



Tackling cyberviolence

How young people stand up against sexualized violence and harassment on the Net

Implemented by

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When the Internet becomes a danger

Madagascar is struggling with the negative aspects of digital networking. Child sexual exploitation, prostitution, abuse and harassment online represent a growing threat, especially to young women and girls.

Crime and harassment on social media are an unfortunate part of everyday life online in Madagascar. And it is more than just hacked accounts, fraud, and threatening or blackmail emails: Child sexual exploitation and prostitution rings sometimes openly recruit children on Facebook and offer materials for sale. This is in part because prostitution and sex tourism have become big business in Madagascar. Those affected are usually unaware that they have legal avenues for bringing criminals to justice, so abuse is often hushed up.



Digital Agents of Change

The “Digital Agents of Change” project is raising young people’s awareness of their rights to participation, privacy, mental health and freedom of expression and information, and helping them fight cyber violence. A Facebook campaign, training sessions and workshops informed young people and their parents about online safety, data protection, privacy and participation in the digital world. Government agencies and companies were equipped to better fulfil their obligations to protect users and guarantee safety in the digital world.

The project was funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and supported by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).



HUMAN IMPACT STORY

“Fight back!”

Caren, 22, a spokesperson for the “Youth First” non-governmental organisation, was a project initiator and organised the online campaigns and events:

People often ask why I help teenagers stay safe on the Internet and protect themselves from abuse. Well, it’s because I was harassed as a teenager too. I started surfing the Web when I was eleven years old. And like most kids my age, I was on my own because my parents had zero experience with digital media. Some of the messages I received back then were so disturbing that they triggered anxiety and panic attacks. The people around me were not aware of how widespread and problematic these incidents were. The prevailing attitude was that anyone who goes online does so at their own risk.

Today many young people are going through the same thing I did. I needed someone to step in, and I want to be that person for them now. It’s important that they learn to use the Internet safely and confidently. The Net is not a lawless space – we have ways of holding people accountable for their criminal acts. And young people need to know that harassment is not their fault for being on the Internet. In 2014, Madagascar passed a law prohibiting cybercrime. But most young people do not know what activities are illegal.

And most do not report being harassed, robbed or bullied online. We have launched a Facebook campaign to show young people and their parents how to use the Internet in a positive way and stay safe. We post tips for safeguarding data from intruders, fighting harassment, and helping others if they fall victim to attack. The more people report illegal posts on Facebook, submit screenshots to the police, and publicly expose harassers, the safer the Internet becomes.

While we were initially primarily met with a lack of understanding, we could see the campaign’s impact after just a few months when we announced a contest for videos on responsible Internet use. Young people posted hundreds of comments thanking us for the important information and forwarded the videos to their friends. We succeeded in changing the perspective of many young people: They now know that they do not have to accept everything that happens online – and they know how to respond. In a number of cases, users, including key influencers, blocked posts and reported them to Facebook until the platform removed the content. And more and more young people who have experienced harassment are getting in touch for help reporting it to the police. Some cases are already ready for prosecution.

The situation in Madagascar

From fraud to pornography

The high poverty rate in Madagascar – more than three quarters of the population live in extreme poverty – is a driving factor in the continuing rise in prostitution and sex tourism in the island state. This includes child trafficking, pornography and trafficking of girls abroad. According to UNICEF Madagascar, around 14 percent of girls between the ages of 15 and 19 have been victims of sexual violence. This includes internet-mediated sexual violence. Children are recruited and pornographic material is openly offered for sale on social media and on Facebook in particular. Many users are also subjected to threatening and blackmail emails, financial fraud, and identity and data theft.

Society is unprepared to respond appropriately. Children and young people often explore the Internet with no guidance or supervision. They cannot judge whether an

email is legitimate, and do not know how to protect their data or how to respond to sexualized images. Around two thirds of young people go online looking for a partner and often send intimate pictures of themselves. In some cases, parents even encourage their daughters to use the Internet to find wealthy men abroad, and are often unaware that this can lead directly to prostitution. In 2019, UNICEF and the “Youth First” nongovernmental organisation carried out a non-representative survey in the capital Antananarivo and found that 84 percent of the young people surveyed had already been subjected to online harassment. Their accounts had been hacked, or they had received unsolicited pornographic or violent content, been insulted, threatened, scammed or pressured by strangers to meet in real life.

The project

Young people fighting cyber violence

Despite the risks, the Internet also offers opportunities for young people if they learn how to use it early and acquire the necessary digital skills. An increasing number of call centres and online services for Asia, Europe and the USA are opening offices and creating jobs in Madagascar. Awareness of cyber violence has also significantly increased in recent years. While the 2014 law against cybercrime was initially rolled out slowly, police have recently made several arrests for crimes like online pornography, fraud, extortion, and defamation. Awareness of the general public has grown as news of cases of child sexual exploitation on Facebook have spread.

The “Digital Agents of Change” project is helping to strengthen this positive development. In addition to a Facebook campaign for young people and their parents, the project trained local peer educators, and organised regular awareness-raising meetings for young people and workshops for parents and teachers. Events like “Safer Internet Day” brought young people together with online platform operators and cybersecurity police officers. Playful activities showed children how to stay safe online.



The project also showed political representatives and police officers how they could better protect young people from online dangers and crime in future. Representatives of telecommunications companies and owners of Internet cafés were also involved. When young people have all the information and the digital skills they need and know they can rely on public law enforcement, they feel safer online, can move around more freely, and take full advantage of the opportunities digitisation offers for their futures.

Pilot projects

The GIZ Sector Programme Human Rights worked with international GIZ projects and local non-governmental organisations to roll out a number of pilot projects in 2018-2020 as part of the Human Rights Innovation Lab. Innovative approaches to mainstreaming the human rights-based approach (HRBA) emerged in a wide range of thematic areas, such as digitalisation, birth registration, and health. The pilot projects detailed in the “Human Impact Stories” show how the “human rights, gender equality and disability inclusion” quality criteria can be anchored in various core and initiative areas in projects in partner countries and yield innovative solutions for current development policy challenges. Even in conflict situations and politically sensitive contexts, the HRBA promotes the development of new instruments and approaches, strengthening human rights on the ground.



The human rights-based approach

Every human being is born with inalienable human rights, and the dignity of every human being is inviolable. Human rights enable every human being to live a free and self-determined life in community with others. These rights are enshrined in international and regional human rights treaties signed by most of the world's states.

Human rights include the right to education, health, an adequate standard of living, and freedom of opinion and information, as well as protection from violence and respect for a person's private life. Violations of the rights of individuals or social groups impede the social, economic and political development of an entire country. Conversely, upholding human rights is an essential prerequisite for sustainable, inclusive development. This is why human rights and the “leave no one behind” (LNOB) principle feature prominently in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda. LNOB focuses on people living in extreme poverty, as well as severely disadvantaged people and population groups, and is designed to ensure that everyone can participate equally in development processes.

Human rights are a guiding principle of German development cooperation (DC) with all its partner countries. Human rights, gender equality and disability inclusion together comprise one of German DC's six cross-cutting quality criteria. The HRBA not only promotes the safeguarding of individual rights; it also helps to realise the human rights principles of participation, empowerment, non-discrimination and equal opportunity, as well as accountability and transparency in all thematic areas and fields where development cooperation is active.

DC projects that employ the HRBA address the structural causes of inequalities and discriminatory practices, such as the marginalization of women or ethnic minorities in educational systems. They support state institutions and stakeholders in protecting and guaranteeing their citizens' rights, educate civil society and citizens about their rights, and encourage them to demand them.

Digital Agents of Change

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Partner project	GIZ “Poverty-oriented communal development and decentralisation” (ProDÉCID II) project
Partners	Youth First Madagascar, SAMEVA, P4H
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Human rights addressed

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (OHCHR):

Right to privacy (Art. 17)

Right to freedom of expression (Art. 19)

Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN children’s rights convention), selection:

Freedom of expression and information (Art. 13)

Right to privacy (Art. 16)

Protection from violence (Art. 19)

Protection from sexual abuse (Art. 34)

Protection from exploitation (Art. 36)

SDGs addressed



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