


Chapter 19

The Prevalence of Online Violence Against Female Students at a Private University in Malawi

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents findings of the study that investigated the prevalence of online violence against female students at the University of Livingstonia in Malawi. The study noted that female students experienced online bullying, online harassment, online defamation, online stalking, sexual exploitation, online hate speech, and revenge pornography. Perpetrators used digital platforms such Facebook, WhatsApp, dating sites, and smartphones to carry out their evil acts. The motivations by perpetrators were driven by revenge, anger, jealousy, and sexual desire, with the intentions to harm the victims socially, psychologically, academically, and physically. The female students confronted and blocked the perpetrator or left the online platform as a coping mechanism. Overall, the study confirmed that the prevalence of online violence against female students is burgeoning in universities in Malawi and urgent strategies are needed to address the vice.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in higher education has revolutionized the education system globally (Šincek, Duvnjak, & Milić, 2017). Students in both private and public universities and colleges are now able to use internet, social media, mobile devices, and other gadgets for research, learning and other academic activities (Faucher, Jackson, & Cassidy, 2014). However, the same ICT tools are also being used to inflict harm on female students. This has led to the emergence of online violence (a form of gender based violence) which has a physical, psychological,

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social, and economic consequences to the victims such as young women and girls (Countering online violence against women, 2015). United Nations (UN) Broadband Commission (2015) indicates that online violence against female students is just as damaging to female students as physical gender-based violence does. The report further estimates that 73% of female students and other young women have endured many forms of online violence, and are 27 times more likely than males to be harassed online.

Globally, literature suggests that young women aged 18-24 in higher education institutions, disproportionately experience severe types of online violence in form of online bullying, harassment, online stalking and online sexual harassment. Despite the growing recognition of the online violence that female students and young women in general experience, comprehensive research studies that tackle online violence against female students in higher education remains scanty. This implies that more studies are needed to further conceptualise the study phenomenon.

By the end of 2020, Africa recorded an 8% increase in ICT penetration (GSMA, 2020) compared to 20% in 2015 (UN Broadband Commission, 2015). Despite this exciting ICT penetration rates, the continent has not been immune to increased online violence against women including female students in universities and colleges. African countries such as Kenya, Nigerian and South Africa are becoming the fast growing hubs of online violence activity. In particular, 33% prevalence of online violence against young women and girls in Kenya and South Africa has been reported. The study also indicated that mobile phones and social media are currently the major digital tools used to perpetuate online violence against young women and girls which are largely university/college students in most emerging African countries (European Institute of Gender Equality, 2017). Though, efforts to tackle such online behaviours are emerging at a larger scale, it remains an extensive and widely under-reported online human rights violation in African countries (Maundu, 2020).

Study Context-Malawi

Malawi gained its independence from Great Britain in 1964. It borders Tanzania, Zambia and Mozambique. The country has an estimated population of 17.7 million people of which 85% live in rural areas. It is regarded as one of the least developed countries in the world with a Gross Domestic Capital per Capita is USD 516.80 (WHO, 2020). Most female students are working in the agricultural sector, which is a backbone of Malawi's economy (Malanga & Chigona, 2018). Of those in non-agricultural waged employment, 21% are female students and 79% are men, and the numbers have remained the same over the years (Malanga, 2020).

Malawi like other African countries, the rate of access to ICT tools such as social media, computers, internet, and among others has increased significantly the last decade (Malawi Communication and Regulatory Authority [MACRA], 2015). For instance, the overall mobile penetration is estimated at 45.5% while internet is 6.5% (Telecommunication Union, 2020; MACRA, 2015). About 34.5% of women in the country own a mobile phone, 0.6% own a desktop computer, 1.8% own a Laptop, while just 4.7% of them have access to the internet. The low rate of ICT penetration in Malawi is attributed to the country's weak economy, high value added tax (VAT) imposed on importation of ICT gadgets, and other contextual factors (Malanga & Banda, 2021).

Higher education institutions in Malawi have also become consumers of these ICTs tools. For instance, students are using computers, social media, internet for research and learning (Chaputula, 2018; Malanga & Jorosi, 2018). Despite this role that ICT play on enhancing students' learning and research, anecdotal reports indicate that prevalence of online violence against female students are increasing at

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