



## ISEJ EXPLAINER SERIES

# Reporting Online Abuse: Know the Law

*Technology-facilitated gender-based violence in Zimbabwe, what the law says and how to use it*

Abuse that arrives through a phone is still abuse. Zimbabwean law caught up in 2021, when the Cyber and Data Protection Act wrote a set of digital offences into the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act. Most people including many victims do not know these provisions exist. This explainer maps the abuse women and girls actually experience onto the law that already answers it.

## What ISEJ's research found

**In ISEJ's research on technology-facilitated gender-based violence, the recurring forms were:** fake messages and fake profiles used to deceive or impersonate; hacking of accounts; and explicit images or degrading, angry and insulting messages sent from unknown numbers or user profiles. None of this is a grey area. Each maps onto an offence below.

## Match the harm to the law

| What happened to you                                                                               | What the law says                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Degrading, insulting or threatening messages; harassment from known or unknown numbers or profiles | Cyberbullying and harassment section 164B of the Criminal Law Code (as inserted by the Cyber and Data Protection Act, 2021). Covers any data message or post intended to coerce, intimidate, harass, threaten, bully, degrade, humiliate or cause substantial emotional distress. Penalties extend to a fine and imprisonment of up to ten years. |
| Someone shared, or threatens to share, your intimate images without consent                        | Transmission of intimate images without consent section 164E. Recording or sharing intimate images of a person without consent is a crime, punishable by a fine or imprisonment of up to five years. The threat itself can also constitute harassment or extortion.                                                                               |
| Fake profiles or fake messages spreading falsehoods about you                                      | The Code criminalises the transmission of false data messages intended to cause harm, and impersonation may also ground fraud or defamation claims.                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Your account was hacked; your data or photos were taken                                            | Unauthorised access to computer systems and data is criminalised under the cybercrime provisions; the Data Protection Act also protects your personal data and creates duties for those who hold it.                                                                                                                                              |
| Ongoing abuse, stalking or monitoring by a partner or ex-partner                                   | The Domestic Violence Act [Chapter 5:16] covers harassment and stalking; you can apply to a magistrates court for a protection order no criminal conviction needed first.                                                                                                                                                                         |

## Five steps if it happens

- **1. Preserve everything.** Screenshot messages, profiles, numbers and URLs with dates visible. Do not delete the conversation evidence wins cases.
- **2. Do not forward intimate images** not even to show others what happened. Re-sharing is itself an offence; describe the content and keep the original secure for investigators.

- **3. Report to the police.** Any ZRP station can take the report; ask for the Victim Friendly Unit and cite the specific offence from the table above. Naming the section changes how a complaint is received.
- **4. Use the platform.** Report the account for takedown on the platform itself parallel to, not instead of, the legal route.
- **5. Get support.** Organisations such as Adult Rape Clinic (free and immediate clinical services) Zimbabwe Women Lawyers Association (free legal assistance) and Musasa (GBV survivor support) walk beside survivors through both the legal and the personal aftermath.

## Where ISEJ stands

Laws only protect people who know they exist. ISEJ's work on technology-facilitated GBV joins its own community research with legal demystification so that the woman receiving abuse from an unknown number knows, within minutes, that the law has a name for what is happening to her and a route to answer it. Where the law falls short and enforcement often does ISEJ documents the gap and advocates reform.

## About ISEJ

The Institute for Sustainable Empowerment and Justice (ISEJ) is a Zimbabwe-registered Private Voluntary Organisation working at the intersection of law, public policy, gender equality, climate justice, public health and narrative change. ISEJ translates complex legal and policy frameworks into knowledge communities can use because access to the law should not depend on access to a lawyer.

### Dignity · Rights · Transformation

*Sources: Cyber and Data Protection Act [Chapter 12:07] (2021) and the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act as amended; Data Protection Act; Domestic Violence Act [Chapter 5:16]; ISEJ TFGBV community research. This explainer is general information, not legal advice; penalties and section numbers should be verified against the current text of the statutes.*