

WHAT ARE YOU DOING ABOUT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN?

End VAW Research: Case Summaries from Country Reports

The following case summaries are excerpted from End Violence Against Women: Country Reports, which involve seven countries and are part of research commissioned by the Association for Progressive Communications Women's Rights Programme (APC WRP) beginning in 2013. APC WRP promotes gender equality in the design, implementation, access and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and in the policy decisions and frameworks that regulate them. End Violence Against Women research focuses on tech-related violence, from mobile phones to the internet. Additional documents will be published later this year.

Identifying country information is not included in the summaries in order to protect the privacy of survivors; instead they are categorised by region: Central and East Africa, Central and South America, South and Southeast Asia, Southeastern Europe. Names of survivors have also been changed.

Central and East Africa

Country 1

- **Photos shared without consent**

A 16-year-old girl agreed to be photographed naked by her ex-boyfriend in exchange for gifts. A few days later, the pictures were published on his Facebook account and the news circulated in the community. Everyone knew about it, and the parents were very angry. His family told him to remove the photos. He said he did not post the photos and suspected that someone hacked his Facebook account. The girl suspected that he was lying but could not prove it.

- **Blog hacked and altered**

A blogger started a new relationship after the man she was seeing decided to return to France. Someone sent the ex-boyfriend, who owned the platform she used for her blog, pictures of her with the new boyfriend. The ex published the photos along with insults on her blog and changed the password, denying her access. He even wrote emails to her family, calling her a bitch, and sent her private messages to his friends. Blog readers wrote insulting and racist comments on her blog, and the ex decided to publish her email and phone number, allowing the readers to harass her by phone. The woman reported the situation to the National Data Protection Commission, a French organisation responsible for responding to online abuse. Six months after everything started, the blog was finally disabled. The woman suffered such injury to her reputation she decided to stop blogging altogether and visited a psychologist.

- **Rape news spread via SMS**

During a night out with friends, a lesbian woman and her girlfriend were drugged, taken to a hotel and raped. Upon awakening, the woman found a message in her phone from one of the rapists telling her what happened. She was traumatized. Returning home, she discovered that the whole neighbourhood already knew the story and her parents said that it brought shame on her family. She tried to find the culprits and learned that they had fled to a neighbouring city. She decided not to complain because of lack of money and her sexual orientation, knowing that authorities would be prejudiced on both counts, especially the latter. After several weeks without the support of her parents, she left the country to seek a new life.

Country 2

- **Cyber bullying**

A writer, author and presidential hopeful faced scathing attacks on Facebook. She was cyber bullied during campaigns and suffered psychological harm, forcing her to seek counselling services. She stopped using social media, particularly Facebook, for the period of trauma.

- **Death threats via SMS**

A woman faced physical violence that included mobile phone abuse perpetrated by her husband of 23 years. She received death threats via SMS, forcing her to report to the police, who turned her away without giving her a restraining order, but suggested that she seek counselling services for herself and her husband since the case was domestic.

- **Invasion of privacy**

A woman suffered physical abuse and her husband's attempt to control her through the use of technology. He accessed her email, Facebook and bank accounts, infringing her privacy and denying her freedom of information and association by intimidating her friends through the use of technology. She was forced to close old accounts and open new ones.

- **Defamation and political implications**

A perpetrator manipulated a woman's photo to disseminate on Facebook and wrote a defaming story about her, making it appear that she was a witness in an International Criminal Court case. Death threats and scolding from her community were so severe that the police offered her security. She suffered psychological trauma, but delays in the case caused her to seek solace in her church community instead of continuing with the police or contacting any internet intermediary. Research on this case revealed that it is common for women to be singled out for violence when they take a political stand.

Central and South America

Country 3

- **Cell phone harassment and abduction**

The life of this 13-year-old girl, a primary school dropout from a poor family in a semi-rural area, was turned upside down when her older sister's boyfriend began to sexually harass her and threaten her by cell phone, ultimately abducting her. For three months, she was deprived of her liberty, beaten and sexually abused. During this period, she was forced to send cell phone messages claiming she was well and living with the boyfriend. When she was finally able to escape, she was referred to a shelter where she received psychological care. After a month-long effort, she and her mother registered a complaint for kidnapping and corruption of a minor with the prosecution service. The latest news was that the aggressor had not been found.

- **Threats and surveillance**

A psychologist and activist for women's and LGTTBI rights was subjected to threats, discrimination and surveillance by cell phone, email and social networks because of her lesbian rights activism. The prosecution service refused to take up her case, arguing that no crime had been committed. She contacted a national anti-discrimination council, which intervened only in the first of her complaints (about a threat to burn down her house), getting the prosecution service to take action without a formal denunciation. In the subsequent cases of aggression, she went to the media and resorted to public protests because the council and the prosecution service did not respond, adding institutional violence to her case. The response of intermediaries was lukewarm: the telephony company would not block the caller and the solution put forward by the blog to avoid anonymous commenters was not effective.

- **Hacking and image manipulation**

A student teacher was subjected to hacking and photomontage in a pornographic video labelled with her city and occupation. On two occasions, she was accosted by men on the street who said they had seen her naked. One of her friends contacted the porn website and had the video removed; however, there are still images of her circulating on similar web pages. She used social networks to contact the cyber police and the state women's institute; the latter belittled her situation. She learned technological skills and constantly monitors websites looking for her image.

- **Defamation on Facebook**

A teacher was subjected to defamation in a Facebook profile devoted to gossip, mainly about women and gays in a neighbouring town. This led to physical and psychological violence from her husband and his family, and she was obliged to leave her home after ten years of marriage. She approached the cyber police who asked her to provide proof and make a formal complaint. In search of evidence, she contacted other women who had been attacked in the same profile and learned that they too subsequently suffered violence from their partners. Two of the people she suspected of managing the profile began to threaten her face-to-face. She has not registered a complaint for the online attacks, but she has done so for her physical injuries.

She has filed for divorce from her husband, who is an officer with the ministerial police.

Country 4

- **Threats to women human rights defenders**

When a women's organisation began receiving threats through email from paramilitary groups, they brought their members together to discuss their reactions, fears and options. Due to the work of the organisation, they were all well aware that such threats could turn into sexual violence and murder, among other forms of violence. They decided to report the threats to the prosecutor, and they requested precautionary measures before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which granted the measures and established a self-protection protocol. While emails kept coming, a complaint was filed for every new threat between 2009 and 2012. To date, the investigation has not been successful and the case remains unresolved.

- **Threats through text, Facebook and in person**

Months after ending a relationship, a woman met someone new. All three attended the same university, and one day the ex insulted and threatened her and her new boyfriend. The two met with university authorities without any results. During the course of the day, she received harassing and threatening messages on her phone and her Facebook page. Fearing that if she reported the harasser, whom she feared, she would have to confront him in person, she decided not to advance any legal action. However, after being advised of her rights, including no confrontation, she went to the police to try to keep the man away from her. Although the procedures were slow and cumbersome, mainly due to police ignorance of relevant legal regulations and lack of understanding for the seriousness of the situation, the woman persisted in persuading the authorities to have the aggressor cited and ordered not to approach her. He ceased his threats.

- **Social media identity theft**

Out of revenge after their divorce, a US lawyer published intimate, sexual photographs of his ex wife. The aggressor perpetrated repeated harassment through messages and pictures as well as identity theft through the creation of fake profiles in her name on Facebook and Twitter. These acts caused serious emotional, physical and mental disturbances, generating constant anxiety, distress, fear, shame, guilt and insecurity. One year after reporting the incident, with assistance from the police and attorney general, the photographs were removed from social networks. The criminal investigation is ongoing.

- **Password theft and privacy violation**

A young woman faced intimidation and digital violence from her ex-boyfriend. He violated her privacy by taking pictures without consent and stealing the passwords to her social media accounts and mobile phone, accessing private information, such as photos and videos. The incident caused the woman emotional trauma. She went to the police, who caught the perpetrator and got him to remove the images he had posted on social networks. The criminal investigation is ongoing and the woman feels that justice will be served.

South and Southeast Asia

Country 5

- **Offline/Online sexual violence continuum**

In the three cases studied, the range of ways in which VAW was committed, enabled or compounded by technology was surprisingly wide. In one case, surreptitious recording of an intimate act with mobile phone cameras was carried out to invade privacy. The recording was then used to blackmail the woman to rape her repeatedly over several months. Later, phone-to-phone bluetooth technology was used to disseminate the recording far and wide. Allegedly, Facebook was also used to upload the video to harm the reputation of the woman. It is hard to imagine how this survivor could have been violated and harmed without the technologies used to hand.

- **Social media violence**

A harasser used social media to hurl sexualised abuse and threaten a woman with violence, including rape and murder. The internet was also used to discover her physical address. Further, social media and intermediary websites were used to accuse the survivor of blasphemy and incite violence against her by third parties. In this case, technology was effectively used to fetter the woman's freedom of speech.

- **Denial of freedom of expression**

Platforms such as Youtube, Twitter, Facebook and blogs were used as the medium to harass and sexually abuse a woman, including dissemination of images carrying her face morphed onto bodies of porn stars. Dozens of fake Twitter accounts were made in her name over time to abuse and degrade her and/or send

obnoxious and pornographic material to her friends and acquaintances. In addition, all of these platforms were used to threaten extreme sexualised violence, including rape and murder. The survivor was regularly abused, threatened and attacked in a similar manner on email as well. In addition, the harasser used a blog to publish detailed personal information about the woman and her immediate family members with edicts to kill them all. Almost a month later, the survivor and her husband faced a gun attack but survived. The abuse and violence directed at this survivor was directly due to her political and social views and was meant to silence her.

Country 6

- **Unauthorised sex video**

In 2009, a video showing intimate acts between an actress and a celebrity doctor went viral. This prompted the actress to file a complaint before law enforcement agencies because she did not consent to the taking and uploading of said video. The case was filed in court because of the emotional and psychological anguish that the uploaded video caused the actress. During that time, there was no national law on violence against women perpetrated through the use of ICTs. The actress lost her case. However, she put a face to the many women whose rights are violated online. Her daring act to come out and speak about her experience hastened the passage of a relevant law.

- **Child cyber pornography**

Early in 2014, the issue of cyber pornography in a small coastal town hit the headlines. The cases reported involved the use of minors in the operation of cyber pornography dens. It was later learned that in some cases, it was the parents of the minors themselves who were encouraging their children to pose naked or perform lewd acts in front of webcams for the satisfaction of paying foreign customers. In some cases, the parents were directly involved in the operation. Several raids were conducted, sending the people involved, including the parents, to jail. The social welfare department took over the custody of the minors. Internet service providers, such as private telephone companies, have policies on the illegal use of their services. However, there has been no action by them on the proliferation of such illegal activities involving minors.

- **Photo voyeurism**

An image showing the breasts of an actress-politician was circulating in various platforms online. Not being well-versed on such online violations and how to claim her rights, the woman engaged the services of a private lawyer to have her photos taken down. Citing the privacy of her client and utilizing an existing law against photo and video voyeurism, which clearly and categorically punishes broadcasting such photos on the internet, the lawyer issued a demand letter to bloggers, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and other social networking sites demanding an end to downloads of the nude photos and warning that to do otherwise was in violation of the law. The photos were taken down within 24 hours of the demand letter being issued.

Southeastern Europe

Country 7

- **Destroying a reputation**

A harasser made a fake Facebook profile of a single mom of three, stealing and uploading all of her pictures. She was presented as “a stripper” and “professional whore”. Status messages contained open calls for sex written in very explicit language. She found out about the profile when a friend request from that profile was sent to her minor son. Because she suspected that students from her children's school made the profile, she informed the principal. The school did not consider the situation their responsibility, and they advised her that she should not send her kids to school that last week before the holiday break because her children were teased and bullied. She also went to the local police, who sent her to a higher jurisdiction. Because they could not do anything to help her either, she was then sent to a federal department. Although officials listened to her case, they would not make an official document about the case and told her their hands were tied because cases of violence through ICT are not part of the criminal code. Thus, she decided to try to clear her name by give an interview to a local online portal. After this, her story was talked about even more, but she felt that at least her side of the story was heard. Finally, she managed get the fake profile removed by reporting it to Facebook as a stolen profile. Unfortunately, she believes, the story will stick around for some time.

- **“You'll always be mine”**

Everything started at the concert where she was singing. The perpetrator photographed her without her knowledge and found her name on the program. Then he tracked her down on Facebook, complimenting her and sending her gifts through the university where she studied. She was interested and eventually proposed for the two of them to meet, and he rejected her her several times. She felt that something seemed off, so

she decided to stop their communication. When she informed him, he changed completely. So did her life. He downloaded her photos, made videos about/for her and uploaded them on YouTube. He included her full name with the photos along with titles implying she would always belong to him. He constantly sent SMSs, messaged her on Facebook and called her phone. She went to the police, but they told her, "That is just love". When she told her parents, they took away her phone and computer and required her to always have someone with her. Her father, a police officer, found out that the perpetrator had lied about his age and was over 40 years old. The perpetrator would change his Facebook cover photo to match hers and posted photos of the area where she lived. Whenever she changed her mobile number, he would find it, call her multiple times and hang up. Now, four years after that concert, she wants to believe her nightmare is over, but she still trembles when her phone rings.

- **SMS threats lead to attack**

A woman and her boyfriend were under constant mobile threats from her ex-boyfriend for almost two months. They called their telecom provider, but were told there was nothing to do about it because the violator changed his phone number too often. It's possible to purchase a SIM card almost anywhere without registering a name. They took their evidence to the police, who said they made a record about it and would follow up. However, the threats continued and grew more serious each day. No one reacted until the current boyfriend was physically attacked and by the ex. The following day the ex was arrested. The court gave him one month custody until the trial, but the fact that he was making serious life threats that actually came true, via mobile phone, were not taken into consideration.

