

A STUDY OF TECHNOLOGY FACILITATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN SOUTHERN AFRICA



PROMOTING FREE EXPRESSION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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International Programme for the
Development of Communication



PROMOTING **FREE EXPRESSION** IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

“*WE cannot continue putting words on paper, if we are not willing to work on how they should be actioned impactfully and effectively, because then all we are doing is ticking off a checklist which says ‘we took care of the gendered element’ of the work.*”

— Reyhana Masters,
Africa Regional
Commemorations
on International
Day to End Impunity
for Crimes Against
Journalists — Victoria
Falls, Zimbabwe,
November 2022



Reyhana Masters

INDEPENDENT
COMMUNICATIONS
CONSULTANT

Freedom of expression
and access to
information advocate

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FOREWORD

ADVANCES in technology have been a blessing for democracy and active citizen participation in governance.

The internet has improved the way we communicate and facilitated access to information in a way that was unthinkable a few decades ago.

However, while democracies have been enhanced by the growth of the internet and social media, these technologies have also provided for the swelling of online attacks on journalists, particularly women media workers.

While both men and women journalists face attacks online, women journalists bear the brunt of sinister and gendered attacks, also known as technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV).

These attacks are carried out and amplified through digital spaces against a person based on gender.

The net effect of TFGBV is that women journalists are driven by online platforms and social

media.

Women journalists are often then forced to self-censor and silenced for fear of being attacked online.

This has an adverse effect on the diversity of news and access to quality information.

Unfortunately, where there are fewer women participating in online platforms, these platforms cease to be representative, negating the internet's democratic credentials.

Instead of enabling democracy, social media and the internet have become echo chambers, where a significant proportion of the population is unable to participate in debates because of the TFGBV.

This phenomenon is ever evolving and makes it difficult to monitor, document and report the violations.

Through this report, MISA, with the support of the UNESCO International Programme for the Development of

Communication (IPDC), sought to understand how widespread the issue of TFGBV is in Southern Africa and what can be done to curb the scourge.

The report notes efforts to address the scourge through continental instruments such as the African Commission for Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) Resolution on the Protection of Women Against Digital Violence in Africa.

Notably, the resolution calls on nations to “undertake measures to safeguard women journalists from digital violence”.

However, more needs to be done in that regard, with countries being encouraged to domesticate the resolution to protect women journalists online.

Globally, the statistics are staggering. It is reported that at least 73% of women journalists say they have been victims of TFGBV.

This should serve as a call to action — that more needs to be done to safeguard women journalists from TFGBV.

Through this report, MISA calls for a multi-stakeholder approach that includes governments, civic society, large online platforms, journalists, inter-governmental organisations and academia, among others, to take steps towards addressing this scourge.

This report serves as MISA and UNESCO's commitment to producing evidence-based knowledge products that can contribute to safe digital spaces.

Golden Maunganidze,

MISA Regional Chairperson



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TECHNOLOGY facilitated gender-based violence (TGBV) has become the new weapon of choice in the online space.

It is being used by an array of individuals and is being inflicted particularly viciously and consistently against women journalists.

Technology-facilitated GBV includes a variety of actions, such as stalking, bullying, sexual harassment, defamation, hate speech, and exploitation.

This form of violence may also manifest in the physical world, with victims enduring a combination of online and offline abuse, encompassing sexual and psychological harm.

However, scholarly research often focuses on singular incidents, neglecting the aggregate impact of repeated acts of violence.

Therefore it is important to understand how TGBV is manifesting in society, the frequency of incidents and who is behind the attacks.

By connecting these components, we can perceive the profound impact of this intensifying issue on the human rights on the media sector health and women journalists specifically.

Such violence endangers the safety and well-being of individuals and has detrimental effects on freedom of expression of targeted communities.

This calls for the development of more rigorous and coordinated strategies to stem this growing menace at a national, continental and global level.

It also needs sustained

willpower from media stakeholders and policymakers, who should, in turn, continually use the aspirations articulated in numerous regional and international instruments and protocols as guiding documents — more specifically, the recently introduced ACHPR Resolution 522 on the Protection of Women Against Digital Violence to ground their work.

As a media freedom advocacy organisation the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) which has chapters in the region intends to play a pivotal role in effectively mitigating against this insidious behaviour.

To play that crucial role, MISA must first acquire a comprehensive understanding of the awareness and prevalence of online violence against journalists, particularly women, in Southern Africa.

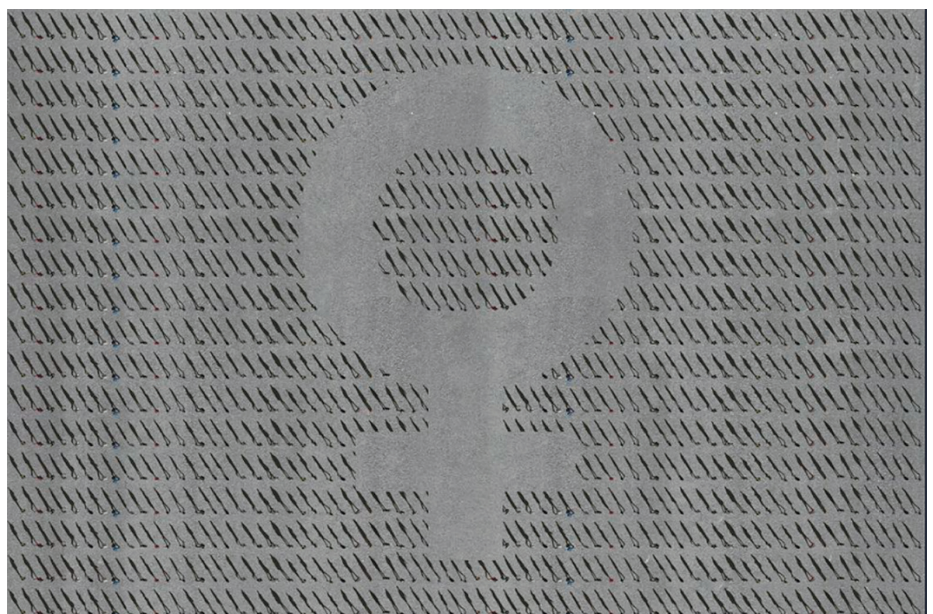
Therefore, in 2022, MISA

initiated its long-term strategy by executing an online survey.

This survey targeted media professionals within the Southern African region to gather data on the utilisation of online platforms, the nature of attacks, and their effects on female journalists.

The aim is to:

- ◆ Establish a baseline for measuring the impact;
- ◆ Use the findings to develop future advocacy actions;
- ◆ Develop effective measures to protect female journalists from digital violence;
- ◆ Develop various tools to curb the rate of technology facilitated gender based violence; and
- ◆ Guide media stakeholders in defining and monitoring online violence against journalists.



OVERVIEW

NUMEROUS milestones are being reached on the journey to gender equity and equality, even if that progress is slow and stilted and the path is strewn with hurdles.

Nowhere is the improvement more noticeable than in the most visibly influential sectors — the media and the legislature.

These male dominated spaces which have been stained in patriarchy for decades have opened up to women over the last 15 years and while the progression is slow, it has been steady.

Women parliamentarians and senators across the African continent are driving discussions and contributing to policy change.

On the media landscape, women are finally breaking through the glass ceiling and being appointed into decision making posts and even heading their own offline and online outlets. These women are positively inspiring change.

Since parliament and newsrooms are also the site of intense contestation — there is often strong pushback against the women who effectively and meaningfully contribute to policy change or the ones who shape the way we think. However, they are constantly being challenged.

While they are encouraged to be bold, to speak up and to take action, they are constantly and systematically rebuked for not conforming to what is termed ‘cultural norms’.

So the very things that are expected of them are the very things they are criticised for.

While men and in particular

journalists, are targets of hate and aggression — it is obvious that women of influence, in positions of power and the perceived voice are a vulnerable target.

Even when the online confrontation with men is aggressive, the attacks are targeted at their opinions and linked to their positions and status in society.

Very rarely are they criticised for their physical appearance nor are they judged for their personal or moral choices.

This conflicting behaviour is particularly felt by women who hold opinions and are able to powerfully convey their messages.

Perpetrators go back default setting resulting in women facing a barrage of criticism.

They are pulled apart if the sentiment they articulate goes against influential personalities, is critical of those in authority or expose corruption through their work.

That condemnation is never aimed at their policy position — instead they are viciously taken apart for the way they look, the way they dress or the way they talk.

Women are reduced to sexual objects and in many instances, culture and tradition are used as a tool of subjugation.

Coupled with the growing culture of impunity — the online space has become a place where freedom of expression is being manipulated and used by online users to spew prejudice inherent in patriarchal societal settings.

Since attacks can occur

under the cover of anonymity, it prevents offenders from facing consequences which emboldens them and feeds into patriarchal and misogynistic notion that it is acceptable to prey on women online.

This offline behaviour translates more aggressively online. What happens offline is enhanced and deepened when it transcends onto the online space.

The exclusion from spheres of influence for so long, means women have not sufficiently sharpened their ability to withstand the pressures that come from being in these spaces

It also means that being barred for so long and knowing they are open to being labelled and castigated for exercising voice and agency, forces many of these women to approach online platforms spaces warily.

This offline behaviour translates more aggressively online. What happens offline is enhanced and deepened when it transcends onto the online space.

Therefore, it is crucial that any strategy designed to curb TGBV is underpinned by the critical understanding that what is offline moves online and comes back online — as part of cycle.

Approaching it with a ferris wheel design plan is needed for initiatives to deal with online violence against women.

It also has to build on activities already being implemented to deal with the growing levels of sexual harassment and gender based violence offline. Our mistake in advocating for change is to see it and treat it as a singular compartmentalised issue.

METHODOLOGY

THIS paper documents the challenges faced by women journalists in Southern Africa as they dispatch their professional duties.

This study is informed by an online survey undertaken by the MISA regional office to gather data on the use of online platforms, types of attacks and impact of those attacks on women journalists in Southern Africa.

This survey will assist in:

1. Guiding media stakeholders in developing a clear definition for the categorisation of online violence.

This will be used to advocate for the inclusion of the monitoring of online violence against journalists and in particular women journalists;

2. The development of tools and strategies to assist female journalists, media institutions and policy makers in developing coping mechanisms to deal with the impact of online attacks;

3. Strategies to reduce digital attacks on female journalists on a sustained and long term basis.

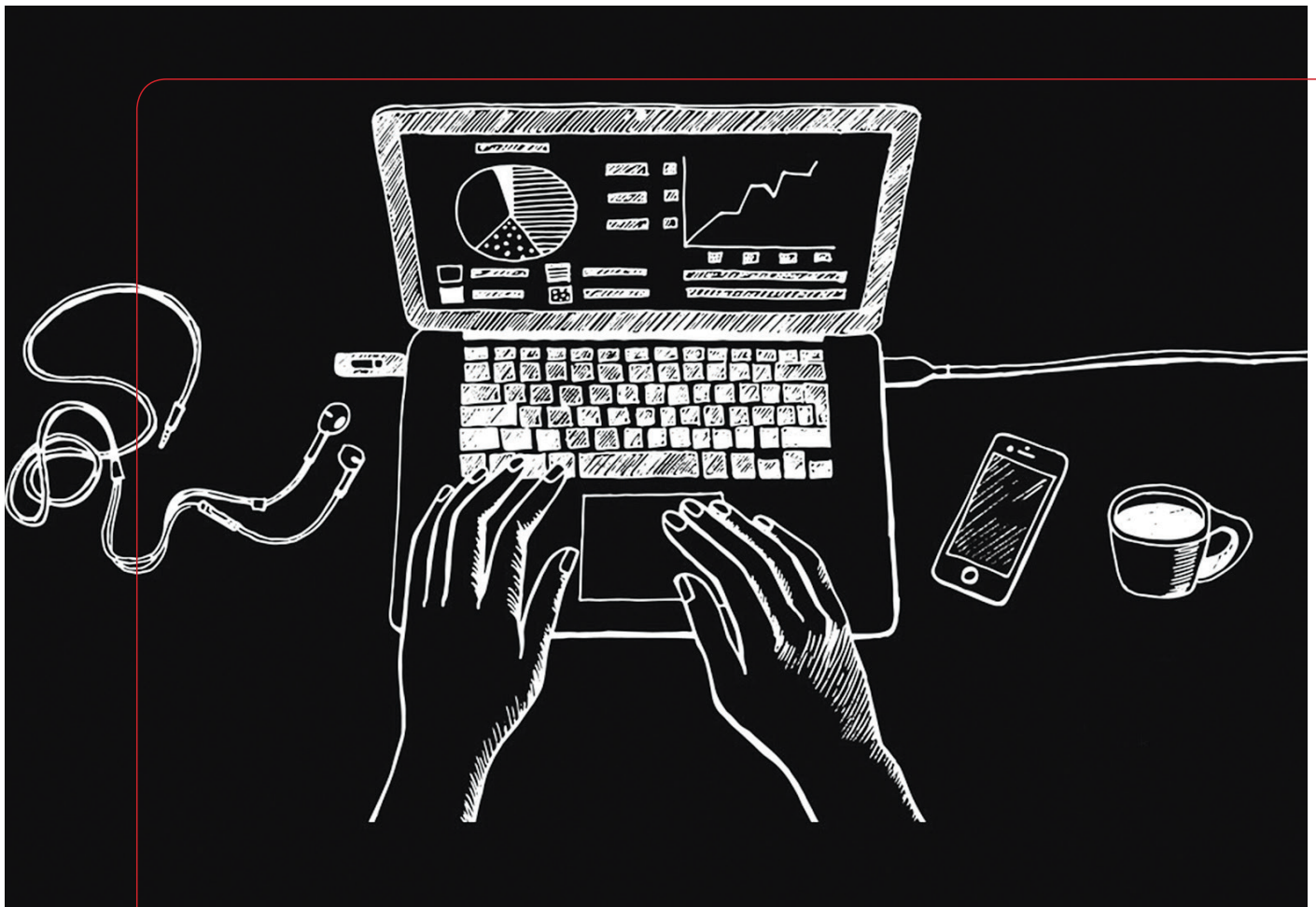
The study made an attempt to explore the definition of

cyberviolence and the extent of the harm its causes.

Three levels of harm were identified; severe, pervasive and online.

It managed to identify other nuances which include astroturfing, concern trolling, outrage/shame, cyberstalking and deep fake which are all explained in the study.

It goes further highlight examples and testimonies of online abuse from the region which provided empirical data on the impact of cyber violence on women journalists.



DEFINING CYBER VIOLENCE

AS PEN America points out: “The first step to combatting online abuse is developing a shared language to identify and describe it.” (source).

The terms most widely used are cyberbullying, cyber violence, online harassment or online abuse with the most preferred terms being online harassment or online abuse.

Sadly though, none of these terms actually speak to the harm that is inflicted upon the women who are on the receiving end of these attacks.

The definition used by the Council of Europe describes cyber violence as: “The use of computer systems to cause, facilitate, or threaten violence against individuals, that results in (or is likely to result in) physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering and may include the exploitation of the individual’s circumstance, characteristics or vulnerabilities.” — **Council of Europe: Cyberviolence**

PEN America prefers the terms online harassment or online abuse, which it defines as the “pervasive or severe targeting of an individual or group online through harmful behaviour.” — **PEN America: Defining “Online Abuse”: A Glossary of Terms**

◆ Severe because even a single incident of online abuse, such as a death threat or the publishing of a home address, can have serious consequences.

◆ Pervasive because, while some individual incidents of online abuse, such as insults or spam, may not rise to the level of abuse, a steady drumbeat of incidents, or a coordinated onslaught, does.

◆ Online includes email, social media platforms (such as X, formerly **Twitter**, **Facebook**, **Instagram**, and **TikTok**), messaging apps (such as **Facebook Messenger** and **WhatsApp**), blogging platforms (such as **Medium**, **Tumblr**, and

WordPress), and comments sections (on digital media, personal blogs, **YouTube** pages, and **Amazon** book reviews).

Astroturfing

Astroturfing is the dissemination or amplification of content (including abuse) that appears to arise organically at the grassroots level and spread, but is actually coordinated (often using multiple fake accounts) by an individual, interest group, political party, or organisation.

Concern trolling

Abusers pose as fans or supporters of a target’s work and make harmful and demeaning messages comments masked as constructive feedback.

Outrage/Shame mobs

A form of mob justice focused on publicly exposing, humiliating, and punishing a target, often for expressing opinions on politically charged topics or ideas the outrage mob disagrees with and/or has taken out of context in order to promote a particular agenda.

Cyberstalking

In a legal context, “cyberstalking” is the prolonged and repeated use of abusive behaviours online intended “to, injure, harass, intimidate, or place under surveillance with intent to, injure, harass, or intimidate” a target.

Deepfake

Definition: The use of “a form of artificial intelligence called deep learning” to make manufactured images, audio, and/or video that appear real.

These images, audio, and/or video are “mimicking speech or facial expressions so as to make it appear that someone has said or done something they haven’t.”



REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS PROTECTING FREE SPEECH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

OVER the past two decades, countries in Southern Africa have enacted progressive legislation that promotes freedom of expression and of the media.

This has been further buttressed by the introduction of access to information laws that have further enhanced freedom of expression and of the media.

In 2020, Zimbabwe repealed the much-reviled Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), which was replaced by the Freedom of Information Act.

In the same year, Malawi's Access to Information Act belatedly came into law, heralding what seemed to be a new era, where access to information was recognised as a cornerstone of freedom of expression.

However, while Zimbabwe and Malawi enacted what seemed to be progressive laws, countries such as Botswana, Namibia and Zambia are yet to enact access to information laws.

In Namibia, a bill has been presented to the legislature and the country is moving ever so slowly towards enacting the law.

The change of government in Zambia gave hope that an access to information law — a bill had previously been tabled in the legislature — would soon be enacted, however, more than a year since coming into power, the United Party for National Development (UPND) is yet to make good on its promise of coming up with access to

information legislation.

While countries in the Southern African region seemed to be making progress in coming up with progressive laws that promoted access to information and freedom of expression legislation, there were signs that this progress could be derailed.

In August 2020, a Southern African Development Community (SADC) Heads of State and Government ordinary summit resolved to take preemptive measures against external interference, the impact of fake news and abuse of social media particularly in electoral processes.

While ideally, this resolution was meant to mitigate the impact of misinformation and disinformation, the flip side is that soon there was a flurry of new legislation that had the potential of infringing on freedom of expression particularly online.

In April 2021, Zambia hurriedly enacted its Cyber Security and Cyber Crimes Act.

There was fear that the new law, would be used to muzzle the media and the right to privacy.

One of the main concerns was that when it came to the interception of communication, a private citizen has no right to be notified by either a law enforcement officer or service provider that they are being investigated or that communication to which they are a party is being intercepted and transferred to the centre.

In addition, the Act empowers a cyber inspector to, with a warrant at any reasonable time and without prior notice, access and inspect the operation of any computer or equipment forming part of an information system and any associated apparatus or material which the cyber inspector has reasonable cause to believe is, or has been used in, connection with any offence.

This is particularly chilling for privacy and whistleblowers, which in addition affects the operations of the media, as very few people would be willing to pass on information to journalists.

In response to the enactment of the Cyber Security and Cyber Crimes Act, MISA said: “The enactment of the Cyber Security and Cyber Crimes Act has a chilling effect on freedom of expression, media freedom and Zambians’ right to privacy. The Act falls far short of regional and international standards and instruments on human rights such as the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection (Malabo Convention), which sets the standards for cybersecurity and personal data protection laws as well as capacity building, knowledge exchanges and experience sharing among signatories.”

Right on the coattails of the Zambian legislation, in December 2021, Zimbabwe's President Emmerson Mnangagwa signed into law the Cyber and Data Protection Act.

Among other things, the law seeks to deal with the publishing

of falsehoods.

However, this has seen a number of journalists falling foul of the legislation.

Alpha Media Holdings editor-in-chief Wisdom Mdzungairi and senior reporter Desmond Chingarande were on 3 August 2022 charged for allegedly publishing falsehoods.

Hopewell Chizuzu, a freelance journalist, faces similar charges.

The Cyber and Data Protection criminalises the publication of falsehoods despite a Constitutional Court ruling in 2013 that ruled the criminalisation of the publication of falsehoods had a chilling effect on freedom of expression.

The Constitutional Court ruled that Section 31(a)(iii) of the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act contravened the

Constitution.

The COVID-19 pandemic further muddied the waters in terms of freedom of expression and of the media in Southern Africa, with a number of countries coming up with legislation that criminalised the publication of falsehoods.

South Africa was the first to promulgate fake news regulations, with the rest of the region following suit.

This is regardless of the fact that the regulations were in most instances in contravention of national constitutions.

While governments have enacted cybercrime legislation that effectively impacts on freedom of expression and in some instances criminalises journalism, there is generally a dearth in legislation that focuses on online gender-based violence in Southern Africa.

Moreso, there are lack of laws that focus on protecting female journalists online.

Cyber security laws are often vague and do not adequately cover the issue of online gender-based violence.

However, during the course of this study a seminal resolution was passed by the African Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR) on online gender-based violence.

While most legal and policy frameworks are broad in terms of wording and what protections they offer, Resolution 522 is notable as it specifically mentions female journalists.

Amidst numerous points, the resolution calls on states to: "Undertake measures to safeguard women journalists from digital violence, including gender-sensitive media literacy and digital security training; Repeal vague and overly wide laws on surveillance, as they contribute to the existing vulnerability of female journalists."

The United Nations Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity also provides for the protection of journalists both offline and online.

While these frameworks are not legally binding, there is scope for these instruments to be adopted into national laws and be the benchmarks by which journalists, in particular female journalists are protected.

All the Southern African countries have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

While the convention is broad, its provisions can be used in an effort to combat online gender-based violence.



**DESMOND
Chingarande**

DOCUMENTATION OF ATTACKS ON FEMALE JOURNALISTS

ONE of the main issues that invalidates the collection of data on online gender-based violence is that there is a general lack of a standardised approach.

As Free Press Unlimited (FPU), quoting CFOM point out, existing shadow monitoring under SDG 16.10 is patchy.

Many CSOs lack the means and capacity for systematic data collection, enabling comparisons.

What may be deemed as a violation in one country may not be seen as such in another.

In many cases, the attacks on female journalists are often gendered and sexual in nature and for this reason, some may not be comfortable in reporting them.

MISA — with all its chapters in Southern Africa — is the only organisation that monitors attacks on journalists in the region and this is mainly based on Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 16.10.

However, there is need for a deliberate approach in specifically documenting attacks on female journalists.

FPU further postulates that collecting data on the violations against media workers is a first step towards creating safer working conditions in which they can fulfil their job of providing citizens with reliable information.

Gathering data helps to paint a picture of the safety situation in a country, to track the gaps in the

laws and the implementation thereof, and to follow trends.

The analysis of the data can shape advocacy efforts and recommendations on the development of better laws, procedures and mechanisms geared towards the protection of journalists.

Freedom Forum also adds that data on the violations against journalists is a strong source and basis for advocacy.

It is hoped that this report may begin a wider debate on standardisation of monitoring, reporting and documenting online gender-based violence.

SHARE Foundation, for example, monitors online violations and media support organisations in Southern Africa could adopt that example, with particular emphasis on attacks on female journalists.

Hindustan Times of India also has an interesting idea on monitoring and documenting attacks of female journalists online.

Under their “Let’s talk about trolls” publication has an interactive platform where it monitors attacks on prominent

women in real-time.

The platform is based on **X** (formerly **Twitter**) and monitors attacks on four women.

The data was then categorised into five categories — political, religious, racial, sexual and violent.

Such kind of documentation provides a platform for advocacy for the improvement of the safety of female journalists online.

These are examples that Southern African media support organisations can learn from.

It is important to reiterate that there is scant data collection and gathering in Southern Africa on attacks on female journalists.

But there is anecdotal evidence that shows that online gender-based violence is prevalent in the region.

Using the reported examples, journalists, media support organisations, the academia and authorities could use this as a springboard to demand legislative reforms from their respective governments and social media platforms.

BOTSWANA

IN 2020, Yvonne Mooka, a female investigative journalist with the **Botswana Guardian** was trolled and harassed online for her exposé of a prophet who was allegedly involved in corrupt activities such as money laundering.

Such kind of attacks are rare on male journalists, as attacks tend to focus on their professionalism and are not trolled to that extent.

It was noted that Botswana media houses do not have

gender policies, which has further normalised online gender-based violence and stereotypes against female journalists.

A World Association of News Publishers report said gender representation in newsrooms in Botswana has hardly improved in the past decade.

From the editorial leadership of nine mainstream newspapers, only two women — the editor of **The Voice** and managing editor of **Weekend**

Post — are in positions of power and influence.

The work environment is generally not conducive for women, accentuated by low salaries and misconceptions of labeling women as “lazy” and unable to take on certain tasks.

Female journalists are often relegated to entertainment reporting, while their male colleagues are assigned politics and investigative segments.

Female journalists who disregard these stereotypes and attempt to thrive in the male dominated sectors are more often castigated than their male counterparts.

In another case, in 2019 at the height of electioneering, a Member of Parliament for Selibe Phikwe West, Dithapelo Koorapetse was accused by the media union of cyberbullying a female reporter, Tirelo Ditshipi.

During a public spat with another journalist, Philemon Mmeso, who is also Ditshipi’s husband, Koorapetse shared the female journalist’s pictures on social media platforms, ridiculing her.

Koorapetse’s party president refused to call the MP to order, saying Ditshipi was “collateral damage”.

A report by Gender Links, quotes a study by **Mmegi**, a Botswana publication, which found that cyber bullying was on the increase, particularly targeting celebrities.

As with most countries in Southern Africa, there are no official police records of cases that have been reported.

This makes prosecution on cases of online gender-based violence almost impossible.



YVONNE Mooka

MALAWI

STUDIES in Malawi have shown that cases of online gender-based violence are often as a result of what would have happened offline.

In one instance, quoted by the **State of Press Freedom in Southern Africa Report**, in 2019, Malawian **WhatsApp** groups were awash with a video of a woman who was being stripped naked by men for wearing political party regalia.

The woman was stripped naked and ridiculed by men from an opposing political party.

The men were eventually

arrested and charged for insulting the modesty of a woman, robbery, and use of force under the Penal Code.

It is important to point out that the provisions of the Penal Code that were used in this case were drafted in 1930.

Section 37 of the Penal Code state that: “Whoever, intending to insult the modesty of any woman, utters any word, makes any sound or gesture, or exhibits any object intending that such word or sound shall be heard, or that such gesture or object shall be seen, by such woman, shall be guilty of a misdemeanour and shall be liable for imprisonment for one

year.”

While not quite explicit, this law could be used to prosecute online gender-based violence.

This provides a platform for which Malawi could build on its laws to provide for an improvement in the safety of female journalists online.

Official statistics on online cases of online gender-based violence in Malawi, like most countries in Southern Africa, are hard to come by.

But a study on cyber violence against women in Malawi is instructive on understanding the landscape in that country.

Women’s experience(s) of gender-based cyber violence	Frequency (multiple response)	Percentage
Cyber harassment	51	76.1
Cyber bullying	56	83.6
Cyber stalking (e.g. false accusations, threats, etc)	62	92.5
Online hate speech	31	46.3
Online sexual exploitation	48	71.6
Non-consensual pornography	36	53.7
Online defamation	29	43.3
Others	13	19.4

While survey is not specific to female journalists, it acts as a microcosm of the general landscape in that country.

Such data helps in understanding the nature of online gender-based violence, with the findings being extrapolated to female journalists.

MOZAMBIQUE

FATIMA Mimbire, a female researcher and human rights defender received death threats via **Facebook**.

The threat began after she

took up an active role in the Centre for Public Integrity's (CIP) campaign against the Mozambique government seeking to repay loans it acquired illegally and secretly.



FATIMA
Mimbire

There was a smear campaign aimed at Fátima on social media in an attempt to further intimidate her and delegitimise her work.

The campaign against Mimbire was vile, with allegations that she was in inappropriate relations with funding partners.

Following the threats, the online publication, Club of Mozambique began an online petition seeking the intervention of the country's President Felipe Nyusi.

The smear campaign followed exposure of inappropriate expenditure by the government.

The petition sought to have the President reiterate his and the country's commitment to freedom of expression and to ensure Mimbire's safety.

NAMIBIA

THE NBC journalist Blanche Goroses suffered violent rape and murder threats online following the 2019 general elections.

Namibia has one of the freest

media environments in the world and the Goroses case sparked organisations to take action.

The Internet Society (Namibia Chapter) was at the forefront of

raising awareness on the issue.

The **State of Press Freedom in Southern Africa Report** also documented a case where a female journalist reported incidents where images of empty coffins were sent to her on **Facebook Messenger** after her newspaper published an article she wrote.

The ISOC campaign, which also included female media workers and celebrities saw victims of online gender-based violence recounting their experiences, with most testimonies reflecting on how the comments were derogatory about the females' bodies or sexuality and this had forced them to reduce their online presence.



BLANCHE
Goroses

ZIMBABWE

THE past two years have seen an exponential growth in the use of online technologies in Zimbabwe, but this comes at a cost, as cases of online gender-based violence targeting female journalists have also spiked.

In September 2020, an X (formerly **Twitter**) account reportedly belonging to a senior Zimbabwean government official dismissed a report from South Africa Broadcasting Corporation reporter Sophie Mokoena by saying: “If I respond to this fool, I will trigger her menstrual cycle.”

The X (formerly **Twitter**) account (Jamwanda2) has since been suspended for online bullying.

In January 2021, Mokoena was also the subject of attacks from former Zanu PF director for information, Tafadzwa Mugwadi, who called her “an embattled marriage wrecker in newsrooms”, an “urchin”, a “little girl”, “a concubine” of a senior ANC leader.

Mugwadi also accused Mokoena of dating one of Zimbabwe’s former cabinet ministers who had fled to South Africa.

Female journalist Ruvheneko Parirenyatwa and media personality Samantha Musa (MisRed) have been bullied online.

Most cases of online gender-based violence centre around sexual coercion and extortion, emotional blackmailing, cyber bullying, verbal attacks and defamation of character.



**RUVHENEKO
Parirenyatwa**

*Online violence is the new
frontline in journalism
safety and . . .*

*“Women journalists sit
at the epicentre of risk.
Networked misogyny and
gaslighting intersect with
racism, religious bigotry,
homophobia and other
forms of discrimination
to threaten women
journalists — severely and
disproportionately.”*

*The Chilling,
UNESCO and ICFJ study*

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY TO THE RESEARCH

AN online survey confined to those working in the media sector, was undertaken by the regional office of MISA to:

- ◆Gather data on the usage of online platforms, types of attacks and the impact of those attacks on female women journalists and

- ◆Gain an understanding on the awareness and extent of online based violence targeting female journalists in Southern Africa.

This was done with the aim of:

- ◆Providing MISA with a baseline from which to measure the impact of advocacy actions to follow;

- ◆Using the survey findings to undertake impactful and

effective measures to safeguard female women journalists from digital violence, including gender-sensitive media literacy and digital security training;

- ◆Assisting in developing tools and strategies to assist female journalists developing coping mechanisms to deal with the impact of online attacks;

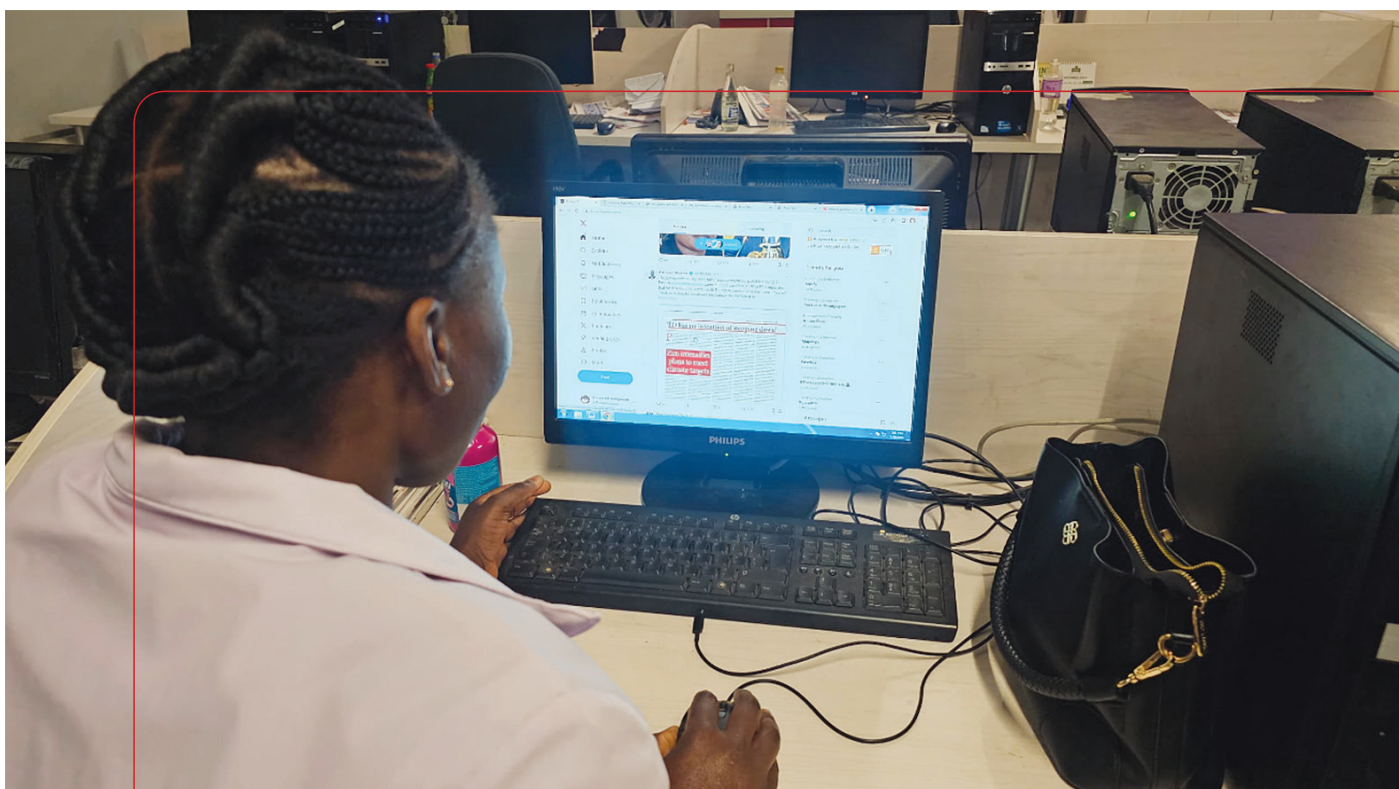
- ◆Working on reducing digital attacks on female journalists in the long term; and

- ◆Guiding media stakeholders in developing a clear definition for the categorisation of online violence, which in turn will be used to advocate for the inclusion of the monitoring of online violence against journalists and in particular women journalists.

To understand the nature of attacks that female journalists face online, an online survey was carried out.

The online survey is anchored on the second recommendation made to Member States in the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights Resolution 522 on the Protection of Women Against Digital Violence in Africa.

The findings from this survey, together with subsequent follow up actions and advocacy strategies, will feed into the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issues of Impunity, which highlights the 4 Ps — Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Partnerships.



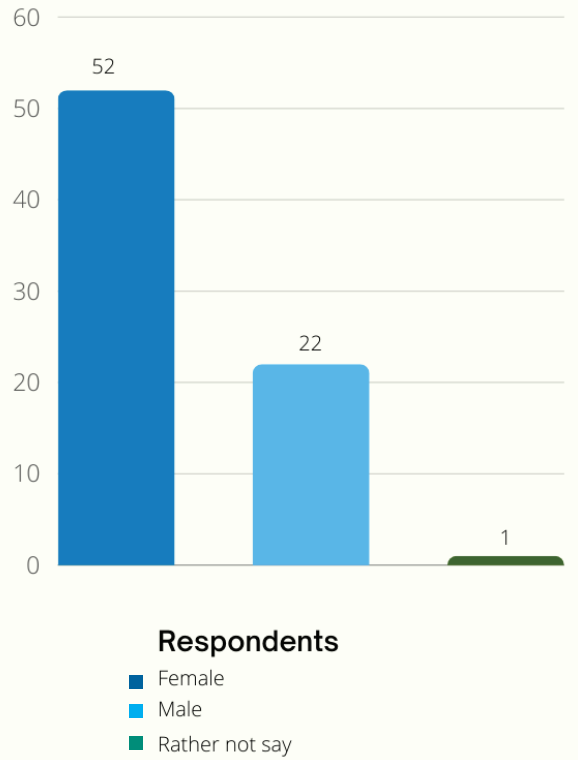
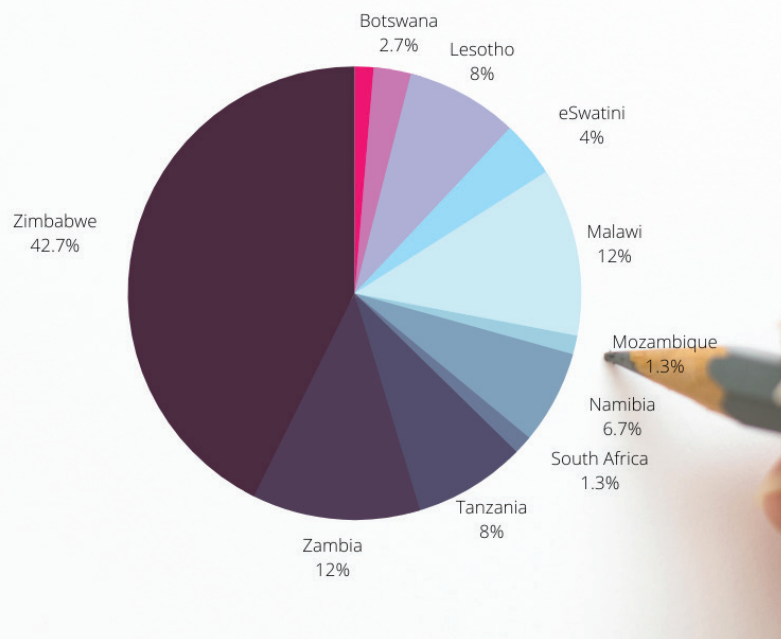
DATA ANALYSIS

THE online survey carried out during September and October 2022 was against the backdrop of the growing number of insults, attacks, threats and doxing of journalists in the southern African region.

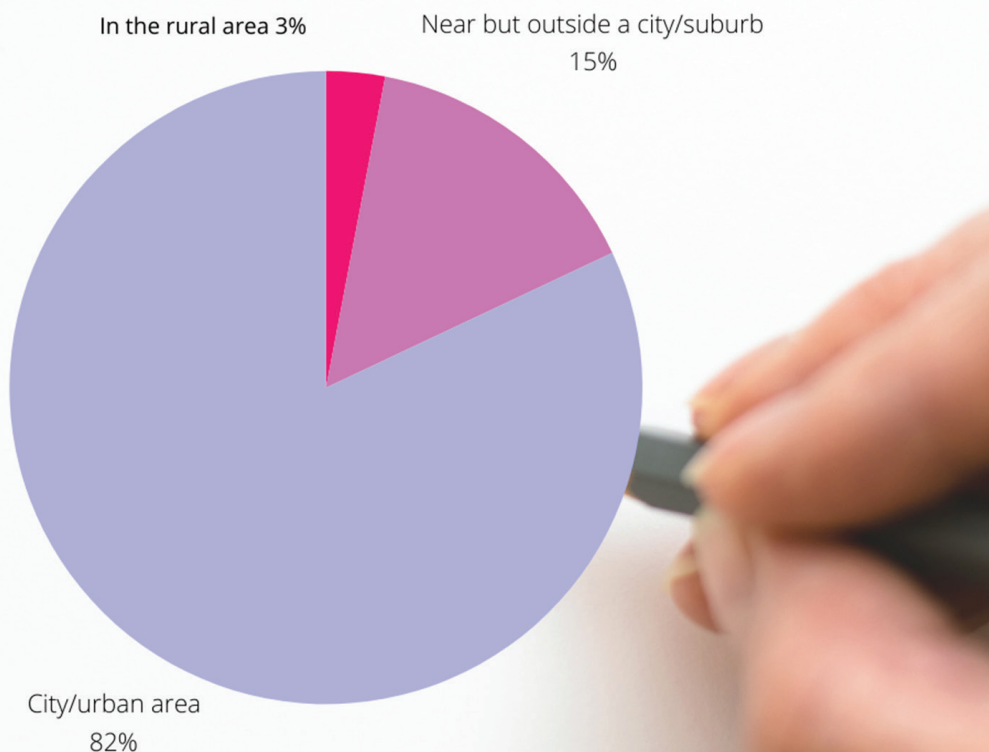
It was conducted in 11 SADC countries with 75 respondents, 22 of whom were men, 52 women and 1 respondent who preferred not to say.

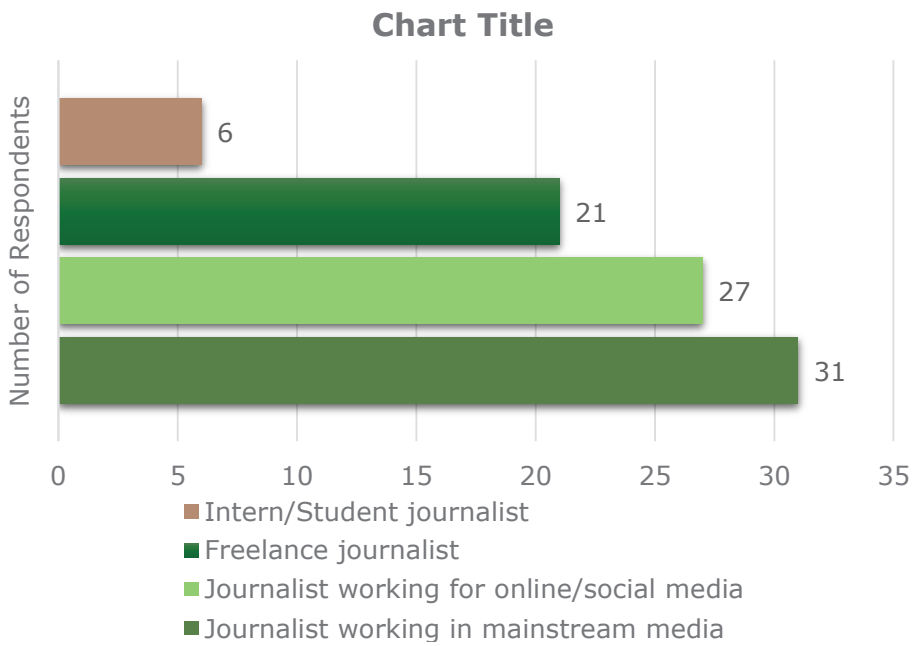
Sixty two of the respondents (87%) live in a city, while 11 respondents reside just outside the city and 2 are based in a rural area.

In which country do you live/work?



COMMUNITIES IN WHICH YOU LIVE

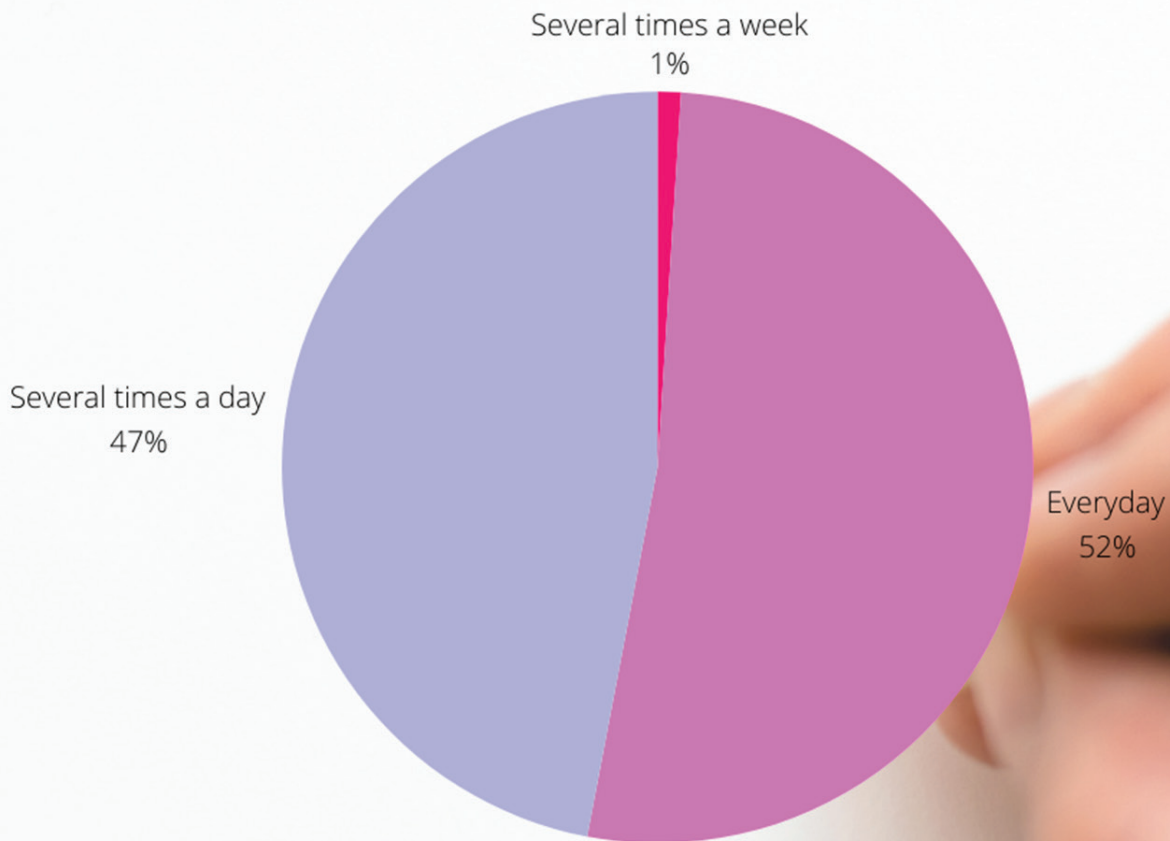




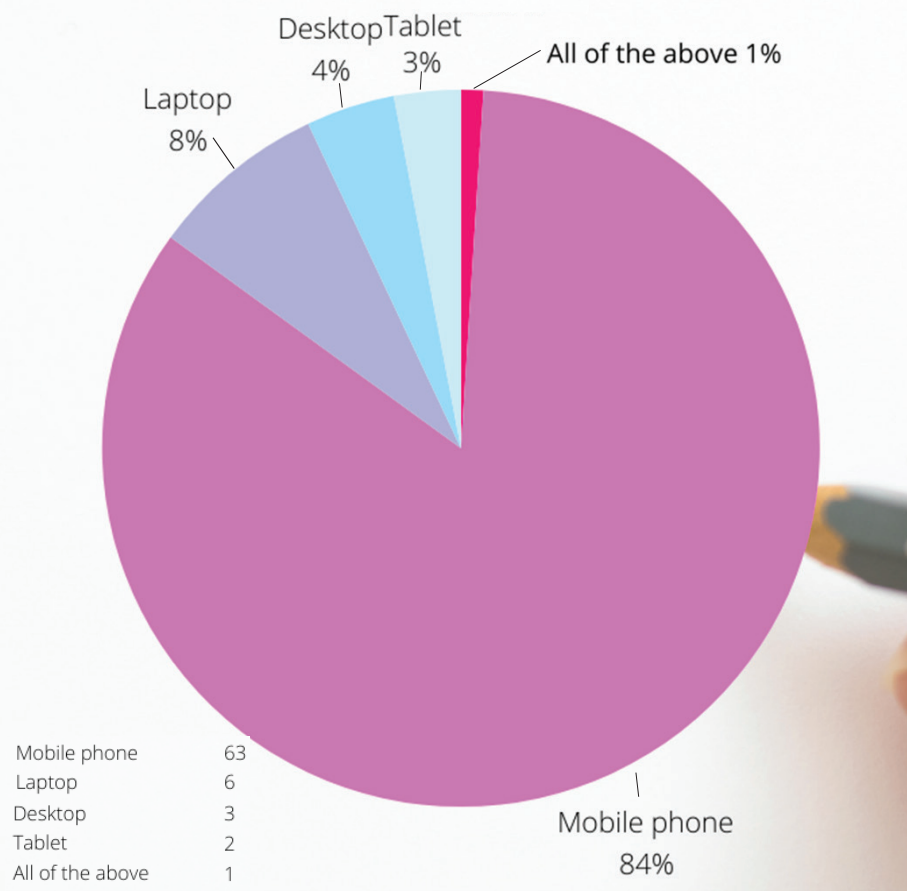
It was evenly spread out in terms of the sectors, with

- ◆ 31 journalists work in mainstream media.
- ◆ 27 work for online media
- ◆ 21 working as freelance journalists.
- ◆ The remaining 6 were students or interns.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU USE THE INTERNET



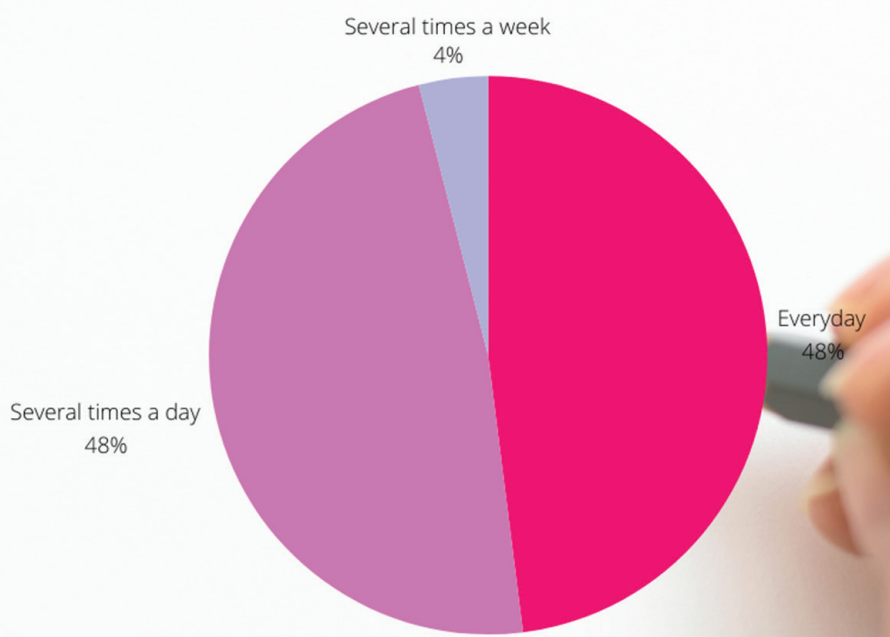
GADGET USED TO ACCESS THE INTERNET



It is interesting to note that:

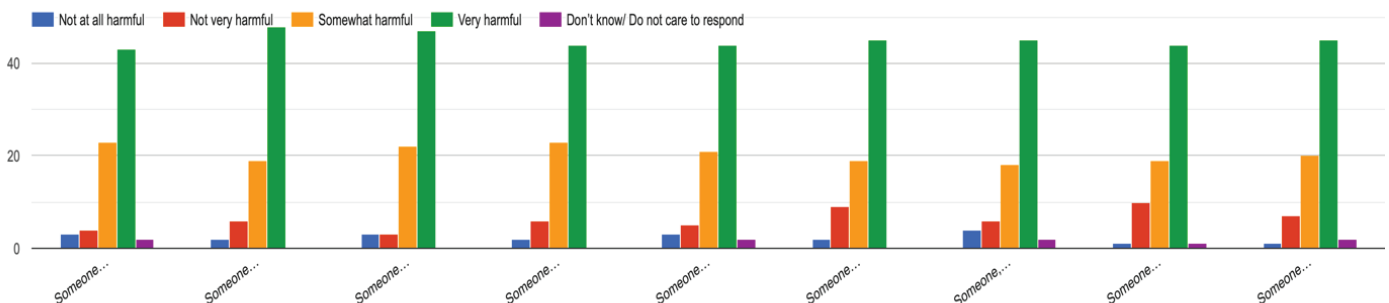
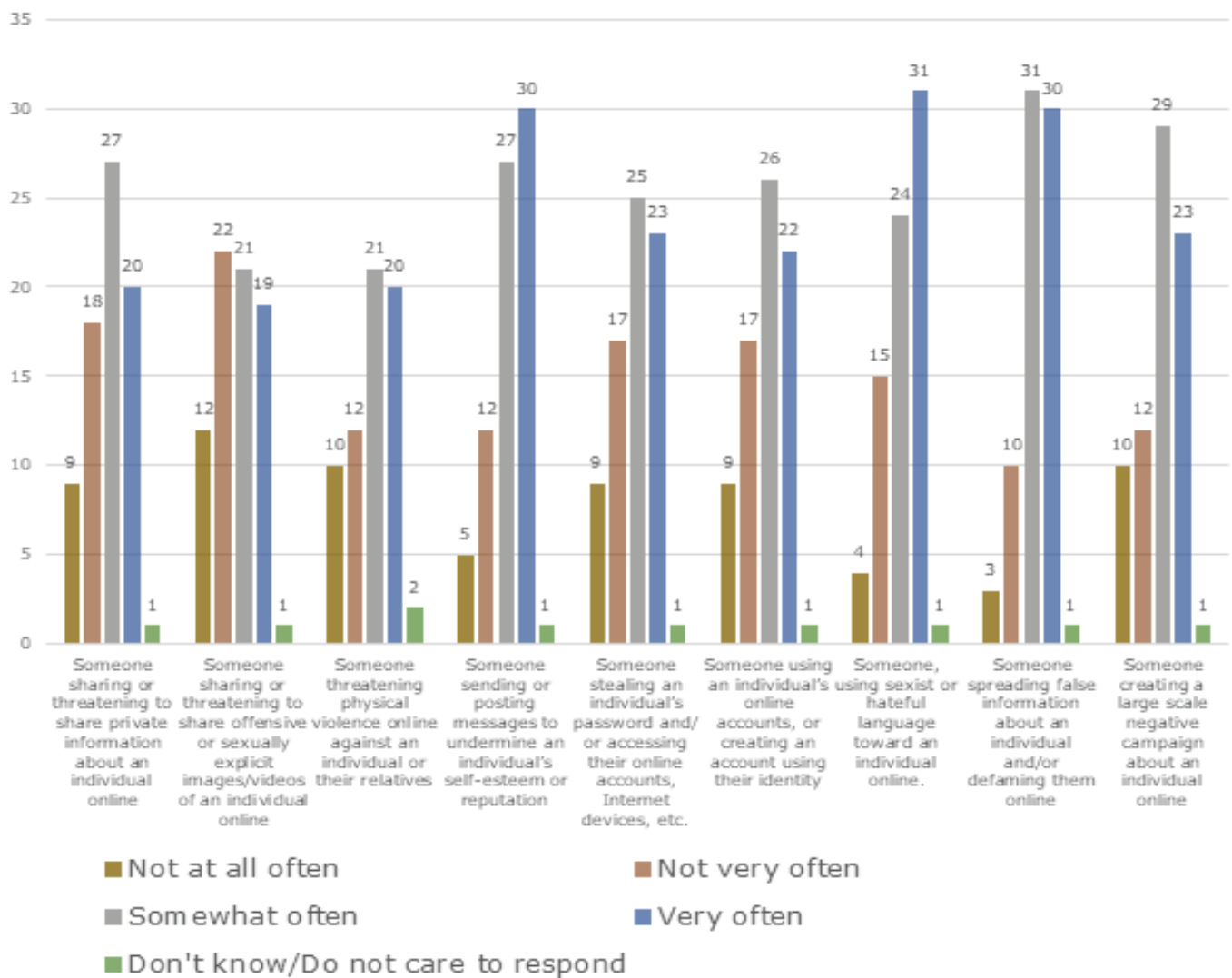
- ◆87% of the respondents go online using their mobile phones.
- ◆57% of the respondents — accessed the internet while at work.
- ◆52% (39) of the journalists access the internet every day.
- ◆46% of the respondents go online several times a day.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU USE THE INTERNET TO ACCESS SOCIAL MEDIA OR SOCIAL NETWORKING PLATFORMS?



It is apparent that social media platforms are a part of people's everyday lives as 96% — (72) of the respondents access **Facebook**, **X** (formerly **Twitter**), **WhatsApp**, **LinkedIn**, **Snapchat** and other such platforms on a daily basis, either once or several times a day.

How often do you believe female journalists are targeted online through the following behaviours?



The survey contained six significant questions relating to harmful behaviours, the platforms on which they occur and the impact on women journalists engaging on social media.

There is a heightened awareness of the fact that women journalists are specifically targeted by harmful online behaviours.

Undermining their self-esteem or harming their reputation was seen as a rather common and harmful online behaviour that women journalists face rather often.

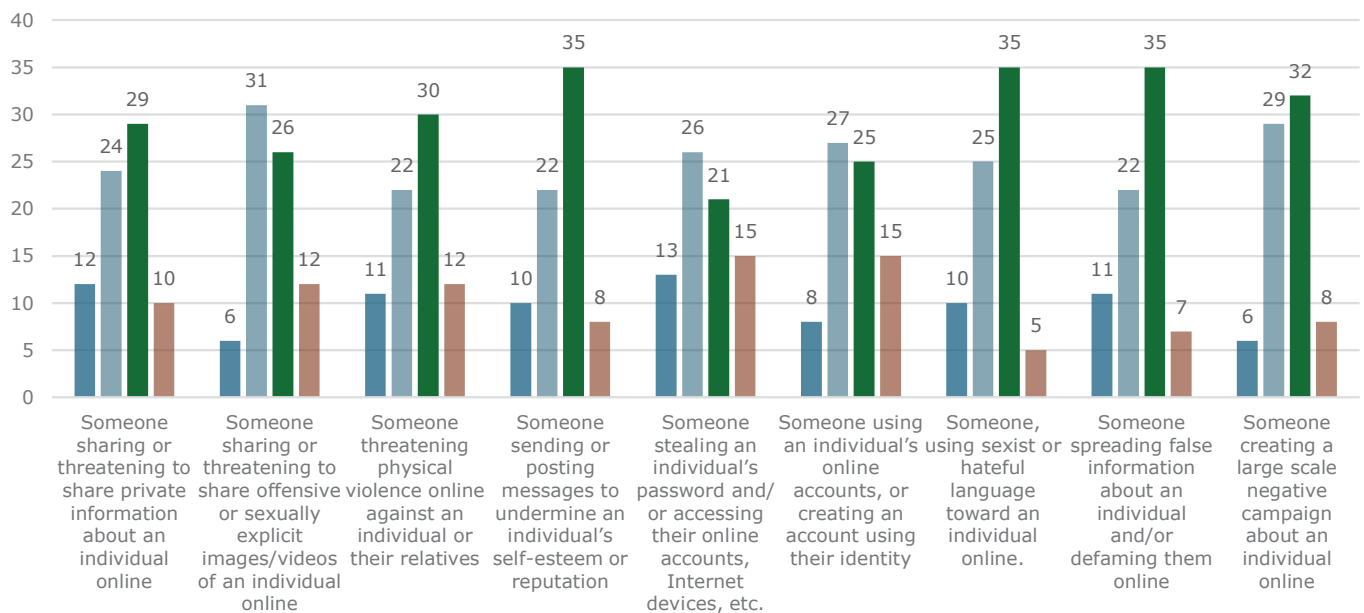
◆31 respondents felt that women journalists are threatened with physical violence rather often.

◆Cybercrime also seems to

an issue as 31 respondents said they knew someone who had their password stolen or their online accounts and in some cases internet devices had been accessed.

◆32 respondents had very often witnessed the use of sexist or hateful language towards an individual online, while 30 had witnessed it quite often.

In the last 12 months, to what extent have you personally experienced and/or witnessed the following behaviours used to target female journalists online?



- Have personally experienced it
- Know someone who was targeted
- Have witnessed it happening online to someone
- Have neither experienced/witnessed it happening or Don't know

FROM the responses, it is noticeable that the online attacks are centred around unwanted sexual remarks, non-consensual posting of sexual media content, threats, harassment, and gender-based discriminatory memes and posts among other things.

◆12 women had personally faced the threat of having private information shared

about them.

◆A staggering 31 respondents knew people who had experienced the threat of having sexually explicit videos or images shared.

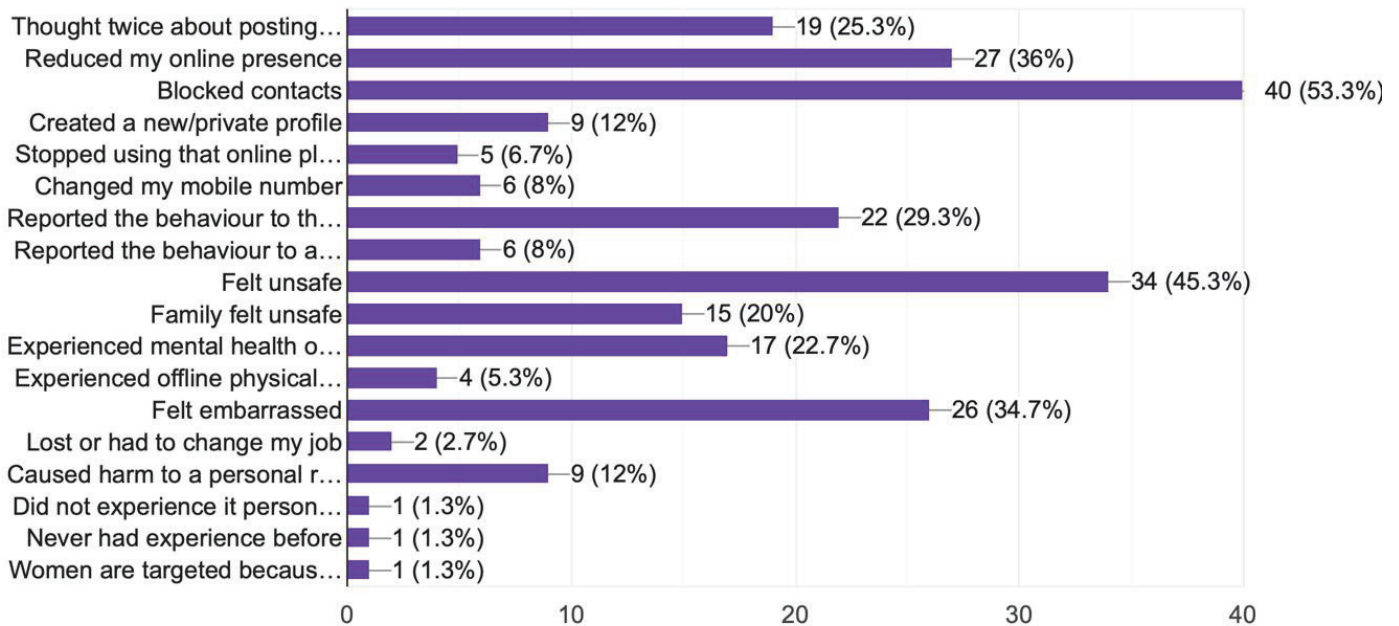
◆One third of the respondents (25) knew someone being threatened with physical violence online.

◆Thirty three respondents knew someone sending or posting messages to undermine an individual's self-esteem or reputation.

The aim is to nullify the power and influence of women, while endorsing the view that they do not belong in powerful public spheres.

What were the most significant impacts, if any, resulting from your experience(s) with these behaviours? Select all that apply.

75 responses



When asked about the most significant impact of these behaviours,

◆19 of the respondents said it made them think twice about

posting again.

◆27 of the journalists said they reduced their online presence.

◆34 respondents said they felt unsafe.

◆17 respondents said they experienced mental health problems or emotional harm.



IMPACT OF ONLINE ATTACKS

ONLINE attacks have real-life impacts affecting the mental health and productivity of even the most experienced veteran journalists.

As world renowned South African journalist and newspaper editor Ferial Haffajee once explained:

“Every morning, I pick up my phone and check **WhatsApp** messages. Then, I open my **X** (formerly **Twitter**) feed. “Bitch!” reads a response to something I’ve posted or written or reported. I block. “Cunt,” reads another. Block. “Racist, go back home,” says another.

Online abuse has become so commonplace that taking it in and blocking is part of the daily routine now.” (Source)

This is in line with the Article 19 and African Media Women in Kenya Digital Security 2016 report which explains how:

“Digital harassment leads

to women withdrawing from the use of the internet and in many cases they have stopped working for some time. It has also changed the patterns of online interaction by women.”

It also effectively censors women—not just in suppressing their words, but also goes as far as restricting their actions and interactions.

◆ They overthink their engagement on social media platforms — often choosing not to engage or they limit their inaction.

◆ The diminished presence on these platforms — reduces their interface with public opinions, perceptions and newsworthy issues.

◆ It paves the way for a dominant patriarchal narratives further perpetuating misogyny.

It is critical to note that in the last survey question on the

impact of online violence:

◆ 22 respondents reported the behaviour to the online platform.

With this in mind it is to be noted that **The Chilling** pointed out how the most common platforms where female journalists face online violence are **Facebook** — the most frequently used platform, network or app for journalistic work — closely followed by **X**.

However, it has been determined that social media companies lack gender-sensitive or human-focused solutions to online attacks on female journalists.

At the same time they lack the ability to respond in real time as well as the capacity to respond in all the languages that their platforms allow.

In their submission to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Pursuant to Human Rights Council Resolution 32/13 on ways to bridge the gender digital divide from a human rights perspective, the Due Diligence Project (DDP) points out: “cessation of online violence and restoration of privacy can only be provided by internet intermediaries and platform providers.”

DDP recommends:

“Intermediaries should seek to empower users to work through hotlines, awareness raising and education. Complaints and remedies should be archived. Intermediary corporations must recognise violence against women as unlawful behaviour, and demonstrate increased and expedited cooperation in providing relief to victim/survivors within the corporations’ capacities. . .”



RECOMMENDATIONS

THE findings call for the development of more rigorous and coordinated strategies to stem this growing menace at a national, continental and global level.

It also needs sustained willpower from media stakeholders and policymakers, who should in turn, continually use the aspirations articulated in numerous regional and international instruments and protocols as guiding documents — more specifically, the recently introduced ACHPR Resolution 522 on the Protection of Women Against Digital Violence to ground their work.

A starting point for the work undertaken should:

◆Ensure stakeholders underpin their work with national, regional and continental policy frameworks enhancing the rights of women.

◆Ensure stakeholders carry

out a review of legislative frameworks in the region and their effectiveness in relation to protection and curbing of technology facilitated gender based violence.

◆Ensure stakeholders utilise insights from the study to foreground discussions to formulate a collective definition of online violence that is relevant to the continental context.

●These definitions should be collated and deposited into a central system that is easily accessible.

●These definitions could be used to monitor violations against men and women journalists in particular.

◆Ensure stakeholders acknowledge the interconnected link between offline and technology facilitated gender based violence.

●Form partnerships and links with organisations to design innovative activities around anti offline and online GBV.

●Advocacy strategies should therefore incorporate this intertwining of issues.

◆Ensure the design of a second and more comprehensive survey by MISA.

●Additional in country research will help amplify the gendered nuances of online violence which in turn should be followed up and followed through with concrete and actionable approaches.

◆Capacitate women journalists to deal more impactfully with TGBV.

◆Incorporate the understanding of TGBV to insert impactful content into existing media literacy programmes and activities.

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ACHPR
African Commission on
Human and Peoples' Rights

African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights Resolution On The Protection Of Women Against Digital Violence In Africa

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