

Digital Abuse: A New Form of Civic Space Restriction

Globally, civic engagement is no longer limited to community meetings, the internet has become a powerful platform for expression, it has become a space where individuals share opinions, advocate for change, and build movements. Yet, as digital participation grows, so does a new and troubling threat: online harassment, abuse, and cyberbullying.

In a recent report by Gatefield, titled *The State of Online Harms 2025*, paints a stark picture of Nigeria's online landscape. According to the findings, an estimated 68.9 million Nigerians have experienced some form of online harm, ranging from gender-based harassment and sexual abuse to cyberbullying and misinformation. What was once considered a space for connection and empowerment has, for many, become a place of fear, intimidation, and silencing.

Gatefield's Advocacy Lead, Shirley Ewang, while presenting her findings at the Child Online Safety Forum in Abuja, says: "With over 137.8 million Nigerians online, we're witnessing an alarming surge in digital dangers"

Sadly, women bear the brunt of this crisis, the study reveals that 58% of online harms are directed at women who dare to speak out. Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram have become battlegrounds where voices are attacked and freedom of expression is undermined through coordinated harassment, bullying and hate speech. When individuals are bullied, threatened, or harassed for expressing their views digitally, their ability to participate meaningfully in civic life is restricted.

Digital abuse does not just harm individuals; it discourages people, especially women and young people, from speaking up. The report found that 90% of children online are exposed to at least one cyber risk, and 97% have faced some form of sexual exploitation on the internet.

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Each of the above statistics represents real lives, hence to confront this digital epidemic, Gatefield and its partners recommend three urgent actions:

- Promote digital literacy nationwide, with a focus on women and children.
- Hold tech companies accountable by establishing local systems to moderate harmful content.
- Update Nigeria's cyber laws to address emerging threats

These steps are vital, but beyond policy and regulation, there must be a shift in attitude. Online safety is not a luxury, it is an essential part of protecting civic space. Every citizen deserves to express themselves freely and safely, whether offline or online. Digital spaces

should be places of empowerment, not a place to abuse or exploit anyone. Protecting these spaces means protecting democracy itself. As more Nigerians engage online, the fight for digital safety must become part of the broader struggle to defend civic freedom. When voices are silenced online, democracy suffers offline. Addressing digital abuse is, therefore, not just about internet safety, it is about preserving the right to speak, organize, and participate in shaping our society.

<https://lawandsocietymagazine.com/68-9-million-nigerians-face-online-harassment-abuse-and-cyberbullying-new-report-warns-of-digital-epidemic/>

<https://www.nih.gov/news-events/nih-research-matters/cyberbullying-linked-suicidal-thoughts-attempts-young-adolescents>