



# TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: WHAT IS IT, AND HOW DO WE MEASURE IT?

This brief was developed by Laura Hinson, Jennifer Mueller, Lila O'Brien-Milne and Naome Wandera of ICRW.

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**Cyberbullying, cyberviolence, online harassment. We've heard these terms, but they fail to capture the spectrum of violent behaviors that occur in digital spaces and disproportionately affect women, girls and sexual minorities. These terms also do not capture the severity and lasting impacts for the victims/survivors or convey the links between online and offline experiences of violence. Without first acknowledging the full range of gender-based violence enacted online or via technology, we will be unsuccessful at preventing it and effectively supporting those who experience it.**

The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) has developed a definition of and framework for understanding **technology-facilitated gender-based violence (GBV)** that links previously disconnected harmful behaviors. Connecting the pieces of this puzzle allows us to understand the depth and breadth of this growing public health and human rights issue that compromises the safety and well-being of individuals and negatively impacts communities.

ICRW is also researching how gender plays a role in an individual's vulnerability to technology-facilitated GBV and how it is experienced across a range of contexts globally, where women, girls and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals are disproportionately disadvantaged and targeted.

## TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED GBV: A GLOBAL DEFINITION

*Technology-facilitated GBV is action by one or more people that harms others based on their sexual or gender identity or by enforcing harmful gender norms. This action is carried out using the internet and/or mobile technology and includes stalking, bullying, sexual harassment, defamation, hate speech and exploitation.*



What we know from prior research and from experts is that the experience of technology-facilitated GBV can be complex and far-reaching. Specifically, we know that:

- ♦ **Technology-facilitated GBV occurs worldwide.** Few studies have estimated the prevalence of online harassment and abuse, but it ranges from roughly 33 percent of respondents in studies from Kenya and South Africa<sup>1,2,3</sup> to 40 percent of adults in the United States.<sup>4</sup>
- ♦ **Technology-facilitated GBV comprises a spectrum of behaviors, including stalking, bullying, sexual harassment, defamation, hate speech and exploitation.** Technology-facilitated GBV may cross into the offline world as well, with victims/survivors experiencing a combination of online and in-person physical, sexual and psychological abuse.<sup>5,6,7,8</sup> However, the literature tends to focus exclusively on single incidents, ignoring multiple acts of violence that individuals may experience on and offline and over time.
- ♦ **Women, girls and LGBTI individuals are disproportionately impacted by technology-facilitated GBV.**<sup>4</sup>
- ♦ **The violence is often sexual.** Perpetrators threaten sexual violence or disparage appearance and sexual desirability.<sup>9,10</sup>
- ♦ **Technology-facilitated GBV can have severe impacts on victims/survivors.** Impacts include emotional distress, loss of status, decreased productivity and suicide.<sup>11</sup>
- ♦ **Overall, there are few interventions that specifically address technology-facilitated GBV.** While there are promising interventions out there, they are mostly small-scale and untested. Even fewer interventions aim to *prevent* technology-facilitated GBV. The solutions that do exist tend to focus on supporting victims/survivors to report and document their experiences and on connecting them to community and institutional support services. Other programs are designed to support local initiatives and grassroots movements to raise awareness of the issue.
- ♦ **Technology-facilitated GBV is a nascent field.** Terminology, definitions and measures are still inconsistent. Terms like cyber violence, cyber aggression, digital abuse and online victimization are used interchangeably, making it difficult to differentiate between them and measure them.

## A need for more evidence

Most studies to date have focused primarily on heterosexual, in-school adolescents and young adults in high-income countries, leaving wide gaps in knowledge. Much of the literature focuses on individual types of technology-facilitated GBV, ignoring the continuum of violence and the fact that individuals may experience different behaviors simultaneously. There is little research on the role of social factors like race, class or disability status in experiences of technology-facilitated GBV, nor on its impacts and consequences. As technology becomes more widely available, the need for rigorous evidence focused on the prevalence of technology-facilitated GBV and its global impacts grows, especially as development solutions increasingly include technology-facilitated platforms with very little evidence to support their effectiveness in the GBV field.

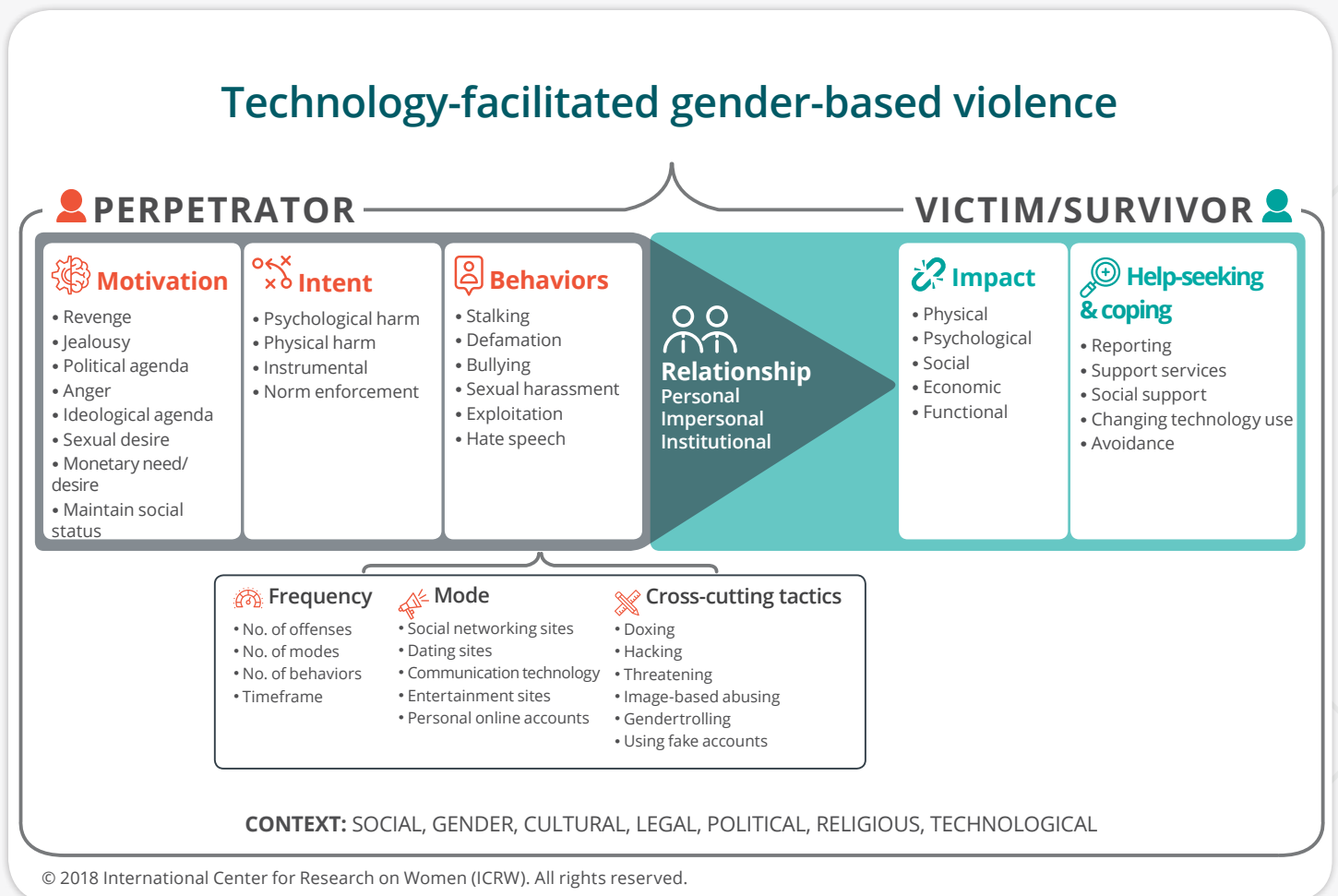
## Closing the gaps

Working with the **World Bank Group** and the **Sexual Violence Research Initiative**, we took an in-depth look at existing interventions and identified gaps in current research. We wanted to understand more about the attitudes and behaviors

that lead to technology-facilitated GBV around the world, the role of systemic inequities and how technology-facilitated GBV can be measured. Working with our partners, we developed a comprehensive conceptual framework and proposed new quantitative measures for studying technology-facilitated GBV across regions and populations. Findings from **research in Uganda and India** will be an important first step towards creating a much-needed evidence-base to inform emerging programs and policies that seek to prevent and respond to technology-facilitated GBV in lower and middle-income countries, where the rapid expansion of mobile and internet connectivity has taken place and little research has been conducted.

## Putting the pieces together: a conceptual framework of technology-facilitated GBV

Our team developed a conceptual framework of technology-facilitated GBV that illustrates the range of experiences — from the motivation of the perpetrator to the impact on and help-seeking behaviors of victims/survivors. This process is set within a larger **context**, and what constitutes technology-facilitated GBV is locally defined and experienced.





### **Technology-facilitated GBV occurs across a range of relationships**

Technology-facilitated GBV is informed by the connection or **relationship** between the victim/survivor and the perpetrator. This relationship may be *personal* or *impersonal*. Or, the relationship can also be *institutional*, in which public figures or state entities commit GBV through technology to further an ideological agenda or enforce a law.

### **Motivation and intent as catalysts for harmful online behaviors**

The perpetrator's **motivation** refers to the emotional, psychological, functional or ideological driver(s) behind the perpetrator's behavior. Motivations can be political or ideological in nature or driven by revenge. From motivation comes **intent**, or the determination of the perpetrator to harm someone. Like motivation, intent varies by type of behavior and can include psychological or physical harm, enforcement of gender norms or extortion.

The **behavior** is the perpetrator's actions or strategy and can include stalking, defamation, bullying, sexual harassment, exploitation and hate speech. Each behavior may be repeated with varying **frequency** and can be conducted using one or more forms of technology (**modes**), such as social networking

sites or entertainment platforms. Perpetrators use a variety of technology-facilitated **tactics** — such as hacking and communicating threats — to carry out specific technology-facilitated behaviors.

### **The far-reaching impact of technology-facilitated GBV on victims/survivors and their varied coping behaviors**

Every victim/survivor is impacted in some way by their experience. Those impacts can include significant harms to their physical and mental health, social status and economic opportunities, and, in some cases, have led to death. **Impact** is divided into five categories: *psychological* (e.g., shame, depression or fear); *physical* (e.g., self-harm, assault or arrest); *functional* (e.g., changing a route or taking down a profile); *economic* (e.g., extortion or loss of income-generating or educational opportunities); and *social* (e.g., excluded by family, friends or coworkers).

There are a variety of **help-seeking or coping** behaviors that a victim/survivor can take that include, but are not limited to, reporting their experience to the police, seeking health, counseling or legal aid services and seeking help from their social networks.

## ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

A man goes through a breakup. He feels angry and resentful (**motivation**) and wants to make his ex-partner feel as hurt as he does (**intent**). He posts an intimate video of his ex-partner, without consent, on social media (**tactic**) and then uses it as blackmail (**behavior**). The ex-partner ends up paying the man money so that he will stop harassing her (**help-seeking**).

A man, living in a country where there are legal repercussions for the LGBTI community, uses an online networking site to arrange a meet-up with another member. However, a police officer has infiltrated the site using a fake account (**behavior, tactic**). The officer passes the man's name along to anti-gay vigilantes (**motivation, intent**), who then meet up with him and severely beat him (**impact**).

A feminist journalist posts a blog that draws slanderous and threatening comments from multiple people online (**behavior, tactic**) who want to silence her (**motivation, intent**). Under the weight of emotional bludgeoning, she shuts down all of her online accounts and quits her job (**impact**).

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## *How this research can benefit donors, researchers, implementers and the tech industry*

Using a framework like ours, researchers and stakeholders can collect data that show the prevalence and impact of technology-facilitated GBV globally. Data collection and measurement can be standardized and we can start designing and testing solutions that work, including interventions to prevent and report such violence, as well as effectively supporting survivors.

How can a variety of stakeholders use this data? For a start:

- ◆ **Government and NGOs** can use the data to develop or update programs and policies that better prevent and mitigate the effects of technology-facilitated GBV in their communities;
- ◆ **Technology companies** can design or adapt solutions to mitigate the pervasiveness and impacts of technology-facilitated GBV among users;
- ◆ **International organizations** will better understand and bring attention to technology-facilitated GBV and its impacts, advocate for solutions and forge new partnerships and collaborations;
- ◆ **Researchers** can use these measures to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the problem and its impacts, identify trends and understand which response efforts are most effective in protecting and supporting victims/survivors.



- ♦ **Donors** can gain more insights into technology-facilitated GBV and how it can be mitigated, particularly through targeted funding of additional research and promising interventions; and
- ♦ **Human rights defenders and advocates** can use the evidence generated from this research to inform and gain support for their human rights campaigns and calls for legal protections and sanctions.

The growth of social networking sites and information and communication technologies has created new opportunities for social and economic participation around the world. However, they have also ushered in new forms of violence. More research and programming are critical to ensure that these spaces are safe, inclusive and conducive to growth.

## WHO IS THE INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON WOMEN?

Anchored in the principle of human dignity, ICRW advances gender equity, inclusion and the alleviation of poverty worldwide. To this end, ICRW works with non-profit, government and private sector partners to conduct research, develop and guide strategy and build capacity to promote evidence-based policies, programs and practices. ICRW has been at the forefront of efforts to understand the causes and economic costs of GBV and transform the gender norms that perpetuate it.



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**For more information, contact Laura Hinson at:**  
[lhinson@icrw.org](mailto:lhinson@icrw.org)

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INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON WOMEN

[www.icrw.org](http://www.icrw.org)

T 202.797.0007 • F 202.797.0020

1120 20<sup>th</sup> Street NW • Suite 500 North, Washington, DC 20036