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"I thought You Are Beautiful": Uganda Women Journalists' Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to our understanding of the notion of mob censorship from the Ugandan context by examining the nature and consequences of harassment targeting women journalists on social media. Drawing on research about online harassment and censorship, we link mob violence in physical spaces to harassment encountered on social media from the perspectives of women journalists. We illustrate that the different forms of harassment enabled by online platforms present serious challenges for individual journalists, and the journalism profession. Our findings suggest that online attacks on reporters include comments that denigrate women's bodies, and discredit journalists' reportage. The harassment compels women journalists to engage in online hibernation and censorship.

Introduction

> Covering gay rights was simply an extension of the good work. I never really expected the hate emails, the vile Facebook messages, or the face- to-face insults. No one warned me that there would be suspicious looks from colleagues, lost friendships, and stern warnings not to write too many gay stories because they might affect the paper's circulation.

The above extract, taken from an article in *The Guardian* of 2013, is a tale of attacks a woman journalist suffered for reporting about gay issues in Uganda (Akumu 2013). The article titled, "I have had hate mail and lost friends – but I will not stop writing about gay rights in Uganda", is a story of a journalist's experience with online attacks for writing about a taboo subject in the country. Although the above quote depicts a level of determination and resilience, this woman eventually quit journalism. While we could not directly link the change of occupation to online attacks, her experience exemplifies violence meted out on women journalists and its likely consequences. The

story illustrates subtle and invisible forms of violence against journalists in online spaces. Whereas this story came out back in 2013 before the subject of online violence against journalists was popular, it exemplifies a growing trend of attacks targeting journalists in physical and online spaces. Attacks on women media practitioners are gendered because of the belief that women can easily be intimidated and hence silenced. A 2015 UNESCO study about freedom of expression shows that women journalists in Africa suffer psychological harm, breach of privacy, loss of identity, limitation of mobility, censorship, and loss of property because of their work. Women journalists encounter abuses and violations that include death threats and arrests (Human Rights Network for Journalists in Uganda (HRNJ-U) 2017). Once regarded as positively contributing to journalists' safety (Selnes 2021), social media serve as conduits of carrying out old patterns of oppression against women journalists. Women journalists in Uganda carry a double burden with online attacks and harassment (Aceng 2020).

This article focuses on women because of the growing evidence of threats online platforms pose to women journalists. Statistics show that one out of three women journalists in Uganda consider leaving the profession due to attacks and threats they encounter online (Aceng 2020). This worsens the gender composition of already unbalanced newsrooms because as research shows, the number of practicing women journalists remains low compared to that of their male counterparts (Nakiwala and Selnes 2021; ACME 2021). In this article we posit that (online) violence (partly) explains why women quit journalism. This article contributes to the concept of mob censorship imposed on women journalists due to online harassment. We use a significant amount of literature from press watchdog and nonprofit organizations because of lack of academic research on this subject in Uganda and Africa generally.

The article addresses three overarching questions: i) what is the extent of online violence against women journalists in Uganda? ii) what is the nature of online violence that women journalists face? iii) how do journalists respond to the online attacks? Drawing on semi-structured interviews with women journalists based in Kampala, Uganda's capital and an analysis of media stories, and reports by rights and press watchdog organizations, we found that women reporters experience online harassment on two levels. The first level targets journalists' professional work while the second is directed at their individual opinions as social media users. The online attacks include sexist comments, age, and body shaming as well as character assassination. Stories related to politics triggered more attacks than other beats as perpetrators accuse journalists of being politically biased. Additionally, some journalists are attacked not because of their own actions but of the media houses to which they are affiliated. Journalists affiliated to media houses that are regarded as politically biased tend to face more attacks. Harassment of journalists is rife on Facebook. Consequently, journalists abandon some online platforms and/or reduce the time they spend online, while some consider other employment outside journalism.

We begin with an overview of literature about women journalists and online violence. Thereafter, we concurrently discuss gendered online harassment, linking it to worsening press freedom conditions, and patriarchal structures that promote discrimination and violence against women. We then distinguish mob censorship from state and commercial-related censorship followed by methodology and the procedure for

analyzing findings. Lastly, we discuss the findings, offer conclusions and direction for future research.

Women Journalists and Online Harassment

Research shows that the Internet is unsafe for women due to pervasive gender-based harassment (Ging and Norman 2016). While all journalists regardless of gender face hostility and intimidation online, women are targeted more than men (UNESCO 2015; Desilver 2021). Studies from different parts of the world show rising cases of online violence against women journalists (Posetti, Harrison, and Waisbord 2020; Koirala 2020).

Although online platforms were initially praised for giving opportunities to engage with citizens, this affordance, unfortunately, exposes journalists and other media workers to Internet abusers whose goal is to threaten, shame and silence journalists. Social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, messenger and WhatsApp have expanded the arenas for harassment of reporters. Online harassment thrives because of the inability to control every aspect of the Internet, which is exacerbated by the anonymity social media afford their users (IFEX 2017). Perpetrators of harassment do so because they feel invisible, and unable to be connected to their actions (Fox, Cruz, and Lee 2015). This in turn cultivates a culture of impunity.

Gendered Violence against Women Journalists

Unlike their male colleagues, women journalists face a triple threat of violence because of their gender identity, the general safety risks as experienced by all journalists and risks relating to their professional work (Mindy 2018). Literature, thus, emphasizes that violence against women journalists is gendered (Chen et al. 2020; Pain and Chen 2019; Carlson and Witt 2020). Gendered harassment is a form of hate speech that is (often) characterized by profanity, insults, and name calling a person. It is a form of incivility that targets someone because of their gender (Chen et al. 2020, p.3). Edström (2016) calls it "a special kind of sexualized and misogynist speech" (in Chen et al. 2020, p.3). Gendered online harassment refers to sexualized expressions or comments directed at women on the Internet. Research shows that online harassment targeting women journalists has "significantly" gone up (UNESCO 2021). Pain and Chen (2019) found that Taiwanese women journalists contend with online gendered harassment characterized by comments that "primarily focused on journalists' looks and physical attributes." This observation is consistent with what Chen et al. (2020) found in Germany, India, United Kingdom, and the US. The researchers noted that women journalists face sexist comments that criticize, attack, marginalize, stereotype, or threaten them. A similar trend was found in Argentina, Mexico, Colombia, Uruguay, Paraguay, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, where Cuellar and Chaher (2021) established that digital gender hostility against women journalists was pervasive. Cuellar and Chaher noted that women journalists face attacks that question their mental capacity, deploy sexist expressions, and criticize their physical appearance in addition to inappropriate requests, threats of rape and death. Reporters without Borders (RSF 2021) identifies

sexual harassment as a serious safety challenge facing women journalists in and out-side newsrooms. Inside newsrooms, sexual harassment is perpetuated by sources, col-leagues, and supervisors (Barton and Storm 2015 in Høiby 2021 p.126). As a result of harassment, women report developing stress, anxiety, fear and depression (RSF 2021). In the worst-case scenario, online violence forces women reporters out of journalism and the public sphere. Some avoid reporting on certain topics, while others stay off social media to avoid the vitriol attacks (OSCE 2017; Oluka 2021). In Uganda, women journalists stop reporting stories that are critical because they fear attacks by the state. In summary, online attacks lead to censorship, which is conceivably the goal of the perpetrators.

We posit that violence against women on the Internet is an extension and reflec-tion of conditions under which women journalists live and operate. It is linked to paternalistic and patriarchal structures that encourage discrimination of women. Discrimination against women persists despite efforts to achieve gender parity and equality. Research attributes harassment to inequalities between men and women journalists regarding their roles and pay (Byerly 2013). Discrimination of women is also portrayed in media content. As research indicates, media content proliferates gender inequalities by underrepresenting women and portraying a "male-centric world view" (Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) 2020; Kassova 2020). This perpetuates mar-ginalization, discrimination, and violence against women.

Harassment ought to also be understood in relation to violence against women (widely known as gender-based violence) in offline spaces. Violence against women and girls is regarded as a global pandemic and a prevalent human rights violation (World Bank 2019). A study in Uganda revealed that almost all women (95%) who par-ticipated in the survey had experienced physical or sexual violence, or both since the age of 15 (Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) 2021). The survey also shows that many women (49%) have ever experienced online harassment. Our analysis links online har-assment of women to the prevalent levels of gender-based violence and mob violence in offline spaces.

Mob violence, which is synonymous with the notion of "mob justice", is extrajudi-cial punishment of someone suspected of wrongdoing by a crowd. The punishment is usually in the form of beating that sometimes ends in death (Kakumba 2020). Mob violence typifies a group of vigilantes taking the law into their hands to deal with suspected offenders. The crowd acts as the plaintiff, judge, and executor of a sentence. Mob censorship, a notion this article illustrates, relates to mob violence in physical spaces, because the aim of perpetrators - the mob - is to silence their victim(s).

Aside from violations by state actors, there are emerging cases of violence of a physical nature in which citizens attack journalists either as individuals or mobs. The Human Rights Network for Journalists in Uganda (HRNJ-U) reports that there are inci-dents of mob violence that target journalists. In one of the incidents in 2018, a group of high school students assaulted a male TV journalist (Media Defence 2021). In another episode in 2018, a "mob attacked a journalist covering by-elections in the western part of Uganda, while the police watched", according to Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRD) (2021), a non-profit that advocates for rights of women

and girls in Uganda. Mob justice in Uganda is attributed to citizens' lack of trust in the country's judicial system (Heuler 2014; Kakumba 2020). We argue that the widespread mob violence offline explains the viciousness directed at journalists in online spaces.

The view that harassment of women thrives on the Internet because of widespread anti-press violence (Høiby 2021; Waisbord 2020) is valid. Violence against the press is on the rise globally, with glaring evidence that freedom of the press has in the past decade tremendously deteriorated (Reporters without Borders (RSF) 2021). This decline is attributed to repressive measures often deployed by state and non-state actors to prevent journalists from doing their work. Journalists and the media all over the world operate under unsafe and strenuous conditions that are characterized by threats, harassment, violence, imprisonment and in some cases death due to their work (UNESCO 2021; RSF 2021; Berger 2017). Governments deploy lawsuits to penalize individual journalists and the media; limiting access to information; controlling the licensing of the media; and blocking of content. The situation has been aggravated by populist leaders whose anti-press rhetoric discredit and publicly attack journalists. This has been witnessed since Donald Trump's presidency in the US and the rise of far right-wing politicians in parts of Europe and Latin America. A survey in Latin America revealed high rates of harassment of women journalists on Twitter for expressing their political opinions and less for their journalistic work (Cuellar and Chaher 2021).

In Africa, freedom of the press is provided by law, but the provisions are often in theory rather than in practice. It is not surprising that Africa is regarded as "the most violent continent for journalists" (RSF 2021). The Coronavirus pandemic aggravated safety conditions for journalists as restrictions "fueled the use of force to prevent journalists from working" as security forces doubled efforts to implement the lockdown and curfew restrictions. In addition to inhibitive access to information laws, the media regulatory framework comprising anti-defamation and libel, terrorism and cyber laws restrict freedom of the media. In Uganda, where this study is situated, journalists face arrest and detention, assault, verbal abuses, confiscation and destruction of equipment, teargas, blocking of access to information and threats of closure by security agents or individuals who occupy political office (Human Rights Network for Journalists in Uganda (HRNJ-U) 2017). Laws that regulate the Internet such as the Computer Misuse Act are strictly implemented in Uganda but women journalists who experience abuse online do not get justice and they often struggle to have their complaints taken seriously partly because of the patriarchy that we earlier alluded to (Aceng 2020). The majority do not report cases of online violence.

Rights and media development organizations often mention "non-state actors" as some of the perpetrators of violence against journalists (HRNJ-U 2017). But their reports do not explain or illustrate what constitutes 'non-state actors' and the nature and extent of violations against journalists by this category. In their analysis of types and sources of threats to journalists' safety in Uganda, Selnes and Walulya (2020) observe that ordinary citizens were behind some of the violations against members of the press in what they call "public and community mob." But their analysis neither

provides details nor mentions social media mobs as perpetrators of violence against women journalists. There is little evidence in literature of the form of censorship exerted on journalists by ordinary citizens – non-state actors, or what we call "the mob" in this article.

Defining Press Censorship

Any measures or tactics used by state and non-state actors to limit, control or silence journalists and the media lead to censorship. Press censorship refers to limitations imposed on the press by state and non-state actors. Censorship by the state is understood as suppressive measures employed by governments to limit freedom of expression and of the media. States use punitive laws, direct and indirect threats, sanctions, and physical authority to censor the media. In Uganda, the government relies on the security apparatus to subdue non-complying journalists while critical media houses face sanctions, risk closure or having their licenses suspended. In regard to newer media, states adopt tactics such as hacking media sites, blocking news sites, online and electronic surveillance of journalists, restricting and in extreme cases blocking access to the Internet. Violence against journalists in Uganda and its consequences has become subjects of deliberation with reflections on threats to media freedom and regulation in relation to journalism practice (Selnes and Walulya 2020; Selnes 2021; Walulya and Nassanga 2020). Scholarly and non-scholarly debate on freedom of the press, violence and journalists' safety focuses on physical state-instigated violence on journalists with evidence pointing to disturbing trends characterized by intimidation and hostility towards the press (Selnes and Walulya 2020; Nassanga and Tayeebwa 2018). Gender specific research in relation to journalists' safety is also emerging (Nakiwala 2021; Monitor 2020; Aceng 2020). In a study about safety conditions for journalists who cover political demonstrations, Nakiwala (2021) observed that women reporters resort to self-censorship due to unsafe conditions related to their work.

Censorship can also emerge from agencies whose economic interests are threatened by the work of the media. Economic censorship or market censorship refers to pressures or restrictions imposed on the media by advertisers and other commercial forces. Pressure from commercial interests negatively affects news judgment and can influence editorial decisions. Journalists are vulnerable to advertisers, powerful economic interests, and media proprietors whose drive for profits often overrides journalistic independence. Market censorship is evident in Uganda with reports suggesting that journalists steer clear of stories at the request of advertisers (Kakooza 2012).

Mob censorship explains forms of repression exerted by one section of the public against another. In this article, we use the notion to examine a tendency in which social media users or vigilantes attack, troll, abuse and harass women journalists. Unlike state and market censorship, mob censorship is perpetuated against journalists by citizens (Waisbord 2020). Mob censorship is bottom-up nonphysical violence perpetrated by unaffiliated individuals or groups. While mob censorship can take place in physical spaces as we explained earlier in relation to mob violence, the concept has so far been developed in relation to online harassment of journalists (Waisbord 2020). This article's point of departure is its focus on often unidentifiable non-state actors as

perpetrators of online harassment and censorship. It draws on women journalists' experiences with online harassment to demonstrate the prevalence of mob censorship from social media vigilantes. We highlight the long-term implications of mob violence on a) gender composition in newsrooms, b) women journalists' coverage of news beats, and c) women journalists' engagement on social media. We respond to the following questions: what is the extent of social media instigated mob harassment; how does it manifest? In other words, are women journalists targeted because of their gender or their professional work? Lastly, we examine the strategies adopted by women journalists to resist or avoid online harassment.

Methodology

This article uses a case study research design. This methodological approach enabled an in-depth investigation of a specific phenomenon and enabled us to narrow down a broad field into a more researchable topic (Yin 2009). Thus, the findings presented below are obtained from 10 semi-structured interviews with women journalists to explain and illustrate the phenomenon as opposed to generalizing about online harassment and mob censorship. Doing so allowed us to gain concrete, contextual, and in-depth knowledge about harassment of women journalists. We invited 20 journalists to participate in the study, but only 10 agreed to be interviewed. The others either did not respond to our invitation or declined to be interviewed. The interviewees were Television and print media journalists. Study participants were obtained using snowball sampling, an approach in which an initial contact with one informant generates further contact(s) (Patton 2002). Participants referred us to fellow journalists who have faced online harassment. While we intended to interview journalists from all types of media, our final sample comprises nine television journalists and one print reporter. This is because the snowball sampling technique led us to more TV journalists than journalists from other media. The interviews were conducted between December 2021 and January 2022 at the participants' places of work. We supplement our interview findings with analysis of news stories on harassment of women journalists and reports by organizations such as Global Voices. These documents were accessed freely on the Internet.

The interviews were transcribed and thematically analyzed in accordance with this article's purpose. The themes that emerged from our analysis are drawn from the research questions. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, we intentionally avoid any references to interviewees' names and places of work.

Findings

Prevalence of Online Harassment: Women Journalists' Tales

Through interviews, journalists shared chilling stories of their encounter with harassment on social media. From these narratives, we have identified the forms of violence women journalists experience, and their negative consequences to journalists and the profession. In the first and second research questions, we sought to assess the prevalence of online harassment and the different forms through which harassment

manifests. Through interviews, we invited journalists to share their experiences with online incivility on social media. The responses indicated that women journalists experience harassment on Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and other social media. Women TV journalists are susceptible to online gendered harassment due to the visibility of this medium. It was discernible that violence against women thrives more on Facebook.

We found that women journalists experience gendered online harassment in the form of bullying, trolling, cyberstalking, threats, hate messages, sexualized messages, and body shaming comments. Women journalists are harassed for a) their professional work, and for b) expressing their opinions, especially on political or controversial social issues. Reporting on political issues exposes women journalists to attacks and that expressing one's political opinions invites vitriol and abuse. We expound on these findings by using long interview excerpts to provide a contextual illustration of gendered online harassment.

Online Gender-Based Harassment

The forms of online harassment as identified in the interviews illustrate gendered harassment. Journalists reported being targeted with comments about their physical appearance and messages that outrightly solicit for sex. It was apparent in the interviews that women journalists are aware that their male colleagues do not experience the same kind of harassment as one respondent noted in the following quote:

> Someone comments on the hair and the dress you are wearing. One will mind about the color of your skin, the shape of your body, rather than the content you are sharing. I find it very agitating because it happens to us female journalists more than to male journalists. (Personal communication 11/01/2022).

As demonstrated in this interview excerpt, gendered harassment overlooks women journalists' professional work and draws attention to their dressing and physical appearance. The excerpts below from two different interviewees further illustrate how gendered harassment happens:

> A lot of people on social media will not even relate or give attention to the information you give. They will instead look at how you are dressed. They comment nasty things, and some will even come to your inbox. (Personal communication 11/01/2022).

> It is vulgar, someone would even go ahead and send you their pictures. I really do not know what comes into their heads when they look at us. It's really bad. The language itself is obscene and they become so angry when you request them to be formal in their communication. They resort to insults like "*oli nakibi, mbadde nkuyamba,*" [loosely translated as: *you are even ugly, I was just helping you*]. This really hurts because the language is abusive and vulgar. (Personal communication 14.10.2021).

Of the 10 respondents we interviewed, nine were television journalists. This was not a deliberate choice, but the snowball sampling technique mostly led us to TV journalists. This is possibly because of the visual nature of television as a medium. Unlike other media formats, TV exposes journalists' physical features, thus exposing them to gendered attacks that target their appearance. Television stations use social media to promote their content which further exposes journalists to online mobs. Based on the

physical identity of journalists on television, perpetrators of online violence target journalists based on their physical attributes through body and age shaming as respondents observed in the excerpts above.

It appears that sexual attacks aim at lowering journalists' self-esteem. The findings further show that online harassment sometimes manifests in the form of sexual solicitation and belittling messages as demonstrated by one respondent, thus, "people ask (me) how much I want in exchange for sex. Men bet on who will sleep with you first." (Personal communication 14/10/2021).

Women journalists are dehumanized when an online mob reduces them to sex workers or sexual objects. It defeats ordinary understanding when journalists are judged based on their physical appearance rather than the quality of journalism they offer. It seems that the common stereotype that TV journalists ought to be 'beautiful' to attract viewership haunts journalism as online mobs use it against women journalists. This is because the unpleasant comments directed at television journalists focus on their physical appearance as exemplified in the following quote: "At times you are just on air and maybe the company posts something on Twitter, and then someone comments, "where did you even get this ugly girl?' Should she even be there?" (Personal communication 11/01/2022). This is further demonstrated thus,

> I (once) did a piece to camera [when a television reporter/presenter speaks directly to the viewing audience through the camera], and when the story (was shared) online, someone commented, 'You have so many pimples. Where do you put the money they pay you?' Another comment read: 'I thought that chic [girl] was tall. She is a dwarf.' And you are like, what did I do to deserve all that negative energy? I felt offended. (Personal communication 07.01.2022).

Targeting women journalists' physical appearance as the respondents explained, lowers their esteem and enthusiasm for work. Yet, TV journalists are expected to appear on screen. We observed that some of the journalists we approached were hesitant to share their experiences with online harassment, which points to the possibility of stigma that is associated with these attacks. This is also highlighted in a report by Global Voices, a rights organization that promotes women's rights (Aceng 2020). The report states that women journalists "fear to open up" and "end up dying in silence."

Causes of Online Harassment

The findings show that women journalists are targeted because of stories they have done and because of personal opinions they have shared on social media. In the first instance, we illustrate incidents in which respondents are attacked for expressing their political views online. An interviewee who works as a news anchor and a host of a popular TV show narrates her experience with online mob harassment in the extract below:

> It was at the peak of the January 2021 elections. I tweeted my own opinion stating that, 'the issue now shouldn't be about whether Uganda needs change but how it can be achieved.' I am convinced that the Kyagulanyi [one of the 2021 presidential candidates] camp misinterpreted my tweet. They abused, insulted, harassed, attacked me on all platforms, including during my live stream tv broadcasts. I had never been attacked like that before and it went on for over a week. Some propagandists went live on Facebook

and dedicated a whole hour to attacking me, my family, my work, my personality. It was a traumatizing moment, seeing them attack me with vulgarity on every post I made after that tweet. I was branded a traitor, a government apologist, a marriage failure, a bitch, a slut, a foreigner. (Personal communication 20/01/2022).

This quotation illustrates the extent to which the online mob goes when they attack journalists. They went beyond the journalist's opinion to attacking her personal private life by referring to her marriage life and questioning her nationality. Expressing her opinion about the political situation at the time, cast the journalist as a sympathizer of the ruling government.

In addition to attacks instigated by personal opinions, the authors established that some online harassment arises out of reactions to stories perceived as negative by sympathizers of specific organizations, political parties, government agencies and individuals. Such stories provoke attacks as one newspaper journalist narrates in the extract below.

I did a story saying a certain government agency had been sued. When the story came out, that agency attacked me on Twitter that I was misleading the country, that someone must have paid me to soil their name. They tagged the media house where I work and my editor in chief and the CEO. They told me that I was a UPE product[1]. They alleged that we journalists don't read and don't do research; they called me fake. (Personal Communication, 06/01/2022).

We discerned three significant issues that arise from this quote. The first one is that the perpetrator targeted the journalist's professional competence. Being referred to as a UPE product is an insult in the Ugandan context because it indirectly means that the journalist lacks proper training. This is because of the perception that the quality of Uganda's free public education system (Universal Primary Education - UPE) is low. Second, the story reveals another tactic mobs use to discredit journalists by questioning the credibility of their reportage. This echoes the observations made from other contexts that perpetrators of harassment use the "fake news" rhetoric to malign journalism (Farhi 2020). The claim that the journalist was bribed to write a story is a common tactic journalism detractors in Uganda use to discredit a story. Considering that journalists deal with stories that hold the powerful to account, it is not unusual for such attacks to manifest, especially in countries like Uganda where public accountability is still a big problem. Discrediting the journalist in such instances is intended to water down the story and limit its impact. The third discernible issue from the quote is that attackers threaten the journalist's career by tagging her editor in chief into the post. By doing so, the attacker is indirectly reporting the journalist to her employer, thereby putting pressure on the media organization, and throwing its image in disrepute. Indeed, the journalist confirmed that she was summoned by her bosses before being directed to stop responding to her abusers following these online attacks. This finding suggests that journalists censor themselves on the kind of stories they publish and the opinions they share in public spaces for fear of attacks.

Politics as a Key Driver of Online Harassment

Our analysis shows that online mob violence tends to escalate during heightened political situations and elections than other periods. During such times, politicians and

their supporters are emotionally charged and intolerant to any negative coverage or opinion. It was discernible in the findings that social media mobs direct their anger towards journalists who write critical stories. As a result of these attacks, some women journalists deliberately refrain from covering politics and elections, as one journalist explains:

> I was covering health and politics, but now when you tell [assign] me politics, 'no.' Last time, I was assigned to cover a local election and I said 'no.' Covering politics in Uganda is becoming a very terrible beat everyday. It doesn't matter who, but there are many threats and censorship from our managers, a lot of 'don't do this, don't do that, licenses will be suspended.' At the end of the day, you are like, 'why should I waste my time doing a story that is going to bring a problem to my employer?' I would rather do my health or education story, than wasting my time on this. (Personal Communication, 07/01/2022).

From the above excerpt, women journalists refrain from covering elections and politics. Yet, politics and elections occupy a central place in the management of public affairs in any given country. This has implications for the diversity of journalists as coverage of political issues is left to male journalists. If not addressed, critical and meaningful reporting will eventually die out or rather propagate male perspectives as women choose to report on 'safe' beats. Censorship emerges from external and internal forces as supervisors restrain colleagues from reporting about certain political issues.

The retreat of women journalists from coverage of politics can aggravate gender inequality in journalism, a profession that is already male dominated. As pointed out earlier, there are fewer women journalists in Ugandan newsrooms compared to men, yet, quite a few are willing and interested in covering politics, as one respondent observed.

> Online attacks create fear, for many, especially ladies who are journalists, to venture into some spheres of life and reporting. For example, politics, back in the days and even now was believed to be a men's beat. So, it creates fear among women thinking that maybe 'I can only report human interest [stories] because it's easier. It doesn't have a lot of repercussions.' (Personal Communication, 11/01/2022).

The above quotation highlights a long-held stereotype that coverage of politics is historically dominated by male journalists. Women journalists are scared off the beat because politics raises tension both offline and online. We discerned fear of spill-over of the online vile into offline spaces. Some journalists stated that they live in fear of being stalked by their online tormentors. The pervasiveness of online attacks makes political reporting a less attractive beat for women reporters. This becomes problematic for gender equity since women are key in propagating feminine perspectives in political news. If online threats continue to deprive society of women journalists to report on politics, it may also be reflected in the passing of female insensitive laws and policies.

The findings also suggest that women journalists refrain from posting their political views on social media to avoid hate comments and harassment. This is illustrated by a TV journalist thus, "I resolved from that time [of attack] to limit or even stay away from political discussions until the political [election] season is over. A year later, I am

still intimidated to comment on politics because it is very sensitive to some people." (Personal Communication, 20/01/2022). Another journalist added: "Since the [election] campaigns, I reduced the time I spend on Facebook. Currently I am more on Twitter, than on Facebook, yet previously, I was more on Facebook." (Personal Communication, 07/01/2022). The two excerpts demonstrate that women journalists retreat from public communication spheres to avoid mob harassment. As indicated earlier, online attacks on women journalists are likely to happen on Facebook more than any other social media. This could be because there are more Facebook users than other social media in Uganda. Although Article 29 of the Uganda constitution gives everyone freedom to express his opinion, our findings suggest that women journalists sacrifice this freedom for their own safety.

What do the women journalists' stories of mob violence online tell us about the identity of their attackers? The findings suggest that the identities of the attackers are unknown as respondents suspect that the perpetrators use pseudo identities. But the interviewees suggest that the pattern of some hateful messages originate from organized groups targeting specific individuals as exemplified in the excerpt below:

> If you read critically, you realize that comments are from the same accounts. There can be slight changes in the comments on your post. But you realize that it is the same group that attacks or discredits you. (Personal Communication, 11/01/2022)

Another journalist confirms this trend by explaining that,

> During the 2021 campaigns, I did a story on Museveni [Uganda's president] and his presidency. I remember there were over 20 accounts attacking and abusing me on Facebook. I knew that it was intended. There were about three people who threatened me. They were like, 'if you do not change your negativity about this government, we shall finish [kill] you.' Accompanying it with statements like, we know you are paid to tarnish this government, but we shall finish you.' Then, another said, 'where did you study journalism from? Is that a news story? Do you think that story can remove Museveni from *entebe* [power]?' (Personal Communication, 07/01/2022).

This quote raises several critical issues. One, it proves that the social media environment is conducive for violence because it is easy for anyone to open an account and initiate communication as has been observed by IFEX and Høiby (2021). It makes it convenient for mobs to create multiple identities and even get away with death threats. In the run up to elections in 2021 in Uganda, Facebook deleted more than 20 pro-ruling party supporters' accounts believed to be engaging in what was called Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB) to target public debate ahead of the election". The Uganda government responded by banning the use of Facebook in Uganda (Nassuna 2021; Aljazeera 2021). This ban is still officially standing but some citizens continue to use Facebook using Virtual Private Network (Dahir 2021). It is possible that some of these accounts were behind the attack reported by women journalists.

Additionally, the online mob sometimes threatens women journalists with death using statements like "we will finish you". Death threats evoke anxiety, prompting women journalists to live in fear for their lives and their loved ones in offline spaces. Unlike other violations, messages that threaten journalists' life are regarded as serious with chilling consequences such as compelling women journalists to withdraw from reporting about political issues or quitting journalism. In addition, we learn from the

above narrative that the online mob describes journalists as "corrupt and sympathizers" of certain political parties or politicians (usually in the opposition) as a way of discrediting reportage that the mob disagrees with. From the journalists' account above, the attackers were supporters of the ruling political party – National Resistance Movement (NRM), which is led by President Museveni. It is noteworthy that supporters of opposition politicians suffered extensive physical violence at the hands of state security agencies during campaigns and elections in 2021. It is not surprising that the same dreadful attacks transpired in digital spaces.

In a country like Uganda, which still lacks transparency in election management, journalists bear the brunt of online and offline attacks for using their media platforms to announce results of often disputed elections as explained in the two quotes below:

> [Online harassment] is hard to deal with. Even when you have many years of experience. It is something you can never get used to. For example, after the general elections, it started slowly with a few pictures, when people tag your pictures and say, 'this is the person who announced the wrong election results.' For me it stretched from just professional attacks to personal attacks on my integrity. (Personal Communication, 11/01/2022).

> It [online attacks] dampens your mood. You are scared, and not sure whether those online threats will eventually manifest into physical attacks because many times I would be very cautious of driving back home, looking into the mirrors to see who is following me. Many times, it even went physical because you would find suspicious persons, maybe next to your home. (Personal Communication, 11/01/2022).

These two quotations point to a relationship between offline and online violence. If the country experiences post-election violence, journalists are physically targeted by mobs of the different political groups. There is fear among journalists that some of the online threats can spill over and evolve into physical attacks.

Women Journalists' Response to the Online Mob

Our findings show that women journalists react to online attacks in different ways. As already demonstrated, some journalists respond by withdrawing from certain beats that invite online harassment, stay away from platforms where mob harassment is common, avoid negative messages and block the perpetrators. Sometimes, respondents attempted to engage the attackers or they ignored the attacks as illustrated in this extract:

> I have over the years learnt that responding to such negative publicity keeps the fire burning. Most of the time, I don't respond. On a few occasions, I blocked some people on Twitter because I couldn't stand their vulgar language. True, the bashing from all corners intimidated me and though I went on with my normal activities on social media, I endeavored to refrain from reading comments on my posts to avoid feeling hurt. (Personal communication 20/01/2022).

Another technique that we found both interesting and unusual was the use of complicated language on social media so that journalists are not understood by everybody as exemplified by one journalist,

> Unless you have hardened [complicated] the tweet, and you have good diction, where you can play around with words and statements. Sometimes you must use a lot of literature to put out the message, which literature many people will not understand, since you might use just a single proverb. (Personal communication 11/01/2022).

Blocking of perpetrators is the common method used to deal with the online mob as one respondent said: "I learnt how to respond to them, brush them off, and to avoid getting irritated, I block them." (Personal communication 11/01/2022).

Self-Censorship as a Consequence of Online Harassment

Women journalists noted that because of online attacks, they have had to censor themselves to avoid being attacked or their media houses being targeted by online mobs.

> It [online harassment] kills your self-esteem as a person and then as a journalist because each time you want to communicate on social media you are worried about how it's going to be perceived. You begin censoring your own point of view. You are thinking about the information that is going to be important if it gets in someone's eyes or ears, but then there comes a point when you are sieving a picture, a video, because you are not sure who it will annoy. (Personal communication 11/01/2022).

From the above interview extract, it is evident that women journalists must edit and re-edit any piece of information before sharing it on social media. They predict in advance the likely reaction to their messages and remove potential statements that may annoy sections of the social media sphere. This is further exemplified by one journalist thus,

> You will literally write for the first time, and you might write something like a paragraph of probably 3-4 lines, you might revisit it many times. So, by the time you are putting out the information, it's not the genuine information you want to give out, but rather overly censored, you might not even communicate directly. (Personal communication 11/01/2022).

This form of self-censorship results from journalists' fear of the likely attacks and threats. This is detrimental not only to journalism but the entire society because when journalists are censored, society is deprived of critical information that is important to decision making. Self-censorship undermines the very reason why journalism exists – to hold those in power to account.

Discussion and Conclusions

This article assesses the prevalence of online harassment of women journalists on social media. Drawing on responses from 10 respondents, we found that online violence against women journalists is pervasive on social media; women television journalists are more likely to experience violence than their counterparts in print media. We established that online attacks on journalists increase during election periods, thus establishing a connection between anti-press attacks offline and online. This means that online spaces have become the new fronts for journalists' attacks that have traditionally taken place in physical spaces. Politically motivated offline attacks on

journalists are common during elections and political demonstrations in Uganda as Nakiwala (2021) observes. Walulya and Nassanga (2020); also observe that attacks on journalists increase during elections and times of unrest. The difference is that violence against the media has always been attributed to state actors. It is possible that online attacks are perpetrated by ordinary citizens, although some of these citizens may be sponsored by state actors.

Our findings suggest that women journalists face sexist comments that criticize, attack, marginalize, stereotype, or even question their mental capacity based on their gender or sexuality in a manner similar to what has been observed in Argentina, Mexico, Colombia, Uruguay, Paraguay, Venezuela and Nicaragua (Cuellar and Chaher 2021). The findings reveal trends and patterns like those reported in other contexts around the world (for example, OSCE 2017; Davidson 2017; Koirala 2020; Waisbord 2020).

We explain Uganda's case in relation to the prevalence of mob justice and gender-based violence in contexts outside journalism. We found that women television journalists are targeted as perpetrators focus on their physical appearance in a manner that sexualizes, humiliates, and utterly abuses them. This is mainly due to the exposure that television offers its audiences. This finding is consistent with what Pain and Chen (2019) found in Taiwan and what Chen et al. (2020) found in Germany, India, United Kingdom, and the US. The choice of words as reported by respondents in this study suggests that the perpetrators of sexualized attacks against women journalists are men. Although this could not be proved, it points to attributes of the patriarchal nature of the Ugandan society that we allude to earlier.

Social media, we emphasize, are simply new arenas where old patterns of oppression of women are carried out. We further assert that the incivility and harassment directed at women journalists are rooted in historical and patriarchal structures as well as social norms and beliefs that promote inequality between men and women. Women's roles have generally changed in the past three decades but beliefs that assign gender roles, perpetuate disparities and prejudices in society persist. Beliefs in relation to what women should and should not do, say or be persist as reflected in unpleasant communication directed at women on social media.

The purpose of attacks is silencing critical reporting and opinions that highlight important issues. The extension of the online attacks to journalists' family members presents a worrying trajectory that may further pressure women journalists into quitting journalism. Any suggestions that attackers may target the journalists' children, spouse or parents are bound to break the journalist's resilience. As we noted in our opening anecdote, women journalists sometimes have the resolve to withstand online and offline attacks. However, when they notice that their job is putting their family members at risk, they sometimes reluctantly quit journalism or retreat from reporting about "controversial" beats. Retreating from the online public sphere has been identified elsewhere because of online violence against journalists (OSCE, 2017; Chen et al. 2020; Waisbord 2020, p.1038). As we noted earlier, women journalists are key in propagating female perspectives in all facets of news including politics. If the online mob continues to deprive society of women journalists to report on politics, it may also be reflected in the passing of female insensitive laws and policies. It is also worth noting

that the attacks directed to women journalists undermine their individual right to freedom of expression online and offline and their right to a safe working environment.

Traditionally, censorship has been regarded as emerging from the state and market forces, but increasingly unidentifiable actors are taking advantage of online platforms to silence journalists. This corroborates a survey in which over 3000 women from Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Senegal and South Africa identified Facebook as the primary platform where online gender-based violence occurs (Monitor 2020). The increasing trend of online attacks against women journalists presents a worrisome scenario since journalists already contend with state and economic forces that have for years censored what goes in the media. Mob censorship comes as an extra baggage to the already overburdened journalists.

Furthermore, the findings show that women reporters are attacked at a personal and professional level as their tormentors discredit the quality of their reportage and their esteem. The attacks are characterized by insults, use of vulgar language and patronizing messages that question the journalists' intellectual capacity, their integrity as well as personality. As a result, women journalists lose the self-confidence and boldness to speak about critical issues that affect society when their integrity is attacked. This aggravates corruption and embezzlement of public funds, human rights abuse with impunity, problems that characterize present day Uganda.

Our findings suggest that the online mob uses sex as a sword to either beat women journalists into submission or to drive them away from social media. Abusive comments on women journalists' physical features such as breasts, their weight and height scare the journalists, and kill their morale and esteem. It is not surprising that some of the journalists choose to keep off social media or reduce usage of platforms where they get insulted as the findings show. Moreover, women journalists believe that keeping off topics such as politics that provoke online crowds into attacks would spare them from violence. While this needs to be further investigated, we posit that online trolls and bullies are just that. They always find something or someone to disagree with, and resort to incivility regardless of the topic at hand. But it is unsettling that mob violence affects women's career choices as all interviewees suggested they would rather cover other beats other than politics.

The prevalence of online violence against women journalists also points to high levels of gender-based violence with reports showing that one in three women are harassed online (Oluka 2021). Whereas we do not generalize that societies where gender-based violence is rampant are characterized by high levels of online violence, it is noteworthy in the case of Uganda that mob violence against women thrives online as a reflection of gender-based violence that is prevalent offline in Uganda. The same applies to mob violence on social media. We submit that culprits use the Internet to torment journalists because online spaces provide opportunities for perpetrators to hide their identity and get away with their actions.

Whereas our investigation is informed by stories of 10 women journalists, we believe that many more women journalists experience online harassment. The goal of journalists' tormentors regardless of their background is censorship. As the story we shared in the introduction section, many women journalists are passionate about their work. What is peculiar about the story of a woman journalist who reported about gay

issues is that her attackers were both from within and outside newsrooms. Her story suggests that she got attacked both online and offline by the public and fellow journalists who regarded her reportage as promoting homosexuality for personal gain. It seems that many haters and attackers of journalism believe that reporting on an issue means that a journalist supports, and or believes in it. Although the woman journalist in question vowed back in 2013 that she will not stop reporting about gay issues, she eventually quit journalism. This, unfortunately, is the fate of many women journalists. They join journalism with good intentions - with a dream of making a difference in their communities, but the weight of the attacks eventually forces them out of newsrooms. Moreover, attacks affect journalists' motivation, which hinder their drive to pursue stories that involve powerful people and institutions.

Protecting and defending journalism ought to be a concerted effort in and outside newsrooms. Going by the stories shared in the findings section, it appears that journalism is increasingly being attacked with mobs using several tools to drive women journalists from social media and journalism. This should concern everyone. Since law makers are eager to implement media laws that penalize journalists, we submit that efforts ought to be made to enforce regulations such as the Computer Misuse Act in favor of journalists. Such efforts will vigorously seek to identify, prosecute, and penalize violations committed against journalists. As noted earlier, women journalists do not often report cases of online harassment. This is with good reason – the lack of trust in judicial processes. Yet, silence exacerbates these violations and impunity. Newsroom managers and media owners ought to establish measures that protect and nurture women journalists to encourage them to stay. This article makes an important theoretical contribution to mob censorship by demonstrating that online violence against women journalists is both an extension and a manifestation of the pervasive physical 'mob justice' and gender-based violence. Further, the article expands our understanding of the concept of mob censorship in the context of Africa, specifically in Uganda where research on violence against female journalists is just emerging. Future research ought to examine the problem of online harassment in quantitative terms in addition to including male journalists in the debate on the subject. We further recommend a study that focuses on the perpetrators of online violence.

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