



# POLICY BRIEF:

THE IMPACT OF  
CYBERBULLYING  
IN SOUTH AFRICA



MARCH 2023



## KEY FACTS

- According to a 2018 survey by Ipsos, South Africa has the highest rate of cyberbullying in the world, with 51% of South African teens reporting that they have experienced cyberbullying.<sup>1</sup>
- In the same survey, South Africa also had the highest rate of teens reporting that they had been threatened or embarrassed online.<sup>2</sup>
- Girls are more likely than boys to experience cyberbullying in South Africa, with 57% of girls reporting that they have been cyberbullied, compared to 44% of boys.<sup>3</sup>
- LGBTQ+ individuals are also at a higher risk of cyberbullying in South Africa, with 70% reporting that they have experienced cyberbullying.<sup>4</sup>
- Cyberbullying can have serious psychological impacts on victims, with one study finding that 25% of South African children who experienced cyberbullying reported symptoms of depression.<sup>5</sup>
- Cyberbullying can also lead to negative academic outcomes, with one study finding that South African students who experienced cyberbullying had significantly lower academic performance than those who did not.<sup>6</sup>

## SYNOPSIS

Cyberbullying is a pervasive issue globally, with South Africa having the highest rate of cyberbullying in the world. According to Ipsos, 54% of South African teenagers experience cyberbullying, significantly higher than the global average of 37%.<sup>7</sup> The anonymity and lack of monitoring of online environments makes cyberbullying challenging to detect and prevent. With the COVID-19 pandemic causing an increase in online activity, UNESCO reported that 60% of children and adolescents worldwide experienced increased levels of online violence. Vulnerable groups, such as girls and LGBTQ+ individuals, were found to be at a higher risk of cyberbullying. UNESCO and the World Health Organization have called for increased efforts to address cyberbullying through strengthening legal frameworks, education, policy, and support services for victims. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach.

## BACKGROUND

Cyberbullying is a form of bullying that takes place online, through social media, messaging apps, and other digital platforms. It is a global issue that affects individuals of all ages and backgrounds, with devastating consequences for victims. Cyberbullying can take many forms, including

<sup>1</sup> IPSOS. (2018) *Cyberbullying: A Global Advisor Study*. Available at: [https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2018-02/cyberbullying\\_2018.pdf](https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2018-02/cyberbullying_2018.pdf) [Accessed 25 Mar. 2023].

<sup>2</sup> IBID. (2018)

<sup>3</sup> IBID. (2018)

<sup>4</sup> CENTRE FOR ANALYTICS AND BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE. (2020) *Cyberbullying in South Africa: A Rapid Evidence Review*. Available at: <https://cabac.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Cyberbullying-in-South-Africa-A-Rapid-Evidence-Review.pdf> [Accessed 25 Mar. 2023].

<sup>5</sup> IBID. (2020).

<sup>6</sup> MAKGATO, M., & MAKGATO, T. (2017) 'The relationship between cyberbullying and academic performance among high school learners in South Africa'. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 27(5), 403-406.

<sup>7</sup> IPSOS. (2018)

harassment, threats, humiliation, and the spread of false information. It can occur anonymously, making it difficult to identify perpetrators and provide support to victims.

In recent years, the prevalence of cyberbullying has increased, particularly among young people. The rise of social media and other digital platforms has made it easier for bullies to target their victims, often from a distance. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, 59% of American teens have experienced some form of cyberbullying, with many reporting negative emotional and psychological effects.

Cyberbullying is a complex issue that requires a multi-faceted approach to address. It involves tackling not only individual behaviour but also societal norms, cultural values, and legal frameworks. Many organisations and governments have recognised the need to combat cyberbullying and have taken steps to address the issue through education, policy, and support services. However, there is still much work to be done to ensure that individuals are safe and protected in the digital world.

## **LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK**

South Africa has taken steps to address the issue of cyberbullying through legal and policy frameworks. In 2018, the country passed the Cybercrimes and Cybersecurity Bill, which criminalises cyberbullying and provides for penalties for perpetrators. The bill also establishes a National Cybersecurity Hub, which serves as a central point of contact for reporting cybercrimes, including cyberbullying.

Additionally, the South African government has developed a National Action Plan to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance. The plan includes provisions for combating cyberbullying and promoting safe online behavior. The government has also launched a Cybersecurity Hub to provide resources and support to victims of cyberbullying. The Department of Basic Education has also implemented policies to address cyberbullying in schools. The department has developed a Safe Schools Framework, which includes guidelines for preventing and responding to cyberbullying in schools. The framework encourages schools to promote digital citizenship and responsible online behavior among students. However, despite these legal and policy frameworks, cyberbullying remains a significant problem in South Africa. Many cases go unreported, and victims often do not receive the support they need. There is a need for continued efforts to address the issue of cyberbullying and to promote a safe and inclusive digital environment in South Africa.

## **ADDRESSING THE DRIVERS OF CYBERBULLYING**

To effectively combat cyberbullying in South Africa, it is important to address the underlying causes of the issue. One of the key factors contributing to cyberbullying is social inequality and discrimination. Marginalised groups, such as women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people of color, are at a higher risk of cyberbullying. To address this, there need to be greater efforts to promote equality and inclusion in society.

Education is also a critical component of addressing cyberbullying. By promoting digital citizenship and responsible online behavior, individuals can learn to recognise and avoid cyberbullying. This includes teaching individuals how to report cyberbullying and providing them with the tools and resources they need to protect themselves and others online.

Another factor contributing to cyberbullying is the lack of accountability for perpetrators. Many individuals who engage in cyberbullying do not face consequences for their actions. There is a need for stronger legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions and deter future incidents of cyberbullying.

Finally, addressing the mental health impacts of cyberbullying is critical. Victims of cyberbullying may experience anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues. Providing support services, such as counselling and therapy, can help individuals cope with the emotional toll of cyberbullying and prevent long-term negative effects on their mental health.

Overall, addressing the underlying causes of cyberbullying requires a multi-faceted approach that involves promoting equality and inclusion, education, accountability, and support services. By addressing these factors, it is possible to create a safer and more inclusive digital environment in South Africa.

## POLICY IMPROVEMENTS

Developing policies to address cyberbullying in South Africa requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach that involves various stakeholders, including government, civil society organisations, educators, parents, and the private sector. Here are some key considerations for developing effective policies:

1. **Multi-sectoral approach:** Policies should involve multiple sectors and stakeholders, including government, civil society, education, and technology companies, to ensure a comprehensive and coordinated approach.
2. **Evidence-based:** Policies should be based on sound evidence and research to ensure that they are effective and relevant to the South Africa context.
3. **Victim-centred:** Policies should prioritise the needs and rights of victims of cyberbullying, including providing support services and legal protection.
4. **Prevention-focused:** Policies should prioritise prevention through education and awareness-raising, and address underlying causes of cyberbullying, such as inequality and discrimination.
5. **Accountability:** Policies should establish clear mechanisms for holding perpetrators accountable for their actions, including legal consequences and sanctions.
6. **Continuous evaluation:** Policies should be regularly evaluated and updated to ensure their effectiveness and relevance over time.

Developing effective policies to address cyberbullying in South Africa requires a long-term commitment and collaboration among various stakeholders. By prioritising prevention, victim support, and accountability, it is possible to create a safer and more inclusive digital environment in South Africa.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Increase awareness and education:** The government, civil society organisations, and educational institutions should collaborate to raise awareness about cyberbullying, its effects, and how to prevent it. This should include educating students, parents, teachers, and the public about online safety and responsible use of technology.
2. **Strengthen legal and policy frameworks:** The government should strengthen legal and policy frameworks to provide better protection for victims of cyberbullying and hold perpetrators accountable. This could include creating dedicated cyberbullying laws and enhancing existing laws to address online harassment.
3. **Provide support services for victims:** The government and civil society organizations should provide accessible and affordable support services for victims of cyberbullying, including counseling, legal aid, and crisis hotlines.
4. **Foster collaboration among stakeholders:** The government should foster collaboration among stakeholders, including educators, parents, civil society organizations, and the private sector, to create a coordinated and multi-sectoral approach to addressing cyberbullying.
5. **Address underlying causes:** Efforts to address cyberbullying should also address the underlying causes, including inequality, discrimination, and prejudice. This requires a comprehensive approach that involves addressing structural inequalities and promoting tolerance and respect.

By implementing these recommendations, it is possible to create a safer and more inclusive digital environment in South Africa, where cyberbullying is no longer tolerated, and victims are protected and supported.

## DISCLAIMER

*This policy brief is for the “Strengthening Local Governance to Improve Gender Based Violence” Project also known as the “Masiphephe Network” (“Let’s Be Safe”). The project is funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), through its Democracy, Human Rights and Governance (DRG) unit, and led by the Centre for Communication Impact (CCI). The Masiphephe Network community-based gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and response partners across three provinces in South Africa, believe that GBV is the grave consequence of complex social and structural problems. Our programme encourages inclusive GBV interventions through strategic policy advocacy, community-led collaborative supportive multi-sectoral partnerships, building awareness and promoting behaviour change to shift GBV social norms. Our views are informed by community engagements and recommendations. The contents of this policy brief are the responsibility of CCI and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID.*

**BREAK THE SILENCE, CALL 0800 428 428 (GBV COMMAND CENTRE) TO REPORT AND GET GBV SUPPORT.**

## Masiphephe Network Implementing Partners

| ORGANISATION  | IMPLEMENTATION SITE/<br>LOCATION                      | CONTACT #    |
|---|---|--------------|
| CCI   | Pretoria, Gauteng                                     | 012 366 9300 |
| GHJRU   | University of Cape Town                               | 021 406 6023 |
| Agisanang Domestic Abuse<br>Prevention and Training (ADAPT) | City of Johannesburg Region E,<br>Gauteng             | 011 786 6608 |
| Sonke Gender Justice (Sonke)                                | City of Johannesburg Region D,<br>Gauteng             | 011 339 3589 |
| Ethembeni Crisis Care Centre<br>(ECCC)                      | eThekwini West, KwaZulu Natal                         | 031 704 6860 |
| Gugu Dlamini Foundation                                     | eThekwini INK Area, KwaZulu Natal                     | 031 292 2852 |
| Project Support Association<br>Southern Africa (PSASA)      | Emalahleni Local Municipality and<br>City of Mbombela | 013 752 5624 |

## Social Media Platforms



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