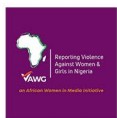




AWiM Report 2025

Policy Brief on Regulatory and Policy Interventions to Improve the Online Safety of Women Journalists.



Publication Information

AWiM extends its heartfelt gratitude to the research participants, particularly the women journalists, who generously gave their time, shared their knowledge, and entrusted us with their stories. We are profoundly grateful to the various contributors—including interview and focus group participants, and online survey respondents—whose collaboration was essential in co-creating this research report.

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Definitions and Acronyms

Definitions:

Violence against women is defined as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life”

Violence against women also includes “all acts perpetrated against women which cause or could cause them physical, sexual, psychological, and economic harm, including the threat to take such acts; or to undertake the imposition of arbitrary restrictions on or deprivation of fundamental freedoms in private or public life in peacetime and during situations of armed conflicts or of war”. The Maputo Protocol states explicitly that all references to women include girls.

VAWG is defined as “violence that is directed at an individual based on their gender, and it is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men”. It is rooted in gender inequality and discrimination, perpetuating the subordinate status of women in society.

Acronyms:

AWiM: African Women in Media.

CEDAW: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

CJID: Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development.

ILO: International Labour Organisation.

OSCE: Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

UNDP: United Nations Development Programme.

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

UNFPA: United Nations Population Fund.

VAPP: Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015.

VAWG: Violence Against Women and Girls.

WHO: World Health Organization.

Executive Summary

Women journalists increasingly face online harassment—including threats, doxxing, and gender-based abuse—that hinders their safety, silences their voices, and undermines press freedom. Existing laws in Nigeria, such as the Cybercrimes Act and the recently enacted Nigeria Data Protection Act, offer partial protection but fail to address targeted online violence and enforcement remains weak. Media organizations also often lack clear policies or digital security measures, leaving women journalists vulnerable. To safeguard their rights, legal reforms must explicitly criminalize online gender-based harassment, law enforcement needs specialized training, and media institutions should implement robust safety policies. Enhanced data collection, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and clear reporting platforms are essential to ensure women journalists can work freely and safely in the digital age.

Introduction



The digital revolution has profoundly transformed journalism, offering unprecedented opportunities for communication, information dissemination, and engagement (Posetti et al., 2017). However, this transformation has also brought significant challenges, particularly in the realm of online safety. As journalists increasingly rely on the transformative power of digital platforms, they face new forms of risk, including cyberbullying, harassment, and threats that compound the existing challenges they face in traditional media environments (Chen et al., 2020). Women journalists, in particular, face unique and intensified risks compared to their male counterparts, with online violence and technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) becoming major concerns (UNESCO, 2020). The anonymity and expansive reach of digital platforms have exacerbated these issues, particularly when women journalists report on sensitive topics such as politics, elections, human rights, social policy, gender, and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) (Koliska & Steinke, 2018). Women journalists frequently encounter gender-based harassment online, including sexist comments, sexual threats, and derogatory remarks aimed at undermining their credibility and silencing their voices (Henrichsen et al., 2015). Additionally, the practice of doxing—where personal information such as home addresses or phone numbers is deliberately exposed online—further jeopardizes their safety, potentially leading to physical threats and invasions of privacy (Gardiner, 2018). Threats of physical violence, including rape and murder, are used to intimidate women journalists, deterring them from covering sensitive or controversial issues (Nash et al., 2017).

The fear of online harassment and violence can result in self-censorship, where women journalists may avoid covering certain topics to protect themselves (UNESCO, 2020). This self-censorship not only diminishes the diversity and depth of journalistic coverage but also negatively impacts public discourse and democratic governance (Posetti et al., 2017). Despite growing awareness of these risks,

many countries lack adequate regulatory and policy frameworks to address the challenges journalists face in the digital age (Fenton, 2018). Existing laws often predate the rise of digital platforms and do not fully account for the complexities of online harassment and abuse (McGonagle, 2019).

Despite growing awareness of these risks, many countries lack adequate regulatory and policy frameworks to address the challenges journalists face in the digital age. For example, the United States' Communications Decency Act (CDA) Section 230, which was designed to protect internet service providers from being held liable for user-generated content, has been criticized for allowing platforms to avoid responsibility for online harassment and abuse (Citron & Wittes, 2017). Similarly, the UK's Malicious Communications Act 1988, although addressing certain forms of harmful online behaviour, falls short in dealing with the specificities of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) (Henry & Powell, 2016). In India, the Information Technology (IT) Act 2000 provides a legal framework for cybersecurity, but it lacks provisions specifically addressing the unique vulnerabilities of women journalists facing online harassment (Chaturvedi, 2016).



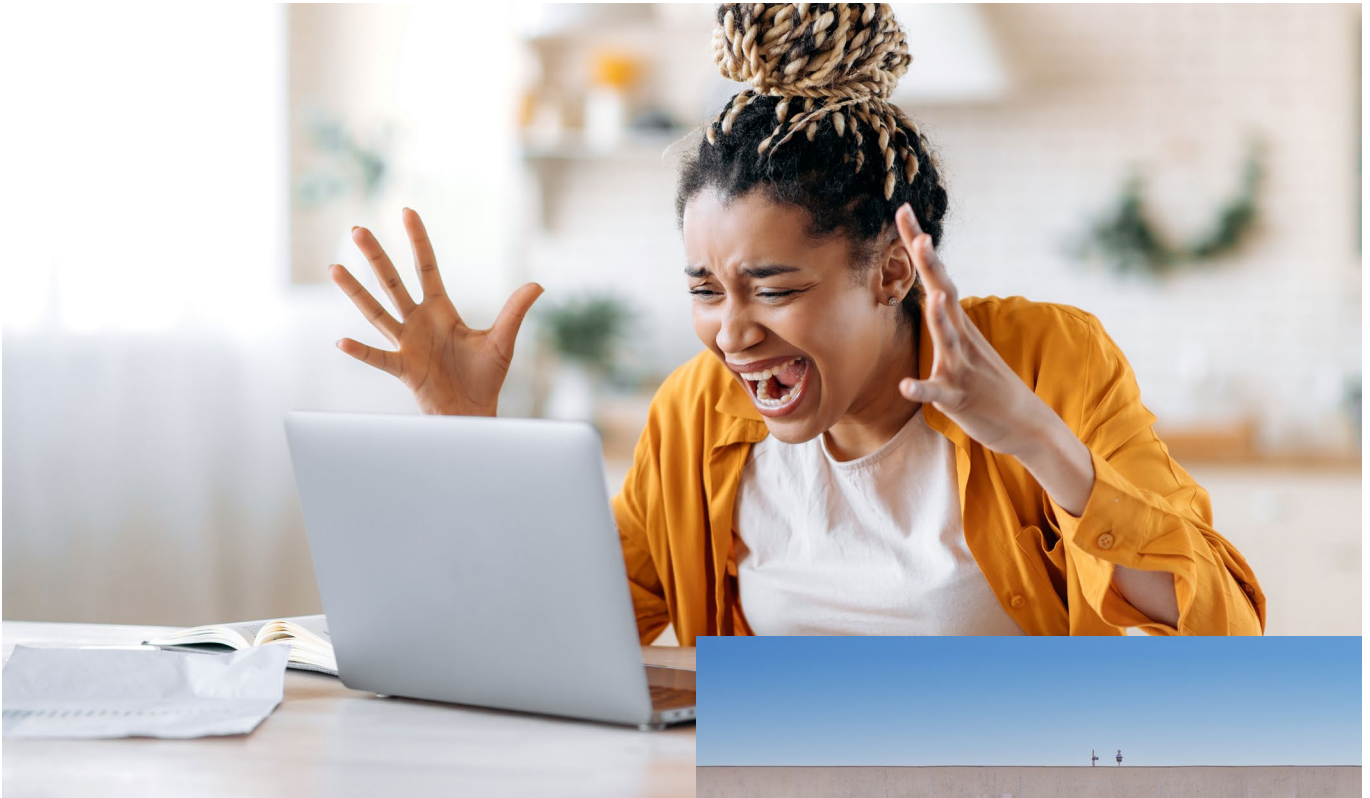
Researchers and analysts highlight that many of these laws were established before the rise of social media and digital platforms, failing to account for the distinct and evolving nature of online violence (Gillespie, 2018). Moreover, even where laws exist, their enforcement can be inconsistent. Law enforcement agencies often lack the necessary training, technological expertise, or resources to effectively investigate and prosecute online threats. For instance, research indicates that police and judicial systems frequently underestimate or dismiss the severity of online harassment, particularly when it involves gendered attacks, thereby fostering a sense of impunity among perpetrators (Jane, 2017). This legal and enforcement gap creates an environment where online abuse, particularly against women journalists, remains unchecked, further silencing their voices and diminishing media freedom.



Moreover, media organisations and institutions frequently lack comprehensive policies or support mechanisms for journalists facing online threats, leaving them without sufficient legal, psychological, or crisis support. One key reason for this deficiency is the financial and resource constraints many media organisations face, especially in regions with limited funding for journalism (Posetti et al., 2021). In resource-limited regions, both traditional and digital media outlets often operate on tight budgets, with little capacity to invest in comprehensive safety and security programs for their staff (Clark & Grech, 2017). According to a study by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), fewer than 30% of news organisations globally have digital security protocols in place, largely because of the costs associated with maintaining robust cybersecurity measures (Posetti, 2017).

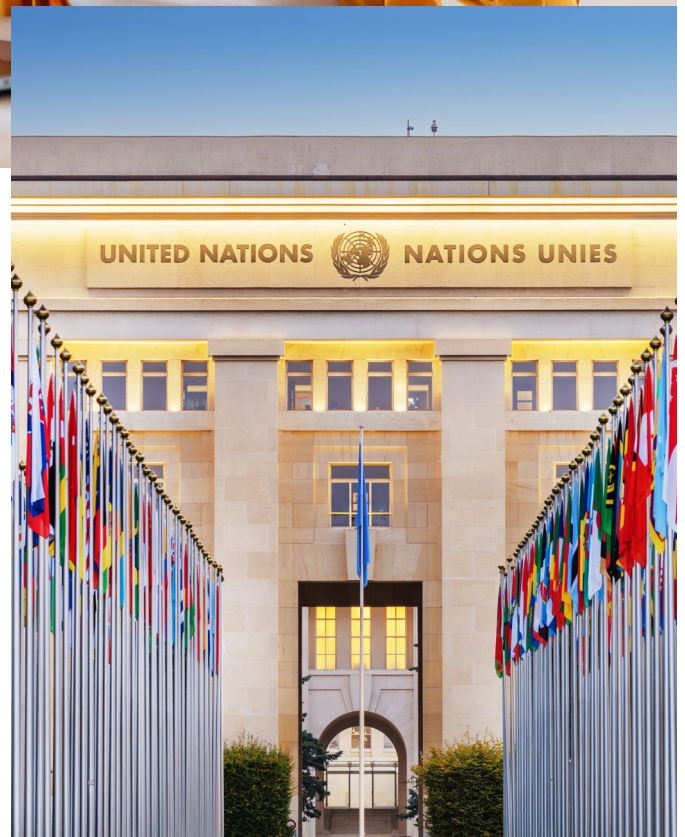
Further exacerbating this issue is the lack of awareness or prioritization of digital security threats by media organisations, many of which focus more on physical security concerns, such as hostile environments or conflict zones, rather than online threats (PEN America, 2021). Media managers often lack the knowledge or understanding of how serious online harassment can be, and as a result, they fail to implement policies that adequately protect their staff (Westcott, 2019).

Additionally, there is a cultural issue within newsrooms where online abuse is sometimes perceived as “part of the job,” particularly for women journalists (Ferrier, 2018). This dismissive attitude can lead to a failure to offer the necessary psychological or crisis support, further isolating journalists who experience online abuse. Research by Ferrier (2018) found that 63% of women journalists who faced online harassment received no support from their employers, highlighting the scale of the problem.



The lack of training in digital security is another significant factor. A study by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) revealed that journalists in many low-income countries receive little to no training on how to protect themselves from cyber-attacks, phishing schemes, or digital surveillance (CPJ, 2020). This makes them particularly vulnerable to cyber-attacks, harassment, and doxing, as they may not be equipped with the skills to safeguard their personal information or online presence (International Federation of Journalists [IFJ], 2020).

The safety of journalists is crucial for a functioning democracy. When journalists, especially women, are threatened or silenced, it undermines the public's access to accurate information and hampers the media's ability to hold power accountable. The erosion of journalistic freedom not only impacts individual journalists but also affects public trust and democratic governance. In response to these challenges, various international initiatives and frameworks have emerged. The United Nations Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity provides a comprehensive



approach to protecting journalists worldwide (United Nations, 2019). Regional policies such as the European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA) and the UK's Online Safety Bill also represent efforts to create regulatory environments that address online abuse and enhance digital safety (European Commission, 2020). Support organisations like the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF) offer emergency assistance and advocate for journalists' rights globally.



In Africa, similar concerns have prompted initiatives from regional bodies like the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The African Union's Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa (2019) emphasizes the safety of journalists, including measures to combat impunity and ensure legal protections for media workers. However, the implementation of these policies often faces challenges due to weak governance structures and limited political will (Dunu, 2020). ECOWAS has made efforts through its Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which supports media freedom and the protection of journalists within its member states, yet enforcement remains inconsistent across the region (Sesay, 2016).

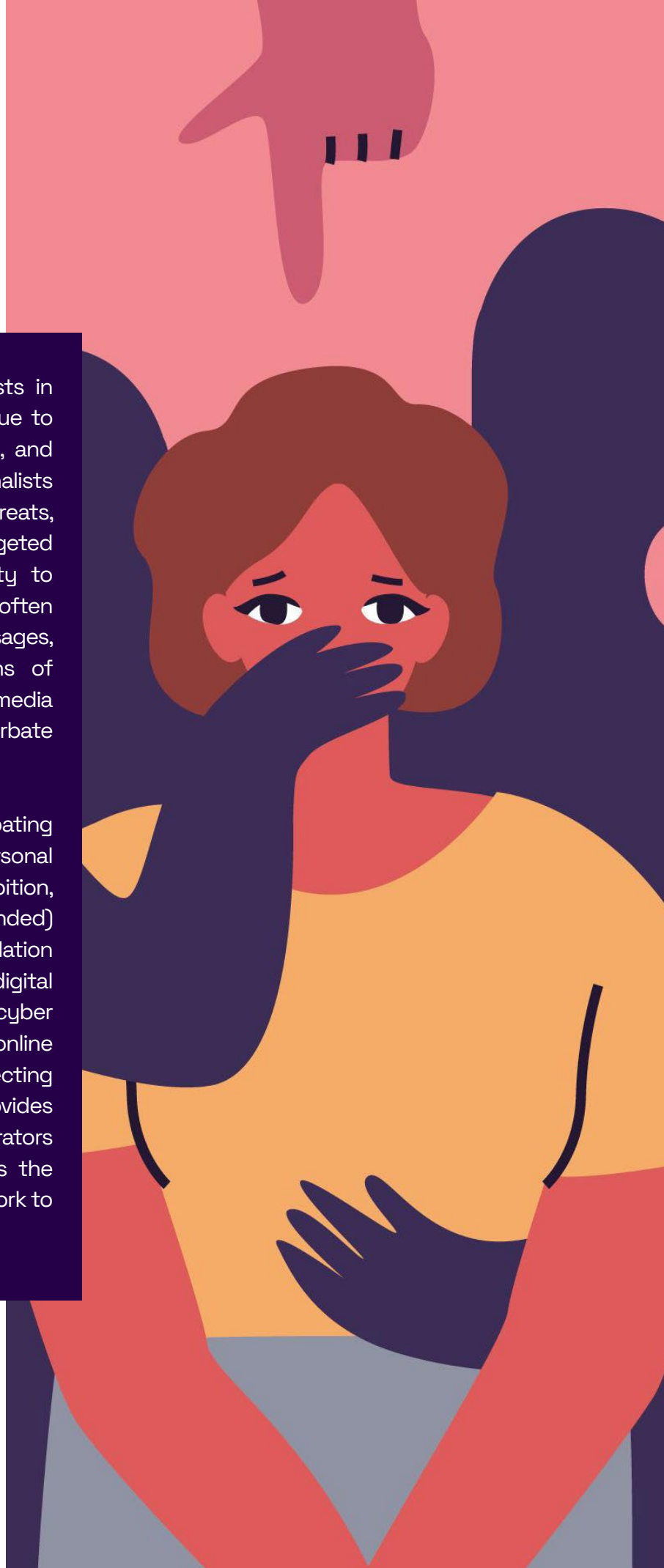
Specific countries, such as Uganda, have attempted to implement their own policies to address journalist safety, particularly in the digital age. However, Uganda's Computer Misuse Act, designed to regulate online content, has been criticized for its use as a tool for stifling dissent and silencing critical voices, including journalists (Freedom House, 2021). Similarly, laws in countries like Ethiopia and Zimbabwe, although purporting to regulate digital spaces, have often been used to target journalists under the guise of combating misinformation (Article 19, 2020). These examples highlight the tension between creating frameworks for protecting journalists and the risk of such laws being misused for censorship.

Western approaches to addressing online abuse of journalists are also being applied in African contexts, but these efforts are frequently hampered by the region's unique challenges, such as resource constraints, political instability, and weak legal systems (Alemu, 2021). In response, some African civil society organisations, such as the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Media Law Reform Project, have advocated for greater protections for journalists, particularly women, emphasizing the need for localised solutions that address both physical and digital safety concerns (MFWA, 2020).

Current Situation

The online safety of women journalists in Nigeria is increasingly compromised due to a complex interplay of legal, societal, and technological factors. Women journalists face a growing number of online threats, including harassment, stalking, and targeted attacks, which undermine their ability to work freely and safely. These threats often manifest in forms such as abusive messages, doxxing, and coordinated campaigns of intimidation, particularly on social media platforms where anonymity can exacerbate the risks (Ogunyemi, 2023).

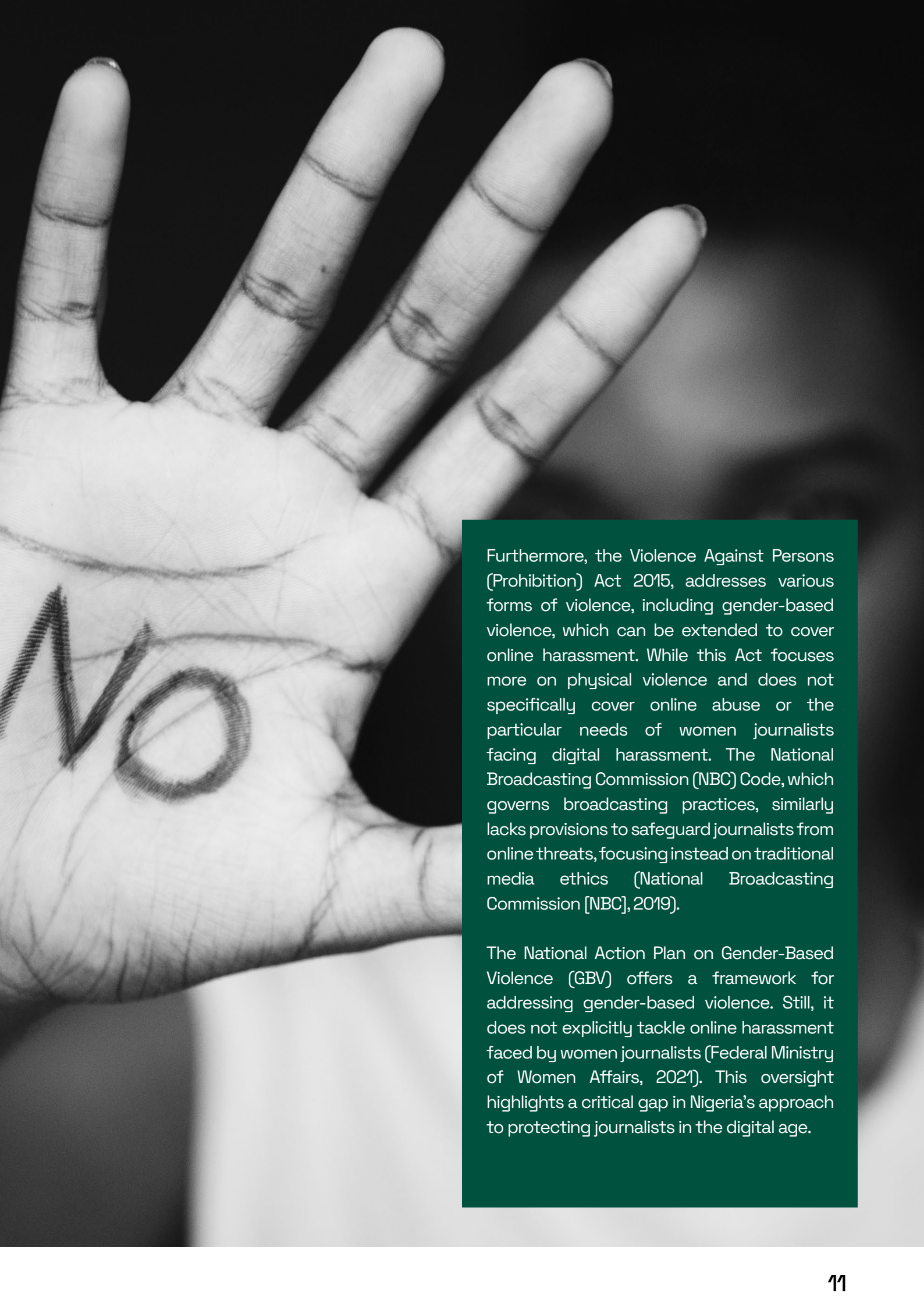
Some legal frameworks aimed at combating cybercrimes and protecting personal data, such as the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, Etc.) Act of 2015 (as amended) which is a significant piece of legislation addressing online threats and digital security. This Act criminalises various cyber offenses, including cyberstalking and online harassment, which are relevant to protecting journalists from online abuse. It provides a legal basis for prosecuting perpetrators of digital harassment and establishes the National Cybercrime Reporting Framework to handle such cases.



Likewise, the Nigerian Data Protection Regulation (NDPR) 2019 has been a key framework for safeguarding personal data and privacy, mandating that organisations, including those in journalism, adhere to principles of data protection. This regulation is particularly relevant in preventing doxxing and the unauthorized dissemination of personal information, providing protections against cyberattacks and privacy breaches. However, while the NDPR offers robust privacy protections, it does not specifically address the gender-specific harassment that female journalists face, nor does it cater to the unique online safety needs of journalists, particularly regarding the misuse of personal data in gender-based harassment (National Information Technology Development Agency [NITDA], 2019). Since its introduction, there have been updates. In June 2023, the Nigeria Data Protection Act (NDPA) was enacted, replacing the NDPR and further strengthening data protection laws. This new Act broadens the scope of personal data protection and introduces new mechanisms, such as the establishment of the Nigeria Data Protection Commission (NDPC), tasked with enforcing compliance and addressing data breaches. While these updates enhance overall privacy protections, they still do not explicitly focus on issues such as gender-based harassment or the unique risks faced by female journalists in online spaces.

The Nigerian Constitution (1999) enshrines the fundamental rights of citizens, including freedom of expression, which is essential for journalism. Section 39 guarantees the right to freedom of expression and the press. However, these constitutional protections are often insufficient in the digital realm, where the nature of threats against journalists—especially women—is constantly evolving (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). Women journalists are particularly vulnerable to online violence, including threats of sexual violence, gender-based insults, and privacy invasions. This contributes to a hostile work environment, discouraging them from reporting and expressing their views freely (Adeniran, 2023). It is important to discuss these challenges in the digital age, focusing on the unique risks faced by women journalists in Nigeria, including the intersection of gender-based violence and press freedom.





Furthermore, the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015, addresses various forms of violence, including gender-based violence, which can be extended to cover online harassment. While this Act focuses more on physical violence and does not specifically cover online abuse or the particular needs of women journalists facing digital harassment. The National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) Code, which governs broadcasting practices, similarly lacks provisions to safeguard journalists from online threats, focusing instead on traditional media ethics (National Broadcasting Commission [NBC], 2019).

The National Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) offers a framework for addressing gender-based violence. Still, it does not explicitly tackle online harassment faced by women journalists (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2021). This oversight highlights a critical gap in Nigeria's approach to protecting journalists in the digital age.

Despite these legal frameworks, there are challenges in their enforcement and application, some fall short of addressing specific and evolving threats faced by women journalists, particularly in the digital context. Implementing these laws often encounters issues such as inadequate resources, insufficient training for law enforcement, and inconsistent application across different jurisdictions. Online violence is now an occupational hazard for journalists therefore, efforts to enhance the safety of journalists, particularly women, in Nigeria would benefit from a comprehensive review and strengthening of laws, policies and work procedures.

Nigeria is a signatory to relevant international and regional treaties which provide standards the country must adopt to ensure the safety and protection of journalists. Nigeria has also ratified the ILO C190-Violence and Harassment Convention which sets standards for improving the work environment including tackling gender-based violence and harassment.

Policy Recommendation

The following recommendations are founded on the facts documented in the study *Confronting the Hidden Crisis in Media: Violence Against Women and Girls in Nigerian Media*:

a. The need to amend existing laws, such as the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention etc.) Act of 2015, to explicitly include provisions that address online harassment and abuse specifically targeting women journalists. This would involve defining and criminalizing online gender-based harassment, including doxxing, stalking, and threats of violence. Moreover, the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act should be expanded to cover digital forms of violence, ensuring that online harassment and other TFGVB are recognized as serious offences under Nigerian law. The Nigerian Legislature should ensure that the laws are fully compliant with Nigeria's obligations and commitments under international human rights law and that amendments do not limit the ability of women journalists to carry out their work independently and without undue interference.

b. The ultimate need for Law enforcement agencies to be given specialized training to aid their understanding of the unique nature of online threats faced by women journalists. This training should encompass how to effectively investigate and prosecute cases of online violence and preserve and document evidence while ensuring that survivors are treated with sensitivity and that their cases are taken seriously.

c. A dedicated platform for women journalists to report incidents of online violence and seek support. This platform could be managed by a coalition of media organisations, civil society groups, and government agencies, providing a safe space for reporting incidents and access to legal, psychological, and technical support. This mechanism should also include a rapid response system to address urgent threats and ensure the safety of the journalists involved.

d. Media organisations should provide regular digital literacy and online safety training for women journalists and also adopt and enforce gender-sensitive online safety and workplace policies that protect women journalists from gender-based violence (online and offline) thereby fostering a culture of zero tolerance towards gender-based violence and discrimination within their operations.

e. Internet communications providers and technology companies should ensure that they have clear policies on what constitute online violence, provide reporting systems, and ensure that complaints from women journalists are investigated promptly and addressed effectively and in line with international standards of protection for journalists.

f. Create systems for collecting data, such as databases, to enable the collection of verified information on attacks and gender-based violence against women journalists. This can be coordinated or maintained by relevant agencies like the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), and the Nigerian Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ). Involving NAWOJ is essential, as it represents the specific interests of female journalists and can play a critical role in documenting cases of gender-based violence and advocating for better protections. By collaborating with these organisations, a more comprehensive and accurate system for reporting and addressing such issues can be developed.

g. Government agencies, media organisations, and civil society should work in synergy to advocate for stronger policies that protect women journalists online. This includes advocating for the implementation of existing laws and the development of new policies where gaps exist. Collaborative efforts should also focus on raising public awareness about the issue of online violence and its impact on press freedom, particularly for women journalists.

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