

Gendering misinformation management: Preliminary results from our baseline surveys in South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Uganda

In the Sentinel Project's experience, we see first-hand that rumours and misinformation (which includes disinformation) can lead to conflict. Indeed, there is growing consensus among practitioners and academics about the relationship between misinformation and fighting on the ground ([Wired](#)). A related topic of concern worldwide is the link between gendered misinformation and violence against women. Most research on gender and misinformation relates to how women in politics are affected by disinformation campaigns that seek to tarnish their reputations and distract from their expertise and politics ([Brookings](#); [The Guardian](#)). However, less is known about how sexism and sexist thinking may pervade rumours, misinformation, and hate speech in conflict zones more broadly. Our understanding is that, together, these phenomena can lead to offline violence, particularly in already volatile political climates. Getting a better understanding of the role of gender in misinformation management is therefore critical to Sentinel Project's overall violence prevention mission. This short report outlines the results of our recent efforts to better understand the gender-related dynamics in three of the countries where we work - the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), South Sudan, and Uganda.

Methodology

The first step in this process was to better understand gendered misinformation in these contexts by looking at the results of our baseline surveys in DRC, South Sudan, and Uganda. We recently started two new misinformation management projects in DRC ([Kijiji Cha Amani](#)) and South Sudan ([Hagiga Wahid](#)). We have had a presence in Uganda since 2019, when we initially started the Hagiga Wahid project (which we later expanded to South Sudan) along with our partners at the [Community Development Centre](#).

As a part of our monitoring and evaluation activities, we conducted baseline surveys in the North Kivu Province of DRC and two cities in South Sudan (Yei and Juba). In the case of Rhino Camp Refugee Settlement in Uganda, we conducted a survey in 2021 for comparison with the results of a baseline survey conducted at the project's inception. Trained enumerators conducted the surveys across locations in February and March 2021, recording survey responses electronically using KoBoCollect software. The samples were collected by the enumerators going door-to-door to people's houses. Regarding gender, our survey allowed respondents to opt for male or female or to enter an answer of their choice. After the completion of the surveys, all data were stored in a secure drive, and downloaded in Excel spreadsheet formats. The data were cleaned and analyses were conducted using Excel.

Although our survey data goes beyond gendered rumours, we specifically report and highlight how gender is reflected in the following findings.

Demographics

Across the four locations, we had **442** respondents in the North Kivu region of DRC, **311** respondents in Yei and **545** respondents in Juba (the two cities in South Sudan), and **164** respondents in Rhino Camp, Uganda.

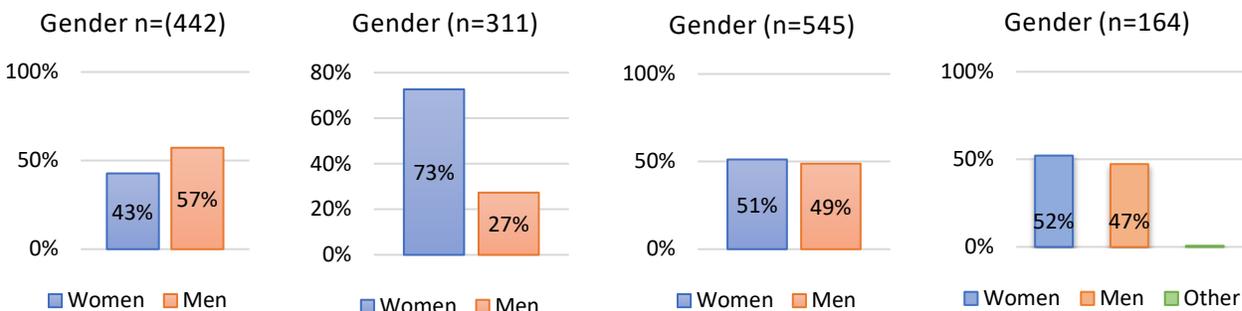


Figure 1: Kijiji Cha Amani

Figure 2: Hagiga Wahid Yei

Figure 3: Hagiga Wahid Juba

Figure 4: Hagiga Wahid Uganda

Although we had balanced gender representation in Juba and Rhino Camp, it was more challenging to achieve parity in the other two locations due to timing. Particularly in the case of Yei, we had many more women respondents than men. For this reason, and others, we are careful to note that the findings of our surveys cannot be generalized beyond the dataset. Nevertheless, we still draw meaningful conclusions that are useful for understanding the gender dynamics within our projects.

Literacy and access to information

First, we wanted to ensure that we captured the link between gender and literacy and access to information, knowing that education outcomes are often worse for women than for men in the areas where we work ([United States Institute of Peace](#); [CARE](#); [UN Women](#); [UNIFOR](#)). For example, in DRC, [UN Women](#) states that “Very few Congolese women have access to decent jobs, and in general women and girls have less access to education than men and boys, as well as higher rates of illiteracy.” Indeed, [UNIFOR](#) shares this perspective, stating that “Nearly half of all women in DRC’s eastern province of Kivu are illiterate. Only 28 per cent of girls are enrolled in secondary school, compared with 51 per cent of boys.” In Rhino Camp, where the population is primarily made up of South Sudanese refugees, [Save the Children](#) writes that “Even before the conflict in South Sudan erupted in 2013 the country had some of the world’s worst education indicators, along with some of the widest gender disparities in school attendance.” This makes the provision of education for refugees even more essential. Less access to education may also mean less access to technology and, therefore, our programs.

For these reasons, our surveys asked respondents about their ability to read and write. We later disaggregated their responses by gender.

The tables reveal that in North Kivu, Juba, and Rhino camp, women had fewer literacy skills than men. In Yei, although it may look like women had a slightly higher literacy rate than men, we attribute this difference to the large discrepancy in the numbers of respondents of each gender (**27%** of respondents were men and **73%** of respondents were women). Nevertheless, the literacy rates of both genders across all survey locations are quite low.

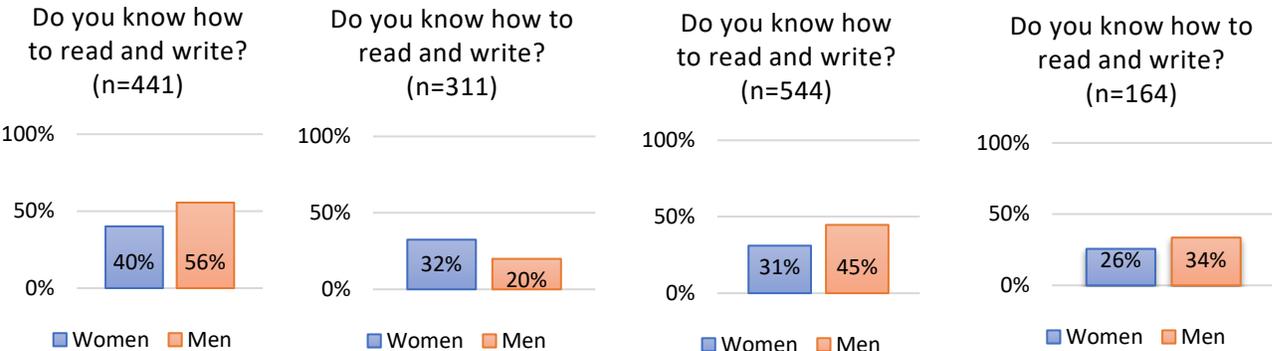


Figure 5: Kijiji Cha Amani Figure 6: Hagiga Wahid Yei Figure 7: Hagiga Wahid Juba Figure 8: Hagiga Wahid Uganda

Second, regarding access to information, we looked to see if women and men have differentiated access to technology, including mobile phones and the internet. It was again difficult to ascertain a meaningful difference in Yei and North Kivu, but we could see that men

in Juba and Rhino Camp have greater access to mobile phones and the internet compared to women's access.

- In North Kivu, **54%** of men in our respondent pool own mobile phones, compared with **38%** of women. Likewise, **39%** of men use the internet, compared with **24%** of women.
- In Yei, **21%** of men in our respondent pool own mobile phones, compared to **46%** of women. Similarly, **21%** of men in Yei use the internet, compared to **46%** of women.
- In Juba, **45%** of men in our respondent pool own mobile phones, compared to **41%** of women. The internet usage gap in Juba is larger, with **36%** of men using the internet, compared with **20%** of women.
- In Rhino Camp, **34%** of men in our respondent pool own mobile phones, compared to **30%** of women. Likewise, **13%** of men use the internet, compared to **9%** of women.

The following bar charts provide side-by-side comparisons.

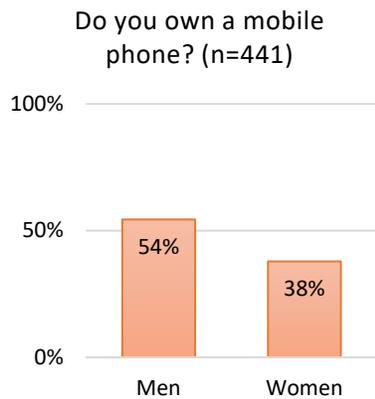


Figure 9: Kijiji Cha Amani

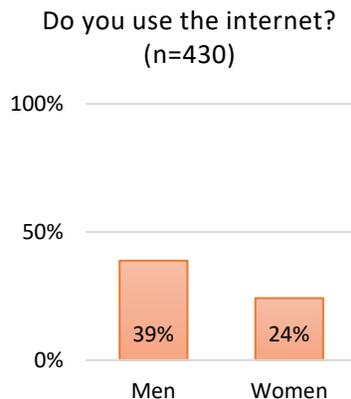


Figure 10: Kijiji Cha Amani

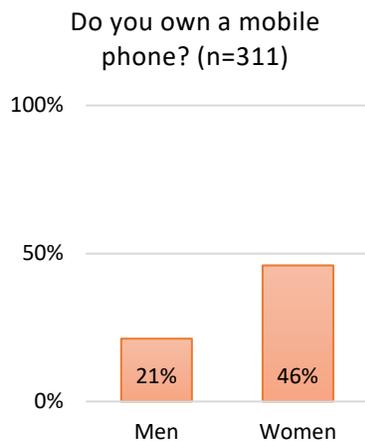


Figure 11: Hagiga Wahid Yei

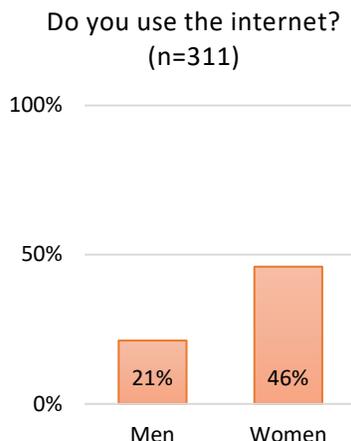


Figure 12: Hagiga Wahid Yei

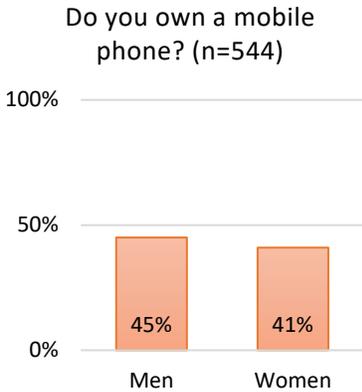


Figure 13: Hagiga Wahid Juba

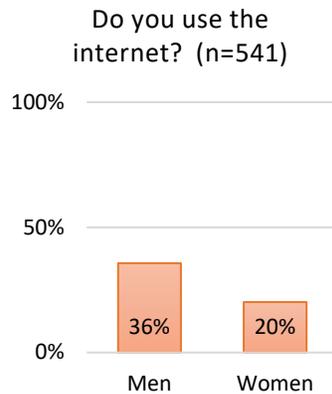


Figure 14: Hagiga Wahid Juba

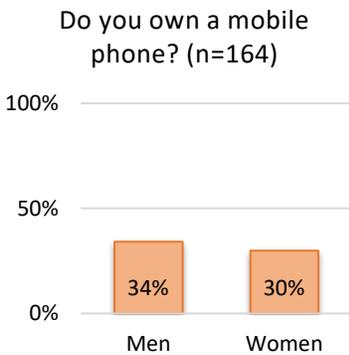


Figure 15: Hagiga Wahid Uganda

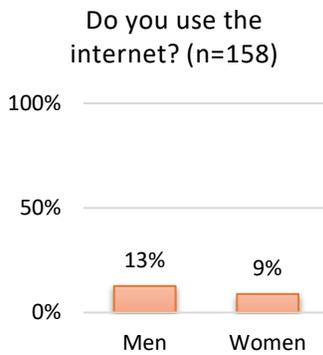


Figure 16: Hagiga Wahid Uganda

Beyond access to mobile phones and the internet, we also asked a self-assessed question about people’s awareness of events that happen where they live. There was some variation in regard to this question.

- In North Kivu, **41%** of men in our respondent pool felt well-informed of events in their village, in comparison to **33%** of women.
- In Yei, **26%** of men in our respondent pool felt well-informed of events in their village, in comparison to **19%** of women.
- In Juba, **33%** of men in our respondent pool felt well-informed of events in their village in comparison to **32%** of women.
- In Rhino Camp, **22%** of men in our respondent pool felt well-informed of events in their village in comparison to **21%** of women.

Perceptions of peace

Moving beyond literacy and access to information, perceptions of peace can differ according to gendered experiences of daily life. Our survey asked respondents about their perceptions of peace in the areas where they live.

- In North Kivu, **22%** of men in our respondent pool described where they lived as being very violent, compared to **10%** of women.
- In Yei, **14%** of men in our respondent pool described where they lived as being very violent, compared to **29%** of women.
- In Juba, **4%** of men in our respondent pool described where they lived as being very violent, compared to **6%** of women.
- In Rhino Camp, neither gender described where they lived as being very violent.

The respondents also described where they lived as moderately peaceful.

- In North Kivu, **30%** of men in our respondent pool described where they lived as being moderately peaceful compared to **27%** of women.
- In Yei, **13%** of men in our respondent pool described where they lived as being moderately peaceful compared to **43%** of women.
- In Juba, **30%** of men in our respondent pool described where they lived as being moderately peaceful compared to **27%** of women.
- In Rhino Camp, **39%** of men in our respondent pool described where they lived as being moderately peaceful compared to **27%** of women.

There are some potential reasons for these differences that require further investigation. First, since more women described where they live as very violent, than moderately peaceful, less women described where they live as moderately peaceful. Second, another reason, at least compared to Juba, might be that men in Yei are more likely to be combatants or targeted as suspected combatants, making them consider where they live less peaceful.

Fortunately, a large majority of respondents in Juba do not describe where they live as being very violent, and no one in Rhino Camp described where they live as being very violent. In the case of Rhino Camp, the lack of 'very violent' responses might have to do with different ideas and perspectives of how peace or violence are self-defined. Refugees in Uganda do not really have to worry about imminent war sweeping through their settlements, but women are reportedly often harassed by host community members while doing everyday things like gathering firewood. Sexual assault is probably also a common problem. Perceptions like that might make women less likely to consider the area to be peaceful even if they are also not labelling it as violent. However, in both North Kivu and Yei, **10%** or more of each gender

described their local areas as being very violent, pointing to an area of concern. These ideas warrant more research.

Rumours related to women

We also asked the respondents if they had recently heard of any rumours, particularly rumours related to women. As can be seen in the bar charts below, the majority of respondents had heard of rumours pertaining to women across all locations.



Figure 17: Kijiji Cha Amani

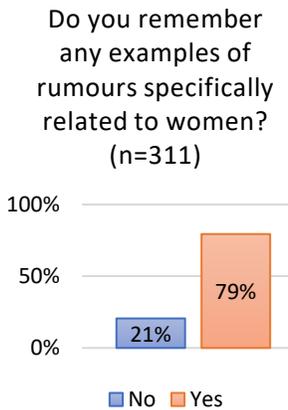


Figure 18: Hagiga Wahid Yei



Figure 19: Hagiga Wahid Juba

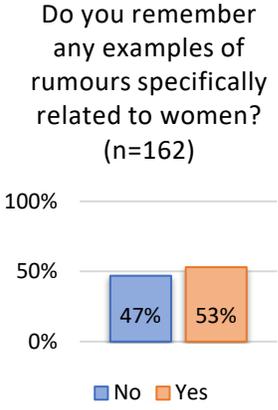


Figure 20: Hagiga Wahid Uganda

We also learned that **39% to 43%** of respondents across the four locations have passed on rumours related to women without first checking whether or not they were true. These findings are not surprising because similar percentages of respondents stated that they have also passed on rumours related to violent conflict more generally without first verifying them either. However, we are continuously studying the impact that the sharing of unverified rumours has upon communities, which is of central concern for the Sentinel Project’s work.



Figure 21: Kijiji Cha Amani



Figure 22: Hagiga Wahid Yei



Figure 23: Hagiga Wahid Juba



Figure 24: Hagiga Wahid Uganda

The respondents who had heard rumours related to women provided examples which predominantly related to the following themes.

Kijiji Cha Amani	Hagiga Wahid Juba	Hagiga Wahid Yei	Hagiga Wahid Uganda
A woman came back from the dead	Cattle raiding	Cattle raiding	Infidelity
Adultery	Child abduction	Killing women and girls	Killing of women
Finding bodies of dead pregnant girls	Eating children	Rape	Marital disputes
Killing, raping, choking girls	Forced marriage		Rampant marriages of girls due to COVID-19
The kidnapping of girls and children	Rape		Rape
Women are witches	Violence against girls		
	Violence against women		

Table 1: Thematic analysis

The chart above shows that gendered rumours are often related to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), or stereotypes about women. Cattle raiding is likely noted here because in South Sudan some men have begun in recent years to more frequently engage in raids to steal cattle (typically from other communities), which are an important status symbol in some ethnic groups as well as being a source of wealth. Cattle are commonly used for transactions related to the traditional marital practice of paying bride price. At the same time, it is worth noting that the vast majority of cattle are probably not kept on what a Western audience would normally perceive to be farms or ranches, but rather are constantly moved around by pastoralists to find new sources of food and water. [France 24](#) reports the following:

Bride prices soared as donor money poured into the country after independence from Sudan, allowing politicians, military men and the well-connected to enrich themselves and “get a lot of money” to pay for a wife... The average price went up from about 20 head of cattle to 100, in a country where the majority of people follow the tradition. Suddenly, many young men could not afford to get married unless they raided cattle from other communities.

In summary, these themes are common current rumours that surfaced in these four contexts very recently.

Discussion

The findings described above provide insights into gendered access to information and technology and the prevalence and types of gendered rumours in North Kivu, Yei, Juba and Rhino Camp. It was important for the Sentinel Project to capture gender-related rumours in these contexts.

First, in information deprived contexts, misinformation is more rampant. As [Huang, Starbird, Orand, Stanek, and Pedersen](#) (2015) underline, “social psychologists have posited that rumoring is a reaction to information scarcity and ambiguity, which are common characteristics of disasters; when information is scarce or ambiguous, people try to fill gaps in understanding by creating their own versions of truth” (p.2).

Second, at the same time, we expect that the sensitivity of these types of rumours means that they have the potential to take an emotional toll on the people who are exposed to them while also fuelling distrust, fear, and instability. Although we do not know for sure, rumours with some sort of gender-related aspect may be more likely to spread widely because of the emotional responses that they inspire in many of the people who hear them, which may also increase the danger of those people responding violently. Gender-based rumours are particularly sensitive and personal and have the potential to cause volatile relations if taken at face value, seized, and reacted upon. So, we understand the importance of capturing the role of rumours, such as about cattle-raiding, in conflict-prone areas because of the heightened seriousness of misinformation in such contexts. When rumours relate to personal violence; violence against one’s family members, friends, or ethnic group/tribe/clan; or involve one’s livelihood or property, especially in places where such occurrences do frequently happen, then we have to be especially attuned to the dynamics at play. Indeed, there is research to support the idea that at least regarding online misinformation, highly emotional content that someone personally about or is attached to is rapidly shared (Huang et al., 2015; [Lazer et al., 2018](#)). Huang et al.’s (2015) study found that “emotional proximity [was] a key factor in online information seeking and sharing behavior...information traveled quickly between social media users at a time when their main concern was to develop a coherent understanding of the situation” (p.10).

Kijiji Cha Amani and Hagiga Wahid play a role in mitigating these kinds of rumours and providing accurate information and context back to the community. For example, related to GBV, Hagiga Wahid has encountered rumours such as alleged [rape](#) that evoked emotional and visceral responses from community members. In 2020, [a rumour](#) surfaced that a person accused of impregnating a girl was killed. This rumour was classified as probably true. Another [rumour from 2019](#) involved a woman who was accused of poisoning people. She was rumoured

to be killed by family and friends of the allegedly poisoned children and elder. The rumour of the murder was proved to be true.

Since these preliminary results from the survey are mainly quantitative, our next step will be to connect them with the results of focus group discussions (FGDs) that followed the surveys conducted in each location, in April and May 2021. Our teams conducted the FGDs in order to gather qualitative data and add context to the survey findings. We hope that the data from the FGDs delve more deeply into these rumours and offer perspectives on why they arise along with their significance and implications. We will map out how these findings relate to tensions within communities in a more extensive report that will be available in summer 2021.