



ISEJ EXPLAINER SERIES

Violence Has Gone Digital. The Law Has Not Kept Up.

Understanding technology-facilitated gender-based violence

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) is any act of violence, harassment or abuse committed or amplified through digital technologies: image-based sexual abuse, sextortion, online harassment and stalking, doxing, gendered hate speech, and the use of phones, GPS and tracking tools by abusive partners. It is not a lesser form of violence that happens “online instead of in real life.” It sits on a continuum with offline violence, shares the same root causes structural gender inequality and harmful norms and frequently escalates into physical harm.

The scale of the problem

- Globally, 58 per cent of girls and young women surveyed have experienced some form of online harassment; most girls report their first experience between ages 14 and 16.
- In a five-country study across sub-Saharan Africa, 28 per cent of women interviewed had experienced online gender-based violence and 36 per cent had experienced sexual harassment.
- 73 per cent of women journalists have experienced online violence in the course of their work; 46 per cent of women parliamentarians in Africa have been targets of sexist online attacks.
- Online violence moves offline: in one regional study, 44 per cent of women who experienced online violence reported that the incident crossed into the physical world.

Why this matters in low- and middle-income countries: internet access is growing faster here than anywhere else, onto ground already shaped by patriarchal norms, weak victim support and laws that predate the technology. Research from these settings remains scarce a knowledge gap that is itself a form of neglect.

The harm is real, and it is political

Survivors experience depression, post-traumatic stress and loss of safety comparable to offline violence. But TFGBV also does distinctly public damage: it silences. Women journalists self-censor; women activists face coordinated pile-ons; women considering politics reconsider. When abuse pushes women offline, it widens the digital gender divide and narrows democratic space. The intended effect of much of this violence is not private pain but public quiet.

What must change

- **Laws that keep pace:** legislation that explicitly covers image-based abuse, sextortion, online harassment and digital surveillance, drafted with survivors rather than around them.
- **Survivor-centred response:** police and courts trained to take digital evidence and digital harm seriously; accessible, confidential reporting.
- **Platform accountability:** technology companies held to safety-by-design standards, with transparent moderation and redress.
- **Knowledge and narrative:** digital literacy that reaches women and girls; research from African contexts; and a public narrative that names TFGBV as violence, not as an inevitable price of being a woman online.

Where ISEJ stands

ISEJ approaches TFGBV as both a legal gap and a narrative problem. Statutes can be amended, but so long as the surrounding culture treats online abuse as trivial, legal gains stay fragile. ISEJ works on both fronts: demystifying the law that already protects women and girls, advocating reform where it does not, and shifting the stories that decide whose safety counts.

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: UN Women (2022), Accelerating Efforts to Tackle Online and Technology Facilitated Violence against Women and Girls; Sheikh & Rogers (2023), Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence and Abuse in Low and Middle-Income Countries: A Scoping Review, Trauma, Violence & Abuse 25(2).