

Background

Online abuse targeting women in digital spaces is a new and widespread problem. Known as Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), it is a pervasive threat to democratic values, human rights, peace, security, and safety of individuals and societies worldwide. While increased access to technology provides opportunities for economic growth, access to education, and a voice to previously unheard voices,¹ TFGBV drastically diminishes these benefits, particularly for women. Globally, 85% of women have witnessed online violence against other women, and nearly 40% of women have experienced online violence themselves.²

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“When a woman participates in politics, she should be putting her hopes and dreams for the future on the line, not her dignity and not her life.”

MADELEINE ALBRIGHT, FORMER U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE (2016)

The systematic silencing of women's voices in public spaces—whether through censorship and self-censorship or forced or voluntary withdrawal from public leadership roles—is known informally as the “chilling effect”. In addition to its toll on those experiencing and witnessing this abuse, the reduction of women's public and political participation negatively impacts institutions, communities, and nations by exacerbating the global trend of polarization and digital authoritarianism. TFGBV is perpetrated both at an individual level and through engineered large-scale online campaigns targeting women in the public eye. While universally pervasive, the origins, targeting, and uses of this threat are highly contextual and require nuanced solutions.

Addressing and preventing TFGBV effectively requires collaboration with diverse stakeholders – including duty bearers, support organizations, bystanders, and survivors—to **reduce the norms, attitudes, and behaviors** that contribute to violence on online platforms, and to **mitigate the consequences** of harm that has occurred, to support women so they may **participate equitably in civic and political life**.

TFGBV is an act of violence perpetrated by one or more individuals that is committed, assisted, aggravated, and amplified in part or fully by the use of information and communication technologies or digital media, against a person on the basis of their gender. UNFPA (2021)

Insights from IREX's Foundational TFGBV Landscape Assessments



In Georgia,

women politicians and journalists are targeted by online abuse as a malign foreign influence tactic in the context of ongoing democratic backsliding and closing civic spaces.



In Kenya,

women politicians are targeted by political rivals seeking to discredit them as opponents. Political parties often do not hold their own members accountable.



In Guatemala,

online violence is produced and disseminated by “netcenters”, staffed to perpetrate it with financing from government, military, and business players.

1. UN Populations Fund. (2021). Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: Making All Spaces Safe. <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA-TFGBV-Making%20All%20Spaces%20Safe.pdf>

2. The Economist Intelligence Unit. (2021). Measuring the prevalence of online violence against women. <https://onlineviolencewomen.eiu.com/>

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IREX's Commitment and Response

IREX's work with institutions, civil society, and communities around the globe both highlights the need and provides evidence-based insights to address TFGBV. We work hand in hand with local partners to leverage our networks, tools, and expertise to engage diverse actors and collaborate across sectors to catalyze change.

By combining immediate threat mitigation with actions preventing systems-level causes, IREX supports a holistic response to the violence that women face on digital platforms:



Awareness to enable action:

Despite the pervasive nature of TFGBV, awareness of the threat—and its impact on individuals and democracy—remains low among duty-bearers and bystanders. IREX's approach is focused on awareness raising through advocacy campaigns, storytelling, and evidence sharing, to generate behavioral and normative change among the public and key stakeholders who can influence their own and collective action.



Prevention and root causes:

IREX recognizes that the key to reducing TFGBV is preventative action targeting its root causes. These are a combination of social norms and attitudes that dehumanize and scapegoat women and girls a legal and cultural enabling environment that sanctions violence against those perceived to challenge such norms; and the infrastructure and business model of technology platforms and tools, including AI, that allow gendered disinformation and abuse to be generated at high volumes and spread unchecked.



Engagement of duty-bearers:

Duty-bearers, from government and regulatory agencies and law enforcement to tech platforms and media organizations, have a critical role to play in the prevention of and response to TFGBV. IREX collaborates with and builds bridges among duty-bearers and other key stakeholders like educators, civil society, and online networks to craft effective systems-level responses.



Targeting perpetrators:

Shining a light on perpetrators is a core aspect of IREX's response. IREX's approach focuses on understanding the profiles and motivations behind those who perpetrate violence online and supporting efforts to address impunity. This includes partnerships to explore local legal strategies and platform-based consequences as well as activities to “de-normalize” TFGBV and incentivize action against it among bystanders.



Empowerment of survivors:

Without placing the burden of responsibility for solving the problem of TFGBV on those experiencing it, IREX supports survivors and organizations that serve them with tools for protection and response so they can stay safely and productively engage in digital spaces and in the design and monitoring of TFGBV mitigation efforts. We engage local experts to test customized, survivor-centered responses to locally prevalent forms of TFGBV, with a focus on high-risk survivors such as women in the public eye (journalists, activists, civil servants, and elected officials) and high-risk periods, such as elections.



Addressing the threat to rights and democracy:

IREX recognizes that when TFGBV is siloed as a “women's issue”, responses are limited. While solutions must center the needs of survivors and perspectives of women-led organizations, they should not be solely responsible for addressing this abuse, especially since the impacts extend beyond harm to individuals by undermining democracy, pluralism of voices, and tolerance.

**Survivor-centered and trauma-informed design:**

When working with survivors of TFGBV and with survivor-serving organizations, IREX prioritizes survivor security (digital, physical, and psychosocial) and needs. Interventions are designed and piloted in collaboration with local experts and survivors to ensure their perspectives are centered and needs are met.

**Co-creative and localized solutions:**

IREX's approach recognizes that the manifestation and impact of online violence depends on the local context—as do opportunities for change. Solutions are locally led and context sensitive to maximize impact and sustainability, and to ensure that the right stakeholders are brought in.

**Capacity sharing and bridge building:**

Those working to address TFGBV too often work in siloes, missing opportunities for collaboration and impact. IREX's approach focuses on bridging gaps between key actors who do not always interact in solution development or implementation. Each of these stakeholders brings unique capacities that can be strengthened and shared with others.

**Evidence informed and learning focused:**

IREX's approach prioritizes gathering evidence throughout implementation to maximize learning and critically, to share that learning with local, national, regional, and international stakeholders to expand the evidence base of contextualized approaches to address TFGBV.

**Threat to rights and human potential**

Those targeted experience emotional, physical, social, and economic harm;
Survivors' families and connections suffer collateral impacts; and
Empowerment and leadership are impeded by the silencing of their voices online.

**What IREX does to address it**

Work with norm forming institutions to foster equitable gender norms;
Equip youth and adults with tools for responsible online engagement;
Collaborate with local partners to ensure effective services for survivors and advocate for improvements to digital platforms and legislation; and
Empower girls and women to participate in tech careers.

**Threat to democracy and leadership**

Public debate is polarized, social cohesion is undermined, and fear and conflict are seeded;
Political and civic engagement are reduced among those who witness this abuse, including future female leaders; and
Misogynistic attitudes and behaviors are normalized online, threatening democratic societies.

**What IREX does to address it**

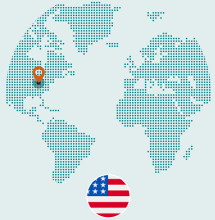
Expand the evidence base around TFGBV;
Raise awareness of the threat and its impacts among duty-bearers: legislators, law enforcement, tech platforms and regulators;
Equip organizations and institutions to support women in politics and public life who are at risk; and
Integrate gender awareness within good governance, information integrity, anti-corruption, and community leadership activities.

IREX Capacity to Address TFGBV and Initiative Highlights

IREX has over a decade of experience with programs in over 20 countries that address TFGBV, build digital and psychosocial security capacities in at risk populations, mainstream gender awareness across government and civil society, build resilience to manipulative information and digital citizenship, and support girls and young women to advance in STEM careers.



The USAID-funded [Transform](#) (Transform Digital Spaces) Program is piloting new approaches to preventing, mitigating, and responding TFGBV, with a focus on addressing violence experienced by women in politics and public life in Georgia, Kenya, and Guatemala. Through Transform, IREX has published a foundational landscape assessment that [examines the impact of TFGBV on democracy](#), created [a digital catalogue of resources](#) for survivors of TFGBV, and supports civil society in developing and strengthening competencies to address TFGBV. To date, Transform has trained 70 organizations in understanding TFGBV as a threat to democracy and provided access to protection and recovery tools to over 500 survivors.



[Securing Access for Free Expression \(SAFE\)](#) program provides digital security training and psycho-social support for at-risk civil society activists and media professionals on four continents. SAFE addresses safety through the unique lens of digital identity, physical awareness, and psychosocial care by delivering trainings for journalists that focus or combine these areas. IREX has conducted targeted trainings with women journalists to support their ability to mitigate the unique threats that they face. Following SAFE trainings, 95% of participants reported that they had stayed in their profession, and 63% of participants reported that their organization had implemented new or updated safety procedures and protocols.



[SHE's GREAT! 1.0 and 2.0](#) are holistic community-based gender responsive initiatives for youth which transform gender stereotypes and build inclusive communities. SHE's GREAT! Equips youth and educators with the networks, STEM knowledge, confidence, and leadership skills to fully participate in their communities and careers. School leaders and educators are prepared to prevent abuse and exploitation, including TFGBV. Following SHE's GREAT 1.0 project activities, 92% of participants agreed that women and men should have equal access to social, economic, and political resources and opportunities. 14% of these participants disagreed with this concept prior to the program and changed their perception and attitude as a result of participation.



In Jordan, the USAID-funded [Takamol Gender Program](#) partnered with over 400 civil society and government organizations to implement gender-related initiatives. IREX supported these organizations to design and conduct professional training for judges and journalists, research, and advocacy on women's political and economic participation, increased social dialogue on gender equality, and strengthened gender mainstreaming in the justice, political, education, and labor sectors. Takamol used strategic online and offline campaigns to address gendered hate speech and foster dialogue on women's civic engagement, rights, and gender, including supporting 79 community-based organizations to engage 38,600 people across all governorates.