Select Gender-Based Violence Literature Reviews: Impact of Information Communication Technology (ICT) on Gender-Based Violence

BACKGROUND
This United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-supported literature review, one of a series of eleven literature reviews contributing to Agency efforts to better understand gender-based violence (GBV) and its impact on the empowerment of girls and women, addresses the research question presented below.

What is the impact of ICT ownership, access, and usage on GBV?
Specifically, what is the relationship between online harassment of women and girls and offline sexual and physical violence against women and girls?

FINDINGS
Evidence confirms that ICT plays a role in online and offline incidences of GBV. The literature review identified several pathways between ICT ownership, access, and usage and both online and offline harassment and GBV. The literature demonstrates: (1) ICTs may directly facilitate offline GBV; (2) offline GBV may be perpetrated to gain access to ICTs for online GBV; and (3) online harassment may incite offline GBV.

What are information communication technologies (ICTs)?
The use of ICTs, particularly as “leapfrog” technology to achieve development targets, is increasingly ubiquitous. Access to 21st century ICTs such as computers, the Internet, mobile phones, and tablets is increasing for individuals worldwide, including in LMICs. This literature review includes three broad categories of ICTs: devices, telecommunication and cellular networks, and networking technologies such as the Internet. Of particular relevance to GBV prevention and response, ICTs can also be classified along a spectrum of the victim’s engagement: direct (e.g., messaging), indirect (e.g., public information used by a perpetrator), or no engagement (e.g., spyware).

The types of harassment experienced online often follow patterns of offline abuse. These include insults, unsolicited sexual advances, surveillance, and threats of physical harm. Online abuse is categorically gendered, as feminine usernames are more likely to receive sexually explicit or threatening messages. Interventions on online GBV should include education and awareness. Civil society interventions may include working across service providers to strengthen support networks for victims. Advocacy may shed light on the impact of ICT-facilitated GBV in the online and offline lives of survivors, and foster culture changes towards rejecting GBV activities. Web-based interventions may include anti-spyware tools and design that supports victim control of devices and accounts.

Globally, legal systems are not equipped to respond to cases in which ICTs facilitate GBV. Because online harassment is not broadly criminalized, it is often inadequately investigated. At the country-level, legislation related to violence against women must be updated to include digital harms, as well as related offline abuse.

The growth of ICT-based interventions for GBV has far outpaced the evidence base in all global settings. Inadequate formative research and monitoring and evaluation —
particularly in LMICs – limits evidence-based uptake of the myriad of interventions. This gap extends to ICT-based interventions more broadly, which may be developed and evaluated in high income countries and parachuted into other settings without evaluating generalizability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Technology-facilitated GBV requires cross-sector collaboration to design and implement effective practice, policy, and legal responses. While limited evidence suggests many individuals experience online GBV and online GBV may lead to offline GBV, data needed for understanding the etiology of these phenomena are insufficient. Several steps towards standardizing the measurement of ICT-facilitated GBV are underway, including the development of indicators. Methods for measuring ICT-facilitated GBV are also necessary for evaluating the efficacy of interventions.

Prevention efforts should begin during the design phase of ICTs, particularly for digital tools that may have dual uses, and should include perspectives of GBV-affected populations. Ongoing assessments of the potential uses of ICTs for abuse are needed in the context of rapidly evolving technologies, and in consideration of the potential to combine technologies for new uses. Private, public, and non-profit actors can work together to mitigate the use of ICTs for perpetrating GBV. Interventions may comprise digital tools, online and offline services, and campaigns to shift social norms related to GBV.

FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

- Identify cultural and social practices that normalize and/or perpetuate GBV.
- Strengthen support for GBV survivors by networking service providers.
- Raise awareness about the harms of online and offline GBV.

FOR TECHNOLOGY-BASED INTERVENTIONS

- Incorporate GBV prevention into ICT development.
- Design anti-spyware that is effective in identifying dual-use apps.
- Adapt online social networks to respond to the dynamics of real-world relationships.
- Support the rights of survivors by ensuring data agency, redress, and rectification.
- Provide technical support for digital safety training services.

FOR THE LEGAL SECTOR

- Introduce legislation to effectively respond to online GBV.
- Include online GBV in protection orders for offline abuse.
- Develop international legal frameworks to prevent and address online and online-facilitated GBV.

FOR RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS

- Address the evidence gap in knowledge of the relationship between ICTs and GBV, particularly at the population level.
- Design standards for data collection relevant to ICTs and GBV, including distinguishing online and offline GBV. Rigorously evaluate interventions for ICT-facilitated GBV.

Please use this link to access the full report in the USAID Development Experience Clearinghouse (DEC):