



What Works to Prevent Cyber Violence against Women and Girls?

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Query: What has worked to help to prevent cyber violence against women and girls, including digital tech based solutions? (e.g. increasing social networks, advocacy such as #metoo, online information and support)

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1 Overview

Cyber violence against women and girls (Cyber VAWG) is a new and emerging form of violence and the term is used to describe how the internet and information and communication technologies exacerbate and magnify acts of violence against women and girls. It includes hacking, impersonation, surveillance/tracking, harassment/spamming, recruiting victims into violent situations, and malicious distribution of intimate photos and messages. This document presents findings from a rapid review of available literature on what has worked to prevent cyber violence against women and girls. It is accompanied by a parallel query (Q211) on the nature and prevalence of cyber VAWG.

Key findings include:

- **There is limited data on cyber VAWG in general, and particularly on what works to prevent it.** This is partly due to this being a relatively new phenomenon, as well as some of the challenges in researching a complex global phenomenon – exacerbated by the difficulties in making comparisons over time and place due to different types of online violence, definitions, and research methodologies. In particular, there are gaps in looking at the effectiveness of different measures for women and girls who are particularly vulnerable to cyber VAWG, such as adolescent girls, women who experience violence offline (e.g. domestic violence), racial and ethnic minorities, people of diverse sexualities and gender identities, human rights defenders and activists, those in the public sphere (e.g. women politicians and journalists) (see Section 2).
- **There are powerful international human rights frameworks which could be used to prevent cyber VAWG,** even though they predate the growth of the internet, such as 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. In addition, there have been various UN resolutions recognising cyber VAWG in the international human rights framework on women's rights and violence against women, as noted by the *Special*

Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Ms. Dubravka Šimonović (Human Rights Council, 2018) (see Section 3.1).

- **However, the effectiveness of international human rights frameworks and laws is constrained by gaps in specialised national legislative and policy measures, mechanisms, procedures and expertise/skills.** Even in relatively well-resourced contexts like the UK there are challenges to the police effectively using the right approaches/digital tools (see Section 3.2).
- **There are guidelines for social media companies but there are severe problems in getting them to enforce them/follow up.** The challenges of holding private sector technology companies to account are illustrated using the case of Twitter (see Section 3.3).
- **School-based interventions have potential to take primary prevention of cyber VAWG to scale,** by reaching large numbers of young people at a time when norms around gender and online violence are being shaped. Although systematic reviews have observed an increase in knowledge and decreases in risky behaviour, there are limited studies looking at long-term sustainability of changes and most studies are based in the US or Canada. There is a need for school-based prevention programming around cyber safety to better integrate gender (see Section 3.4).
- **Various apps and online tools have been developed, but these are mostly not evaluated.** Apps have tended to focus on making women feel safer in public spaces and rarely address the deeply rooted social norms that underlie violence against women and girls (online and offline). Online resources exist for young people, but rarely address gendered dimensions of cyber harassment and violence, for example incorporating learning about what constitutes online sexual harassment and healthy online relationships (see Section 3.5).
- **Importance of contextualised, bottom up responses which acknowledge and address socio-cultural norms.** For example, Take Back the Tech! provides space to allow campaigners to respond to local priorities rather than a top down, centralised approach. A study of Love Matters (an online provider of sex education on web, mobile and social media platforms in China, Egypt, Kenya, Mexico and India) has highlighted the importance of understanding audiences in different contexts, and the role of traditional and invisible online gatekeepers, and young people themselves, in shaping sources of information online which can help women and girls protect themselves from cyber VAWG (Oosterhoff et al, 2017; see Section 3.6).
- **Social media and the internet have also been used by women for online advocacy to combat VAWG.** Hashtags such as #MeToo can inspire reflection and a space to share experiences, challenge social norms, demand legal and policy change, create networks of cooperation, as well as adapt to different legal and cultural factors, forms of violence and responses, as examples from China, India, Kenya and Japan (see Section 3.7). However, there is limited evidence on their effectiveness, partly due to the methodological difficulties of measuring impact, for example shifts in attitude and behaviour, and attributing them to a hashtag. In addition, further research is needed to understand how online advocacy and activism links to offline social movement building, who is excluded due to inequitable access to the internet, and how to prevent women and girls who speak out on the internet and social media platforms from facing further violence and harassment.

2 Methodology

This rapid research query has been conducted as systematically as possible, under the given time constraints (four days). The methodology is described below.

Search strategy: Evaluations were identified through searches using Google, 'Duck, Duck, Go', Google Scholar, PubMed and relevant electronic databases. Key search terms included: 'cyber violence', GBV, violence, digital, technology, women, evaluation, research, study, intervention.

Criteria for inclusion: To be eligible for inclusion in this rapid mapping, literature had to fulfil the following criteria:

- Focus: Strategies and interventions to help prevent cyber violence against women and girls, including digital technology based solutions, with a focus on literature from lower and middle income countries.
- Time period: completed between June 2000 and October 2018.
- Language: English.
- Publication status: publicly available – in almost all cases published online.

In addition, two experts were also consulted; Nogah Ofer from the [Centre for Women's Justice](#) UK, and Jerker Edström from the [Gender Cluster at the Institute of Development Studies \(IDS\)](#).

Limitations:

- Availability of evidence: Literature on what works to prevent cyber VAWG is generally limited to case study examples, with few evaluations or studies conducted. Obtaining more detailed insights from a wider range of organisations working in the digital technology sector would be likely to involve interviews with key organisations and requests to share any available monitoring data or research conducted.
- Methodological limitations: A challenge in understanding what works to prevent cyber VAWG is the rapidly evolving technological context, in terms of both types of violence and harassment, as well as tools and approaches. As noted in Q211, different definitions of violence, survey questions asked, and research methodologies make it difficult to compare the effectiveness of approaches across time and location.
- Geographical limitations: More examples of approaches to prevent cyber VAWG exist for North America, and Europe (including the UK), with some literature from South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. No research was identified from the Middle East and North Africa during the research process.
- Quality: Using DFID's (2014) How to Guide on Assessing the Strength of Evidence¹, the overall body of evidence on what works to prevent cyber VAWG in low and middle-income countries is assessed to be 'limited' in size and scope, with low levels of consistency. The studies that have been published on what works largely focus on a few case study examples and vary in quality; few look comparatively across countries or regions, and even fewer examine change over time, or how sustainable this change is.

¹ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/291982/HTN-strength-evidence-march2014.pdf

- Gaps in looking at the effectiveness of different measures for women and girls who are particularly vulnerable to cyber VAWG: As noted in Q211, there is some emerging evidence showing that some groups are particularly at risk of cyber violence and harassment, including younger women and adolescent girls, women who experience VAWG ‘offline’ (particularly intimate partner violence), racial and ethnic minorities, people of diverse sexualities and gender identities, gender and sexual rights activists, and ‘public’ women who are prominent in online and offline environments. There is conflicting evidence on whether women with disabilities are more at risk and whether urban/rural location can exacerbate vulnerabilities. However, no studies were found looking at the effectiveness of different solutions for particular groups of women and girls at risk.

3 Approaches to Preventing Cyber VAWG

The VAWG Helpdesk Report 211 showed that there is “*limited data on the nature and prevalence of cyber VAWG.*” Given the paucity of the data on prevalence of cyber VAWG, it is therefore unsurprising that there is limited data on effective responses. The diverse platforms used as a medium for cyber violence against women – from social media (Amnesty International 2018) (Hudson 2013) to emergent threats from connected devices and the ‘internet of things’ (Vella 2018) – make it challenging to categorise approaches.

However the five characteristics which distinguish cyber VAWG from other forms of violence (Fascendini and Fialová 2011) also offer certain ‘affordances’ (Faith 2018) – or opportunities for action - for approaches to addressing cyber VAWG which are a useful means to categorise and understand this complex and dynamic environment.

Characteristics/Affordance	Approach	Case study
1. Anonymity – The abusive person can remain unknown to the victim/survivor.	Teach women to use digital tools anonymously.	The NGO Chayn developed digital security (CHAYN 2018) guides aimed at women.
2. Action-At-A-Distance – The abuse can be done without physical contact and from anywhere.	The same action at a distance can be used to send solidarity messages.	Hashtags like #BeenRapedNeverReported and #MeToo provide important opportunities for remote support and engagement (Mendes <i>et al.</i> 2018).
3. Automation – Abusive actions using technologies require less time and effort.	Automate delivery of solidarity messages and information through bots.	Beta, a Brazilian feminist robot on Facebook created by Nossas, a national network of citizens’ rights organizations informs everybody who agrees to receive her updates of different legislations or policy drafts on the table that can threaten women’s rights (Hao 2018).
4. Accessibility – The variety and affordability of many technologies make them readily accessible to perpetrators.	The ubiquity of technologies mean low barriers to entry for activists.	Training with grassroots women’s groups in rural Uganda to help them use bulk SMS campaigns to address VAWG (Loyce 2014)

<p>5. Propagation and Perpetuity – Texts and images multiply and exist for a long time or indefinitely</p>	<p>Allow women the possibility of sharing sexual content anonymously: engage with new and traditional gatekeepers, porn distributors and young people themselves (Oosterhoff, Gilder and Mueller 2016)</p>	<p>Brazilian NGO Coding Rights appropriated a 'Send Nudes' meme to create a fun digital security guide (CODING RIGHTS 2015)</p>
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The dynamism of the technological environment and contextual differences in platforms used in different countries makes it challenging to design and evaluate responses that are appropriate to multiple regions and platforms. Each platform offers different affordances, security settings and regulations. Data from 2017 shows the worldwide dominance of WhatsApp Messenger which was installed on over 90% of devices in 45 countries (Bobrov 2018). But this obscures regional variation such as the popularity of the Viber Messaging app in 10 countries as diverse as Ethiopia, Serbia and Tajikistan.

3.1 International legal standards

International human rights law mandates states to exercise due diligence to promote, protect and fulfil human rights and prevent human rights by non-state actors such as transnational corporations. States are required to act towards establishing and safeguarding an online environment that is safe and conducive for engagement for all, and to meaningfully address gender-based harassment. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights states that businesses must '*[a]void causing or contributing to adverse human rights impacts through their own activities, and address such impacts when they occur*' and '*[s]eek to prevent or mitigate adverse human rights impacts that are directly linked to their operations, products or services by their business relationships*' (Human Rights, Big Data and Technology Project 2017).

These responsibilities should be understood within the framework of the notion of 'intermediary liability'. In the context of CyberVAWG, these intermediaries are internet companies who host, transmit and index content; they have legal liability for content contributed by and activities carried out by third parties. Writing about this issue, Aziz (2017) describes the challenges of gauging which data and images constitute violence;

- **Consent** in online contexts is complicated by the exact act to which the consent, if any, relates but focussing on consent recognises that women have the right to sexual expression.
- **Anonymity** is both a positive and negative affordance in that it provides challenges in identifying perpetrators but can also allow victims to re-enter online spaces.

As noted by the *Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Ms. Dubravka Šimonović* (Human Rights Council, 2018), there have been significant soft law developments² in the understanding and

² Soft law instruments "range from treaties, but which include only soft obligations...to non-binding or voluntary resolutions and codes of conduct...to statements prepared by individuals in a non-governmental capacity, but which purport to lay down international principles" (Chinkin, 1989: 851).

recognition of cyber VAWG in the international human rights framework on women's rights and violence against women³. There is limited evidence on the effectiveness of international legal standards in tackling cyber VAWG, and in particular what works best in creating an enabling environment for the effective implementation of international legal standards.

3.2 International policies/local laws and policies

Whilst the above intentions are enshrined in international law, research shows the challenges of addressing these issues at a local level, in terms of the deficiencies of local legislation, lack of mechanisms, procedures and expertise/skills, as well as more general measures to improve women's access to justice⁴ (Aziz, 2017). A report entitled 'Uganda's ICT Laws and Policies from a Gender Perspective' argues that weaknesses in data protection law, in terms of who is permitted by law to collect and own data and under what circumstances it can be used, "*promote online harassment and violence against women as no checks and balances are provided*" within the law. (Owiny and Amuriat 2016)

In India, a study of women and verbal abuse online showed that laws on cyber abuse of women have some value and women used threats of police complaints and sections of the IT Act as tools to fight harassers. However, most of the women interviewed for the study said that they have never resorted to legal measures, and feel that engagements with law enforcement in India were rarely favourable experiences for women (Kovacs et al. 2013). So whilst there is a legal framework to penalise online abuse, there are severe problems with implementation of these laws, in large part owing to entrenched socio-cultural norms. The submission by the Internet Democracy Project on online violence against women to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women recommends that there should not be more laws to address online abuse: "*What is primarily needed in India, therefore, is more discourse, more awareness and a variety of non-legal measures, so as to challenge and ultimately displace these socio-cultural norms. We believe that measures to tackle online abuse must go hand-in-hand with measures to protect women's expression.*" (Chandrasekhar 2017)

In terms of the UK Legal Context, there is specific legal advice from the Crown Prosecution Service on online violence against women and girls, which reflects the challenges of working in this dynamic environment; "*The landscape in which VAWG Crimes are perpetrated is changing. The use of the internet, social media platforms, emails, text messages, smartphone apps (for example, WhatsApp; Snapchat), spyware and GPS (Global Positioning System) tracking software to commit VAWG offences is rising. Online activity is used to humiliate, control and threaten victims, as well as to plan and orchestrate acts of violence*" (The Crown Prosecution Service 2018)

³ For example, in its resolution 20/8, the Human Rights Council (HRC) clearly stated that the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online. In 2015, resolution 29/14 recognised that domestic violence could include acts such as cyberbullying and cyberstalking. In 2016, the General Assembly, in its resolution 71/199, recognized that women were particularly affected by violations of the right to privacy in the digital age, and called upon all States to further develop preventive measures and remedies. In 2017, the Human Rights Council, in its resolution 34/7, reaffirmed this call, noting that abuses of the right to privacy in the digital age may affect all individuals, including with particular effects on women, as well as children and persons in vulnerable situations, or marginalized groups.

⁴ Aziz (2017) has noted that "*Experience has shown that women's access to justice should be a mix of criminal, civil and administrative processes and include the areas of all the 5 P's, namely in prevention of online violence, protection of victims/survivors, prosecution and punishment of perpetrators and provision of redress and reparation for the victims/survivors*" (p.20).

A few studies have noted that the lack of expertise within the police system and police resources is particularly problematic, for example, research in the UK on cyberbullying legislation has noted that: “Police officers are not often experts in technology, and training in online monitoring might not be prominent in their professional history” (Samara et al, 2017: 7). Nogah Ofer, from the UK [Centre for Women’s Justice](#) highlighted the connections between on and offline conduct; a report by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) and HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPIS) found evidence of some elements of the use of digital and/or communications technology in 82 of the 112 harassment and stalking cases reviewed (HM Inspectorates of Constabulary and HM Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) 2017). The same report found that police response to digital crime was ‘inconsistent’ and that ‘*some forces are struggling to respond effectively to crimes that have taken place either online or by other digital media*’. However it showed that police forces that invested in digital solutions were able to provide a significantly better service to victims; for example one police force had software that enabled investigators to take over a victim’s social media account to help acquire evidence of the offending and others were developing tools to enable call handlers to obtain digital evidence available on social media at the outset, before the opportunity was lost.

3.3 Safeguards – working with private sector technology companies

Private sector technology companies have an important role to play in developing and implementing safeguards to protect women and girls from cyber violence. To date, there is limited rigorous evidence looking at how safeguards have been used to prevent cyber VAWG. The challenges of holding private sector technology companies to account are well illustrated using the case of Twitter. Twitter, it has been argued, is one of the platforms where the gap in national media coverage of black women’s issues is filled (Williams 2015). However it is also a site where leading black politicians such as Diane Abbott receive a disproportionate amount of abuse. As she wrote in a recent blog; “*Online abuse does damage you, it damages your confidence, it corrodes your self-esteem and it can make you second guess yourself as to what you talk about and what you write about*” (Abbott 2018). Twitter’s ‘Hateful Conduct’ [policy](#) also provides an overview of the types of behaviours that are not allowed on the platform and encourages users to report content on the platform that they believe is in breach of Twitter’s community standards. Yet, as an Amnesty Report on the subject reports, the company does not state who is responsible for the oversight and implementation of this policy (Amnesty International 2018). Amnesty quote Twitter’s responsibilities under the [United Nations \(UN\) Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#), to assess how its policies and practices impact on users’ right to freedom of expression and opinion as well other rights, and take steps to mitigate or prevent any possible negative impacts.

The Amnesty report made a series of recommendations based around the principle that the company should communicate and reinforce to users which behaviours are not tolerated on the platform and to consistently apply its own rules. Additionally, they suggested the following;

- Twitter should publicly share comprehensive and meaningful information about the nature and levels of violence and abuse against women, as well as other groups, on the platform, and how they respond to it.
- Twitter should improve its reporting mechanisms to ensure consistent application and better response to complaints of violence and abuse.
- Twitter should provide more clarity about how it interprets and identifies violence and abuse on the platform and how it handles reports of such abuse

- Twitter should undertake far more proactive measures in educating users and raising awareness about security and privacy features on the platform that will help women create a safer, and less toxic Twitter experience.

The NGO Glitch!UK recommendations (Glitch!UK 2018) cover

- Better Prevention through Deterrence
- Effective Reporting Process
- Basic Transparency with Users
- Rebuild Trust through Communication
- Enforce Reasonable Retribution

3.4 School-based interventions

School-based interventions aim to prevent cyberviolence by using schools as an entry point for preventing different forms of bullying, abuse and harassment of women and girls online. Schools have huge potential to take primary prevention to scale by reaching a large number of students, teachers and parents in a teaching-learning environment. Schools are also uniquely placed to influence and shape young people's understanding of what sorts of behaviour is acceptable online, at a time when young people are having their first experiences of online abuse and when unequal gender norms and attitudes around violence intensify (Chandra-Mouli et al, 2017).

Systematic reviews on the effectiveness of school-based cyber-abuse interventions targeting children aged 5-19 have observed an increase in internet safety knowledge and decreased risky online behaviour, although there are limited studies examining long-term effects to assess the sustainability of these changes beyond 3-12 months. The evidence base on school-based interventions is assessed to be weak due to a lack of rigorous evaluations (Mishna et al, 2009; Walsh et al, 2015) and most studies are based in the US or Canada. One study has urged a note of caution on the applicability of findings from high-income countries given that internet use amongst children and adolescents differs considerably between high-income and low and middle- income countries (Radford et al., 2014). A further challenge is that gender is not widely mainstreamed into school-based cyber-safety or cyber-bullying programmes, with a lack of evidence of programmes specifically factoring in the gendered dimensions into their design, and a lack of sex disaggregated data (Kangas et al, 2018). Examples of promising practice are shown in the box below.

Case studies of promising practice on school-based interventions

CyberSAFE in Schools Programme, Malaysia includes a focus on online relationships, cyber stalking, cyberbullying and online harassment. It involves a combination of awareness raising activities in schools together with online resources and promoting reporting mechanisms for disclosing online abuse. The programme has reached more than 70,000 primary and secondary school students and 4,000 teachers with more than 850 ICT teachers being trained as 'CyberSAFE ambassadors'. According to a 2013 pre/post survey of students who had taken part, there was a 20% increase in students feeling safe using the internet. 8 out of 10 students felt better able to protect themselves online, and awareness of cyber bullying increased. Data is not disaggregated by gender or disability. The programme is a public/private partnership between DiGi Telecommunications, Childline Malaysia, CyberSecurity Malaysia and the Ministry of Education (Malaysia Ministry of Education, 2013).

i-SAFE curriculum, United States was a multi-component programme delivered in schools in the early 2000s aimed at grades 5-8 and delivered by teachers during class time. A quasi-experimental evaluation found that although children retained the safety messages they received through the i-SAFE programme and were more likely to discuss risks with friends and family, there were no significant changes in online behaviour. Girls had consistently higher scores than boys in knowledge acquisition, having conversations with parents about internet safety, and were less likely to provide personal details to strangers online or display other risky behaviours. Key implementation challenges included time constraints meaning that teachers were not able to deliver the curriculum as intended, and difficulties teaching children with limited computer skills (Chibnall et al., 2006; Mishna et al., 2009).

In many developing countries, traditional gatekeepers of sex education, such as governments, religious leaders and parents, still attempt to keep sexuality out of the public sphere. A recent study of Love Matters – an online provider of sex education on web, mobile and social media platforms in China, Egypt, Kenya, Mexico and India targeting young people aged 18-30 – suggests the need to engage with new and traditional gatekeepers, porn distributors and young people themselves to address online violence (Oosterhoff *et al.* 2016). Recommendations include:

- Conduct action-research with young people on gender and power dynamics underlying the production and distribution of online gender-based and sexual violence – including revenge porn.
- Develop youth-led interventions to reduce digital violence and improve digital literacy.

European research (Project deSHAME 2017) carried out with young people in Denmark, Hungary and the UK found that online sexual harassment is embedded in their digital lives and to some extent normalised and expected. It highlighted some examples of effective multi-sector cooperation in preventing and responding to online sexual harassment including providing effective preventative education and overcoming barriers that prevent young people from reporting, to ensuring that schools, police and others are equipped to effectively handle incidents. The study quotes a 17 year old girl from the UK, commenting on the challenge of identifying harassment “[*We need to learn what ‘sexual harassment’ really is - in regards to being online. Everyone gets comments about being ‘hot’ and what would be classed as sexual comments, but no one really knows where the limit is; no one is aware of what classes as harassment when everything - comments, photos - revolves around sexualising bodies. Then once we can identify it, we can then be taught how to deal with it.*” . A range of suggestions to address this issue are included; from removing the taboo around the topic to clearer descriptions of what constituted online sexual harassment, as well as what constituted healthy online relationships. Embedding a whole school approach where all staff were equipped to deal with any report of online sexual harassment was highlighted. The relationships they had with young people were seen as fundamental, as well as having accessible ways in which young people could report (Project deSHAME 2017).

3.5 Online information and apps

There are a range of tools and guidance available to women and girls; however these are mostly not yet evaluated. Examples include [Chayn’s Do-It-Yourself Online Safety toolkit](#), [Take Back the Tech’s online safety toolkit](#) and [HackBlossom’s DIY Cybersecurity for Domestic Violence’](#). The African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms enshrines the right of women and girls to use ‘individualised tools that allow them to track and limit the availability of personal information about

them online (including public sources of data)' as a response to online violence ('African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms | The African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms' 2014).

In addition, there are a range of online tools, hubs and apps aimed at young people for accessing information and resources to keep safe online. This is often tailored to different age groups, for example, the Cybersafe website in the Phillipines includes information on cyberstalking and harassment in their 'youth' section, and information on managing cyber friends and safeguarding personal information in the 'kids' section. However, online resources for young people rarely address gendered dimensions of cyber harassment and violence, with most tools targeting both boys and girls equally, and no sex-disaggregated data available (Kangas et al, 2018).

Furthermore, there are many apps now available aimed at making public spaces safer for women, mostly by reducing the time taken to contact someone in a dangerous situation. However, most apps do not meaningfully shift deeply rooted norms around gender inequalities and violence. An in-depth study of 50 safety apps in India questioned the effectiveness of these solutions given that most perpetrators of violence are not strangers, as well as raising security and privacy concerns: *'Apps that make it easy to contact the police or a family member in a short time are of no use when cases of sexual assault by a known person can involve wilful ignorance by family members, reluctance of police to meddle in 'family matters', blackmail and any number of other complications'* (Ranganathan and Kovacs, 2017).

A more positive example of the use of online information as part of digital advocacy during the annual ['16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence'](#) (25 Nov - 10 Dec) combines creative and strategic use of digital tools with the issue of VAWG including workshops on online safety, media monitoring on rape reporting, and solidarity actions on the streets. Take Back the Tech! provides space to allow campaigners to respond to local priorities rather than taking a top down, centralised approach.

Finally, a report from the MenEngage Alliance from a roundtable on *Roles and responsibilities of men and boys in response to #MeToo* (MenEngage Alliance 2017) had a series of recommendations for men and boys; *'...developing contextualized toolkits, providing men with concrete actions they can take to bring an end to violence and harassment in their various spheres of influence, from the family, to the workplace and the community. The importance of creating spaces for men to have these difficult conversations with one another was stressed, and of having support networks in order to take collective actions.'*

3.6 Advocacy

Social media and the internet can also create spaces for women to share experiences about violence and harassment, challenge social norms about what is acceptable behaviour, mobilise and claim their rights, demand legal and policy change, as well as creating networks of cooperation online and offline. Women and girls have also used the online space to advocate against harassment and violence, both online and offline, including #BringBackOurGirls, #RapeMustFall, and #NiUnaMenos, and most notably in the recent #MeToo movement, which began trending on Twitter on 24 October 2017. Although the phrase was initiated by African American women's rights activists Tarana Burke in 2006, it gained widespread attention when actress Alyssa Milano used it as a Twitter hashtag in response to allegations of sexual assault by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. Through the #MeToo hashtag, Milano encouraged members of the public to join in to showcase the magnitude of the problem of sexual violence. Capturing both public and media attention, the hashtag was used 12

million times in the first 24 hours alone⁵. The regular, and importantly sustained, use of a hashtag over time can lead to 'repeated exposure' to ideas and message, and inspire reflection and action (Kangere et al, 2017).

However, the evidence on the effectiveness of online advocacy against cyber VAWG remains limited due to the recent nature of this type of advocacy. Measuring attitude and behaviour shifts, and attributing them to a hashtag, is also methodologically complex and there is very limited published research in this area (e.g. Williams 2015; Berridge and Portwood-Stacer 2015). More broadly, understanding the impact and disruption of social networks and advocacy can be even more challenging online, due to the complexities of understanding different nodes, affiliations and coalitions at a large scale (Aavriti, 2018).

Research that has been published (Mendes, Ringrose and Keller, 2018) show that Twitter and online platforms were viewed by many participants as safer and easier spaces for engaging in feminist activism than offline places such as the street, workplaces, schools and among family and friends. This was particularly true for teenagers who found that practising feminism offline at school was extremely difficult to navigate. Yet the article also found that while it may be *technologically easy* for many groups to engage in digital feminist activism, there *remain emotional, mental or practical* barriers which create different experiences, and legitimate some feminist voices, perspectives and experiences over others.

Published reports exploring the role of digital advocacy have mostly been written by female activists involved in the movement, and although useful contributions, there is a notable gap in rigorous, independent, academic analysis in this area. In addition, most of the online activism has focused on offline harassment, rather than cyber VAWG.

The #MeToo movement has become an international movement, with unique geographical manifestations, as can be seen in the data visualisation project [MeToomomentum](#). Examples of the effectiveness of #MeToo in adapting to different legal and cultural factors, as well as forms of violence and responses, includes:

- **Japan:** #MeToo became #WeToo in recognition of the cultural shame of reporting sexual harassment and the importance of 'saving face'. #WeToo encourages unity between victims and survivors and aims to validate victims and thereby increase reporting (Rearick, 2018).
- **China:** the #MeToo movement used the Chinese characters #WoYeShi and initially focused on anonymous accusations from universities, with 68 petitions demanding systems for reporting and investigating harassment. Although #WoYeShi was initially censored, the Communist Party acknowledged the bravery of the women and ordered China's media to avoid aggressive, in-depth coverage, hoping to prevent the hashtag developing into a broader popular movement that could potentially topple the party's male-dominated leadership (The Economist, 2018; Phillips, 2018).
- **Kenya:** The #MeToo movement was slow to take root in Kenya, partly due to media coverage focused on the presidential election in October 2017. However, by January 2018, the hashtag was used by several new mothers who alleged sexual misconduct by Kenyatta National Hospital staff.

⁵ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/metoo-more-than-12-million-facebook-posts-comments-reactions-24-hours/>

Following online and offline protests in Nairobi, an investigation was launched by the Health Minister (Dunaway, 2018).

- **India:** Women's rights activists in India have also mobilised around the #MeToo global movement, with women using the hashtag to share experiences of sexual harassment in the country's political, media and entertainment industries. Although too early to assess the full impact of this advocacy, several men are currently under investigation and have had to step down from managerial positions (Jha, 2018). However, Indian feminists have encouraged the #MeToo movement to go beyond the elite 'online' English-speaking space to communities which are not present digitally and have stories of abuse, for example Dalit women, sex workers, and trans women (Gupta, 2018). India's #MeToo moment builds on earlier women's movements and advocacy, and is part of a broader use of digital advocacy to challenge violence and gender inequality in India. For example, in 2017 a coalition of feminist organisations and young activists rapidly mobilised widespread support around the safety of women and minorities in public spaces using the #IWillGoOut. The campaign was successful in transforming online support to offline action, with #IWillGoOut marches and events held in over 30 cities and towns in India; it continues to campaign for legal change to ensure women's public safety (Titus, 2018).

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VAWG Helpdesk services are provided by a consortium of leading organisations and individual experts on VAWG, including Social Development Direct, International Rescue Committee, ActionAid, Womankind, and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). Expert advice may be sought from this Group, as well as from the wider academic and practitioner community, and those able to provide input within the short time-frame are acknowledged. Any views or opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of DFID, the VAWG Helpdesk or any of the contributing organisations/experts.

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