

## **Violence Against Women Online: Safety Measures**

### **By Catherine Kamatu**

I recently attended a Forum on Internet Freedom in East Africa 2015 in Kampala, where I met several accomplished researchers, activists, lawyers and development works who are paving the way on how internet governance in Africa. This informative session challenged me to interrogate privacy, and in particular – online bullying particularly women, who are considered as a minority group in the internet world.

The [State of Internet Freedom in East Africa 2015](#) was launched at the same forum stated that lack of professionalism and ethics before sharing information online with and publishing personal details was a major cause of privacy and security vulnerabilities in East Africa resulting to cyber bullying. However, the question remains, is the internet not a free platform where people can post whatever they wish? Does this not go against the mantra and guiding principles of Freedom Speech?

Cyberbullying is a major problem for Kenyans online with several cases reported of individuals going through various forms of online abuse. As more people embrace the use of social media, some are turning this into a bullying platform. In 2013, Kenya noted an increase in cyberbullying including use of text messages or emails, posts on social networking sites. This abuse has been on the rise in Kenya with women with high online profiles making up majority of the victims with incidents of cyber stalking, sexual harassment, persistent abusive mobile messages, sex trafficking and humiliating comments that reinforce gender stereotypes.<sup>i</sup>

### **Tackling Cyberbullying**

The Forum provided a good platform for different experts in the internet freedom world to exchange ideas on online security. What struck me most was the availability of simple tricks to avoid online harassment.

I recommend that we as internet users apply the same caution online as we do in our offline lives. Assuming that our computers, phones or any gadgets are our homes, there are several safety measures we could apply to avoid content posted online from hurting us.

**Ensure that you have quality locks:** When operating online it is important to ensure that passwords that are not easily ‘picked’ by people who can access you accounts, this would come in hand to keep away

anybody from posting incorrect information on your timelines. Just as quality locks would keep people away from accessing your home is the same way they would struggle to get into your accounts. Avoid using birthdays, names of family members as passwords. Use letters, numbers and punctuations marks to enhance the strength of passwords.

**Keep doors locked even when you are home:** Even when you are home, you could be in the kitchen preparing a meal but a burglar comes in through the front door and does whatever he so wishes in your house without your knowledge and leaves. The burglar could pick up your private photo album and distribute your photos in public. In this case therefore, avoid leaving your gadgets unattended and accounts logged in while you are away.

**Do not write your full names on your roof top or front door:** When operating online share only what you feel is necessary. Distribute minimal information about yourself. Cyberbullying can escalate to offline abuse if locations are shared. Cyber bullying has sometimes been faced by people who share every kind of information online, from where they work to where they are travelling to.

**Do not welcome strangers to your home:** Opening doors to strangers can be a risky affair. Therefore, one should be cautious when associating with people they do not know online. If the harassment/ bullying comes in form of text messages, comments on social media sites one should use privacy tools to block the intruders.

We can have enriching experiences online even as we practice more caution in our associations. Stay safe!

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.ipsnews.net/2014/01/cyber-bullies-target-kenyas-women/>