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]

> "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**.

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1. UN Populations Fund. (2021). Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violencez: 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/

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.

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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.