

## **Case Studies Activity #1: Understanding VAW Online, Its Impacts within a framework of Human Rights (10 minutes each)**

Note: The following short summaries are taken from real-life cases studies that were documented in APC's End Violence: Women's Rights and Safety Online research. Names of people and specific locations have been removed to respect the privacy of the women who shared their stories with the research teams.

### Case # 1: A young teenage girl, South Asia

A surreptitious recording of an intimate act between a girl and her male partner was carried out via mobile phone cameras. The recording was then used to blackmail the girl into weekly meetings with a group of boys would rape her repeatedly over several months—or else they would show the video to her family and community.

Later, the boys did show the video to her father, and threatened to release the video to the public, unless the girl's father paid an exorbitant sum to the boys. When the father refused to pay, phone-to-phone blue-tooth technology was used to disseminate the recording far and wide, within the girls' school and amongst her small community. Allegedly, Facebook was also used to upload the video to harm the reputation of the woman.

The case was reported to the local police, but no action was taken until a prominent figure in local government took a public stand on the case. Eventually the three boys were taken into custody for questioning, and at least one admitted to the blackmail and repeated rape while in police custody.

Even with an admission of guilt, the laws in place on violence against women are inadequate in affording women redress from rape; cyber-harassment is not recognized in the law; and the attitudes of the police, the girls' lawyer and even the school and other community members tacitly or explicitly suggested the girl herself was to blame for engaging in sexual activity to begin with. This caused the girls' education to end as she could not face the pressure of a school environment that did nothing to support her in finding redress or even address the issue within the school's own policies for student conduct, bullying or violence-prevention.

### Case # 2: A women in her 30s, Central Africa

A woman blogger started a new relationship after the man she was seeing decided to return to France. Someone sent the ex-boyfriend, who owned the platform she used for her blog, pictures of her with the new boyfriend. The ex published the photos along with insults on her blog and changed the password, denying her access.

He even wrote emails to her family, calling her a bitch, and sent her private messages to his friends. Blog readers wrote insulting and racist comments on her blog, and the ex decided to publish her email and phone number, allowing the readers to harass her by phone.

National legislation did not recognize threats, harassment and intimidation online, nor the publishing of photos and identifying information without consent as an offense. Besides which, the hosting platform was registered in France, so formal complaints to the company had to be made overseas. Eventually with the help of a lawyer she was able to report the situation to the National

Data Protection Commission, a French organisation responsible for responding to online abuse. The blog was finally taken down after six months.

The emotional and psychological impacts on the woman were severe; she suffered such injury to her reputation —at work, in the community and online —that her performance at work suffered, she secluded herself from social life, sought out a psychologist for help and has stopped blogging altogether.

### Case # 3: A woman in her 40s, South Asia

Platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and blogs were used as the medium to intimidate and hurl abuse at an outspoken woman who is an activist and well-known political critic.

Across the platforms she was threatened with extreme sexual violence, physical torture, and murder; images were disseminated carrying her face morphed onto the bodies of porn stars; fake profiles using her photos and bio-data were made in her name to abuse and degrade her, and/or to send harassing and pornographic materials to her friends and acquaintances; and one blog published detailed information about the woman (her physical address, mailing address, telephone number, email, photos) and her family members, with a call to kill them all.

These attacks began in 2\*\*\*, and continue to this day: “I had nightmares all the time of being raped by these bastards, of them doing harm to my parents, my husband and my daughter because of me. I still get nightmares that they have done something to my daughter, or kidnapped my husband.”

The criminal laws in place offered her no redress, as VAW online is not recognized as an offense. Additionally, the social networking services have done little to nothing to support her. Twitter refused to give her a verified account —which would have provided marginal redress for all the fake profiles on the site in her name; despite the fact that is a prominent public figure in her country with tens of thousands of followers.<sup>1</sup>

When she did succeed in getting one fake profile taken down by Twitter, she had to go to the market to fax them a photocopy of her government ID card to the US-company headquarters and it took multiple times before Twitter finally received the fax. This was a process she would have to repeat every time to try and have get the other profiles removed, since Twitter would only deal with her directly for a fake-profile complaint, but refused to accept her ID via email even the following times. This proved too time-consuming and costly for her and Twitter offered no other recourse.

Discussion Questions for each case:

1. What makes this a manifestation of gender-based violence?

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<sup>1</sup> Twitter’s verified accounts are for “highly sought users in music, acting, fashion, government, politics, religion, journalism, media, sports, business, and other key interest areas”. See <https://support.twitter.com/articles/119135-faqs-about-verified-accounts> for more details.

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2. What are the different acts of violence against women that took place in this case? Can you classify them under the overarching forms of violence: i.e. physical, verbal, psychological, emotional, sexual, economic, structural?
3. How was technology used to commit an act of violence (i.e. the technology was the primary means through which the girl's rights were violated)? How was the online sphere used to commit or exacerbate acts of violence?
4. What universally recognized rights were being violated through the act(s)?
5. Who are the key actors in this case with whom the responsibility to take action lies? What one action would you suggest/demand from these actors in providing redress to the woman?