DECODING ONLINE VIOLENCE

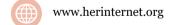HER Internet

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INTRODUCTION:

Uganda has seen tremendous growth in mobile penetration, and access to the internet; for example, teledensity estimates in 2015 were 64%. The country also continues to experience growth in internet subscription, with a 37.4% internet penetration rate in the same time period. With these advancements in access, there is also a marked rise in incidence of cybercrime such as fraud, hacking and identity theft.

An increasingly worrying trend amongst cybercrimes is online violence against womxn and the numbers increase exponentially when queer womxn and female sex workers are added to the equation.

In a recent U.N. report, online violence was found to be just as damaging to womxn as physical violence. The report goes on to indicate that womxn are becoming increasingly vulnerable to online violence with growing access to internet across the world, which could in turn detrimentally impede the uptake of broadband services by girls and womxn worldwide.

> *"Online violence has subverted the original positive promise of the internet's freedoms and in too many circumstances has made it a chilling space that permits anonymous cruelty and facilitates harmful acts towards women and girls"*
>
> *-Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, UN women.*

1. WHAT IS ONLINE VIOLENCE?

Online violence refers to the violence experienced due to presence on the internet including social media. Such violence may not be physical but it has psychological effects. Online violence can also be facilitated using other forms of technology like mobile phones, laptops, cameras.

Online violence includes harm that is derivative: we are social beings and so when somebody else is harmed, we also experience some psychological pain. This kind of secondary trauma happens especially when the target of attacks are people who suffer from similar marginalisation as we do: women, LGBTI+ persons, sex workers, etc.

Online violence is often trivialised but it can have real effects on one's life outside of the online space. Thus, it is as important to pay attention to it as other forms of violence. Unfortunately, instead of finding ways to address it, online violence has been normalised on the internet via trends like "Twitter for Violence".

Online violence is insidious because it can happen to people even when you're with them physically, and you may not be able to know. Someone next to you could be experiencing some form of violence as they interact with their device and you won't be able to tell unless they tell you.

Discourse about womxn and LGBTI+ persons in the public space can also be harmful to watch. Since media houses like TV's and radios are now taking up space online via Twitter accounts, YouTube channels, Facebook Lives and others, they can also be vehicles for this kind of violence. What we consume online can have real life consequences.

Sometimes, harmful content comes to us via the algorithms which control the content we are constantly bombarded with. Womxn who are queer for example, might have few protections from triggering content because it is hard to control their entire web of connections.

2. WHY DOES ONLINE VIOLENCE PERSIST?

The normalisation and trivialising of violence online is a major reason for why it persists. Victims and survivors of such violence have little recourse, as there aren't well established and trusted avenues for reporting of such incidents.

A major reason why violence persists online and affects womxn and LGBTI+ people especially is patriarchy, a system of male dominance upheld by cultural and religious norms. Patriarchy as a system dehumanises womxn and exalts men, regardless of status. Online violence is often gendered, stemming from historical constructions of space that relegate women to the "private" and men to the "public". Thus, men often exercise their power over womxn in public spaces as a way of attempting to push them out because they don't "belong". The objectification of women comes from male entitlement and men do not necessarily realise that such interactions are harmful.

The internet exacerbates the violence that exists offline, as it affords perpetrators the protection of anonymity as well as remoteness from their victims.

What happens online is an extension of real life. Thus, cultural misconceptions and norms about womxn, LGBTI+ persons and sex workers are transferred online and used to harm these people.

Another major factor is the social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook which prioritise engagement and capital over the safety of (marginalised) people who use these platforms. They do not have strong controls in place to protect users from online violence.

Private interactions that happen offline can also determine online behaviour. For example, some

womxn have to get permission to make certain posts, or may have to take down posts for fear of violence in the relationship.

Online violence also continues when it's not countered, which is why it's important to develop a sisterhood and camaraderie spirit to show up for each other when one of us experiences violence.

Countering violence with violence may also further it, and this is a common response when interacting on online platforms. It would be better to educate people and put in place systems to hold perpetrators accountable.

HOW DOES ONLINE VIOLENCE MANIFEST?

The common forms that online violence include:

Body shaming, which is often directed towards womxn who post pictures of their bodies. Social constructions of what "good bodies" look like vary across cultures and womxn may find themselves shamed regardless of their size.

Trolling, which is when several accounts swarm one's post or account often with insults if they don't agree with them.

Stalking, which can happen online but also continue offline. This is especially possible if one shares their personal information online such as location, address or contact.

Doxxing, which is the sharing of personal information online with malicious intentions such to cause someone extreme discomfort or anxiety. Anonymous or pseudonymous accounts may be at risk of this.

Death threats.

Rape threats, which are often directed towards womxn. LBQ womxn are at an even bigger risk of this due to men's sense of entitlement towards womxn's bodies, sensuality and sexuality.

Image-based abuse in the form of sending one unsolicited nude images or pornography

Non-consensual distribution of intimate images, commonly known as "revenge porn". This is common when relationships go sour and one of the partners (usually the man) shares intimate images of their partner in order to shame them and cause them distress.

Sexist portrayals of womxn in the media including the news, songs, cartoons, adverts, among others

Intellectual property theft, including the appropriation of ideas and words. This is rampant due to the lack of anti-plagiarism policies on these platforms.

Outing, especially of LGBTI+ persons or sex workers who may have concealed parts of their identity for their safety offline.

Unfortunately, certain groups of people suffer all the above forms of violence at a higher rate and in specific ways. LGBTI+ persons and LBQ womxn in particular, activists / womxn human rights defenders as well as sex workers may face specific threats when interacting online.

This is because legal structures in Uganda are not in place to support them, and homophobia and transphobia are thereby institutionalised.

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