GBV AoR HELPDESK
Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies

Gender Based Violence AoR
Global Protection Cluster

Learning Series on
Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence

Learning Brief 3:
Implications of technology-facilitated GBV and actions for humanitarian agencies, donors and online industries

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Introduction

Digital and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) are potentially powerful tools for catalyzing women's empowerment and gender equality. Technology is, however, also changing women and girls' experiences of violence. Technology-facilitated GBV (TFGBV) is rapidly emerging as a significant form of GBV globally, including in contexts impacted by conflict, disaster and other humanitarian emergencies. There is a pressing need for action to prevent, mitigate and respond TFGBV in humanitarian contexts. Yet little is known about TFGBV or about effective approaches to addressing it in emergency-affected and fragile settings. To prevent and respond to this emerging problem as part of wider GBV in emergencies (GBViE) efforts, it is critical that the GBViE community understands TFGBV and develops effective strategies and capabilities to prevent and mitigate it and respond to survivors.

This learning series seeks to: 1) build basic knowledge about TFGBV; 2) highlight existing strategies for preventing and responding to TFGBV that may be adapted for use in emergency-affected and fragile contexts; and 3) suggest priority actions for different stakeholders to take to begin to address the problem. The series is informed by research and practice evidence,[1] including review of published and grey literature and interviews with 25 researchers, practitioners and activists working across diverse contexts globally.[2] Those interviewed included GBV specialists, women's and digital rights activists, researchers and other experts working at the intersection of technology and GBV.

This third learning brief in the series[3] looks at some of the wider implications of TFGBV, and offers recommendations for key stakeholders, including humanitarian agencies, donors and online industries, on priority actions to take to prevent and respond to TFGBV.

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1   In addition to undertaking review of literature and resources, the Helpdesk partnered with the GBV AoR Community of Practice (CoP) to undertake a survey on TFGBV among members to seek input on how TFGBV in manifesting in different contexts, how services are responding and challenges in addressing the problem. CoP members were invited to participate in an interview to share their knowledge, experience and expertise in addressing TFGBV.

2   Those interviewed included GBV specialists and service providers working with survivors of TFGBV, researchers, women's rights activists, policy advisors and program managers, the majority in middle- and low-income contexts. Informants work for community-based and national NGOs, international NGOs, research institutions, UN agencies in Africa, Asia-Pacific, the Middle East, Europe and North America. While they are not individually named to protect the identity and location of some informants, they are all acknowledged and thanked for sharing their time experience, knowledge and expertise in this area.

3   The first learning brief unpacks the issue by looking at different types of TFGBV, its' prevalence, how it is manifesting in emergency contexts, and the impacts it has on women and girls, while the second highlights strategies and actions for preventing and responding to it.

Impacts of TFGBV on women's rights and gender equality

As highlighted in *Learning Brief 1 Understanding technology-facilitated GBV*, TFGBV is occurring in humanitarian contexts and it is highly likely that it is occurring at similar or higher rates to non-emergency settings, given the increased vulnerabilities and risks facing women and girls created by conflict, disaster and displacement. Digital technology and ICTs are reported to be commonly used to perpetrate sexual harassment, abuse and exploitation, intimate partner violence and trafficking of women and girls across humanitarian contexts.[4] Concerningly, humanitarian workers are among those reported to be perpetrating it.

TFGBV can have profound, long-lasting and severe impacts on survivors. These include short and long-term physical, mental and social harms leading to severe psychological distress, self-harm and even suicide. The reactions of others can be devastating. Violence and honor killing have been identified as a direct consequence of image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) and sexual harassment in a number of settings. The severity of these impacts underscores the need for GBV services in emergency-contexts to have capacity to effectively respond to survivors. However, the impacts of TFGBV go beyond the significant harms caused to individual survivors, and the responsibilities to mitigate and prevent TFGBV in humanitarian contexts go well beyond GBV practitioners and programs.

TFGBV is a violation of women's human rights

TFGBV is a fundamental violation of women's human rights, including rights to health and bodily integrity, rights to live free from violence, rights to freedom of expression and access to information, and rights to privacy and data protection. See Box 1 for a summary of applicable human rights law. In conflict-affected settings, TFGBV may also violate international humanitarian law when used by parties to a conflict. A report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression examining the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet affirmed that the same rights people have offline must also be protected online.[5]

Human rights are expressed, promoted and guaranteed by national laws, regional and international treaties, norms and standards and other sources of international law. States and other duty-bearers are responsible for promoting, protecting and fulfilling women's human rights in relation to TFGBV as set out in international human rights law, including through domestication of international law into national laws. States are also responsible for implementing other measures to protect women and girls from GBV, including in settings where there are inadequate legal frameworks and/or acts of TFGBV are not criminalized. In humanitarian contexts, international actors may have responsibilities for upholding women's human rights in relation to GBV, including when perpetrated using technology. Importantly, as the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women highlights, private sector actors, including Internet platforms and services, also have responsibilities to protect women's human rights in relation to TFGBV.[6]

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4   Dunn (2020); A/HRC/38/47, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspectiv*e: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1641160?ln=en#record-files-collapse-header

5   APC. See A/HRC/RES/20/8, available at: undocs.org/en/A/HRC/RES/20/8

6   A/HRC/38/47, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences on online violence against women and girls*

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Box 1: International human rights law applicable to online violence against women and girls[7]

The right to live free from gender-based violence

International and regional human rights instruments set out States' obligations to combat all forms of discrimination against women, including online violence against women, and to protect their human rights, including every woman's right to be free from violence. The core women's human right instruments, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, predate the development of the Internet and ICT, and consequently the emerging forms of online violence against women. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women has been progressively analysed by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, which has addressed ICT-facilitated violence against women in several general recommendations and concluding observations.

The right to freedom of expression and access to information

Freedom of expression, enshrined in article 19 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees the right of everyone "to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his/her choice", is now exercised in the digital space with the use of ICT and the Internet, including the right to seek, receive and impart information freely on the Internet without censorship or other interference. Access to information includes access to ICT, which is often marked by gender inequality or a gender digital divide, namely, gender-based discrimination against women with regard to their access to and use of ICT, which hinders women's full enjoyment of their human rights. Women's access to ICT is part of their right to freedom of expression, and is necessary for the fulfilment of other basic human rights, such as the rights to participate in political decision-making and to non-discrimination.

The right to privacy and data protection

Many forms of online violence are per se acts of gender-based violence that violate women's and girls' rights to privacy; for example, the publication or posting online without consent of intimate photographs or Photoshopped images that are sexualized or have been created to humiliate, shame or stigmatize a woman is a violation of a woman's right to dignity and to live a life free from violence. In a recent report, the Special Rapporteur on the right to privacy highlighted the need to examine cyberviolence against the more vulnerable, including domestic violence enabled by digital devices, risks to the privacy of young children and embedded gender and other biases in algorithms (A/HRC/37/62).

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Acts of TFGBV may constitute sexual exploitation and abuse

Some acts of TFGBV may constitute sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) as set out the Secretary General's Bulletin on Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse[8] which applies to all UN agencies and their personnel, contractors and implementing partners. In addition to the harms caused by SEA to survivors and their families, it poses a reputational, financial and security risk to humanitarian agencies. Humanitarian and development actors have responsibilities to protect affected people from SEA and to take action when they have knowledge or suspicion of an incident. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Statement of Commitment on Eliminating Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by UN and non-UN Personnel (2006)[9] and the subsequent statement in 2015[10] highlights SEA as a serious human rights violation and clearly states that all humanitarian organizations have a fundamental responsibility to take action on SEA.

TFGBV is silencing women's voices and decreasing their online presence and participation

Experiences of online violence are impacting women and girls' online engagement, behavior and participation. Those directly targeted often withdraw from online engagement, platforms and services, and other women and girls who witness TFGBV commonly modify their own online behavior, restricting and censoring what they post online, and withdrawing from digital spaces and services due to concerns they too will be targeted with threats, intimidation, stalking and abuse online. As a result of TFGBV, women and girls "self-censor and reduce or end their participation in digital spaces and leadership roles. The systemic impact of this silencing reinforces patriarchal gender roles, discourages women from taking up leadership roles, and reduces online content related to equality and human rights".[11] Research on online violence in the UK undertaken by Glitch details how civil society organisations and human rights activists have documented the silencing effect of online abuse, particularly on Black and minority groups. This research found that 41% of white respondents and 48% of Black and minoritized respondents reported spending less time online after facing online abuse.[12] Research undertaken by Amnesty found that 76% of women across eight countries who had experienced abuse or harassment on social media made changes to the way they use social media platforms as a result.[13] This has clear and significant implications for women and girl's political and social engagement, participation and expression, access to information and ability to communicate.[14] In fact, a growing technology gender 'use' gap has been partly attributed to women's concerns over online and ICT privacy, safety and security.[15]

In humanitarian contexts, the Internet is fast becoming a vital source of information and a critical link to services for affected populations, including humanitarian services and programs. ICTs are also an important tool for communication and accountability. If women and girls reduce or avoid online participation due TFGBV, this reduces their access to vital information, resources and services. It also serves as a barrier to their ability to communicate to humanitarian actors about their needs and circumstances, and to hold humanitarian agencies and other duty-bearers to account for fulfilling their rights. In settings where women and girls don't have access to mobile

women and girls from a human rights perspective, p. 11-13.

8   ST/SGB/2003/13: https://undocs.org/ST/SGB/2003/13
9   https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/63377.pdf
10   https://psea.interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/principals_statement_on_psea_2015.pdf
11   Dunn (2020)
12   Glitch UK and End Violence Against Women Coalition (2020) *The Ripple Effect: COVID-19 and the Epidemic of Online Abuse:* https://glitchcharity.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Glitch-The-Ripple-Effect-Report-COVID-19-online-abuse.pdf
13   Amnesty International (2018) *Toxic Twitter*: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-1/
14   Ferrier, M. (2019) *Attacks and Harassment: The Impact on Female Journalists and Their Reporting,* International Women's Media Foundation and Troll-Busters.com: https://www.iwmf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Attacks-and-Harassment.pdf
15   UN Broadband (2015) *Cyber Violence Against Women and Girls: A worldwide wake-up call*, Broadband Commission for Digital Development was launched by the International Telecommunication Union.

phones or other technology, TFGBV is likely to serve as a further barrier to access to technology, as their families seek to protect them from online GBV, therefore further entrenching the digital gender divide.

TFGBV is an impediment to sustainable development and gender equality

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes that ICTs and global interconnected-ness has great potential to accelerate human progress, to bridge the digital divide and to develop knowledge societies. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 focusses on achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls through the elimination of all forms of violence against all women and girls (target 5.2) and on enhancing the use of enabling technology to promote women's empowerment (target 5.9). Moreover, Goal 9 requires States to significantly increase access to ICT and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020. Yet, TFGBV is an impediment to women's economic, social and political empowerment, and therefore to sustainable development and gender equality. TFGBV may even further entrench gender-based discrimination and inequality. Technology will be vital to providing women and girls with equal access to education, health care, decent work, and repre-sentation in political and economic decision-making processes; "not having an online presence is detrimental, at a time when the Internet has assumed greater significance, even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic, in obtaining and maintaining a job, accessing information, exercising democratic rights, having a voice, getting an education and conducting commercial transactions."[16]

Priority actions for preventing and responding to TFGBV in humanitarian contexts

There are clear responsibilities, obligations and accountabilities for different stakeholders to prevent and respond to TFGBV in contexts affected by conflict, disaster and displacement. Priority actions are offered below to encourage humanitarian agencies, donors and online industries to take steps to fulfill their obligations towards promoting the safety, protection and rights of emer-gency-affected women and girls in relation to TFGBV.

Five priority actions for humanitarian agencies

1. **Assume TFGBV is occurring in emergency-affected settings and consult with GBV specialists** to learn about the nature, scope and impacts of TFGBV.

2. **Integrate TFGBV into SEA and safeguarding policies and staff training** and take proactive steps to prevent and respond to technology-facilitated SEA, including through establishing safe reporting mechanisms.

3. **Integrate digital safety and security into human resource and operational policies** and protocols and ensure there are clear guidelines in place to respond if staff members experience or perpetrate TFGBV.

4. **Collaborate with GBViE specialists** to identify how to:
   - Safely integrate TFGBV indicators into humanitarian needs assessments and sectoral response plans;

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16 UN Women (2020) *Online Violence Against Women in Asia: A multi-country study*, p. 50: https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eseasia/docs/publications/2020/12/ap-ict-vawg-report-7dec20.pdf?la=en&vs=4251

- Identify and mitigate TFGBV risks in humanitarian programs and services;
- Establish systems for monitoring and reporting on TFGBV.

5. **Advocate within the humanitarian architecture through clusters and other mechanisms** to:
    - Draw attention and increase commitment to the issue of TFGBV as a protection and human rights issue;
    - Direct resources towards preventing and responding to technology-related abuse and exploitation in emergency settings;
    - Encourage humanitarian agencies and sectors to take proactive steps to mitigate TFGBV risks and respond appropriately when reports of are made, including in relation to their own staff.

Five priority actions for donors

1. **Resource and support the development, testing and piloting** of:
    - Tools for safely undertaking research and assessments on TFGBV in emergency contexts;
    - Guidance and tools for GBV programs and services to integrate TFGBV into case management protocols and practices;
    - Capacity-building strategies to support GBV workers, services and referral networks to safely address TFGBV in humanitarian settings.

2. **Resource national and regional women's rights actors** to convene fora and events and develop advocacy resources in partnership with other stakeholders. Support them to develop networks to share experiences, information, learning and resources on preventing and responding to TFGBV in humanitarian settings.

3. **Influence developments in technology in humanitarian action**, such as the emergence of digitalized identities and digitalized service delivery, through funding initiatives that promote the rights, safety and empowerment of women and girls.

4. **Engage in global discussions on digital data privacy and protection in humanitarian contexts, and advocate across the humanitarian system** for the safety, security and rights of GBV survivors, and women and girls more broadly, to be addressed in guidance and standards regarding digital data and technologies. For example, make sure women and girls' digital safety and rights are considered in program guidance and tools in settings where biometric identity systems are being rolled out.

5. **Support convening of GBViE, digital rights and technology communities**, including private sector actors, at global and regional levels to foster cross-pollination and learning on TFGBV and to identify shared principles and standards to guide the ethical and safe introduction and use of technology in humanitarian settings.

Five priority actions for online and digital industries

1. **Support women and girls' digital inclusion and safety** in emergency-affected settings and from the design phase, contribute to development of applications and other technology solutions to monitor and protect women and girls' safety online and when using ICTs.

2. **Learn about how digital technologies are being used to perpetrate violence and abuse of women and girls in contexts impacted by humanitarian emergencies**. Create ways to hear from women and girls' representatives and organizations in contexts impacted by humanitarian emergencies, as well as from humanitarian actors.

3. **Provide women's rights organizations operating in contexts impacted by humanitarian emergencies** with resources to support them in awareness-raising, education, practical and technical support and skills training for women and girls.

4. **Establish confidential, safe and transparent mechanisms for reporting TFGBV and employ dedicated staff to receive TFGBV complaints from organizations and individuals** in countries impacted by humanitarian emergencies to ensure that workers can adequately assess reports and take-down requests in local languages based on local cultural context.

5. **Take action against perpetrators of TFGBV** to stop them using your platforms to harass and abuse women and girls. Be proactive and establish accessible mechanisms for escalating reports of harassment, abuse and violence, particularly in relation to IBSA, in emergency-affected and fragile contexts.

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The GBV AoR Help Desk

The GBV AoR Helpdesk is a unique research and technical advice service which aims to inspire and support humanitarian actors to help prevent, mitigate and respond to violence against women and girls in emergencies. Managed by Social Development Direct, the GBV AoR Helpdesk is staffed by a global roster of senior Gender and GBV Experts who are on standby to help guide frontline humanitarian actors on GBV prevention, risk mitigation and response measures in line with international standards, guidelines and best practice. Views or opinions expressed in GBV AoR Helpdesk Products do not necessarily reflect those of all members of the GBV AoR, nor of all the experts of SDDirect's Helpdesk roster.

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The GBV AoR Helpdesk

You can contact the GBV AoR Helpdesk by emailing us at:
enquiries@gbviehelpdesk.org.uk

The Helpdesk is available 09.00 to 17.30 GMT Monday to Friday.

Our services are free and confidential.