

Summary Document

Research on Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence in Ethiopia

The Centre for Information Resilience

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Introduction

As 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. As such, this project aims to:

- Strengthen the evidence base on TFGBV in Ethiopia.
- Better inform government institutions, civil society organisations (CSOs), social media companies, and the general public about TFGBV in Ethiopia.
- Empower CSOs and government institutions in Ethiopia with practical recommendations on how to address TFGBV.

In combination, the Centre for Information Resilience's (CIR) research into TFGBV in Ethiopia, and the roundtables and workshops in Addis Ababa, all signal that women and girls in Ethiopia suffer from several different types of TFGBV. These include hate speech, revenge pornography, and harassment. During the roundtables and workshops, a shared belief was expressed among participants that women and girls in Ethiopia face high levels of TFGBV. Many participants cited the lack of data as a key issue preventing TFGBV from being addressed. This study aims to help fill this gap.

Why research TFGBV?

TFGBV represents a distinct and harmful form of gender-based violence that actively exacerbates the marginalisation of women and girls, both within the digital and physical space. If women and girls do not feel safe online, they may be deterred from fully and meaningfully participating in public life, both online and offline. This exclusion can have devastating impacts, leading to less representative public spaces and democratic processes.

TFGBV reinforces cycles of marginalisation. It is a product of attitudes and beliefs, including sexism and misogyny, and can be rooted in historical, religious, political, and cultural attitudes. These attitudes and beliefs provide the foundation for cultural microaggressions: actions or speech that signal indirect, unconscious, or unintentional prejudice or discrimination towards marginalised groups. These more subtle forms of marginalisation often pave the way for verbal expression, including insults, harassment, and threats, before escalating to physical expression in the form of stalking, arrests, or even physical and sexual assaults. Unsurprisingly, once it has reached this stage, there is a high risk of long-term physical and psychological harm. The silencing and ostracising of women and girls from public spaces hinders informed decision-making. The absence of diverse perspectives may even undermine the legitimacy of governing bodies.

Research into the specific forms and locations of TFGBV is therefore essential to crafting effective policy solutions.

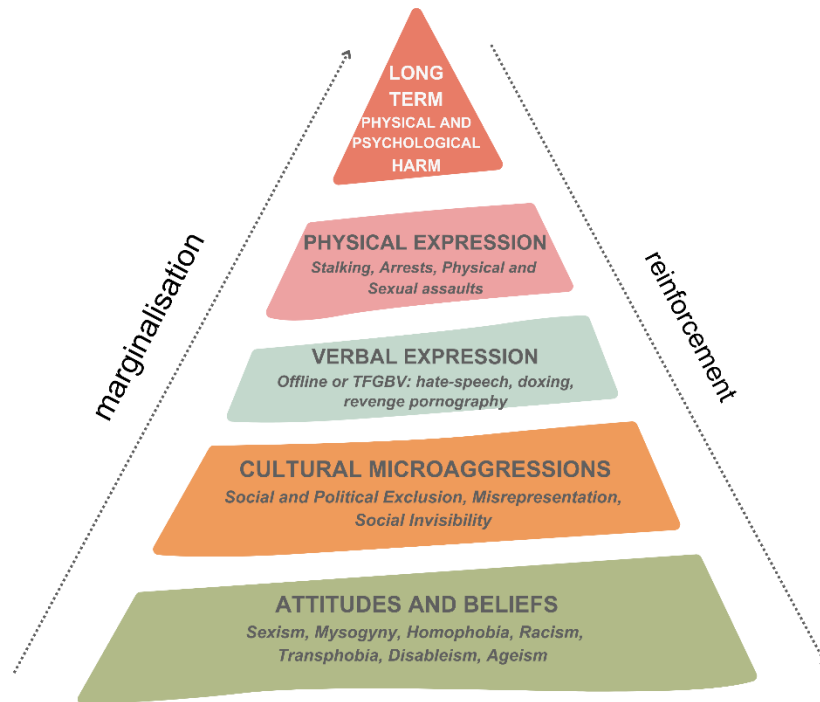


Figure 1: Diagram to demonstrate the cycle of marginalisation within which TFGBV contributes. Diagram made by CIR.

The research

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

There is no doubt that women, girls, men, and boys in Ethiopia are all victims of online abuse.¹ CIR researched the lived experiences of survivors and lasting impacts of online abuse through a review of existing literature and interviews with 14 women who hold prominent positions in Ethiopian public life, including in the media and civil society.

Research Questions:

- **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?

¹ CIR (2023) Silenced, shamed and threatened: the online abuse of women and girls who participate in Ethiopian public life. Available on the CIR website.

- **Location:** Where does TFGBV occur? Does it vary by social media platform? Is it mostly in public or private channels?
- **Purpose:** Are there any clear motives for TFGBV? Does it appear to be coordinated?
- **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 public domain both online and offline?

The interviewees reported that there are differences in the sentiment, purpose, and impact of that abuse depending on the gender of the target. While women and girls often face stereotypical abuse, centred around gender roles and laced with misogyny, interviewees reported that abuse against men and boys often focuses on expressed views or politics. The findings revealed the toxicity of online environments in Ethiopia and how online abuse directed against women and girls reflects existing societal divisions around the role of women and girls in society, as well as in relation to ethnicity, politics, and religion.

Ethiopian women interviewed reported that the online abuse they faced left them feeling silenced, with many withdrawing from public spaces, both online and offline, as a result. Cultivating safe online environments for women and girls is essential to empowering their full and meaningful participation in public life, both online and offline. To have a lasting effect, any strategies to combat TFGBV must address its root causes. This includes countering gender stereotypes and gender-based discrimination and promoting women and girls' representation in all public spaces.

2. Normalised and Invisible: An analysis of gendered hate speech on social media in Ethiopia

This report both complements and builds on the first study, by conducting a quantitative study of gendered hate speech (one form of TFGBV) in Ethiopia on three social media platforms (Facebook, Telegram, and X). This study therefore has a narrower focus in terms of the type of TFGBV investigated, only covering hate speech, as opposed to wider online abuse. However, its focus has simultaneously broadened in scope, by investigating hate targeting individuals not only on the basis of their gender, but intersectional hate speech (i.e. when a woman is targeted due to their gender as well as another protected characteristic, including disability, ethnicity, race, and religion).

Through workshops and roundtables in Addis Ababa, CIR developed a comprehensive lexicon of 2,058 inflammatory keywords to guide the collection of hate speech data across four languages (Amharic, Afaan Oromo, Tigrigna, and English). This lexicon will be released alongside the reports. Social media posts were sampled and then annotated according to three dimensions: hate speech target, type (insult, threat, presumed association of gender with certain

characteristics or alleged inferiority of a gender), and sentiment (whether text was offensive, aggressive, stereotypical or irony/mockery).²

Research Questions:

- **Forms (type and sentiment):** What types of gendered hate speech are prevalent? What is the sentiment of this hate speech? How does hate speech vary by gender subgroup?
- **Intersectionality:** how does hate speech vary when gender is being targeted alongside another protected characteristic, such as ethnic or religious identity?
- **Location:** Does gendered hate speech vary by social media platform?

Both studies found that women and girls receive different types of online abuse than men and boys do. The social media analysis in this study found that women and girls receive more hate speech which includes gendered stereotypes and mockery or irony, than men and boys, and less aggressive hate speech. Additionally, this study found that the risks associated with being female online can be compounded when other protected characteristics are also targeted.

This study also found that hate speech targeting women and girls differs from hate speech directed against other identity groups. Women and girls were more likely to receive abuse which suggests their inferiority, contains gendered stereotypes, or irony and mockery than ethnic or religious hate targets, and less aggressive hate. Additionally, the findings from this study support the view that current events offline impact online debate and hate speech. This can be seen by the relatively high prevalence of intersectional abuse targeting women and girls of Amhara and Oromo ethnicities, compared to other ethnicities, in the context of active conflict in these areas of Ethiopia during the data collection time frame. Hate speech that is reactive to political events and uses inflammatory rhetoric, may be more apparent than gendered hate speech.

Discussions during roundtables and workshops revealed that hate speech is often misunderstood, leading to certain forms of TFGBV being overlooked. Additionally, certain forms, such as the use of gendered stereotypes, insults, demeaning language, or speech implying women and girls' inferiority to other genders, are often considered less harmful than hate speech that is threatening or aggressive. Better education on what constitutes hate speech, and its impact, is therefore essential in Ethiopia. Gendered abuse, in the form of stereotypes and the suggestion of inferiority, appears to almost go under the radar. Workshop participants expressed a belief that gendered abuse is so endemic that it has become normalised to the point of invisibility.

Recommendations

To accompany this research, CIR has worked with stakeholders in Ethiopia to create a policy and community-led recommendations whitepaper. This study reveals that hate speech differs

² Hate speech type and sentiment are defined in the full report's Conceptual Framework, section 3.1, and the Annotation Protocol, section 7.1.

depending on the target. Understanding these differences provides an entry point for targeted policy solutions to better safeguard women and girls online. CIR hopes that government institutions can use the findings to inform decision making, that social media companies can use them to inform their content moderation efforts, that civil society can use them in their advocacy, and that the public can use them to call for action.

Conference: Combating Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence in Ethiopia

9 May 2024 – Addis Ababa

A conference to bring together individuals and organisations that are working to better protect women, both online and offline. This includes those working towards the prevention of online harms, combatting or responding to TFGBV and hate speech, those seeking accountability, or attempting to develop policy.

The event will include the formal launch of CIR's research on TFGBV, an expert panel discussion, a call to action led by the Ethiopian Human Rights Defenders Centre and the Ethiopian Women Human Rights Defenders Network, and an exhibition. The exhibition aims to raise awareness about women's rights, TFGBV and hate speech, and showcase the amazing work that is being done by organisations in Ethiopia. Through the event, CIR and its partners hope to instil optimism, show solidarity, and signal that TFGBV is an issue that should be addressed.



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