

Digital revolution silencing Kenyan women

By Faith Muiruri

Digital revolution is becoming a dangerous paradox: the same technologies powering mobile money, online journalism, education and political engagement are increasingly being used to intimidate, exploit, and silence women.

For women in public life, the threat is especially severe. “The danger is particularly acute for women in public life,” says a gap analysis by the Community Advocacy and Awareness Trust (CRAWN Trust), supported by the African Women’s Development Fund.

According to the report, 80 per cent of women parliamentarians in Africa have experienced psychological violence online, while 75 per cent of women media workers have faced digital abuse in the course of their duties.

The report notes that: “These attacks are not harmless insults dismissed as the price of public visibility. They can trigger fear, self-censorship and withdrawal from public debate.”

It further observes that digital violence makes it harder for journalists to investigate corruption and for women politicians to participate freely in democratic life.

These abuses are also reshaping Kenya’s universities. The report found that 64.4 per cent of female students in Nairobi’s higher learning institutions had personally experienced online violence, nearly twice the proportion of male students.

Most survivors of this violence have been forced to limit their online presence, avoid professional networking, abandon academic discussions, or reconsider careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

Rural Dimension

In rural communities, the violence often enters the home through mobile phone and mobile money accounts. The report cites regional research indicating approximately 31 per cent of women experienced technology-enabled economic abuse, including the control of their phones and M-Pesa credentials.

“That control can determine whether a woman is able to feed her children, seek medical care or escape an abusive relationship. A partner may demand passwords, monitor transactions, track a woman’s movements, install spyware or seize control of her mobile money account.

What may appear to outsiders as a private domestic dispute can become a system of economic imprisonment.”

While the report highlights heightened risks among women students in Nairobi and survivors in rural and regional communities, it does not rank counties according to the prevalence of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV).

TFGBV includes cyberstalking, online harassment, doxing, non-consensual sharing of intimate images, sextortion, digital financial abuse, coordinated smear campaigns and emerging forms of artificial intelligence-enabled abuse.

Digital innovations

This form of violence is happening in a country widely recognized for its digital innovations such as M-Pesa and Ushahidi. Mobile penetration in Kenya stands at 149.4 per cent, while mobile money penetration is 91 per cent, according to the CRAWN Trust report.

The concerning reality is that as more people conduct their livelihoods, relationships, and civic engagements online, their risks of digital abuse also increases.

The consequences of these digital abuses are dire. The CRAWN Trust report identifies a phenomenon it calls “radio silencing” which mirrors the withdrawal of women from digital spaces because of sustained harassment, threats, and reputational attacks.

Says the report: “Up to 60 per cent of women leaders, journalists, activists and students are estimated to have reduced or abandoned online participation to protect themselves.”

According to the report, such withdrawal comes at a national cost. “When women stop posting, reporting, campaigning, teaching, organizing or building businesses online, Kenya loses more than social media activity. It loses voices, expertise, innovation, and leadership.”

“Such withdrawal affects the entire country.” Democratic debate becomes less diverse, the leadership pipeline narrows, and the knowledge economy suffers.”

Some women abandoned social media entirely. Others stopped sharing personal content, limited their interactions or became excessively cautious online. The report makes clear that this is not simply a matter of changing personal habits; it is a measurable loss of digital freedom and civic voice.

The threat can also move rapidly from the digital world into the physical one. The report warns of a “lethal continuum” between online and offline violence, with threats, stalking and the circulation of intimate images potentially escalating into physical attacks and femicide.

It cites 579 femicide cases recorded in Kenya in 2024, arguing that digital threats and coercive control should be treated as possible indicators of serious physical danger.

What is disturbing is that survivors of this form of violence rarely get support when they report abuse. According to the report, 78 per cent did not know where to report or seek assistance, while 67 per cent said they did not feel heard or supported after reporting.

Worse still, some survivors encountered further humiliation within the institutions, which they expected to protect them. The report documents cases where survivors were shamed, dismissed or mocked at police stations, including inappropriate comments about intimate evidence. “One

survivor said her phone was retained by police for more than a year for forensic examination, affecting her ability to communicate and earn a living.”

“These experiences should not be viewed merely as isolated misconduct by individual officers,” the report cautions. “Instead, they point to structural failures in trauma-informed training, digital forensic capacity and institutional accountability.”

Legal gaps

One of the challenges affecting effective response to TFGBV is failure by Kenya’s laws to keep pace with the speed and complexity of digital abuse. Existing legislation addresses some forms of cyber harassment and the sharing of intimate images; but important gaps remain around Artificial Intelligence (AI)-generated sexual imagery, spyware, location tracking, forced password sharing and virtual sexual violence.

The report therefore calls for a standalone TFGBV Act, emergency content-removal orders, stronger obligations on online platforms, specialised prosecution units, better-equipped digital forensic laboratories and trained police gender desks.

Its central message is both urgent and unavoidable: digital safety is not separate from Kenya’s development agenda; it is a condition for achieving it.

A country that drives women out of digital spaces loses businesses, ideas, votes, investigations, innovations and leaders. Kenya’s Silicon Savannah will only fulfil its promise when its digital frontier is safe, inclusive and free from violence.

--SS--