

Silenced, shamed, and threatened: Technology-facilitated gender-based violence targeting women who participate in Ethiopian public life

The Centre for Information Resilience

May 2024

1. Executive summary

As people's personal and public lives are increasingly played out on the internet and through social media, a new frontier in the fight against gender-based violence has emerged. While the internet serves as a conduit for information dissemination, social connection, and the facilitation of activism and political mobilisation, it concurrently serves as a platform for the perpetuation of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) and discrimination. Combatting TFGBV is an essential part of better protecting women and girls online and empowering their safe and meaningful participation in all forms of public life.

The Centre for Information Resilience (CIR) considered the lived experiences and lasting impact of TFGBV in Ethiopia through a review of existing literature and interviews with 14 women in media, civil society, and other public roles. This research addresses the following questions on online abuse: the forms (nature and scale), location, purpose, and impact. CIR found that women and girls in Ethiopia face significant levels of gendered, misogynistic TFGBV. CIR believes that this contribution to public debate can assist in the creation of effective and informed solutions to combat TFGBV in Ethiopia.

Key findings

The findings reveal the toxicity of the online environment and how online abuse directed at women reflects existing schisms around the role of women in society, politics, ethnicity, and religion. The interviewees unanimously agreed that TFGBV was so widespread that it had become normalised. TFGBV faced by Ethiopian women led many interviewees feeling silenced and some reported withdrawing from online and offline public spaces altogether.

CIR's research into TFGBV in Ethiopia reveals that the differences in the nature, purpose, and impact of abuse when directed at women and girls are stark compared to online abuse targeted at men. The interviewees reported that while men receive abuse related to their perceived political integrity, views, or partiality, women receive misogynistic abuse characterised by gendered stereotypes, related to their appearance and their role in society. For example, interviewees outlined how women in public positions have their hair, clothing, weight, marital status, rumoured lovers, and number of children debated on social media, and acknowledged that these things are not discussed in relation to men in public roles. Interviewees also reported that TFGBV often centred around women and girls' role in society, including accusations that they were underqualified to talk about politics, that they should stick to household chores, or that their advocacy for women's rights was degrading Ethiopian values.

Types of abuse included insults, intimidation, threats, and being harassed, defamed, doxed — the public release of personal details — and publicly humiliated. Many women were threatened with rape, death, or calls for their arrest. The interviewees also said that women who advocate for women's rights are often accused of being homosexual. This accusation puts women at increased risk as homosexuality is illegal and carries a prison sentence.

The interviewees believe that abusers seek to embarrass, discredit, scare, defame and/or silence women. The women interviewed reported that the online abuse and harassment has had real-world impact, including psychological harm, damaged professional reputations, disrupted family life, and the silencing of women on- and offline. Over 78% of those interviewed noted feelings of fear or anxiety when describing the incidents of online abuse that they had experienced.

No platform feels safe for the interviewees. While Facebook was overwhelmingly cited as the platform on which most TFGBV occurred, many of the women said that public comments on X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were also sites of online abuse. The interviewees also received inappropriate and unsolicited messages on Telegram and Facebook messenger. The different locations of the abuse shows that the issues driving online abuse are societal rather than the result of the failings of a particular platform.

Several women recounted stories of physical assaults and arrests; one interviewee was detained, and one had to flee the country to avoid arrest. CIR has been unable to verify if the online abuse itself led to the physical assault or arrests, or whether both the offline and online harm represented different manifestations of the same abuse. In some cases, the relationship between online and offline harm is clearer, for example: the threats of arrest which women received online had real-world psychological impact on those involved, and they reported concern for their physical safety and that of their families.

Strategies to end this practise must address the root causes of TFGBV. Strategies recommended by interviewees include countering gender stereotypes and gender-based discrimination and improving women's representation in both the online and mainstream media environments, in turn reducing barriers to women entering public life.

Follow-up Research

After completing this research, CIR held a series of roundtables and workshops in Addis Ababa and carried out a large-scale quantitative study of gendered hate speech on three social media platforms in Ethiopia that will be released alongside this report.

Warning: While this report has made every effort to minimise the use and exposure to graphic imagery, it contains content relating to online abuse that some readers may find distressing.

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3. Introduction

Social media in Ethiopia provides a medium for technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) and discrimination. Social media has many benefits: it represents a source of information; a means for connecting with others; and provides an alternative forum for public debate that is largely outside of the Government's or mainstream media's regulatory sphere.¹ As a result, social media can “decentralise, democratise and reinvigorate” political discussions,² and has become a tool for activism and political mobilisation.³ However, it simultaneously provides a platform for abuse. It enables TFGBV and discrimination. Dialogue and exchanges on social media have the power to shape public understanding and perceptions of gender and gender relations through its ability to create, re-create and spread gendered norms and stereotypes.⁴ As a result, social media plays a critical role in either supporting or sabotaging (perhaps simultaneously) the fight for gender equality.⁵ The impacts of TFGBV can be far-reaching, including emotional trauma, restrictions on free speech and human rights, and offline violence. Despite this, research into TFGBV in Ethiopia is significantly lacking.

Social media in Ethiopia is a male dominated space. According to research, only 34.1% of social media users in Ethiopia are female.⁶ The diversity in internet access across Ethiopia also means that the average usage does not consider the vast regional and language differences. Despite proportionally low internet access in Ethiopia compared to other African countries, many news agencies, businesses, and individuals now have an online presence. This is particularly significant in Ethiopia as the media and civic landscape is renowned for being highly censored, with strong state control of media outlets and restrictions on Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), resulting in limited independent media.

This research has investigated TFGBV targeting women who hold prominent positions in Ethiopian public life through semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal the toxicity of the online environment and how TFGBV directed against women mirrors existing societal schisms around the role of women and girls in society, politics, ethnicity, and religion. The online abuse and harassment received by Ethiopian women has had real-world impact, including psychological harm, damaged professional reputations, and the silencing of women both online and offline.

¹ Workneh (2019) African Journalism Studies, Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23743670.2020.1729832>

² Skjerdal and Gebru (2020) Media Culture & Society, Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340832244_Not_quite_an_echo_chamber_ethnic_debate_on_Ethiopian_Facebook_pages_during_times_of_unrest; De Zúñiga, Molyneux, and Zheng (2014) Journal of Communication, Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/joc/article-abstract/64/4/612/4086027?redirectedFrom=fulltext&login=false>; Holt et al (2013)

European Journal of Communication, Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0267323112465369>; Valenzuela (2013) American Behavioral Scientist, Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0002764213479375>

³ Yilma (21 September 2021) Cambridge University Press, Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-african-law/article/abs/on-disinformation-elections-and-ethiopian-law/AD43AE2160E071FEF73EE8E4128F0B7A>

⁴ Manila (2017) Available at: <http://norden.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1092200/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

⁵ Kassa and Sarikakis (2022) Feminist Media Studies, Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/14680777.2021.1917640>

⁶ Ibid.

3.1 Research Aims

Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with women journalists, activists, lawyers, and other human rights defenders in Ethiopia, this research addresses the following questions on TFGBV:

- 1. Forms (nature and scale):** What forms of TFGBV are prevalent? Are there any specific narratives employed by the abusers? How widespread is TFGBV in Ethiopia?
- 2. Location:** Where does TFGBV occur? Does it vary by social media platform? Is it mostly in public or private channels?
- 3. Purpose:** Are there any clear motives for TFGBV? Does it appear to be coordinated?
- 4. Impact:** What are the online and offline impacts of TFGBV? Did it impact professional, personal, or family life? Did it change the way women engaged in the online and offline public domain?

This research aims to inform further investigation into TFGBV targeting women in public roles by identifying the locations of TFGBV, and the narratives and trends that can be analysed within a large-scale quantitative study.⁷

3.2 Research Scope

CIR conducted interviews during March and April 2023 to identify the nature, scale, location, and impact of TFGBV targeting women who hold prominent positions in media, civil society, and other public roles in Ethiopia. Talking to victims of TFGBV provides a deeper understanding of the full scope of the problem and the lived experiences of women and girls in Ethiopia. The interviews will provide contextual information to complement and enrich further quantitative study into the same phenomenon.

The research findings may be delivered to social media companies to raise their awareness of abuse occurring on their platforms or be used to inform planning for appropriate campaigns to address these issues.

⁷ For a detailed breakdown of the proposed quantitative research project, please see the phase 2 methodology overview and workplan.

4. Methodology

CIR carried out in-depth interviews with 14 women who hold prominent positions in public life in Ethiopia who have experienced TFGBV. These included journalists, lawyers, fact-checkers, TV presenters and other human rights defenders. The CIR team included experienced Ethiopian researchers who ensured that intersectional voices were heard and that cultural sensitivities were considered.

To ensure the interviews were conducted as safely and sensitively as possible, the CIR team undertook an online training module in trauma-informed interviewing. Informed by guidelines developed by the [DART Center](#), the ‘do no harm’ principle, and the [Murad Code](#), interviews were conducted on the basis of:

- **Informed consent.** The participants were provided with an outline of the research purpose and required to provide written consent prior to the interviews.
- **Anonymisation** of interviewees and removal of personally identifiable information from both the interview transcripts and final report, unless otherwise agreed. This is in addition to interviewees being advised not to disclose any personally identifiable information prior to the interview itself.
- **Respect and sensitivity** with every reasonable effort made to accommodate the needs, timings, and wishes of the interviewees.
- **Security.** The interview data (including the transcripts, translations, and consent forms) is stored in a secure folder in Egnyte⁸ and only accessible by the researchers. All communication with the interview participants was carried out via encrypted communication services for the safety of the interviewee and the interviewer.

The interviews were conducted by a female Ethiopian researcher in Amharic, either in-person or via WhatsApp or Signal. The interview followed a semi-structured format to provide the women with the space to elaborate on certain questions when they felt comfortable. The interviewers were given the freedom to ask additional, follow-up questions based on the respondents’ answers to the main questions, provided the follow-up questions did not violate CIR’s ethical standards and trauma-informed interview approach. A full list of the interview questions in both Amharic and English, along with other documentation used within the interview process can be found in the appendices.

Following this, the interviews were transcribed and translated into English. A team of English and Amharic speaking researchers analysed the transcripts in both languages to understand the experiences of the women and find information related to the research objectives. This included information on the forms, locations, perceived purposes, and impact of TFGBV. These findings will be investigated further in the second phase of this research, which will include a large-scale quantitative analysis of social media posts.

⁸ A secure online workspace used by CIR across its projects.

The collaboration between English and Amharic speaking team members was essential to ensure that the linguistic and cultural nuances were not lost in translation. The importance of collaborating with local experts was raised during the literature review. The result of the interview analysis is the focus of this report.

4.1 Research Participants

The participants were 14 women who are/were active online and hold public roles in Ethiopia. This included journalists, activists, lawyers, fact-checkers, human rights investigators, social media influencers and other human rights defenders who have experienced TFGBV.

They were identified and contacted by experienced Ethiopian researchers who have over a decade of experience working in the Ethiopian research, journalism, and civil society community. Although over 70 individuals were initially identified as potential participants, the research team were only able to speak to 26 of the women. This was due to several factors, including the inability to find individuals' contact details or a lack of response to the interview invitations during the timeframe of the research.

Thirteen women either declined to be interviewed or stopped responding during the research timeframe. Many women were reluctant to come forward about their experiences, even on the condition of anonymity. Several women noted that online harassment was “part of the job”, and therefore they did not see the point of the interviews. A few women were contacted as the TFGBV they suffered was well documented, however they declined to participate as they did not recognise certain behaviours as TFGBV or harassment, and instead believed this behaviour was normal. This is an interesting finding in and of itself, as it signals the normalisation of TFGBV in Ethiopia. One important caveat is that due to the limited sample of women, the findings are likely to underestimate the scale of the problem.

4.2 Contextual Analysis and Literature Review

Before carrying out the primary research, CIR undertook a contextual analysis and literature review. The contextual analysis bolstered CIR's understanding of the media, civil, and legal environment, and how this impacts women and girl's presence and abuse in the online space. This was supported by discussions with a range of stakeholders in Ethiopia.

CIR carried out a comprehensive literature review to understand the existing scholarly information on TFGBV in Ethiopia and identify key debates and gaps within existing research. While the number of studies on TFGBV is increasing, they predominantly focus on global trends or western countries. Although the articles included within the literature review were predominantly in English, Amharic-speaking team members contributed to the literature review, identifying prominent Amharic articles where possible. The lack of research in the Ethiopian context provides further rationale for studying this phenomenon.

Due to a lack of literature, the literature review takes a broader approach. First, it covers the challenges associated with defining online abuse, including TFGBV, followed by an assessment of the literature on online abuse in Ethiopia, where possible focussing on the online abuse of women and girls. Additionally, literature on the relationship between online and offline violence is explored. The full literature review can be found in appendix 7.1.

5. Analysis

This research has investigated the forms, locations, purpose, and impact of TFGBV targeting women who hold prominent positions in media, civil society, academia, and other public roles in Ethiopia. The semi-structured interviews provided raw accounts of the 14 women's lived experiences of online abuse.

The findings reveal the toxicity of the online environment and how TFGBV mirrors existing societal schisms around the role of women in society, politics, ethnicity, and religion. There is no doubt that both men and women are victims of TFGBV, however this research signals the differences in the nature, purpose, and impact of that abuse.

TFGBV appears pervasive across social media platforms and manifests in both public and private channels. While lacking substantial evidence to suggest that the abuse faced is coordinated, multiple perceived goals of the abuse emerged, including the desire to silence women in the public domain. TFGBV and harassment received by Ethiopian women has also had real-world impact, including psychological harm, damaged professional reputations, the silencing of women both online and offline, physical assault, and arrests.

This analysis presents a deeper understanding of the scope of the problem. The views expressed within the analysis are the women's experiences as they narrated them. CIR has not verified the allegations made by the interviewees.

5.1 The forms of TFGBV

This research investigated the forms (nature and scale) of TFGBV suffered by Ethiopian women who hold public roles. This included an analysis of the types of TFGBV, the narratives underpinning the TFGBV, its frequency and scale. This research found that abuse targeting women differs in nature, despite men also receiving online abuse along ethnic, political, or religious lines. Misogynistic abuse provides an additional, gendered dimension to TFGBV faced by women, often with deep, long-lasting real-world consequences.

5.1.1 Narratives underpinning TFGBV and online abuse

The TFGBV reported in the interviews centred around several prominent narratives, including misogyny (including gendered stereotypes, for example a focus on appearance, sexualisation, their role in society or the household), ethnicity, politics and conflict, alleged homosexuality, and religion (see Figure 3). It is important to note that these categories are not discreet; for example, ethnicity and religion can underpin issues related to politics and conflict. Each of these categories are now examined in turn.

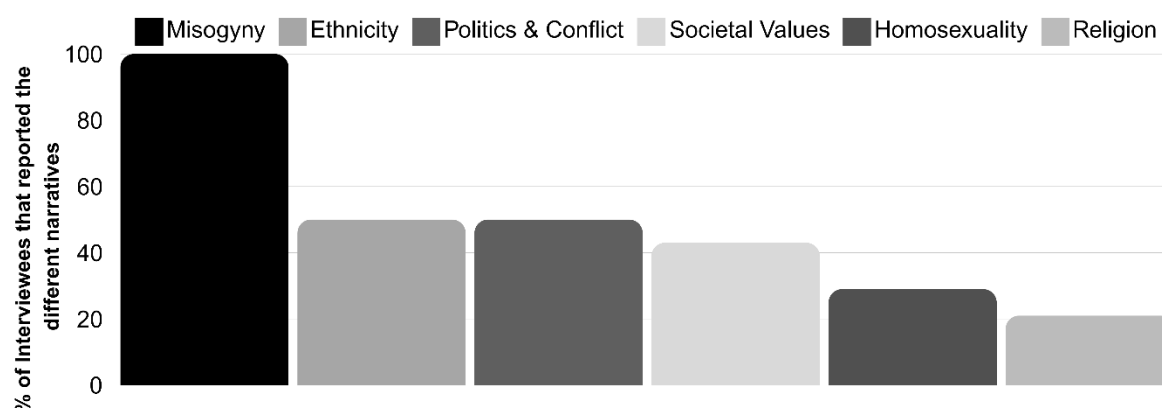


Figure 1: A graph to show the percentage of interviewees that faced TFGBV along the specific narrative lines included. More detail on this in the following sections.

5.1.1.1 Misogyny

Every woman interviewed in this study referred to the misogyny they faced online. The women unanimously agreed that both women and men are targeted with TFGBV, however, they noted that they receive very different forms of abuse. They noted that while both genders receive abuse for their religious and ethnic affiliations, the women reported receiving gendered abuse, including misogynistic insults related to their physical appearance and their role within society while they said men did not.

Interviewees outlined how women in public positions have their hair, clothing, weight, marital status, suspected lovers, and number of children debated on social media and acknowledged that these things are not discussed in relation to men in public roles. An interviewee said: *“positively for men, it doesn't get personal. They are not attacked for their looks, their marital life, and other personal things like that”*. According to a journalist interviewed, comments men receive...

“[...] challenge [their] ideas, however, females get comments about appearances or on the general notion of being female. There are insults that are directly aimed at embarrassing women. Things like ‘She should just raise her children, she should just be making coffee, and she should be a prostitute’”.

One journalist outlined how *“males are not attacked for being male”*. She continued: *“I mean hate speech is common, but it's usually not directed at the male gender, it's usually content related or opinion related for them”*. Instead, women often receive comments unrelated to the original content that say things like: *“Have you seen her outfit? Drop your comments on it below”*. The responses that follow then contain insults and hate speech. This form of gendered abuse was indiscriminate among women, targeting both individual social media users and influential public figures. A journalist recounted the response to a post from the female Mayor of Addis Ababa:

“Adanech Abebe posted something... Unsurprisingly around 70-80% of the comments were about her looks.”

Many of the women reported that the insults they received sexualised them. One journalist reported that, following an interview with a Facebook influencer, social media users posted comments calling her *“a prostitute, a concubine and many more demeaning insults targeting my gender.”* Similarly, a TikTok influencer interviewed revealed how people often ask who her sugar daddy is, while another journalist reported frequently being accused of being a sex worker. Two other interviewees discussed how women were far more likely than men to have sensitive information leaked and be the victims of fake pornography — when their faces are photoshopped onto images of sex workers.

The role of women in society was noted as a narrative underpinning the abuse received by over 50% of the women interviewed. This ranged from women being told they were underqualified to talk about politics, that they should stick to household chores, or that their advocacy for women’s rights was degrading Ethiopian values. For example, a host of a YouTube channel said: *“One person commented I was better suited for being a wife because I say yes a lot. Which is a reflection of what they think a wife should be.”* References to women’s role as a wife or mother were frequent, including shaming if they were not married, for example, one blogger said: *“I am also still insulted and shamed because I’m not married yet. They tell me ‘You are old but not married’, ‘nobody wants to marry you’.”*

Women posing a threat to Ethiopian values as the reason behind the misogynistic comments directed at them was repeatedly raised by interviewees. One interviewee even outlined how this issue served to unite individuals across other deep political, ethnic, or religious schisms in society:

“Even people who otherwise don’t get along due to different reasons like religious and political differences, all gang up against issues related to feminism and women’s rights. There is this conservative culture that they feel needs to be respected. Especially when it comes to clothing. I have received a lot of negative comments and insults regarding my online and also offline activity. I think these attackers are also encouraged by the fact that these insults are interesting to most people and easily get viral. I had so many comments that tell me to correct my cleavage and cover my breasts, and to properly sit.... They said I’m one of the officials who don’t respect the community’s value with my dressing style... people say we’re violating culture and values...”

One TikTok influencer acknowledged being repeatedly accused of representing western values. She reported she was accused of...

“[...] trying to bring the western values [to Ethiopia] ... For them, husband cooking for families is bad, changing his kids’ diaper is bad... they say we’re trying to bring [Western] value[s] here and ruin the Ethiopian tradition.”

One communications professional was accused of being paid by westerners to spread their values in Ethiopia:

“I don’t understand why some people think someone needs to be paid to be vocal about something. I used to do it for free because it was something I cared about. People that support me on other issues usually don’t when it comes to gender issues. They get really upset and I receive a lot of insults. They are often very personal, and they associate everything in my life with being a feminist like why I’m not with my husband, why I only have one child and that I was paid by the Westerners to propagate feminism.”

For a number of those interviewed, the misogynistic remarks directed at women who hold prominent roles in society reflected offline societal values. For example, one interviewee expressed her belief that *“what we are witnessing online is a direct reflection of our offline existence. And if you take a closer look at that it’s just completely filled with a lot of abuses.”*

While both men and women suffer from online abuse along ethnic, political and religious lines, the nature of the abuse received differs significantly. While women face abuse for breaking with the perceived gender stereotypes and because of misogyny, they face an additional layer of abuse that is gendered and misogynistic when compared to men.

The study showed that women and girls are disproportionately underrepresented in the online space and face significant levels of gendered, misogynistic online abuse. As a result, increasing their access to and representation in online spaces, paired with education campaigns which target enduring patriarchal values, might be effective in combatting this form of online abuse.

5.1.1.2 Ethnicity

Half the interviewees cited ethnicity underpinning some of the TFGBV that they faced. The women reported being accused of showing solidarity with specific ethnic groups, biased reporting, allegedly diminishing death tolls of certain ethnic groups, being paid to spread false narratives, sharing extremist views, or somehow working to undermine one ethnic group’s position, whether in an orchestrated campaign or individually. An image of one interviewee was shared online alongside claims she was conspiring against a specific ethnic group, while another interviewee claimed she was made into a target by social media users after being accused of belonging to an informal ethnic armed group.

The social media coordinator for a women’s rights CSO outlined the TFGBV they received following a post they shared on Twitter which mentioned that the *“elders gave a blessing”* during one of their conferences:

“In our post we did not even mention the ethnic group of the elders, and somebody said only two ethnic groups were represented and people started commenting saying ‘does that mean other ethnic groups don’t have mothers’, ‘you guys are just amassing donor funding using women’, ‘we pray God to kill you’ and it got more tense.”

Multiple women journalists and human rights investigators interviewed reported being abused by two warring parties, often concurrently and contradictorily, for their coverage of various ethnic conflicts. During the recent conflict in the north, Twitter became a battleground for narratives. Genocidal language relating to ethnic groups, including Tigrayans has also been reported by other studies.⁹ The Tigrayans, their allies and the diaspora allegedly used Twitter for online activism and information sharing, while the Ethiopian Government and its allies used social media to “discredit Tigrayan activists” through information campaigns.¹⁰ A journalist and fact-checker interviewed during this research outlined how she was repeatedly targeted for siding with different ethnic groups during the Tigray conflict:

“I’ve been called biased and a traitor because I was assumed to be part of one ethnic group. I’ve been called ‘junta’, [a derogatory term used to refer to Tigrayans during the war] I’ve been called ‘Neftegna’ [a derogatory word used to refer to ethnic Amharans]. I don’t like to say or use these words in the media. They build a narrative against you.”

Another journalist faced similar accusations:

“For example, they’ve said I am a hater of the nation because I am a ‘junta’ by my mother’s side. This wasn’t true but it fit the narrative they wanted at the time so everyone justified it.”

Interestingly, one interviewee outlined that the nature of the abuse they faced differed when it was along ethnic lines, compared to gender:

“The harassment and insults had two layers, ethnic and gender. When it was ethnic, they used derogatory words. Gender-wise I was usually called someone’s mistress and insulted in that line.”

The findings of this research into TFGBV reinforces the importance of ethnic identity within Ethiopia. Ethnicity represents one politicised Ethiopian debate being played out online which has been previously researched by academics. For example, in an analysis of a small sample of Twitter posts, the European Institute for Peace found that “ethnonationalism” frequently featured in online hate speech and disinformation.¹¹ Additionally, prominent “ethno-nationalist” social media influencers have been criticised for “fanning inflammatory remarks” which further the ‘othering’ of ethnic groups and for spreading misinformation.¹² While existing literature has focussed on ethnically motivated hate speech, it has done so without exploring the issue of gender. This signals the need to further explore this intersectionality to understand if women are

⁹ DFR Lab (2021) Influential Ethiopian social media accounts stoke violence along ethnic lines, Medium, Available at: <https://medium.com/dfrlab/influential-ethiopian-social-media-accounts-stoke-violence-along-ethnic-lines-6713a1920b02>

¹⁰ Wilmot, Tveteraas and Drew (2021) The Media Manipulation Casebook, Available at: <https://mediamanipulation.org/case-studies/dueling-information-campaigns-war-over-narrative-tigray>

¹¹ European Institute for Peace (2021) Available at: <https://www.eip.org/new-publication-fake-news-misinformation-and-hate-speech-in-ethiopia-a-vulnerability-assessment/>

¹² Ibid.; Workneh (2019) African Journalism Studies, Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23743670.2020.1729832>

more at risk of receiving ethnic abuse than men, and whether the abuse received has greater consequences because of its nature.

5.1.1.3 Politics and conflict

The interviews revealed a widespread belief among the interviewees that human rights issues have been politicised. As a country with over 90 distinct ethnic groups, Ethiopia is often the site of ethnic conflict on a variety of scales.¹³ The conflict in northern Ethiopia starting November 2020, provided a flashpoint for online abuse along ethnic dividing lines. Over 42% of those interviewed said that they faced online abuse following their coverage or posts related to the Tigray conflict. While many also reported online abuse following other events, the tension surrounding the Tigray conflict should not be overlooked. For example, one interviewee reported online abuse related to coverage of the conflict, stating how...

“The harassment that was caused by Tigray-related [reporting] lasted for months at times it was very persistent then it calms down a bit but starts up again after a while.”

Another interviewee who faced online abuse after giving a press statement on a report into war crimes in Tigray said that...

“[...] the harassment came from both sides; from the Tigrayans and people from the rest of the country... it was intense for me because hundreds of people were engaging and commenting”.

Another key finding was the belief that social media is considered a tool that can be used to further a political agenda, both at the government level and the ethnic and regional level. For example, a journalist interviewed hypothesised: *“I don’t think the attacks were personal... I think it is to advance their own agenda.”* Similarly, another interviewee noted that:

“[...] when you’re fitting a certain group’s agenda they are with you but as soon as you report something against them like certain people dying or fleeing from their homes because of wars, they tend to turn against you. Then we receive threats.”

The speed at which the audience change from supportive to critical was also raised. These concerns were reiterated by other interviewees, including a fact-checker who said:

“When people from a certain ethnic group are violated... you are going to be a tool for that ethnic group’s politicians because you will advocate for them... and they cheer you on. But it’s not genuine. When the group you defended at one time does something wrong and you speak out against them, you are labelled as being biased or a tool for some other politician. So there are a lot of people who distort genuine concerns.”

¹³ Minority Groups International (n.d.) Ethiopia - World Directory of Minorities & Indigenous Peoples, Available at: <https://minorityrights.org/country/ethiopia/>

Women expressed a belief that when abusers disagreed with their political opinions, they would attack them with gendered abuse. For example, one interviewee explained:

“The trend is if some people disagree with your political opinion, they insult you and it's mostly gender based. I've been called ugly, I've been told I'm not pretty enough to speak out in public, I've been called a prostitute and I've been told no one wants me.”

Similarly, while discussing a specific incident, a programme host outlined how the *“the topic we were talking about was very serious, but the comment was directed at me and not the content.”* This view was also raised by another interviewee, who said:

“If people can't have a conversation about the opinions stated, they tend to insult you as a woman. They believe you're weak because you're a woman, so they tend to threaten you.”

This signals the toxic and often ingenuine environment that Ethiopian citizens must navigate online, which impacts both men and women and is a manifestation of the fractured nature of Ethiopian politics. Individuals become collateral damage while elites, groups or individuals with an agenda seek political gain. However, while men receive abuse on their perceived political integrity or partiality, women received misogynistic abuse which focusses on their appearance or role in society.

5.1.1.4 Alleged Homosexuality

Multiple women who advocated for women's rights in online forums reported facing verbal attacks and accusations of being homosexual. Homosexuality is a taboo subject within Ethiopia where it is illegal and carries a penalty of one year imprisonment. This form of TFGBV was reported by just under 29% of the women interviewed. One interviewee said:

“My general feminism is also used to attack me and they say I'm gay. Because, I don't like men — that is what they say — because I talk a lot of not great things about men, they think I must not be attracted to men.” TikTok influencer

This was reiterated by other interviewees, for example a women's rights advocate gave the following example:

“You hate men is the regular comment, you're a lesbian, go back to the kitchen, go make me a sandwich, it's because you're ugly, who would want you, you look like a man, who would even want you are the regular insults I receive... Mostly, they paint us as lesbian. They would also make videos about us and tell the public that we're trying to spread homosexuality.”

A communications professional explained that her divorce was used by strangers on social media as evidence that she is gay. After publishing articles that did not mention homosexuality, she reported receiving considerable abuse and accusations that she is herself, homosexual.

A government employee recounted the distress caused by a campaign that was started against her, which targeted her for her perceived support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) rights:

“I was on a list that mentioned people who work under the government and who are supporters of LGBTQ. The people on the list were accused of working on passing different policies that are in favour of LGBTQ in Ethiopia. It had our names and pictures. The posts said we were government officials in the administration, who have been lobbying the government to change its policy against homosexuality. This was started by the activist named Zemedkun and later people started picking up on it and screenshotting it and it started to be a campaign against me. It has started as a conversation with my name and picture and then grew to a full-blown campaign against me.”

These accusations represent a significant physical threat to the victims. Although the women who spoke about this specific issue did not link this form of abuse to threats of arrest online, or any actual arrests offline, accusations of homosexuality online could have legal ramifications offline. During the interviews, one interviewee mentioned that arrest sometimes followed populist requests; this raises the concern that a false homosexual label could provide an excuse for arrest, even without evidence. They also reveal how controversial the issue of homosexuality is within Ethiopia; it is a taboo subject that even human rights defenders avoid speaking about.

5.1.1.5 Religion

Of those interviewed, over 21% identified religion as a narrative underpinning the abuse they faced. Interestingly, those that did raise the issue of religion did so in relation to gendered issues. For example, one interviewee recounted her disappointment at being attacked online by a female presenting social media user when the interviewee spoke out against the marriage of a 12-year-old girl by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church: “[...] it hits differently when you are being attacked by a female when you post about gender-related issues every time.” In a separate interview, a similar incident was reported. The communications coordinator for a women’s rights organisation reported that although they did not intervene in the specific case, they received abuse nonetheless:

“[...] there was a viral incident on Twitter where a 12-year-old girl married an adult, who serves at the Orthodox Church. Later the police and court intervened and void the marriage and convicted the man. People on Twitter accused us for using the term early marriage and for attacking their religion. They accused us for being behind the [police and court] decision and said we did it to discredit the Orthodox Church and tarnish their religion.”

Another interviewee outlined an incident in which she experienced a large volume of online abuse on Twitter which intersected both religion and her advocacy for women's rights:

"I shared something that was regarded as an unpopular opinion... The post said 'I don't trust religion when it comes to women's rights' and I quoted that and re-posted saying 'That is why I chose to raise my kids outside of any religious denomination'... I said my kids can decide for themselves which religion they want to follow when they are older instead of me limiting them to one religion and making them hate other religions. I added that I am tolerant and liberal today because of how my parents raised me and that is how I want to raise my children. However, my post caused an extremely negative reaction from people. They associated it with my feminism, my personal life, and the like."

In a separate interview, a journalist outlined how she avoided engaging in the topic altogether as she equated it to *"choosing death"* and said that politics was safer to discuss than religion.

While the participants in the study raised religion less frequently than ethnicity or politics, engaging in online dialogue on these societal issues appears to increase the risk of receiving online abuse. While both men and women are abused along religious lines, the interviews indicated the challenge of advocating for women's rights in an environment in which religious values and women's rights might conflict. This signals the need for future studies to investigate the gendered dimension of religiously motivated online abuse.

5.1.2 Types of TFGBV

The interviews revealed a range of different types of TFGBV faced by Ethiopian women. Insults, intimidation, and threats were most frequently reported by interviewees, followed by harassment and defamation. Two women recounted how they became the subject of viral memes and degrading videos.

Multiple interviewees cited that they were threatened with bodily harm, rape, and arrest. Additionally, one TV presenter reported receiving threats from the authorities, warning them to stop reporting on anti-Government information.

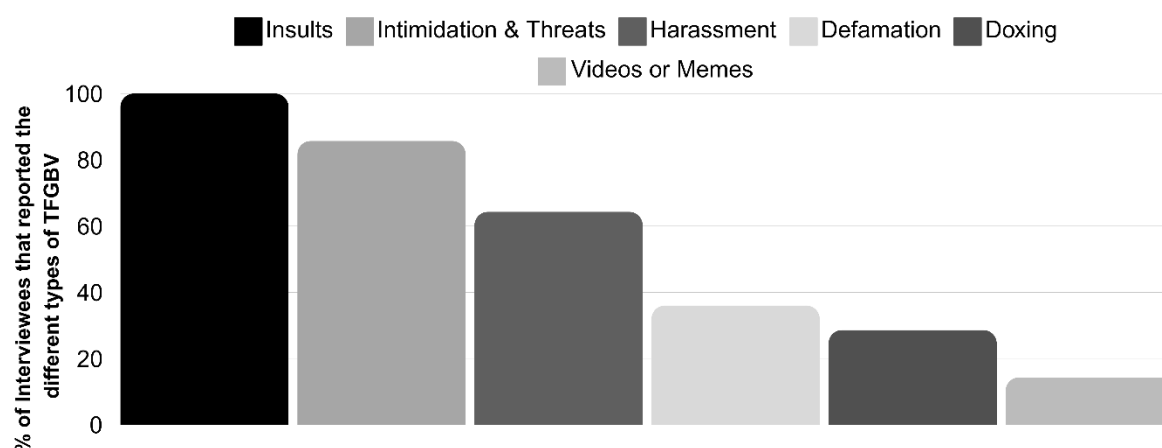


Figure 2: Type of online abuse faced by the women interviewed.

The threat of rape was raised by multiple interviewees. One interviewee reported that she had even received comments on Facebook from individuals calling for her children to be raped. A journalist outlined her belief that *“The rape threats also double when [you speak] on issues of feminism”*. In a separate interview, a TikTok influencer said:

“They just tell you if they see you on the streets... they would beat you, or I have had someone telling me that they will throw acid on my face, I have had someone telling me that they would rape me, specifically they said ‘we’ll gang rape you me and my friends hate you but you’re still pretty so we would rape you””.

Multiple women outlined how people called for their deaths or directly threatened to kill them next time they saw them in the streets. For example, one TV presenter reported receiving frequent messages that threatened her life, including messages on almost all social media platforms which she said were something along the lines of: *“I’ll make sure I kill you before I pass away”*.

The impact of these forms of TFGBV, including doxing — where the interviewees personal details and travel habits were released online — resulted in significant risk to the individuals’ personal lives and families. One interviewee reported that she was detained following a specific incident of TFGBV and another fled the country to avoid arrest (see section 5.4). Other interviews received multiple threats of arrest. A journalist reported regularly receiving threats of arrest, and comments which supported her detention, including: *“good luck finding a place to hide, you’ll be thrown into prison, and you’ll talk about this once you receive a beating”*.

While speaking about receiving threats of arrest, one journalist outlined her concerns around receiving threats of this nature. She said:

“What surprised me was that some big and influential people in the media industry were also campaigning for my arrest. I was amazed at what grounds they thought they had to campaign for my arrest. Because I interviewed someone they didn’t like? I even received death threats but didn’t take them seriously... people not only commented that I am next to be arrested and that they wanted that to happen but

also what they wished would happen to me in prison like being raped and beaten up and killed. I realised rape has been registered as a weapon in the minds of Ethiopian men and I was very disappointed."

The founder of a women's rights website and newsletter said their social media accounts regularly received messages from women about the abuse they were suffering. Often these included threats that the abusers would release sensitive information, for example:

"[Our organisation's] social media accounts receive many messages from young women who got harassed or abused online. Most of them mention they have faced these attacks and threats via Telegram and Instagram. What they tell us is they receive threats from their exes or someone who claims to be their love interest. They send them threats through DMs saying they will release their private pictures or publicise the texts they have exchanged. So many women reached out to us with such kinds of cases and it's very alarming."

The threats recounted by the women interviewed varied in both nature and severity. While men also face the threat of arrest, the women said they believed that men did not receive the same level of rape threats.

5.1.3 Frequency and scale of TFGBV

The interviews revealed a unanimous belief that TFGBV is becoming more prevalent and extreme. Interviewees expressed a belief that every woman active online has likely experienced online harassment or abuse and that this is silencing women, forcing them to leave public forums (see section 5.4).

Most of the interviewees faced TFGBV following articles they published, events they participated in, or posts they shared online. However, just over 14% of those interviewed explicitly said that the TFGBV they faced was not restricted to specific incidents but occurred daily. For example, a TikTok content creator said that: *"These were happening consistently and there was not a moment or a day that goes by [without receiving them]."* Similarly, a female journalist interviewed noted that:

"Online harassment and abuse [are] almost a day-to-day occurrence. People write insults and threats. People also tell you to retract what you have said and that you should be regretful for the opinions you have posted".

According to a few interviewees, as well as the differences in the nature of the abuse, men and women suffered from a different volume of TFGBV. One interviewee who runs a show broadcast on YouTube received insulting and intimidating comments online. While she expressed her belief that the political nature of the show was the rationale for the abuse, she received substantially more abuse than her male colleague and this abuse centred around her appearance. She said:

“As the show was political, I think it was easier attacking me instead of challenging the content. I especially think being female has made me an easier target. Maybe they thought I would be intimidated, take the comments personally and stop the show. Because the comments were totally different from the topic of the show.”

However, this view was not unanimous across the interviewees. One respondent reported that her male colleague was *“the most bullied and threatened person”* she knew. Her colleague was later arrested, and she fled the country to avoid arrest herself. While there are different opinions regarding whether men or women received a larger volume of TFGBV, it is clear that the online environment is a toxic place for both men and women in Ethiopia.

5.2 Location of TFGBV

This research investigated where Ethiopian women who hold public roles were subjected to TFGBV. This included an analysis of social media use, the identification of key sites where TFGBV occur, whether it occurred in public or private channels and if the women believed that the abuse was reflected in the mainstream media. Facebook was overwhelmingly reported as the site where most TFGBV occurred, however women reported receiving or viewing abuse across the platforms they used.

5.2.1 Platform use

The women interviewed reported facing TFGBV across the social media platforms on which they were active. The women overwhelmingly reported using Facebook, Telegram, Twitter, and WhatsApp. Newer platforms like Mastodon and TikTok are gaining traction.

The interviewees reported using different social media platforms for different reasons. For example, the interviewees regarded social media platforms as an information source, a site to share their own opinions, a location to share their work, for entertainment, a place to engage in advocacy, or a medium to connect with friends and family. One content creator said she believed that social media was her *“biggest weapon”* for her advocacy work on women’s rights, and others pointed to their large followings on sites like Facebook and Twitter, which provide them with a platform for advocacy. However, while discussing different social media sites and their specific uses, all the women interviewed expressed their concerns regarding the scale and nature of TFGBV across the social media platforms that they used.

A notable finding was reference to the rise of new social media platform Mastodon, which 21% of women interviewed mentioned using. One interviewee reported that Mastodon felt like a safer environment for communication. She added that Mastodon is *“becoming a community where there are a lot of journalists, a lot of like-minded people who write and share things that I’m interested in.”* Another interviewee noted that she had moved to Mastodon because she *“[...] noticed Twitter getting very ugly these days”*.

The interviewees noted that government restrictions on social media platforms in times of unrest led to the broad range of platforms used, as people sought to evade the restrictions. Multiple interviewees noted a general distrust of WhatsApp and switched to Signal. One interviewee noted how she specifically used Telegram to communicate with the youth, indicating a perceived difference between demographic and social media channels used. These findings signal the complex social media landscape users must navigate to communicate online.

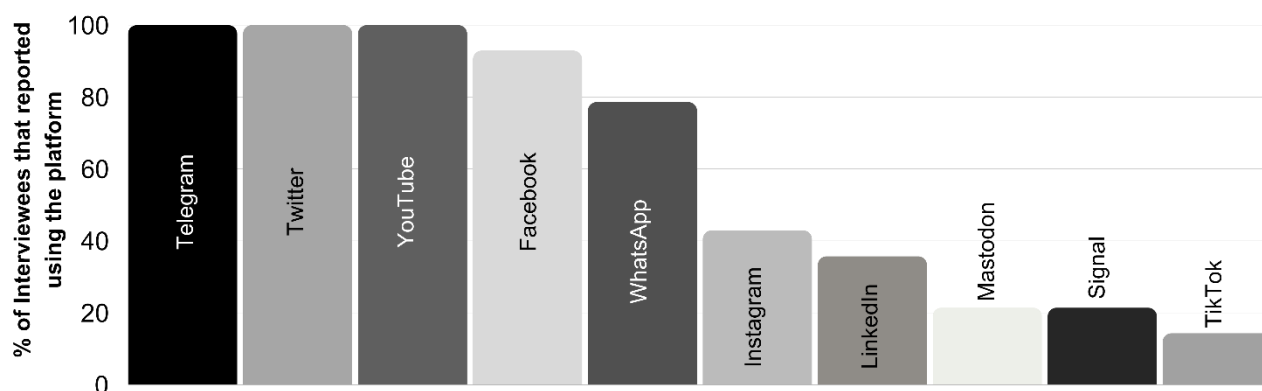


Figure 3: Social media platforms used by the interviewees. The percentage represents how many of those interviewed use each platform. Top ten platforms listed.

5.2.2 Locations of TFGBV

The interviewees overwhelmingly cited Facebook as the site of most TFGBV, closely followed by Twitter. Many women interviewed reported that comments on either TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were sites of TFGBV.

TFGBV is not restricted to public comments; women reported receiving inappropriate and unsolicited messages anonymously on Telegram and Facebook Messenger. Additionally, for one interviewee who hosted a show broadcast on YouTube, the feedback phone line was often inundated with harassing comments. The same individual reported that...

"[...] the other main source of harassment comes from Facebook Messenger. I think this is because they can be anonymous. Right after you're done posting anything on Facebook, they would come off in an organized manner through direct messages to insult you. Even after our show, we receive threats in the comment section. Most people are anonymous, not all of them but most are like that."

The issue of anonymity was raised in many of the interviews. For example, the communications coordinator for a women's rights CSO said: *"When people get anonymity and the power to say whatsoever they want against whoever they want, they don't filter."*

Existing research into TFGBV largely focusses on publicly available social media data, meaning messages that are received via closed channels or through private messages are under-researched. The closed nature of certain social media platforms, including Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, and Telegram makes it harder to research, monitor or respond to TFGBV. Interviews provide a glimpse into this issue which large-scale analysis of social media posts cannot, for example, interviewees spoke about receiving hate messages, insults, threats, and pornography, via private messages. A political blogger outlined how:

“Through messaging apps on Twitter and Facebook, I also used to get a lot of DMs that were insulting and gender based. I used to get hundreds of messages on Twitter, and just a few of them were positive messages. The remaining were insults mainly gender related. Surprisingly all of them do not challenge my view of what I said instead they are insults and every insult against me was gender related.”

Almost all the women interviewed expressed the need to have privacy settings which prevent direct messages to avoid receiving direct, private TFGBV. This means that most of the TFGBV faced by the women was taking place in the public domain.

Perceptions about the overall tone of rhetoric on social media platforms was also revealed; for example, one interviewee reported avoiding Facebook altogether as the ‘news’ shared on the platform and the comments gave her anxiety. Another woman spoke about how she no longer used the platform ‘Clubhouse’ as it had become toxic, and rather than listening to individuals, it had become a site of anonymous “mob attacks”.

The fact that women and girls are victims of TFGBV across the various social media channels they use, and often within both private and public channels, signals that the issues driving online abuse are at a societal level rather than the result of the failings of a particular platform.

5.2.3 Is gender-based violence also visible in the mainstream media?

Over 42% of those interviewed reported that they felt the narratives on social media were also often reflected in mainstream media. For example, a journalist outlined that “*rumours and negative attacks that are discussed online [are] also discussed on radio, television, or other mainstream platforms.*” One of the interviewees had been personally affected by TFGBV that transcended online media into the mainstream; she said:

“When the government doesn’t want people listening to you or when it wants you to only broadcast what they want you to broadcast, they tend to attack you using mainstream media. It does that by criminalising you. This is still happening. You can even see it in the parliament nowadays. There are a lot of media that are detrimental to the country because they preach ethnicity divides and letting those media roam free while attacking journalists that are trying to speak the truth is common and is getting worse.”

Similarly, another respondent noted how state media often responded to public opinion:

“The state media sometimes has a tendency to side with the public if there is an individual who is disliked and we will see and hear negative things about that individual on mainstream media.”

Like social media, mainstream media in Ethiopia is male dominated. Existing research has found that news values which are often framed by patriarchal societal norms, provide a barrier to women and girls entering the media industry.¹⁴ Academics have suggested that encouraging more women to enter the media industry, including in decision-making roles, could help to break down existing gender divisions and improve the portrayal of women and girls by the mainstream media.¹⁵ Using this logic, strategies which aim to encourage their access to and participation in online dialogue could have a positive impact on their portrayal. However, the misogynistic rhetoric and TFGBV found in this study reveal the need to do this alongside efforts to bolster the rights of women and girls both offline and online.

5.3 Purpose of TFGBV

This investigation sought to understand if there are clear motives for TFGBV and whether there is some level of coordination. The interviewees outlined several perceived goals of the abusers, including the desire to silence women or maintain society’s patriarchal values. The women interviewed did not provide -- nor did CIR attempt to identify -- any substantiated or verifiable evidence of coordination.

5.3.1 Goal of the abuser

The interviewees provided several reasons for the abuse when asked if they knew the abuser’s goals. These included to embarrass, intimidate, scare, or silence the women, or to feel better about themselves. The women additionally reported a belief that TFGBV was directed at them as they are perceived as a threat. For example, one interviewee who advocates for women’s rights on TikTok said:

“I think it has a lot to do with power dynamic because the things I say... I think a lot of men find that very offensive to where they stand in the society. And or like they think I take their rights away”.

Fifty percent of the women claimed that the abusers sought to silence them (as will be discussed further in Section 5.4). An advocate for women’s rights said:

¹⁴ Mengistu (2007) Addis Ababa University, Available at: <http://etd.aau.edu.et/handle/123456789/5375>

¹⁵ Kassa and Sarikakis (2022) Feminist Media Studies, Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/14680777.2021.1917640>

"I believe the abusers are doing this to silence me... and they have achieved it by the way. We have managed to inspire a lot of girls to speak out... we would challenge other creators to talk about rape, sexism, and women. We convinced them to do videos about such topics to jump start the conversation. Usually what happens is they could not handle the threats and bullying so they would take down the videos and stop posting about this issue. The abuser's desire is to silence us, they repeatedly tell us 'shut up, when are you going to shut up, all what you do is talk, you don't have the right to talk, you're not married, you don't have children so you don't have the right to talk about domestic violence'... the whole message that you constantly hear is 'shut up, be silent'."

While those interviewed reported that the abuse they received was often gendered, other perceived goals were also identified including the perpetrators advancing their political or ethnic agendas (as mentioned in section 5.1.1.3). For many interviewees, the goal of the perpetrators was unclear. They expressed a belief that several reasons could drive online abuse:

"Most of it could emanate from political positions, but they don't want to challenge any idea raised so they settle for the easier way to go which is gender-based attack. I also think some people just don't like women being outspoken. Or it's to silence you and honestly it has a significant impact. You start to think why you're even on that platform."

In one interview, the journalist outlined how the goal was solely to attack without rationale:

"They want to troll you and not listen to your answers. Initially, I was under the assumption that we could reach a certain agreement by discussing our differences and showing the proof we had for our claims. However, I realised soon after that they were not interested in discussion they just wanted to attack."

Another interviewee believed that *"some people do it to grab people's attention by propagating an idea they think the mass agrees with and as a result gain followers."*

Almost half of the women interviewed outlined how misinformation was used to discredit women in public roles. For example, a journalist said: *"Using misinformation and disinformation is part of discrediting women reporters."* Women reported being labelled, including along sexual or ethnic or religious lines, to discredit their work and viewpoints.

The director of a women's rights CSO outlined her experience of the type of defamation that her organisation frequently received:

"Then Twitter became the platform where I was constantly subjected to insults... I realised how the platform can be used as a battlefield. Even those who had never been in our office before, started calculating fabricated stories on the platform. They said they have experienced ethnic based attacks in our office. Not only is the platform used to spread false information, I realised Twitter can be weaponised. You try to address issues using logic, so I publicly requested details from those

who claimed to have been attacked in our office, in order to provide an apology. [...] I remember one post that detailed what they claimed our organisation does... they say we were encouraging women to go through divorces, and how we spend donors' funding to drink whiskey, it was like a whole post as if that person knows us."

The significant commonalities between the lived experiences of the women interviewed, and their views of the perceived goal of the TFGBV they face, signals that attempts to embarrass, silence, discredit, or defame women could be a widespread issue.

5.3.2 Perpetrator identity

The perpetrators of TFGBV were overwhelmingly strangers to the women interviewed. In a few instances, the interviewees reported that they knew one or two people involved, or that influential public figures had been involved. In some of the cases, the perpetrators were identified. For example, one interviewee reported that:

"We later found out that one of the accounts that used to harass me was also doing the same to my colleague... We then found out the account belonged to a former [colleague]. I assume maybe he wanted to be provocative and make us leak sensitive information or he just wanted to put us in a trap."

In one interview, a blogger revealed her sadness when she realised that many of those perpetrating abuse were not trolls, but seemingly normal people with families:

"I sometimes get surprised with the hateful comments coming from people and go to their accounts assuming they are trolls with fake name and pictures, to my surprise, these accounts are real and legit with the family photos."

Further research should be undertaken to investigate the perpetrators of TFGBV.

5.3.3 Coordination

When asked if the women believed the TFGBV was coordinated, the respondents almost unanimously believed that there could be some level of coordination, however they were unable to substantiate this with evidence. For example, one journalist said:

"I think there are such groups orchestrating and coordinating online attacks. Especially during the war, there were specific groups that represented a certain ethnic group that constantly used to harass us and it was obvious that it was a well-crafted group"

Similarly, the head of a women's rights organisation believed the attack were orchestrated:

“The attacks come frequently, and as part of a strategy when one group wants to attack you, it’s concerted and they use the same words. So I have observed that pattern...”

A TikTok user who had experienced several video campaigns which mashed up videos of her to produce fake content, said:

“There is definitely an element of coordination behind such online abuses. On TikTok there is a feature called stitch and they don’t actually use this feature. They download the video, cut it, add more things - they are very dedicated surprisingly, which is kind of concerning... I think there are specific accounts, pages or groups responsible for online abuse directed against women... There are few accounts, who have an account making fun of other influencers and threatening their safety.”

There are also organised ‘Prank’ channels on TikTok which have been associated with both online and offline abuse of women. For example, an interviewee stated that on *“Ethiopian TikTok, if you [are] looking at Pranks, funny videos and these short enactments, guarantee there is a woman insulted, beaten, and sexualised.”* The respondent continued to speak about one TikTok account which they reported and got taken down. The individuals would...

“[...] follow around girls on the street and take videos of their back side and post it. With their face and everything... There is another account which we could not get blocked, but he has been doing the same and has over 50,000 followers now”.

These types of accounts were also identified by the founder of a women’s rights website and newsletter, who expressed her alarm that:

“[...] on TikTok you will see attacking women is content by itself... that show men on the road attacking women or using derogatory words or insults against women on the roads.... We also see famous TikTokers attacking women publicly.”

Due to the lack of verifiable evidence, CIR is unable to confirm if the TFGBV these women suffered was coordinated. Further research should investigate the perpetrators and signs of coordination.

5.4 The impact of TFGBV

The TFGBV faced by the interviewees had wide ranging impacts, from damaging their professional reputation, to causing significant psychological damage and impacting their family life. As a result, many of the interviewees reported withdrawing from online and offline public spaces.

5.4.1 Impact on personal, professional, and family life

Over 78% of the women interviewed reported feelings of fear or anxiety when describing the incidents of TFGBV that they had experienced. One interviewee was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which she said was the result of the abuse she received on Facebook. Several interviewees reported feeling self-conscious following attacks on their personal appearance. For one journalist, the TFGBV caused her to feel depressed:

“It even caused me to be depressed at one time because people write negative comments without even reading your post properly especially when it's issues related to gender. It even affected my health.”

Another interviewee said that the TFGBV she received...

“[...] made me realise how polarised the space is and it made me question if I can survive this as an individual. So, I would be lying if I said it had no impact on me.”

For some, TFGBV resulted in their caution and withdrawal from offline public spaces:

“As a journalist, we don't stray far from our homes and we don't go to places that aren't very public because they move like mafia groups or muggers. They'll come to you in deserted places and they'll beat you up and take you away from what we have seen so far.”

One TikTok influencer outlined how she felt unsafe moving around Addis Ababa:

“I don't move around the city freely anymore, thank God I have a company car, but whenever there is emergency or when the car is at a workshop for services and maintenance, whenever that happened what I do is cover my face with a mask and put sunglasses on so that I won't be recognisable...”

One human rights investigator reported feeling unable to travel to certain locations in the country, due to the risks to their life: *“I told my bosses that I will be targeted and that I can't risk it.”* Concerns about offline personal safety, and the safety of family members, were reiterated by multiple interviewees.

“I have suffered a lot because of this – my children did not go to school for two weeks and my husband stopped working because he was accompanying me wherever I go such as at police stations... The economic pressure because both myself and my husband were not working, and also the psychological pressure was huge. The social impacts were also huge.”

For many of those interviewed, the risks to their family were cited as a key concern following TFGBV. After sharing images of her children on her personal Facebook, the head of a women's rights charity found images of her children being used online in attacks against her. This incident contributed to her withdrawal from Facebook. The need to prepare their families to deal with TFGBV was also raised by multiple interviewees.

“The biggest thing I’m scared of is [the impact] on my family because I decided to pursue this path knowing the risks but they shouldn’t be paying any prices. This is something you discuss [with] your family.”

Many women interviewed reported that their families had expressed concern about their online advocacy and work. Concerns for personal safety, their professional reputations, and the safety of their families were reported as reasons why some women stopped posting online. For example, one journalist said: *“When it started affecting my work and people started commenting on my children, I decided it wasn’t safe to continue...”*

5.4.3 The silencing of women

Unfortunately, many of the women interviewed reported that the online TFGBV they had faced led to their silencing and a decrease in their engagement online. While explaining her withdrawal from platforms like Clubhouse, one interviewee expressed her belief that: *“the harassment is more of a psychological test. It is used as a silencing mechanism.”* Similarly, a journalist interviewed said that the abusers had achieved their aim to silence her:

“The main aim of all the harassers is to silence me. And they did achieve that. I am not afraid of them but I think about my daughter and my family and most importantly I ask myself if there even is a public that deserves this type of sacrifice from me. I was a vocal and opinionated person and I think they have robbed me of that personality not because I’m afraid but because I feel like it’s not worth it anymore.”

The harassment faced by one journalist led her to quit journalism and she expressed her concerns for other women and girls entering the industry. For example, she said: *“[...] if I had a younger sister and she told me she wanted to pursue being a journalist my answer would be ‘over my dead body. I will not allow that’.”*

Multiple women explained the need for self-censorship. For example, a journalist said she stopped posting about specific topics and removed the term ‘feminism’ from her bio, following negative messages on Facebook. One blogger outlined how online forum for public debate was closing, becoming more and more extreme, and limiting freedom of expression and dialogue. For example:

“Ten years back, I wrote a radical blog about being a young woman, abortion, women’s sexuality and reproductive health. The reaction to that post was that people had a conversation where they challenged the ideas they didn’t agree with and appreciated the ones they did. It even had two three response articles. Bring that to the current day and you will be crucified.”

The director of a women’s rights charity also shared her concerns that certain rights couldn’t be advocated for or defended online due to the TFGBV that would be received,

and the risk of offline harm. Her personal experiences of TFGBV had led to self-censorship:

“These incidents definitely affected my activism and curtail me from sharing what I believe, especially on advocating on rights of sexual minorities. I refrained from publicly supporting these groups. Imagine what you would face advocating for gay rights, in a community where you will be stoned for talking about child marriage. I hope it’s a fine-line and I don’t want to be an activist who behind the scenes support them and then say publicly I don’t support you. So you pick your fight and you can’t help anyone for being known for such controversies and being bullied and harassed. So personally, this is one of the things I struggled a lot with.”

Although not a view expressed often within the interviews, there was an element of hope. For example, one journalist reported on a recent conversation she had had:

“I recently met a feminist who is a TikTok influencer for work. She said that she always expects hate comments on her videos and she even says that’s what motivates her to create more content addressing this issue.”

Another interviewee shared a similar belief saying: *“In fact, what it made me do is actually fight more. It made me realise they are silencing girls left and right. I’m just gunna keep pushing.”* Sadly, this interviewee was in the minority.

5.4.3 The normalisation of TFGBV

A key finding was a unanimous belief that TFGBV targeting women from all political, ethnic, or religious affiliations had become normalised. One interviewee said the following, a view which has been mirrored by many other interviewees:

“We have a situation where insulting women online is a normal thing. Especially women who are public figures, women who are being interviewed on TV, or women who are active generally, are being ridiculed very publicly. I believe the process of embarrassing women, and making sure that she doesn’t become independent and confident is growing.”

After participating in a panel of women who were active in Ethiopian public life, one interviewee said: *“One of the things that [the panel] said is it’s almost as if by the virtue of being online you should be okay with the kind of harassment...”* Another journalist reported that cyberbullying and insulting women had *“become a way of online communication in Ethiopia.”*

For some interviewees, TFGBV was so normalised they didn’t even view it as TFGBV. This belief led several women declining to participate in this research study as they either misunderstood what TFGBV was, or they believed it was just part of the job. One participant outlined how:

“When we talk about it we don’t even consider it as an online abuse. It’s like it’s just a thing that just keeps happening so much it’s kind of I hate to say it has been normalised.”

5.4.4 Offline attacks and arrests

Many of the women reported that the TFGBV they faced had led to significant offline harm, including psychological damage and physical assaults. While talking about a friend who also suffered from TFGBV, a journalist reported that her friend...

“[...] was having drinks at a lounge around Bole and she got up and went to a bathroom. They followed her to the ladies’ room and they tried to hold her and physically assault her. But thankfully, she knew the security guards so she kind of screamed and then they were able to come and pull them off, saved her and kicked them out.”

CIR has been unable to verify whether the TFGBV itself caused the offline harm, or whether both the offline and online harm represented different manifestations of the same abuse. In some cases, the relationship between online and offline harm is clearer; for example, the threats of arrest which women received online had real-world psychological impact on the women involved.

A number of those interviewed raised concerns that they would be imprisoned for their work. One political journalist reported her fear during a particular period of online abuse:

“Some DMs were threatening and others insulted me personally but the most dangerous ones I think at that time were the ones which called out the government to arrest me. I say this because the government used pleasing the public and activists as one strategy so I’ve seen a lot of people taken to prison just because people asked for it. Due to this, I was expecting to be arrested any minute during that time.”

Despite promises of reforms, the arrest of journalists has continued since Abiy Ahmed’s government came to power. Multiple interviewees spoke about friends, colleagues, or public figures who had been arrested, detained, or sued for their work. For example, a TV presenter said:

“[...] a journalist from Yeneta Tube was taken yesterday. There is a video of this event and that’s the kind of condition that exists in Ethiopia right now. We’ve all lost sleep over the video. This is especially disappointing after all the promises from such high-up government officials including the prime minister regarding how journalists would be treated better and wouldn’t be arrested. Seeing that video where a female journalist was being degraded and insulted in public was shocking and I think we could all see ourselves through her. This goes to show how much of a risk we are all in and how we are surrounded by fire. I hope everyone can see what’s going on.”

When discussing the threat of arrest and abuse she received, the TV presenter also mentioned the arrest of a family member for her work:

"They mostly attack the fact that you're female by saying things like 'If you don't stop this and just raise your kids, we're going to come for your family'... Our families are scared too. For example, my brother was imprisoned although he has no affiliation with politics. They came home and arrested him. So there are a lot of threats regarding my family."

Following the arrest of her colleague and co-host, one interviewee fled the country:

"The next day they came to my house and my family called me after that to tell me not to come home. So since I already had a Turkish visa and booked a flight to go, I just had to change my flight to that day and I went before I was put on the no-flight list. It was a heartbreaking realisation that my feud was not only with the government but also with the people. That was a terrible feeling because it meant I wouldn't even be safe walking on the streets in my country."

CIR has been unable to verify whether the TFGBV itself was the cause of these events, or whether the TFGBV represents one manifestation of the broader abuse these women faced in response for their advocacy, leading to arrests or threats of arrest.

The risks to journalists in Ethiopia have been commented on by national and international commentators. Journalists covering an array of topics — including the Tigray conflict or anti-government issues — have been threatened, attacked, killed, expelled, arrested, and detained without trial.¹⁶ As a result, interviewees outlined the anxiety following the threat of arrest or trials in the *"court of public opinion"*. Following an article on an abusive husband, a journalist reported that she was threatened online by the subject of the article and members of the public, and a chain of events then led to her unfair arrest:

"I was sued and an arrest warrant was issued... This usually happens when a person fails to appear before the court on a first summons... After getting the subpoena on a Monday at around 04:00 pm, I went to the police station around a place called Kazanchis the next day. They said that it was good that I went there myself and it would not have been good had they brought me to the police station. I had copies of the newspapers in which the original story and the response were published. The investigator read me the 23-page alleged crimes I committed."

The journalist had explained that she had given the article's protagonist the opportunity to respond and be interviewed and that the article had been signed off by her media house. She was released on bail. The journalist suggested that the online response to the article was somehow related to her detention, indicating that TFGBV and public perceptions can influence law enforcement.

¹⁶ Reporters Without Borders (2023) Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/country/ethiopia> [accessed 19 April 2022]

Cases like this do little to diminish the country's reputation for persecuting and censoring journalists.

5.5 Recommendations for combatting TFGBV

When asked if they had any recommendations for how to combat TFGBV targeting women who hold public positions in Ethiopia, the respondents had several suggestions:

Education and training:

- Public education campaigns on human rights, including respect, empathy, solidarity and equality along multiple identity lines, specifically gender, ethnicity, and religion.
- Media literacy and digital security education in schools and workplaces
- Strengthen resilience to online abuse, including training for women journalists and supporting women to take on more public roles

Legal reform and application:

- Ensure transparent application and improve the implementation of existing laws on hate speech
- Collection and documentation of evidence of online abuse which can be shared with the local justice system and social media platforms
- Development of new laws which seek to codify gender-based violence both online and offline (in partnership with other strategies)

Engage social media platforms:

- Improve social media reporting tools, platform policies, and public awareness of them
- Develop AI to identify online hate speech, including in minority languages
- Increase pressure on social media platforms to: remove accounts that repeatedly violate their community standards; hire more content moderators who speak local languages; and end anonymisation of social media accounts to prevent barriers to identification and accountability of online abusers

These suggestions have also been raised within existing literature on combatting TFGBV, online abuse and hate speech in Ethiopia and at the international level. Additional recommendations identified in the literature include: creating an international body to investigate online harm¹⁷ and engaging influential public figures to share informative messaging related to the impact of online abuse.¹⁸ Researchers have previously suggested that the Ethiopian Government should work

¹⁷ Stremlau (23 March 2022) The Citizen, Tanzania. Available at: <https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania/oped/why-we-need-an-international-body-to-rein-in-hate-speech-during-conflict-3757350>

¹⁸ Workneh (2019) African Journalism Studies, Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23743670.2020.1729832>; Yilma talks of media literacy campaigns: Yilma (2021) Cambridge University Press, Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-african-law/article/abs/on-disinformation-elections-and-ethiopian-law/AD43AE2160E071FEF73EE8E4128F0B7A>

closely with social media companies to improve community guidelines and codes of conduct, and have highlighted the need to build institutional capacity which can support the legal frameworks so that existing law is implemented effectively.¹⁹

Many of the interviewees made it clear that they believed the success of campaigns to combat TFGBV relies upon ensuring that the strategies are well resourced and accessible to as many people as possible. In a country with such ethnic and linguistic diversity, a multi-language approach is needed. Additionally, the women expressed that, to have a positive and lasting effect, any strategies which seek to end this practise must address the root causes of online abuse against women, including countering gender stereotypes and gender-based discrimination.

¹⁹ Yilma (2021) Cambridge University Press, Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-african-law/article/abs/on-disinformation-elections-and-ethiopian-law/AD43AE2160E071FEF73EE8E4128F0B7A>

6. Conclusion

There is no doubt that both men and women in Ethiopia are victims of online abuse, however this research signals the differences in the nature, purpose, and impact of that abuse. Both Ethiopian men and women must navigate the highly politicised online environment. However, while both men and women suffer from online abuse along narratives which represent well-documented fractures in Ethiopian society — ethnic, political, or religious lines — the women believe that the nature of the TFGBV differs significantly.

The interviewees reported that abuse directed at men is related to their perceived political integrity, views, or partiality, while abuse directed at women and girls is misogynistic, and is characterised by gendered stereotypes related to their appearance or role in society. For example, interviewees outlined how women in public positions have their hair, clothing, weight, marital status, suspected lovers, and number of children debated on social media and acknowledged that these things are not discussed in relation to men in public roles. This provides an additional, gendered dimension to the online abuse women and girls face, often with deep and long-lasting real-world consequences.

The women interviewed also revealed a belief that they were victims of TFGBV due to their — or their abusers — ethnic, political, or religious identities or viewpoints; however, even so, the abuse was often gendered in nature. Existing literature has explored these issues without examining the intersection with gender. Further research which explores this intersectionality is needed to establish whether women and girls are more at risk of receiving this form of abuse than men, and the consequences of this abuse when it is targeted along gender lines.

Women reported receiving many types of TFGBV, including insults, intimidation, and threats, and being harassed, defamed, doxed and publicly humiliated. Facebook was overwhelmingly reported as the site where most TFGBV occurred, however women reported TFGBV across the platforms they used, both in private and public channels, showing that the issues driving TFGBV are at a societal level rather than localised to a particular platform.

The severity of these online attacks varied and so did their impact. The TFGBV faced by women in this study had wide ranging impacts, from damaging their professional reputations, to causing significant psychological damage, and impacting family life. Many women were threatened with calls for their arrest, rape, or death. The women recounted stories of physical assaults and arrests; one interviewee was personally detained, and one had to flee Ethiopia to avoid arrest. CIR has been unable to verify whether the TFGBV itself caused the physical assault or arrests, or if both the offline and online harm represented different manifestations of the same abuse. In some cases, the relationship between online and offline harm is clearer, for example, online threats of arrest had real-world psychological impact on the women involved.

As a result of TFGBV, many of the women interviewed reported that they felt silenced and had withdrawn from public spaces, online and offline. In addition, a few women reported being labelled homosexual. This puts women at increased risk as being homosexual is illegal and carries a prison sentence.

The women interviewed identified several goals behind the abuse; for example, attempts to embarrass, discredit, scare, or defame women and girls were reported in almost all interviews, and 50% of the women claimed that the abusers sought to silence them. The women unanimously stressed that TFGBV had become normalised within the online environment. Though they did not provide any substantiated or verifiable evidence of coordination, coordination is typically identified through direct analysis of social media activity rather than interviews. Future research into the normalisation of TFGBV could explore whether specific groups, accounts, or profiles are responsible.

Through the contextual analysis, literature review and interviews, CIR has explored the forms, locations, purpose, and impact of TFGBV targeting human rights defenders. This report has signalled the need to investigate TFGBV along intersectional lines to establish whether women and girls are at higher risk of receiving abuse along ethnic and religious lines.

Building on this research and the conclusions of this investigation, CIR will broaden the study through a larger scale analysis of content drawn from social media. The interview analysis coupled with existing research on ethnic and religious hate speech in Ethiopia, will form the basis for a collection plan targeting a broader range of hate speech categories. This will enable analysis of how the forms and locations of TFGBV vary.

The women interviewed in this study expressed their belief that to have a lasting effect, any strategies which seek to end TFGBV must address its root causes. This includes countering gender stereotypes and gender-based discrimination and resolving the issue of women and girls' representation in both the online and mainstream media environments. By doing so, women and girls may be more inclined to enter prominent roles within Ethiopian society.

7. Appendices

7.1 Literature review

This literature review explores the debates surrounding the role of social media and online abuse in Ethiopia. As research focussing on women and girls is limited, the literature review takes a broader approach. First, the literature review will cover the challenges associated with defining online abuse, followed by an assessment of the literature on online abuse in Ethiopia, where possible focussing on the online abuse of women and girls. Additionally, literature on the relationship between online and offline abuse will be explored.

7.1.1 Defining online abuse and TFGBV

Online abuse is a broad term which encompasses many types of harmful behaviours that occur on the internet. The ‘Online Harassment Field Manual’ published by PEN America, defines online abuse as “pervasive or severe targeting of an individual or group online through harmful behaviour.”²⁰ This includes, and is not limited to, acts such as hate speech, doxing, and sexual harassment.²¹ The gendered dimension to online abuse is frequently overlooked within existing scholarship.

The increasing international attention and awareness within both academia and policy over recent years on the online abuse of women and girls has led to a rise in publications and debates surrounding gender specific definitions. For example, the UN Populations Fund (UNFPA) outlines that both old and new technologies can be used to perpetrate TFGBV.²²

TFGBV is defined as: “an act of violence perpetrated by one or more individuals that is committed, assisted, aggravated and amplified in part or fully by the use of information and communication technologies or digital media against a person on the basis of their gender.”²³ Similarly, ‘Online violence against women’ is also used interchangeably to describe the same phenomenon²⁴ and covers “online misogyny, text-based abuse (e.g. on social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook), up skirting, image-based sexual abuse (also referred to as ‘revenge pornography’),

²⁰ PEN America (n.d.) Online Harassment Field Manual, Available at: <https://onlineharassmentfieldmanual.pen.org/defining-online-harassment-a-glossary-of-terms/>

²¹ Ibid.

²² UNFPA (n.d.) Available at: https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/TFGBV_Brochure-1000x560.pdf; UNFPA (2021) Technology-facilitated Gender-based Violence: Making All Spaces Safe, Available at: <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence-making-all-spaces-safe>

²³ UNFPA (n.d.) Available at: https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/TFGBV_Brochure-1000x560.pdf; UNFPA (2021) Technology-facilitated Gender-based Violence: Making All Spaces Safe, Available at: <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence-making-all-spaces-safe>

²⁴ Barker and Jurasz (2020) Online violence against women as an obstacle to gender equality: a critical view from Europe. European Equality Law Review, Available at: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/71877/1/EELR%201-2020-Article%20GE%20Online%20violence%20%28ORO%29.pdf>

rape pornography, doxing, cyberstalking and cyberharassment”.²⁵ This report will use the term ‘online abuse’ to encompass all of these harmful activities.

Hate speech – a form of online abuse

Compared to other forms of online abuse, hate speech has received increased academic attention, in part due to the fierce academic debate surrounding its definition and identification. Many of the debates around hate speech are also applicable to online abuse more generally, and to online abuse against women and so have been explored below.

Due to the differences in definitions of hate speech, Téwodros Workneh argues that the concept remains “stubbornly elusive”.²⁶ Academics and practitioners also use several other terms including: “cyberhate”,²⁷ “anti-social media, offensive speech, excitable speech, online vitriol, cyberbullying, micro-aggression, or inflammatory language”.²⁸ Other alternatives include ‘dangerous speech’²⁹ (speech that could lead to real world violence) and ‘fear speech’³⁰ (speech that reinforces fear and hatred). In the context of Ethiopia, the Government defined hate speech within the ‘Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation’ (No.1185/2020) as “speech that deliberately promotes hatred, discrimination or attacks against a person or a discernible group of identity, based on ethnicity, religion, race, gender or disability”.³¹ While not dissimilar to the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech definition,³² this definition has faced criticism for being too vague and unactionable.

Researchers have taken a variety of approaches to defining hate speech. For example, the Mechachal (meaning tolerance) study into online debates in Ethiopia used a framework that

²⁵ Barker and Jurasz (2020) Online violence against women as an obstacle to gender equality: a critical view from Europe. European Equality Law Review, Available at: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/71877/1/EELR%201-2020-Article%20GE%20Online%20Violence%20%28ORO%29.pdf>

²⁶ Workneh (2019) African Journalism Studies, Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23743670.2020.1729832>

²⁷ Perry and Olsson (2009) “Cyberhate: the globalization of hate”. Information & Communications Technology Law, Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13600830902814984>

²⁸ Pohjonen (2022) Popular Communication, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2022.2074998>; Pohjonen (2019) International Journal of Communication, Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/9110>; Gagliardone (2019) Defining online speech and its “public lives”: What is the place for “extreme speech”? International Journal of Communication, Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/9103>

²⁹ Benesch (2014) Countering dangerous speech: New ideas for genocide prevention, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Available at: <https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/20140212-benesch-countering-dangerous-speech.pdf>

³⁰ Buysse (2014) Words of violence: “Fear speech,” or how violent conflict escalation relates to the freedom of expression. Human Rights Quarterly, Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24518298>

³¹ Federal Negarit Gazette (2020) Available at: https://ethionab.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/1185_2020_HATE_SPEECH_AND_DISINFORMATION_PREVENTION_AND_SUPPRESSION_PROCLAMATION_.pdf

³² The UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech defines hate speech as “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor”. See: <https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/what-is-hate-speech#:~:text=In%20common%20language%2C%20E%80%9Chate%20speech,that%20may%20threaten%20social%20peace>

categorised statements as either “going toward” or “going against” dialogue. Speech that could be classified as “going against” included “offensive speech, hate speech, [and] dangerous speech”.³³ Statements could classify as “going against” if they “explicitly advocate hatred based on ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual identity or political affiliation and which incite to discriminate, be hostile or violently attack individuals or groups based on their belonging to a group.”³⁴ This latter statement bares many similarities with the Ethiopian Government’s definition of hate speech. The Mechachal study differs from other research however, as it placed importance on the identity of the individual or group as the key rationale behind the abuse. Alternatively, the authors of a UNESCO study into ‘Countering online hate speech’ employed a wider understanding, stating that hate speech “concerns antagonism towards people”,³⁵ removing the emphasis on identity. Twitter also uses a broad definition of hate speech in its terms of service: “abuse that threatens safety”.³⁶ While a broader definition may encompass additional types of online abuse, it increases the challenges associated with identifying online abuse.

Other researchers have also sought to define hate speech by its characteristics, which according to Waldron 2012, include “dehumanising and reinforcing in/out group boundaries”.³⁷ This was reinforced by Gagliardone et al who claim that hate speech “unites and divides at the same time” by creating an ‘us’ and a ‘them’.³⁸ The lack of consensus within academic debate provides a challenge to researchers. Having a clear definition is essential to underpin a rigorous research methodology and to reject the co-option of the term to describe other societal issues.³⁹

Contextual awareness

Defining online abuse is difficult because it is often contextually specific. According to Brown, the term is “systematically ambiguous” and has a “multiplicity of different meanings” in different contexts.⁴⁰ This view is echoed within the literature and signals that researchers need to understand the nuances of language and culture. Defining and identifying online abuse therefore requires full acknowledgment of the “social, cultural, political, and historical” context.⁴¹ As a result,

³³ Gagliardone et al (2015) Mechachal Study Online Debates and Elections in Ethiopia, Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317998916_Mechachal_Online_Debates_and_Elections_in_Ethiopia_Report_One_A_Preliminary_Assessment_of_Online_Debates_in_Ethiopia

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Gagliardone et al (2015) Countering online hate speech, page 11, Available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000233231>

³⁶ Pohjonen and Udupa (2017) International Journal of Communication, Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/5843>

³⁷ Waldron 2012 - the harm in hate speech (book MA Harvard press)

³⁸ Gagliardone et al (2015) Countering online hate speech, page 11, Available at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000233231>

³⁹ Brown (2017) What is hate speech? Part 1: The myth of hate. Law and Philosophy, Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10982-017-9297-1>

⁴⁰ Brown (2017) What is hate speech? Part 2: Family resemblances. Law and Philosophy, p.564, Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44980889>

⁴¹ CARD (2023) Ethiopian Media Landscape, Available at: <https://www.cardeth.org/the-ethiopian-media-landscape>

Pohjonen argues that the general definition should remain “as open-ended as possible” so that it can encompass cultural specifics.⁴²

The need for cultural awareness signals that an anthropological approach to understanding online abuse might be required. For example, Pohjonen and Udupa outline the importance of contextualising online dialogue with an understanding of “user practises”, “histories of speech cultures”,⁴³ and “variations in user motivations”.⁴⁴ However, as of yet, there is limited ethnographic research into online practices in Ethiopia.⁴⁵ Academics have argued that a “thorough ethnographic exploration” is needed to understand how different factors, including “technology, online agency, and political cultures” can make something classify as online abuse in one location and not in another.⁴⁶ This represents a key challenge for researchers.

Identifying online abuse and hate speech

A critical challenge associated with defining online abuse lies with its identification. As mentioned, determining what is and what is not online abuse or hate speech is an incredibly complex, culturally sensitive topic. There is limited agreement within academia and various methods for identification have been used, including computational models.⁴⁷ For example, Pohjonen asks if, when establishing whether text contains hate speech, researchers should assess the “surface features of the content” to identify “deeper sentiments, effects, emotions, intentions, motivations, feelings, or attitudes of hatred” or whether researchers should “rely on their implicit contextual knowledge and interpretation”?⁴⁸ The latter raises concerns however; research has found that the background (gender, age, ethnicity) and political affiliations of the researcher significantly impacts the identification of hate speech.⁴⁹ Additionally, cultural and linguistic nuances can act as a barrier

⁴² Pohjonen (2022) Popular Communication, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2022.2074998>; Pohjonen (2019) International Journal of Communication, Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/9110>

⁴³ Pohjonen and Udupa (2017) International Journal of Communication, Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/5843>;

⁴⁴ Udupa (2016) Middle class on steroids: digital media politics in urban India, Available at: <https://casi.sas.upenn.edu/iit/sudupa>

⁴⁵ Pohjonen and Udupa (2017) International Journal of Communication, Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/5843>

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ For examples, see: Burnap and Williams (2015) Cyber hate speech on Twitter, P&I Policy and Internet, Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275412246_Cyber_Hate_Speech_on_Twitter_An_Application_of_Machine_Classification_and_Statistical_Modeling_for_Policy_and_Decision_Making_Machine_Classification_of_Cyber_Hate_Speech; Davidson, Warmesley, Macy, and Weber (2017) Automated hate speech detection and the problem of offensive language, Available at: <https://ojs.aaai.org/index.php/ICWSM/article/view/14955>

⁴⁸ Pohjonen (2022) Popular Communication, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2022.2074998>; Pohjonen (2019) International Journal of Communication, Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/9110>

⁴⁹ Kwok and Wang (2013) Locate the hate: Detecting tweets against Blacks, Available at: <https://ojs.aaai.org/index.php/AAAI/article/view/8539>; Ross, Rist, Carbonell, Cabrera, Kurowsky, and Wojatzki (2016) Measuring the reliability of hate speech annotations: The case of the European refugee crisis, Available at: <https://arxiv.org/abs/1701.08118>

to the identification of online abuse; understanding the meaning of “jokes, innuendo, irony, metaphors, or double meanings” requires familiarity with both cultural and linguistic contexts.⁵⁰

Establishing where the line is between acceptable speech and online abuse is difficult as the line can be ambiguous.⁵¹ Even social media platforms acknowledge that there is a fine line between acceptable and hate speech.⁵² In the Mechachal study, actions that could constitute “going against” dialogue provide insight into what speech was deemed unacceptable. They classified “going against” as “attacking another speaker or a specific group by belittling, challenging, provoking, teasing them maliciously, or explicitly threatening them”.⁵³ These types of ‘unacceptable’ online communication could inform future study.

Implication on Research: There is often an ambiguous line between what is considered hate speech and what is considered acceptable speech. The literature review signals the need to carry out research on online abuse in Ethiopia in consultation or collaboration with local experts and researchers. Defining and identifying hate speech must be done with contextual awareness, so the nuances of culture and language are not missed.

7.1.2 Online abuse in Ethiopia

The issue of hate speech in Ethiopia is not new. The rise in internet access and social media has arguably provided it with a new forum within which to flourish,⁵⁴ where partisan individuals and groups can promote their views.⁵⁵ Hate speech was highlighted by a senior Government official as one of the biggest challenges facing Ethiopia.⁵⁶ Similarly, members of the public raised their concerns about the prevalence of online hate speech in an opinion survey carried out by academics.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Pohjonen (2019) *International Journal of Communication*, Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/9110>;

Udupa (2017) *Gaali cultures: The politics of abusive exchange on social media*. *New Media and Society*, Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1461444817698776>

⁵¹ Pohjonen and Udupa (2017) *International Journal of Communication*, Available at:

<https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/5843>

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Gagliardone et al (2015) *Mechachal Study Online Debates and Elections in Ethiopia*, Available at:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317998916_Mechachal_Online_Debates_and_Elections_in_Ethiopia_Report_One_A_Preliminary_Assessment_of_Online_Debates_in_Ethiopia; Gagliardone (2016) *The Politics of Technology in Africa: Communication, Development, and Nation-building in Ethiopia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 17

⁵⁴ Lovink (2013) *Hermes on the Hudson: notes on media theory after snowden*, Available at: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/54/59854/hermes-on-the-hudson-notes-on-media-theory-after-snowden/>; Morozov (2012) *The Net Delusion: the dark side of internet freedom*, Available at: <https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/titles/evgeny-morozov/the-net-delusion/9781610391061/?lens=publicaffairs>

⁵⁵ CARD (2023) *Ethiopian Media Landscape*, Available at: <https://www.cardeth.org/the-ethiopian-media-landscape>

⁵⁶ Workneh (2019) *African Journalism Studies*, Available at:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23743670.2020.1729832>

⁵⁷ Ibid.

According to academics, to understand online hate speech we must understand the debates that exist within society that are now being played out in the online sphere.⁵⁸ Research suggests that, against the backdrop of media censorship, online abuse in Ethiopia is linked with “the political antagonisms in the country”⁵⁹ and is used by stakeholders to express both “pre-existing political grievances” and the “broader history of political struggle and conflict”.⁶⁰ For example, a study by Skjerdal and Gebru investigated the use of social media by three popular online channels during the 2016 and 2017 state of emergency which followed anti-government protests. They found that the Facebook posts were “overwhelmingly political, with a particular focus on ethnic issues”, while the reader reactions focussed “less on politics and more on society and culture”. To the surprise of the researchers, the reader reactions contained a variety of views. They concluded that Facebook provided a site for political discussions and intense disagreement.⁶¹ This finding contradicts research into online abuse on social media in other contexts, which suggests that the ability to “easily self-select into niche topics and extreme viewpoints...” may result in the creation of echo chambers, reinforcing similar ideas.⁶²

Facebook (now Meta)⁶³ and Twitter⁶⁴ claim to have acted in attempts to address the prominence of hate speech and disinformation in the Ethiopian context. For example, in November 2021, a post from the Abiy administration encouraging citizens to ‘bury’ advancing Tigrayan rebels was removed for violating Facebook’s policies.⁶⁵ Social media has not only changed the way people interact with each other, but has changed how politicians communicate with the general population.⁶⁶

⁵⁸ Ahmed (2006) Coexistence and/or Confrontation?: Towards a Reappraisal of Christian-Muslim Encounter in Contemporary Ethiopia, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Available at: https://brill.com/view/journals/jra/36/1/article-p4_3.xml?language=en; Barata (2012) Minority Rights, Culture, and Ethiopia’s “Third Way” to Governance, *African Studies Review*, Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43904848>; Tronvall (2008) Human Rights Violations in Federal Ethiopia: When Ethnic Identity is a Political Stigma, *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, Available at: https://brill.com/view/journals/ijgr/15/1/article-p49_3.xml?language=en

⁵⁹ Pohjonen (2019) *International Journal of Communication*, Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/9110>; Gagliardone (2017) *The politics of technology in Africa: Communication, development, and nation-building in Ethiopia*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; Legesse (2012) *Shielding marginalised groups from verbal assaults without abusing hate speech laws*, Cambridge University Press, Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/content-and-context-of-hate-speech/shielding-marginalized-groups-from-verbal-assaults-without-abusing-hate-speech-laws/AFE2A33AAD528AE4D805B857697FADBB>

⁶⁰ Pohjonen (2022) *Popular Communication*, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2022.2074998>; Pohjonen (2019) *International Journal of Communication*, Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/9110>

⁶¹ Skjerdal and Gebru (2020) *Media Culture & Society*, Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340832244_Not_quite_an_echo_chamber_ethnic_debate_on_Ethiopian_Facebook_pages_during_times_of_unrest

⁶² Müller and Schwarz (2018) *Flaming the flames of hate: social media and hate crimes*, SSRN, Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3082972

⁶³ Meta (2021) *Update on Ethiopia*, Available at: <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/11/update-on-ethiopia/>

⁶⁴ Twitter (2021) *Safety Tweet*, Available at: <https://twitter.com/TwitterSafety/status/1456813764184055808>

⁶⁵ BBC (2021) *Reality Check*, Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/59251942>

⁶⁶ Patterson (2016) *Social Media: Advancing Women in Politics?*, *Women in Parliaments Global Forum*, http://www.w20-germany.org/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/WIP-Harvard-Facebook-Study_Oct2016.pdf

7.1.3 Online abuse against women

Through their global reach, social media platforms have facilitated the online abuse of women and other minorities on a global scale.⁶⁷ While the number of studies on the online abuse of women is increasing, they predominantly focus on global trends or western countries. As a result, this section will first explore the limited research into the online abuse of women in Ethiopia, before looking further afield.

Online abuse against women in Ethiopia

Only a handful of studies have looked at gendered abuse in Ethiopia and this is mostly in relation to mainstream media, such as newspapers, radio, and television.⁶⁸ In one exception, Kassa and Sarikakik investigated the trivialisation of women's increasing participation in Ethiopian politics on social media. They outline how social media gives a voice to women politicians and allows them to be the "producers of their own narratives", unlike mainstream media. Through an analysis of Facebook posts, they found that although media could empower women to engage in politics, it is "playing a sabotaging role on the promotion of women in politics". The researchers also believe that while the Facebook messages often had a 'playful' tone, the aim of the messages is to "reinforce masculinised power in the society and to keep women under that power". This view was also voiced by Hussein, who analysed tweets discussing women's participation in public life.⁶⁹ Tigist Shewarega Hussen revealed that equal participation in politics is a highly polarising topic and that in response, there have been symbolic debates about women's inclusion in Ethiopia's future.⁷⁰

Kassa and Sarikakik argue that "the online media (re)produce gendered stereotypes that undermine the role of women in the political sphere."⁷¹ Facebook messages contained narratives that "ridiculed" women for holding positions of power, and signalled a belief that women in politics is unnatural and a threat to religion and culture.⁷² The "(mis)representation" of women politicians, they argue, reproduces "the dominant discourses about the role women (should) play in society"⁷³ and is indicative of "a patriarchal society's deep-rooted resistance towards women's engagement

⁶⁷ UNFPA (n.d.) Available at: https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/TFGBV_Brochure-1000x560.pdf; UNFPA (2021) Technology-facilitated Gender-based Violence: Making All Spaces Safe, Available at: <https://www.unfpa.org/publications/technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence-making-all-spaces-safe>

⁶⁸ Kassa and Sarikakis (2022) Feminist Media Studies, Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/14680777.2021.1917640>

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Hussen (2020) Gendered inequalities and media representation: Social media contestations on Ethiopia's 'gender-balanced' political leadership, Agenda, Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10130950.2020.1738712>

⁷¹ Kassa and Sarikakis (2022) Feminist Media Studies, Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/14680777.2021.1917640>

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.; Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen (2012) The discursive construction of women politicians in the European Press, Feminist Media Studies, Available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14680777.2011.615636>; Haraldsson and Wängnerud (2018) The effect of media sexism on women's political ambition: Evidence from a worldwide study', Feminist Media Studies, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1468797>.

in the public sphere”.⁷⁴ Although women’s presence in Ethiopian politics has increased since the introduction of the Government’s 2004 voluntary quota, which says that 30% of party candidacy in local elections should be women,⁷⁵ Muhammed argues that women continue to be excluded from political decision-making.⁷⁶ Barriers to women’s representation and participation include cultural norms and values, economic resources, and poor media coverage.⁷⁷ Social media gives Ethiopian women a voice but also increases their vulnerability to abuse and marginalisation by providing a new medium for the dissemination of online abuse.

Online abuse against women in other contexts

Even outside Ethiopia, comprehensive and systematic research into online abuse of women is lacking.⁷⁸ With the rise in access to the internet and social media platforms, women and girls across “various demographics and geographic locations” are being increasingly affected.⁷⁹ While the issue is gaining international recognition,⁸⁰ there are challenges for researchers including that the online environment changes rapidly, meaning that any data on the topic will be quickly outdated.⁸¹

Researchers have highlighted that the internet provides a forum within which real-world dynamics are reproduced.⁸² The links between pre-existing societal norms and challenges and online abuse against women was explored by Barker and Jurasz outside of the Ethiopian context; they note that the root causes are similar, if not the same, as offline violence against women. As such, there is a recognition that the phenomenon is rooted in the normalisation of violence against women, as well as “unequal gender relations, patriarchy and gender stereotypes”.⁸³ However, the online environment brings additional dangers to a pre-existing problem, including the anonymisation of the

⁷⁴ Kassa and Sarikakis (2022) *Feminist Media Studies*, Available at:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/14680777.2021.1917640>

⁷⁵ Muhammed (2017) *Women’s Political Participation in Local Government in Ethiopia: The Case of Two Districts in Amhara Regional State*, Bergen: University of Bergen, Available at: <https://bora.uib.no/bora-xmlui/handle/1956/16941>

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ OpCit Research (2013) *Women in Decision-Making: The Role of the New Media for Increased Political Participation*, Brussels: European Union, Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOL-FEMM_ET\(2013\)493010](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOL-FEMM_ET(2013)493010)

⁷⁸ Barker and Jurasz (2020) *Online violence against women as an obstacle to gender equality: a critical view from Europe*. *European Equality Law Review*, Available at: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/71877/1/EELR%201-2020-Article%20GE%20Online%20violence%20%28ORO%29.pdf>

⁷⁹ Ibid.; United Nations Human Rights Council (2018) *Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective*, (UN Publication, A/HRC/38/47), Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc3847-report-special-rapporteur-violence-against-women-its-causes-and>; Amnesty International (2018) *Toxic Twitter – a toxic place for women*, Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violenceagainst-women-chapter-1/>.

⁸⁰ European Commission (2019) *Stop violence against women: Statement by the European Commission and the High Representative*, Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_19_6300. As cited in Barker and Jurasz (2020) *Online violence against women as an obstacle to gender equality: a critical view from Europe*. *European Equality Law Review*, Available at: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/71877/1/EELR%201-2020-Article%20GE%20Online%20violence%20%28ORO%29.pdf>

⁸¹ Barker and Jurasz (2020) *Online violence against women as an obstacle to gender equality: a critical view from Europe*. *European Equality Law Review*, Available at: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/71877/1/EELR%201-2020-Article%20GE%20Online%20violence%20%28ORO%29.pdf>

⁸² Williams (2006) *Virtually Criminal: Crime, Deviance and Regulation Online*. Routledge.

⁸³ Barker and Jurasz (2019) *Online Misogyny as a Hate Crime: A Challenge for Legal Regulation?* Routledge, Chapter 2.

perpetrator and the potential for high visibility of posts due to social media platforms' algorithms.⁸⁴ For example, due to how social media platforms operate, certain debates and views within society may be disproportionately amplified, leading to the dissemination of fringe ideas into the mainstream.

Research into the online abuse of women and girls in other contexts reveals similar trends to those seen in the limited number of studies in Ethiopia. For example, research conducted by UNESCO shows that online abuse of women can be politically motivated.⁸⁵ The report indicates that women who are politically active, and “cover topics such as politics, law, economics, sport, women’s rights, gender and feminism” are most likely to be targeted.⁸⁶ During the study, 73% of women reported experiencing online violence. The women revealed a variety of threats, including “threats of sexual assault and physical violence, abusive language, harassing private messages, threats to damage their professional or personal reputations, digital security attacks, misrepresentation via manipulated images, and financial threat”.⁸⁷ These forms of online violence against women were also identified in research by Barker and Jurasz.⁸⁸

Similarly, Patterson looked at social media use by female politicians in 107 countries including Ethiopia.⁸⁹ Almost 50% of the participants reported receiving threatening or abusive comments about women’s participation in politics. Amnesty international examined online abuse against women in Denmark, Italy, New Zealand, Poland, Spain, Sweden, the UK, and the USA. They found that 23% of women aged 18-55 had experienced online abuse.⁹⁰ In another study, Lewis et al looked at the online abuse that feminists received on social media platforms. They found that those who engage in online feminism received shocking levels of threats and violence but also more routine, even mundane levels of sexism, prejudice, and misogyny.”⁹¹ Threats included

⁸⁴ Daniels (2008) “Race, Civil Rights, and Hate Speech in the Digital Era”, Available at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1218&context=gc_pubs

⁸⁵ Posetti et al (2021) Online violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidence and Impacts, UNESCO, Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375136>

⁸⁶ Ibid.; Barker and Jurasz (2021) Text-based (sexual) abuse and online violence against women: towards law reform? Available at: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/978-1-83982-848-520211017/full/html>; Barker and Jurasz (2020) Online violence against women as an obstacle to gender equality: a critical view from Europe. European Equality Law Review, Available at: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/71877/1/EELR%201-2020-Article%20GE%20Online%20violence%20%28ORO%29.pdf>

⁸⁷ Posetti et al (2021) Online violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidence and Impacts, UNESCO, Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375136>; Barker and Jurasz (2021) Text-based (sexual) abuse and online violence against women: towards law reform? Available at: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/978-1-83982-848-520211017/full/html>; Barker and Jurasz (2020) Online violence against women as an obstacle to gender equality: a critical view from Europe. European Equality Law Review, Available at: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/71877/1/EELR%201-2020-Article%20GE%20Online%20violence%20%28ORO%29.pdf>

⁸⁸ Barker and Jurasz (2020) Online violence against women as an obstacle to gender equality: a critical view from Europe. European Equality Law Review, Available at: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/71877/1/EELR%201-2020-Article%20GE%20Online%20violence%20%28ORO%29.pdf>

⁸⁹ Patterson (2016) Social Media: Advancing Women in Politics?, Women in Parliaments Global Forum, http://www.w20-germany.org/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/WIP-Harvard-Facebook-Study_Oct2016.pdf

⁹⁰ Amnesty International (2017) Online poll of women aged 18-55 in the UK, USA, Spain, Denmark, Italy, Sweden, Poland and New Zealand about their experiences of online abuse or harassment on social media platforms, Available at:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/11/amnesty-reveals-alarming-impact-of-online-abuse-against-women/>

⁹¹ Lewis, Rowe and Wiper (2017) Online Abuse of Feminists as An Emerging form of Violence Against Women and Girls, Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/bjc/article/57/6/1462/2623986?login=true>

sexual harassment, sexual violence, and violent pornographic depictions.⁹² These studies all highlighted that Facebook and Twitter were used to spread abuse.⁹³

Online media coverage that targets women's agency, credibility, or place in society, Haraldsson and Wängnerud argue, provides a barrier for women entering public roles, regardless of whether laws have been introduced which provide space for women.⁹⁴ This is echoed by O'Neill et al, who also state that the repercussions may lead to the diminished perception of women's political contributions,⁹⁵ and by Citron and Norton, who state that online abuse may restrict women's civic participation.⁹⁶ The impact is "the silencing of women and women's voices in – and even their exclusion from – online spaces."⁹⁷ This has a knock-on effect for the quest for gender equality, which has been highlighted as a key international goal; for example, gender equality is a core pillar of the millennium sustainable development goals.⁹⁸

Implication on Research: The rise of social media in Ethiopia provides opportunities; it also provides a forum to amplify politicised views or problematic societal norms. Most research into online abuse in Ethiopia has focused on other societal issues, including ethnic division. The lack of research that focusses on Ethiopian women signals the imminent need for research on this topic. To understand online abuse against women, an understanding of Ethiopian women's position offline is also required.

In a country where social media platforms, especially Facebook, are deemed synonymous with the internet the role of these platforms must be investigated so that oversight and accountability can be delivered.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Patterson (2016) Social Media: Advancing Women in Politics?, Women in Parliaments Global Forum, http://www.w20-germany.org/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/WIP-Harvard-Facebook-Study_Oct2016.pdf; Kassa and Sarikakis (2022) Feminist Media Studies, Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/14680777.2021.1917640>; Barker and Jurasz (2020) Online violence against women as an obstacle to gender equality: a critical view from Europe. European Equality Law Review, Available at: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/71877/1/EELR%201-2020-Article%20GE%20Online%20violence%20%28ORO%29.pdf>; Lewis, Rowe and Wiper (2017) Online Abuse of Feminists as An Emerging form of Violence Against Women and Girls, Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/bjc/article/57/6/1462/2623986?login=true>; Posetti et al (2021) Online violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidence and Impacts, UNESCO, Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375136>

⁹⁴ Haraldsson and Wängnerud (2018) The effect of media sexism on women's political ambition: Evidence from a worldwide study', Feminist Media Studies, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1468797>.

⁹⁵ O'Neill, Savigny and Cann (2016), 'Women politicians in the UK Press: Not seen and not heard?', Feminist Media Studies, Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14680777.2015.1092458>

⁹⁶ Citron (2009) 'Cyber Civil Rights', Boston University Law Review, Available at: <https://www.bu.edu/law/journals-archive/bulr/volume89n1/documents/CITRON.pdf>; Citron and Norton (2011) 'Intermediaries and Hate Speech: Fostering Digital Citizenship for Our Information Age', Boston University Law Review, Available at: <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/bulr91&div=59&id=&page=>

⁹⁷ Barker and Olga (2020) Online violence against women as an obstacle to gender equality: a critical view from Europe. European Equality Law Review, Available at: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/71877/1/EELR%201-2020-Article%20GE%20Online%20violence%20%28ORO%29.pdf>; Lewis, Rowe and Wiper (2017) Online Abuse of Feminists as An Emerging form of Violence Against Women and Girls, Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/bjc/article/57/6/1462/2623986?login=true>

⁹⁸ UN Sustainable Development Goals, Available at: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

7.1.4 Relationship between online and offline violence

There have been significant claims that social media platforms have not only facilitated the spread of online hate speech, but also contributed to offline harm. The online and offline worlds are intrinsically linked; online violence can be an extension of offline behaviour.⁹⁹ Several researchers have pointed out that the online world is still ‘real’.¹⁰⁰ For example, Lewis et al outlined how the “‘real’ and the virtual are not separate experiential realms; activities that take place in the virtual world are still experienced as reality, with material consequences.” Similarly, Posetti et al noted that online violence “spills offline, causing physical harm as well as psychological injury”.¹⁰¹ Not only can it cause harm to those targeted, but research has found that online abuse can motivate action offline.¹⁰² Less noticeable forms of offline harm have also been reported, for example, the silencing of journalists.¹⁰³

A review of the existing literature reveals a limited number of studies that look at the relationship between online and offline abuse in Ethiopia, none of which focus on women or girls. There are also a handful of studies that focus on the offline impact of online abuse on women and girls, but not in the Ethiopian context. This reveals a gap in the literature that CIR’s research aims to address.

Offline harm in Ethiopia

Given the rise in social media, it appears essential to assess the digital environment alongside real world events. Although Pohjonen and Udupa¹⁰⁴ stated that connecting offline violence in Ethiopia with online speech was “without empirical grounding” and Workneh argued that it was perhaps “premature to conclusively establish a correlation” due to a lack of research, the literature reviewed overwhelmingly referred to the relationship between online and offline harm.¹⁰⁵

In 2018, Felix Horne, the Human Rights Watch senior researcher for the Horn of Africa, argued that online hate speech “contributed to the growing ethnic tensions and conflicts across the

⁹⁹ Barker and Jurasz (2020) Online violence against women as an obstacle to gender equality: a critical view from Europe. *European Equality Law Review*, Available at: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/71877/1/EELR%201-2020-Article%20GE%20Online%20violence%20%28ORO%29.pdf>

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.; Barker and Jurasz (2014) Gender, Human Rights and Cybercrime: Are Virtual Worlds really that Different? Available at: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/40836/>

¹⁰¹ Posetti et al (2021) Online violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidence and Impacts, UNESCO, Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375136>

¹⁰² Müller and Schwarz (2018) Flaming the flames of hate: social media and hate crimes, SSRN, Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3082972; Barker and Jurasz (2021) Text-based (sexual) abuse and online violence against women: towards law reform? Available at: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/978-1-83982-848-520211017/full/html>; Barker and Jurasz (2020) Online violence against women as an obstacle to gender equality: a critical view from Europe. *European Equality Law Review*, Available at: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/71877/1/EELR%201-2020-Article%20GE%20Online%20violence%20%28ORO%29.pdf>

¹⁰³ UN (n.d.) Plan of action on safety of journalists, Available at: https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/246014eng.pdf

¹⁰⁴ Pohjonen and Udupa (2017) *International Journal of Communication*, Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/5843>

¹⁰⁵ Workneh (2019) *African Journalism Studies*, Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23743670.2020.1729832>

country that have created more than 1.4 million new internally displaced people in the first half of 2018 alone”.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, Abraha stated that “there is no doubt that hateful speech and disinformation have contributed significantly to the unfolding polarised political climate, ethnic violence and displacement in Ethiopia”.¹⁰⁷ This has been reiterated by the European Institute for Peace, who stated that the spread of online hate speech and misinformation is “strongly correlated with significant, tragic, real-world consequences” and it has “exacerbated pre-existing tensions, and contributed to violence and conflict.”¹⁰⁸ Researchers have also questioned the role of online hate speech and misinformation in several ethnically motivated violent events, including the “Burayu massacre, the Gedeo crisis, the Jigjiga killings, the Amhara assassinations, the Sidama riots”.¹⁰⁹

In the Ethiopian context, online hate speech has been linked to the dynamics of violent conflict.¹¹⁰ As Pohjonen explains in the context of the Tigray conflict, it is essential to look at the digital environment as well as the events on the ground. Following a review of social media posts, specifically an analysis of jokes, subvertisements, and cartoons, Pohjonen states that social media has been used “in a kind of ‘epistemic proxy war’ that has paralleled the events on the ground” with all actors trying to “control the narrative or discredit the other side.”¹¹¹ Pohjonen outlined how social media users had employed various media manipulation techniques to share polarising political rhetoric, including “*copypasta* (text that is repeatedly reposted), *impersonation* (pretending to be another person or member of a social identity group) and *viral sloganeering* (short, catchy phrases intended to deliver persuasive, disruptive messaging).”¹¹² This, coupled with the denied access for journalists and the communications blackout, has meant that the

¹⁰⁶ Horne (2018) Human Rights Watch (blog), Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/03/tackling-hate-speech-ethiopia>.

¹⁰⁷ Abraha (2019) LSE Media Policy Project Blog, Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mediapolicyproject/2019/06/04/the-problems-with-ethiopias-proposed-hate-speech-and-misinformation-law>

¹⁰⁸ European Institute for Peace (2021) Available at: <https://www.eip.org/new-publication-fake-news-misinformation-and-hate-speech-in-ethiopia-a-vulnerability-assessment/>

¹⁰⁹ Workneh (2019) African Journalism Studies, Available at:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23743670.2020.1729832>; Alemu (2019) The Reporter, Available at:

<https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/hate-speech-and-social-media-how-govern-it.>; Chala (2019) Global Voices, Available at: <https://globalvoices.org/2019/08/07/in-ethiopia-disinformation-spreads-through-facebook-live-as-political-tensions-rise/>;

Schemm (2019) The Washington Post, Available at:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/after-years-of-repression-ethiopias-media-is-free--and-fanning-the-flames-of-ethnic-tension/2019/04/20/c4573f5a-5a4b-11e9-98d4-844088d135f2_story.html

¹¹⁰ Buyse (2014) Words of violence: “Fear speech,” or how violent conflict escalation relates to the freedom of expression. Human Rights Quarterly, Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24518298>

¹¹¹ Pohjonen (2022) Popular Communication, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2022.2074998>; Pohjonen (2019) International Journal of Communication, Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/9110>

¹¹² Pohjonen (2022) Popular Communication, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2022.2074998>; Pohjonen (2019) International Journal of Communication, Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/9110>

conflict has seen “a proliferation of hateful language, misleading information and propaganda that shadowed the events on the ground”.¹¹³

According to Workneh, the increased levels of “displacements, killings and violence amplified by ethno-nationalist discriminatory discourses on platforms such as Facebook” has led to widespread debate on the need for state regulation of online hate speech in Ethiopia.¹¹⁴ Facebook specifically has been accused of “fuelling murderous violence” in countries, including Ethiopia, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka.¹¹⁵ In January 2022, Meta told its oversight board that it would “assess the feasibility” of carrying out an investigation into the human rights implications of its work in Ethiopia and that it had “invested significant resources in Ethiopia to identify and remove potentially harmful content”.¹¹⁶ However, in March 2022, Frances Haugen, the Facebook whistleblower, revealed her belief that Facebook was “literally fanning ethnic violence” in Ethiopia.¹¹⁷ While the relationship between online and offline abuse is not always clear-cut, it is clear that the two realms cannot be segregated.

Offline abuse of women outside Ethiopia

Several studies have investigated the relationship between online and offline abuse of women specifically, but not in the Ethiopian context. According to Lewis et al, researching this topic requires viewing online abuse as “an extension of offline gender relations” – a notion which reinforces the connection between the virtual and physical spheres – and researchers to engage with those who have experienced it.¹¹⁸

Within the UNESCO study mentioned above, the women reported that some of these threats moved from the online sphere to the offline one, with 20% of the those interviewed reporting “abuse and attacks in the physical world that they believed were associated with online attacks”.¹¹⁹ They also found that women journalists were disproportionately affected, with their sources or contacts perpetrating violence against them. Posetti et al outlined how this could be used as a

¹¹³ Pohjonen (2022) Popular Communication, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2022.2074998>; Pohjonen (2019) International Journal of Communication, Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/9110>; Drew and Wilmot (2021) Washington Post, Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/02/05/ethiopias-digital-battle-over-tigray-region-facts-are-casualties/>; Jeffrey (2019). Al-Jazeera, Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/29/the-challenges-of-navigating-ethiopias-new-media-landscape>; DFR Lab (2021) Influential Ethiopian social media accounts stoke violence along ethnic lines, Medium, Available at:

<https://medium.com/dfrlab/influential-ethiopian-social-media-accounts-stoke-violence-along-ethnic-lines-6713a1920b02>

¹¹⁴ Workneh (2019) African Journalism Studies, Available at:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23743670.2020.1729832>

¹¹⁵ Naughton (2018) The Guardian, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/29/facebook-global-monopoly-deadly-problem-myanmar-sri-lanka>

¹¹⁶ Milmo (2022) The Guardian, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/jan/14/ethiopia-facebook-to-assess-feasibility-of-study-into-impact-on-human-rights>

¹¹⁷ Stremmlau (2022) The Citizen, Tanzania. Available at: <https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania/oped/why-we-need-an-international-body-to-rein-in-hate-speech-during-conflict-3757350>

¹¹⁸ Lewis, Rowe and Wiper (2017) Online Abuse of Feminists as An Emerging form of Violence Against Women and Girls, Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/bjc/article/57/6/1462/2623986?login=true>

¹¹⁹ Posetti et al (2021) Online violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidence and Impacts, UNESCO, Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375136>

method to silence reporting.¹²⁰ The study also revealed psychological impact of online abuse. The respondents reported “feeling physically unsafe”, leading some to “increase their personal security” or stop working.¹²¹ This places additional pressure on women who wish to participate in civic life.¹²²

In a study into the politically motivated online abuse of women in Myanmar, survivors reported “attacks on their views, person and dignity, and threats of rape, death and violence with severe emotional and psychological impacts.”¹²³ Not only were women targeted with sexualised disinformation narratives in an attempt to shame and humiliate them, but they were frequently doxed, leading in some cases to the women being arrested.¹²⁴ Myanmar Witness reported that this online abuse has had a “silencing effect... causing women to retreat from public life.”¹²⁵ As a result, hate speech and online abuse can be counter-democratic as it limits participation in public life.

Implication on Research: When dealing with online abuse, the offline harm it causes must also be considered. This includes not only physical violence, but also psychological harm. There is a dearth of literature on the relationship between online and offline abuse of women in the Ethiopian context.

7.2 CIR Ethical Standards

The Centre for Information Resilience follows the Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open-Source Investigations, WITNESS Ethical Guidelines for the Use of Eyewitness Testimony in its reporting, and the Murad Code in instances associated with conflict-related sexual violence.

- **Accuracy:** Reports should accurately represent the data collected. Exculpatory information and contextual background should be included, as well as an explanation of any redactions or gaps. Only content that has been verified through CIR’s verification process may be published.
- **Attribution:** Reports will distinguish between content in the public domain, general unclassified information, classified or restricted information, and content that reflects the judgement of CIR and/or other professional investigators. Where safe and appropriate to do so, CIR will credit the source of content. Where doing so would compromise the privacy

¹²⁰ Posetti et al (2021) Online violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidence and Impacts, UNESCO, Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375136>

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Lewis, Rowe and Wiper (2017) Online Abuse of Feminists as An Emerging form of Violence Against Women and Girls, Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/bjc/article/57/6/1462/2623986?login=true>

¹²³ Myanmar Witness (2023) Digital Battlegrounds, CIR, Available at: <https://www.myanmarwitness.org/reports/digital-battlegrounds>

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

and safety of the source, CIR will describe how the content was found and why we believe it to be authentic.

- **Completeness:** Findings must provide an indication of the completeness of the underlying data. Where data has been verified but certain facts e.g. on the broader context remain unknown, these must be acknowledged.
- **Confidentiality:** CIR assigns a privacy rating to content which prevents the publication of any material where the safety, privacy, and dignity of those involved in or creating the content could be compromised. Where such content is published, CIR will always anonymise it (blurring faces and distinguishing features, distorting or subtitling audio, removing identifying information and metadata) to protect the identity and privacy of victims, witnesses, alleged individual perpetrators, and sources.
- **Language:** Reports will be written in objective and neutral language and state facts clearly without overusing objectives or emphasis. Reports must be written in gender neutral language. CIR has developed a data coding protocol in consultation with legal experts which sets out which terms we use to describe certain events and actions. This should be used consistently in reporting. Our general rule is ‘describe what you see’ and avoid imposing judgements, particularly those relating to the legality of the conduct portrayed.
- **Transparency:** Reports should state clearly how CIR went about this work, our aims, processes, and methods or provide a link to where this data is provided.
- **Informed Consent:** Where safe and practical to do so, CIR will obtain the informed consent of an individual to record and publish their image and story. When this is not possible, CIR uses VAE Witness guidelines to establish whether using that footage could violate the consent, privacy, or dignity of those involved and to establish whether publication is in the public interest.
- **Minimising exposure to traumatising content:** CIR will seek to minimise exposure to graphic content by i) only using this where necessary (e.g. to collaborate findings); ii) providing advance warning of graphic content and iii) providing options for readers not to view it.

7.3 Vicarious trauma and trauma-informed interviewing

CIR follows a ‘do no harm’ approach and trauma informed interviewing methodology when speaking to survivors of violence. Violence online is equal to, and sometimes has an even greater impact than, violence offline. Survivors often go through the same psychological trauma and face real threats in both instances. Therefore, it's important to talk to survivors in a safe environment, create trust, use respect, and avoid judging and making assumptions. CIR staff were required to watch an online training module on trauma-informed interviewing techniques prior to undertaking any interviews.

To limit the impact of vicarious trauma, the interviewer was offered 1-1 support from the Research Coordinator. This was to provide a safe space to decompress following the interviews. In cases where professional help is required, CIR staff are provided with appropriate resources.

7.4 Procedural docs

To obtain a copy of the consent forms, debriefing documents, and semi-structured interview questions in either Amharic or English, please contact CIR.

7.5 Funding

This material has been funded by UK International Development from the UK government; however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.



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