



Digital violence continues against women for many reasons such as anonymity that some perpetrators enjoy on the internet. PHOTO/FILE

From 25 November to 10 December, the world marks the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence.

BY JOAN SALMON

Every year, from 25 November (International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women) to 10 December (Human Rights Day), the world marks the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence.

This year, the global campaign is under the theme *"End digital violence against all women and girls."* It comes at 30 years since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the focus is on a growing and urgent concern: digital violence against women and girls.

That is also because while technology has the potential to empower, connect, and uplift, UN Women warns that the online sphere has increasingly become a minefield of abuse, harassment, and control for millions of women and girls around the world.

According to Pollicy, discriminatory gendered practices rooted in social, economic, cultural, and political inequalities offline are being reproduced online across digital platforms. Uganda, too, has seen rising cases of online harassment targeting women in public life as well as everyday users.

What is digital abuse?

The Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) defines Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV) as harmful behaviour carried out through digital platforms that targets individuals—particularly women and girls—because of their gender.

This includes harassment, threats, exploitation, and abuse conducted

End digital violence against women and girls: A call to action

via social media, messaging apps, emails, and other online spaces.

OGBV falls under the broader category of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV), which involves any form of abuse enabled by digital tools such as mobile phones, social networks, and internet-based communication.

TFGBV disproportionately affects women and limits their ability to express themselves freely, seize online opportunities, and participate safely in the digital world.

Digital tools are increasingly weaponised to stalk, harass, or abuse. WOUGNET highlights several common forms:

Cyber harassment: This is repeated or aggressive online behaviour intended to intimidate, humiliate, or threaten.

Example: A female entrepreneur advertises her business online, and trolls deliberately flood her page with insulting memes and derogatory posts.

Doxxing: The non-consensual sharing of personal information,

such as home addresses, phone numbers, or workplace details, placing the victim at risk.

Example: After a woman exits a toxic relationship, her ex-partner leaks her new residential address in a Facebook group.

Non-consensual sharing of intimate images: Often referred to as "revenge pornography", this involves distributing private intimate photos or videos without permission.

A 2021 WOUGNET report shows that this form of abuse is common, especially among women active in public spaces.

Example: A man threatens to upload intimate photos from a previous relationship unless the woman returns to him.

Online stalking: It is persistent, unwanted monitoring of someone's online activities, which can escalate into real-world threats.

Example: A stranger uses location tags on Instagram to track a woman's movements and shows up at a café she just posted about.

AI deepfakes and image manipulation: Artificial Intelligence has also worsened matters as technology is now used to alter images

or videos to misrepresent an individual.

Example: An AI-generated voice clip is made to sound like a female CEO admitting to fraud, damaging her credibility.

Online blackmail and sextortion: This is when one is threatened by someone that they will reveal sensitive or fabricated information unless demands—often money or sexual acts—are met.

Example: A hacker claims he will release fabricated intimate pictures of a young girl unless she sends real ones.

UN Women also notes additional forms, including hate speech, disinformation aimed at women, impersonation and catfishing, as well as misogynistic online networks.

Importantly, digital abuse is not confined to virtual spaces—it frequently escalates into offline violence, including coercion, physical assault, and even femicide.

Why is digital abuse so hard to stop?

Digital abuse persists because society often normalises harmful behaviours. We live in a technological environment where the commercial norm is widespread data collection, surveillance, and behavioural manipulation.

According to digital ethicist Per Axbom, companies bury crucial information in lengthy privacy policies that few users read or understand. Platforms are designed to influence behaviour and maximise engagement, often through habit-forming techniques.

Because these practices are everywhere, people assume they are safe or inevitable.

For individuals with limited time, money, or digital literacy, managing online risks is even more difficult.

It must also be noted that victims often internalise blame, believing they failed to make the "right" choices.

Axbom notes that many victims say things like: "They used my Instagram photo in an advert that promoted rape threats, but it's my fault for not reading the terms of service."

But it is never the victim's fault. A lack of transparency, accountability, and ethical standards from tech companies contributes significantly to the problem.

Other barriers include:

- Weak legal frameworks or the absence of laws addressing digital violence.
- Anonymity and cross-border abuse, which make perpetrators hard to trace.
- Limited accountability from tech platforms and social media companies.
- Artificial Intelligence, which is creating new forms of manipulation and amplifying existing abuses.

What must happen now?

To effectively tackle digital violence against women and girls, coordinated action is needed across governments, tech companies, civil society, and communities. Key priorities include:

- Hold perpetrators accountable through better laws and enforcement.
- Make tech companies step up by hiring more women to create safer online spaces, removing harmful content quickly, and responding to reports of abuse.
- Support survivors with real resources by funding women's rights organizations and movements.
- Invest in prevention and culture change through digital literacy and online safety training for women and girls and programmes that challenge toxic online cultures. It's time to reclaim our digital spaces and demand a future where technology powers equality.

A call to reclaim digital spaces

Violence against women is a severe public health and human rights crisis, affecting nearly one in three women globally. The risks worsen in humanitarian crises, climate-vulnerable regions, and contexts of poverty.

Behind every statistic is a real woman or girl whose safety, dignity, and rights have been violated.

Yet violence against women is preventable. Around the world, communities are challenging harmful norms, governments are strengthening policies, and health systems are working to provide care and justice for survivors.

As we mark the 16 Days of Activism, it is time to reclaim our digital spaces and work towards a future where technology drives equality—not harm.

1 IN 3
WOMEN
SEVERELY
AFFECTED BY
GBV GLOBALLY

KEY STATISTICS

- One in every three women experience GBV in their lifetime
- 16 to 58 percent of women and girls face digital violence
- 90-95 percent of deepfakes are sexual images of women