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THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES (GBVXTECH) IN DOCUMENTING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

New digital technologies are being used for victims to communicate their experiences of gender-based violence to law enforcement and other agencies. However, these technologies are not considering minimum best practice principles for interviewing victims face-to-face.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a global issue that disproportionately affects women and children, with 1-in-3 adult women and 1 in 2 children worldwide having experienced domestic and/or sexual violence within their lifetime. Concerningly, the actual prevalence rates of GBV may be much higher due to mass under-reporting. For example, only one-sixth of all sexual offences are reported to the police in the UK and only 1.6% of those cases result in a conviction. As such, there has been a global movement to document cases of GBV using alternative formats (e.g., digital platforms).

#METOO AND THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION

Given the global pandemic that is GBV, the #MeToo movement went viral in 2017. The movement was initially started to support women of colour in disclosing sexual violence, but later to provide all victims of GBV with a space to document their experiences on social media. Following its inception, the hashtag MeToo was used over 19 million times within the first year, which reveals the mammoth nature of GBV globally. From this movement, we have seen a growth in mobile phone applications and online platforms to assist in gathering evidence and reports from all victims of GBV.

GBVXTECH - WHY IS IT USEFUL?

GBVxTech platforms allow victims to disclose incidents soon after they occur. In this way, GBVxTech captures critical memory evidence before the amount and specificity of recall decreases over time. If and when a victim later decides to involve authorities, a detailed account can aid the investigation and prosecution. Given that a victim's statement is frequently the central evidence in GBV cases, tools that facilitate thorough, timely documentation of the victim's account offer major benefits for justice. GBVxTech must align with established minimum best practice standards for gathering victim accounts to collect the strongest evidence for investigations and prosecutions.

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GBVXTECH - DOES IT ALIGN WITH MINIMUM STANDARDS OF BEST PRACTICE?

To investigate whether GBVxTech platforms adhere to the best practice principles recommended for face-to-face interviews, we conducted a systematic review of all GBVxTech we could access (N = 13) that documented a disclosure from a victim. We found that almost all of the GBVxTech platforms reviewed used open questions at least once, encouraged the victims to report their account in their own words without influence from others, and asked crime-relevant questions imperative to facilitate investigations, which is all in line with best practice. Positively, none of the platforms reviewed asked leading questions. However, the most commonly used responding method was forced-choice drop down menus. These limit the amount of detail a victim is able to communicate and may invalidate the victim if they feel that their experience is not captured within the options provided.

Digital GBVxTech platforms cannot replicate all aspects of in-person interviews. However, key best practices could be implemented in these platforms to enhance disclosure quality and minimise re-traumatisation.

For example, GBVxTech currently lacks a pre-interview phase. Ground rules could be provided, instructing victims to report unsure details. Narrative practice could be included, allowing

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victims to first recall a neutral event. Studies show such ground rules and narrative practice facilitate accuracy by setting expectations. A short pre-interview stage on GBVxTech could administer these techniques before questions on the incident. Simple additions like these, drawn from research on optimal interviewing, can improve complete and accurate documentation without necessitating face-to-face interaction.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Where possible, GBVxTech platforms should adhere to minimum standards of interviewing best practice to allow victims to communicate their independent voice and document their most complete and accurate statement. But there are additional challenges that come from using alternative digital reporting methods. For example, it is recommended that GBVxTech platforms are accessible for all; but, all the platforms we reviewed require a smartphone with WiFi or a data connection to document a case. Therefore, future GBVxTech platforms should consider how to provide offline reporting for individuals who do not have data privileges. Additionally, current GBVxTech platforms are not accessible for individuals with visual or cognitive impairments to communicate (e.g., text-to-speech functions). GBVxTech providers should partner with accessibility organisations to ensure all individuals can communicate their experiences.

Furthermore, and our most concerning finding, around only half of all the platforms we reviewed had security features (e.g., password protection) to ensure that the victims' reports were safe and could not be viewed by anyone who can access their phone (e.g., the perpetrator in intimate-partner situations). Moving forward, alternative communication platforms like GBVxTech must prioritise victim safety and confidentiality above all else.

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