



Examining media coverage of online violence against women in East Africa

A study report

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Contents

- 1. Executive summary** **6**

- 2. Methodology** **12**
 - 2.1 Description of research data 13
 - 2.2 Limitations in data collection and analysis 16
 - 2.3 Data analysis 17

- 3. Findings** **18**
 - 3.1 Media content analysis findings 19
 - 3.1.1 Limited diversity of OVAW themes 19
 - 3.1.2 Determinants of media coverage of OVAW 21
 - 3.1.3 Sourcing media reports on OVAW 22
 - 3.1.4 Trivialization of OVAW 30
 - 3.1.5 Republication of derogatory content 33
 - 3.1.6 Characterization of OVAW victims and perpetrators 35
 - 3.1.7 Inadequate verification of information 37
 - 3.1.8 Sensationalism 39
 - 3.1.9 Sexualization of OVAW survivors 40
 - 3.1.10 Limited understanding and framing of OVAW 40
 - 3.1.11 Limiting further harm 45
 - 3.1.12 Polarized opinions 46
 - 3.1.13 Flexibility in media genres 47
 - 3.2 Emerging issues 47
 - 3.2.1 Newsroom attitudes 47
 - 3.2.2 OVAW survivor / public attitudes 48
 - 3.2.3 Skill gaps 49
 - 3.2.4 Weak enforcement of media reporting standards 51
 - 3.2.5 OVAW in newsrooms 51

- 4. Recommendations** **54**
 - 4.1 Media training 55
 - 4.2 Advocacy initiatives 57

- 5. Conclusion** **60**

- Glossary of terms** **62**

1. Executive summary

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is one of the most prevalent human rights violations,¹ affecting an estimated 736 million women globally.² While occurring mostly offline, a recent UN report³ described cyberspace as “the new front-line” for VAWG. Any act of violence targeted at women that is committed, assisted, or aggravated using information and communication technology is referred to as online violence against women (OVAW). It can take various forms, such as cyberbullying, cyber harassment, non-consensual sharing of nude images or videos, and body shaming. Though online violence can affect both men and women, women are often the primary targets. This gender disparity is rooted in deeply ingrained sexism and misogyny, prevalent in patriarchal societies, which is reflected in online spaces.

Cyberspace breaks down barriers, such as distance, and therefore enables perpetrators to attack women anonymously and repeatedly. Perpetrators of OVAW often intimidate and humiliate women into self-censorship. In doing so, they silence the voices of affected women in important conversations. Cyberspace also allows violent incidents to go viral, prolonging the trauma of survivors – a term this study uses for women that have been affected by online violence.⁴ This provides opportunities for multiple perpetrators to gang up and escalate attacks across various platforms. OVAW incidents often spill over from private online spaces, such as WhatsApp, into public spaces, such as Facebook. Depending on the perceived severity of the incident or prominence of the survivor, traditional media platforms, like TV, radio, and newspapers, expose OVAW incidents to even greater audiences and trigger public discussion both online and offline. Videos, photos, or remarks related to incidents do not just disappear from the internet but can still be found long after, in formats such as GIFs and memes. Some survivors may never be able to fully leave the experience behind.

Data on OVAW is generally sparse. However, some studies show that women in the public eye, such as media

practitioners, activists, and politicians, are most vulnerable to cyber violence. For instance, a 2016 study on the online safety of women journalists revealed that 75 percent of journalists in four Kenyan cities had encountered online harassment in the line of duty.⁵ A study by the World Wide Web Foundation indicated a spike in global OVAW cases during the COVID-19 pandemic, as more women and girls used the internet for work, education, and personal relationships.⁶

While internet access is increasing in East Africa,⁷ so is the number of OVAW cases. This has a direct impact on women’s digital participation, as many survivors of various forms of OVAW withdraw from online media and their voices fall silent. Many suffer emotional and psychological trauma, often left alone without support. Only a small number of affected women report their cases, and of those, very few are pursued in court. This problem is worsened by an absence of policy and legal regulations to combat such crimes in the digital sphere.

To address this challenge, DW Akademie initiated the regional project Women@Web. This project, launched in 2018, focused on providing women in urban and semi-urban areas with the necessary skills, knowledge, and tools to navigate the digital landscape safely and confidently. DW Akademie collaborated with a network of organizations in Uganda, Rwanda, Kenya and Tanzania specialized in cyber security for women to address the unique challenges women face online and to promote a safer and more inclusive online environment for all. They did this through tailored digital literacy training, strategic advocacy campaigns, and insightful research studies on OVAW. In the course of project activities, it became clear that the public’s perception of OVAW is not only shaped by the online space. Traditional media continue to play an important role in agenda-setting and influencing public discourse.

Against this background, in November 2021, DW Akademie commissioned this study to comprehensively analyze how traditional media report about OVAW in Kenya, Rwanda,

¹ Amnesty International, What Is Online Violence and Abuse against Women?, November 20, 2017, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2017/11/what-is-online-violence-and-abuse-against-women (February 7, 2023).

² UN Women, Facts and Figures. Ending Violence against Women, last updated February 2022, www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures (February 7, 2023).

³ Women’s UN Report Network (WUNRN), Statement on Online Violence against Women and Girls, November 4, 2020, www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/SR/Online_VAW_Statement.pdf (February 7, 2023).

⁴ See glossary page 62.

⁵ Association of Media Women in Kenya, Article 19. Women Journalist’s Digital Security, May 2016, www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/38757/Women-Journalist%27s-Digital-Security-Kenya-2016.pdf (February 7, 2023).

⁶ World Wide Web Foundation, There’s a Pandemic of Online Violence against Women and Girls, July 14, 2020, www.webfoundation.org/2020/07/theres-a-pandemic-of-online-violence-against-women-and-girls (February 7, 2023).

⁷ Digital 2022 Reports Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda, February 15, 2022, Datareportal: <https://datareportal.com/reports/?tag=Eastern+Africa> (February 7, 2023).

Tanzania, and Uganda and provide recommendations for journalistic training and advocacy work. The study's findings, summarized in this report, can assist development organizations, government bodies, civil society organizations, the media, and other stakeholders in developing effective strategies to address and combat OVAW.

Despite an increasing number of online media platforms ("new media"), traditional media is generally more affordable and trustworthy in East Africa, and therefore continues to play the leading role in informing the public and shaping opinions. It not only introduces topics into the public domain but also suggests their importance, defines the quality of discourse, and influences change. The frequency and prominence of media coverage on any subject usually means more public awareness. The media coverage of OVAW is therefore essential in any strategy to combat this form of violence.

Methodology

The research was designed as an exploratory case study. The exploratory case study design entails examining a complex issue in its real-life context to understand it better. In this study, 13 cases of OVAW were selected from Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda for in-depth study. The cases were selected based on the availability of traceable media reports (published between November 1, 2016, and October 30, 2021), the diversity of survivor profiles, and types of OVAW experienced. To unpack traditional media reporting on the 13 OVAW cases, the research team undertook two streams of data collection and analysis. First, the research team analyzed all available reports on the 13 OVAW incidents as published by newspapers or broadcast on radio and television. In total, the study analyzed 137 media reports obtained from 77 media houses in the four study countries. Thereafter, the research team organized focus group discussions and interviewed key actors that included OVAW survivors, alleged perpetrators, media practitioners (editors, producers, and reporters), media content regulators, legal and women's rights experts (including civil society organizations – CSOs). A total of 70 respondents participated in the study.

Key findings

The study revealed the following:

1. OVAW coverage follows clear and rigid patterns:

All 137 media reports covered only seven aspects: occurrence of the OVAW incident; public reaction to the incident; OVAW survivors' responses; pursuit of justice; consequences of the OVAW incident; attribution of blame for the incident; and other issues (e. g., responses to OVAW incidents by survivors'

families and mentions of OVAW incidents in broader human rights articles). These findings show that traditional media coverage of OVAW is typically quite predictable in its course, unchanging, and basic. The media is typically feeding their audiences the same type of information regardless of the survivors and type of OVAW. On the other hand, what all reports are usually missing is a discussion of why and how OVAW is committed, what laws prohibit OVAW, and what measures exist to combat this kind of violence.

2. The threshold is high for OVAW to be covered:

Editors have created a more stringent criteria for covering OVAW, compared to other topics such as crime, sports or politics. Apart from audience preference, other factors that determined whether OVAW incidents received traditional media spotlight included, among others,

- magnitude and gravity of the incident;
- opinions of (male-dominated) newsroom teams on the value of OVAW stories;
- compliance with editorial policies, most of which censure incidents involving nudity;
- and whether the incident attained an offline dimension (e. g., if it was reported to police).

All in all, OVAW stories need to tick many more boxes to be included in traditional media coverage than politics and crime stories, for example, and are therefore less likely to be published, despite their frequency.

3. Single-sourcing is common:

The analysis covered

- the diversity of sources used in media reports (that is, the number of sources per media report);
- relevance of sources;
- gender diversity in sources;
- the involvement of OVAW survivors, and
- the involvement of OVAW perpetrators in media investigation and coverage.

Across the region, 62 percent of media reports on OVAW only cited a single source. Single-sourcing was most often found in radio reporting of OVAW at 90 percent, followed by news websites at 68 percent, with television and newspapers coming in at 50 percent each. Across the region, most sources quoted

in OVAW reports (95 percent) were relevant to the topic covered. However, even though sources were mostly relevant, the widespread practice of using a single source ultimately limited the scope of relevant information published or broadcast on OVAW. At a regional level, there was a fair balance of male and female sources. Reasons for the exclusion of OVAW survivors and alleged perpetrators as sources by the media included the refusal to take interviews, cases being on trial, and the convenient option to replace personal interviews with the use of social media posts. A few survivors and alleged perpetrators dominated media coverage. Where survivors dominated coverage, they achieved significant public awareness, diffused incidents, and demanded accountability from alleged perpetrators.

4. OVAW is trivialized:

Several factors indicated that OVAW incidents are seen as trivial by the media, including the low-priority placement of stories on media platforms, inadequate verification of evidence, and miscommunication of the gravity of OVAW. For instance, 82 percent of OVAW stories were not front-page stories in newspapers. In all four countries, 48 percent of web articles on OVAW were placed in the lifestyle and entertainment sections. However, OVAW is not a subject of entertainment regardless of whether the women affected work in the entertainment industry. Most radio content on OVAW (81 percent) was classified as gossip or entertainment indicating OVAW as a non-newsworthy item. Most traditional media houses also relegated OVAW reports to their digital platforms. Media reports also framed OVAW incidents as “love scandals,” diminishing their gravity. Some media practitioners said OVAW was not a serious topic for news coverage.

5. Derogatory content is republished:

The study encountered instances where media outlets republished nude photos and/or negative remarks against OVAW survivors. Most of the derogatory remarks published in the media were comments from social media users and alleged perpetrators. The republication of derogatory content affected women irrespective of their home country, occupation, or OVAW experience (cyberbullying, cyber harassment, non-consensual sharing of nude images or videos, body shaming). The use of derogatory remarks in media reports fueled negative public perceptions of survivors and validated perpetrators.

6. The media characterizes OVAW survivors and perpetrators:

Media reports used language that aimed directly to characterize the main protagonists in OVAW incidents. For instance, alleged perpetrators were described as “foul-mouthed,” “young,” or “tycoon.” Survivors were called “prostitutes,” “poor,” or “aggressive.” During our research interviews,

survivors and alleged perpetrators criticized such characterizations, saying labels helped to spread misinformation. Overall, negative characterizations did not affect OVAW survivors who were strongly involved in the media coverage of their incidents. On the other hand, most of the survivors who were not at all or minimally engaged suffered significant negative publicity. In some cases, where the media republished derogatory contents, the affected survivors were also portrayed in an overall negative light. The inadequate verification of information from sources also contributed to negative characterization.

7. Information is not always verified:

The degree to which the media verified the information they published on OVAW was evaluated by looking at the evidence that supported the information: the causes of OVAW, identity of perpetrators, and authenticity of leaked videos or photos. Such information was categorized as inadequately verified when 1) it could not be traced back to a credible source or 2) journalists flagged the information as inauthentic themselves. The study found that media practitioners freely publish questionable information. This could partly be attributed to a lack of technology to verify images supposedly illustrating OVAW incidents.

8. Sensationalism aims to capture public attention:

Journalists blew key facts about OVAW incidents out of proportion, made unsubstantiated claims about the responses of survivors to their incidents, used shocking words like “dirty” and “raunchy” to describe incidents, and exaggerated the impact of OVAW on survivors, all to garner greater interest from the public. Media houses discard ethical standards in favor of audience capture, which affects the dignity of survivors and distracts audiences from considering the severity or illegality of OVAW. Instead, the focus remains on mundane issues like social media excitement over leaked nude photos.

9. OVAW survivors are sexualized:

Sexualization refers to the portrayal of women or their bodies as objects for sexual pleasure. The sexualization of survivors in media reporting not only distracts from the depravity of violence against women but makes it seem normal. This approach was mostly taken by identifiably male reporters, going by names and photos accompanying reports. However, two female TV presenters also applied the male gaze. Sexualization was common in OVAW incidents involving nudity, where media reports described survivors as “sexy” or “curvy,” among other things.

10. Media reports foster limited understanding of OVAW:

Even though our interviews revealed that media practitioners could adequately define OVAW, their reports nevertheless fell short of reflecting this understanding. For instance, they

reported some OVAW incidents as mere online controversies without pointing out the violent nature of the content. Additionally, most media reports did not use terminology that clearly communicated the offensive nature of what had been done to women, such as cyberbullying or doxing. Instead, media reports were dominated by euphemisms, such as “embarrassing episode,” or “romance video,” for instance. Reports also included sensationalist phrases like “18+ video,” “raunchy video,” or “adult-rated video”, and misrepresentations, for example referring to cyberstalking as love. To help their audiences understand OVAW, the media used one of only five overarching frames, telling OVAW stories against the background of

- cultural and religious immorality;
- crime and sabotage;
- love;
- unjustified hate; or
- bad upbringing.

The phenomenon of framing, that is, the adoption of a certain perspective from which media outlets chiefly tell OVAW stories, also impacts the selection of sources to cover OVAW stories, because pre-set perspectives prevent balanced coverage, especially of survivors and perpetrators.

11. Media coverage can add further harm:

Interviews with survivors and alleged perpetrators revealed that media reports resulted in social and economic harm for them. For instance, survivors and alleged perpetrators were stigmatized at work and in their communities. Even though two men formerly accused of committing OVAW were acquitted for lack of evidence and other reasons, this was not sufficient to improve or reverse the harm inflicted on them by media reporting. Such scenarios can lead to lawsuits for defamation against media houses. The study found that editors and reporters were aware of multiple strategies to prevent such harm but did not put them into practice.

12. OVAW is a controversial topic:

In all four countries, opinions on OVAW were divided. This can be explained by the fact that OVAW incidents spark conversations about morality, decency, and sexuality, which are ordinarily very emotive topics. One opinion article made use of satire to launch what seemed like a defense of the behavior of online abusers. The expression of opinions in the media is one of the benefits of free speech. However, these benefits need to be reviewed where free speech leads to the publication of misogynistic ideas. The study concluded that the use of satire in OVAW reporting is inappropriate, as humor is subjective and

could be understood in different (and harmful) ways.

13. Emerging issues:

Five unique observations were made from interviews with various respondents. These are as follows:

- Attitudes of reporters and editors play an important role in OVAW coverage. In a typical newsroom, a variety of attitudes held by reporters and editors compete in defining the relevance of OVAW incidents for media coverage.
- Some OVAW survivors have developed a degree of tolerance for OVAW, which might be detrimental to efforts to eliminate online abuse. For instance, one survivor told the research team that there is an acceptable degree of stalking beyond which an incident should be reported.
- The majority of editors and reporters have not received any specialized training on reporting OVAW. Some have been trained in reporting VAW in general.
- Editorial teams barely enforce ethical standards, which promotes poor reporting of OVAW. In addition, some media houses exploit loopholes in media regulatory laws to continue their poor reporting.
- OVAW that affects media practitioners themselves is not actively addressed by media houses.

Recommendations

In line with the findings, the research team proposes a series of interventions by the various stakeholders targeting media practitioners such as reporters and editors, women at risk of OVAW, and policy makers.

1. Media practitioners:

The study recommends comprehensive **media capacity-building on reporting OVAW**. A reference guide for optimal reporting on OVAW should be developed. Training should be provided, above all, to digital platform reporters and editors who publish the bulk of OVAW reports. Such efforts should strategically cover the following:

- A refresher course on the **basics of journalism**, including the basic principles of sourcing, verification, and objectivity. Such training should also include ethics and compliance with existing regulatory frameworks and laws.
- Foster a holistic **understanding of gender-based violence (GBV) and OVAW** as well as sociocultural paradigms and norms which promote, tolerate, and/or trivialize OVAW.

- Introduce **appropriate language, style, and frames** when reporting on OVAW and strategies to avoid sensationalism and humor.
- Explore ways to apply uniform **inclusion criteria** to OVAW and strategies for making OVAW cases newsworthy.
- Develop strategies to achieve a **balanced representation of sources** in terms of both gender and quantity, as well as ensure in-depth **investigative coverage** of OVAW cases.
- Identify **techniques to minimize further harm** and address the challenges of translating theoretical knowledge into practical reporting.
- Provide trainees with **tools to effectively verify** the authenticity of documents and images related to OVAW.
- **Advocacy targeting the media** should aim at influencing editors and columnists to take a stand against OVAW, for example, through the publication of editorials or commentary in newspapers or on news websites.
- There is a need to **tear down legal barriers** to online safety. CSOs can partner with the government to support 1) the revision of laws which wrongly incriminate OVAW survivors, 2) training on the effective investigation and prosecution of online offenses, and 3) the effective investigation, prosecution, and adjudication of online crimes.

2. Media outlets:

- In addition to improving the quality of reporting, the media can provide a **platform for constructive dialogue** about the topic of OVAW. This will create more awareness of OVAW.
- Sensitize trainees to OVAW in the newsroom and possibilities to **support staff**.
- Implement **policies and standards** on how to report on OVAW.

3. CSOs / NGOs:

- **Capacity-building** for women online: Every woman online is a potential target of OVAW. As such, women should be armed with strategies to effectively respond to OVAW. For prominent women, such strategies should include tips on effective media management. CSOs can provide women with these strategies and tools by offering trainings on OVAW-related topics.
- CSOs working on women's rights and online freedom can proactively monitor and swiftly respond to media coverage of OVAW incidents, for instance, by publishing statements condemning OVAW. **Media monitoring** can support direct dialogue with media managers to improve coverage.
- In addition, women's rights organizations can provide **spaces for media to interact with OVAW survivors** in a safe environment to increase these women's role in public discourse.
- The **sensitization of potential perpetrators** is an important intervention to enable women's safety in digital spaces. Among other things, online users should be educated on the negative impact of online violence in order to deter abusive behavior.



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2. Methodology

This research was designed as an exploration and comparison of the traditional media coverage in 13 cases of OVAW in Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda. The case study investigation was carried out in two phases:

Phase 1 — Collection and analysis of existing print, audio, and video material for OVAW cases

The research team selected and analyzed 138 media reports on 13 OVAW incidents reported by 77 media outlets, including newspapers, TV, radio, and news websites, in the four countries. The team started out with country-specific online searches using phrases like “leaked nude photos,” “leaked sex tape,” “body shaming,” “cyber harassment,” “cyber stalking,” and others. To these results, the research team, which consisted mainly of media practitioners and women’s rights activists, added more examples of incidents which they could recall. The research team also held consultations with relevant CSOs and media practitioners in the countries. These served to validate the initial list of OVAW incidents and obtain information on additional incidents for consideration in the study. From the initial list of 24 OVAW incidents, 13 were eventually included in the study. On the one hand, this selection came down to the availability of traditional media reports for each case—the requirement was a minimum of ten reports representing radio, TV, and newspapers per case. On the other hand, the study wanted to include a diverse sample of survivor profiles and types of OVAW. What followed was an analysis of these media report to identify common characteristics in the traditional media coverage of OVAW.

Phase 2 — Collection and analysis of data gathered from interviews

The research team conducted a total of 70 interviews and three discussion rounds with various people who could provide information on the OVAW cases studied. Among them were OVAW survivors and alleged perpetrators, media practitioners, such as reporters and editors, from the media houses which reported the OVAW incidents, CSOs working in women’s rights advocacy and media development, as well as government officials in charge of regulating media practices, police officers, and lawyers who represented survivors and perpetrators.

2.1. Description of research data

Media reports

A total of 138 media reports on 13 OVAW incidents were selected from the four traditional media, as displayed in the table below. TV and Radio content was difficult to trace over a six-year period (2016–2021) as current media laws in all four countries require broadcasters to archive content only up to six months. Radio content was especially scarce. In searching media archives, the research team also learnt that the leading media outlets publish most OVAW content on digital platforms. Therefore, news websites were included in the study.

Distribution of media reports across the study countries				
COUNTRY	RADIO	TELEVISION	NEWSPAPERS	WEBSITES
Kenya	1	10	5	20
Rwanda	2	4	0	25
Tanzania	5	4	1	13
Uganda	3	20	11	13
Total	11	38	17	71

Table 1

The 138 media reports were collected from 77 media outlets in the four countries. The table below (Tab. 2) shows the distribution of the 77 media outlets by country.

Across all four countries, radio, and television reports on OVAW were rare due to the six-month archiving requirement, as mentioned above. As a result, broadcast content for reports dating back six years was largely untraceable.

Only few OVAW incidents made it to print, which explains the low number of 17 newspaper stories. Newspapers published OVAW reports mostly on their websites. In Rwanda, the printing of newspapers ceased, and all newspapers migrated online. In Uganda, two newspapers, *Kampala Sun* and *Red Pepper*, which might have covered more OVAW incidents, moved online and discontinued respectively. These factors reduced the availability and traceability of newspaper articles on OVAW.

Although news websites are not traditional media platforms, they were included in the study given the preference of traditional media to publish OVAW stories on digital platforms. More than half (51 percent) of the media reports studied were published on news websites. The report explains this trend in the findings section (see *Trivialization of OVAW*).

The study focused on investigating content from the region's most popular traditional media outlets. A majority (75 percent) of these outlets ascribe to "professional" (as opposed to tabloid) editorial styles. Compared to tabloid-style reporting, professional reporting is, in theory, strictly guided by journalism standards and ethics. However, this study found significant evidence of unprofessional or tabloid-style reporting in professional media outlets.

Interviews

The research team spoke with a total of 70 people, including OVAW survivors, alleged perpetrators, reporters, respondents and producers, representatives of law enforcement agencies, and CSOs working on media development and women's rights. All apart from three OVAW survivors declined interview requests. The research team also interviewed three alleged perpetrators. The survivors and alleged perpetrators recalled their personal experiences with media reporting on the respective OVAW incidents. They discussed with us their portrayal in the media, whether they were interviewed, the accuracy of information reported in the media, and the harm suffered as an overall result of media reporting. Media practitioners (reporters, producers, and editors) offered valuable information including explanations of content sourcing strategies, verification of images, as well as characterization, objectivity, and placement of OVAW reports on various media platforms. Representatives of law enforcement agencies and CSOs shed light on the connections between media reporting of OVAW, media laws, and journalism ethics and standards aiming to protect and promote women's rights. Each category of respondents also made recommendations on how to improve the quality of media coverage of OVAW.

OVAW incidents

The 13 OVAW case studies included four incidents from Rwanda and three from each of the other three countries, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. Together, they represented five types of OVAW, which were body shaming, cyberbullying, non-consensual sharing of nudes, cyberstalking and surveillance, and cyber harassment. The definitions of OVAW applied in this report were coined and adapted by the research team using common traits in various definitions.

Distribution of media outlets across the study countries

COUNTRY	RADIO OUTLETS	TELEVISION OUTLETS	NEWSPAPER OUTLETS	WEBSITE OUTLETS
Kenya	1	6	3	11
Rwanda	2	2	0	18
Tanzania	3	3	1	4
Uganda	3	8	5	7
Total	9	19	9	40

Table 2

Online body shaming

Body shaming is humiliating someone by making inappropriate or negative comments about their body shape or size. Body shaming can also be called fat shaming if it targets plus-size women. However, body shaming is not limited to specific body types, as social media users even shame fashion and beauty models, with derogatory comments about skin complexion or certain body parts, for example.

This study investigated traditional media reports on five incidents of online body shaming. These five incidents were the subject of 33 media reports (24 percent) from all four countries.

The body shaming incidents involved fat shaming, claims of skin bleaching, mockery of a beauty pageant winner, negative remarks about one woman's breasts shown in a Twitter video, and derogatory social media remarks on a woman's private parts after she posted photos of herself wearing "indecent clothes" on Instagram. The perpetrators could not be identified in these incidents, although some media reports included street polls and comments obtained from specific social media users.

Non-consensual sharing of nude images and videos

This refers to the sharing of sexually graphic images of people without their permission. Perpetrators can obtain such images from secret recordings, taken during an intimate relationship, or steal them from other's electronic devices.

The study analyzed 58 traditional media reports (41 percent of the total number of reports from all four countries) on five incidents of non-consensual sharing of nudes. There were three cases of leaked videos (36 media reports) and two of leaked photos (22 media reports). Alleged perpetrators were identified in two of the incidents.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is the use of online platforms to convey information intended to hurtfully tease, threaten, abuse, aggressively dominate, or intimidate another person. It can be perpetrated through instant messages, text messages, emails, and social networks.

One incident of cyberbullying was included in this study, for which there were 14 media reports (10 percent). The incident involved a male student cyberbullying a female schoolmate.

Cyber harassment

Cyber harassment is the repeated hostile conduct towards a person in cyberspace for no obvious reasons, intended to terrify, intimidate, humiliate, or embarrass them.

In the cyber harassment case studied, one man employed a variety of strategies to humiliate the survivor: He made defamatory comments about the woman, created social

media content that depicted her negatively, and spread rumors about her. Nine media reports (6 percent) were collected on this OVAW incident.

Cyberstalking and cyber surveillance

Cyberstalking is the systematic, deliberate, and persistent use of communication platforms to aggressively contact an uninterested party. Perpetrators do not stop interactions even if the recipient of such communication expresses displeasure or asks them to stop. Cyber surveillance is using information technologies to monitor people against their will.

One incident was studied in which a woman suffered both cyberstalking and cyber surveillance. The study collected 26 media reports (19 percent) on this incident. A man accused of being the stalker was identified.

The survivor described the incident in an interview with the research team as follows:

“ It started as a call [...] a call which I thought was maybe from a constituent, then it continued. [...] He continued calling day and night [...] I blocked that number [...] He kept calling using other numbers. So, every time I blocked one, there was a new number coming in and I would innocently receive thinking it was someone else calling me [...] So it continued like that until I got scared [...] I had to report to the police [...] It was too much. I had stopped moving freely [...] going to the market [...] even interacting with my friends [...] even keeping up late [...] I would miss out some days to go to work [...]

Survivors description of a cyberstalking experience

OWAW survivors profiles

The names of the survivors have been changed and only limited information is provided on their profiles to protect the privacy of the individuals. The 13 women targeted in the OWAW incidents from this study belonged to five general groups of occupation:

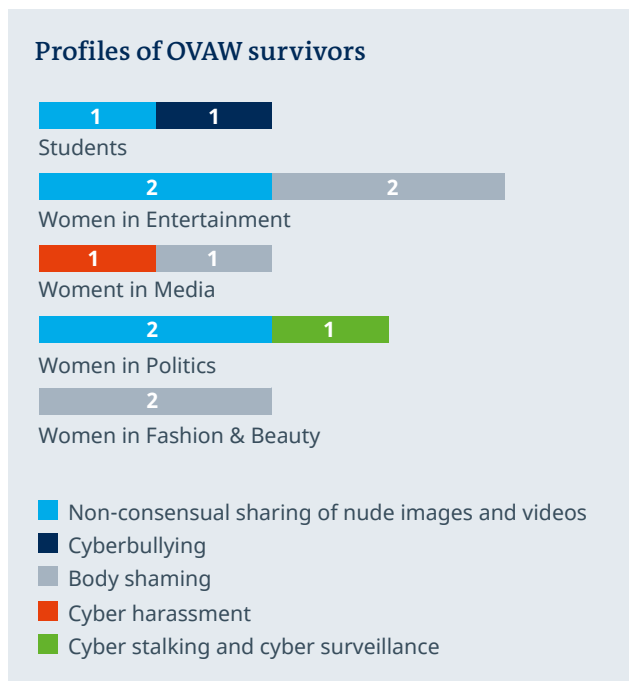


Figure 1

Two school students

Naomi (18 at the time of the incident) was the target of non-consensual sharing of nudes and *Dada* (a minor) suffered cyberbullying. The study collected ten media reports on *Naomi* and 14 on *Dada*, totaling 24 reports on OWAW affecting students.

Four women in entertainment

Tina, *Peace*, *Bridgette*, and *Nancy* all work in sectors of the entertainment industry including film and music. *Tina* and *Bridgette* are survivors of non-consensual sharing of nudes, and twelve reports were collected on each incident. *Peace* and *Nancy* experienced body shaming because of videos and photos they had posted on social media platforms. Ten reports were collected on *Peace* and four on *Nancy*. A total of 38 media reports were gathered on online violence against four women in the entertainment sector.

Two women in media

Mwesa experienced body shaming after posting her photo on social media, while *Nadia* was cyber harassed by one man and some of his online fans. In total, 19 reports were studied on the two incidents: ten on the body shaming and nine on the cyber harassment case.

Three women in politics

The study examined 50 media reports on OWAW in politics. There were 26 reports on the cyberstalking and cyber surveillance of *Alexa*, ten on the non-consensual release of nude photos alleged to belong to *Mercy*, and 14 on a leaked sex tape supposed to feature *Annette*.

Two women in fashion and beauty

While body shaming is commonly perpetrated against plus size women, the study included two cases of fashion and beauty queens who suffered body shaming. The two, *Masha* and *Alice*, had won important beauty pageants in their respective countries. Only nine media reports were traceable on the incidents: two on *Masha* and seven on *Alice*.

2.2. Limitations in data collection and analysis

The team encountered the following limitations to their research during the study:

- **Complete broadcast media content was rarely available:** Instead of entire broadcast programs, such as news bulletins, the research team could mainly obtain clips of individual news stories, for example. Therefore, it was difficult to make statements about the actual prominence of OWAW stories in broadcast media (for instance, how long was the entire program, and how much time was given to the OWAW segment?). Instead, the research team relied on other indicators, such as the types of format and genres used to report on OWAW.
- **The print media sector had changed between 2016 and 2021:** During the period 2016 to 2021, Rwanda stopped the printing of newspapers completely and all publications migrated online. For this reason, hard copies of newspapers were difficult to find. In Uganda, the *Red Pepper*, a local daily tabloid which would cover many OWAW incidents, was shut down several times. Another Ugandan tabloid, the *Kampala Sun*, moved online in 2021 to save money during the COVID-19 pandemic. These factors restricted the accessibility of print newspaper content on OWAW.

- **OVAW perpetrators could not be identified:** The study originally sought to explore the traditional media coverage of alleged OVAW perpetrators alongside coverage of survivors. However, only five of the 13 OVAW incidents had identifiable perpetrators. In eight incidents, OVAW was committed by a mass of faceless social media users or individuals whose identities remain undisclosed by the police. Therefore, in addition to using the little data available on the OVAW perpetrators, the research team also used the interviews to inquire into the coverage of OVAW perpetrators.

2.3. Data analysis

The research team analyzed the 138 media reports both in qualitative and quantitative terms, meaning what was discussed and how, and how often was it discussed. Interviews with 70 individuals provided additional information.

Two types of patterns could be identified: patterns that were apparent in the media reports and those that were not apparent but could be interpreted. Apparent patterns included, for example, whether an OVAW story was placed on the front page or not, or what formats were used to report the story (news, opinions, or gossip and entertainment). Those patterns were measurable in numbers (how often did they occur?). On the other hand, non-apparent content included interpretations of nuances, such as how guilt was attributed, how survivors and perpetrators were characterized, what sources were used, and how OVAW was framed in the media reports.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated as literal as possible from local languages such as Swahili (Tanzania and Kenya), Luganda, Lusoga (Uganda), and Kinyarwanda (Rwanda).



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3. Findings

This section details the findings of the study in two categories: findings from the media content analysis and emerging issues. Findings from the media content analysis combine data from both, the media reports, and the interviews. Emerging issues stem from the interviews only, which could not be observed from the content analysis, for example, OVAW in newsrooms.

Summary of findings
CONTENT ANALYSIS FINDINGS
Limited diversity of OVAW topics
Stiff inclusion criteria for OVAW stories
Weak sourcing
Trivialization of OVAW
Replication of derogatory content
Characterization of survivors and perpetrators
Inadequate verification of information
Sensationalism
Sexualization of OVAW survivors
Limited understanding and framing of OVAW
Limiting further harm
Flexibility in media genres
EMERGING ISSUES
Newsroom Attitudes
Survivors/Public Attitudes
Skill Gaps
Enforcement of Standards
OVAW in Newsrooms

Table 3

3.1 Findings of media content analysis

3.1.1. Limited diversity of OVAW themes

The study found that there was a limited number of themes—or topics—covered by media reports on OVAW. The following seven topics were identified throughout all 138 media reports studied:

- **Occurrence of OVAW incident:** This category represents the first reports informing the public that an OVAW incident had occurred, identifying the parties involved, the platforms where the incident had occurred, and other general information. These reports were based on readily available information at the time of the incident. Each of the 13 OVAW incidents had this type of report.
- **Public reaction to OVAW incident:** These were media reports focusing on how the OVAW incident was received by the public. Such reports were based on comments on the incidents gathered from online platforms, through street polls or vox pops and call-in shows. Examples include a TV report on *Masha*, where different members of the public expressed their negative opinions on *Masha*, claiming she was not beautiful enough to be crowned a beauty queen; a live TV show where callers showed support for *Tina* after her nude photos were leaked; a news website article on the *Dada* case which also describes the nature of public reaction as “a choir of online criticism” against the alleged perpetrator; and a newspaper report where public reactions on the *Nadia* incident were categorized as “Team *Nadia*” and “Team Alleged Perpetrator.”
- **OVAW survivor response:** In this category were reports about the differing responses of OVAW survivors to the incidents they (had) experienced. Common responses included self-defense (survivors denying involvement in the OVAW incident, and others), explanations of how and why the incident had occurred, one public apology, and the dismissal of the incident as inconsequential or fake. One example is an online news story on “body positivity,” which was based on *Mwesa*’s response to her online attackers. A radio report also featured her explaining how the incident had unfolded. One TV station aired a press conference in which *Bridgette* issued a public apology for the OVAW incident. A radio interview with *Peace* revealed she was confident in her body and did not care much for public comments on her breasts.
- **Pursuit of justice:** Closely related to the responses of the public and the survivors, this group of reports dealt with the different processes undertaken, especially by survivors

and government officials, to pursue justice. Topics include, among other things, the launch of police investigations into OVAW incidents, survivors seeking redress from courts, and investigations by other quasi-governmental or private bodies, such as professional associations. Most reports in this category were on the *Annette* case, where parliamentary and police investigations were launched, as well as the trial of the alleged perpetrator in the *Alexa* case and police investigations on the *Tina*, *Naomi*, and *Bridgette*'s cases. It was noted that these pursuits of justice were not completed for various reasons (*Bridgette*, *Tina*, *Naomi*, *Annette*) or ended in favor of the perpetrator (*Alexa*).

- **Consequences of the OVAW incident:** These reports documented the impact of OVAW on survivors and alleged perpetrators. They were based on discussions with survivors, alleged perpetrators, circle of relatives and friends and/or experts (especially women's rights advocates). Examples include an online news report on *Bridgette*'s testimony on the consequences of the OVAW incident for her as a survivor. Another website report titled *Will Tina get a chance?* cast doubt on whether her career could recover from the OVAW incident.
- **Attribution of blame for the OVAW incident:** This category of reports discussed the question of guilt for the occurrence of OVAW incidents. They were mostly based on speculations (information that could not be proven by credible sources). A few were based on information provided by various sources. In several cases, the media blamed the OVAW survivors themselves for the incidents, criticizing them for indecent dressing (*Nancy*), poor upbringing (*Naomi*), immorality (*Nancy*), or carelessness (*Tina*). For instance, a TV report suggested that *Tina* had leaked her own nude photos as a publicity stunt and for profit. News website reports blamed *Nancy* for instigating online violence by posting her indecent photos on social media. Perpetrators were assigned blame, calling them ill-mannered, for example (in *Dada*'s and *Naomi*'s cases). Another news website alleged that a man said to be *Naomi*'s partner had drugged her before recording intimate videos and posting them on Instagram. A newspaper report attributed the *Annette* incident (along with other infractions) to rampant misconduct among youthful politicians, blaming both the survivor and the perpetrator.
- **Others:** This final category represents topics that were very rarely talked about in the 138 media reports, such as responses by the parents of OVAW survivors or by notable people in society, or broader discussions about women's rights. Some of these reports dealt with other events in the social, political, or professional lives of the survivors and alleged perpetrators and the OVAW incidents were only mentioned as a side note.

An overview of the topics covered in OVAW reporting helps to understand what the media finds interesting or important to communicate to audiences about OVAW. It was also noted that the media can re-introduce OVAW incidents into unrelated reports, even three years after the incident (see subsection 11: Limiting Further Harm). The research team concluded from these findings that traditional media coverage of OVAW typically follows a predictable path, starting with breaking news on the occurrence of an incident and becoming less intense over time, until incidents become mere mentions in the context of broader conversations (on women's rights, for example).

The seven topics covered in the 138 media reports also show that the media approaches OVAW coverage as static and basic: The media is typically feeding their audiences the same type of information regardless of the survivors or types of OVAW. If a newsworthy OVAW incident occurs, audiences can reliably expect to receive information on the seven topics listed above. One editor commenting on the nature of media coverage described this as a "lack of depth" in reporting: "[T]hey [media reports] will pick what so and so has said, what she said, what the other one said, what police said, and when the incident happened."

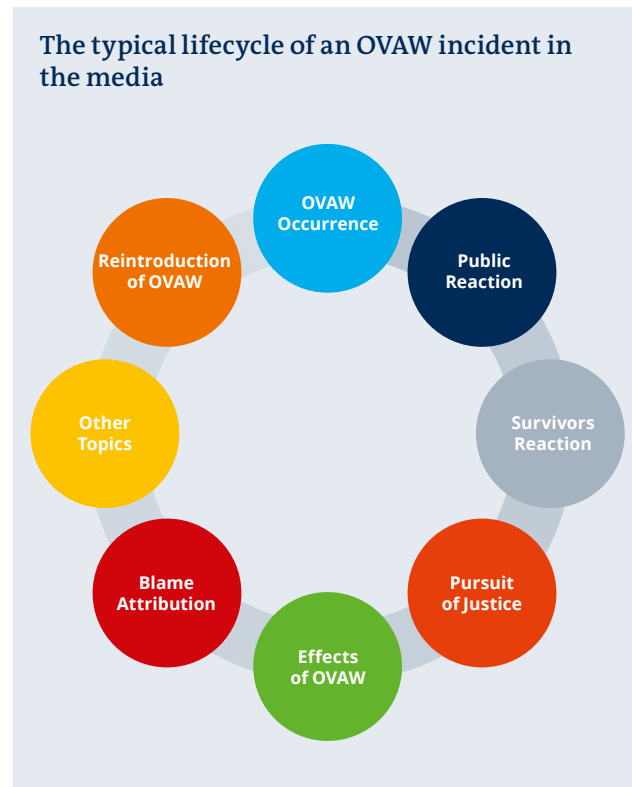


Figure 2

This superficiality can also be explained by a tendency in traditional media reporting to copy content or approaches from

each other. For instance, one editor said they had not interviewed an OVAW survivor because she had already spoken to another media outlet. Thus, a fresh interview was considered unnecessary because they already knew her side of the story and proceeded to report using another news media's content. This also means that the editor did not think there were any other important angles to explore apart from those covered by the already existing interview. This reveals the low level of innovation when it comes to OVAW storytelling and may be a useful starting point for conversations on more nuanced reporting and the inclusion of different perspectives.

Interviewees from civil society said the media should focus more on creating public awareness of the impact of OVAW incidents. They also pointed out the following topics which are still missing in the media coverage of OVAW:

- **The “why?” and “how?”:** Media reports mainly cover the “what” happened, but hardly ever the “why” and “how” OVAW incidents happen. Understanding why and how, however, is essential for societies to adopt measures that prevent OVAW. One CSO respondent argued the media should ask, *“why do perpetrators do these things,”* shedding light on their motives, and *“how are these incidents perpetrated?”* The media should also be vigilant and adopt an inquisitive approach to events related to OVAW. For instance, when *Alexa* stopped appearing for court sessions, the media was critical but did not investigate why. A CSO representative said such an investigation was important, *“because sometimes people [survivors] face threats.”* In addition, media coverage did not adequately explain the context in which the OVAW incidents occurred, which left important facts open to misinterpretation by the public.
- **Laws prohibiting OVAW:** The media did not cover laws which prohibit OVAW and therefore did not effectively inform the public that OVAW is a criminal offence.
- **Combating and preventing OVAW:** Media coverage of OVAW did not create public awareness regarding the prevention and response to OVAW incidents. For instance, reports did not include information on the availability of support services for survivors.
- **Accountability for OVAW incidents:** Media coverage did not demand accountability for OVAW incidents. This can be partly explained by the difficulty of identifying perpetrators in most OVAW incidents. However, CSO representatives observed that the media do generally not call on the police to identify perpetrators. A CSO respondent remarked, *“in comparison to other forms of violence that happen outside the digital platforms, accountability for the violence that happens on digital platforms is still very low. Online spaces make violence easier despite the lack of physical access.”* The research team also observed that, in incidents where perpetrators are not

identified, the media tends towards a one-sided coverage and typically will not investigate the whereabouts of the alleged perpetrators.

In general, members of civil society linked shallow reporting to the media's race for audiences, which happens at the expense of high-quality content.

3.1.2. Factors determining OVAW media coverage

The researchers interviewed editors in order to understand their views on what makes OVAW reports interesting to their audiences. According to them, audiences were mostly interested in OVAW reports which have educational value, affect the lives of prominent people (as opposed to ordinary people), involve conflict, are detailed, or are relatable (human interest stories). One editor said audiences were interested in stories that portray women negatively. Editors attempt to satisfy these interests when producing stories on OVAW, which influences the quality of reports. For instance, audiences attracted by a negative portrayal of women may be served sensational stories to meet their needs.

While audience interests are a key consideration for editors, the actual decisions to cover OVAW incidents depended on additional factors:

- The media is informed that the incident happened, for example by the police or the survivor;
- The magnitude, severity, and impact of the OVAW incident;
- The opinion of male-dominated newsrooms that the incident is important, as well as the ability of a reporter to make “a flawless pitch” for the story. One reporter explained that, if you had the intention to report a story, you needed to defend it well, *“to the level where you're given the machinery to go and do the story and come back, and also defend it well in the debrief for it to get the space [in the program] that it deserves.”* He added, *“Whenever I encounter [these stories], I really have to think critically around them. [...] [T]he what-ifs are many in my mind, [... much more so than] when I'm told to go and cover Baba's [Raila Odinga's] campaign somewhere. That one is easy-peasy.”*
- House editorial policies, and whether they allow coverage of stories involving nudity;
- The ability of newsrooms to verify key facts of an incident, such as the validity of images;
- The offline dimension of an incident, for example, whether it has been reported to the authorities, a case has been filed in court, or the incident has been mentioned by a prominent person in an offline space like a press conference;

- Whether the incident is considered outrageous, which is especially the case when involving respectable public figures or children;
- The virality of an incident on social media, especially when the target audience is young;
- Whether an incident is of public interest, for example, if it alerting other women of a danger that might affect them;
- The prospect of a good outcome, such as access to justice for survivors;
- The availability of reporters interested in covering the story;
- The potential to attract more audience to the media outlet.

Explaining the factors determining coverage of OVAW, one Kenyan editor said,

"I think the fact that we're in Kenya is the determining factor. Our editors have invested so much into politics. And unfortunately, it's because it's also what people want. So we are so much invested in politics, and anything politics [-related] will get the highlight and prominence of the day."

Referring to another OVAW incident not studied in this research project, the same editor explained,

"We reported it because the EABL [East African Breweries] withdrew advertising [from a radio station whose presenters trivialized an OVAW incident]. Yes, we only reported it because of the repercussions. If there were no repercussions, I don't think there would be anyone willing to put aside space in the newspaper to report it."

Commenting on the necessity to cater to audience interests and the numerous factors that justify OVAW coverage, one editor said,

"In other cases, you realize that violence is happening but since it's not reported, we don't have the proximity to power. If the [survivors] are not speaking up, most of the time it is ignored. And if the incident does not shock the nation, for example, [...] we will ignore it. Imagine, it's like we have become immune to violence. And now you can imagine this is physical violence. What about violence online?"

The judgements of editors on the value of an OVAW survivor's story—or the OVAW survivor herself—are also influenced by personal prejudices. For instance, one editor explaining the factors which determine coverage of OVAW, stated, *"It all depends, number one, [on] the survivor in question. I'm not saying they're not equal. But let's say for example, you get a prostitute who's been raped. We won't say that it's her own doing. But if you get a minor being molested, sexually molested, I'll give it prominence."* One

reporter shared his experience with the editorial decision-making process on the coverage of the *Annette* incident:

"[T]he management at that time was saying, is it a story that is interesting to the public? Or is it a matter of public interest? And that is where many draw the line. It could be interesting to the public, but is it a matter of public interest? And that's where we could not really push the story further than her statement from the press conference. Yes, there was a feeling it was a personal matter, and not necessarily something that was affecting the masses."

These factors point to the interests and priorities of media decision-makers when covering OVAW incidents. They demonstrate the following:

- OVAW incidents must meet higher standards of news value to be featured on traditional media platforms. Topics such as politics are covered at a lower threshold of news value. This also explains the low media coverage of OVAW, as only few cases meet the high standards of news value.
- "Unknown" women suffering OVAW are systematically excluded from media coverage. This is a dramatic finding, given the majority of OVAW survivors are not prominent women. This discriminatory approach also ignores the ability and responsibility of media practitioners to raise awareness of the dangers, frequency, and impact of OVAW on society.

3.1.3. Sourcing of OVAW media reports

A source is a person who provides information to the media on a subject being reported. The credibility and variety of sources not only improve the quality of media reports but also promote a balanced representation of different perspectives on events. This leads to better-informed opinions and choices in society.

The study analyzed sources which were directly quoted in text-based media or featured in interviews and/or other forms of discussion in broadcast media.

The analysis covered 1) the diversity of sources in media reports (the number of sources per media report); 2) the relevance of sources; 3) the gender diversity of sources; as well as 4) the involvement of OVAW survivors and 5) of OVAW perpetrators.

The research revealed the following on sourcing:

Diversity of sources

Across the region, 62 percent of media reports on OVAW were based on a single source only. This excludes media formats such as interviews and opinions where different approaches to sourcing are acceptable. Single-sourcing was most prevalent



in radio reporting of OVAW at 90 percent, followed by news websites at 68 percent, with television and newspapers coming in at 50 percent each. This is problematic, especially since radio is still the most popular traditional media platform in all four countries while news websites are a rapidly growing source of information. In Rwanda, news websites have already replaced newspapers.

Editors admitted that OVAW stories are overwhelmingly one-sided. They explained this with the unwillingness of survivors to talk to the media and the difficulty to identify perpetrators (especially “trolls” using pseudonyms on social media).

Relevance of sources

A source was considered relevant if they were credible to speak on the subject for which the media required their input. For instance, parents of OVAW survivors are credible sources to discuss how the consequences of OVAW, such as stigmatization, affect the families of survivors.

Across the four countries, most of the sources quoted in OVAW reports were relevant (95 percent). All radio and newspaper sources were relevant. However, a few TV (13 percent) and news website (8 percent) reports featured irrelevant sources. Irrelevant sources included celebrities unrelated to the case, purported supporters of either the survivor or alleged perpetrator, as well as new partners or spouses of the alleged perpetrators.

High source relevance indicates that the media is skilled at identifying the right sources. However, this positive is counteracted by the widespread practice of using a single source, which ultimately limits the scope of relevant information published or broadcast on OVAW. The net effect of this finding is that most of the single sources featured in media reports on OVAW were relevant.

Gender diversity of sources

In the total 138 media reports included in the study, 41 percent of sources were identifiably male, 48 percent identifiably female, and 11 percent of unspecified gender. Rwanda had the highest proportion of female sources (71 percent), while Kenya had the lowest (36 percent). Relatedly, Kenya had the highest proportion of male sources (50 percent), while Rwanda had the lowest (9 percent).

Gender diversity of sources is important to enrich perspectives on OVAW, given that different genders understand OVAW differently and are affected in different ways. At a regional level, there was a fair balance of female and male sources. But at national level, this was not the case everywhere.

Involvement of OVAW survivors in media coverage

The involvement of OVAW survivors as sources varied. Four survivors did not engage with the media at all about their incidents, and another four were minimally involved. That is, they were quoted in not more than two reports on their incidents. Five survivors were highly involved, meaning their voices dominated the media coverage of their incidents.

Uninvolved

This category represents four of the 13 OVAW incidents in this study. The survivors are two school students, a fashion model, and an entertainer. *Dada* is a student who experienced cyberbullying and the other, *Naomi*, is a teenager who was the target of non-consensual sharing of nude images. The fashion model, *Masha*, suffered body shaming shortly after winning a beauty pageant, while the entertainer, *Tina*, encountered the non-consensual publication of nude photos alleged to be hers.

None of the twelve media reports studied on *Tina*'s OVAW incident featured information obtained through direct interviews with her. Media reports which quoted her relied on social media posts and did not reveal whether she had refused to comment. One editor stated she had “turned down all interviews for a year” after the incident. While this is not uncommon in tabloid reporting, professional media websites strangely applied the same approach. Overall, there was only one interview with a police officer published in one newspaper article. For *Naomi*, none of the ten media reports feature direct interviews with her. Reports were dominated by Instagram remarks, especially by her mother, the man in the controversial video, and a woman accused of “setting *Naomi* up” for the incident. These three sources were also not interviewed. *Masha*'s case analysis, on the other hand, included only two media reports in which she was not interviewed.

Even though *Dada* was not featured in any media reports, her incident was arguably the best sourced OVAW incident studied. Several leaders from government and politics, mental health practitioners, media, and civil society, as well as parents were interviewed across all 14 media reports. The majority of interviewees expressed sympathy for the perpetrator (a schoolboy) and a few criticized him for his reprehensible conduct. Explaining *Dada*'s exclusion from coverage, one editor said, “*Nobody cared to go and give the survivor of abuse an interview. We never even got to her parents. We never got to know whether she's okay or not.*” The editor also thought that excluding *Dada* from the media coverage of the incident worsened her trauma, because the media paid more attention to her attacker. Another editor reaffirmed this, saying “*Nobody bothered to go and check on that girl. What is her mental state? Has she been able to see a psychologist to handle this situation? Nobody! Absolutely no one! Actually, [...] I don't even remember if there was any journalist who even ever bothered to get the side of the story of the girl.*” A reporter commenting on the access to survivors said, “[C]hallenges also

happen when the survivors at hand are not willing to give you that interview for obvious reasons. And you are pushed by the editor. Yes, go and do the story. But you cannot go and shoot [a video of] someone who's not willing to give you this information."

Apart from an apparent lack of awareness of the importance to interview survivors, others made a conscious choice not to do so, because 1) they could obtain the statements of survivors from interviews done by other media outlets, and 2) the reporting angles they chose only required social media or public comments. As one editor said, *"We based [the story] on the photo and the comment that the victim posted. We didn't need anything else."*

In some cases, reporters directly substituted interviews with social media posts. For instance, even though *Alice* was highly engaged in the coverage of her case, one editor said they did not interview her because she had already posted her comments on the incident on her social media page:

"It's obvious that Alice had already responded and explained about the issue of the accusation that she had bleached her skin. Such a story posted on Twitter, you just quote her because that is like talking to her, then you add the comments of her followers posted on that tweet, then you have a full story. You don't need to contact her again and ask her 'what do you have to say about the accusation that you bleached?'"

In conversations with CSOs, insensitivity and lack of interview skills among reporters were mentioned as barriers to the media cooperation of OVAW survivors. A CSO representative said,

"If I ask if you've ever procured an abortion and you respond and say, 'several times', then I say, 'what!?' or make a face. I am not supposed to do that even when I am shocked 100 percent, okay? So I find that the media does that. Not all of them, but you find some are smiling, some are also laughing. They are really not taking a neutral stance, which hurts [survivors]. [T]hose are the things [...] that send the survivors into depression."

Another CSO representative argued that OVAW survivors needed a *"very supportive and validating environment"* to tell their stories, which, evidently, the media did not successfully provide.

Overall, the exclusion of OVAW survivors from media reporting can be attributed to various factors, including survivors' preference not to engage or their input being considered low priority by editors, the substitution of interviews with survivors' social media posts; and poor interview or engagement techniques that have previously led to further traumatization of survivors.

Minimally involved

This category represents four of the 13 OVAW incidents in this study. The survivors are two politicians (*Alexa* and *Annette*), a media personality (*Nadia*), and one entertainer (*Nancy*). *Alexa* suffered cyberstalking and surveillance, and *Annette* non-consensual sharing of nudes. *Nadia* experienced cyber harassment and *Nancy* was body shamed by social media users.

Alexa and *Annette* received significant media coverage because of their political positions; 26 reports were studied on *Alexa's* case and 14 on *Annette's*. Media reports were dominated by the statements of politicians, legal practitioners, and civil society. Media reports on *Annette's* case indicate some contact as she was reported to have said the video was fake. While she was not widely engaged through interviews, the media notably featured her quest for justice. The media used a variety of key sources, including police officers, parliamentary officials, politicians, and some of the alleged perpetrators in reporting her case. In the 26 media reports collected on *Alexa's* case, she was interviewed live on air in one radio program and quoted in one newspaper article. She informed the research team that the media had not been open to considering her point of view. She said the media *"took the wrong approach"* by attracting enormous public sympathy for the alleged perpetrator. As a result, she said it had been difficult for her to communicate her views. Her engagement with the media improved slightly following interventions by women's rights organizations which appealed to some media houses to hear her out.

It is also important to note that legal limitations existed whenever cases were on trial, which is another reason why *Alexa's* and *Annette's* voices were not prominently featured in the media. *Alexa's* case remained on trial for close to two years, while *Annette's* case involved protracted police investigations lasting over seven months. Under the so-called sub judice rule, journalists are legally obliged to report only facts shared by the police and in court sessions. The interaction with witnesses (including OVAW survivors) may obstruct police investigations or a fair trial and is therefore prohibited. The minimal engagement of OVAW survivors with the media might represent interaction from before their incidents entered the courtroom. Explaining *Annette's* involvement, a newspaper editor said, *"First of all, we called her. She was very reluctant, but at the end of the day, we explained to her that it's for her own benefit, and she explained that that was not her in the video. And then we asked her if she had any defense, she said she knew the people who were behind it."*

Five media reports were studied on *Nancy's* case. While she is a widely publicized entertainer, the OVAW incident did not have many traceable media reports. She was referenced in a single online news report, where she stated that some of the photos on her social media accounts were not hers. Most of the news websites, however, published statements of her attackers. *Nancy* informed the research team that reporters had not contacted her over the incident, although she had only learnt

about it from media reports. She blamed this on the desire for fame of small media outlets, which they tried to achieve by publishing celebrity news and gossip.

In all eight media reports studied on *Nadia's* case, one newspaper reporter claimed to have contacted her without success and one news website quoted her. However, all reports quoted the perpetrator, giving him the upper hand in directing the narrative on the incident. Explaining *Nadia's* low participation, one editor argued *Nadia* did *"still not talk about [the perpetrator]. We've tried to reach her in different ways. We've tried to convince her to give us the interview. She does not want to talk about [the perpetrator]."* Another editor stated that *"attempts to get Nadia's side of the story were lukewarm, to say the least."*

Overall, the minimal involvement of some OVAW survivors can be explained by the subjudice rule as well as survivors' low interest in participating. In one incident, an editor mentioned a survivor who could not be reached because she had decided to give an exclusive interview to a media house. Personal experiences of survivors also reveal that the ways OVAW is framed by the media can discourage survivors from cooperating with the media. This was especially noted in the case of *Alexa*, who told the research team that the media's negative approach prevented her participation. No media outlet was interested in her perspective until local women's rights organizations intervened.

Highly involved

Five of the OVAW survivors were highly engaged, meaning their voices dominated the media reporting on their own incidents. Three survivors—*Mwesa* (media personality), *Peace* (musician), and *Alice* (model)—suffered body shaming. Two—*Bridgette* (musician) and *Mercy* (politician)—experienced non-consensual sharing of nudes.

Where OVAW survivors dominated media coverage on their incidents, public discussions focused on the following issues:

- The survivors' first experiences with the OVAW incidents and the resulting trauma;
- Trauma to families and others in the survivors' surroundings (work colleagues, church members, and others);
- The consequences of OVAW, such as self-censorship on social media or embarrassment;
- Providing clarity on the authenticity of OVAW materials, such as leaked photos and videos;
- Dismissing perpetrators;
- Creating awareness on the prevalence of OVAW.

Experience and initial trauma

In a radio interview, *Mwesa* described her shock, confusion, and anger when first hearing about the social media reactions to a photo she had posted:

"I got a phone call from a friend asking me what I had done, and I didn't really know what that meant because I was home sick that day. And then I came to work the next day at around 4:30 am. I went on my Twitter and saw a bunch of notifications and stuff on something I hadn't even talked about. [...] Every morning I look at what's trending, what I can use on my show and there is my name—spelt incorrectly. [...] That's how I found out. It was a shock to me. I didn't understand why I was trending... I guess that's what shocked me, I didn't know what was happening [...]. At first, I was confused. There was nothing else going through my head except confusion and then after, there was a little bit of anger because these people don't know me. How can they make such a judgement?"

One online news article quoted *Mwesa* saying, *"It [the effect of cyberbullying] makes my voice shake because I do not want another girl to go through the same."* News websites reporting the impact of the leaked sex video on *Bridgette* quoted her saying, *"When I received news that the video had been leaked, I fainted and was hospitalized for two days."* In another interview, she said, *"When my video with [the man] was leaked, I had a difficult time. I was not used to online insults."*

These statements reveal the emotional impact of OVAW on survivors, helping to create awareness of the gravity of such attacks.

Trauma to families and other close relations

Mwesa also informed the media that the incident "hurt" her family and other close relations. For instance, she did not know how to explain to young children who look up to her for inspiration that *"one can be deemed inadequate purely based on their physique."* She also mentioned "trolls" sending her husband mean remarks in direct messages on various social media platforms. *Bridgette's* parents gave a radio interview about her incident, where they discussed the broader impact of the incident:

"That incident made our hearts stop. Because it is something that we did not expect in our life. [...] There came a time when we could not even use the main road. When we drove, we would roll the car windows all the way up because the insults had already started in the streets. You are driving your car and someone riding on a motorbike insults you as they ride by."

This demonstrates the vicious nature of OVAW and that its effects can extend well beyond the targeted women.

Coping with the effects of OVAW

A website article quoted *Mwesa* describing social media as "a tough world" where "trolls" are to be expected every time you

post a picture. She repeated this view in a TV interview. Reflecting further on the impact of OVAW, *Bridgette* was quoted in an online news article saying, *“My first thoughts were, ‘I should quit music?’ [...] I was worried that my brand endorsement deals would be withdrawn.”*

These conversations help create public awareness of how OVAW can promote self-censorship among women, depriving them of their freedom of expression and potentially affecting their livelihoods. It also demonstrates that the effects of OVAW are long-term and difficult to cope with.

Clarifying authenticity of OVAW material

In *Mercy*'s case, the media reports that quoted her treated the leaked photos with skepticism, describing them as “nude photos alleged to belong to *Mercy*.” Additionally, in her comments, *Mercy* herself stated the photos were “doctored,” “fake,” or “photoshopped” and “intended to discredit her and tarnish her reputation.” *Mercy* also wrote an opinion article, where she discussed political intimidation, pointing out that the fake nude photos were among several strategies to curtail her political ambition. Media reports that did not quote her claimed the photos were hers. *Bridgette* issued a public apology at a press conference shortly after her sex tape had been leaked. In her apology, she admitted the authenticity of the video, but insisted not knowing how it was leaked.

Such clarifications serve at least two purposes. First, it invites the audience to consider the photos or videos from the survivors' perspective, which could arouse empathy. Second, it helps to discourage speculation and rumors by providing useful facts for the media. In *Bridgette*'s case, the survivor's own statements showed her as remorseful, accountable, and responsible.

Dismissing perpetrators

OVAW survivors who extensively engaged with the media also used their slots to offer their own negative characterizations of the perpetrators and to criticize their behavior. For instance, *Mwesa* consistently called her incident cyberbullying or body shaming and exposed the perpetrators' intent to put down *“anyone whose body they deem unfit.”* She also described them as *“random bullies hiding behind faceless pseudonyms and feeling like they can't be touched.”* In a radio interview, *Alice* said the OVAW perpetrators were *“not reasonable”* for picking on her over baseless claims. She further dismissed the perpetrators by saying their concerns about her skin color were personal perceptions to which she was not bound to respond.

The reactions of OVAW survivors to their attackers invite the public to evaluate the character of perpetrators. They may also dissuade social media users from joining hostile online conversations for pleasure.

Creating awareness of the prevalence of OVAW

Due to *Mwesa*'s active engagement, the media documented her childhood experience with offline body shaming. This supported the notion that VAWG transcends physical spaces and spills over onto virtual platforms. In one interview, she not only advised women and girls on how to deal with cyberbullying, but also warned bullies of the potential ramifications of their actions. *“I feel bad for you if you took part in it [cyberbullying]. [...] [O]ne day it will come back to haunt you because one day somebody will tell you the same mean things, you're telling other people,”* *Mwesa* said. In an online news article, *Mercy* highlighted the fact that online violence targeted women just because they were women. She said, *“they used my being a woman to get to me. If it was a man, they would have done something else.”*

Bridgette also used her public apology as an opportunity to create awareness of the prevalence of OVAW and to identify with other survivors suffering in silence outside the media limelight:

“I know there are many [survivors] who are not known, maybe it is because this happened to me and that is why it has been in the public domain and [...] a big issue. [...] I know there are many who have experienced such situations where private information gets out of their phones, but theirs were not publicized like mine.”

She was also quoted in a web article claiming that it was *“a common threat against celebrities: I have been in a relationship before with somebody who also threatened me since he had my photos and wanted to release them to the public because I was already a renowned artist. I reported to the police, and he stopped the threats, I have really learnt a lesson.”*

She consistently called the incident *“a tragedy”* as opposed to a *“sex video,”* creating an underlying emphasis on her non-involvement in the circulation of the video while also influencing public perception to consider OVAW as an event that causes great suffering, destruction, and distress.

In her engagement with the media, *Alice* explained her experience with OVAW, shared her understanding of why it happens along with insights into her personal ways of coping. For instance, while appearing on a TV show, she explained, *“when you are a famous person, it is always easy to focus on you [...], people have to talk about you.”* In another interview she said, *“I knew that cyberbullying was part of the package that comes with exposure.”* *Peace* said her body shaming incident was *“not anything strange.”* Most importantly, she communicated an affirmative position against body shaming by saying, *“First of all, I love my body. I'm the first person who should love my body before anyone else. [...] If you don't love your [own] body, no one else will love it better than you.”*

Coming from survivors, these viewpoints help potential targets, especially women, to anticipate the threat of

online violence by exposing the fact that online violence is widespread.

Engagement of alleged perpetrators

The research team interviewed alleged or formerly accused perpetrators from diverse backgrounds: one businessman and socialite, a blogger, and a college student. While their profiles varied, the study found major similarities in their experiences with traditional media coverage of the incidents they had supposedly been involved in.

The participation of alleged OVAW perpetrators in the study was limited because most were not identifiable; only in four OVAW cases out of the 13, the media named the perpetrators. One was excluded for reasons of child protection given he was a minor (*Dada's case*); two were minimally involved, since their cases went on trial (*Annette's* and *Alexa's cases*). The third alleged perpetrator (*Nadia's case*) dominated media reports on an OVAW incident, where the media extensively publicized his slighting remarks against a media personality he was harassing on social media. He repeatedly referred to her as a "thief," saying "she stole his money" and that she was "not marriage material." One TV station aired an interview in which the alleged perpetrator not only shrugged off the consequences of his insults, but also threatened to dox the survivor. He said, "If she makes a mistake of going on camera [i. e. talking to the media], I will post all our photos I have of her."

The editors we interviewed confirmed the legal limitations that prevented the media to speak with suspected perpetrators of OVAW incidents which were brought to trial. However, they also pointed out that some suspected perpetrators, just like survivors, were inaccessible or refused to make statements. One editor mentioned security concerns, saying his newsroom decided not to interview the perpetrator in *Nadia's* case because he was harassing one of their own reporters.

The man formerly accused of cyberstalking *Alexa* informed the research team that he had little media contact because his lawyer spoke with the media on his behalf. He also said the media could not reach him when he was on bail following his arrest. However, after the dismissal of his case, when the incident was no longer on trial, he said he had declined media interviews after a few "unprofessional" encounters. For instance, he cited one incident in which a female radio talk show host had tried to force him to play along with a narrative that trivialized the incident (see subsection 4: *Trivialization of OVAW*). He also decided to avoid the media because he had observed immense misinformation in the coverage of the incident. He stated, "Many things were written that I didn't say and weren't true, so I remained silent." He further added, "However much I was yearning for them [media] to listen to me, the other side [Alexa] had a higher hand."

One of the formerly accused perpetrators in the *Annette* case told the research team that he had not been interviewed by any media house about his involvement in the leaking of a video. Having been accused of leaking said video, he argued he had only received requests from several journalists asking him to share the video with them.

Criteria for selecting sources

This section provides information on the overarching sourcing strategies, that is, the selection of sources by the media, which lead to generally flawed or imbalanced reporting on OVAW incidents.

Editors interviewed for this study explained that they applied standard criteria in the selection of sources for OVAW stories. Sources were discussed and agreed upon at newsroom meetings using the same criteria applied to any other topic. These include, among other things, the relevance of the source and the best options for obtaining objective information. The intention is to involve all parties involved in an incident unless they decline to comment.

Having said that, the unavailability of key sources (OVAW survivors and perpetrators) causes a major gap in this standard approach to sourcing—a gap that seems insurmountable, according to one editor: "So the other person we could have talked to could be who? In *Tina's* case, no one. Who are you going to ask about leaked photos?"

The challenges in sourcing OVAW stories require further discussion of the tendency of editors to explore other strategies to select sources when facing such gaps, as it commonly happens in all other fields of reporting. Evidence from the study shows that social media is considered an alternative, even when survivors have not declined interviews. The finding that OVAW is treated as a trivial subject in the media can explain the low motivation of editors to become innovative when solving sourcing puzzles.

The study also found that the balance or diversity in the selection of sources can suffer when there is a need to break news fast. Editors want to get OVAW stories out to the public and return to the details later. However, they then find out that the sources to support more detailed reporting on the stories they already broke are unavailable.



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3.1.4. Trivialization of OVAW

Trivialization refers to the treatment of OVAW as a topic of minimal importance, which in turn affects agenda-setting: Topics that are seen as low priority receive less financial investment by media managers and less journalistic rigor by reporters. Ultimately, these stories are shared with audiences at a low quality of information. Overall, the trivialization of topics weakens the educational role of the media. Given the limited space and time on traditional media platforms, and the mass of topics to choose from, the trivialization of certain topics is inevitable when newsrooms make subjective decisions over the day's most and least important stories. However, where topics win space or time on traditional media platforms, additional aspects of trivialization can be studied in the contents.

Two other observations which reveal the trivialization of OVAW in the media, namely the inadequate verification of evidence and single-sourcing, are discussed in previous sections of this report.

Overall, the trivialization of OVAW was visible in 1) the offloading of OVAW reports onto (less prominent) digital platforms; 2) the placement of OVAW reports in low priority segments (time slots, formats); and 3) the miscommunication of the gravity of OVAW or its impact. Slots such as a newspaper front page or primetime programs point to the fact that topics are seen as significant by media teams. On the other hand, stories that appear in gossip, entertainment, or lifestyle sections are clearly given lesser priority. The amount of space and time granted to a story, as well as the format it appears in—news and features versus opinions and letters—all reveal whether a topic is considered important by the newsroom.

A degree of trivialization of OVAW by means of placement could be observed across radio, TV, newspapers, and news websites. But in only two out of the 13 cases was this trivialization very significant, constant, and clear in the traditional media coverage.

Placement of OVAW reports

Overall, a statistical study of the 138 media reports showed that OVAW is most often presented as a topic of gossip, entertainment, fashion, or lifestyle by newspapers, radio and TV stations, and news websites. Most commonly, this happens in radio coverage (57 percent), followed by news websites (48 percent), TV (39 percent), and newspapers (6 percent).

Newspapers

This study analyzed 17 ePaper articles from Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Newspapers were not available in Rwanda as printing had stopped and all publications moved online. The analysis found that only 18 percent (4 out of 17) of these OVAW

stories featured on the front-page, and only because the OVAW survivors involved had social prominence (*Alexa*, a female politician; *Nadia*, a media personality, and *Naomi*, a student). The fourth front-page story can be explained by the involvement of a minor (*Dada*) in a bizarre OVAW incident that upset the entire country. While the placement of articles on newspaper front pages is a good sign that the topic is seen as important, it is worth noting that the three OVAW incidents cited were only listed a single time on front pages, although the incidents continued to unravel over weeks and months.

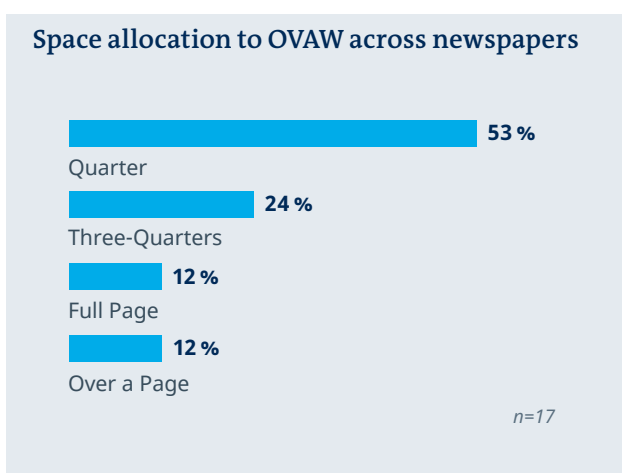


Figure 3

In the three countries, an outstanding 70 percent of OVAW stories were reported as news, compared to 18 percent as opinions, 6 percent in magazines or pullouts, and 6 percent in lifestyle or fashion sections. Examples of OVAW cases that were largely treated as news are *Alexa* (politician) and *Dada* (school student). These two incidents also inspired most opinion articles in local newspapers. The stories of *Annette* (politician) and *Tina* (entertainer) were featured in news sections a few times. At the national level, Uganda's newspapers treated OVAW stories as news most often (82 percent), compared to 60 percent in Kenya. In Tanzania, where the team could only track down one ePaper, a front-page story was placed as a feature article in the lifestyle and fashion section. These findings on the tendency to place OVAW in news sections explains the fact that more than half of all OVAW stories in newspapers (53 percent) were given about a quarter of a page of space, since news articles tend to be compact in language and content. A considerable number of stories, or 24 percent, were granted three-quarters of a page, while another 12 percent had a full page or more. Articles that were three-quarters of a page long or even more than a page were primarily opinions and feature stories, most of them placed in magazines or pullouts and in lifestyle or fashion sections.

An editor reflecting on the newspaper coverage of *Annette* said,

"I don't think it's a big story. I don't think that the prominence we gave it was worth it. Because just saying that an MP has been implicated in a sex scandal and you're not saying that she's cheating on the husband or something? It's just a rumor mill. Some things are supposed to remain in the rumor mills and not [...] be given prominence in the media, especially the mainstream media."

Another editor, who tried to recall OVAW incidents he had worked on between 2016 and 2021, remarked, *"the other places that we can run those online violence cases is [...] on the opinion pages. The fact that we do not put a lot of prominence on such issues, that even makes it very hard for me to remember. But if the issues are political, or crime-related, then they might get some headlines."*

News Websites

The research team studied 71 news website articles on OVAW. In all four countries, 48 percent of web articles on OVAW were placed in lifestyle or entertainment sections. The logic behind this is the fact that the majority of the OVAW survivors (eight out of 13) are personalities from the media, fashion, and entertainment industries. This means that even on the websites, where traditional media outlets prefer to publish contents, they regard as less important, including OVAW stories, OVAW was usually not prioritized as news. The news section was only the second most probable section to find OVAW reports (42 percent). These were mostly reports on incidents affecting women in politics and school students.

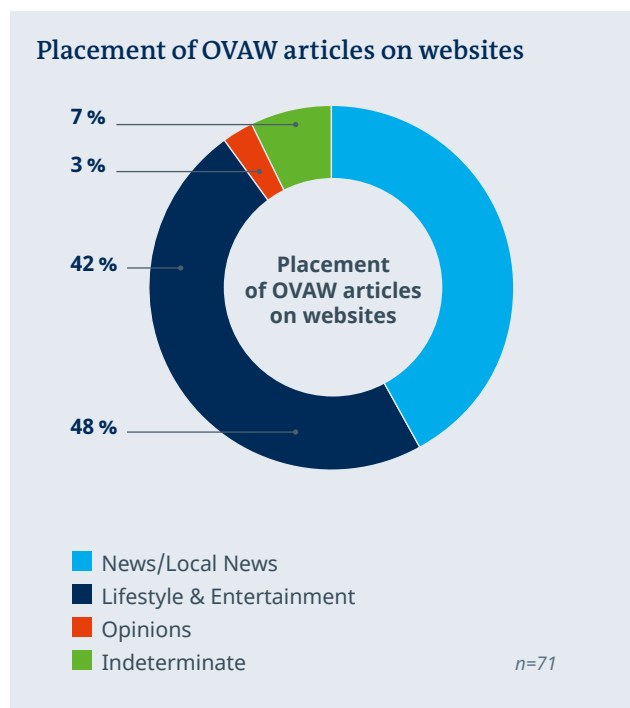


Figure 4

TV and Radio

In terms of formats, more than half of OVAW TV content (61 percent) was treated as news and 39 percent as gossip, entertainment, or lifestyle. The inclusion of OVAW in the news suggests that OVAW was much more a topic of priority on TV than in newspapers. The news format was followed with some distance by talk shows or discussion programs (21 percent), which are lengthy formats that can give OVAW room for detailed discussion. Although news stories are ordinarily short (1 to 2 minutes), TV stations used other formats as part of their news shows, for example features and interviews. As a result, 79 percent of the TV content on OVAW was over three minutes long. At the national level, TV stations in Kenya and Uganda treated OVAW as news most frequently (60 percent and 70 percent respectively).

Close to half of the radio content on OVAW (45 percent) was discussed as gossip and 36.4 percent as entertainment. Altogether, a staggering 81 percent of radio content treated OVAW as gossip or entertainment and thus as a trivial, non-news-worthy item.

One TV reporter explained that the dominant stance of media outlets on OVAW as a trivial subject led to delays in the broadcasting of a OVAW stories in favor of pieces deemed higher priority, or their placement outside of prime time, *"in next day's bulletin at 1pm."* Another TV editor added that OVAW was only given more screen time on a "dry news day," when there was nothing more important to report.

Miscommunicating the gravity of OVAW

The local media told *Alexa's* OVAW incident as a love story gone wrong, referring to messages sent by the formerly accused as "love messages" or similar terms. This was not at all in agreement with the terminology used in court proceedings (cyber harassment and offensive communication), which were the basis for all media reports. The media only used the appropriate terms cyber harassment and offensive communication when talking about the supposed perpetrator's first conviction and in direct quotations from women's rights activists. Other media reports, which at least mentioned the offense, entangled themselves in contradictions by saying that the alleged perpetrator faced prosecution for cyber harassment and offensive communication *"over incessant love messages."* When interviewed by the research team, the accused shared similar observations: *"They [the media] didn't follow the files in court. They didn't go deep into what was on court files. They would only report that I had appeared in court and the rest of the story they would put what they wanted, and I think it was not good. [...] [I]t hurt me terribly."*

One newspaper columnist downplayed the *Alexa* incident and admitted he would only discuss the case except with his fans who asked for his opinion. The local media also belittled the



dirty



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possible impact of the cyber harassment and offensive communication on the survivor. One newspaper article claimed *“the messages could not even hurt a fly.”* Many media reports agreed with the general idea that *Alexa* was *“overreacting to a love proposal”* after she had told the public that she was not in a relationship.

Presenters of entertainment and gossip TV shows trivialized *Tina*’s incident by joking about it and minimizing its impact. In one such show, the host sarcastically exclaims, *“Tina we are standing with you, we are praying for you”* while he is laughing together with the studio audience. In the same show, the host says, *“I’m sure by next week, we should have moved on to another thing,”* suggesting the incident was not very serious. Contrary to these examples, there were some reports that addressed possible consequences for the survivor, such as damage to her reputation and career. However, one single article argued that the survivor had created the pain and problems for herself: *“One of the major lessons it should’ve taught her is not to fall in love and not to trust easily.”* This viewpoint is counterproductive, because it promotes victim-blaming and can shame survivors into silence, which is an obstacle to full recovery.

The formerly accused man in the *Alexa* case informed the research team that a radio presenter had asked him *“to tell the public that it was not a serious issue, something small ... She wanted to trap me to make the program entertaining.”* He added, *“the call-ins also said the issue was small even though the case was still in court.”* Reflecting on the overall coverage of the incident, he concluded that the media had painted the incident as *“boys playing on social media.”* This experience reveals that some media practitioners actively enforce the idea that OVAW was a triviality. This can prevent the participation of survivors as sources in media coverage and exclude their point of view. One survivor said she feared giving interviews because the traditional media she had spoken to would turn the issues she raised into jokes.

It is likely that media trivialization of OVAW reflects broader societal perceptions. *Alexa* reports having observed many people, including politicians, who *“made all sorts of fun”* about her incident. She told the research team that, during meetings, her constituents would now always demand from her to stop *“mistreating”* the suspect, by which they mean to pursuing justice in court. On the other hand, *“nobody saw it [the OVAW incident] as an attack.”* On the contrary, she received calls from more men expressing interest in her because they found the incident funny.

Offloading of OVAW onto news websites

More than half of the 138 media reports (53 percent) were published on news websites belonging to TV, radio, and newspaper outlets. Discussions with reporters and editors reveal that

news websites provide additional space for traditional media platforms to publish less important subjects which are interesting but cannot compete with domains such as politics for space and airtime. Commenting on the coverage of *Mwesa*’s case, one editor said,

“You will find that we will not take a story farther [than the website]. If abuse happens online, for instance, you remember the Mwesa incident? I don’t think any newspaper saw it worthy to report. It just happened on your social [media] pages. And then it’s maybe the features sections that will pick it up and run with it.”

The trivialization of OVAW in the media is a probable obstruction to public awareness, discourse, and action. The allocation of less prominent slots and formats means audiences are comparatively less likely to hear about OVAW, especially in broadcast media, where gossip and entertainment shows air during off-peak hours. If they do hear about the incident in the media, they are comparatively less likely to treat the issues discussed as important.

3.1.5. Republication of derogatory content

In this study, derogatory content was defined as words (written or spoken) and audio-visual material criticizing OVAW survivors in a manner which belittles, deprecates, and devalues them. The use of derogatory content, reprinted or broadcast, by traditional media outlets supports an offensive discourse against women who experience online violence. It fuels negative public perceptions of women survivors.

The study analyzed instances where media outlets published nude photos and/or negative remarks against OVAW survivors. Most of those republished derogatory remarks were comments from social media users and alleged perpetrators. There was one instance where media staff directly used derogatory language when speaking about an OVAW survivor.

The use of derogatory content in the media was mainly observed in seven of the 13 OVAW incidents. These are the body shaming of *Masha*, *Peace*, and *Alice*, the cyberbullying of *Dada*, the non-consensual sharing of nudes targeting *Tina* and *Mercy*, and the cyber harassment of *Nadia*.

The following points were noticed in the coverage of those seven incidents:

- The publication of derogatory content did not just affect women of a certain occupation but survivors of varying profiles (students, women in media, fashion and beauty, politics, and entertainment) across the region. This practice was also applied to cases of various forms of OVAW (cyberbullying, cyber harassment, non-consensual sharing of nudes, body shaming).

- Professional media houses published derogatory remarks, while tabloid news websites published nude photos in addition to derogatory remarks.
- Derogatory remarks were mostly published as social media screenshots and quotes, interviews or social media posts of perpetrators, comments of local celebrities or similar sources, and remarks by TV presenters.
- Some (well-intentioned) editors misjudged the outcome of the republication of derogatory remarks. For instance, some editors thought that publishing the derogatory remarks of perpetrators would lead to criticism of their conduct and calls for respect for women.

Tabloid news websites published cropped versions of *Tina's* leaked nude photos or included links in articles, alongside statements like *"Click on the link below and check out the exclusive nude pics."* Given that news websites treated the *Peace* incident as gossip, they extensively republished both derogatory and supportive social media remarks, along with photos of her breasts obtained from screenshots of a video. On one news website, these derogatory remarks included a comment from social media saying *Peace's* breasts had *"fallen off."* Additional abusive remarks against *Peace* are documented in section 3.1.9 (*Sexualization of OVAW*).

In *Nadia's* case, the media continuously published the insulting remarks of her abuser. In fact, his words dominated the media coverage of the incident. Most of these derogatory remarks are context-specific and cannot be quoted without revealing information that might jeopardize the safety of the survivor. However, the perpetrator constantly referred to *Nadia* as a *"thief,"* saying she stole his money and was *"not marriage material."* The reports did not present any evidence that these claims were true, especially the theft. Some news websites also published equally derogatory remarks made by other celebrities against *Nadia*, including one who called her a *"prostitute"* and another who said she *"has a poverty spirit following her."* Some news websites published insults as screenshots of the perpetrator's social media posts. As mentioned before, one TV station aired an interview in which her abuser not only downplayed the negative effects of his insults, but also threatened to publish all other photos of her that remained in his possession if she dared to give media interviews. It was however strange to find that some editors believed they acted in the interest of women by republishing derogatory comments, presumably to bring disrespectful behavior to the attention of the public. One editor said, *"First of all, Nadia, the story was mainly communicating about the incident that happened, and also respecting women. Respect a woman. When a woman is done, accept and move on."* Another editor from a different media outlet said they told *Nadia's* story to warn women not to trust men like the perpetrator, who *"air the dirty linen in case you break up."* A similar point was made by a third editor,

who believed his coverage of *Alexa* communicated the need to respect women's rights and decisions.

Only two TV reports were studied on *Masha's* case; one gossip show and an interview with the organizer of the beauty pageant. Traditional media content on this incident was inaccessible at the time of study, which limited the depth of analysis. The gossip program was problematic because it broadcast a street poll which promoted insults against *Masha*. People who were interviewed on the streets said she was *"old," "not beautiful,"* and *"unworthy"* of the beauty title. A female presenter on the same show further said, *Masha* had *"fat arms."* However, the TV station which interviewed the beauty pageant organizer provided an opportunity to discuss important issues on 1) different perceptions of beauty in society; 2) possible flaws in photography and makeup that could have resulted in poor quality photos of the model; and 3) the criteria of the beauty competition, which was not based on the evaluation of photos but real people. The organizer advised the audience against judging the models' beauty based on one bad photo, clarifying that *"there were many nice photos of her which were not shared."*

Online news reports on *Alice's* body shaming incident relied heavily on social media comments, republishing both positive and negative remarks. Some news websites also published photos showing the survivor's face side-by-side with that of Michael Jackson, who is said to have bleached his skin.

The republication of derogatory content was not common in *Dada's* and *Mercy's* cases and only found in two media reports. One news website published excerpts of remarks by *Dada's* attacker. These remarks were not only abusive but also showed the perpetrator's intention to escalate his violence to offline spaces (school). In *Mercy's* case, one tabloid news website republished the leaked nude photos.

Professional media houses did not publish any nude photos or sex videos, on the grounds that editorial policies and media laws prohibit the publication of *"dirty images"* or *"gross content."*

The study thus concluded that traditional media feed negative public perceptions of OVAW survivors by publishing derogatory remarks and by validating perpetrators. When traditional media publish abusive content, they are (inadvertently) saying that such remarks are worth publishing and important for public consumption. It communicates to the abusers that traditional media platforms support their behavior and are interested in showcasing them to a wider audience. In the *Dada* case, the perpetrator posted a second abusive video after all the media attention he received from the first. In the second video, he appeared alongside a friend whom he wanted to help become famous on social media by committing online violence. The republication of images used in non-consensual sharing of nudes also promotes their circulation, which further harms the survivor. Reflecting on the media coverage devoted

to perpetrators, one CSO representative said that this kind of coverage *“implies that you can get away with it, and [it] emboldens other people who would want to take that action.”*

The majority of CSO representatives saw a lack of respect for survivors as a trend in traditional media coverage of OVAW. The examples they shared were supported by the findings in this report regarding the republication of derogatory remarks and images as well as the use of language which, altogether, aim to rob survivors of their dignity. One CSO representative said, *“there is need to be more careful on how words are being used to ensure dignity is preserved.”* Sensational reporting was also seen as a reason for the lack of respect for survivors (see subsection 3.1.8: *Sensationalism*).

3.1.6. Characterization of OVAW victims and perpetrators

Negative characterization refers to the use of reporting angles which portray OVAW victims in a bad light. For this purpose, journalists develop overarching narratives—construed background stories—which communicate unfavorable ideas about the character of the OVAW victims. On the one hand, the media’s approach to characterizing victims and perpetrators in OVAW incidents reflects widespread norms in society, but at the same time, these characterizations also influence perceptions and responses to OVAW in those same societies.

The study analyzed characterization from an audience perspective, asking what kind of perception of the characters of victims and perpetrators each media report was likely to create.

Negative characterization of victims was noticed in five of the 13 OVAW incidents studied. The victims concerned were two politicians (*Alexa* and *Annette*), two women in entertainment (*Tina* and *Nancy*), and one media practitioner (*Nadia*). Characterization of perpetrators was most obvious in the cases of *Dada* (school student), *Alexa* (politician), and *Nadia* (media personality).

In the coverage of *Alexa’s* case, the media continuously described the formerly accused man as a “young” college student. While this represented a fact (he was a student) and an acceptable social perspective on youth, this description also attracted a great deal of public sympathy for him. Alternative characterizations as just a “man” (not a “young man”) would have still been accurate and socially relevant, yet more impactful in ensuring a balance public perception on the incident. In an interview, the formerly accused man agreed that the initial media coverage created sympathy towards him. He said, the media *“portrayed me as innocent and put pressure on the other end,”* namely *Alexa*. On the other hand, he questioned the finding that he had been depicted as a young man or boy. He criticized his portrayal in the media *“as a stubborn person”* and not

“as a man who was interested in a woman.” He told the research team he wanted to be seen as *“a man trying to reach out to a woman.”* Instead, he was *“described in a terrible way.”*

A few journalists in their reports mixed critical labels, like *“stalker,”* with more benign descriptions, such as a *“student accused of harassing”* a woman by *“sending love messages.”* One website article called him an *“admirer.”* This characterized him positively as a young man in love. On the other hand, the media consistently spoke about *Alexa* using her actual name and political title, which practically retained her image of power in the face of online violence. Overall, the depiction of *Alexa* as powerful (a political figure) and aggressor (strongly rejecting love) and the alleged perpetrator as a young and vulnerable man in love created the false narrative of *“powerful woman vs. defenseless young man.”* One CSO representative said the media made *Alexa* the culprit, suggesting that she had somehow provoked the attack. One editor commented on the attitude in his office: *“Even in our newsroom itself, people were like, a young man like this, what would he want with an old woman? And some people actually started even saying she’s an old woman, and this is a young man, why would she feel threatened in any way?”*

In *Tina’s* case, one national newspaper tried to portray her as a liar. The reporter claimed the police had denied ever having received complaints by the victim on the incident, although *Tina* had posted on social media that she had filed a police report. The reporter interviewed the police spokesman but did not interview the victim to 1) make sure the social media post was authentic and 2) to check the details of the controversial police report. This is an especially critical point, because fake social media accounts were reportedly appearing online after the incident. Another report characterized her as an accomplice in the incident, saying *“the photos show Tina completely naked, smiling for the camera.”* This created the impression that she intended the photos for publication or would be happy about the incident, which however contradicts other reports of her withdrawing from public life (“going into hibernation”) after the incident. In a similar vein, one news website article called her *“the once innocent celebrity,”* meaning she was now guilty of something. She was also characterized as careless by reporters, who thought she should have learnt from the experiences of other female celebrities who became targets of non-consensual sharing of nudes. One such reporter remarked, *“like most female celebrities, the immense attention she received got her making the wrong calls on who to go with and while she was enjoying the ride, she never anticipated disaster was around the corner.”* Confirming the negative publicity *Tina* received, one editor commented, *“The story elicited disgust and disappointment in Tina. But also, it attracted some kind of sympathy from those who are against any form of abuse against women, especially women’s rights activists.”* A CSO representative familiar with the case said *Tina* was portrayed as *“a bad girl.”* The same representative interpreted the message of the media about *Tina* this way: *“This is a girl you should not deal with. She’s beautiful but she has*

a bad character, maybe she is a slut [...]". The perpetrators in this incident were not identified. As a result, the media did not say much about them.

Media reports on the cyber harassment of *Nadia* showed the victim in a negative light by continuing to publish numerous questionable comments of the perpetrator. He often called *Nadia* a thief, claiming she had stolen his money. As *Nadia* was minimally involved in the media coverage of her incident, the perpetrator dominated the coverage. He was portrayed positively as a rich man, with most media reports specifically calling him a "tycoon." Some news websites contributed to this negative publicity by quoting other celebrities who resented *Nadia*, including one who called her a "prostitute" and another who said a "poverty spirit" was following *Nadia*.

One editor reflected on the coverage of this OVAW incident:

"I think what we communicated is, one, that she should get married quick and settle. So we were judging her [...]. Also, what we communicated about her is that she has been, for lack of a better phrase, she has been loose, she has not been morally upright so she should now get morally straight. And by getting morally straight, she should stop having relationships and just get married and stay there."

However, two editors from unrelated media outlets argued that their intention in publishing the insults was 1) to make a point that relationship problems should be solved in private and 2) to show the public that the perpetrator was disrespectful towards women.

Reports on *Annette* included mixed characterizations. While the media started off reporting this incident as a crime, in effect portraying her as a victim of cybercrime, developments in the pursuit of justice led the media to recharacterize her as a lawbreaker. The media reported on one incident where the victim had breached parliamentary procedures by leaking confidential communication between parliament and police on investigations related to the OVAW incident. Parliamentary disciplinary hearings were then held and found the victim guilty of abuse of her office. At this point, the media generally changed direction focusing on the victim's illegal tendencies in the past. This new angle was supported with reports linking the victim to other abuse-of-office scandals. Shortly after, the police announced it did not have sufficient evidence to charge anyone in the cybercrime investigation. As a result of these developments in the story, the media shifted from covering *Annette* as the victim to portraying her as a person of questionable integrity. Practically, media attention on the main issue (OVAW) was numbed and along with it, the opportunity to create public awareness of OVAW as a crime. In comparison, the media never framed the *Alexa* case as a crime; even though the formerly accused was on trial for the crimes of cyber harassment and offensive

communication. Instead, the media reported the incident as a love story gone wrong.

The research team interviewed one man formerly accused of circulating the sex video supposed to feature *Annette*. He said the media vilified him. *"I saw the video online, but media houses tried to make it look like I am the source of the information [video],"* he said. The man was not interviewed by the media. In relation to another OVAW case, which was not included in this study, one editor spoke about editorial bias and which role it plays in the characterization of OVAW victims and perpetrators:

"I feel like the whole story, like the whole scandal was covered with the media being very pessimistic about her. So, if she said something, it was [like], 'she's claiming.' But we were not giving her, what do I call it? A chance. We didn't want to believe her. Whatever is coming from her, it's claims. So I think that says a lot about our attitude towards her, and I think women in general"

The media coverage of Nancy's incident relied heavily on the republication of remarks from social media, most of which were insulting. However, when Nancy directly responded to one of the "trolls," two news websites reported her reply as *"an attack on her fans."* Her reply was addressed to a social media user, who said the photo incident was Nancy's own fault, because she could not get over a failed relationship. She then reminded the user that they were free to unfollow her if they did not like her content. By calling her response "an attack," the two news websites defended this social media user's right to make offensive comments (and, by extension, the right to online abuse in general) and devalued the victim's voice in a conversation focused on her own body. Since Nancy was not immediately available to comment on the matter afterwards, one report furthermore indicated that she had *"attacked a fan and immediately switched off her phone,"* creating the image of an impulsive personality who avoids accountability. A civil society activist commented on Nancy's characterization in the media:

"[T]hey took her to be like she's a young girl who does drugs, they said a lot of things. They took her to be like a rebellious girl, very complicated, immoral and all those things people said. But if you approach her, you might realize that she has many people whom she beats in being morally better than those who were judging her."

In *Dada's* case, the perpetrator received a considerable amount of negative publicity, with most media reports calling him *"foul-mouthed."* The media also referred to his abusive video message as *"vulgar," "a vile rant," "cyberbullying," "adult-rated,"* and *"threatening."* The choice of words was a clear signal for the audience that the perpetrator had done something wrong.

All in all, the following conclusions can be drawn from the traditional media characterization of OVAW victims and perpetrators:

- Negative characterization did not affect OVAW victims who were highly involved in the media coverage of their incidents. On the other hand, most victims who were not or minimally engaged suffered significant negative publicity. One editor commented on the characterization of *Nadia*:

“Just like I said that we were receiving only one side of the story, there was the risk of consumers believing in that one side. The perpetrator was making claims [...] and there is no rebuttal to that coming from the side of Nadia. So there was a risk of consumers taking the allegations [...] by [the perpetrator] as truthful.”

This points to a connection between participation in media coverage and characterization of victims. In incidents with high involvement of OVAW victims, perpetrators (even unidentified ones) were characterized negatively. For instance, a media report on *Mwesa’s* body shaming case read, *“the internet is crawling with body-shamers who, like hyenas that have caught the scent of blood, are out to put down anyone whose body they deem unfit.”*

- In some OVAW incidents in which the media republished derogatory content an overall negative characterization of victims was also visible. Examples include *Nadia* and *Tina*. This points to a link between the republication of negative remarks and poor characterization of victims.
- The existence of sociocultural mindsets that tolerate, promote, justify, and/or trivialize VAW among media practitioners partly explains the negative characterization of victims like *Alexa* and *Nancy*, whose responses to OVAW were viewed as too aggressive. One editor justified the characterization of *Alexa*, criticizing her for *“blowing something small out of proportions”*:

“[T]his is something she should have handled [differently], maybe probably talk to the family of the boy involved instead of going to police. And of course, which also reflects the fact that in most cases, women who are subjected to that kind of harassment fear coming out or reporting to police. And by the time it took a whole [politician] to do that, but still, people thought it was not necessary, including some of her colleagues in Parliament [...]. She could have shrugged it off. There was really nothing much about it.”

This also explains the negative characterization of *Tina* as careless for not having learnt from past experiences; in many people eyes, she should have foreseen and prevented her OVAW incident. In the context of explaining why less rigor is applied to finding sources for OVAW reports, one editor also sheds light on the sentiments of male editors, which echo perceptions justifying offline VAW:

“I think we have become so sensitized against seeing such things [OVAW] as crime [...]. And actually, you might find even editors

unfortunately, even male editors, who agree with the abusers. [...] [Y]ou hear comments such as ‘women like these are the ones who bring problems to themselves.’ And this is an editor, a gatekeeper, who should be shaping opinion[s].”

- The insufficient verification of information coming from sources also contributed to the negative characterization in *Tina’s* case, where she was portrayed as a liar after her social media post contradicted a police statement.
- The (unconscious) use of descriptive language and sensationalism played a role in the negative characterization of victims. For instance, in *Tina’s* and *Mercy’s* cases, some media reports described details of the leaked nude photos in a manner which suggested they were intended for publication by the victims. Descriptions such as *“completely naked smiling for the camera”* or *“striking a pose on the couch”* might appear to state the obvious, but they can misrepresent the intentions behind such photos and are unnecessarily explicit. In addition, calling responses of OVAW victims *“attacks”* or *“overreaction”* fueled negative characterization in reports. Likewise, the title *“tycoon”* for a perpetrator who was relentlessly insulting a woman by calling her a thief gives the abuser unnecessary positive publicity. In all these cases, more neutral wording, such as *“businessman”* instead of *“tycoon,”* would have still been accurate without pushing subjective characterizations and stereotypes.
- A turn of events that led to the changing portrayal of *Annette* shows that characterization is flexible and can be influenced by unrelated developments. This invites discussion on the possibility for the media to redirect the characterization of victims in a strategic manner during media reporting of OVAW incidents.
- Characterization also results from 1) the media’s attempts to see victims or perpetrators through the public lens or to please audiences; 2) attempts to create catchy or sensational headlines, for example, *“tycoon [does something]”* to attract readership; 3) a person’s known or real-life character depending on their conduct; and 4) contributions from sources, whether they support or criticize survivors and perpetrators.

3.1.7. Inadequate verification of information

Inadequate verification of information happened where media practitioners used inauthentic information in their reports. This is highly problematic since it is the media’s role to inform and educate the audience. It leads to the spread of misinformation and impacts the quality of public discourse on OVAW.

One CSO respondent in an interview remarked, *“people take what is covered in the media as gospel truth. [...] [T]he more credible*

the media house, the more it is considered to be true. [...] [I]f it is covered by three 'credible' media houses, then it is gospel truth."

The degree to which the media verified the information they published on OVAW was evaluated by looking at the evidence that supported this information: the causes of OVAW, identity of perpetrators, and authenticity of leaked videos or photos. Such information was categorized as inadequately verified when 1) it could not be traced back to a credible source or 2) media practitioners flagged the information as inauthentic themselves.

This problem was observed in two out of the 13 OVAW incidents; the cyberbullying of *Dada* (student) and non-consensual sharing of nudes involving *Tina* (student). Neither survivor participated as a source in media reporting on their incidents. In cases where survivors were highly involved, the publication of poorly verified information was not an issue. Members of civil society and law enforcement confirmed findings on the use of problematic information in the reporting of OVAW incidents.

One of the most distinctive features of the media coverage in *Tina's* case was the uncertainty regarding major aspects of the incident, including the genuineness of the images, the cause of the incident, and the identity of suspected perpetrator(s). One national TV host discussing the incident said,

"I don't really know how the pictures came out, what led to what. Whether they are real pictures or they are photoshopped, but whatever it is, you men, you guys need to style up. Tina, we still have love for you, we still have respect for you [...]. But then again, even to the girls out there, men! You need to be careful in case the pictures are indeed hers, right?"

Another online news report read, *"We are yet to ascertain whether it is a genuine photo or work of photoshop."* Nonetheless, both referred to the photos as *"Tina's nude photos."* Despite explicit uncertainty, the TV host engaged the studio audience in a discussion about the photos that were allegedly *Tina's*, while the news website reporter described the photos as *"depicting Tina completely naked, smiling for the camera."*

There were also at least three conflicting claims on the cause of the incident, all unsubstantiated. Several reporters pushed the narrative of the rejected ex-boyfriend's revenge, while others suggested the images were leaked by thieves who had stolen *Tina's* phone. None of these reports were supported by credible sources. For instance, one report claimed, *"two men were arrested,"* but there was no police statement on the arrest. According to yet another report, *Tina "had been robbed of her phone where the thieves extracted nudes photos of her, which they later circulated on social media."* One supporter of the ex-boyfriend narrative suggested, *"A jilted lover she had fallen out with over allegations of being cheated on by her"* had leaked the photos. Other reports blamed a "male friend." Several journalists

based their claim on the probability that *Tina* was *"like most female celebrities"* making *"wrong calls on who she should/shouldn't be with."* While there is no justification, the editors interviewed for this study explained this with *Tina's* refusal to take interviews after the incident. What stood out in the media coverage was also that reporters kept using the word "allegedly" in order to publish rumors that were exciting but could not be proven.

While the reports studied on *Annette* did not make any specific reference to the authenticity of the concerned sex video, a CSO representative questioned its validity: *"I remember those images and I was like, okay, do people stop to think, did the media houses stop to think that they could have taken a bit of time to ascertain the validity of this video?"*

The *Dada* case was arguably the best-sourced online violence incident studied. Several leaders from government and politics, mental health practitioners, media, and civil society actors, as well as parents were interviewed by various media houses. The media reports on this incident focused squarely on the actions of the perpetrator and reactions of the public. The media saw the cause for the OVAW incident in the bad upbringing of the perpetrator. High-profile sources in civil society, government, media, and politics, for example, all publicly expressed the view that the OVAW perpetrator and the "dirty content" in traditional media were *"a reflection of the rot in our society."* They agreed that the perpetrator was the product of poor parenting. This angle was partly underlined by the gender stereotype of a boy neglected by his mother. The absence of the mother, however, was a baseless claim. For instance, while many journalists argued that the perpetrator came from a disadvantaged family background, some alluded specifically to the possibility of a single-mother setting. One news website, making a similar assumption, based their claim on *"word going round on social media,"* a hint that the story about the alleged perpetrator's household was not factual.

Contrary to the above-described cases, media reports on the body shaming of *Mwesa* (a media professional) and *Bridgette* (an entertainer) contained verifiable information on the authenticity of the concerned photos and videos. Thanks to the survivors' media involvement, journalists were able to verify the genuineness of the materials in question, eliminating any potential for rumors. The anonymity of the perpetrators was also confirmed by the survivors.

Related to the problem of verification is the question of accuracy or the correctness of used information. Accuracy is not always completely achievable, but the media tries to solve such potential challenges through the rigorous application of sourcing and verification protocols. The study has so far established that the majority of OVAW reports were based on a single source.

Although the verification of evidence used in reporting OVAW was beyond the scope of this study, the research team found one case where the media downright misrepresented facts, resulting in sensationalism.

The controversial video in the *Naomi* case showed her kissing a man. However, the media reported it as a “sex tape” and a “*video showing intense love making.*” This may have significantly influenced public perception, especially when combined with the portrayal of *Naomi* as a child, despite being 18 years old. Effectively, the media spun a sensational and confusing narrative, where a child had been recorded having consensual sex with an adult. The characterization of the survivor as a child was socially and culturally accurate in the sense that *Naomi* was both under the care of her parents and a high school student at the time. However, the media failed to acknowledge the fact that she was legally an adult.

Two alleged perpetrators insisted the media misinformed the public. The man formerly accused of stalking *Alexa* told the research team that there was false information about him and about the case circulating on social media, some of which was reported in the traditional media. He added that “*it reached a point where the media got too excited, so they left the truth and started reporting rumors.*”

Reporters who covered different OVAW incidents complained about challenges in the verification of information, especially regarding the authenticity of images and the identity of perpetrators. One reporter commented,

“I think the biggest one is, can you verify who was the initial person who sent out this image? In the online world, we have so many faceless people. So when you pick something, maybe a video off of Twitter, are you picking from the person who originally posted it? Are you sure? Can you confirm? [...] Is it truthful? Has it been tampered with? What is the agenda of the person who sent it out?”

Given the potential impact of misinformation, Nancy told the research team that she had attempted to talk about journalistic practices used in the coverage of her incident with a media manager, who told her “*his employees were doing their jobs and he can't interfere with them.*”

3.1.8. Sensationalism

Sensationalism is the use of shocking or exciting language, exaggeration, and/or lies to capture the attention of the audience. Sensational reporting tactics can ultimately lead to misinformation.

The study explored sensationalism by identifying instances of exaggeration, publication of unsubstantiated information or rumors, and the use of words that aim to shock readers.

Exaggeration was encountered in three of the 13 OVAW cases, namely the cyber harassment of a media personality (*Nadia*), as well as the non-consensual sharing of nudes involving two politicians, *Mercy* and *Annette*.

Sensationalism was observed in the following aspects of reporting:

- The exaggeration of the scale of OVAW incidents; this involved blowing key facts of OVAW incidents out of proportion;
- Unproven claims about the responses of survivors to their OVAW experiences;
- The use of shocking words (for instance, “dirty” or “raunchy”) to describe OVAW incidents;
- The overstatement of the impact of OVAW on survivors.

Some reports on the cyber harassment of *Nadia*, spoke of the OVAW incident as a “battle,” which implied *Nadia* was actively opposing the perpetrator. One newspaper article reported that “*the battle had escalated and both parties had recruited teams to fight for them on social media.*” The media did not present any evidence for the claim that factions had intentionally been created or supporters been mobilized. The media repeatedly published evidence for how the perpetrator provoked online violence; but the same could not be said about the notion that *Nadia* was fighting back. Without citing any references, one news website article alleged that *Nadia's* team had “*leaked nude videos of the perpetrator*” in retaliation of his endless insults.

Media reports on *Annette's* leaked sex tape included the occasional use of sensational language. For instance, the OVAW incident was referred to as a “sex tape scandal” and “raunchy video” in headlines of news websites and newspapers.

Two websites sensationalized news on the leaked nude photos of *Mercy* by claiming, among other things, that the photos were “breaking the internet” and “*spreading like wildfire through instant messages and social media.*” The reports also said the photos had “*instantly put off her political torch.*” One local news website republished said photos. In *Mercy's* case, sensational language was only observed on websites which covered the incident in the entertainment or gossip section, but not where it appeared in news, opinions, or features.

Two men formerly accused of committing OVAW and two survivors told the research team that the media used different strategies to sensationalize reports with the aim to increase audience engagement. The man formerly accused of stalking *Alexa* stated, “*journalists want stories that will uplift their programs.*” He added,

“What I didn’t like about the media is that it reached a point where they were against me and started adding their opinions to the story. [...] [I]t reached a point where the media got too excited. So, they left the truth and started reporting rumors. What I wanted them to report and emphasize: the court processes. The media was in court but didn’t report what was in the court.”

In sensational reporting, journalists tend to throw ethical standards overboard just to attract more public interest. This can be harmful to the dignity of survivors. One CSO representative commented, *“where is the sense of duty and responsibility by media houses to separate the desire to sell stories from the responsibility to preserve, uphold, and restore dignity to a person from whom the perpetrator intended to strip dignity?”*

Sensationalism in the reporting of OVAW is even more problematic because the language used often distracts audiences from thinking about the severity of OVAW as a crime. Instead, their focus is on mundane issues like social media excitement over leaked nude photos. Sensationalism has the power to derail a sensible public discourse about OVAW. Nevertheless, under the pressure of growing competition from digital media, traditional media outlets might prioritize gaining and retaining audiences at the expense of human dignity. This study found that media outlets allow sensationalist reports on OVAW incidents on their digital platforms, while they retain more professional standards on their traditional platforms. These findings highlight the need to find new ways to interest audiences in OVAW reports without resorting to sensationalism.

3.1.9. Sexualization of OVAW survivors

When women or women’s bodies are portrayed as objects of pleasure, this means they are being sexualized or objectified. Sexualization normalizes aggression against women by promoting ideas that reduce them to mere objects and therefore trivialize or even justify violence against them. When used in (traditional) media reporting of OVAW, sexualization diverts the audience’s attention from the severity of OVAW and makes it a matter of entertainment.

This study isolated three OVAW incidents where media coverage significantly focused on the bodies of the survivors, that is, *Tina*, *Nancy*, and *Peace*. All three cases had two things in common, 1) they all involved women in entertainment and 2) they all involved nudity.

Media reports sexualized *Tina* by referring to her as “miss curvy,” describing her as a *“hot lady with scintillating curves and eyes that tantalize.”* They also used photos from the internet aimed at visualizing this mental image. While this was a tactic used mostly by identifiably male reporters (going by names and photos of said reporters), two female TV presenters also applied the male gaze, suggesting the leaked photos

“paralyzed men in the capital city.” The majority of identifiably female reporters used *Tina*’s real name, stage name, and title.

In *Nancy*’s case, media reports focused on describing her private parts, which, according to social media users, were visible through her clothes. They claimed these pictures revealed *“the size of her private parts”* through her *“tight fitting clothes.”* Where news websites had audience feedback sections, such as forums or commenting sections, reports sexualizing *Nancy* also prompted public discussion about her genitalia. Some news websites moreover republished said photos along with derogatory sexual remarks from social media.

Most news websites sexualized *Peace* by contributing to discussions about her breasts and publishing social media remarks on the same. One news website headline declared that *“her breasts were still perfectly round.”* Other news websites published vulgar remarks from social media, including some expressing interest in offline sexual encounters with the survivor. Explicit comments included, *“Do you know how many people have masturbated because of that breast of yours?”* or *“What a breast ☺, It’s good to be sucked.”*

In combination with the violent nature of OVAW, sexualization is especially problematic, because it evokes the idea that OVAW is entertaining. It normalizes or even promotes the male gaze and allows the focus on a woman’s body to overshadow the alarming crime. Statements which sexualize survivors also introduce online sexual violence as a unique aspect of OVAW.

3.1.10. Limited understanding of OVAW

Using the right language is key to an appropriate discussion of OVAW in the media. Although OVAW terminology is still evolving, technical terms such as cyberbullying, body shaming, and doxing are available and convey a strong message about the offensive nature of OVAW. The use of language to describe OVAW also plays a role in influencing the emotions of audiences towards the subject. For instance, people are more likely to feel sympathy for women targeted by “cyber harassment” than protagonists in “dirty videos.”

This study asked media practitioners (editors, producers, and reporters) to define OVAW and compared their responses to the descriptions of OVAW incidents across all media reports. It found that respondents correctly identified key elements of OVAW: that it is a form of GBV committed online and enabled by advancements in modern technology, such as photo and video editing, and that it occurs in various ways and is hurtful. However, when it came to identifying the various types of OVAW (cyber harassment, non-consensual sharing of nudes, etc.) and applying the correct technical terms, they showed knowledge gaps.



This was reflected in the media reports. For instance, the media did not identify the cyber harassment of *Nadia* (media personality) and the body shaming of *Masha* (fashion model) as OVAW. *Nadia's* case was covered as a social media quarrel between two ex-lovers. Even though most media reports published the derogatory remarks of the perpetrator, there was no sign that the journalists recognized the situation as violent. Most media reports dealt with the incident as a source of entertainment. Likewise, *Masha's* case was reported as a controversy in which an undeserving woman was crowned a beauty queen. One TV report aired street polls, most of which were insulting, while another interviewed the beauty pageant organizer on the standards of beauty. Where incidents were identified as OVAW, many reports did not make such acknowledgement. The study thus found that in most traditional media reports, OVAW was not called out as such.

The word cloud below includes words and phrases used to describe OVAW in media reports that identified incidents as either violent or offensive:

These words could be categorized as follows:

- **Euphemism:** This category includes phrases such as "embarrassing episode," "strange things," "that issue," "romance

video," and "family issue" which were used to downplay OVAW instead of naming violence for what it is. They were preferred especially by contributors or sources in Tanzania, where the media also described videos and photos as "dirty" or "private." One OVAW survivor called her OVAW incident a "tragedy." While there is a technical Swahili term for OVAW, this study could not establish the existence of specific Swahili words for different types of OVAW. The use of euphemisms is also closely linked to the conservative attitudes in Tanzania on conversations about sexuality.

- **Sensational phrases:** This category includes phrases like "18+ video," "raunchy," "adult-rated," "pornographic" or "viral" video. These terms were exclusive to media reporting on OVAW that was sexual in nature, such as leaked sex videos or nude photos.

- **Descriptive phrases:** This category includes instances where the media reports described incidents relatively plainly, for example as "*photos showing Tina naked*," "*video showing Bridget and X making love*," and "*breast photos*."

- **Misrepresentations:** This category involves the use of phrases which significantly confuse a proper understanding of OVAW, such as "love messages," "love notes," or

Words and phrases used in the media to describe OVAW



Figure 5 – Words used in OVAW reports on websites, radio, TV and in newspapers (created with freewordcloudgenerator.com)

“love proposal” in the cyber harassment case of *Alexa* (politician).

- **Technical words and phrases:** This final category was present in few OVAW incidents, to be exact in the cases of *Mwesa* (media personality), *Annette* (politician), *Dada* (student), and *Alexa* (politician). Here, technical terms were sometimes used to describe OVAW. The words include body shaming, cyber harassment, and offensive communication. They were more common in reporting where survivors were highly engaged (e. g. *Mwesa*), the justice system was involved (*Alexa*, *Annette*), and many expert sources were consulted (*Dada*).

Closely related to language, the study also assessed the framing of OVAW in traditional media, meaning the perspectives from which the media chiefly told OVAW stories. Frames show the extent of knowledge among media practitioners on a topic. It also directly affects other elements of media coverage, such as prominence and sourcing: For instance, if OVAW is described (framed) as a crime, it gains greater prominence because audiences must be warned of events that may put their lives at risk or against participating in illegal activities. In terms of sourcing, the depiction of OVAW as a crime would naturally lead to a greater involvement of sources in law enforcement. Frames are barely objective, because they are loaded with the (shared) values of individuals (content creators, contributors, readers, viewers) and organizations. Oftentimes, there will be several different, even contradictory, frames circulating in the media about one and the same incident.

In media practice, frames can introduce bias or promote balanced coverage. One CSO representative remarked, *“The way you tell a story can very easily tell me about your internal culture as a media house.”* Frames have the potential to be real barriers to the online safety of women.

This study found five major frames applied to OVAW incidents: crime and sabotage, love, unjustified hate, and bad upbringing.

Crime and sabotage

Annette’s case is an example of framing OVAW as a crime. Media reports mention that the survivor had made a complaint of defamation to the police. To support this defamation angle, journalists quoted the survivor saying that the intention of the video was to “injure her reputation.” In the following reports, while the police cybercrimes department was specifically investigating her case, it was concretely called a cybercrime. One report, focusing on the arrest of a media personality in connection to the incident, named the charge explicitly as *“publication of obscene information in an electronic form.”* The media continued to zero in on the police activity around this incident. For instance, they reported difficulties in summoning powerful politicians suspected to have been involved in circulating the

video. Some media outlets reported how politicians were pressuring the police to speed up the lengthy investigations. One politician said, *“It is now seven months since the video went viral on social media [and the survivor has] yet to get justice.”* Reports on *Mercy’s* incident did not discuss criminality. However, in one report, she was quoted saying the reports were *“intended to discredit her and tarnish her reputation.”*

In an interview with *Alexa*, she told the research team about her suspicions that the incident was meant to hurt her political career, because she had been *“pushing for some decisions”* for her country in the weeks preceding the incident.

Addressing OVAW as a crime can help to prevent incidents or at least their escalation. But to do it right, media practitioners need the help of legal experts from the private sector, government, and civil society. This study found that access to legal experts is limited across all four countries. As one lawyer said,

“I think that is mainly a public relations issue. [...] [Y]ou find that most officers, whether in private practice or in public practice, are not at liberty to just give comments. [...] [T]hey are supposed to seek authorization before you interview them which in most cases is not forthcoming due to public relations concerns.”

In Uganda, the Anti-Pornography Act 2014 imposes penalties on persons who produce and disseminate pornography. The Uganda Computer Misuse Act 2011 prohibits unauthorized access to, and disclosure of, information as well as cyberstalking, cyber harassment, pornography, and offensive communication. The active participation of legal practitioners in media coverage is therefore essential in creating awareness of OVAW as illegal acts.

Love

The majority of media outlets told *Alexa’s* case as a love affair gone wrong. The unwanted communication of the perpetrator, which reached the level of stalking, was described as “love messages.” Meanwhile, local courts were treating this as a crime of cyber harassment and offensive communication. This reporting demonstrated the media’s ability to superimpose their sociocultural interpretations irrespective of what the law says. As a result, *Alexa’s* incident came to be seen as trivial and the survivor was vilified as one stubbornly resisting love. *Alexa* also told the research team how the first media article on her incident shaped the trends in the subsequent media coverage:

“He was still joking and even harassing me in front of the court or kind of belittling me and even confirming in front of the magistrate that he will not stop. So for me, that was so painful. I cried in court... So when I cried in court, this reporter, and it was a girl, a woman talked about my crying in court [...] and did not talk about what was making me cry. She did not speak to me to ask, ‘why are

you crying' [...] She just said 'MP cries in court [...] cries in court for love,' or something. [...] But because they broke the story and said I cried in court because of a boy who asked me for love, it was made a mocking story, it was made a joke. Nobody was getting to the heart of the problem or to my whole emotions and where they were coming from."

Unjustified hate

Mwesa's case was painted as a *"hate-inspired social media movement"* led by people who hold unrealistic perceptions on beauty. One media report indicated, *"the internet is crawling with body-shamers who, like hyenas that have caught the scent of blood, are out to put down anyone whose body they deem unfit."* Together with her testimonies on the emotional trauma she had suffered, the overall framing of the incident communicated that her attackers were awful people and practically discouraged cyberbullying.

Cultural and religious immorality

Members of law enforcement and CSOs observed the framing of OVAW as a form of cultural or religious misbehavior in the media coverage. A CSO representative from Kenya commented,

"And it's very sad to note that the way the survivors are portrayed even in media or on social media, they're seen as very bad people, like people who are immoral, who cannot control their sexual urges. They are portrayed in a very bad manner, and they are not seen as survivors. They are seen as people who have brought shame to their communities or to their culture or to their society, and that's very sad."

A CSO respondent from Uganda agreed, *"They are portrayed like they are the weaker sex, they are portrayed as someone who was against the religious laws, Uganda being a religious country. And of course, being against the culture."*

This portrayal of OVAW can provoke negative reactions from entire communities allied to these religions or cultures towards both survivors and perpetrators.

Bad upbringing

The two incidents involving school students were framed as a result of a difficult family background. While Naomi was legally an adult (18), describing her as a child attracted considerable criticism from society, where people saw the cause of the incident in the child's bad upbringing. As a result, media organizations raced for comments from parents and teachers and characterized her as a wayward teenager. Her mother

was attacked for raising her poorly, especially by allowing her to use social media and exposing her to the celebrity lifestyle at an early age.

In Dada's case, the perpetrator's action was also blamed on poor parenting, above all the absence of his parents and unsupervised access to social media. His behavior was also seen as a psychosocial problem. As a result, the media was dominated by opinions from psychologists.

When read alongside the findings in this report on the limited variety of OVAW themes, the findings above clearly demonstrate the media's lack of innovation in OVAW coverage. Across all 138 reports on 13 quite different OVAW incidents, the media consistently applied the same frames. This was especially damaging for the survivors *Alexa* and *Naomi*.

In addition, the research team found that framing impacts the selection of sources for OVAW stories, because preset perspectives prevent a balanced choice and thus coverage. One survivor expressed the view that the media had taken the wrong approach in covering her case by framing it as a love issue and painting her as unreasonable. In what followed, public opinion turned against her, and the media was not interested in her perspective until CSOs intervened. She said the frame adopted by the media made it difficult for her to make her own viewpoint known, not just to the media, but to people on social media and offline, and even when seeking conversations on other, unrelated issues. Another survivor criticized a lack of professionalism in the framing of OVAW incidents, saying she did *"not know whether to call it ignorance"* or meanness. The research team also concluded that it was important to fight misleading media frames early. Once a frame and public opinion were established, they were difficult to change.

In our interviews with various CSOs, media framing of OVAW was generally seen as problematic in the context of efforts to prevent and eliminate OVAW. CSO representatives pointed to a bigger underlying issue in the perspectives of media practitioners on women and women's issues. For instance, one women's rights activist questioned the motive behind media houses' strong interest in the marital status of women running for political office, unlike men. The media is also more lenient towards men who suffer online violence compared to women. The activist said, *"Framing OVAW will not be complete unless it is securely anchored in a foundation of fair treatment of women in the media vis-à-vis men."*

Another CSO representative said there was a need to "ensure that the narrative on how we view women changes." CSOs called for dialogue on what the media says about women. They recommended that OVAW should be framed as a societal problem, not as an issue affecting women.

3.1.11. Limiting further harm

The principle “First, Do No Harm” (*primum non nocere*) recognizes that well-intentioned actions (such as media reporting) might have unforeseeable risks. In journalistic practice, Do No Harm is an ethical consideration to avoid or limit harm that might result from reporting events. Strategies to achieve that include concealing the identities of survivors of violent crimes, delaying news of the demise of persons until their families are informed, rigorous verification of information intended for broadcast or publication, and many others.

This study examined the adherence of journalists to the Do No Harm principle in reporting OVAW incidents by looking at the extent to which survivors’ identities were concealed. However, findings on the weak verification of information and republication of derogatory remarks also give insights into harmful reporting. This section focuses on the concealment of identities of survivors and the weak application of Do No Harm strategies as identified by editors.

The research team found that the media only concealed the survivor’s identity in one of the 13 OVAW incidents.

Fourteen media reports were studied on *Dada’s* OVAW incident. She was a school student and a minor, so her real name was never mentioned. In fact, she was barely the focus of the storytelling as the perpetrators took center stage. Her father was referenced (not by name) in one of the 14 reports. Even though the perpetrator (also a student) revealed his own identity in a cyber harassment message he posted on social media, the media tried to protect him by using blurred images and distorted videos. Only one news website strayed off this course by publishing a social media comment containing a live link to said abusive video.

The media however shared the identities of survivors in the other twelve OVAW incidents, including *Naomi’s* (also a school student). This is inconsistent with the reporting standards in cases of physical violence, such as domestic violence and rape, where survivors are usually anonymized.

Findings from interviews with editors were also inconsistent with observations from the media reports: While editors were perfectly able to name many strategies to avoid or limit harm in reporting OVAW, these strategies were largely not reflected in the actual reporting, except where minors were involved. The strategies include:

- Limiting sensationalism;
- Ensuring balance, objectivity, and fairness;
- Using empathy;
- Adherence to media house editorial policies;
- Respecting survivors’ rights to withhold comment;
- Excluding minors from negative publicity;

- Concealing identities;
- Avoiding republication of nonconsensual pornographic images;
- In-depth research and verification of information;
- Avoiding coverage altogether.

For instance, *Tina’s* right to withhold comment was not entirely respected, when her own voice was conveniently replaced with rumors or assumptions concerning key aspects of the incident, such as the authenticity of the photos or the identity of the perpetrators. One editor commenting on his preferred approach to limiting harm said, “I stop. I stop completely, just stop publishing. Reach out or just give it some time. Do extra research and see because the internet doesn’t forget.”

The study discovered that some traditional media reports used background information related to OVAW but with questionable relevance to the actual topic. For instance, a report on *Tina’s* career progression concluded with the statement, “It should be remembered that 3 years ago Tina became the talk of town when her nude pictures flooded the internet after an allegation that her phone which had private pictures had been stolen.” The added value of this statement is not apparent. However, it somewhat diminishes the career accomplishments actually discussed in the article. Another article on *Tina’s* incident named other female celebrities whose nude photos had been leaked as far back as five years. This kind of reporting OVAW may be harmful to the recovery of survivors. On a similar note, *Alexa* told the research team that the media misused an interview she had given about a year before the incident. In the interview, she had stated not to be married. In the wake of the incident, the comment on her marital status was used to justify the behavior of her stalker.

A unique but potentially harmful occurrence was found in one of the twelve reports on *Tina*, where an article included a list of celebrities whose nude photos might get leaked in the future. The speculative list of potential survivors is dangerous and unnecessary as it might make the women named in the list a target both online and offline.

Men formerly accused of committing OVAW and three survivors spoke with the research team about the significant harm they suffered as a result of traditional media coverage. Public opinion had turned against one of the survivors because of “exaggerated stories” published in the media. After her attempts to contact media managers had failed, Nancy said she had to “bear negative media coverage.” *Alexa* revealed the media coverage of her incident damaged her career. She was criticized for taking the supposed perpetrator to court for cyberstalking her and the topic began to seep into her public meetings. The same man confirmed in his interview that “the case got a lot of negativity which was not necessary.” This negativity led to hostility towards *Alexa* both in online and offline spaces, which prompted her to withdraw from social media, because she

“felt there was no safe space” for her. Outside social media, her name became synonymous with the incident; google searches of her name would generate stories on the incident. Offline, when introduced to new contacts, the incident would be mentioned. She also received phone calls from more men stalking her and mocking her.

The man formerly accused of cyberstalking *Alexa* also suffered great harm as a result of traditional media coverage of the incident. For instance, he lost personal contacts, had to withdraw from social media to protect his privacy, and became depressed. His reputation was damaged, as everywhere he went, people would *“see the picture of a stubborn person.”* Similarly, one of the people formerly accused in the *Annette* case said he was temporarily dismissed from work. He is now known as someone who “leaks videos” and people avoid him in offline settings. He admitted, he was “still traumatized” by the situation.

Speaking about the irreversible damage traditional media coverage of OVAW can cause, *Alexa* explains,

“The interview that I had [with CSOs] [...] I expressed myself for them to be able to understand my side of the story. [...] That is when a positive story started coming out. But even then, they were swallowed up by the bad media that had already been circulated. Earlier, people’s opinions had been formed already. The media had also formed an opinion.”

The same survivor spoke about her experience with the real-life implications of her incident and the coverage:

“[I]t has affected the way I interact with people. I fear everyone. For example, if I sit, I don’t want someone to sit behind me, [it feels] like maybe there’s another harasser, maybe there’s one of those people who were accusing me and writing against me on social media [...]. But it has also affected the way I interact with other people, especially the opposite sex. Because I do not trust anyone.”

The two men formerly accused of committing OVAW in the *Alexa* and *Annette* cases were cleared of their charges for lack of evidence and want of prosecution in other countries. Nevertheless, they complained in interviews, this did nothing to undo the damage already done to their reputations. In such cases, defamation lawsuits against media outlets are also a possible consequence.

In one single case, a man formerly accused of OVAW said his online popularity significantly increased because of the media coverage of the incident.

3.1.12. Polarized opinions

The study found that OVAW is a controversial topic in all four countries. This can be explained by the fact that OVAW incidents

start conversations on morality or decency and sexuality, which are usually very emotive topics.

Based on public and expert opinions expressed in the media (especially on TV), the following three cases were the most polarizing among the 13 included in this study:

- **Dada (school student):** The public agreed that the attack against her by a fellow student was shameful. However, the perpetrator’s actions were excused by his poor upbringing, which somewhat absolved him from his responsibility.
- **Mwesa (media personality):** Opinions published especially on news websites were divided between sympathy and support, on the one hand, and insults and judgement, on the other.
- **Nadia (media personality):** Opinions published across radio, TV, newspapers, and news websites showed that her fans and the perpetrator’s fans were disagreeing on social media. The point of disagreement was whether the perpetrator was justified to defame her.

The *Alexa* case, however, stood out because the opinions of the public representing opposing viewpoints were published in a leading national newspaper.

One possibly satirical opinion piece in a newspaper defended the actions of the formerly accused, saying stalking was an acceptable, even natural way for young men to behave. The author directly supported the overarching news narrative of “powerful woman vs. helpless young man” by depicting *Alexa* as “an elephant” and the formerly accused as “a caveman” or hunter. He wrote that *“young men have a compulsion to ask for sex.”* He then dismissed *Alexa* as an anomaly among “normal women,” given that women’s *“fat deposits empower them to be patient and tolerant and their estrogen makes them submissive”* to constant advances from men. He said blame for the incident *“should go to the creator, God” for wiring men to act as such. About the initial court sentence against the alleged perpetrator, he said “such punishment would dissuade boys from developing the perseverance they need to function as future custodians of society.”*

The study concluded that the use of satire in OVAW reporting is inappropriate because humor is subjective so that even well-intentioned messages could be misunderstood. In addition, techniques such as exaggeration, used in this article, reflect deeply rooted sociocultural viewpoints that justify VAW. This begs the question whether this article was in good taste given its ability to shape public opinion on online stalking.

In another opinion piece, a columnist expressed outright condemnation of the incident, calling it “stalking” and highlighting its “dangers.” He also criticized the *“media for reporting the perpetrator was jailed for love.”* The author argues that the formerly

accused *“was not young”* and that the initial two-year *“sentence was not too harsh.”* He calls the age defense “poppycock,” pointing out that by the man’s age, *“Alexander the Great had already conquered half of the known world in the 4th century BCE.”* He also disagrees with the “love message” framing, writing that *“love messages are supposed to be beautiful and attractive, pleasant and enjoyable.”* The article concludes with examples of online stalking which escalated to become life-threatening attacks in the real world. *Alexa* expressed a very similar view, which was published as a quote in one newspaper article. In it she says, *“if someone says they can kill for love, then I cannot take it lightly.”*

The expression of opinions in the media is one of the hallmarks of free expression. However, in sensitive cases like OVAW, boundaries may be set in the interest of preventing the publication of misogynist ideas.

3.1.13. Flexibility in media genres

Gossip is a popular addition to media programming, especially on TV, Radio, and news websites. It involves casual conversations, often based on speculations about the lives of prominent personalities. Ordinarily, gossip has a negative focus on the people in question, often expressed as ridicule, scorn, mockery, or blame.

The gossip genre is especially important as it makes up a significant proportion of OVAW reports in the media. To be precise, OVAW was published or broadcast as gossip, entertainment, or lifestyle in 39 percent of all TV reports, in 55 percent of all radio content, and in 48 percent of contributions to news websites included in this study. Not only does gossip trivialize OVAW incidents, but it may also adversely impact the public perception of OVAW survivors because of its negative tone.

Interestingly, there was one gossip TV show which discussed the *Mwesa* body shaming incident but took a very different approach from the usual gossip genre. The following stood out in this show:

- The show accurately described the incident as cyberbullying and body shaming;
- It appropriately called the perpetrators out as attackers and haters;
- It complimented the survivor on *“clapping back at”* her attackers;
- And it unpacked unrealistic beauty standards and related stereotypes.

Gossip is a very popular genre that can reach many people. This show demonstrated that gossip can be a useful context to

discuss serious societal issues such as online violence if it puts a positive or more constructive spin on the genre.

However, the TV show went wrong in the following areas:

- It broadcast the derogatory social media comments as screenshots, which were read out; this made the remarks known to an even larger audience;
- It overdid it in portraying the survivor as strong and downplaying the impact of the OVAW incident by saying she was “unaffected” by the nasty social media comments; this was misleading given that the survivor had stated the opposite on social media.

3.2. Emerging issues

This section of the report discusses important issues which could not be directly observed in the media reports. Instead, they were raised in conversations with various interview respondents.

3.2.1. Newsroom attitudes

The attitudes of editors and reporters towards a topic contribute to a newsroom atmosphere in which that topic can be covered effectively—or not. Where newsrooms see a topic as interesting or important, for whatever reason, its coverage is likely to be given more space and time. In the context of OVAW, this study was able to determine the coexistence of multiple attitudes in a newsroom. This creates a problem, because the missing consensus in a media team is an obstacle to advancing a positive OVAW agenda, as one reporter confirmed:

“[W]ould I be able to change [the status of OVAW as a topic in newsrooms?] [N]ot as an individual, it has to start from management. How do we treat stories of violence? In my mind, these are gender-based violence stories in whichever way we look at them. So we have to understand how to treat them with the respect they deserve, for the management also to be onboard, because as a reporter, I cannot make such a huge decision, I can only fight as many battles as I can to enable such stories to go on air. However, if the system does not change from the top, then [...] it’s like you’re going round in circles, and we’ll never really move forward.”

Newsroom attitudes towards OVAW were categorized as follows: positive, neutral, mixed, and negative.

Positive attitudes: This group includes reporters who show an interest in covering OVAW for a variety of reasons. Editors explained that some reporters have a positive attitude because *“those are topics that bring a lot of feedback in most cases”* and therefore they *“will go anywhere to get that*

information.” Reporters also showed interest in covering incidents already popular on social media. One editor mentioned that the interest of reporters in OVAW had increased due to a growing awareness of *“how badly it is affecting women.”* They were therefore motivated to make a positive contribution to help such women.

Neutral attitudes: This category represents reporters who need persuasion from editors to cover OVAW and those who were assigned stories regardless of their attitudes. One editor said, *“Some are not so well-informed. So, you have to first explain to them the magnitude of the problem and why the topic is important. Then along the way that will pick [their] interest.”* Other editors had a management style that did not take their reporters’ attitudes into consideration; incoming topics are discussed and assigned to reporters no matter their attitudes, and results are expected based on fixed criteria, including angles, sources, and interview questions. This finding indicates that indifference towards OVAW can be balanced by a value-based editorial system.

Mixed attitudes: This group comprises situations where the attitudes of reporters are not fixed but determined by various factors on a case-by-case basis, for example, what individuals are involved in the OVAW story and/or pre-existing stereotypes, which can lead to either positive or negative attitudes. For instance, one editor commented as follows:

“The attitude, of course, depends on who is covering. Like I said, we still have a challenge of the media also being just a mirror, a reflection of society. So the attitudes are usually determined by the stereotypes and biases that we pick from society. Even as journalists, as editors, sometimes these biases feed into the work that we do. And so, [...] that is something that is a work in progress [and] requires continuous training and reminders.”

Another editor explained how the individuals involved in the OVAW incident could matter:

“In some instances, you find that the character of one individual has been cantankerous over the years. He has been in the news, and he has been [pictured] in awkward incidents. So, under [sic!] such a situation, you find the reporter having a sort of bias on that person and it comes back to you as an editor to treat each particular incident based on the facts for that particular case. So, it is usually based on the history and incidents of that particular individual.”

In a separate conversation, one editor said *Annette* was seen as *“a loud-mouthed woman.”* These mixed attitudes could result in biased reporting of OVAW.

Negative attitudes: This category represents reporters who are not interested in covering OVAW or for the wrong reasons, for example, portraying women as survivors of violence. Editors saw one reason for the lack of interest in the fact that

male reporters do not take OVAW very seriously, or as one editor put it,

“Sadly, most of my team is made up of male writers. And from my observation, most of them usually don’t take these kinds of issues very seriously. So, most times I have to push a bit on how they cover the story, to make them understand that well, this person has been violated or there’s a report that this person has been abused in this kind of way [...]. And I think it’s a general thing about how women are framed or seen in society.”

Another editor explained, *“I will be honest, for such stories, no reporter has interest in that because we purely do hard news. So for such stories, we leave them either online or for our sister [publications], in particular, the Weekend magazine. So there is no reporter who is willing to cover such a story.”* Hard news includes topics on politics and crime. This is problematic as OVAW is rarely recognized by the media as a crime.

Positive attitudes are beneficial to OVAW coverage. Taken altogether, neutral, mixed, and negative attitudes have proven to be damaging in the cases studied.

3.2.2. Attitudes of survivors and the public towards OVAW

Discussions with OVAW survivors showed a degree of tolerance for OVAW which might be adverse to efforts to put an end to such abuse. For instance, one survivor told the research team that there was an acceptable degree of stalking beyond which an incident required third-party intervention (by the police, for example). She argued that the inability to tolerate a minimal amount of stalking would lead to isolation from the community. This viewpoint is problematic as it 1) supports sociocultural perspectives which tolerate OVAW and 2) suggests that there is an acceptable degree of violence, even if it threatens the online safety of women.

In a different country, another survivor commented on her body shaming incident, saying *“these are things that must occur against public figures.”* This suggests OVAW is a normal experience in stardom. Another survivor said women must endure negative media coverage.

Such perspectives prove that survivors, as members of society, can hold the same sociocultural beliefs that promote violence. Public attitudes towards OVAW are discussed in subsection 3.1.12: *Polarized Opinions*.

3.2.3. Skill gaps

None of the editors and reporters interviewed have been trained on reporting OVAW. Some editors have attended training on reporting VAW or GBV. Therefore, most reporters and editors are learning to report OVAW by experience, which leads to the kind of journalistic output explored in this study. One editor remarked,

"[T]he training that I have is from colleagues who have covered such beats [specialized topics] for a long time. [...] [T]hrough the experiences you learn, sometimes by making mistakes you also learn and feedback from colleagues in the industry. But also, through reading, and then doing more research online, on just how to cover such stories."

This was supported by another editor, who said, *"[A]ll the things I've done are through research, through talking to, you know, just women. I listen to a lot of Twitter spaces and go online for resources and stuff like that, but I haven't had any formal training."* One reporter commented on the need for training:

"I think, it should even be a degree in the university. On a serious note, I really wish these opportunities that come to journalists to train on such [issues] would come more often, reach many of us. We are in a competitive space where sometimes it feels only a selected few get these opportunities."

In order to get an idea about current skillsets among editors, producers, and reporters, the research team asked media practitioners questions on four related points:

- **Mistakes by other media houses:** Media practitioners were asked to identify mistakes they observed in the OVAW coverage by other media houses. Responses pointed to an awareness of common mistakes, especially when editors were not evaluating their own coverage.
- **Editing challenges:** Editors and producers identified common challenges faced in producing OVAW reports.
- **What could change:** Media practitioners provided insights into aspects of reporting they would change if they covered the same OVAW incidents again.
- **How to change:** Media practitioners identified specific changes they could make to improve coverage of OVAW.
- **Training needs:** Training needs were identified in relation to the above-listed issues. Training was considered a solution to avoid mistakes made by other media houses and overcome editing challenges. It was also seen as required to implement changes the media practitioners thought necessary.

The word cloud below shows key areas where changes were proposed. These findings not only confirm findings from the media report analysis but also illustrate that media practitioners are not ignorant of gaps in reporting OVAW.

Reporting gaps identified by media practitioners



Figure 6 – Words used in OVAW reports on websites, radio, TV and in newspapers (created with freewordcloudgenerator.com)

In total, 15 areas were proposed for change. Overall, the problems mentioned show that editors are aware of what hinders the professional coverage of OVAW. However, they grapple with resolving these challenges, some of which are linked to basic journalistic principles like objectivity. Three issues (survivors' voices, media regulation, and citizen journalism) are discussed below under recommendations for advocacy on OVAW. It is worth mentioning that media practitioners pointed to a lack of cooperation by OVAW survivors as the main challenge to reporting. The remaining twelve areas were categorized as technical gaps and mindset or attitude issues.

Technical gaps can be addressed through the creation of awareness or strengthening of knowledge. Mindset or attitude issues require efforts to change deep-seated socio-cultural beliefs which impact OVAW coverage in traditional media.

Technical gaps

Content strategy: First, there is a need to build consensus around the fact that OVAW is a highly relevant topic of public discourse which needs to be taken seriously by the media. Second, newsroom decision-making practice has to improve to adequately decide when to cover or not to cover an OVAW incident, to identify when OVAW incidents involving prominent women are private or of public interest, to determine the right style and language to talk about OVAW (for example, to avoid sexualization or inappropriate creative styles like satire), to consider potential legal consequences of OVAW coverage, to proactively avoid or limit harm, to build trust with OVAW survivors and alleged perpetrators, to learn ways to tell stories where survivors withhold comment and how to successfully pitch OVAW stories to editors.

Verification: OVAW reporting involves information shared on social media. This presents challenges to verification. An editor argued, GBV stories were "generally complicated" due to the difficulty of checking information. The lack of reliable statistics on OVAW is also a major barrier. Fact-checking is especially difficult given the speed at which OVAW incidents develop in digital spaces compared to violence offline. The identification of perpetrators, especially in mob social media attacks, is a major problem.

Awareness: There is limited awareness of OVAW among media practitioners. Most do not take OVAW seriously because "it does not involve blood and scars" like physical violence. Editors learn to report OVAW on their own and without training, or as one editor put it, "you just see, learn, apply: [...] this is good, this is not good." Interest does exist among editors to "discover more" about OVAW, including how to correctly identify incidents when they occur.

Sensationalism: Especially for tabloids, there is a need to discuss options to make OVAW interesting to audiences without sexualization, exaggeration, republication of derogatory remarks, and addition of unnecessary information.

Weak sourcing: Editors mentioned the need to improve source diversity by talking to a greater number of scholars, human and gender rights experts (especially male experts, whose views are noticeably missing in OVAW stories), perpetrators and those close to survivors, such as family, friends, and colleagues.

Solution-oriented or purposeful reporting: Related to the need for greater awareness, media practitioners should be sensitized to solution-oriented reporting on OVAW, which includes knowledge of the kind of information that must always be communicated in an OVAW story, so that the public develops a good understanding of this kind of violence and what people can do to prevent or fight it.

Improving OVAW rating: Editors and producers thought OVAW should be elevated from gossip, entertainment, and lifestyle to news and features and, ultimately, to primetime slots. They also suggested more space, time, and attention to detail in OVAW reporting, especially since it has become so widespread. One editor, however, suggested OVAW should be given much less coverage, saying it belonged to the "rumor mills."

Mindset and attitude issues

Redefining objectivity: Besides acknowledging personal bias, newsrooms need strategies to proactively address subjective reporting on OVAW.

Stereotypes: There are different stereotypes involved in the media reporting of OVAW, such as women in entertainment leaking their own intimate images for publicity therefore presenting isolated instances as a general problem.

Male dominance: Men dominate the media as company owners, editors, producers, and reporters. The study found that, generally, men do not take OVAW seriously. For instance, they treat it as less important than politics and crime, and even physical violence, because its effects are less apparent. In a newsroom meeting, this means OVAW is not voted for prominent coverage. A female editor remembered having once told a media trainer, "*You are calling us women to [...] teach [us] about report on violence against women, or even gender-sensitive reporting. Why are you not calling the men, yet they're the main people who sit in those big city offices?*"

Trivialization of OVAW: Many media practitioners think OVAW is a topic best covered by tabloids. Where special circumstances exist, such as involvement of political figures, it is offloaded unto digital platforms.

Framing of OVAW and characterization of actors: This study has demonstrated that newsrooms have a rigid understanding and way of communicating OVAW. Editors pointed out the need to rethink paradigms of VAW both online and offline. This can reduce the negative characterization of survivors and alleged perpetrators in the media.

While the focus of this study lies on major skill gaps among media practitioners, the research team also found a limited understanding of OVAW among law enforcement personnel. This is an obstacle to the legal protection of OVAW survivors. In Kenya, a lawyer insisted that there was a need for more training *“especially with law enforcement agencies. I want to believe that not all police officers are well aware or informed of these situations, because I’ve seen cases of people reporting that they’ve been turned away or [...] mistreated at the police stations when they report certain incidents.”* A lawyer from Uganda spoke in the same vein:

“But how many of our law enforcement are even aware, know what online violence is, know what violence is to start with, and then online violence? Are they knowledgeable about the interpretation and the application of the [Computer Misuse] Act? Are they even using it? [...] So, I think the enforcement officers are there, but it is [currently beyond] their capacity to understand the issues and to, you know, use the law to curb online violence.”

3.2.4. Weak enforcement of media reporting standards

Interview respondents from CSOs and law enforcement mentioned the weak compliance of media practitioners with set standards. A CSO representative said, *“The media, just like research, they have an ethical code of conduct [...], which I find somewhere somehow they tend to breach most of the time.”* Another argued that media coverage of OVAW incidents was by default sensational unless there was a critical backlash from the audience, then the media would make attempts to *“sanitize the angle.”*

Two challenges are noticeable in relation to the enforcement of media reporting standards: weak self-regulation by media house editorial teams, and loopholes in media regulatory laws.

In Uganda for instance, the Uganda Communications Act permits the regulator to intervene in cases where minimum broadcasting standards are not respected. The law also states that broadcast licenses should be withdrawn where standards are seriously and repeatedly violated. This may allow a degree of unethical conduct to exist below the threshold of what is considered “serious,” if it is not repetitive. In the past, the regulator has ordered programs with adult-centered content to be aired late at night.

With the amount of unverified or unverifiable information used (see subsection 3.1.7: *Inadequate Verification of information*), OVAW media coverage is vulnerable to defamation lawsuits.

At an editorial level, the study has observed laxity in the adherence to minimum broadcasting standards, especially among tabloids, but also in the professional media, where it is most frequent on digital platforms and in gossip and entertainment sections. On the other hand, the news format is more likely to respect broadcasting standards.

All in all, weak self-regulation and neglect by regulatory bodies promote the rapid spread of low-quality content on OVAW.

3.2.5. OVAW in newsrooms

Discussions with female editors and reporters highlighted the existence of OVAW in newsrooms. Here, it takes the form of sexual harassment by male colleagues and trolling by audiences over unpopular stories. While the study did not establish how widespread this is, these examples can be used as a basis for proactive interventions. Below are the accounts of a female editor and a female reporter about OVAW in newsrooms:

“ [...] With the kinds of newsrooms that we have, because not only [Annette], even a colleague who has since left faced a similar situation, and we did not cover, and it was a colleague in the newsroom. But a different newsroom covered the situation when this colleague went to the [police] to say, hey, someone is doing this, this, this and this, and I want it investigated.

A female editor’s account of OVAW in the newsroom

The fact that OVAW is committed in newsrooms highlights a major gap in internal organization cultures that must be tackled first before media houses are able to offer a balanced external coverage of the topic. One CSO representative explained the lack of accountability for OVAW in media reports, saying *“within the media houses themselves, that culture, that accountability is minimal. Is very low. Because within the media houses, we have a lot of complaints of sexual harassment that get subdued and suppressed.”* She argued for *“a genuine sustainable commitment”* from media managers to

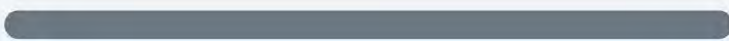
stomp out violence from media houses and demonstrate this commitment in public awareness-raising efforts.

“ [...] I think there are personal challenges, yes. Because online spaces can be very violent [...] And when you do those stories, after a while, you also, it can really get into your psyche, because then you get into a space where there's a lot of anger and hatred, and misunderstanding [...]. I think there's definitely room to provide mental health resources for journalists who have to sift through this every day, because after a while you start thinking there really is no difference between me and [survivor A], there's really no difference between me and [survivor B].

A female reporter's account of OVAW in the newsroom



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4. Recommendations

Based on these findings, the research team proposes a series of interventions aimed at key actors, namely, media practitioners (reporters and editors), women at risk of OVAW, and CSOs working for safer online experiences for women.

4.1. Media training

The research team recommends comprehensive media capacity-building on reporting OVAW. The following strategic areas can be included in such training:

- 1. Fundamentals of reporting and editing (refresher course):** The media employs trained professionals and untrained talent working collaboratively to produce content. Therefore, it is important to start any training with a refresher course on the basics of journalism, including the basic principles of sourcing, verification, and objectivity. Such training should also include ethics and compliance with existing regulatory frameworks.
- 2. Full understanding of GBV:** OVAW is an expression of GBV and an extension of VAWG taking place in digital space. A few media practitioners have been trained in reporting VAWG but they do not possess an adequate understanding of OVAW and the relationship between GBV, VAWG, and OVAW. This understanding is a must for OVAW coverage. Training may emphasize the significant impact of OVAW despite the absence of blood and scars typical in other forms of VAWG.
- 3. Sociocultural paradigms and norms:** Media coverage of OVAW is shaped by sociocultural perspectives, which are limiting to the coverage of VAWG. Training should address mindsets which promote, tolerate, and/or trivialize VAWG and OVAW in newsrooms. The focus should include supporting male and female reporters and editors to acknowledge the growing frequency and impact of OVAW, and to adjust their attitudes, actions, and decisions accordingly.
- 4. Develop criteria to guide optimal reporting on OVAW:** The study suggests many action points for improving the quality of journalism on OVAW. A reporting guide for the coverage of OVAW can standardize and facilitate better reporting. For instance, it can include recommendations on 1) the right balance between privacy and the need to inform the public or defining public interest in OVAW; 2) the balance between extensive reporting to create public awareness and limiting such conversations to a relevant timeframe, so that survivors are given space to recover; and 3) a pre-publication checklist. One CSO actor recommended that media coverage of OVAW incidents can end once the

media “have made the point” or “the issue has been picked up by relevant authorities.” The reporting guide should be developed in partnership with media outlets and associations to support uptake and enforcement.

- 5. Digital platforms and radio:** The study found that traditional media shifts OVAW to digital platforms because it is viewed as a trivial topic. But digital platforms are growing in popularity and might soon overtake radio, which is currently the most popular traditional media platform in all four countries. Training should specifically target digital media and radio content producers given the high audience ratings.

In addition to these strategic considerations, media training to improve reporting on OVAW should include modules on some operational issues. The research team has categorized these issues as follows:

- **Practices requiring elimination:** These are recommendations on trends which must be condemned and removed from the media coverage of OVAW.
- **Institutional or systemic intervention:** These are recommendations on matters which may require the participation of media managers, who can review editorial policies where possible.
- **Practices linked to the quality of coverage:** These recommendations deal directly with the quality of publications or broadcast products.

Issues requiring elimination

Trivialization of OVAW: The trivialization of OVAW was reflected in 1) the relegation of OVAW reports to digital platforms; 2) low priority placement of OVAW reports; and 3) miscommunication of the gravity of OVAW or its consequences. It is a likely barrier to public awareness, discourse, and action. Training should seek to change problematic mindsets which deny, for example, that OVAW is not as serious as physical violence or that it is a domain for tabloids. A positive change in attitudes will allow OVAW more space, time, and importance on traditional media platforms. The objective should be to influence editors to assign OVAW equal importance to politics, crime, and other typical high priority topics. While prominent placement is key, coverage in less influential formats and slots should be high quality.

Republication of derogatory content: The republication of content such as intimate images and nasty social media

comments boosts an offensive discourse against women experiencing online violence. It also gives the impression that such comments are worthy of publication by elevating them to the same level as other comments, for example from experts. While it is only tabloids that publish intimate images, professional media outlets do not shy away from publishing derogatory remarks on their digital platforms. Media content regulations in all four countries prohibit, at a minimum, the publication of intimate images. Consequently, journalists of both tabloids and professional media should be made aware of the possibility of lawsuits.

Sexualization of OVAW survivors: Sexualization normalizes aggression against women by promoting ideas that reduce them to mere objects and legitimize violence against women. In the reporting of OVAW, it diverts audience attention from the severity of OVAW and makes it an object of entertainment, leading to trivialization. Sexualization is most common in OVAW involving leaked intimate images and in content produced by male reporters. Training should 1) encourage editors to ban sexualization of women in any content, not just OVAW; 2) support editors and reporters with strategies to find the right language in reporting OVAW involving intimate images of women; and 3) provide strategies to develop ways of attracting public interest for OVAW as a topic without sexualization.

Use of satire and humor: OVAW is a major problem in the digital era with significant consequences for mental health. While satire is an approach that makes fun of important, oftentimes very serious, topics, editors should be encouraged to avoid the use of satire or humor in the coverage of any OVAW incident regardless of format or placement. For instance, if an OVAW incident is discussed in a gossip or entertainment show, it must never be depicted as humorous (see subsection 13: Flexibility in Media Genres).

OVAW in the newsroom: Only one incident of OVAW in the newsroom was brought to light in this study. The incident occurred in Kenya. However, OVAW in the newsroom falls within the scope of sexual harassment at the workplace and should be identified, reported, and handled at first instance, regardless of how often it happens. A general introduction to GBV, VAW, and OVAW should empower all (male and female) reporters, editors, and managers to tackle OVAW in their own organizations. In addition to OVAW in the newsroom, female journalists reported experiencing online violence (especially trolling) because of stories they took on. The training should thus enable media managers to organize the provision of psychosocial support to staff experiencing online violence.

Issues requiring systemic intervention

Factors determining the media coverage of OVAW: The study found that traditional media have stricter criteria to

include OVAW in their coverage compared to other topics. As a result, OVAW incidents rarely make the cut. Editors and producers should be trained to apply uniform inclusion criteria to OVAW. Most importantly, OVAW affects more ordinary women at a higher frequency than it affects prominent women. Editors should therefore be trained on how to make OVAW in the lives of ordinary women newsworthy.

Sourcing: Editorial policies or editors determine the sourcing criteria used in reporting, and editors enforce such requirements. Editorial policies should ensure that there is a healthy balance in the number and gender of sources as well as depth of investigation in OVAW coverage. Editors may face financial and time constraints as factors limiting the optimal selection of sourcing. Training should therefore introduce editors and reporters to low-cost sourcing strategies. Ideally, the reliance on a single source per report should be highly discouraged in the media, with the exception of formats such as opinions.

Sensationalism: The overall objective of sensationalism is to capture the attention of audiences for media products. It however promotes misinformation. In the context of reporting OVAW, sensationalism is likely to cause further harm to the individuals involved in incidents. Training should support editors and reporters to explore alternative approaches to making catchy content on OVAW, without employing sensationalism. Training should also tackle sensationalism in headlines and in fine details and wording.

Limiting further harm: The study made two contradictory discoveries. First, media coverage of OVAW is resulting in immense harm to survivors and suspected perpetrators. Second, editors and producers understand strategies to prevent such harm. Training should thus address barriers to their ability or willingness to put theory into practice. It should also strengthen the enforcement of internal quality controls and minimum ethical standards at editorial level.

Issues linked to the quality of coverage

Understanding and framing OVAW: Any meaningful coverage must be founded on an adequate understanding of a topic. The media should be sensitized to OVAW, with the aim of enabling them to recognize incidents. The identification of incidents must be backed with the right technical language in English and local languages. Finally, the right (most suitable) frame (devoid of negative sociocultural biases) must be used in the coverage. For this purpose, the media should be trained in identifying frames: OVAW is a crime, a source of mental health problems, a growing danger to society in the digital age, to name just a few examples.

Diversification of themes, topics, and angles: After identifying the most suitable frame (crime, for example), the media

should make it a habit to use innovative angles to media coverage. In the context of underreported topics like OVAW, for example, a media outlet may explore public awareness of OVAW and its criminal nature. Such new perspectives can be developed by working with CSOs, law enforcement agencies, and other actors. Special attention should be paid to developing headlines which directly convey the best possible frames. For instance, if an OVAW incident is reported to the police, a headline could be “Police Launch Hunt for Suspect Who Leaked Nude Photos” instead of “Mary Reports Leaked Nudes to Police.” It is also important to innovate in covering OVAW incidents that have left the courtroom and are now open to media coverage.

Sourcing: The most important goal is to create a climate where survivors and alleged perpetrators feel safe to talk about their OVAW incidents. This includes objectivity and sensitivity towards both. There are many past incidents to learn from where the media caused additional harm. Related issues, such as source diversity and gender diversity, can also be addressed in a standardized manner in newsroom policies.

Verification of information: Beside the need to ensure that sources are relevant, the media must also consider the interests of all sources providing information (including survivors and alleged perpetrators). For instance, a perpetrator’s intent to promote OVAW (such as in *Nadia’s* case) should be treated with the utmost caution. OVAW is a highly sensitive topic. Therefore, the media need to create systems to evaluate information provided by sources in order to reduce bias. This should be applied across all formats to stop the dissemination of toxic or dangerous opinions through opinion articles. Training should also supply the media with tools to verify the authenticity of documents and images involved in OVAW. Where technical limitations exist, the media should be enabled to select and work with organizations that can do such assessments. The media should also be sensitized to the risks of basing their reports on unproven allegations to avoid possible lawsuits. For instance, if a news or opinion article is based on assumptions on its key points (for example, the authenticity of images, identity of perpetrators), the editor should delay publication until such information is verifiable.

Characterization: Popular perceptions, expert opinions, poor verification of information and sourcing, and the use of language can all contribute to the media characterization of survivors or others involved in OVAW. The media should aim at neutrality in characterization, backed with high quality verified information to allow audiences to make informed decisions about OVAW. Training should address the consequences of using colorful and descriptive language in various contexts. It should encourage to question whether value is added by referring to an alleged perpetrator as a “tycoon” instead of businessman or describing women’s postures in leaked videos or photos in a manner suggesting they intended such

images for publication (“completely naked, smiling for the camera” or “striking various poses”).

Formats and placement: Challenges with formats and placement have been discussed at length. Certain formats, such as news, are more prominent than opinions and features, and some slots, such as front page, are better than gossip and entertainment. However, each format and slot exist for various audience segments who should all receive high quality information on OVAW, regardless of their preferred media product. The media should be trained to meaningfully cover OVAW, providing high quality verified information, devoid of objectification, humor, trivialization, and sensationalism across all formats and slots. This way, awareness creation is prioritized and maximized.

4.2 Advocacy initiatives

Advocacy targeting women online

Media management strategies for prominent women: The study found that it is more beneficial for OVAW survivors to engage the media than to disconnect. The benefits of this approach are both personal (to the survivor) and societal (to the public). However, survivors who refuse media involvement have valid reasons to do so, such as fear of mockery, hate, and other forms of negative attention. The research team recommends providing tailored awareness-raising to prominent women on effective PR management in the event of an OVAW incident. Such awareness interventions may focus on developing a media response strategy, including 1) how to get media audience; 2) the important topics to discuss with the media (for instance, the impact of OVAW on self and family; 3) how to use media engagement opportunities to rally public sympathy, support, and action; 4) when and how to decline media cooperation, among other things.

Trivialization of OVAW by survivors: Advocacy should specifically target female users of digital platforms. Women should be empowered to recognize the perceptions and biases they have inherited from their societies and which may 1) cause them to trivialize or normalize their own violent online experiences; 2) cause them to tolerate OVAW; 3) stop them from seeking help and support.

Advocacy targeting media outlets

Media advocacy against OVAW: Aside from providing quality reports, the media can become a platform for sending important messages and creating awareness about OVAW. The nature of media engagement may vary, especially from one type of media to the next (broadcast, digital, newspaper).

However, advocacy targeting the media should aim at influencing editors and columnists to take a stand against OVAW, for example through the publication of editorials or commentary in newspapers or on news websites.

Media-based awareness-raising and trendsetting on OVAW coverage: Typically, OVAW is covered by the media when an incident happens. This approach may not lead to a sufficient number of reports that can truly impact public awareness and discourse on OVAW. Therefore, it is important to support media practitioners in the creation of innovative content on OVAW which is not just based on current OVAW incidents. For example, a TV station may produce a documentary on OVAW. Large media outlets can set the trends in the coverage of OVAW in general, influencing smaller outlets. Therefore, making larger media outlets aware of this role may contribute to an overall improved coverage by the majority of outlets of all sizes.

Regulation of online accounts: While the media thrives on free expression of ideas, media outlets can be encouraged to moderate public conversations on OVAW incidents on their digital platforms, including social media pages where such stories may be posted. This may include deleting offensive remarks which contain insults.

Advocacy targeting CSOs

Stopping unprofessional reporting before it starts: CSOs working on women's rights and online freedom can proactively observe and swiftly respond to media coverage of OVAW incidents. For instance, if intimate photos or videos are leaked, CSOs can make press statements condemning such actions as illegal. If backed by research, statistics, and laws, such statements can prevent unprofessional coverage of OVAW incidents from the outset. Moreover, their actions can help to promote the framing of OVAW as a crime and enable well-informed public discourse. CSO statements can complement media reports by creating awareness of laws, supporting survivors, and calling for the enforcement of their rights.

Supporting professional coverage of OVAW: CSOs can monitor media coverage of OVAW incidents with the intention of identifying and flagging media misconduct to the media house managements, media regulators, and the public. This way, they can deter unprofessional reporting. The media is required by ethical standards to withdraw unverified statements or issue apologies for the distribution of inaccurate information. CSOs can push the media to accept accountability in reporting OVAW. Where necessary, CSOs can mobilize private sector representatives to publicly boycott media outlets which continue unprofessional reporting on women for the placement of their advertisements.

Mainstreaming online safety in women's rights agenda:

Online safety is a growing concern in the digital age. CSOs can focus on strategies to integrate online safety in the women's rights agenda at national and regional levels, lifting OVAW to the same level of awareness and action as physical violence. Strategies may include supporting women's rights and human rights organizations (including women's media associations) in their work to sensitize partners and beneficiaries to the consequences of online violence.

Facilitating safe access to and for OVAW survivors: Media practitioners should build their capacity to work with OVAW survivors and alleged perpetrators as sources independently and effectively. This is essential to ensure the independence of the media. However, CSOs can enable media access to OVAW survivors and vice versa by providing safe spaces where the media and survivors can interact in a controlled environment. This approach may be most beneficial in developing in-depth stories, such as features as opposed to news.

Advocacy targeting potential OVAW perpetrators

Awareness creation initiatives targeting potential perpetrators are a key measure to support women's safety in digital spaces. Such initiatives can involve sensitizing online users to the negative impact of online violence and therefore deterring violent behavior.

Advocacy targeting legal practitioners

There is a need to remove legal barriers to online safety. CSOs can partner with the government to support 1) the revision of laws which wrongly incriminate OVAW survivors; 2) training on the effective investigation and prosecution of online offenses; and 3) the effective investigation, prosecution, and adjudication of online crimes. These interventions can be directed at members of parliament (especially select committees with special mandates relevant to OVAW), private lawyers, prosecutors, police officers, and judicial officers. Within the legal fraternity (lawyers, prosecutors, judicial officers) it is important to undertake a training-of-trainers with senior officers who can in turn impart their newly acquired knowledge and skills to lower ranking officers.

5. Conclusion

This regional study documented 13 OVAW incidents reported in the traditional media in Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda. The study examined the balance in traditional media coverage of these OVAW incidents and compared the extent of balanced reporting in the four countries. Furthermore, it documented views of various actors on how traditional media reports OVAW in each of these countries.

In addition to assessing balance, the available media content enabled a broader and more in-depth analysis that considered additional aspects of media reporting such as verification of evidence, diversity of topics reported, and the potential trivialization of OVAW. Beyond unpacking the technical aspects of media reporting, the study also unearthed interesting information on the nuanced context in which the traditional media reports OVAW incidents. For instance, it has been revealed that these incidents are being reported from newsrooms with diverse attitudes on the subject. In certain cases, the study highlighted newsrooms where female journalists continue to face and endure online violence from both colleagues and audiences.

The research project considered 137 media reports from 77 radio, TV, newspapers, and news websites alongside insights from 70 stakeholders including OVAW survivors, alleged perpetrators, media practitioners, CSOs, media regulatory agencies, and law enforcement. The evidence presented in this report leads to the following key conclusions:

1. OVAW is not considered an important subject by traditional media outlets in the four countries:

This study examined digital content from websites owned by traditional media outlets. Such reports constituted 52 percent of all the reports analyzed, as OVAW stories are seldom given space or airtime on mainstream platforms by traditional media houses. The criteria for featuring OVAW stories on mainstream platforms — such as radio, TV, and newspapers — are also more stringent compared to other topics. When these stories are showcased on mainstream platforms, they are often relegated to unfavorable slots, such as gossip or entertainment columns.

2. Traditional media reporting on OVAW is biased:

The bias in traditional media reporting of OVAW can be traced back to flawed media sourcing strategies that allow for single-sourcing and content duplication across media outlets. Additionally, the perpetuation of stereotypes against female characters and their bodies further contributes to this biased reporting. Poor verification of key pieces of evidence such as images and statements from sources compounds the problem.

3. Traditional media reporting on OVAW is problematic in all four countries:

At inception, the research team intended to explore differences in coverage among the four countries. However, during the media content analysis and in interviews with stakeholders, it became apparent that the same challenges exist across the borders.

4. Many traditional media practitioners lack knowledge about OVAW:

On one hand, online violence is a growing concern in the advent of digital communication. A simple Google search of terms like “cyberbullying” or “trolling” yields different definitions, pointing to the fact that the terminologies on the subject are still work in progress. On the other hand, offline violence is an established issue which the media is well informed about. Many journalists interviewed for this study have received training in reporting on GBV or VAWG. Media practitioners are trapped in a knowledge transition between the new realm of OVAW and the old realm of VAW. For example, they recognize that online violence is wrong, but struggle to accurately identify when it occurs. Even when they do recognize it, they lack the language to properly convey it to their audiences. Additionally, some fail to comprehend why OVAW holds the same importance as offline violence.

5. Traditional media coverage of OVAW is significantly less rigorous, compared to other topics like politics and crime:

This can be attributed to factors such as limited knowledge and interest, resulting in basic reporting on OVAW by traditional media outlets. It is apparent that currently, the underlying motivation in reporting OVAW incidents is to inform and entertain the audiences. Most media content on OVAW has neither direct educational value nor solutions. Additionally, it is not a subject for investigative reporting.

6. Survivors’ involvement in media reporting is challenging, yet more beneficial:

Conversations with OVAW survivors revealed the intense emotional trauma they experience in the aftermath of such incidents. However, the study found evidence that survivors who were actively involved in media coverage from the onset had more control over the narrative. This is especially important because it is almost impossible to manage the reputational damage at later stages of media reporting, for instance, when the survivor has recovered from the attack.

7. Challenges hindering professional reporting on OVAW are both cultural and technical:

Technical challenges include the inconsistency in applying industry standards, such as the do-no harm principle, fact-checking, and balanced sourcing. These challenges are not exclusive to reporting on OVAW in the four countries; they are evident across many topics. However, certain cultural perceptions on women may influence the unique manifestations of these technical challenges. For instance, if reporters, who are also ordinary members of their society, perceive an OVAW survivor as politically aggressive, they might be less inclined to crosscheck details of her incident compared to subjects and individuals of interest to them. Similarly, from a religious standpoint, if reporters view an OVAW survivor as promiscuous, they might be less motivated to ensure their reports avoid causing harm to her.

The findings of this study have led to several recommendations for interventions that can contribute to creating safer online spaces for women. However, to gain a deeper understanding of the issue of OVAW in East Africa and its portrayal in media, a comprehensive investigation into the role of social media in this context is necessary. This should encompass the various languages used, as they are often overlooked. Also, the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is becoming increasingly relevant in the context of OVAW. Currently, there is limited data on the impact of AI on OVAW. Hence, examining the extent to which artificial intelligence has influenced OVAW thus far — whether by contributing to it or being utilized to counteract it — would provide valuable insights on how OVAW might evolve and guide the necessary steps to ensure the creation of secure digital spaces for women.

Glossary of terms

AI: Artificial Intelligence (AI) refers to the creation of computer systems with human capabilities such as reasoning and problem-solving.

CSO: Civil Society Organization (CSO) is a non-profit entity serving a specific community need. In this report, reference is made to CSOs working to protect internet rights and women's rights in the study countries.

GBV: Gender-based violence (GBV) is violence directed against a person because of their gender. It is a violation of human rights. GBV affects both males and females. However, females are disproportionately affected compared to males. This study focused on investigating how traditional media reports a type of GBV known as online violence against women.

Male gaze: The male gaze describes a way of portraying women in the media from a male perspective. While men view women from various perspectives, the male gaze specifically refers to men viewing and portraying women as sex objects. The male gaze is synonymous with the sexualization of women.

MP: Member of Parliament (MP) is an official elected or nominated to represent people from a specific geographical location, a special interest group, or a political party in parliament. In the East African region, there are different categories of MPs. For instance, in Uganda, there are MPs representing women, persons with disabilities, and youths. In Kenya, some MPs represent geographical areas known as constituencies.

NGO: Non-governmental Organization (NGO) is an organization operating independently from the government to serve a social need. The term NGO is often substituted for CSO.

OVAW: Online Violence Against Women (OVAW) is violence perpetrated against women on virtual spaces such as social media platforms and direct messaging platforms. Examples of OVAW include making derogatory remarks against women on social media, sharing women's private information, or sending incessant, unsolicited messages.

Survivor: A survivor is a woman who has experienced violence. In this study, the word survivor refers specifically to women who have experienced online violence. The term 'survivor' is used to emphasize the strength and resilience of a woman who has experienced violence. The alternative term 'victim' emphasizes weakness and vulnerability.

VAW: Violence Against Women (VAW) is violence directed towards a woman because she is a woman. It is a type of GBV specifically affecting women. VAW can occur both offline and online. When it occurs in online spaces, it is referred to as OVAW.

VAWG: Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) is any act of violence targeting women and girls. This term is related to another term VAWC, i.e., violence against women and children. However, VAWG is different in that instead of considering both male and female children, it makes a specific reference to girls. This study includes examples of online violence directed at girls.

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