

Sahelian Women In Digital Spaces

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About

Tilwate Peace Network is producing a dedicated study on Sahelian women in online spaces in partnership with the Bamako Forum on Digital and Social Cohesion. Based on a literature review and key informant interviews with women in Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali about their online experiences, this paper provides insight into the safety of online spaces for women and how online spaces can better serve them as key actors in peace consolidation. The study proposes recommendations to multilateral organizations, government authorities and policy-makers, tech companies, educational institutions and advocacy organizations on how to improve equitable access to the internet while promoting policies that encourage women's participation and protect them from harassment and abuse.

About the authors

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About the Bamako Forum on Digital and Social Cohesion

This report is a product of the Bamako Forum on Digital and Social Cohesion, a network of academics and practitioners from governmental and non-governmental institutions who aim to create a space for multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder collaboration to advance digital and social cohesion in West Africa and beyond. Search for Common Ground is the convener of Bamako Forum on Digital and Social Cohesion.

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Introduction

Approximately 69.13% of Internet traffic in Africa is driven by mobile connectivity¹ and about 84.3% of Internet users in the region use mobile devices to connect to social media platforms.² According to a recent survey, ownership of mobile phones combined with Internet access is globally linked by digital consumers to enhanced quality of life³. While overall the impact of social media is considered⁴ positive by the surveyed, in the Sahel this experience changes depending on your gender and intersectionality. It can also differ according to the age group and occupation. The Sahelian digital ecosystem functions as a dual medium. On one hand, it reflects the region's conflicting characteristics, in particular the struggle for influence between national authorities, societies, militants and armed groups. On the other hand, it is a tool for dialogue, professional emancipation, cultural sharing, entertainment and maintaining social ties.⁵

Internet penetration varies across the region: in January 2024, the number of Internet users was 12.1% for Burkina Faso, 9.1% for Mali and 2.2% for Niger. Among those users, women accounted for 30.4% in Burkina Faso, 24.2% in Mali, and 19.3% in Niger, despite representing around half of the population

in the region.⁶ Indeed, the gender gap is at 37% for access to mobile internet in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁷ For the purposes of this study, the focus will be on social media apps and social messaging, restricting online spaces to social networks. Despite their under-representation, women globally encounter “hate speech, hacking or interception of private communications, identity theft, online stalking and uttering threats”, which complicates their experience.⁸ The 2017 General recommendation of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women CEDAW⁹ recognized that gender-based violence includes “technology-mediated environments, such as contemporary forms of violence occurring in the internet and digital spaces.”

There is a common pattern of gender inequality, exclusion, and violence against women online in the Sahel: according to respondents, an online profile identified as female almost systematically ushers unwanted sexualized interaction. Female journalists, politicians, and activists are particularly stigmatized and the majority of perpetrators are men¹⁰. Of the three countries surveyed, Burkina Faso is the country with the highest number of social network posts illustrating gender-based violence.¹¹ In order

to adapt to this hostile climate, women develop a number of coping mechanisms, including self-censorship.

As Facebook and WhatsApp are the most widely used platforms in the region, they can potentially be breeding grounds for the spread of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). TFGBV¹² refers to instances of violence, harassment, or abuse perpetrated against individuals, primarily women and girls, using digital technologies such as social media, messaging apps, email, and other online platforms. Namely, TFGBV includes cyberstalking, non-consensual sharing of intimate images online (commonly known as revenge porn) and digital coercion. Government and tech responses to this gap have been insufficient to make online spaces safer and more equitable for women and girls online. According to the World Wide Web foundation,¹³ TFGBV is reversible as it is due to policy failure by government and technology companies.

Reversibility can be partially achieved through adequate funding, and failing to close the digital gender gap is costing national authorities billions of dollars.¹⁴ While Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso already enforced hate speech legislation¹⁵ to punish the promotion of hatred, discrimination and violence, its application in the digital domain would benefit female users. However policy and legislation is not enough to make the digital space fairer and safer. Awareness-raising, national dialogue and training is needed to enable women to exercise their civil liberties online and not withhold them.

1. StatCounter, “Desktop vs Mobile vs Tablet Market Share Africa,” StatCounter Global Stats (2024), <https://gs.statcounter.com/platform-market-share/desktop-mobile-tablet/africa>.

2. GSMA, *The State of Mobile Internet Connectivity 2023* (2023), https://www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/The-State-of-Mobile-Internet-Connectivity-Report-2023.pdf?utm_source=website&utm_medium=button&utm_campaign=somic23.

3. GSMA and Gallup, *The Impact of Mobile on People's Happiness and Well-Being* (2018), https://www.gsma.com/solutions-and-impact/connectivity-for-good/mobile-for-development/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/The-Impact-of-Mobile-on-People%E2%80%99s-Happiness-and-Well-Being_summary.pdf.

4. In this latter survey.

5. Habibou Bako, “Réseaux sociaux et désinformation au Sahel,” *Bulletin franco-paix* 7, no. 10 (2022).

6. Simon Kemp, *Digital 2024: Global Overview Report* (Datareportal, 2024), <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-global-overview-report>.

7. GSMA, *The Mobile Economy Sub-Saharan Africa 2022* (2022), <https://www.gsma.com/solutions-and-impact/connectivity-for-good/mobile-economy/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/The-Mobile-Economy-Sub-Saharan-Africa-2022.pdf>.

8. Plan International, *Free to Be Online? Girls' and Young Women's Experiences of Online Harassment. The State of the World's Girls Report* (Plan International, 2020), <https://plan-international.org/publications/free-to-be-online/>.

9. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *General Recommendation No. 35 on Gender-Based Violence Against Women, Updating General Recommendation No. 19 (1992)* (United Nations, 2017).

10. Internal report Search For Common Ground.

11. Internal report Search for Common Ground.

12. Suzie Dunn, “TFGBV,” in *Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: An Overview*, 3–5 (Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2020), <http://www.ijstor.org/stable/resrep27513.9>.

13. Alliance for Affordable Internet, *The Costs of Exclusion: Economic Consequences of the Digital Gender Gap* (Web Foundation, 2021).

14. In the three countries studied.

15. Internal report Search For Common Ground.

Key Findings

1. Sahelian women use discretion with sharing content online, informed by social and cultural norms as well as fear of harassment. Self-censorship is common practice to reduce risk of violence and to conform to cultural norms. Social networks are most often used for direct messaging and professional reasons.
2. Women expressed they are harassed most often based on gender, physical appearance, and opinions they share online.
3. Discrimination experienced by respondents was the most virulent in Mali, followed by Niger and Burkina. While not all respondents had personally experienced online violence, 90% have witnessed it at least once.
4. Women are actively trying to make the online experience safer for themselves and other women. When respondents gain new information through training or classes, they share that with their peers.

Literature review

Women in the Sahel have a differential experience online than their male counterparts. The Internet multiplies both the possibilities of expression and repression for women. Many women feel they are unable to exercise their freedom of expression without fear because of discriminatory practices by governments and societies. The inability of states to promote access and protect girls and women from threats to their freedom, privacy and security persists as an issue. Gender norms also play a significant role in shaping women's online experiences. Research on social media algorithms indicates¹⁶ a gender bias, with female users more often encountering content that reinforces patriarchal and racialized gender norms. Findings imply that profit motives influence these algorithmic behaviors, as algorithms tend to amplify content that upholds 'traditional' or patriarchal perceptions of the female body, which are deemed more lucrative.¹⁷ In addition, sexist language and imagery in online content can reinforce traditional discriminatory gender roles and perpetuate stereotypes, affecting women's sense of belonging and engagement online.¹⁸

Women face societal barriers to engaging in online spaces: limited connectivity, affordability, lack of digital literacy training, and exclusionary cultural norms.¹⁹ Another pressing challenge facing women in online spaces is the prevalence of harassment and gender-based violence, namely cyberstalking, doxxing, revenge porn, and misogynistic trolling.²⁰ Such harassment can have negative impacts on the victim's mental health and reputation, leading to feelings of fear, anxiety, and self-censorship²¹. Moreover, the intersectionality of gender with other identity markers, such as race, occupation, sexual orientation, and disability, can increase the risk of

online abuse for marginalized women²².

Despite these overwhelming challenges and risks, the women who are using social media in the Sahel are using it to push back on gender norms and fight for equality and inclusion.²³ They can raise awareness through social media campaigns, online petitions, and digital storytelling. These initiatives aim to address these disparities and promote women's digital inclusion.²⁴ By harnessing the power of technology, women are reshaping public discourse and advancing gender equality on a global scale. However, sustained efforts are needed to ensure that they have equitable opportunities to benefit from digital technologies.

Cultural norms shape how Sahelian women engage in online spaces.

Female respondents appear to limit their use on social media to messaging (83%), and for professional purposes (58%).²⁵ Sahelian women are very cautious about what information they share online. Most women use it for direct messaging or for professional communication. One aspect that contributes to this personal discretion is the cultural role played by shame in the Sahel, which regulates women's relationships with their body, sexuality,

16. Sarah Roberts, "Digital Detritus: 'Error' and the Logic of Opacity in Social Media Content Moderation," *First Monday* 23, no. 3 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v23i3.8283>.

17. Ibid.

18. Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (NYU Press, 2018).

19. World Wide Web Foundation, *Women's Rights Online: Closing the Digital Gender Gap for a More Equal World* (World Wide Web Foundation, 2019), <https://webfoundation.org/research/womens-rights-online-closing-the-digital-gender-gap-for-a-more-equal-world/>.

20. Danielle Keats Citron, *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace* (Harvard University Press, 2014).

21. Amanda Lenhart, Michele Ybarra, Kathryn Zickuhr, and Myeshia Price-Feeney, *Online Harassment, Digital Abuse, and Cyberstalking in America* (Data & Society Research Institute, 2017).

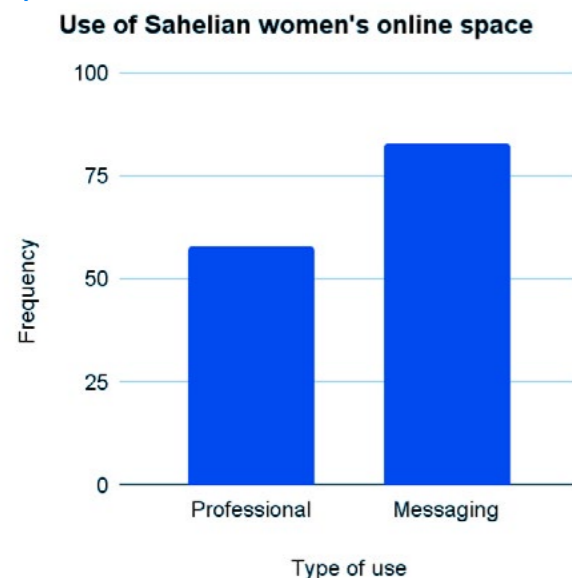
22. Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell, "Embodied Harms: Gender, Shame, and Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence," *Violence Against Women* 21, no. 16 (2015): 758-779.

23. Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller, *Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back Against Rape Culture*, Oxford Studies in Digital Politics (Oxford Academic, 2019).

24. Anita Gurumurthy, *Bridging the Digital Gender Divide: Issues and Insights on ICT for Women's Economic Empowerment* (UNIFEM, 2004).

25. The representative sample of respondents may have influenced this result, as there were more professionals or students involved in activism (50% of respondents) than unemployed women or students (33% of respondents).

Graph 1



speech, etiquette, and social belonging.²⁶ In some cases, women show preemptive embarrassment to demonstrate their virtue. In others, they self-censor the information they share of their private life. In a survey of the participants most expressed that being discreet about one's private life was a positive thing and they did not care to share details of their private life online. This reluctance to share private information has myriad effects. It acts as a first barrier to apprehend gender-based violence, as it provides less content that can be commented on.²⁷ In addition to restricting posts or photos with personal content, women also reported not giving access to

26. Catherine Baroin and Barbara Cooper, eds., *La honte au Sahel. Pudeur, respect, morale quotidienne* (Sépia, 2018).

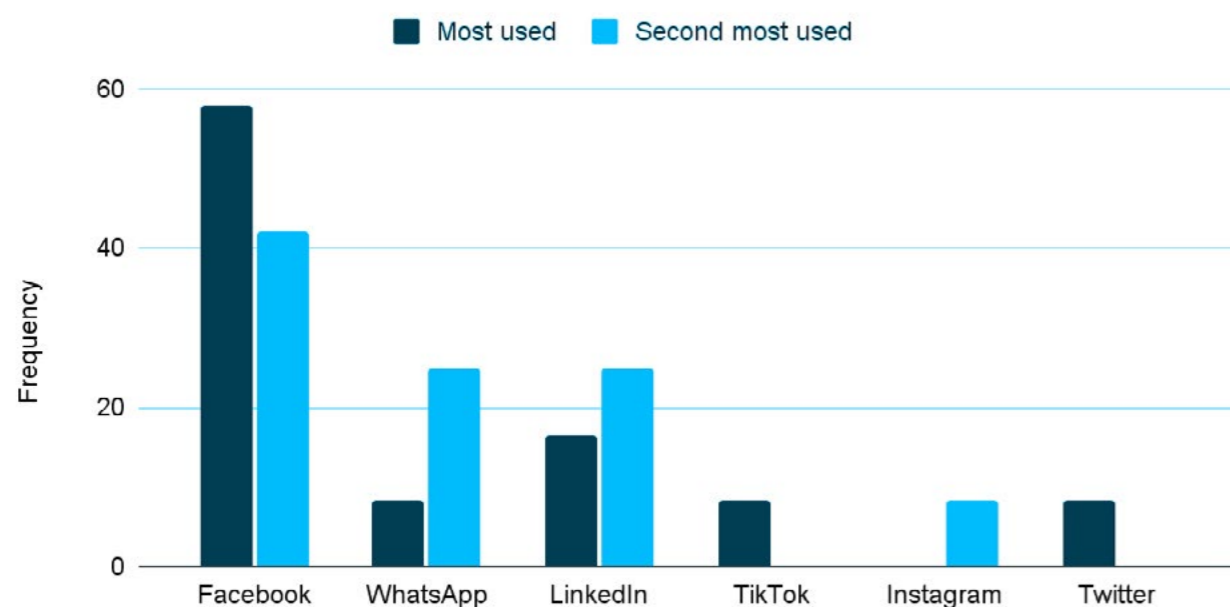
27. Experienced in their physical lives and likely to erupt online.

private details on the public display of their account. Some post less and less over the years, preferring to focus on the professional aspect of social media usage.

Singularly, respondents appear to favor one social network over another, with Facebook maintaining its dominance as the preferred social media platform. One Malian respondent in the 20-30 age group explains that she “has had a Facebook account since middle school.” Such early and continued adoption of Facebook underscores its pervasive influence and usage among youth and adults alike. Despite a preference for Facebook, many respondents maintain a profile on multiple sites. In Mali, respondents reported using a different expression for each network (“*My expression differs between X and Facebook. On Facebook, I use a lot of satire, images and characters that allow me to interact more with my audience, which is usually smaller than on Twitter*”, respondent between 40 and 50 years old) or even use personification to testify on behalf of a fellow citizen, “*with a view to bringing to light problems that people may not want to express.*” (respondent from between 20 and 30 years old).

This study reveals that Sahelian women's use of social networks gives rise to mixed feelings. 75% of respondents explained having mitigated feelings after using the online spaces, and one third of them also reported feeling tired after prolonged use. Positive experiences on social platforms were often described as brutally interrupted by hateful con-

Graph 2



tent, either towards themselves or other women. Bad feelings, such as anger and fatigue, occur particularly when they spend too much time online or are exposed to hateful posts. When women interact with hateful content, they often disengage from the platform. Especially when these posts remain active, it affects the norms of what is acceptable behavior in their online circles. This affects women's digital expression and their safety,²⁸ and this marginalization highlights their needs for digital security. Overall, women's use of online spaces reflects some of the socio-cultural practices of the Sahel, such as using preventive shame as a coping mechanism for possible digital violence. They exhibit specific behaviors to protect themselves and avoid violent online experiences.

There is a continuum between offline and online violence.

In terms of online prejudices experienced by the participants, harassment often occurs based on their gender identity or their looks (50% for their gender, 17% for their physical appearance) or because of an opinion or action displayed in a digital space (e.g. publishing or sharing content).

The barriers between offline gender-based violence and online gender-based violence are porous. Once gender-based violence goes beyond its initial context, it has a twofold impact on victims.²⁹ Online gender-based violence is also known as TFGBV. TFGBV uses technology to inflict harm, often blurring the boundaries between physical and virtual spaces, and can have profound psychological, social, and economic impacts on victims.

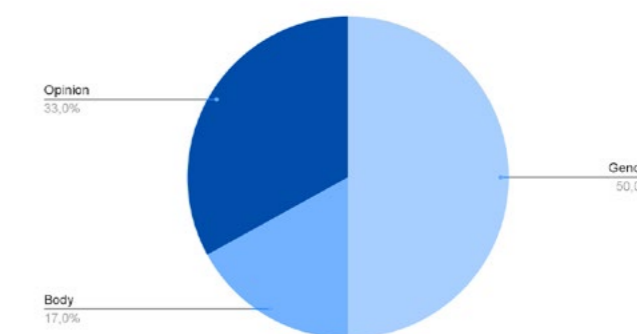
These online experiences had offline effects. Respondents shared stories of women being fol-

28. Plan International, *Free to Be Online? Girls' and Young Women's Experiences of Online Harassment. The State of the World's Girls Report* (Plan International, 2020), <https://plan-international.org/publications/free-to-be-online/>.

29. UN Women, *Background Document on Gender, Innovation and Technology in Africa* (2023), https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/background_document_on_gender_innovation_and_technology_in_africa_web.pdf.

Graph 3

Focus of digital harassment and violence



lowed and threatened in the street because of a publication posted on a social network. In other cases, some are intimidated and discouraged by peers in real life from starting to express themselves in digital spaces. Harassment and discrimination occur both online and offline: online violence and offline violence quickly overlap. As a result, TFGBV flows in both directions. TFGBV appears to be exacerbated by regional conflicts, particularly ethnic and religious hate speech, as one respondent mentioned online hate speech towards Christian in Burkina Faso. This study draws attention to another facet of violence and conflict in the Sahel, namely the challenges of the digital space.

TFGBV is a pervasive experience for Sahelian women online. The harassment fell around four categories: impersonation, fraud, cyber violence, and non-consensual sharing of content and information.

Testimonials from respondents about TFGBV

Identity theft

“People use women’s photos and create fake accounts for them, especially on Facebook.” Respondent from Niger (between 20 and 30 years old). Identity theft is common on Facebook, which affects women’s safety.

Fraud

“I’ve also been the victim of an attempted scam, with people trying to extort money from me by offering to finance new projects. Unfortunately I’m on the Banque de France list as a result of this fraud. I find it very annoying.” Malian interviewee (aged between 20 and 30). Being a victim of fraud had an impact on her mental health and the financial consequences were also damaging hence reducing her human security.

Sexual harassment

“Recently I shared on my Facebook page a message I received from a stranger: I was offered to prostitute myself during the holy month of Ramadan for 50,000 CFA francs. I shared the screenshots on my page and many other young women replied in the comments with screenshots of similar messages from the same person. A complaint has been filed.” Respondent from Niger (aged between 20 and 30). When this respondent explained that she faced online solicitation, she emphasized her shock given that it was during a month she considers holy. These terms suggest the importance of religious norms for Sahelian spaces, both offline and online. The interviewee took swift action by exposing the perpetrator, enabling other victims to speak out and easing the decision to lodge a common complaint.

Revenge porn

“I know a fellow university student in her twenties who was sexually harassed. She had video calls with the perpetrator. The person was recording their calls (...) She did not want to share it with her family. I told her about the existing laws on cybercrime. She was very stressed and didn’t eat anymore. The man stopped his threats for fear of going to prison.” Respondent from Niger (aged between 20 and 30). Upon learning about her classmate’s situation, the interviewee tried to reassure and steer her towards a legal solution, demonstrating her knowledge of the legal framework in Niger. On another hand, her prompt reaction shows her understanding of Internet dangers. Although she tried to mitigate the risks, the negative experience seeped into the victim’s daily life, leading to a temporary anorexia.

Ethnic marginalisation, exclusion and violence

“I have witnessed online ethnic violence, harassment, discrimination and marginalization against various segments of the population.” Respondent from Mali (aged between 30 and 40). This respondent’s answer highlights the conflictual interactions between Sahelian societies³⁰, in this example the conflictuality being based on ethnic categorization. She explains that, online and offline, communities have suffered harassment, men and women alike. The incident’s effects extend into real life.

30. Jiaxuan Yue, Habibou Bako, Kelsey Hampton, and Katie Smith, *Conflit et espace en ligne au Sahel: Défis et recommandations* (Search for Common Ground, 2022), <https://documents.sfcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Note-D-Analyse-Conflit-et-espace-en-ligne-au-Sahel-Juillet-2022.pdf>.

Religious discrimination

“I have witnessed extremist content, especially religious debates. Recently in my country, during Ramadan, a woman advised her brothers and sisters in the faith not to listen to Christian music. I’m a Christian, and I’ve seen the different messages of hate. It’s an example of how our digital spaces aren’t necessarily healthy. I don’t want to get into debates, especially religious ones. This palpable example shows the extent to which people are inclined to fall into hate speech.” A respondent from Burkina (aged between 30 and 40) faced with hate speech, was reluctant to express herself on the subject of religion. In her opinion, the incalculable number of interactions linked to this hate publication proves that the majority Internet users are prone to violence. She feels that online spaces are unhealthy.

Marital status

“The experience that affected me the most was when an acquaintance told me offline that I wouldn’t have a husband because of my online publications. It stopped me in my tracks. I spent the whole day brooding over that sentence.” Respondent from Burkina (less than 20 years old). When the interviewee was confronted with negative comments about her online activity, she recounts the distress she felt, and the temporary isolation and silence she chose to take refuge in. This illustrates that TFGBV flows from the online to the offline space causing an escalating feeling of insecurity.

Physical attack

“I and the other blog moderators have received insults from people on our social networks. It went beyond cyberspace. In the wake of this event, I was followed home by a biker, who tried to force me onto his motorcycle, then knock me off. He threatened to kill me. (...) This also continues in the physical space, with people we don’t know demanding we respond to them and still asking us to meet face-to-face.” A respondent from Mali (aged between 20 and 30) recalled as she was threatened online and then followed. As the person explains how a stranger threatened her because of her social media posts, stress is audible, signaling a similar sense of insecurity.

The participants from Mali reported the most instances of discrimination experienced online.³¹ Respondents expressed hesitation to speak about sensitive topics related to TFGBV, especially those from areas with strong conservative Islamic influence. This observation underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity and nuanced approaches in conducting research and addressing issues related to gender-based violence in diverse sociocultural contexts. Although some respondents weren’t victims themselves, 90% of KII had witnessed violence, and respondents trained in cyber-security often offer their help to victims in their environment.

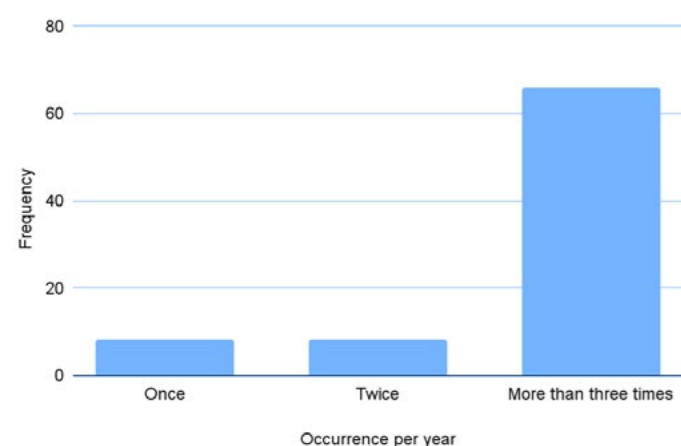
31. This may be due to the fact that the sample of Malian women interviewed included more activists than in the other samples, i.e. 75% activists for Mali. This can also be due to a greater number of Internet users in Mali than in Niger, for example.

Women are actively making their online spaces safer.

Proactively, Sahelian women seek to minimize this violence as much as they can. For instance, 66% of women update their security parameters more than three times a year to mitigate impersonation. All respondents are aware of at least one practice of digital hygiene, such as double-factor authentication.³² 25% want to improve their expertise on cyber safety, while 66% of them focus on the domain of digital safety. Trainings on cybersecurity practices they have previously received encourages them to share this knowledge with those around them, and to pursue self-training. Respondents show a strong desire to learn and to protect oneself, even with no access to a formal training (*"I wasn't able to take part in any activities, but I did receive some information. I'm studying at a technological university which has a cybercrime course. I'm roommates with young women studying in that field. I follow their work and have been able to improve my digital hygiene by working with them."* Respondent from Niger, between 20 and 30 years old).

Graph 4

Privacy settings update



32. This is probably due to the identification method of respondents, who already participated in activities related to digital hygiene with Search For Common Ground.

Purpose of the chosen training

Codes	Occurrence	Themes
Knowledge	25%	Expertise
Prevention	66%	Digital safety

Despite the violence, women persist in developing their professional activities (*"I communicate about my company's services."* Respondent from Mali, between 20 and 30 years old). They are enthusiastic about the idea of informing their fellow citizens (*"I use networks for strategic purposes. I raise awareness. I want to highlight role models, and the actions I take to bring young people to positive change."* Respondent from Burkina, less than 20 years old). Showing their responsiveness and solidarity, women's individual and common recovery capacity is key to lasting results.³³ Despite their discrete presence on online spaces due to traditions and customs, women play a very important role in raising awareness among children and their peers by drawing their attention to better living.³⁴

33. Jason Bremner, Kristen Patterson, and Rachel Yavinsky, *Building Resilience Through Family Planning: A Transformative Approach for Women, Families, and Communities* (Population Reference Bureau, 2015), <https://www.prb.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/sahel-resilience-brief.pdf>.

34. Internal report Search For Common Ground.

Recommendations

Online discrimination against women and abusive behavior directed at them perpetuates broader gender discrimination. Solutions should address the root causes and a global effort is needed to change them at a societal level over time.

Multilateral organizations, government authorities and policy-makers

1. Include and consult women about policies and norms concerning their technology usage as the UN's Human Rights Council and governments of the central Sahel recognizes. Gender equality at all levels of decision-making is essential to achieving development.
2. Establish solid partnerships with multilateral organizations, governments and policy-makers in order to mitigate TFGBV specific to the countries studied, regardless of the perpetrator's place of residence, as the digital sphere enables violence to spread rapidly. Build effective mechanisms for reporting and addressing cybercrimes, including dedicated offices for cybercrime complaints, psychological support, and legal assistance, to ensure timely and comprehensive support for victims.
3. Include the various manifestations of TFGBV among the list of crimes punishable by law in the penal codes of central Sahel countries.
4. Implement gender mainstreaming in Sahelian cybersecurity legislation, i.e: the Malian Law No. 2019-056 on the Repression of Cybercrime ; the Nigerian Law No. 2019-33 of July 03, 2019, on the repression of cybercrime in Niger; the Burkinabe law N° 061/2008/AN on the general regulation of electronic communications networks and services.
5. Adapt criminal procedure codes of central Sahel countries to the digital sector, in particular for the collection of evidence of cybercrimes.
6. Integrate women's digital security as a public health, national and human security issue, in the agenda of the digital national strategies: Burkina

Faso's National Strategy for the Development of the Digital Economy 2018-2027, Mali's National Cybersecurity Strategy for 2024-2028, Niger's Telecommunications and ICT Sectoral Policy 2013. Enforce strict policies against online harassment and ensure effective implementation to protect women's rights and safety online.

7. Provide a toll-free helpline or hotline to offer immediate assistance and guidance on cyber-related issues, enhancing accessibility to support services for women in need.
8. Fund quantitative research on TFGBV as well as qualified national and regional administrations in the field of cybercrime control.

Tech companies

1. Adapt their strategies of TFGBV mitigation to the Sahelian market in order to accommodate cultural nuances: a) Conduct cultural sensitivity training focusing on understanding Sahelian cultural norms and values related to gender, privacy, and online behavior. b) Collaborate with local advocacy groups in the Sahel region to gain insights into community-specific challenges related to TFGBV and to co-create solutions tailored to the local context. c) Develop customized safety features that also align with female users' needs.
2. Implement Sahel-focused awareness campaigns focused on increasing women's visibility in digital spaces to promote online safety and empowerment.
3. Streamline the complaint in-take process to better serve users who are experiencing online harassment and violence.
4. Ensure that privacy settings are clear and acces-

sible to all users regardless of digital knowledge.

5. Collaborate with local actors to identify culturally-specific online violence trends and implement relevant complaint mechanisms

Educational institutions

1. Develop and implement training programs focused on digital literacy, online safety, and verifying information, specifically tailored for women.
2. Empower women with the skills needed to protect their digital identities and navigate online platforms safely, highlighting the role of technology in education.
3. Encourage women to take ownership of their digital presence, emphasizing responsible content sharing, privacy protection, and strong security practices.
4. Create trainings, curriculum, and awareness campaigns targeting men to improve their online behavior towards women.

Civil society organizations

1. Advocate for policies that ensure women's freedom and safety online.
2. Safeguard ongoing feminist movements in digital spaces by advocating for protections against challenges and threats they face.
3. Organize open forums accessible to women and the general public, incorporating knowledge assessments at the beginning and end to gauge understanding and retention of digital safety concepts.
4. Collaborate with tech companies and government authorities to create awareness campaigns that target women in marginalized communities. They can collaborate on local projects to promote digital education, internet access, and cultural changes. Launched in 2018 by UN Women, in partnership with the African Union Commission (AUC) and the International Telecommunication Unit (ITU), the African Girls Can Code Initiative is one of myriad positive examples worldwide.

Acknowledgments

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Conclusion

Digital safety is not only a public health issue, but also one of national and human security, as violence in the online space spills over into the real world, exacerbating conflict dynamics. While online platforms offer opportunities for connection, expression, and empowerment, they also pose risks of harassment, discrimination, and exclusion. This paper identified diverse forms of technology-facilitated gender-based violence experienced by women in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali. As Sahelian women's digital safety is a requirement for sustainable peace in the region, it requires greater content moderation efforts and financial investment from international, regional and national actors, namely national governments and tech companies.³⁵ Sahelian governments need to guarantee access to connectivity and to consolidate a TFG-BV-sensitive digital model in order to meet identified needs. This qualitative study also calls for a quantitative study to allow a better contextualization of digital strategies for the Sahelian market by tech companies.³⁶ As social media can fuel or reduce violence, special attention must be paid to women's vulnerability.³⁷ Global discussions on digital strategies for a better safety and the achievement of gender equity are a necessity, as addressing women's digital security vulnerabilities in the Sahel can contribute heavily to peacebuilding. By centering the voices and experiences of women, researchers, policymakers, and activists can work together to create safer, more equitable digital environments for all.

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