

A Submission of the Center for Information Technology and Development (CITAD) to the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on Gender-Based Violence Against Women Online in Nigeria

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(A) Introduction

Center for Information Technology and Development (CITAD) is a non-governmental and non-profit organization that is committed to the use of information and communication technologies for development and promotion of good governance. Established in 1996 as a computer Literacy Project and expanded in 2000 to include other areas, CITAD sees technology as a tool to promote sustainable development, good governance and peaceful coexistence, it therefore uses ICT to empower youth and women through access to information, skills and online mentoring opportunities.

This submission focuses on the gender-based violence online in Nigeria. It is based on research undertaken by CITAD in 2017 to understand the factors that contribute towards inhibiting women's presence and participation online, particularly in northern Nigeria¹. Online violence is a form of human right abuse that is targeted at mainly women. Gender-based violence online is hardly visible to the government and therefore, it either assume it doesn't occur or choose to ignore it. The invisibility of gender-based violence is due to the fact that there are usually no witnesses when they occur and victims feel reluctant to speak out. The reluctance of the victims to speak out their experiences is as a result of lack of appropriate laws to deal with it as well as stigmatization.

CITAD is therefore concerned with the persistent threats, harassments, intimidations and attacks on women internet users including activists, journalists, civil servants, politicians, celebrities, students and housewives among other groups of women and that greatly affects their participation on the internet. This prompted CITAD to undertake some studies on instances of online violence against women and to find out ways to mitigate it.

¹ See <http://www.citad.org/2018/02/02/text-of-a-press-conference-on-gender-based-violence-online-research-carried-out/> for more information

From the findings, 75.2% responses generated showed that online harassment faced by women and girls has discouraged their internet usage. This therefore means that violence against women in Nigeria limits the right of the women to fully and actively participate online since fear of being attacked by perpetrators left many of them with no option than to go completely offline.

Thus, Online GBV has curbed the freedom of expression that the internet guarantees, since women that express themselves online are subjected to series of harassments, intimidations, attacks, discrimination etc on the internet. GBVO also attacks the right to privacy which section 37 of Nigeria's 1999 Constitution (as amended) provided as many online accounts of women are being hacked and sensitive or confidential information are being exposed. It also affects the right women to education since higher education requires access to the internet.

Most perpetrators as the findings indicate are male and in most cases ex-boyfriends, friends, colleagues at work, ex-husbands etc. Justification for online violence against women committed by male gender ranges from: a turning down a man's request; vengeance after breakup; lack of proper upbringing; selfish interest; lack of morality; ignorance and; lack of understanding of the right of women on the internet. The platform where gender violence against women occur almost on frequent basis is Facebook. Others include WhatsApp, Instagram and Twitter.

CITAD is also alarmed by the failure of Nigerian government to protect women from Online GBV by establishing strong laws that will address specifically the issue of online against women in Nigeria which seriously affects women participation on the internet especially in the northern part of the country.

(B) Forms and Instances of Gender-Based Violence Online in Nigeria.

The forms of GBVO include account hacking; unwanted/unsolicited messages; posting of pornographic materials; disclosure of private life by someone online; unauthorized exposure of naked pictures by someone including boyfriend, husband, ex-boy or ex-husband; blackmailing; inappropriate or misuse of images; identity theft and impersonation among others. The examples given below are not just isolated cases. They are daily occurrences in the Nigeria cyberspace.

A female journalist with Freedom Radio in Kano, Kano state shared the experience of harassment she suffered from, someone she did not know intimidated her continuously. She tried blocking him several times on her WhatsApp but he repeatedly used new numbers to send her abusive and scary messages as well as pornographic contents. He was tracked down when she reported the case to her mother and who in return reported to the case to plain clothes police. But there have

been many instances of GBVO where the women either did not make a report or their efforts didn't yield any result.

An activist with “Mufarka Youths Development Initiative” remarked that her job demands publicity on social media especially for advocacy and campaign, but whenever she posts a photo which shows her in action, some people she had already marked will not only comment negatively, but would pick the picture and post it in other groups to injure to her reputation. And there are some people on Facebook that always tag her in indecent posts.

A responsible single PhD candidate of Computer Science experienced an act of GBVO that made a severe injury to her. Somebody picked her photo and applied photoshop tricks, merged it with indecent male's picture and wrote, “My husband to be” and posted it online. This generated many comments against her, that “she is so eager to get married”; “she hasn't yet found a suitor” and comments along that line. That made her father to terminate her studies.

Miss Cynthia Osokogu was a 24 year old only daughter of General Frank Osokogu (rtd). She was a boutique store owner and post graduate student of Nasarawa State University who was murdered at a hotel in Festac town, Lagos State after being lured to Lagos for business purpose. She was drugged, strangled and robbed of her possession on 22, July 2012. It was gathered that Cynthia was strangled to death in the hotel by her assailants who thereafter left with undisclosed amount of money, her student identity card and phones. The incident started when Cynthia chatted with two undergraduates on Facebook for months. In the process of chatting, her assailants got to know that she owned a boutique in Nasarawa State, following which they claimed to have a business proposal and proposed to host her whenever she visited Lagos. On her arrival at the Murtala Muhammed Airport, Ikeja, she was picked up by the two undergraduates and drove her to a hotel in Festac town. At the hotel her drink was drugged before she was strangled to death

Another housewife reported that her husband divorced her as a result of an act of GBVO she had experienced. Someone kept contacting and sending unwanted messages and pornographic contents to her which she tried to keep away from her husband with the fear of being suspected or misunderstood. Her husband later found out about it and it developed misunderstanding between them and ended their marriage.

Miss Chidimma Okeke was a 200 level medical laboratory student of Nnamdi Azikwe University UNIZIK, Awka, when she was crowned Miss Anambra. Miss Chidimma Okeke is from Ogboji in Orumba North Local Government Area of the State. She was forced into an X-rated video recording with a lesbian partner

recording. The organizers demanded that she should sign a contract which would make her return the prize to the organizers and when she refused, secretly recorded video went viral, making her to be dethroned

Miss Rahma Sadau is one of the phenomenal Hausa actress from Kaduna State. She studied Business Administration at Kaduna Polytechnic and joined the Hausa Movie Industry (Kannywood) in 2013. In the course of her career as an actress, she emerged as the Best actress (Kannywood) 2014 award by City People Magazine, and also won Best African Actress at the 19th African film awards by African Voice, a British tabloid with African interest. Miss Sadau was suspended by Motion Pictures Practitioners Association of Nigeria (MOPPAN) from the Hausa Movie Industry. It was alleged that an actor named Adam Zango denied Rahma Sadau role in a movie “Duniya Makaranta” for refusing sexual overtures of the actor. She posted on her Instagram page the story which led to her suspension. Also, on 2nd October, 2016, MOPPAN expelled Rahma Sadau from the Industry. Miss Rahma offence was that she featured in a 4 minute 19 second romantic musical video which went viral on social media, with some fans of the actress criticizing her role in the video. Reactions poured online, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram immediately the musical video went online.

Two women’s pictures on different occasions were taken and the statement “RIP” (Rest in Peace) was written on them and were spread on different social media platforms to the extent that their friends and family thought they were really dead.

The popular Kannywood (Hausa Movie Industry) actress, Zainab Indomie was also a victim. Her picture was photoshopped and widely spread on social media. People began to accuse her of misbehaving. Whether it is factual that she snapped that picture herself. Someone exposed her private images to the public without her consent. As a result of that, her career in film making drastically suffered to the extent that she now hardly act or appears in movies unlike before.

Miss Maryam Usman Hiyana first came into prominence through her role in Hausa movie “Hiyana”. She is in no doubt in history the first Northern Muslim woman to have her nude image viewed by millions across the globe in August, 2002. She was alleged to have steamy sex with her boyfriend, a Lagos-based Bureau de Change operator identified as Usman Bobo. The sex video was recorded by the man. It was stated that Usman boasted to his colleagues and showed them the sex clip to prove to them he had an intimate relationship with Maryam Hiyana. The sex video went online when Usman’s friends sent the clip to their phones and they decided to spread the video using the Bluetooth transfer. The video was made privately and had no relation to the Kannywood Industry, it was called the

first Hausa “Blue film”. The scandal confirmed public fears about film making. The actress was expelled from Kannywood with some other actresses. Her fiancée took her to an unknown destination from Kano in an attempt to protect her from the threats from her people. The incident cost her career and impression in the society. The public outcry focused on the girl, blaming her alone despite the fact that two people could be seen in the clip

Another lady’s identity was impersonated by someone. The lady uses Instagram only, but the person created various accounts on different platforms with her personality. Whenever she updated herself on Instagram, that person would take the photo or video and update it on the false accounts he created. He also used to spread bad stuffs that discredit the image of the person he impersonated. The lady realized that she was been impersonated and kept explaining on Instagram that she was been impersonated, and all other accounts in her name are false. These are just few of instances of GBVO CITAD has documented.

(C)Recommendations

- Addressing GBVO should be a multi-stakeholders responsibility, for example governments, security agents, women, media civil society organizations etc. Government should make a formal declaration that Gender Based Violence Online (GBVO) is a major form of human rights abuse and propose action on dealing with it.
- Governments at different levels need to establish laws specifically protecting women internet users. The acts of GBVO should be clearly stated as unacceptable and punishable by law. The 2014 Cybercrime Act is too weak to protect women from this abuse.
- Security agents are the law enforcers. They need to acquire the skills to track down GBVO perpetrators since it is not a physical crime. It isa responsibility on the government and other concerned Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), Community Based Organizations (CBOs) etc therefore to train and prepare a capacity building on ICT skills for them if the fight against GBVO is to be accomplished successfully. Security agents especially the police cannot bring down the perpetrators if they lack the technical know-how.
- Government should through the sector regulatory agency ensure that Service providers should allow users to submit complaints about a particular website or platforms either through a telephone hotline or an online form. Actions should be taken instantly on any reported online violence so as to limit gender-based violence online. Police can follow up the complaints made by victims through the links provided by the service providers and make a thorough investigation. Harassers should then be punished accordingly. Thus, police and service providers should collaborate and work together in identifying and

prosecuting perpetrators of online gender based violence. Social media companies also need to take proactive steps to ensure that their platforms don't tolerate GBVO.

- Lack of awareness on internet safety and security tools has promoted the vulnerability of women to online attacks, and secondly, many people are not aware of GBVO and its harms. Therefore, Government should through its appropriate Agency, the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) engage in sensitization programme against GBVO. They should also formulate training for women on how they could safely use the internet by educating them on online privacy and protection tools. Enlightening those who perpetrate GBVO or who are likely to do so on the consequence of their actions. Remove the psychological reasons which tempt to make people harass women online by campaigning to alter attitudes in society so that the views (GBVO) are seen as unacceptable.
- For women, before going online, women must ensure they are well-prepared to understand and mitigate the risks they might face in the course of accessing the internet. Such preparation might include knowing and understanding the privacy and personal security online that they can use to protect themselves from harassers online. Reading "Terms and Conditions" before agreeing to use or register with any type of application or platform is very essential in protecting oneself. Women should keep their personal information private online especially on social media. Such information like mobile phone number should be kept hidden on platforms like Facebook where everyone could possibly have access to it. Displaying improper pictures or videos of oneself can easily attract harassers to a woman.