

THE HOLISTIC APPROACH

Exploring women's online freedom of expression
and freedom of assembly
in the Democratic Republic of Congo

The holistic approach:

Exploring women's online freedom of expression and freedom of assembly in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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The Feminist Internet Research Network focuses on the making of a feminist internet, seeing this as critical to bringing about transformation in gendered structures of power that exist online and offline. Members of the network undertake data-driven research that provides substantial evidence to drive change in policy and law, and in the discourse around internet rights. The network's broader objective is to ensure that the needs of women and gender-diverse and queer people are taken into account in internet policy discussions and decision making.

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Top findings

- Most women have experienced online gender-based violence (OGBV) at some point.
- Not all women were able to identify it was OGBV when they experienced it due to the knowledge gap; however, they did know how it made them feel.
- Most of the research participants opted to stop using social media platforms or significantly reduce their usage of the platforms.
- There is more support and more efforts and mechanisms in place to deal with offline gender-based violence than online gender-based violence.
- Respondents demonstrated a productive use of the digital platforms for matters such as business, entertainment, learning and communication; however, there was limited use of online platforms for civic participation.
- Access and control of technology is mainly male-dominated; hence women miss out on the digital revolution, especially due to device and affordability gaps.
- In areas of conflict, access was not prioritised, especially since most women had more pressing matters such as safety and basic needs to be concerned about.
- Access to devices and connectivity in conflict areas was higher, especially for women who could not afford it.
- Most women reported not knowing how to deal with OGBV, including how to report it to social media companies, and whether there were any legal measures at all they could take.
- Culture and societal norms allow for OGBV to thrive as the system favours men and allows for discrimination of women as the lesser and weaker sex who have no say.
- There are no specific laws that address OGBV itself, though general cybersecurity provisions exist; however, most women do not know how to negotiate such laws.
- Facebook was identified as the platform where one was most prone to experience violence followed by Twitter, TikTok, Instagram and WhatsApp.

1.

About Core23lab

Core23lab is a non-profit organisation based in the Lualaba province of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The organisation works with different populations in the DRC, especially the mining communities of Katanga and Lualaba. It enables them to access opportunities and resources to elevate their socioeconomic status through research, education, technology and innovation. The biggest challenge in achieving socioeconomic development in these communities is gender inequality, which is rooted in patriarchal systems so often expressed in muted freedom of expression and freedom of association, with women at a disadvantage. The emergence of interactive social technologies such as social media has further escalated this challenge even though they provide a viable opportunity to counter gender inequality that continues to poison the health of productive communities.

While Core23lab's core mission is to empower communities with tools to curb unemployment and poverty, our work uses social inclusiveness as an effective approach to define sustainable development solutions. This research is an ongoing effort by us to understand the existing inequalities that hinder women in the DRC in exercising their freedom of expression and freedom of association when using online platforms. Since Core23lab is very much intertwined with gender inclusivity, much of our work is focused on ensuring equity for all genders across the nuances of intersectionalities such as age, income, education backgrounds, among others.

2.

Background

The internet has revolutionised life and made access to opportunities and resources widely available, yet this accelerated development has not been without its challenges. Technology provides a space for free expression, access to information and movement-building around key concerns, in particular for women and girls, on gender and development; and as such, the throttling of such spaces leaves women with no avenues to rightfully express themselves and assemble in their quest to fight for equity and equality.

Living in a digital era means embracing technology and making the most of the enormous possibilities that comes with it to create a better world.¹ It is not a myth: the advancement in digital technology is revolutionary and transformational, touching almost every sphere of human life.² The unprecedented opportunities offered by technological innovations have occasioned rapid economic growth, enhanced social connectivity, afforded productive and convenient working environments, facilitated information management efficiency and improved communication, just to list a few.³

The internet, for instance, is considered as the driver of social evolution with huge impact on interpersonal communication and sociability through social networking services, commonly known as social media.⁴ The DRC has, over the years, been slowly embracing the digital era. However, support mechanisms such as enabling policies are still few and far between to foster that adaptation.

1 Shepherd, J. (2004). What is the digital era? In G. Doukidis, N. Mylonopoulos, & N. Pouloudi (Eds.), *Social and Economic Transformation in the Digital Era*. IGI Global. <https://www.igi-global.com/chapter/digitalera/29024>

2 <https://www.un.org/en/un75/impact-digital-technologies>

3 Fitzgerald, M., Kruschwitz, N., Bonnet, D., & Welch, M. (2014). Embracing digital technology: A new strategic imperative. *MIT Sloan Management Review*, 55(2).

4 Subramanian, K. R. (2017). Influence of social media in interpersonal communication. *International Journal of Scientific Progress and Research*, 38(2), 70-75; Castells, M. (2013). *The impact of the Internet on society: A global perspective*. <https://www.bbvaopenmind.com/en/articles/the-impact-of-the-Internet-on-society-a-global-perspective/>

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The internet provides a space for women to speak about and participate in politics, economic situations, commerce as well as point out the inequalities that exist in their communities. It is against this backdrop that this research project aims to fully understand the existing inequalities that hinder women from fully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly on the internet, explore the power dynamics at play as well as address the backlash they face for exercising these rights. The research proposes to look at stories and narratives of victims, and explore avenues that will address not only the social aspects but also their mental well-being. It also seeks to understand the challenges that each of these groups is facing and how best they can be addressed, especially through policy and legislative measures.

3.

Objectives

The overall objective of the research was to understand the existing inequalities that hinder women from fully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly on the internet, identify measures for redressal and propose policy changes that ensure maximum exercise of these restricted rights, and protection of women in the online space. In addition, the research sought to close the knowledge gap on OGBV, and encourage women's participation in the technological field in the DRC. Further, the research explored and analysed the social impact of digital technologies on women and girls, surfaced policy and human rights-related issues in digital technologies, with particular focus on OGBV, and investigated the effects of digital violence on the governance system.

The research captured principles of a feminist internet specifically on the two principles of:

- a. Amplification:** This involved studying how social media platforms can and are being used to amplify women's narratives and lived realities to respond to their silencing by patriarchal systems.
- b. Movement-building:** Opening up social media platforms as civic spaces where women can congregate for a specific cause for transparency and accountability.

Specifically, the research sought to answer the following key questions:

Research questions

1. What fosters inequality when women participate in freedom of expression (FoE) and freedom of association (FoA) on social media?
2. How can we ensure that women can anticipate, prepare and respond to online gender-based violence when exercising their rights on social media by documenting their experiences and responses to OGBV.
3. What are the power dynamics of amplification and movement-building for women human rights defenders, activists, influencers and politicians on social media?

4.

Methodology

To understand how OGBV affects the way women interact online, especially for FoE and FoA, we had to employ mixed methods and learn from previous researches done in the DRC to identify the best way to get information. Our research led us to include a diverse group for interviews, surveys and focus group discussions (FGDs) to help us gain more insights. This included looking at how ordinary women internet users are affected by OGBV. The survey questions were distributed in French while the FGDs and interviews were conducted in a mixture of Congolese Swahili and French.

a. Sampling

The research targeted women and girls upward of 16 years, as this is the legal age of adulthood in the DRC, old enough to access social media. We sought out women human rights defenders, journalists and politicians, as this is the demographic that is at risk and faces the maximum backlash on social media. In addition, our research also targeted ordinary women internet users to get a holistic view of their experiences. The research participants comprised a total of 150 respondents (100 quantitative and 50 qualitative).

Target respondents:

- The woman politician
- The woman activist/human rights defender
- The woman journalist
- The everyday woman.

b. Sampling selection procedure

The survey respondents were selected using snowball sampling method to increase the probability of accurately representing the targeted population. The research aimed to interview both known and unknown victims of OGBV. The FGD participants were identified through partner organisations and women's rights groups that work on digital rights, gender and OGBV while the survey used random sampling to gather experiences of women in relation to online participation.

c. Research tools

The research utilised both quantitative and qualitative research methods, but the following tools were used specifically:

- Desktop research: This entailed documents and literature, including legislation, relevant reports and media content, and monitoring of social media accounts of research participants, with their consent, to map existing legislation/policy, gender context, and identifying local and regional trends.
- Interviews: We interviewed 30 women using semi-structured questions. In addition, the research aimed to interview both known victims of censorship or OGBV and with an unknown history of censorship or OGBV.
- Focus groups: Three focus groups with six to eight participants each from partner organisations and women's groups.
- Targeted survey: One survey deployed to 100 respondents to analyse what hinders women in general from exercising FoE and FoA on the internet and social media in the DRC.

Data collection tool	Quantity	Number of people	Number per location	Location	Targets
Interviews	1	30	10 people	Goma	Women activists/ human rights defenders
			10 people	Bukavu	Women journalists
			10 people	Lubumbashi	Everyday women/ internet users
Focus group discussion (FGD)	3	6-8	1 FGD	Goma	Women activists/ human rights defenders
			1 FGD	Bukavu	Women journalists
			1 FGD	Lubumbashi/ Kolwezi	Everyday women/ internet users (university students)
Targeted survey	1	100	25 people	Goma	Women activists/ human rights defenders
			25 people	Bukavu	Women journalists
			25 people	Lubumbashi	Everyday women/ internet users
			25 people	Kolwezi	

d. Data collection

We collected data for the quantitative research using a structured questionnaire deployed online using Google Docs.

The qualitative data was garnered through interviews and half-day FGDs where participants were selected through the help of local partners (referrals), a stakeholder mapping exercise, as well as involvement of existing project partners. The core23lab team members who interviewed participants facilitated the FGDs. All responses were written down by a note-taker and recorded using audio recorders.

The desk research was conducted by the research team, drawing from their experience in the field to analyse research and policy documents and literature including legislation, relevant reports and media content from organisations within the DRC and the region who have written on the subject. All data collection was done under strict ethical considerations and voluntary consent.

e. Data analysis

The quantitative survey responses were collated and analysed using a quantitative approach to identify patterns and trends. In addition, the qualitative findings from the focus group discussions were analysed to support the quantitative findings to help interpret the numbers.

f. Report writing

The comprehensive report is to be presented combining findings from both the qualitative and quantitative research at a validation and participatory workshop to share initial findings and to check biases and misinterpretations of the data at a dissemination meeting. The report includes components on the background to the activity, a literature review, a description of the methodology, major outcomes (identified practices, trends, etc.), and recommendations to different stakeholder groups. The report uses both narratives/paragraphs and graphs to convey the research findings.

g. Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations for this study were based on feminist internet ethical research practices such as transparency on the research process and objectives, informed consent, data protection and privacy considerations, gender beyond binary, voluntary participation, anonymity/confidentiality, and result communication. Through the data collection process, our enumerators sought consent from all respondents to interact with them during the interviews and focus group discussions before the interview processes commenced. The enumerators were transparent and explained the research process, goal and overall objectives. In addition, we conducted the survey using secure Google Docs, which included a disclaimer saying the survey was entirely optional and that respondents' personal data would be kept private, used only for the research process, would not be passed on to third parties, and be stored for up to three months.

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Furthermore, our survey ensured that the question on gender was not restricted to male and female but took into consideration other gender identities. The monitoring of social media pages of female politicians was based on what was available in the public domain. Information and identities on all the screenshots presented in this report have been blurred, barring those of public figures. Names of respondents and other personal identifiers were also not required throughout the research process.

5.

Research limitations

The major limitation was that we were unable to get female politicians to participate in the focus group discussions as planned due to the red tape involved in getting parliamentarians and other politicians to participate in external activities. Secondly, there was also the worry of things being lost in translation, literally. Questions and responses from English to French/Swahili then back to English may have led to loss/warping of information and nuances that are vital for the research outcome. We also experienced delays in the response rates to the online survey by respondents, which slowed the data collection process.

We mitigated these limitations by proceeding with the other target audiences such as women journalists, human rights defenders and ordinary internet users as planned, monitored social media pages of women politicians as a means to garner their thoughts and experiences on online violence and freedom of expression/assembly, used experienced translators to ensure accurate translation, and allowed for more time for the survey to be completed.

6.

Literature review

The DRC and the digital era

The number of internet users in the DRC is increasing each year. It is reported that by January 2022 there were 16.5 million internet users, which is roughly 17.6% of the country's population.⁵ However there is a lack of gender disaggregated data when it comes to technology adoption, including the statistics on the number of internet users. While the growth is slower for a country that is the second largest in Africa, government hindrances have limited this growth through their culture and practice. The government has, over the years, been known to limit the expansion of the digital space through oppressive measures such as internet shutdowns. The first reported digital communication interruption was in December 2011, when SMS services were blocked for 25 days consecutively.⁶ This practice continued at various points, often triggered by political reasons such as elections and threats of protests across the country, with the latest being during the 2018 election that saw a transition from Kabila reign to the current Tshikedi rule.

In this digital age, social networks have been a gathering space, allowing different people to exchange ideas and opinions on issues that affect the community, particularly socio-political and economic problems. For example, the coronavirus pandemic worldwide saw an increase in the number of people online, and women's communities came together as part of a campaign against OGBV.⁷

5 Kemp, S. (2022, 15 February). Digital 22: The Democratic Republic of Congo. *DataReportal*. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-democratic-republic-of-the-congo>

6 Tungali, A. (2027, 31 March). The Evolution of Internet Shutdowns in DR Congo. *CIPESA*. <https://cipesa.org/2017/03/the-evolution-of-internet-shutdowns-in-dr-congo/>

7 <https://www.sofepadirdc.org/communique-de-lancement-de-la-campagne-techsansviolences/>

Various legal reforms were required, followed by institutional reforms that resulted in:

- The adoption of Law No. 20/017 of 25 November 2020, on Telecommunications and Information and Communication Technologies and Technologies, repealing Framework Law No. 013/2002 of 16 October 2002, relating to telecommunications in the Democratic Republic of Congo.
- The adoption of the draft law on the digital code by the National Assembly as a tool to be implemented for the success of the DRC's digital transformation programme and to protect personal data as well as considering the legal validity of electronic writing and electronic evidence, an element that could be crucial when it comes to prosecuting cyberbullies and the perpetrators of OGBV.

It should be noted that Ordinance-Law No. 23/010 of 13 March 2023 on the Digital Code in the DRC has enshrined various provisions that set up competent entities related to the protection of cyberspace, in particular, the National Cybersecurity Agency, and thus provides for sanctions for violations committed on the internet.⁸ For harassment through electronic communication that women are often subject to on the internet, Articles 358-360 can be invoked to impose penalties on the perpetrators.

This legal framework, therefore, is an important tool in the protection of civic space. It guarantees freedom of association on the internet for all Congolese in general though without particularly referring to women who have been facing online violence for years.

Contemporary views on gender inequality, FoE, FoA and OBGV

A UN report on promotion and protection of freedom of opinion and expression shows that equality in freedom of expression remains a "distant goal to achieve"⁹ even though freedom of expression (FoE) and freedom of assembly (FoA) are protected by Articles 19 and 20 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human rights respectively,¹⁰ and in Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.¹¹ The impact of gender-based violence on the two has yet to be fully understood from a digital perspective despite the steps regional bodies such as the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) have taken.

8 Numerique.gouv.cd. (2022, 8 December). Assemblée Nationale juge recevable le projet de loi portant Code du Numérique. <https://numerique.gouv.cd/actualites/assemblee-nationale-juge-recevable-le-projet-de-loi-portant-code-du-numerique-1svfuk>

9 OHCHR. (2021, 18 October). Gender equality in freedom of expression remains a distant goal – UN expert. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/10/gender-equality-freedom-expression-remains-distant-goal-un-expert>

10 <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

11 https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36390-treaty-0011_-_african_charter_on_human_and_peoples_rights_e.pdf

ACHPR recently passed the Resolution on the Protection of Women Against Digital Violence in Africa to acknowledge the significant digital violence online that women are subject to and encourage efforts toward ending OGBV.¹² These rights are enshrined in the sole mandate of democracy and open societies.¹³

In countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, marred with violence, war, corruption and economic crises despite their vast natural resources,¹⁴ sexual violence is used as a weapon of war against right to freedom of expression and association.¹⁵ Human Rights Watch states that freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and media freedom are a big challenge in the DRC.¹⁶ However the national Constitution enshrines freedom of expression,¹⁷ access to information,¹⁸ peaceful assembly¹⁹ and media freedom.²⁰ The DRC also subscribes to international treaties and claims to uphold freedom of expression and assembly among other rights. This is reflected in Articles 23-25 of its Constitution, which guarantee citizens the right to freedom of expression, information and association.²¹ According to Freedom House statistics for 2021, the country has a score of 15/60 with respect to civil liberties, including freedom of expression and association.²²

For nearly 18 years, the digital sector in the DRC was governed by a general legal framework which was thoroughly wanting with regard to the concepts covered by law apropos of the evolution of digital technologies. This legal framework did not respond effectively to human rights violations nor the violators. It is useful to remember digital rights include those of women and girls on the internet.²³

The social status of women is still at the base level because of lack of gender equality and poor implementation of legislations and laws that specifically protect women and punish perpetrators of gender violence. This despite the Constitution affirming the protection of

12 African Commission of Human and Peoples' Rights, Resolution on the Protection of Women Against Digital Violence in Africa. (ACHPR/Res.522(LXXII) 2022).
<https://achpr.au.int/en/adopted-resolutions/522-resolution-protection-women-against-digital-violence-africa-achpr>

13 Equality and Human Rights Commission. (2018). The Human Right Act 1998.
<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/human-rights/human-rights-act>

14 BBC. (2013, 9 October). DR Congo: Cursed by its natural wealth. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24396390>

15 Bronte, D. T. (2020). *Sexual violence in the DRC: the stereotype of 'weapon of wall' and its dangerous consequences*.
https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_marco/2020/DIEEEM01_2020TRIDEI_Congo-ENG.pdf

16 Human Rights Watch. (2021). *World Report 2021: Democratic Republic of Congo*.
<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/democratic-republic-congo>

17 Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Article 23.
<https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/DRC%20-%20Congo%20Constitution.pdf>

18 Ibid., Article 24.

19 Ibid., Article 25.

20 Ibid., Article 24.

21 Ibid.

22 Freedom House. (2021). *Freedom in the World: Democratic Republic of Congo*.
<https://freedomhouse.org/country/democratic-republic-congo/freedom-world/2021#CL>

23 Baraka, P. (2020, 11 September). In DR Congo, will new legislation protect citizens' digital rights? *Global Voices*.
<https://globalvoices.org/2020/09/11/in-dr-congo-will-new-legislation-protect-citizens-digital-rights>

women against all forms of violence.²⁴ Women from all walks of life, including journalists, face increasing intimidation and death threats, for exercising their freedom of expression and airing of their opinion publicly.²⁵

Women's inability to feel safe online has been a barrier to their freedom of expression and basic human rights, exacerbated by existing gender disparities in political and economic participation.²⁶ While freedom of association is enabled by freedom of expression,²⁷ and they ensure that "every individual is free to organise and to form and participate in groups, either formally or informally,"²⁸ their link to human rights and OGBV is yet to be explored. Therefore, more comprehensive studies are crucial to completely understand OGBV through the lens of human rights.²⁹

The humanitarian crises that the DRC has experienced over several decades have had several repercussions on the social life of the populations in the affected regions in general, but with an impact on women's rights in particular, especially by amplifying sexual and gender-based abuse and violence.³⁰

Gender-based violence in the DRC is often linked with the ongoing wars in the east of the country where a majority of women are victims of sexual violence such as rape. The wars and instability have contributed greatly to this violence not only in the east but across the country as a whole. A sexual and gender-based violence factsheet by USAID in the DRC states that "continued population displacement, insecurity, and conflict in eastern DRC perpetuate the cycle of violence against women and girls."³¹

Gender-based violence being a huge problem in the DRC, the government, in order to address it, has tried to put in place mechanisms such as accountability frameworks, including national protocols for case management and a database of incidents.³²

24 Constitution of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Article 14.
<https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/DRC%20-%20Congo%20Constitution.pdf>

25 Amnesty International. (2022). Democratic Republic of Congo 2022.
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/africa/east-africa-the-horn-and-great-lakes/democratic-republic-of-the-congo/report-democratic-republic-of-the-congo/>

26 Nyamwire, B., Metial, K., & Siba Yahaya, M. (2022). *A Dark Place for Women Journalists and Women Human Rights Defenders: Documenting the Experiences of Online Violence in Anglo and Francophone Countries*. Pollicy.
<https://pollicy.org/resource/a-dark-place-for-women-journalists>

27 African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms Coalition. (2020). *The struggle for the realisation of the right to freedom of expression in Southern Africa*.
<https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/files/struggle-foe-southafrica.pdf>

28 <https://humanrightshouse.org/we-stand-for/freedom-of-expression/>

29 Internet Governance Forum. (2015). *Best Practice Forum (BPF) on Online Abuse and Gender-Based Violence Against Women*. <https://www.intgovforum.org/en/content/online-abuse-and-gender-based-violence-against-women>

30 UNFPA. (2019, 24 May). Gender-Based Violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Key facts and priorities of humanitarian actors. *ReliefWeb*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/gender-based-violence-democratic-republic-congo-key-facts-and>

31 <https://2012-2017.usaid.gov/democratic-republic-congo/fact-sheets/usaidrc-fact-sheet-sexual-and-gender-based-violence>

32 UNFPA. (2019, 24 May). Op. cit.

However these protocols and mechanisms only respond to GBV in the offline world, completely ignoring OGBV.

Towards a more holistic approach

Recent studies show that globally, women politicians, journalists, human rights defenders and feminist activists are particularly targeted “with vicious, coordinated online attacks in order to intimidate, silence and drive them off social media platforms and out of public life, undermining human rights, media diversity and inclusive democracy”³³ and this is due to preconceived mindset based on institutionalised patriarchal norms incorporated in power dynamics of politics and leadership.³⁴

A regional study conducted in English- and French-speaking countries in west and central Africa shows increasing attacks and online violation against women in politics and journalism, as well as other influential figures, and that OGBV affects 45% of women on social media in the region.³⁵ In addition, a report by Pollicy on online violence trends in Anglophone and Francophone Africa notes that women journalists in the DRC do not often use online platforms because of the misogynistic attacks they experience online when they share information publicly. The report describes the country as one of the dark places for women journalists and human rights defenders.³⁶ Furthermore, it notes that women’s human rights defenders and journalists remove themselves from public conversations or self-censor to avoid attacks.³⁷

Research conducted in Uganda shows that most female politicians suffered OGBV during the 2021 general elections campaign.³⁸ As such, research and reports point out that there is a pressing need to understand OGBV in light of human rights to amplify and engage movements that will lead to gender equity and eliminate all forms of OGBV.

Africa is facing a disconnect in developing and applying specific laws to protect women against gender-based violence.³⁹ This is resulting in a skewed reaction with increasing

33 OHCHR. (2021, 18 October). Op. cit.

34 Jeremic, I., Zivanovic, M., Marusic, S. J., Grebo, L., Begisholli, B., Kajosevic, S., & Krstic, E. (2019, 18 June). Online abuse now commonplace for Balkan women reporters. *Reporting Democracy*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/06/18/online-abuse-now-commonplace-for-balkan-women-reporters>; Aceng, S., Katambi, J., Grandolfo, F., & Andrew, G. (2020). *Online Gender-Based Violence: An assessment of women’s safety in the digital space*. Feminist Hub. <https://www.feministhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/SayNoToOnlineOBV.pdf>

35 <https://internetwithoutborders.org/iwd2019-online-gender-based-violence-affects-45-of-women-on-social-media-in-west-and-central-africa>

36 Nyamwire, B., Metial, K., & Siba Yahaya, M. (2022). Op. cit.

37 Ibid.

38 Kakande, A., Achieng, G., Iyer, N., Nyamwire, B., Nabulega, S., & Mwendwa, I. (2021). *Amplified Abuse: Report on Online Violence against Women in the 2021 Uganda General Elections*. Pollicy. <https://archive.pollicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Amplified-Abuse-Report.pdf>

39 Acoso. Online. (2020). *Domestic violence and its online manifestations in the context of a pandemic*. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/chile-1-acoso-online.pdf>; <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>

response to OGBV rather than preventing and finding a solution.⁴⁰ In addition, there is need to conduct studies in various regions across the globe to develop specific, interactive, collaborative frameworks where all stakeholders are engaged and tasked with the responsibilities to understand what exactly is going on with both sides (victims and perpetrators) when women participate in freedom of expression and association on social media; this is so as to develop and apply preventive and redressal mechanisms.⁴¹

A holistic perspective includes intrinsic and extrinsic factors of the victims' painful experiences that affect their mental health, physical well-being, dignity, and loss of reputation when exercising freedom of expression and freedom of association. While it is true that the real extent of OGBV on the physical, psychological and social component on people remain unknown,⁴² it is well known that gender equality in freedom of expression and association remain a distant goal.⁴³ More inclusive and collaborative studies where victims, lawmakers, technology developers, political leaders coming together for a solution is the key to gender equity and respect for human rights.

Gender-based violence has a high prevalence rate in the DRC while OGBV is often viewed as something that only affects certain sections. This is underscored by a journalist from Goma referring to "the elite, educated woman who has access to technology while gender-based violence overall affects any woman, whether they are online or not".

For most women who experience OGBV, they must first be connected to the internet and in conflict areas where priorities are many, access is a privilege and hence only the most vocal women of influence who are connected experience OGBV.

Women journalists and human rights defenders who work in conflict areas find that their job makes them the target for abuse both online and offline. However, they also face digital gap challenges such as unreliable power and connection, hindering their right to fully utilise digital platforms. This gap is more pronounced for LGBTQIA+ communities who are not only stigmatised but are also easily victimised on various platforms. These communities are not exempt from gender-based violence, both online and in real life, what with being forced to hide from harassment, attacks and hatred; all this when there is no law criminalising homosexuality in the DRC.⁴⁴

40 APC. (2017). *Online gender-based violence: A submission from the Association for Progressive Communications to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences*. https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/APCSubmission_UNSR_VAW_GBV_0_0.pdf

41 Ibid.; Amaral, I., & Simões, R. B. (2021). *Online abuse against women: Towards an evidence-based approach*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350870697_Online_abuse_against_women_towards_an_evidence-based_approach; UN Women. (2015). *A framework to underpin action to prevent violence against women*. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/PreventionFrameworkNov2015.pdf>

42 CIPESA. (2022, 3 March). *Combating online violence against women and girls towards a digital equal world*. <https://cipesa.org/2022/03/combating-online-violence-against-women-and-girls-towards-a-digital-equal-world>

43 OHCHR. (2021, 18 October). Op. cit.

44 Pierret, C. (2023, 17 January). In eastern DRC, homosexuals are forced into hiding. *Le Monde*.

For most women in the DRC, OGBV is still a new and not fully understood experience for them to understand its implications on their basic rights of freedom of expression and association. They mostly see OGBV as a consequence of their actions and not such a big deal, though the fallout can be petrifying, such as damage to their mental health and inability to exercise their rights. If a woman's nude picture is released in public domain – as many university students have found to their horror – it is often viewed as the woman's fault. She is cyberbullied while the perpetrators go scot-free despite their role in the sharing of the images.

Gender-based violence is often tied to systems, practices, norms and cultures that exist in communities. This is the same case for the DRC where the culture, despite some communities being matrilineal, supports and perpetuates GBV by silencing the voices of women and giving more power to men.

Abuse of power and gender inequalities have exacerbated women's vulnerability to all these forms of violence and have significantly reduced their ability to speak out on "sensitive" issues within the community that is strongly dominated by sociocultural and patriarchal norms.

In such cultures and systems that favour men's access to key rights such as FoE and FoA than women, it is difficult to address OGBV without first dealing with the cultural and societal norms of oppression.

Most often, GBV is looked at from an offline perspective, specifically the physical such as rape, domestic violence, etc. and is hardly looked at by the sum of its parts. Hence, the methods used to address the challenge tend to be in silos. The relationship between offline and online GBV demonstrates the need for mechanisms that are able to look at GBV in a holistic way, keeping in view that the online world is just a reflection of the offline world.

GBV is multifactorial and not tied to a set of defined factors, and for it to be sufficiently addressed, a holistic approach is necessary. This entails looking at how culture, systems, behaviour and experiences perpetuate OGBV with respect to FoE and FoA. This also calls for redefining mechanisms to ensure that norms, traditions and practices do not reinforce online GBV violence as they have with offline GBV. A holistic approach looks at how the heart, mind and body are affected by OGBV and offers solutions that factor in all this. This study took an inclusive and engaging approach in its recommendations to help shape and advocate for holistic approaches to be taken by the various stakeholders.

https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/01/17/in-eastern-drc-homosexuals-forced-into-hiding_6011875_124.html

7.

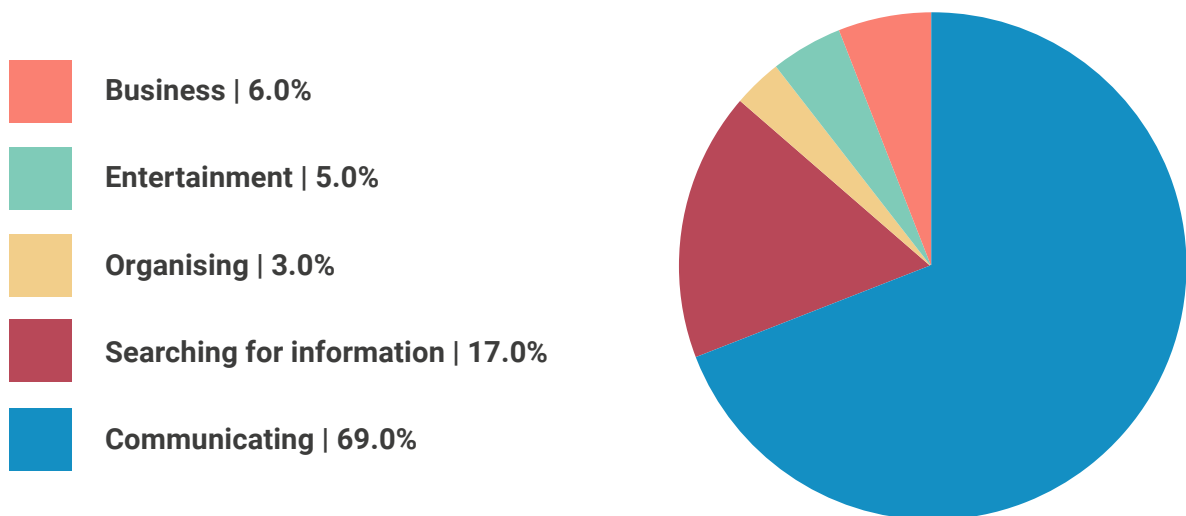
Key findings

Demographics

The research targeted women (journalists, human rights defenders, ordinary internet users) who were between the ages of 16 to 50 and beyond. Overall, the main respondents who filled the survey were between the ages of 21-40 years, representing Tanganyika, Lualaba, Katanga, Kasai, Lomami, Kinshasa, Kwilu and Kivu regions. The majority of respondents were between the ages of 26 to 30 years. On employment status, 35 respondents were employed, 14 unemployed, 17 students, while 34 did not disclose their employment status. Some 28 participants were from ongoing conflict areas of Goma, Kivu and Bukavu in the eastern part of the DRC.

Internet usage

What is social media most used for?



In terms of internet usage, all respondents had online access except one, who preferred not to say why they do not have access. On frequency of accessing the internet, 42% of respondents accessed it very often, 26% often, 20% sometimes and 2% indicated they rarely accessed it. Access to devices and frequent use were also affected by factors such as non-professionals like university students using social media more while journalists terming the usage as often though they described the social media environment as being oppressive and not conducive. Almost 99% of the respondents owned the device they used to connect to the internet.

Respondents gave varied reasons as to why they used the internet.

A majority used it to communicate, read the news, conduct academic research, advertise their businesses, and watch and post videos both for entertainment and learning purposes. Only one used the internet for campaigning on political matters, their reason being social media provides them with a wider audience and ability to interact with politicians. However, they did say that it was not a very friendly space for an aspiring woman politician.

In terms of social media access, all respondents had access to social media networks and were registered on the following platforms: WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn, and used these sites to communicate, search for information, post advertisements, conduct business and to organise around common issues. This was more so for women human rights defenders and those who work in the civil society sector. They said these platforms helped amplify their work and build communities that they can work with. While a vast majority of respondents had access to the internet and social media platforms, they did point out that not many women are as privileged due to lack of devices and bandwidth. Respondents demonstrated productive use of the digital platforms such as business, entertainment, learning, and communication. However, there was limited use of online platforms for civic participation. Women human rights defenders noted that civic participation online was not reliable due to the ease with which the government turns off the internet as it has been doing over the years.

Enjoyment of FoE

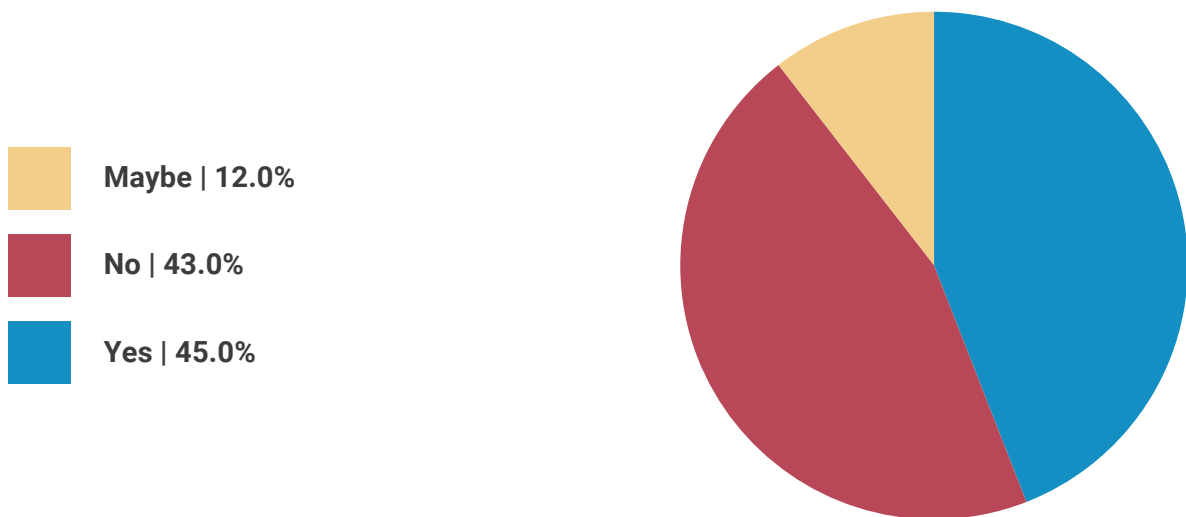
One of the research's objectives sought to understand the inequalities women and girls in the DRC face in their enjoyment of freedom of expression and association online. The survey revealed that 45% of respondents felt that both women and men in the DRC enjoyed an equal share of the right to free expression while 43% felt that this was not the case. This finding differed with what the survey participants in interviews felt. They believed that women had less access to FoE and FoA than men and this was because the digital space, especially in the DRC, was treated as a space for men and measures not being taken to make it inclusive enough, such as making the devices and internet packages affordable.

THE HOLISTIC APPROACH

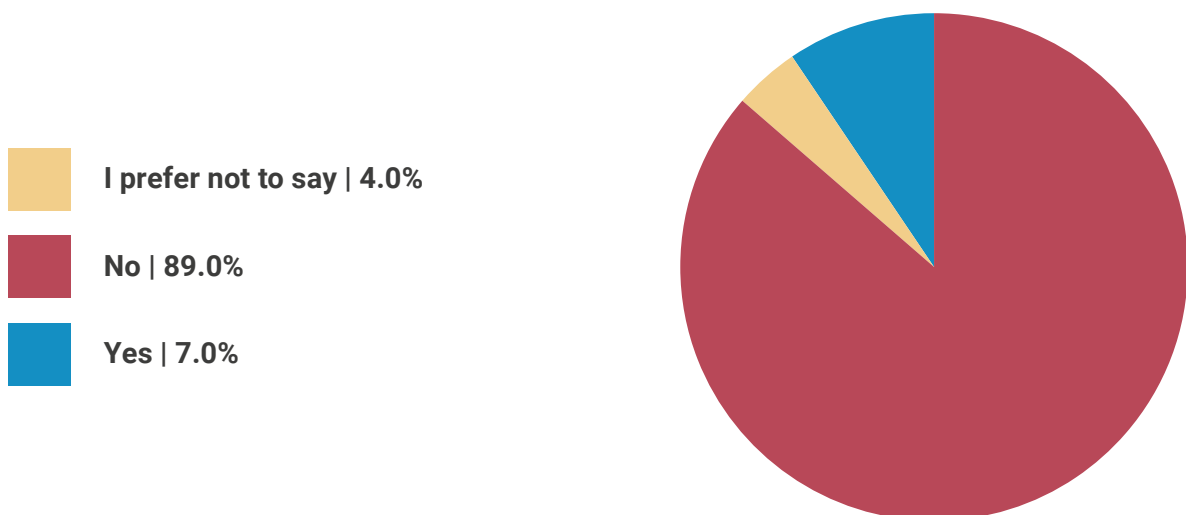
Significantly, 89% of the respondents felt that the right to freedom of expression and association for women in the country was not sufficiently protected and they did not feel safe to exercise this right.

They were also not aware of the legal provisions to protect online freedom of expression in the country. Women in the civil society sector from places like Bukavu and Goma blamed this on the low representation of women in the senate and local parliaments, robbing them of their voices in the policy development process.

Is the right to freedom of expression and association online equal for men and women in this country?



Do you think that women's right to freedom of expression and association online is sufficiently protected in this country?



Our research revealed that even today, women's rights in many areas in the DRC remain at a low percentage and they do not enjoy the same rights when it comes to access to the internet as men, who still dominate internet usage in the DRC. For instance, a respondent spoke about a case in Bukavu where husbands complained that their wives no longer took care of the household and were always on their phones. On the other hand, women said they spent a large portion of their time attending to household tasks while their husbands spent a considerable amount of time online. Furthermore, access and control of technology by men force women to miss out on the digital revolution as they sometimes have no way to connect and must wait for the husband to give them access, especially in cases where the woman does not own a device or cannot afford to pay for the data package. It was observed that in the Bukavu community, married women did not know how to use the internet without the husband's guidance and authorisation, and the single women did not know where to start.

The study revealed that unequal access to technology exists in the target communities and this can also be seen in the broader DRC context. This inequality is also characterised by patriarchal norms where husbands see access to technology as a waste of time and not as an avenue for access to information and freedom of expression and association. In addition, the patriarchal norms reinforce the existing gender digital divide whereby women have to rely on their partners' technological skills to access the internet.

To safeguard freedom of association online, respondents suggested that it would be helpful if women from different backgrounds came together for a common cause and built movements to champion equal access to technology and to carry along both rural and urban women and those in formal or informal employment, at the same time dismantling historical socio-cultural norms and biases that label women who access technology.

While some positive strides have been made in the legal and policy landscape such as the amendment of the Constitution of 2005 through 2011 on human rights, of fundamental freedoms, and of the duties of the citizen and the state,⁴⁵ the revision of Law No. 96 of the Constitution, which safeguards freedom of expression in both offline and online media, however, is still problematic, especially regarding the internet and online access for actors. Most respondents were not aware of legal provisions that protect freedom of expression and safeguard against violence, in particular in the online space, and this situation has created insecurity, especially among women.

For instance, in the workplace, women in private sector employment easily have access to the internet at their office but for women who are state employees, access is not so easy due to connectivity and infrastructural issues, and even when they do have access, there is fear that the connection is monitored. It was noted that in exercising freedom of expression,

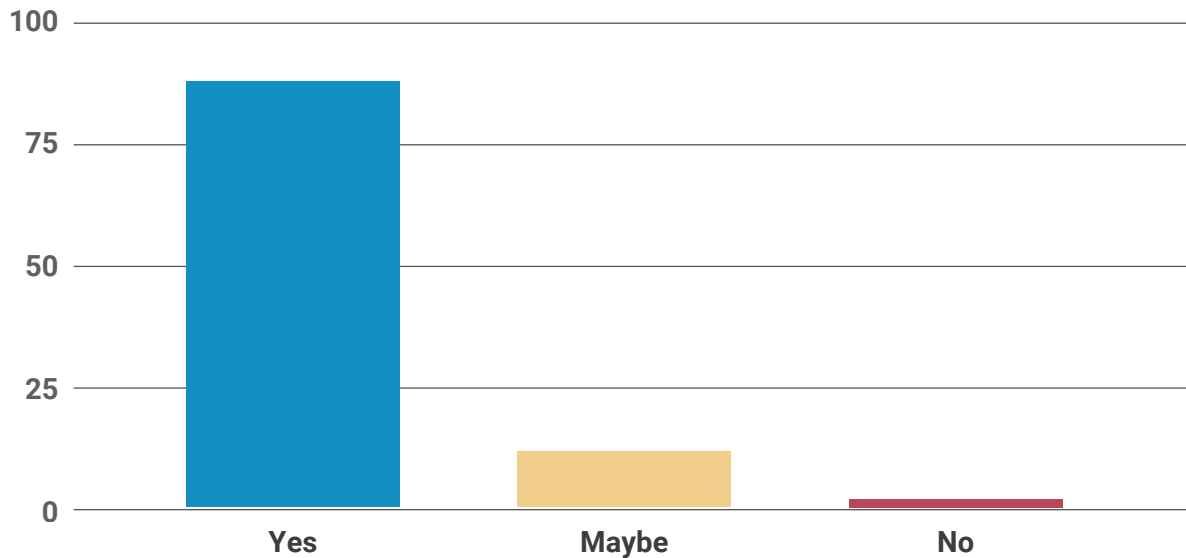
45 https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Democratic_Republic_of_the_Congo_2011.pdf?lang=en

many women face prejudice and intolerance such that they see fit to be silent rather than to express themselves; this happens in open online platforms and online discussion groups. To this end, respondents argued that the legal and policy frameworks are not sufficient to protect FoE because the laws such as the Cybercrime Act are still in Parliament and in cases where they are already enacted, women were not aware of them.

Factors affecting enjoyment of freedom of expression

I. Online censorship and violence

Do you think women in this country face violence when exercising their rights online?



Over 88% of respondents indicated that women in the DRC face significant violence when exercising their right to free expression and assembly online, leading to a culture of self-censorship. One respondent noted that "women see fit to be silent than to express themselves, this happens on online platforms and in online discussion groups". This is more so the case of women whose roles engage them with the public a lot. During war, women who tend to write about the situation on the ground fear that exposing their profiles and information on social media platforms leaves them easily vulnerable to be attacked both physically and emotionally.

Another respondent noted, "Yes, we experience this kind of violence because men denigrate us in relation to our sex and tell us that we are of the weaker sex and that we cannot do anything or move forward when we undertake certain things."

She added, "For example, in the case of politics, when a woman gets involved, people judge her and she experiences several stresses that sometimes prevent her from achieving her goals."

Another participant expressed that women and girls in her community were freer to express themselves in a closed WhatsApp group that she belonged to, which was dedicated to discussing sexual health and sexuality. She also noted that women express themselves less in open groups that bring together many people for fear of being judged. "They prefer to give their opinions within closed groups."

Women in the DRC face violence that is of a gendered nature when accessing online platforms to exercise their right to free expression and association online. Consequently, self-censorship on public platforms has become a coping mechanism where women and girls express themselves less on public platforms but are more forthcoming in closed groups and this further infringes on their enjoyment of digital rights.

In terms of which groups were most affected by this violence, women politicians and community leaders, women's rights activists, journalists, and students were seen as those at the receiving end of violence. Journalists were often attacked for their work, which involves publishing online posts and interacting with their audiences. Activists, on the other hand, were targeted because they often speak out on behalf of their communities and are often bullied; and students because most are perceived as being "naive" and easily targeted so they fall victim to harassment and blackmail online. In addition, women politicians were attacked to dent their reputations and such attacks increased during election time.

"For women politicians, it is sometimes during election time that men persecute them with indecent and insulting remarks which tarnish their images."

It was noted that in the DRC, it is difficult to gauge the prevalence of online violence against women. Although only 69% of respondents said they were aware of online censorship and OGBV and 58% indicated that both were common, a participant noted, "It is difficult to give a good analysis or figures in the DRC. It is also difficult to be explicit because in this country, the internet is not used properly. Many cases of sexual violence are recorded but this is not reported online."

Another respondent observed that OGBV in the DRC was escalating at a very high rate, "We estimate the violence to be at around 80% among women internet users (this sometimes increases due to a lack of protection knowledge and not knowing how to use the digital tools)."

There is a clear lack of information regarding the true extent and prevalence of online violence against women, including reliable documentation of statistics to inform research outputs and interventions. Considerable efforts on offline GBV, such as Panzi Hospital that

offers support to victims of sexual violence, exist in the DRC; however, there is no deliberate focus by stakeholders to understand, raise awareness and provide interventions on OGBV and this has significant potential to censor and deter women's voices in public online spaces. In addition, there is a lack of know-how on digital security practices by women and girls that can help them navigate harmful practices.

While we did not get to interview women politicians, an analysis of some notable women political figures' social media accounts threw up some interesting findings. For instance, a woman senator and long-time diplomat of the DRC recently tweeted about the ongoing crisis between Rwanda, M23 and the Monusco forces in the east of the DRC, and voiced her opinion on the matter. The tweet invited a backlash from users, mostly men, who belittled what she said, even using insults such as, "Twitter is not a dating site or top model website." Surprisingly, some of the abusive responses were coming from women. This shows that although most perpetrators of OGBV are men, women also use the space to intimidate other women.

Deputy Minister of Primary, Secondary and Technical Education Aminata Namasia has been the target of attacks by internet users over her alleged pregnancy.

On 11 May 2023, she issued a statement recalling that beyond her official and public duties, she has "a life that must be respected by all" and that this is a "right guaranteed to every Congolese by our Constitution."

"On the eve of the elections scheduled for December this year, political detractors can attack my political opinions and actions instead of opting for practices tending to smear my person," she said.⁴⁶

When the DRC is heading for an election, more women politicians find themselves victims of OGBV as they face targeted comments, abusive content and trolling, among others. For women politicians in the DRC, social media platforms are not only a means to share their work but are also avenues to advocate for pertinent issues and push for more women's participation in politics. Currently, women constitute 52% of the population but their representation in Parliament is a mere 12.8%, which puts the country well below the average of 24% in sub-Saharan Africa. This despite laws introduced by the Congolese government to promote women's participation, including adding the principle of equality between men and women in the preamble during the revision of the Constitution on 18 February 2006.⁴⁷

46 mediacongo.net. (2023, 11 May). Aminata Namasia : « au-delà de mes charges officielles et publiques, j'ai une vie qui doit être respectée par tous ». https://www.mediacongo.net/article-actualite-121760_aminata_namasia_au_dela_de_mes_charges_officielles_et_publicques_j_ai_une_vie_qui_doit_etre_respectee_par_tous.html

47 FEMNET. (2021). *Document d'orientation sur la participation Politique des Femmes en République Démocratique du Congo (RDC)*. <https://femnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Policy-Brief-WPP-DRC-French.pdf>

This study noted the most common violence was account hacking, trolling, cyberbullying, non-consensual sharing of intimate Images, unwanted sexual remarks, and cyberstalking. Our survey participants were least aware of trolling and doxxing.

On whether respondents had experienced censorship and OGBV attacks or knew someone that did, only 16% said they had either been directly affected or knew a victim, while 82% said they had never been victims of OGBV. However, 88% of respondents agreed that in the DRC people should be wary about OGBV when exercising their freedom of expression and freedom of association.

"Certainly, because there are women who censor themselves as they are afraid of being judged if they express themselves. This right has been taken away from them," a respondent noted. In addition, they highlighted that "the internet can be an advantage, or disadvantage if you don't know how to use it."

They pointed to the case of another victim of online abuse, Nathalie Yamb, a Swiss-Cameroonian national who can no longer go to France today, because of her comments on what she describes as that European country's neocolonialism in Africa.

None of the women interviewed saw themselves as victims of OGBV as a result of expressing themselves online. However, they knew friends who have experienced hacking and blackmail, harassment, receiving unwarranted content that is of a sexual/pornographic nature as well as scammers out to extort money. Others stated that high-profile women were vulnerable to cloning of their social media accounts and revenge porn.

A respondent narrated a case of two women who were harassed and threatened online for posting photos deemed "inappropriate" by their followers who later tried to gouge money from them. This is one among the many incidences that put women online at risk in the DRC where perpetrators of cyber extortion are not easily caught and the system is not well equipped to deal with digital crimes.

Another case related to some parliamentarians publishing classified information about Dr. Denis Mukwege's work online to denigrate him. The gynaecologist is renowned for his campaign against sexual violence as a tool for war. However, this case inspired women to galvanise a movement online to fight fake news against Dr. Mukwege and his work.

Some respondents addressed incidents of non-consensual sharing of intimate images, faking of women's photos to tarnish their reputation, incidents of revenge porn suffered by students who could not report it for fear of being shamed; and a case where a woman had her Facebook account hacked and her photos posted online by a stranger who had pretended to be a computer specialist to gain access to her profile. In another incident, a girl disclosed her bank account details such as password to her boyfriend who emptied the account and fled. Again, here we see how digital literacy and security skills could help prevent online harms that also have offline consequences. Women public figures are particularly targeted as a means to disempower and deter them from meaningfully participating in civic matters.

Women journalists felt steps should be taken to address OGBV as women would be discouraged to get online if their basic security was not guaranteed. Documented violations reported from the east by journalists and human rights defenders noted that “what happens offline actually translates to the online world and vice-versa, and the vile abuse and demeaning of women offline persists online, but the latter is not taken as serious as the first.”

“In my work, when I speak out against what is happening in communities that are affected by violence and share such content online, people attack my work and often label me as privileged. I’ve had people even wish that a man would rape me to silence [me]. That is a terrifying thought that has traumatised me a lot. While I prefer to use tools like Facebook Live and Instagram stories to engage and build movements on things that are pertinent to security in the east, I am also cautious of how that puts me and my family at risk in real life,” a victim said.

More often than not, offline GBV in the DRC takes precedence over OGBV, which makes the latter difficult to address as most are not aware of it. While the two are equally important it is crucial to have mechanisms in place that address both.

Meanwhile, only 3% of the respondents were aware of a specific emergency number, entities (public or private) or similar where one can report potential violence. Women journalists in Bukavu stated there are no specialised organisations that address OGBV; however, there are actions taken by some organisations against GBV generally. “Some organisations are limited to denouncing online violence. There is no call centre but [having one] would be a great opportunity to contribute to the fight against GBV.” In Bukavu, for example, there is an office called “Woman on the Phone” that collects information from GBV victims or from any woman who feels that her rights are being violated.

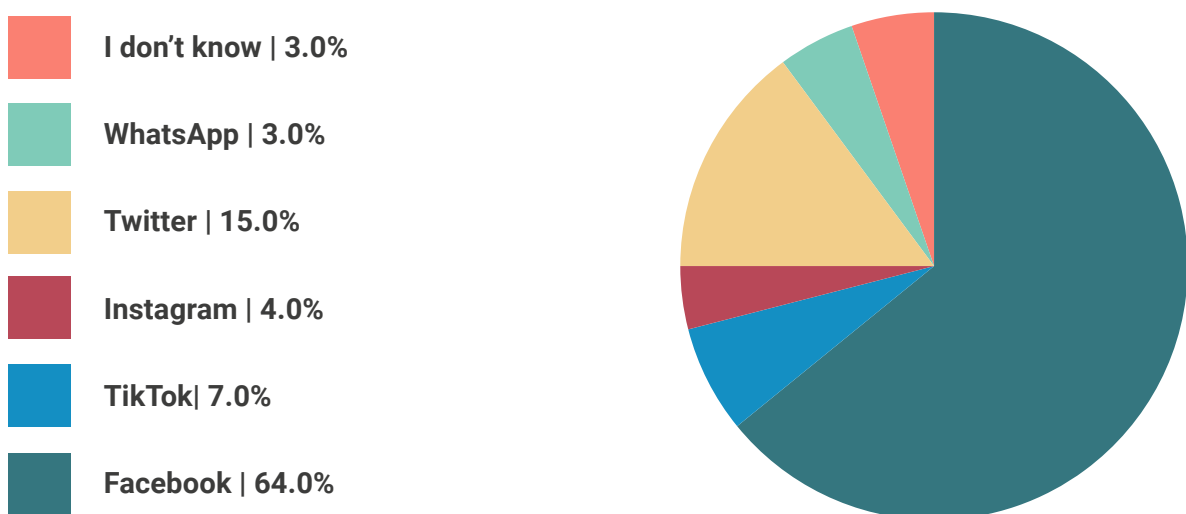
On the other hand, 89% of the survey respondents agreed that attacks on freedom of expression and association through online violence should be punished because of the adverse effects that they cause such as self-censorship and abandoning online platforms. Victims often felt stigmatised and users changed how they interacted with social media

platforms. One participant responded, “A simpler option is just to leave social media; why stay where you are harassed and demeaned?” Other reactions included loss of self-esteem due to the humiliation suffered, quitting online groups and social media platforms as a means to get away from the attackers, depression, and in the most severe cases, suicide, due to not knowing how to repair the damage caused to their reputation. One woman stated that she experienced cyberbullying. “As a journalist, when I publish certain information on my page, people start putting bad comments against my post, sometimes they body-shame me, call me names, and attack my work.”

While social media is empowering to women, giving them avenues to express themselves not normally available to them, it also brings new challenges and creates situations that curtail their right to free speech. Most women agreed that social media is both enabling and disabling and the government as well as social media platforms have the role to level the playing field and balance the scales, especially where gender is concerned.

The DRC criminal code offers some level of protection for potential victims of online violence, although there is need to also include such provisions in the Digital Code Bill to ensure that digital cases are adequately addressed. As it stands, regulation of the internet remains complex in the DRC. Meanwhile, Facebook was identified as the platform where one was most prone to experience violence, followed by Twitter, TikTok, Instagram and WhatsApp. A majority of women used Facebook to create closed groups but even in such groups, the vetting process was unreliable, leading to sometimes men joining women-only groups.

Which platform is most prone to violence against women when they use it to exercise their rights?



The study found that there was a need to protect women who use social networks or the internet. However, a respondent noted that online censorship is sometimes good because it protects women who are victims, but at the same time not good because it limits women from informing themselves. The survey highlighted that censorship or content moderation should be permitted under circumstances that involve national security, child pornography, hate speech, dissemination of false information, incitement to violence and pornography among others.

The role of social media platforms in ending online censorship was deemed critical.

"Yes, because the social network platforms are not there only to cause harm, but also through them we can implement a mechanism to fight against this violence and avoid self-censorship. We think this role is not really considered because group and platform administrators must implement a tracking mechanism to block the bad [players] on social networks."

Lastly, 26% of respondents were aware of women's movements that raise awareness against OGBV, which affects freedom of expression and freedom of association. Some respondents highlighted the role of social media in organising movements. "Obviously, through social networks women or women's rights activists can organise online campaigns or online demonstrations to denounce GBV.

Like when the coronavirus pandemic hit the world, with an increase in the number of people online, women's communities came together as part of a campaign against OGBV.⁴⁸ It is possible to create channels to disseminate or relay laws on the protection of women and victims of sexual violence."

In addition, there are other examples of successful movements born online such as #MeToo, the viral campaign that exposed and denounced people in power who harassed and exploited women employees and subordinates.

48 <https://www.sofepadirdc.org/communique-de-lancement-de-la-campagne-techsansviolences>

8.

Conclusion and analysis

The research sought to understand the inequalities and hindrances to the enjoyment of freedom of expression and assembly online by women in Democratic Republic of Congo by assessing what fosters this inequality when women participate in FoE and FoA on social media, how can we ensure that women can anticipate, prepare and respond to OGBV when exercising their rights on social media by documenting their experiences and responses to OGBV, and assessing what are the power dynamics of amplification and movement-building for women human rights defenders, activists, influencers and politicians on social media.

The research targeted women who were journalists, human rights defenders, activists, politicians and ordinary internet users who were between the ages of 16 and 50 from Tanganyika, Lualaba, Katanga, Kasai, Lomami, Kinshasa, Kwilu and Kivu regions. The survey helped capture broader perspectives from various women on their experiences and understanding of OGBV while the focus group discussions and interviews delved deeper to probe the respondents on issues they raised. The “hows” and lived experiences helped inform and reinforce the data from the survey.

The woman journalist

Women journalists who are often in the public sphere due to the nature of their work said while their work afforded them a platform, they were targets of OGBV in various ways. Their work drew an element of scrutiny tied to their gender, and anything they published or shared is viewed with bias, and often their personhood attacked in the process. Women journalists interviewed during focus group discussions stated that they are often trolled, bullied, body-shamed, and worse, attacked with malicious comments on their social media accounts.

The woman human rights defender and activist

In a country that witnessed vast violations of human rights, especially in the east, a group of women human rights defenders and activists were interviewed in Goma through a focus group discussion. For these women, OGBV often comes from well-known political entities, and they often find themselves at a crossroads with political figures as well as perpetrators of human rights violations. They use their rights of FoE and FoA for movement-building as well as advocacy. However this often comes with both physical and online threats. From the survey, 35% of respondents – the highest percentage – said women activists faced more violence online due to the nature of their work. This group often faces cyber harassment, trolling and cyberbullying; sometimes this is coupled with manipulated images.

The everyday woman

Our study found that a majority of women internet users in the DRC are subject to revenge porn, cyberbullying and unwanted sexual advances, mostly on social media platforms. Some 64% of the respondents said the platform where they faced the most violence is Facebook where crimes like identity theft are rampant. Most of the women interviewed in this group were students who said non-consensual sharing of intimate images often led some of them to suffer mental health issues such as depression. A majority of this group chooses to self-censor on platforms they find to be unhealthy for their online freedom.

Participants in interviews and focus group discussions were from gender organisations, women's movements, journalists, activists and human rights defenders. The organisations disclosed they had prior experience working on promoting online freedom of expression and assembly and preventing OGBV. While all respondents had access to social media, Facebook was identified as the platform where one was most prone to experience violence, followed by Twitter, TikTok, Instagram and WhatsApp.

The focus group discussions revealed that the women experienced OGBV when they exercised their right to freedom of expression. This was ranked as being rife in the DRC and said to be escalating at a high rate, and leading to self-censorship. Respondents estimated the occurrences at around 80% among women internet users and said that this rate could increase due to lack of knowledge on how they can protect themselves and not knowing how to use digital tools. Responses of participants suggest that they do not have a clear definition of what OGBV really is.

None of the women interviewed said they had been victims of censorship. However, 16% of the survey respondents said that they had either been or knew a victim. The most common types of OGBV cited were account hacking, abusive or sexist replies, revenge porn, sexual harassment and leaking of sex tapes. Respondents agreed that preventing online censorship would empower women to be more informed, free to express themselves, create a connection with the outside world, create work opportunities – for example to trade and increase their customer base in relation to online marketing.

There are many factors that foster inequality when women exercise FoE and FoA online. Most often, OGBV broadens this inequality further, coupled with the access and skills gaps that many African countries such as the DRC face. The dynamics within the communities in the DRC, which are mostly patrilineal, allow men to have more power to voice their needs and practise FoE and FoA, unlike women in their communities. Shifting power from the systematic and structural barriers that have long existed in the communities will require building resilient women who will not only adjust to the ever-evolving tech space but also be able to build movements and amplify their voices using the very tool that is currently being used to suppress their voices. For OGBV's impact on FoE and FoA to be mitigated, it is important for knowledge gaps on key digital skills such as security to be imparted to women and their capacity improved to identify, anticipate, prepare, prevent and respond to OGBV.

9.

Recommendations

- **Legal and policy protections**

The DRC's national Constitution enshrines freedom of expression and association, and protection of women and the Criminal Code Act criminalises violence against women. The country has ratified and signed several world conventions on GBV but the laws do not reflect or harmonise with these frameworks. The current legal provisions and frameworks on violence against women are not sufficient to safeguard women online.

- As the Ordinance Law No. 23/010 of 13 March 2023 on the Digital Code in the DRC has enshrined various provisions that set up competent entities related to the protection of cyberspace, in particular the National Cybersecurity Agency, and thus provides for sanctions for violations committed on the internet that women are often subject to; authorities should make more efforts to set up law enforcement mechanisms and finalise institutional reforms to protect the civic space and guarantee freedom of association.
- There are no specific laws that address OGBV. To this end, respondents argued that where the law was already present, women were ignorant of them. A cause of concern has been how women report such incidents as there are no legal mechanisms that specifically respond to OGBV. Furthermore, there is a knowledge gap among judges and lawyers on how to prosecute on such matters: hence the need for more capacity building.

- **Awareness raising**

Addressing online violence in the DRC will require women to have the courage to speak out against it to raise awareness and receive justice. Also, the focus by the state has been on other forms of offline violence than those that women experience online due to the war which ushered in a surge of sexual harassment and GBV.

- **Role of social media platforms**

Social network platforms have a huge role to play to ensure they facilitate free expression and that no one quits, by implementing mechanisms to fight against online harms, especially those targeted at women and girls. Furthermore, the role of these platforms extends to tracking, monitoring and moderating content posted by perpetrators. While some of these mechanisms are already available – for example, one can block and report abusers – moderators can also detect misconduct by users. Some efforts have been made to end online violence; however, there's need for awareness on online safety for women, especially regarding privacy policy and platform community standards.

- **Digital security training**

In terms of how to ensure that women participate fully online, respondents suggested that women and girls be trained in the secure use of digital platforms, especially on digital safety and hygiene in order to protect themselves while fully enjoying their rights online, and by emphasising privacy policies and data protection as mandated by the Data Protection and Privacy law 2020. Digital security training was cited as critical for women, particularly journalists, and that this training should be focused on women not only in major provinces like Kinshasa but also in other provinces like Lualaba, as interventions were often happening in bigger provinces while journalists work everywhere.

- **Movement building**

Respondents expressed need for support to extend their offline GBV work to include online GBV advocacy, especially using digital tools as a means of communication to those already using online means. Furthermore, suggestions were made on the need for more politicians, in particular local parliamentarians, to speak out on issues of online expression and violence and, if possible, appointing a local champion to raise awareness on such issues.

- **Preparing women to identify and respond to online gender violence**

To ensure that women can identify, prepare for and respond to OGBV when exercising their rights on social media, the state and the various platforms should agree to a mechanism for prosecution of wrongdoers to complement digital security practices. Habari RDC has made some efforts in this regard but its training is often concentrated in major provinces such as Kinshasa. The creation of a toll-free number or an online proximity policy would be possible thanks to monitoring software or applications.

- **Expanding GBV focus to include OGBV**

In the DRC, much emphasis is often placed by the government and various stakeholders on GBV in general than OGBV. Discussions with women activists and human rights defenders brought to light that the DRC has mechanisms in place to educate and respond to GBV, but not OGBV. This is more so the case when one looks at GBV in war-torn areas such as the east, and even in the mining sectors in the south of the country where most activists, journalists and politicians address offline GBV such as sexual violence as a weapon of war, domestic abuse and so on but not OGBV. Most consider OGBV to be “self-inflicted” rather than an act that violates rights. “Often, in cases when a woman is raped and it is reported, people will question what she was wearing and where she was, rather than the violent act that happened to her. This is the same case when one speaks of OGBV: rather than condemn the action, they are viewed as people who did something to warrant that kind of treatment,” a female journalist responded during the focus group discussion.

- **A holistic approach**

The government and other stakeholders should take a holistic approach in developing solutions that address OGBV by factoring in cultural practices and structural and systematic causatives. This will be crucial to developing a survival-centred solution that allows power to rest with women over OGBV concerns.

Appendix

A. Focus group discussion – Questionnaire

1. Do you have experience working in **online** freedom of expression, freedom of association and GBV? Tell us about it.
2. Do you feel women face violence when exercising their rights **online**? Especially freedom of expression and assembly? Explain.
3. How prevalent are **online** censorship and GBV in this country?
4. Do women and men enjoy the right to freedom of expression and association **online** equally in this country?
5. Do you feel women's right to freedom of expression and association **online** is sufficiently protected in this country? Do women feel safe exercising these rights?
6. Do you feel that attacks on freedom of expression and freedom of association **online** should be punished?
7. Are you aware of the laws and policies and the protections they offer on freedom of expression and freedom of association online?
8. What are the most common types of **online** censorship and GBV in the DRC?
9. What are some of the side effects/impact of **online** censorship and GBV on women in relation to specific sectors (e.g. trade/economic growth activities, health, agriculture, political development, media, education, civil space), and how has it affected/affects their income and livelihoods? Explain.
10. Under what circumstances should freedom of expression and association be restricted (online and offline)?
11. How can we ensure that women fully participate online (to exercise their freedoms of expression and freedom of association)? What are the mitigation measures that can help them identify, prepare and respond to **online** censorship and violence when exercising their rights on social media and other online platforms?
12. Which groups of women are mostly affected by **online** censorship and intimidation in relation to freedom of expression and freedom of association?
13. How would preventing censorship empower women (economically, socially, politically, mentally and professionally)?
14. Do you feel social media platforms have a role to play to end online censorship? What does this role look like, and which other stakeholders should be involved?
15. What is your organisation doing to help the situation? How can you be supported?

B. Interviews – Questionnaire

Demographics and internet use

1. Age range: 16-20 | 21-25 | 26-30 | 31-35 | 36-40 | 41-45 | 46-50 | above 50
2. Gender
3. Do you have access to the internet?
4. Why not? (If answer is no).
5. What do you use the internet for?
6. Which of the following social networking sites do you access?
Facebook | Twitter | Instagram | LinkedIn | TikTok | Other

Online freedom of expression/association

1. Are you aware of **online** censorship, threats and gender-based violence?
2. Have you ever experienced censorship, attacks or GBV **online** or know someone who has faced them?
3. If yes, what kind? How did you or they overcome or mitigate this?
4. Do you feel women in this country face violence when exercising their rights **online**? Especially freedom of expression and assembly? Explain.
5. Do you feel we should be concerned about **online** censorship, threats and GBV against women in this country? Why?
6. How prevalent are **online** censorship and GBV in this country?
7. Do women and men enjoy the right to freedom of expression and association **online** equally in this country?
8. Do you feel women's right to freedom of expression and association **online** is sufficiently protected in this country? Do women feel safe exercising these rights?
9. Do you feel that attacks on freedom of expression and freedom of association **online** should be punished?
10. Are you aware of the laws and policies and the protections they offer on freedom of expression and freedom of association **online**?
11. Under what circumstances should freedom of expression and association be restricted (**online and offline**)?
12. What are the most common types of **online** censorship and GBV in the DRC?

13. What are some of the side effects/impact of **online** censorship and GBV on women in relation to specific sectors (e.g. trade/economic growth activities, health, agriculture, political development, media, education, civil space), and how it affected/affects their income and livelihoods. Explain.
14. How can we ensure that women fully participate **online** (to exercise their freedoms of expression and freedom of association)? What are the mitigation measures that can help them identify, prepare and respond to online censorship and violence when exercising their rights on social media and other **online** platforms?
15. Which groups of women are mostly affected by **online** censorship and intimidation in relation to freedom of expression and freedom of association?
16. How would preventing censorship **online** empower women (economically, socially, politically, mentally and professionally?)
17. Do you feel social media platforms have a role to play to end online censorship? What does this role look like and which other stakeholders should be involved?
18. What are the digital security measures or circumvention tools or specific emergency numbers (public or private), entities or the like where you can report potential violence against your right to freedom of expression and association online based on gender?
19. Are you aware of centres or organisations that help victims or work on online GBV, and freedom of expression and association?

C. Survey – Questionnaire

Demographics

1. Age range: 16-20 | 21-25 | 26-30 | 31-35 | 36-40 | 41-45 | 46-50 | above 50
2. Gender: Male | Female | Prefer not to say
3. Province: drop-down list
4. City: Drop-down list
5. Employment status: Employed | Unemployed | Student | Other | Prefer not to say

Internet usage

1. Do you have access to the internet? Yes | No | Prefer not to say
2. Why not? Short answer (If the answer is no).
3. Why do you use the internet? (If answer is yes).
4. How often do you access the internet? Never | Sometimes | Often | Very often
5. Do you own the device? Yes | No | Prefer not to say

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6. What do you use the internet for?
 - a. Communicate
 - b. Watch videos
 - c. Post photos and videos
 - d. Read the news
 - e. Campaigning
 - f. Advertising

7. Conduct academic research:
 - a. Social media
 - b. Other

8. Which of the following social networking sites do you access?
Facebook | Twitter | Instagram | LinkedIn | TikTok | Other (tick on applicable)

9. Are you aware of **online** censorship, threats and gender-based violence?
Yes | No | Prefer not to say

10. If yes, which type
 - a. Cyberbullying
 - b. Revenge porn
 - c. Unwanted sexual remarks
 - d. Trolling
 - e. Doxxing
 - f. Cyberstalking
 - g. Website blocking
 - h. Internet shutdown
 - i. Social media block
 - j. Other

11. Do you think women in this country face violence when exercising their rights online?
Especially freedom of expression and assembly?
Yes | No | Prefer not to say

12. Do you feel women's right to freedom of expression and association online is sufficiently protected in this country? Do women feel safe exercising this right?
Yes | No | Prefer not to say

13. Do you think online censorship, intimidation and GBV against women are a big threat in this country?
Yes | No | Prefer not to say

14. Do women and men enjoy the right to freedom of expression and association **online** equally in this country?
Yes | No | Prefer not to say

15. Are you aware of the laws and policies and the protections they offer on freedom of expression and freedom of association online?
Yes | No | Prefer not to say

THE HOLISTIC APPROACH

16. Do you know of any specific emergency number (public or private), entities or such like where you can report potential violence against your right to freedom of expression and association online based on gender?
Yes | No | Prefer not to say
17. **Online** censorship and GBV in this country are common.
a. Strongly disagree
b. Disagree
c. Neutral
d. Agree
e. Strongly agree
f. Very Common | Somewhat Common | Neutral | Not Common
18. Have you ever experienced censorship, attacks or GBV online or know someone who has faced it?
Yes | No | Prefer not to say
19. If yes, which type? and how did you or they overcome or mitigate this? Long answer.
20. Do you know a politician, or a government person, or a popular public figure, or a female activist who was sexually abused online while exercising her right to freedom of expression?
Yes | No | Prefer not to say
21. Do you feel that attacks on freedom of expression and freedom of association **online** should be punished?
Yes | No | Prefer not to say
22. What are some of the side effects/impact of **online** censorship and GBV on women in relation to specific sectors (e.g. trade/economic growth activities, health, agriculture, political development, media, education, civil space) and how they affected/affect their income and livelihoods. Long answer.
23. How can we ensure that women fully participate **online** (to exercise their freedoms of expression and freedom of association)? What are the mitigation measures that can help them identify, prepare and respond to online censorship and violence when exercising their rights on social media and other **online** platforms? Long answer.
24. How would preventing censorship **online** empower women (economically, socially, politically, mentally and professionally?) Long answer.
25. Are there women's movements to raise awareness against OGBV when exercising freedom of expression and freedom of association?
Yes | No | Prefer not to say
26. How can you prevent and protect yourself from OGBV-related attacks when exercising your freedom of expression and freedom of association? Long answer.

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