

Silence by Design: How the Digital Civic Space Is Being Weaponised Against Women

CcHUB convened a continent-wide conversation on International Women's Day 2026 to examine how online violence is silencing women—and what Africa must do to reclaim its civic future.

On 8 March 2026, CcHUB hosted a virtual roundtable titled “*Silence by Design: Civic Space and Women's Silenced Voices.*” The conversation gathered three remarkable voices: Sherylle Dass, Regional Director of the Legal Resources Centre and a public-interest litigator of 24 years; Blessing Oladunjoye, award-winning investigative journalist and co-founder of the Human Rights Journalist Network of Nigeria; and Professor Geci Karuri-Sabina, ICT & SDG Chair at the University of the Witwatersrand and one of the continent's foremost researchers on innovation and futures. Together, they confronted an uncomfortable truth: the digital civic space — once celebrated as freedom's new frontier — is increasingly being engineered to keep women silent.

International Women's Day
Rights. Justice. Action. For All Women and Girls

Silence by Design: Civic Space & Women's Silenced Voices

Blessing Oladunjoye
Executive Director, BO Foundation for Inclusive Media (BOFIM)
SPEAKER

Prof Geci Karuri-Sebina
Associate Professor, Univ of Witwatersrand & ICESCO Chair for the Study of Innovation and Futures in Africa
SPEAKER

Sherylle Dass
Regional Director, Legal Resources Centre, South Africa
SPEAKER

Adeboro Oduniami
Coordinator, African Internet Rights Alliance
MODERATOR

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TIME 10 AM -11 AM WAT

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The conversation was timely, urgent, and deeply African in its orientation. With the United Nations theme for International Women's Day (IWD) 2026 being Rights, Justice, Action for All Women and

Girls, CcHUB chose to centre the discussion precisely where the most friction exists — at the intersection of technology, power, and gendered harm.

It Is Not an Accident — It Is a Weapon

The first question posed to the panel cut straight to the heart of the matter: is online violence against women real, and is it deliberate? Blessing Oladunjoye left no room for ambiguity. Drawing on her landmark 2025 research into online misogyny and tech-facilitated gender-based violence in Nigeria, she described a landscape where coordinated attacks are not spontaneous eruptions of individual prejudice but organised, often monetised campaigns to punish women who dare to speak.

She recounted a striking example: when a major Nigerian bank appointed its first female CEO, a torrent of misogynistic commentary followed — not engaging with her decades of professional achievement, but attacking her appearance, her femininity, and her very right to hold the role. "Someone posted that her profile was giving them an orgasm," Blessing noted. "Would you ever say that about a man?" The comment encapsulates something systemic: the relentless sexualisation and diminishment of women in positions of public authority.

"Online violence is not an accident. It is targeted, it is coordinated, and it is a deliberate weapon to silence women who participate in public life."

The targets, she explained, extend far beyond politics or activists — female journalists, social media personalities, and even ordinary women sharing their lives online are subject to these attacks. What is consistent is the intent: to shame, discredit, and ultimately erase.

The Algorithm Is Not Neutral

Sherylle Dass brought the structural analysis that the conversation demanded. She reminded participants that the internet began as something liberating — a tool that amplified feminist movements like #MeToo and South Africa's #FeminismShutDown, reaching global audiences and mobilising ordinary people to pressure governments and reshape public norms. But that same amplification power has been captured and monetised in ways that now actively undermine those movements.

The core problem, she argued, is simple: platform revenue models are built on engagement, and nothing drives engagement like outrage, conflict, and hatred. Divisive, harmful content — particularly content targeting historically marginalised groups such as women — is algorithmically

rewarded. The more people react, the more the platform earns from advertising. Harassment, in the coldest terms, is profitable.

"It is all about the money. The platforms' business model is designed to maximise engagement — and harmful content drives engagement."

But Sherylle pushed the analysis further, into geopolitics. The concentration of digital power in five mega-corporations — controlling social media, search engine, cloud computing, digital advertising, and more — has created a monopoly that increasingly operates in alignment with far-right political movements. The rollback of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, the dismissal of content moderation, the replacement of meaningful safeguarding with "community notes" — these are not technical decisions. They are ideological ones, and they have tangible consequences for women across the African continent and the global south.

Erasing the Future: Intersectional Violence and Democratic Decay

Professor Geci brought the sharpest conceptual lens to the conversation. She affirmed that not all women face online violence equally — compounded, intersectional attacks fall hardest on those who already occupy the margins: indigenous women, women of colour, women activists, women journalists. A UNESCO study she cited found that nearly three-quarters of women journalists surveyed had faced brutal online attacks.

But her most powerful intervention was epistemological. When women, and particularly African women — are systematically pushed out of digital civic space, she argued, we do not simply lose individual voices. We lose the narratives, knowledge, and imaginaries that those voices carry. We lose the alternative futures they make possible. Silencing them is not collateral damage; it is the point.

"This is a colonisation of our futures. When you silence the loudest voices for alternatives, you monopolise the narrative of what the world can become."

She drew an intense analogy: forcing a woman offline for her safety is no different from stoning her in a public square for wearing a miniskirt. In both cases, power decides who gets to show up, and on what terms. That is not democracy — it is coercion wearing a digital mask.

What Is Lost When Women Journalists Go Quiet

Blessing returned to explore what this violence does to the practice of journalism itself — and the picture was sobering. Women journalists in Nigeria are increasingly self-censoring, walking away from investigative beats on politics, corruption, gender rights, and security because the cost of pursuing them is simply too high. Politically-funded troll networks generate coordinated counter-hashtags to discredit their stories before they gain traction. Sources become harder to protect. The instinct to tag a key source — providing crucial visibility and credibility — is suppressed for fear of unleashing attacks on the source themselves.

She described a chilling incident involving a colleague, who published a follow-up story on a high-profile rape allegation case — and was immediately subjected to coordinated online attacks. The journalist held firm and published subsequent installments. But, Blessing noted, not everyone does. For every story of resilience there are dozens of stories never written, investigations never completed, truths never told — not because the journalism was not important, but because the journalist was not safe.

The silencing of a platform dedicated solely to women's rights coverage is not a technical glitch — it is the shutting down of a constituency.

What Africa Must Do: From Outrage to Architecture

The final bit of the conversation turned toward solutions — the panelists refused easy answers but offered clear direction. The challenges are structural, and the responses must be too.

Sherylle Sherylle Dass called for the criminalisation of TFGBV, for an educated public that understands its legal rights and genuine regional solidarity — because asking one African government to regulate while others remain lax simply displaces the problem. Tech corporations' market share does not respect borders; African advocacy must not either. The African Union and civil society must coordinate to hold platforms accountable at scale, because tech companies' market share does not respect national borders.

Professor Geci pointed to a different kind of architecture — the architecture of knowledge itself. She highlighted the work of researchers like Timnit Gebru and the DAIR Institute, building sovereign, community-governed language technologies rooted in African epistemologies. She pointed to tools like Afrofeminist GPT and IFA GPT as early proof that different architectures — built on different values — are possible. These are not just technical alternatives. They are acts of resistance — refusals to accept that the logic of Big Tech is the only logic available.

Blessing closed with a call to collective accountability. Tech platforms must enforce their own policies consistently. Media organisations must treat online harassment of their journalists as a professional safety issue, not a personal problem. And individuals — and every one of us must stop being a passive consumer of content that degrades and erases. Normalising abuse by scrolling past it, laughing at it, or sharing it makes us complicit in it.

Why CcHUB Convened This Conversation

For us at CcHUB, this conversation was an expression of a foundational conviction: that technology without equity is infrastructure for harm.

As a pan-African organisation, CcHUB understands that the digital future of the continent will be shaped by who gets to participate in building it — and who gets pushed out. When women are systematically driven from the digital civic space through coordinated harassment, skewed algorithms, and regulatory vacuums, the future Africa builds will be narrower, less just, and less imaginative than it could be.

Through policy advocacy, community building and research, and dialogues like this one, CcHUB remains committed to ensuring that the continent's digital infrastructure serves everyone — especially those most systematically excluded. The conversation on 8 March 2026 was a beginning, not an end.

"Silence by design can be undone — but only by those who refuse to be quiet."

About CcHUB

CcHUB is **the leading pan-African creative and innovation ecosystem enabler. Our mission is to accelerate the application of social capital and technology for economic prosperity across Africa. Read more <https://cchub.africa/>**