



Breaking the Silence: Ending online violence and abuse against women's rights activists in Zimbabwe, Nepal and Kenya



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Who we are & what we do

Womankind Worldwide is a **global women's rights organisation** working in partnership with women's rights organisations and movements in Africa and Asia to transform the lives of women and girls.

Our vision: A just world where the rights of all women are respected, valued and realised.

Together with women's movements,
we will work towards...



An end to all forms of violence against women and girls



Women's economic rights and control over resources



Women's equal influence in decision making and ability to exercise political power



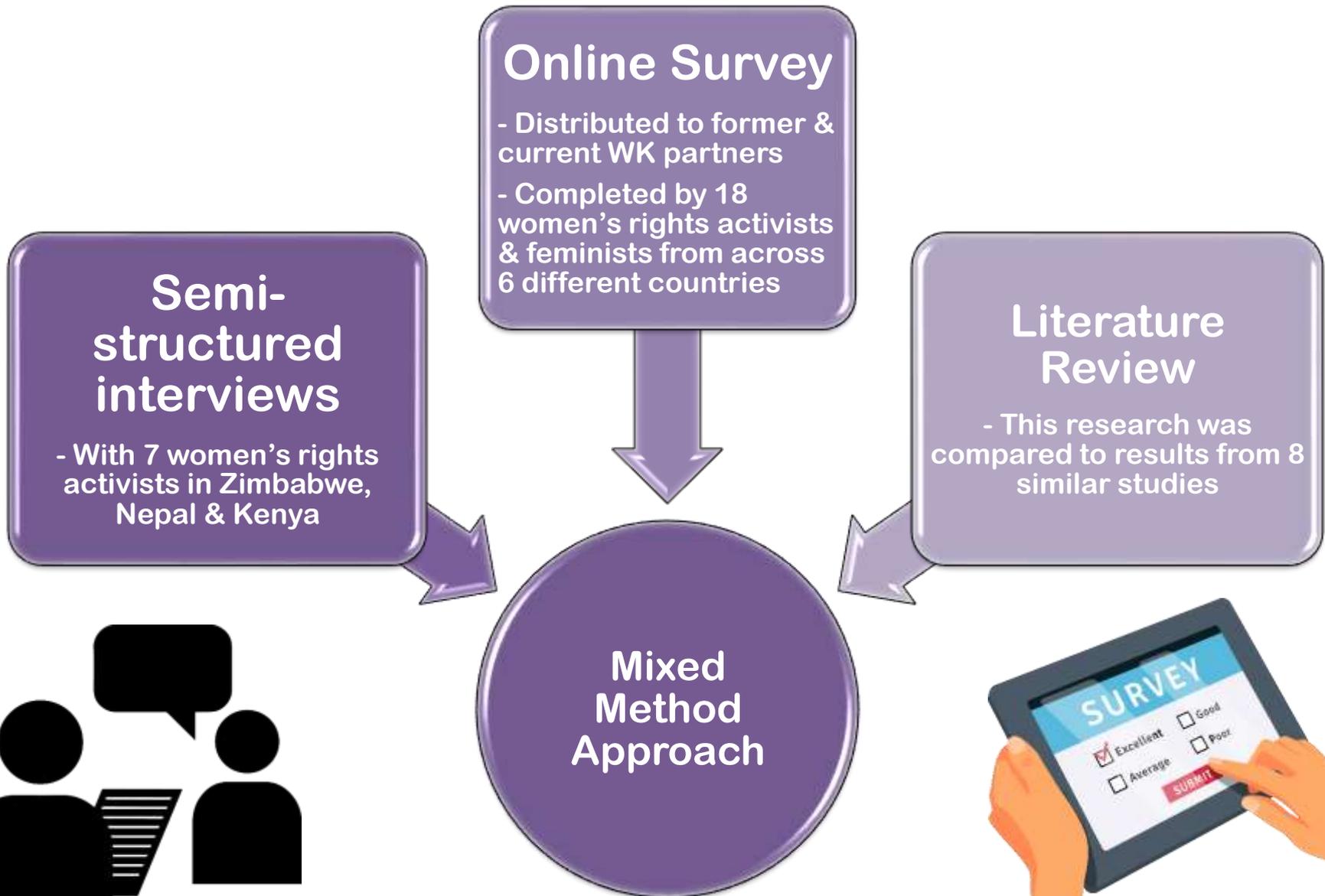
Why look at online violence & abuse against women's rights activists?

- **Importance**
 - VAWG offline and online is a **human rights violation**
 - Growing global & political attention to this issue
 - Online technologies are vital for women's rights organisations & activists
- **Challenges**
 - New forms of online violence & abuse against women
 - Increasing attacks online against activists
- **Implications**
 - Subjugates and silences women
 - Limits women's public and political participation
 - Policies, programmes & funding responses are not fulfilling the needs of women who experience online abuse



Developed a research partnership between Womankind Worldwide & the School of Politics and International Studies (POLIS) at the University of Leeds, and published a policy briefing in 2018.

Methodology





Key findings

(1) Online violence & abuse against women is common

- 89% of survey respondents witnessed another woman being abused online;
- 50% of survey respondents personally experienced online violence & abuse

Most common patterns of abuse reported were:
Sexual harassment, cyber stalking, & threats of violence (direct & indirect)



(2) Online violence & abuse against women is gendered

- Harmful social norms and negative gender stereotypes about women offline are reflected online
- Rooted in patriarchy, oppression & gender inequality
- Highly sexualised & misogynistic attacks
- Often focus on a woman's body, appearance or sexuality

If your Twitter profile is a bit different you get more reaction and attacks. Those that fit into certain stereotypes get fewer attacks.

Women's rights activist, Nepal

Key findings

(3) Intersecting Identities

Many of the women interviewees stated that online discrimination was due to their other social identities



(4) The Impact of online violence & abuse against women

- Psychological & emotional harm
- Withdrawal from the debate or online spaces altogether

- Self-censorship:
71% of survey respondents reported that the threat of online violence & abuse affects their social media participation

"The women who tend to be publicly shamed & abused online are Black, there seems to me to be a peculiar form of abuse tied to the post-colonial realities of Zimbabwe. I think this is important. Race is therefore a factor."

Women's rights activist, Zimbabwe

"It changes how I engage, what I choose and choose not to say. I want to speak a lot more about [LBTQ rights] but I pull back from this...it has to be on a day when I'm ready to fight."

Gender and sexual rights activist, Kenya



Survey respondents: 18 women's rights activists took part in the survey in six countries

Key findings

(5) Women Seek Help & Adopt a Range of Coping Mechanisms

- Block & report their abusers to social media companies
- Alter technology use
- Seek support from other feminists



(6) Barriers in Accessing Justice

- Inadequate response from social media companies
- Ineffective and unequal implementation of existing laws
- Inadequate law enforcement response

“Unfortunately laws are still inadequate in online spaces and the burden of proof is on women to record their experience and take it to offline courts.”

Women’s rights activist,
Zimbabwe

“I reported two users on Twitter and they decided the language wasn’t abusive. Twitter doesn’t understand my context and doesn’t understand what gender abuse is and how it takes place.”

Women’s rights activist, Zimbabwe



Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 7 women’s rights activists in Zimbabwe, Nepal and Kenya



Women's digital inclusion

The Internet & technology sector are **gender unequal**:

- Women are **less likely to use** the Internet than men
- Women have **unequal Internet access**
- Gender digital divide as a **symptom and cause of women's human rights violations**
- Women are **under-represented** in internet governance & in the development of technologies & policies
- Gender bias in technology development, including frontier industries like artificial intelligence

Globally, women are **12% less likely** to use the internet than men. In Africa the gender gap has widened to **25%**.



Recommendations

Ensure **meaningful consultation** with women

Create a **positive** enabling Internet environment

Improve national level **data collection & disaggregation**

Increase **funding for research** into online violence & abuse against women

Challenge **harmful social norms** and **gender stereotypes**

Agree on a **comprehensive definition** of online violence & abuse against women



Contacts

For further information and a copy of the policy briefing please contact:

maria@womankind.org.uk.

Or download a copy at <https://www.womankind.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/resources/breaking-the-silence>.



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