

OGBV Regional Insights

Africa



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The World Wide Web Foundation is working with Social Finance and members and affiliates of the Women's Rights Online Network to address online gender-based violence and develop responses that lead to lasting and systemic change. This regional summary is part of a research project aiming to develop a global landscape of the responses to online gender-based violence (OGBV) from civil society, tech, and governments. It has a particular focus on the Global Majority.

Executive Summary

It is estimated that only [19%](#) of women in Africa have access to the Internet. We know that, when online, they are more likely to experience violence, although the true extent of online gender-based violence (OGBV) in Africa is unknown. The level of reporting is indeed estimated as low, particularly in a context where offline patriarchal norms can inhibit women from speaking out. There is however growing research on the issue from civil society organizations (CSOs), who have been at the forefront of driving change towards a better response to OGBV. Tech companies' engagement on OGBV in the region is limited and ad-hoc, and they don't have a strong regional presence. As the provider of Facebook and Whatsapp, where most OGBV takes place, Meta has collaborated with CSOs on some positive initiatives, but has also been involved in scandals relating to online violence. Some governments - such as Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal - are increasingly active in the space of cybersecurity, but emerging laws often lack a gender focus and a clear implementation strategy. Civil society is also receiving these laws with caution, as they fear they could be used to curb freedom of expression and silence women.

Please note that this summary focuses on East, West and Southern Africa. Northern Africa is included in the Middle East and Northern Africa regional summary. The contributors to this research were mostly based in West Africa.

Regional partners

- [MFWA](#), Ghana
- [Mobile Web Ghana](#), Ghana
- [Paradigm](#), Nigeria
- [Tech Societal](#), Nigeria
- [Wougnet](#), Uganda

Context

- **Internet penetration varies widely across Africa, but is overall lower than the global average.** [Internet penetration rates](#) in 2022 varied between 68% in South Africa, 29% in Uganda and 7% in the Central African Republic in 2022, with most countries having between 30%-50% internet penetration.
- **The digital gender gap in Africa is the biggest in the world.** It was estimated that only 19% of women had access to the Internet in 2020 across the continent, meaning that access to Internet and digital infrastructure is often addressed before tackling OGBV. The 2021 edition of the Inclusive Internet Index reported that Uganda had a [13%](#) gender gap in access to the internet.
- **Offline patriarchal and misogynistic culture across the region fuels OGBV and makes it harder to tackle:**
 - Strong patriarchal norms and discrimination limit women and girls' access to the internet and inhibit women from speaking out to report OGBV
 - Across Africa, there is a lack of poor reporting mechanisms or follow ups in cases of OGBV
 - Instances of OGBV often stem from events occurring offline which then spread onto online platforms
- **WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram are among the most used social media apps in Africa.** WhatsApp is the most used app in many countries, for example Nigeria and Ghana. Other apps commonly used include WhatsApp Business, OperaMini and Jumia.

OGBV prevalence and data

- **OGBV in Africa is likely particularly underreported**, due to the cultural barriers to reporting this kind of abuse. Together, underreporting and a lack of data collection on OGBV mean that there is a **significant lack of data on OGBV across Africa**, and thus the full extent of the issue remains unknown, particularly in Southern Africa. This makes it particularly hard to address.
- Where data does exist, it often focuses on **younger women and girls**.
- There is also generally a lack of data on OGBV published by tech companies across Africa and therefore a lack of accountability.

Tech company initiatives

- **Meta is the provider of the most used online platforms in Africa, as well as the platforms where OGBV is most happening.** Research in Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Senegal and South Africa indeed found that most OGBV incidents occurred on Facebook or Whatsapp.
- **Engagement from tech companies across the African continent is very limited and ad-hoc**, according to civil society organizations (CSOs).

- **To start with, tech companies have limited physical presence across the continent**, impacting the nature of engagement and understanding of regional contexts. Meta, TikTok and Google have one or more regional offices. For example:
 - In **Nigeria**: Meta and Google are seen by CSOs as the most collaborative tech companies due to their physical presence in the country;
 - In **Zambia**: Meta, TikTok and Google have a regional office;
 - In **Ghana**: Twitter recently opened an office, but most employees there [were made redundant](#) following Elon Musk's takeover of the company.
- **Meta is perceived as the most actively engaging** with CSOs in the region. Some positive initiatives include:
 - For the upcoming Nigerian elections in 2023, Meta is partnering with ElectHER and Nigeria Women Trust Fund (NWTF), to address bullying and harassment targeted at women in politics on Facebook and Instagram by training women public figures on their safety policies and tools.
 - Meta has engaged with Media Foundation for West Africa in Ghana
 - Meta has funded research into OGBV on the continent, such as this [eight country analysis on OGBV](#) in Southern Africa, and this Internet Without Borders [study](#) in 18 countries of West and Central Africa, also supported by Twitter (2019).
- **Meta has however been involved in various scandals relating to online violence**. For example, at the end of 2022, Meta was [sued for 1.6 billion USD](#) for fueling Ethiopia ethnic violence. In Ghana, tech companies generally appear to steer clear of engaging with governance issues, and even did not engage when there was speculation about the government shutting down the internet and social media in 2016 and 2020.
- **Some concerns have also been raised about the working conditions of content moderators in Africa**, for example:
 - In 2022, Daniel Motaung, an ex-content moderator from South Africa hired by Sama, Meta's main subcontractor for content moderation in Africa, [filed a suit](#) against both companies in Kenya.
 - African content moderators for TikTok [complained they were treated like robots](#) in 2022.
- **Finally, there are examples of small tech innovators in some African countries building tools to support the safety of women**:
 - In Mozambique: Txeka is a digital platform for promoting political participation of young people, especially women, and Nyandayeyo is an e-platform created to fight domestic violence
 - In Nigeria: The RydeHer app was developed in response to a scandal around women's safety on ride-hailing services like Uber and Bolt.
- **CSOs call for more action from tech companies, that goes beyond research**. As is the case across the world, the safety features of most applications used in Africa put the burden on the survivor to protect themselves and take action themselves in response to instances of OGBV

Government initiatives

- **In some African countries, no laws specifically designed to address forms of digital violence exist** (such as to address non-consensual sharing of intimate images, trolling, bullying, and harassment).
- **In other countries**, including those that are seen as particularly progressive in this area such as Ghana and Senegal, **cybersecurity laws exist but still lack a gender focus, and their actual application to address OGBV appears to be very limited.**
For example:
 - **In Nigeria:** the Cybercrimes Act 2015 is in practice not implemented to protect women and girls, as there is no known case of successful prosecution using the Act in the incidence of online violence or abuse against women, girls or other vulnerable groups.
 - **In Nigeria:** In June 2022, the government issued a Draft Code of Practice which mandates digital platforms to remove unlawful and prohibited content within 24 hours. This is to become the first legislative measure in Nigeria to overtly impose responsibility on internet intermediaries to act as frontline responders in cases of non-consensual intimate image sharing. However, this Code of Practice lacks a focus on prevention or support for survivors as well as details on how it will be enforced.
 - **In Ghana:** the Cybersecurity Act 2020 contains provisions against sextortion and NCIIA, however we are only aware of one case where a perpetrator has been prosecuted since the Act was passed in 2020 (see [here](#)).
 - **In Senegal:** cyberharassment is criminalized, but there is no gender focus in the law, despite up to 85% of targets being women. OGBV is not considered a priority for members of the Assembly or the President Seat occupiers, who are mostly of an older generation and are less aware of tech strategies.
 - **In Zambia:** the Cybersecurity Act 2021, which does not specifically address OGBV, is applied selectively and often not applied to high-profile individuals
- **There is a widespread fear amongst some CSOs that those emerging laws are used to curb freedom of expression** and silence women in the guise of protecting them from online crimes or harms. Those fears are not unfounded: it has already happened in some instances, such as in the use of the Cybercrimes Act in Nigeria.
- **In some cases, national governments have shut down tech companies, such as in Nigeria:** in June 2021, the government banned Twitter for 200 days after the platform deleted a post from the Nigerian President. In March 2022, the government shut down seven digital loan services platforms for privacy violations and harassment.
- **There are only a few examples of governments bringing in positive initiatives to directly address OGBV.**
 - One example is the Ghanaian Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection [introducing 5 systems](#) to help with tracking of gender-based violence of all forms.
 - Ghana's cybersecurity authority (CSA) has put in place an Incident Reporting Point of Contact (by calling or texting 292) to report all forms of cyber harassment; and they work with the criminal investigative unit of the Ghana

Police Service to investigate such issues. The CSA has also been providing public education on how to stay safe for all, especially vulnerable groups such as women and children.

- **In 2022, a Resolution on the Protection of Women Against Digital Violence in Africa was passed** by the African Commission on Human and People Rights. It calls on states to review and adopt legislation that combats all forms of digital violence and to expand their definition of gender-based violence to include the digital dimension. It specifically recommends a set of actions for signatories to take, including research into OGBV and the implementation of awareness-raising programmes that address root causes of OGBV and target men and boys specifically. It is not yet clear which countries have signed this.

Civil society initiatives

- **Actions and initiatives to support women are typically led by CSOs**, with tech companies taking more of a supporting role when involved. Civil society has also been instrumental in carrying out research and providing guidance for policy development.
- **Key players actively working towards tackling OGBV across Africa include:**
 - **Ghana:** Media Foundation for West Africa, Africa Digital Rights Hub, Africa Cybersecurity and Digital Rights Organisation, Child Online Africa, Mobile Web Ghana
 - **Nigeria:** Paradigm Initiative, TechSocietal
 - **Uganda:** Wougnet
 - **Kenya:** KICTANet
 - **Zambia:** National Women's Lobby
 - **International:** Association for Progressive Communications (APC), International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Division of Violence Prevention.

This is not an exhaustive list, please find further information on civil society organizations working in this region [here](#).

Case studies

- **In Nigeria, Meta is collaborating with [ElectHer](#) and the Nigerian Women's Trust Fund** to address bullying and harassment targeted at women in politics on Facebook and Instagram in the run up to the 2023 elections.
- In response to a projected increase in rates of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, [the Ghanaian government introduced the Orange Support Centre](#), among other systems, to provide information and support services to survivors of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.
- [An EU-funded UNESCO project, Social Media 4 Peace](#), running in Kenya, as well as in other countries across the world, aims to maximize the potential for digital technologies to promote narratives and initiatives that create incentives for peace.

- [Aisha's story](#) (Nigeria): A prominent activist of one of the most visible online campaigns in recent years reflects on a life led with the constant threat of attacks and online gender based violence, and the need for resilience as well as policy changes to protect online diversity.
- [Gifty's story](#) (Ghana): High-profile women such as journalists and politicians are regular targets of online gender-based violence, especially when it is weaponised as a tool to intimate and silence. Gifty's story illustrates the power of courage and resilience.

Selected reports

Below is a list of selected reports on OGBV in Africa. For an extensive list of reports, see [here](#).

- [In Search of Safe Spaces](#) focuses on documenting the nature of challenges faced by Ugandan women who are active online, manifestations of cyber Violence Against Women (VAW), and how online groups can be leveraged to enhance women's participation (Cipesa, 2020)
- [Alternate Realities, Alternate Internets](#), *African Feminist Research for a Feminist Internet*: In this paper, Pollicy researched the online lived experiences of women living in five sub-Saharan Africa countries to illustrate that repeated negative encounters fundamentally impact how women navigate and utilize the internet (Pollicy, 2020)
- [Understanding OGBV in Southern Africa](#) maps the state of OGBV in eight countries, reviewing the policy and regulatory framework in each country and discussing how different forms of OGBV manifest in the region (NamTshuwe Digital and partners, 2021)
- [Women's Rights Online Digital Gender Gap Audit Scorecards](#) assessing the digital gender gaps per country and the policy efforts and progress made on a national level (World Wide Web Foundation, 2022)
- [Advocacy paper on Women's Right online in Ghana](#) looks at how policy, practices and inhibiting factors are impacting women's rights in the country (Media Foundation for West Africa, 2020)
- [Building Digital Literacy and Security Capacity of Women Refugees in Uganda](#) builds on the experience of 35 women refugees interviewed from DRC, Eritrea, South Sudan and Sudan (Cipesa, 2019).