

A CASE STUDY FROM KENYA

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

Keywords: repeated harassment; threats of violence; abusive comments; emotional harm; harm to reputation; Facebook; other social networks; many abusers; abuser is unknown; collective action; survivor's age is 31-45

THE STORY AND THE VIOLENCE

Kinca is a 30-year-old writer and journalist living in Nairobi, Kenya. After completing her Masters degree in the United Kingdom, Kinca decided to return to Kenya and contest the 2012 Kenyan presidency. Kenya has a history of threatening, shunning or damaging the campaigns of women who attempt to take public office. In the past, women candidates have suffered varying degrees of physical violence at the hands of those who do not believe women have the right to participate in politics.

By 2012, a percentage of campaigning had moved onto online platforms. Kinca used social media to communicate with her electorate, and began to face several forms of verbal abuse. She says, "I was a presidential candidate and my way of getting in touch with Kenyans was online, especially through Facebook. I had quite an interesting experience – a lot of insults, a lot of rude messages, a lot of hate. That's all I got." Comments such as "You will be a failure" or "I believe you running for this election is a waste of resources" made Kinca doubt her decision to run in the first place. She felt she was under "psychological attack". She recalls, "I got depressed. I could not work for three months." It was only after Kinca began seeing a counsellor that she was able to recover from the emotional and psychological violence she continued to face.

SEEKING JUSTICE

Kinca did not report the abuse she faced, first and foremost because *she believed she put herself in a position where abuse was inevitable*. She says, "Le-

gal redress was never a consideration since I am the one who put myself in this situation and this was something to be expected." Moreover, *she did not believe what she faced could be addressed by the law*. Describing her abusers as "negative" and "uncivilised", Kinca says, "[It is not like] physical abuse where you can go and report to the police and they understand."

Kinca's reservations were not misplaced. *The cyber crime unit within the Kenya Police Services exists only on paper* – in reality, it does not function. Moreover, it only addresses crimes such as fraud, rather than cyber bullying or abuse. In fact, *there is no mention of cyber bullying in Kenya's ICT law and Kenya's hate speech law only addresses discrimination on the basis of ethnicity*, and cannot cover gender discrimination. Aside from insufficiencies in the law itself, a study conducted by the Communications Commission of Kenya in 2010 found that "victims do not feel confident enough to bring the issues into the limelight." One reason for this is that *cases of violence against women take too long to be investigated and the burden of accessing justice is placed on the survivor*. Precedents of long, tedious procedures in cases of physical or sexual violence against women may have served as a deterrent for Kinca to come forward.

FINDING AGENCY

Instead of seeking legal redress or reporting the violence to internet intermediaries, *Kinca turned to counselling services*, which she believes were essential to helping her cope with the situation. She says, "It helped me to stop doubting myself [and] affirmed

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and validated all the anger that I had... It made me a stronger person."

Threats, intimidation and public harassment both online and offline are often used to pressurise women to drop their political campaigns. In fact, the chair of the Kenya Women Parliamentary Association says, "Most women candidates had to withdraw from seeking elective positions because

of [the] physical and psychological violence meted against them." Subsequently, *the Coalition on Violence Against Women (CODAW)* launched a *Facebook campaign on her wall*, asking the government of Kenya to put a stop to violence against women during elections. Addressing both online and offline violence faced by women candidates, the campaign raised an issue that had been removed from public discourse so far.



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