”) represented by 27% followed by online sexual harassment represented by 22% and cyberstalking represented by 13% on digital platforms. Impersonation is represented by 11% of the respondents while hacking is 7%. Additionally, 4% of the respondents identified doxing as the most committed and surveillance was at 2%. The digital spaces where OGBV is widespread are WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, video conferencing platforms, dating sites, and YouTube. Online gender-based violence has caused a lot of psychological and economic harm to the victims, the majority of whom are women. Blocking the perpetrator was identified as the major reaction by survivors to online gender-based violence.

The government ministries and agencies should strengthen the implementation and monitoring of existing international legal frameworks and national laws. Social media companies should develop strategies for rapid prevention and reporting of OGBV in a timely manner to avoid negative consequences.

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## 1.0 Introduction

The internet is one of the most powerful platforms for opportunities, sharing ideas, and building community, but women and girls are too often silenced and censored due to online gender-based violence and hence they fear to speak out.<sup>1</sup> Online gender-based violence experienced by women in Uganda remains the most ignored form of violence at personal, societal, and policy levels, yet it causes real and more harmful attacks, threats, and intimidation to women like all other forms of violence that are highly condemned under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

According to World Health Organisation (WHO), one in three women worldwide will have experienced a form of violence in their lifetime. Despite the low adaptation to internet use, it is estimated that one in ten women have experienced a form of cyber violence since the age of 15 (EIGE, 2021). In Africa alone, 1 in 2 women has suffered sexual harassment in the workplace. Of those cases, only 30% were reported (WAN-INFRA 2021). Based on WOUGNET's 2020 study, 43.5% of the victims were found to have faced sexual harassment, 39.1% have been cyber stalked in various forms and 17.4% have had their images shared without their consent (non-consensual intimate images (NCII) commonly known by the misnomer as "revenge pornography.")<sup>2</sup>

Despite the contributions and efforts made, it is still very difficult for victims of online GBV to find support, because most laws do not refer to online violence. Article 33(1) of the Ugandan Constitution accords full and equal dignity of women with men which must also extend to the online sphere. It is therefore important to fight for and improve the status of women's rights online by creating an environment that enables an inclusive and effective policy response to tackle online gender-based violence in Uganda.

In this study, WOUGNET conducted nationwide evidence-based research on the types, spread, and impact of online gender-based violence on women for knowledge sharing and policy advocacy.

The purpose of the study was to investigate the spread, types, and impact of online gender-based violence on women's rights online in Uganda and produce a research report and policy brief for knowledge sharing and policy advocacy.

## 2.0. Methodology

This study was conducted in the five (5) districts of Uganda; Lira, Jinja, Kampala, Kabarole, and Kabale. These districts were strategically selected to represent the five (5) administrative regions of Uganda.

The research used a cross-sectional research design involving both qualitative and quantitative approaches to facilitate the collection of a wide variety of data and information from respondents in Uganda.

The study population included; women politicians, university students, journalists, law enforcement officers, activists, and women artists. The study targeted 283 respondents to participate in the study which was determined by the Taro Yamane formula.

<sup>1</sup> AzminaDhrodia. (2021, April 9). To stop online abuse against women, we must reform digital spaces <https://webfoundation.org/2021/04/to-stop-online-abuse-against-women-we-must-reform-digital-spaces/?s=08>

<sup>2</sup> Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) Submission on domestic violence in the context of COVID-19 to UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women (VAW) <https://wougnnet.org/website/publications/publicationsingle/28>

The research team reviewed various documents focusing on laws, policies, ICT use, and online gender-based violence. The research team also carried out an online survey to get views of different stakeholders using Open Data Kit Collect (ODK) and the data collected were transferred to the server daily to check its accuracy. Key informants were also carried with national and district stakeholders over the phone that included law enforcers, Internet Service Providers (ISPs), Facebook/Twitter, Ministries, Departments and Associations, Women and Human Rights Organizations, Justice, Law and Order institutions, Universities, ICT departments, and University.

Focus Group Discussions were held via zoom in each region with selected women politicians, university students, journalists, and artists/ musicians and activists.

Quantitative data was collected, compiled, and analyzed using spreadsheets according to data requirements. Data collected from the field (quantitative) was entered into excel data analysis sheet for final cleaning and analysis. The qualitative data were cross-checked for completeness, validity, consistency, and accuracy. Content analysis was used to analyze the data on the basis of emerging themes and sub-themes in line with evaluation objectives.

Data collectors/ interviewers were trained in data collection methods. Development of data collection tools was done in a consultative process with DHRLab. After the tools have been discussed and approved by DHRLab, they were pre-tested by research assistants in Wakiso District.

## 3.0 Findings and Discussions

### 3.1 Demographic Characteristics

In the sample selection, Kampala had the highest percentage of women politicians followed by Jinja, Lira, Kabarole, and Kabale respectively. In terms of education level, the majority of the respondents who did not go to school were from Kabale while Jinja, Kabarole, Kampala, and Lira had respondents who had had some level of schooling. The level of education attained by respondents included; certificates, masters, and Ph.D. This depended on the level of urbanization.

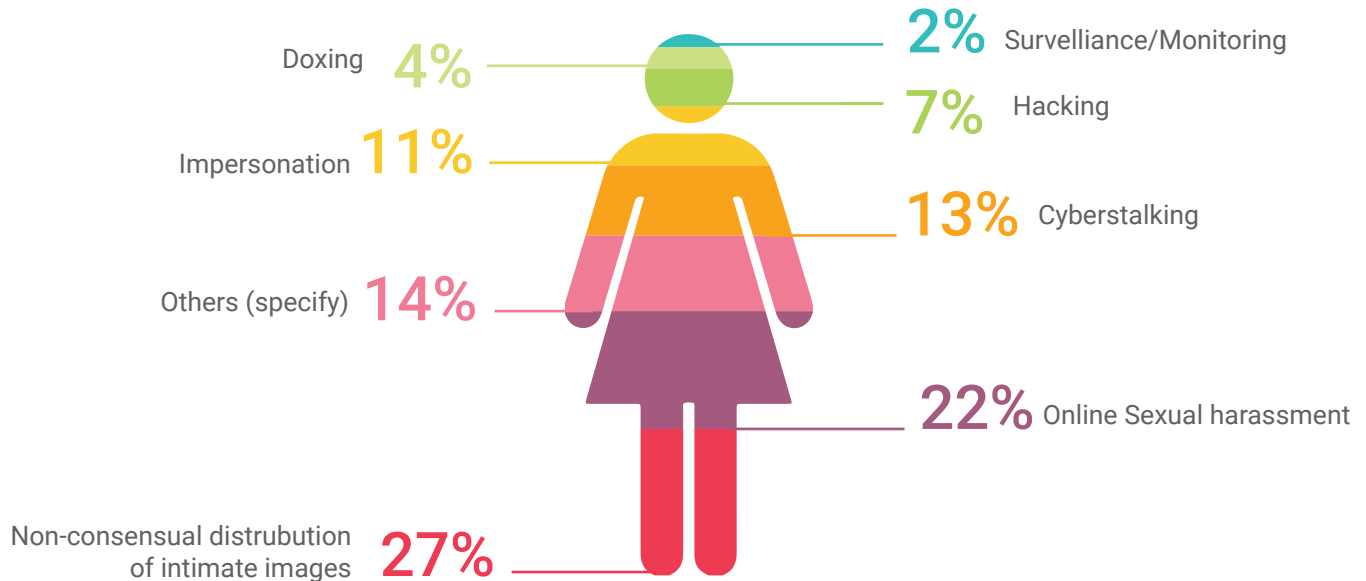
### 3.2 The Types of Online Gender Based Violence Committed

The study noted various types of OGBV and these included sharing non-consensual intimate images ("revenge pornography") represented by 27%, online sexual harassment represented by 22%, and cyberstalking 13% on digital platforms. Impersonation is represented by 11% while hacking is 7%. Additionally, 4% of the respondents identified doxing as the most committed form of OGBV, and surveillance was reported at 2%. The other types of OGBV that were also prevalent included abusive posts, conning people of their money, trolling, and vulgar posts among others, and these were represented by 14%.

In terms of the kinds of online gender-based violence that the community in Uganda has suffered most from, the non-consensual distribution of intimate images or "revenge porn" recorded the highest rate (35%) followed by online sexual harassment (26%), cyberstalking (12%). Other types of OGBV that the community suffers from include; conning people of their money, cyberbullying, and gender prejudice (21%).

Victims of trolling are public figures and celebrities. The trolling always targets body shaming and emphasizes them being inadequate just to bring such victims who are being celebrated down. This detail is shown in figure 1 below.

**Figure 1: The Types of Online Gender-Based Violence Committed in Uganda**

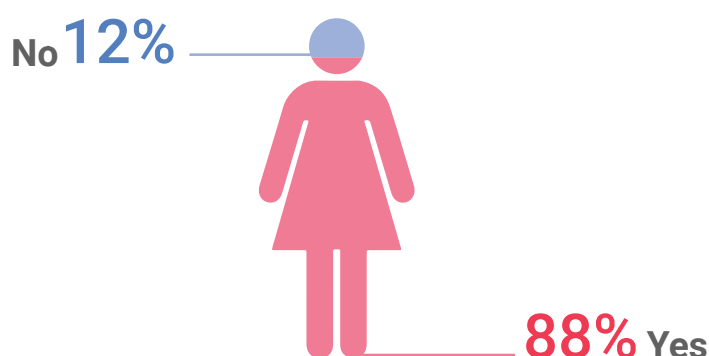


### 3.3 The Spread of Online Gender-Based Violence

The digital spaces where OGBV is widespread are WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, video conferencing platforms, dating sites, and YouTube. As shown in Figure 2 below, OGBV is widespread and 88% of the respondents agreed that OGBV is widespread in Uganda, compared to only 12% who think that it is not that widespread in Uganda. According to the KII's, Twitter has some kind of OGBV being spread around almost on a daily basis.

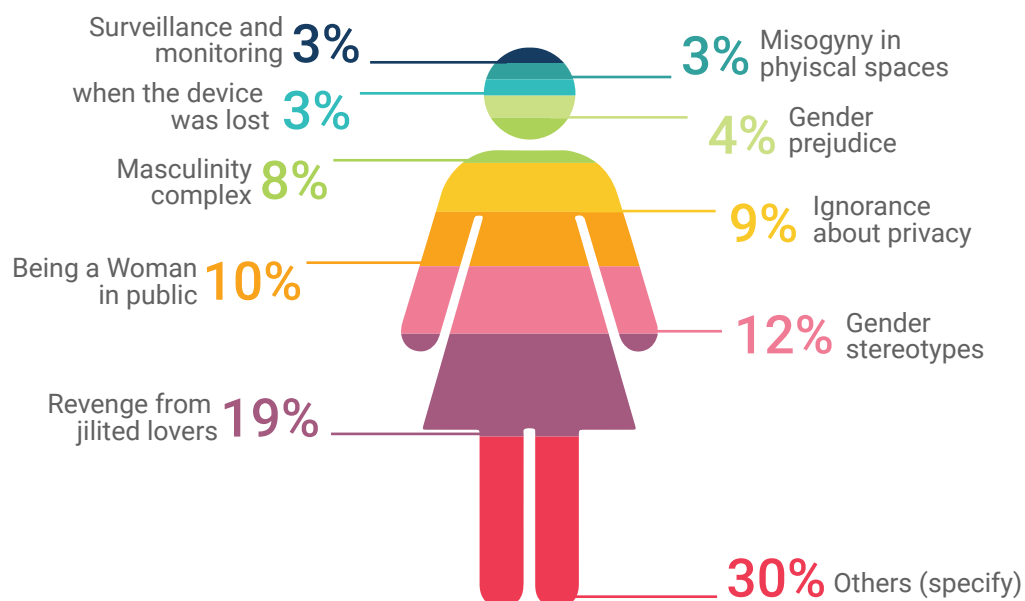
From the regions where data was collected, 49% of the respondents had experienced online gender-based violence, 10% were women politicians, 30% were university students, 18% were journalists while 21% were women activists and 15% and 6% were women artists and law enforcers respectively.

Since the majority confirmed that OGBV is widespread in Uganda, it is important to design strategies that aim at tackling male domination, addressing the limited legal recourse for women/ survivors of OGBV to the laws, limiting attacks on women's sexuality, limiting exposure of personal information, stopping manipulation of images, threats based on morality and religion, stopping conspiracy with law enforcers, and counseling on intimate partner jealousies, if we want the women to be safe online.

**Figure 2: Spread of Online Gender-Based Violence**

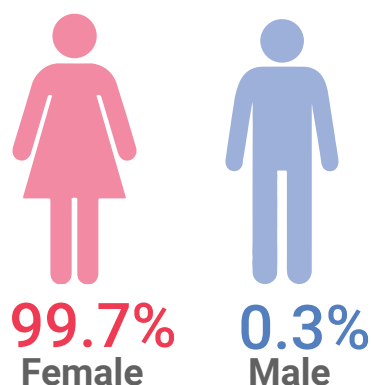
### 3.4 The Root Causes of OGBV

The root causes of online gender-based violence varied. The majority of the respondents cited revenge from jilted lovers, gender-stereotypical perceptions about women, being a woman in the public space, not knowing how to set your privacy settings on social media platforms, surveillance, and misogyny in public space, and when the phone is bought by an intimate partner. Others included being money-minded, copying western culture, drug influence, easy access to the internet leading to harassment, malice, idleness, ignorance, dishonesty, lack of regulatory frameworks to stop OGBV, male dominance, peer pressure, and poor upbringing. Others cited people being desperate for love, poverty, being in a 'rotten' society, advancement in technology, unemployment, and yearning for fame as factors that cause OGBV.

**Figure 3: The Root Causes of Online Gender-Based Violence**

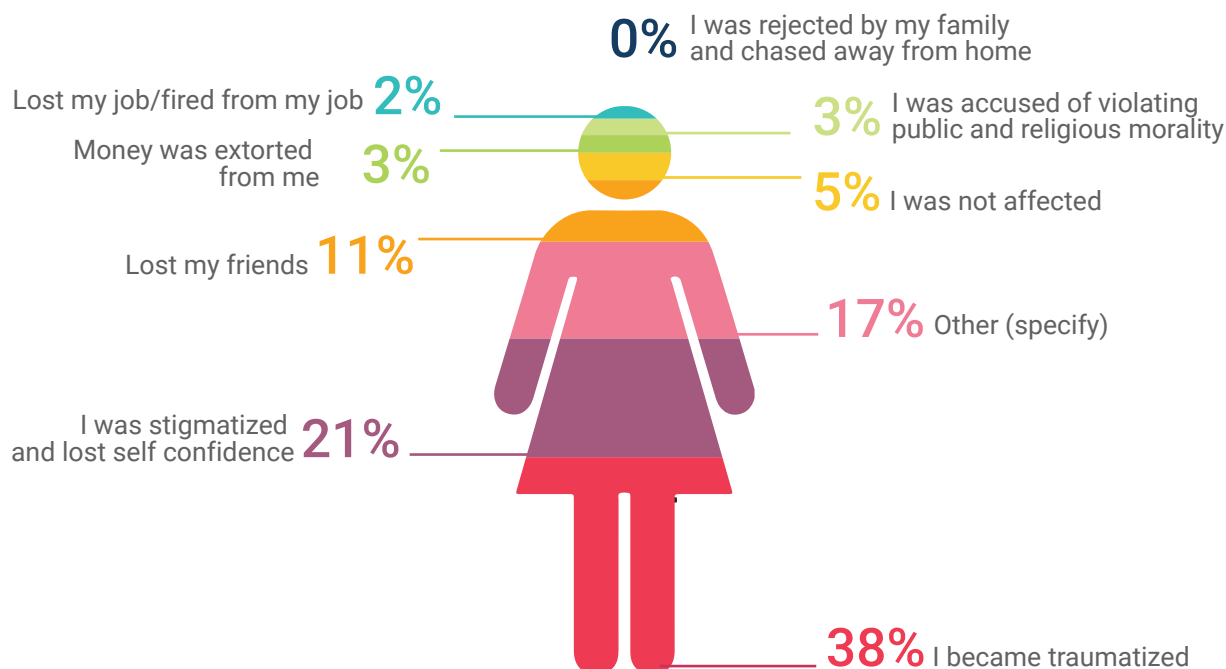
### 3.5 The impact of Online Gender-Based Violence on victims/survivors in Uganda

Online gender-based violence has caused a lot of psychological and economic harm to the victims, the majority of whom are women. The majority (99.7%) of the total respondents agreed that Ugandan women are more victims of OGBV and only 0.3% mentioned that Ugandan men are also victims of OGBV. This goes on to substantiate the literature available that is skewed towards the fact that women are more victims of OGBV than men.

**Figure 4: Sex Category most affected by OGBV**

### 3.6 The effects of OGBV on the Victims/survivors

The study showed that OGBV has affected the victims in many ways with psychological trauma being the highest in number. From the interviews 38% of the victims of OGBV became traumatized after exposure to OGBV, 21% said they became stigmatized and lost confidence, 11% lost friends as shown in figure 5 below.

**Figure 5: The Effects of Online Gender-Based Violence**

### 3.7 Methods of dealing with OGBV

In the study, blocking the perpetrator was identified as the major reaction by survivors to online gender-based violence represented by 30% of the survivors, 25% of the respondents reported that they ignored the perpetrators.

A total of 11% deleted or deactivated their own social media accounts and 8% censored themselves while 4% especially students reported the matter to the higher authority to help address the matter and over 14% reacted in other ways apart from those discussed above.

### 3.8 The Policies, Laws, and Guidelines regulating Online Gender-Based violence in Uganda

The following laws that protect against gender-based violence, in general, are applicable for use. The Ugandan Constitution of 1995, The Domestic Violence Act 2010 and its Regulations 2011; The Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act 2009; The Children (Amendment) Act 2016 and The International Criminal Court Act 2010.; The Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act 2010 and regulations; and The Penal Code Act, Cap 120. There are others like the employment Act 2006, and the Employment (Sexual Harassment) regulations 2012, and the Magistrates Courts Act 2010. Specifically, the Ugandan laws that govern against OGBV are; Anti-pornography Act 2014, Computer Misuse Act 2011, Data Protection and Privacy Act 2019, Uganda Communications Act 2013, the Interception of the Communication act of 2010, and other internet community standards and privacy policies.

Much as these laws and policies are available, the fact that they do not target OGBV directly makes the crime go unpunished thus the need for this policy brief to offer some advice on how to make these policies relevant to survivors of OGBV.

## 4.0 Conclusions

In conclusion, OGBV is a form of violence that is slowly threatening the elite, especially young women who love to use social media for entertainment and the socio-economic development of the country. OGBV infringes on the rights of these women by causing stigma which leads to depression and lack of confidence. Most of the affected women fail to show their faces in public physically as well as virtually online. This makes OGBV one of the crimes worth prosecuting. Unfortunately, in Uganda, there have still been no cases where offenders have been prosecuted and suffered the maximum wrath of the law. OGBV, therefore, remains a threat that needs to be tackled holistically. Researching online gender-based violence is trauma-inducing. Oftentimes many people think it is only hard on the survivor but it is also hard on the researchers.

## 5.0 Recommendations

- The government ministries and agencies such as the Ministry of ICT and National Guidance, Uganda Communications Commission, and Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development should strengthen the implementation and monitoring of existing international and national laws on governing access and use of ICTs to ensure the laws speak to the plight of OGBV survivors; are gender-inclusive and update to date with the changing and current trends in technologies.
- Social media companies should develop effective strategies to report and prevent OGBV incidences in a timely manner to avoid negative consequences.
- The media should be gender-sensitive and careful in reporting cases of OGBV to avoid inflicting further harm on the survivors/victims.
- The communities should be sensitized about the negative effects of OGBV so that they consciously stop harassing women online.
- Civil society organizations like WOUGNET should effectively continue to lobby the government and advocate for it to formulate specific gender-specific laws and policies that enhance the efforts to tackle OGBV.
- Parents should engage their teenagers and know what their children do online so that they are not abused while they are too busy doing other things.
- The government should provide funding for more research on the extent of distribution of non-consensual intimate images and lay down practical strategies that can be used to mitigate it since it came out as the major type of online gender-based violence in Uganda.



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