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# Cyberbullying: The Digital Pandemic

By Damaris Parsitau



Throughout the world, cyberbullying (the use of the internet and/or mobile technology to harass, intimidate or cause harm to another person) and online harassment have emerged as a new pandemic with devastating consequences for a wide spectrum of people, including children and adults, the powerful and the powerless, celebrities and media personalities.

The ever-growing and fast expanding reach of the internet, coupled with the rapid spread of information and communication technology (ICT), as well as the wide diffusion of social media globally, have presented new opportunities and challenges to online users. In fact, technology as we know it today is fraught with the good, the bad and the ugly. This technological revolution could rightly be described as a “double edged” sword, where the user is continuously balancing between risks and opportunities.

On the one hand, this technological revolution has shrunk our world into a global village where people can easily connect, share, and engage in conversations about issues that concern them. It can be used to support and fundraise for important global and national causes, create and inspire social movements like the *blacklivesmatter* movement, *Metoomovement*, *Bringbackourgirls* for the public and global good, and mobilise the world for humanitarian action, such as coming together to help the Haiti earthquake victims.

On the other hand, it has exposed the invisible evil world of cyberbullying and online harassment that

have wrecked lives, caused deep pain and hurt to millions of online users, destroyed relationships, and affected people's integrity, health, well-being and career development. It is increasingly becoming apparent that cyberspaces have become violent and ungovernable civic spheres.

Technological advancements have led to the emergence of new forms of violence, such as online trolling, sexual harassment and gender-based technologically-driven violence against both men and women, although women and young girls are particularly on the receiving end because they are more vulnerable. Cyberspaces are today characterised by online anonymity. Technologically-mediated violence nowadays is performed using electronic devices, such as mobile phones, tablets and computers.

While gender-driven sexual violence is viewed as the norm by many people, this traditional form of violence has recently gained a new space and currency and is now part of the online violent experience. Traditionally, bullying had been a preserve of school compounds and sports arenas, but it has now moved to media spaces where online anonymity allows bullies to hound their prey with their predator tactics unperturbed. Bullying is a form of abuse that is based on an imbalance of power. In fact, it can be defined as the systemic abuse of power.

Bullying is often defined as an aggressive, intentional act or behaviour that is carried out by a group or an individual repeatedly over time and space, against a victim who cannot defend himself or herself.

Cyberbullying, on the other hand, is a form of bullying that has recently become more apparent as the use of electronic gadgets continues to expand. Here, it is defined as the intentional use of the internet and social media platforms to degrade, demean, belittle and embarrass another person. It employs electronic forms of contact and can take many forms that include, but are not limited to, unwanted trolls, sharing of unwelcome content, sexual harassment or threats of sexual violence, such as threats of rape, cyberstalking, body shaming, sending or publishing or sharing of nude pictures, death threats, hate speech, and professional sabotage with the aim of stripping someone of their sexual or personal integrity.

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Global emerging trends suggest that cyberbullying is now recognised as a serious threat not just to the physical health of people, but also to their emotional well-being. Yet, despite much awareness about this serious challenge, it seems that the problem will continue to grow if no concerted effort is taken by the relevant authorities.

### **Cyberbullying in Kenya**

In the past one and half decade or so, Kenya has undergone a significant ICT revolution. Kenya has been ranked as the second leading innovation hub in sub-Saharan Africa, after South Africa, according to the 2019 Global Innovation Index. Similarly, internet penetration in Kenya currently stands at 90 per cent, according to the Communications Authority of Kenya (CA). Broadband internet take-up, as of September 2017, rose by more than 14 per cent. Consequently, the number of internet users has increased from 45.5 million to 51 million users, with the popularity of mobile internet being the biggest factor behind this meteoric rise and expansion.

Thanks to increased internet connectivity across the country, more Kenyans than ever before are using social media platforms to share, communicate, interact and generate important conversations

on topical issues in the Kenyan public sphere. According to a survey conducted by the Google Consumer Barometer, about 90 per cent of Kenyans go online to visit social networks platforms, which include Facebook, Instagram, Linked-in, Snap Chat and Twitter, among others. In addition, 80 per cent of Kenyans use the internet to check emails and access instant message services.

The ever-growing and expanding appropriation of the internet and other communication technologies in Kenya and across the African continent has, unfortunately, led to the proliferation of cyberbullying. While cyberbullying is on the rise globally, in countries with weak policies like Kenya, it is becoming a nightmare for many people.

In April 2020, the United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime (UNODC) ranked Kenyans as “the worst bullies on Twitter”. In the UNODC survey, Kenyans were described as having the capacity to “come together and attack their common enemies, as well as deconstructing both real and perceived enemies”. The survey stated that Kenyans on Twitter (#KOT) will attack anybody - the famous and the-not-so-famous “with little regard for truth, fact or any benefit of doubt that can be given”.

The survey further observed that “various brands like CNN and New York Times now have to think twice before they tweet about Kenya”, and noted that “today no country dares start an online feud with Kenyans unless they have a well-functioning mental healthcare system”. Countries that have suffered the wrath of the #KOT army include China, Nigeria and South Africa.

Like all other forms of violence that are prevalent in Kenya, including gender-based, sexual and political violence, cyberbullying is not only rife, but continues to thrive in Kenya’s ungovernable online space, even as it keeps evolving.

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Academics, business leaders, the clergy, female leaders, judicial officers, media personalities, politicians, performing artists and senior government officials, among others, have all been cyberbullied by faceless predators who hide behind their anonymous identities.

#KOT cyberbullies are notorious for having harassed a wide spectrum of Kenyans. Some of the more well-known Kenyans who have been victims of cyberbullying include Chief Justice David Maraga, who has been trolled and bullied online. Chief Justice Maraga recently shared his frustration about trolls and bloggers who torment public figures by portraying them negatively with a view to destroying not just their integrity, but also their careers. #KOT also ran President Uhuru Kenyatta out of town, forcing him to close his Twitter and Facebook accounts.

While oftentimes such trolls and memes on public personalities tend to be hilarious, even entertaining, much of the bullying take the form of personalised attacks, which are humiliating and vicious. Hence, cyberbullying crosses the line between freedom of expression and human rights and ethics.

### **Why are people so mean?**

Current research suggests that the youth, especially young women, are most vulnerable to cyberbullying, with 6 to 10 per cent of women and men in developing countries aged between 18 to 24 years who regularly use the internet indicating that they had suffered online abuse at one time or

another.

Why are cyberspaces becoming such violent, unsafe and ungovernable arenas? Why are people being so mean to each other? How can we understand and explain cyberbullying?

Firstly, bullying and violence are a normalised part of our public and private culture. As bullies used to be found in schools, they now seem to have relocated to cybernetics, where the anonymity of this space has enabled these “keyboard warriors” to wreck peoples’ lives. The motivating factors of cyberbullying could be anger, boredom, frustrations, jealousy, revenge, or the fact that some bullies derive pleasure from hurting other people.

With the advent of the coronavirus pandemic and lockdowns that have trapped many people in their homes, cyberbullying seems to have spiralled. Therapists and psychologists are pointing to the increased mental health issues relating to anger, anxiety and stress that are being experienced by a wide spectrum of people cocooned in their houses. Already the UN, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Kenya Police have sounded the alarm about increased levels of domestic and sexual violence.

Cyberviolence against women and girls could be considered a pandemic that now affects one in three women who are said to have experienced some form of cyberbullying and online harassment, according to recent studies. A study commissioned by the African Development Bank suggests that up to 70 per cent of women have endured cyberviolence and that women are 27 times more likely than men to be harassed online.

Studies further suggest that while more males are exposed to cyberbullying related to physical aggression, more females are victims of cyberbullying that includes non-consensual sharing of intimate images, unsolicited sending of sexual and pornographic images and other forms of cyberbullying that entails sexualised behaviour.

Of the several women that I interviewed between the ages of 20 and 35, more than half of them said they had been, in one way or another, victims of cyberbullying and online harassment. They said people, both unknown to them as well those they knew (mostly ex-partners) posted their pictures online without their consent. Others intimated that men solicited for sexual favours online and when they were refused, they verbally and sexually abused or threatened their victims online.

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The young men I interviewed also spoke about being cyberbullied sexually and verbally by their jilted female lovers, who either threatened or actually published their intimate photos for revenge. One told me that he actually paid his ex-girlfriend money to take down what she had published, but this only helped to open up a new avenue for extortion and threats of further postings every time she needed money, forcing him to finally report her to the police.

### **Sexualised cyberbullying**

Why are women’s bodies sexualized and demeaned not just by Kenyan society but globally? More importantly, why is this oftentimes not just tolerated, but also increasingly normalised?

There are several explanations for this: Violence against women is gendered as it is rooted in

stereotypes about gender roles, sexuality and sexual norms for women. For example, the non-consensual sharing of intimate images or the threat to share such images is meant to humiliate and intimidate women. This occurs in the context of the patriarchal sexual double standard, which unfairly judges women – but not men – for enjoying their sexuality. It is often a coercive method used for controlling behaviour in on-going relationships that is breaking down or has ended.

Secondly, the underlying cause of violence inflicted through cyber-mediated violence lies in the hierarchical nature of how gender is socially structured. More importantly, it is disdain for women with voice, power and agency. At the same time, men's disdain for feminism, which most of them do not critically understand, has pitted them against women. In short, violence and bullying are generally strongly linked with gender dynamics and sexuality and their construction and on-going contestations in the public sphere. The normalisation of male violence against women and girls, as well as the restrictive expectations about women and girls, are some of the key drivers of sexualized cyberbullying and online harassment of women.

There are clear gendered differences in the harassment itself. Men are largely attacked for their opinions but women are attacked for their gender, sexuality and appearance. The recent cases of Brenda Cherotich and Brian Orinda, who were alleged to have survived COVID-19 and became the face of survival in a pandemic that has scared the hell out of many people, were both heavily trolled on Twitter. Brenda's case immediately assumed sexual overtones with sexual and nude pictures of Brenda circulated online. When TV personality Yvonne Okwara Matole spoke against this sexual violence against Brenda, she too was personally and sexually attacked. She was body shamed, trolled and bullied for speaking up against the rampant sexual violence against women and girls in Kenyan society.

Why is the cyberbullying and online harassment of women and girls sexualized? Well, it is simply a question of power relations and who holds the power at the time. It is not only men who are responsible for gendered harassment and it is not always directed at women; it is about one group experiencing loss of status and power to another group. Kenyan women are emerging and contesting not just political power, but economic, social and cultural power as well.

Bullying someone in a sexual manner is a typical and highly effective master oppression technique. Threats of sexual violence have always been about power, as well as a sign of a change of status between men and women. Today, many women are increasingly gaining a voice and agency, and are participating in public debates and conversations on various issues, such as governance, human rights and leadership. This certainly has given them visibility in the public sphere, including in media spaces, to the chagrin of misogynists.

These prejudices hinder women's participation in public discourses and processes as many cower, self-censor, and in some instances, totally withdraw from public, civic and social media spaces. To properly combat cyberbullying, the government needs to recognise that technology-based violence is the new arena that is preventing women from achieving their full potential.

The experience of bullying is intensified in cyberspace because the perpetrator can hide behind a screen name and can act unhindered without fear of reprisal. In addition, the arena for the bullying is not just a playground, but part of a huge cyberspace spanning countries, cultures and even times.

A sharp rise in technology-related violence against women and its normalisation have made the internet a gendered space. Social network spheres, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snap Chat, are the new frontiers for not just gender-based and sexual violence, but also for the expression of toxic, patriarchal and violent masculinities. These social network spaces have become a nightmare for many people, especially women and girls.

A baseline report by the Kenya ICT Action Network on the challenges faced by Kenyan women on the internet lists non-consent, distribution of intimate images, sexual harassment, stalking, hate, offensive comments and body shaming as some of the most prominent violations of women's rights and well-being. Female journalists between the ages of 25 and 35 are twice as exposed to cyberbullying and threats than their male counterparts.

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A 2016 study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) indicated that online societies judge women politicians more harshly than they do male politicians. The study suggested that on social media, women politicians were at the receiving end of sexual comments, with their appearance and marital status often being the subject of discussions on gauging their fitness for public office.

Cyberbullying puts a premium on emotional health, personal and workplace time and resources. The impacts of cyberbullying on women are psychological, social, physical, emotional, and economic. Anxiety and self-esteem affect young women in particular. For one, many younger women internalise this by self-objectifying themselves as either beautiful or ugly, or as an object to be looked or evaluated on the basis of their appearance. This has many consequences for the mental and emotional well-being of young women and girls who more often than not grapple with issues of self-esteem and confidence in a heavily patriarchal society that does not value women very much.

### **Enlarging women's online engagement**

Digital technologies offer people innovative ways to get involved in politics and governance issues. From receiving instant news notifications on political developments to engaging in online debates and discourses and expressing personal opinions on a wide array of issues, social media can enhance the political and civic engagement of women in a way that traditional media cannot.

Social media platforms allows women to speak up. They are the only forum where women have control and space. Other spaces for civic engagement may not always be welcoming of women's voices. Thus digital spaces can be both empowering and dangerous for women. They can be spaces for mobilisation, for the formation of voice and agency, but they can also be spaces fraught with abuse and violence.

Cyberbullying, therefore, restricts the civic opportunities offered by digitisation. It restricts women from having a voice and agency online. Young people, especially young women, are hence discouraged and put off from taking part in political discussions and online debates and conversations.

In contrast, young men are more politically active online, posting their comments liberally, and reading and sharing articles on social networks, thus contributing to robust conversations on social and political happenings and discourses. Social media allows women and men to voice their opinion on a wide array of socio-economic political and cultural issues. With thousands of online resources posted every minute, social media could be a potential educational platform, especially when used responsibly.

However, cyberbullying or abuse has to be prevented so that women can fully participate in conversations about governance and human rights, among other topics affecting them. Participation of women, especially young women whose voices are less heard, could be important, not just for

their visibility, but also for civic engagement. Women will only navigate their voice and agency if civic spaces like social media are made safe for them.

There is no gainsaying that social media has become an important tool for social and professional advancement, more so for women. Many women have built their businesses online and in the process have learned how to connect with others. Many find clients to buy and sell their products online. Others find platforms to incubate ideas, leading to hundreds if not millions of social enterprises that not only spur economic growth but directly empower young men and women economically. They have also learned how to improve their entrepreneurship skills online. No doubt then, social media has emerged as a great space to do business. This is important for women's economic empowerment and visibility.

But the internet needs to be a safe place to enable young people to express their opinions and build their careers and social enterprises. Given that it is nearly impossible to govern gender- and sexual-based cyberviolence, such as cyberbullying and online harassment, without stepping on peoples' civic liberties, including freedom of expression, it is important to rethink safe civic spaces for everyone, especially women and girls.

Cyberbullying and online harassment must not be normalised but must be fought to create a safe place for respectful, civil, ethical and lawful online conversations. However, this can only happen if online spaces could engender conversations that rethink the toxic masculine, patriarchal, and hypersexualized social and gendered norms about women and girls that currently prevail in Kenyan society.

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