

# COVID-19 and Online Violence in India

DIGITAL INTELLIGENCE REPORT

Executive Summary

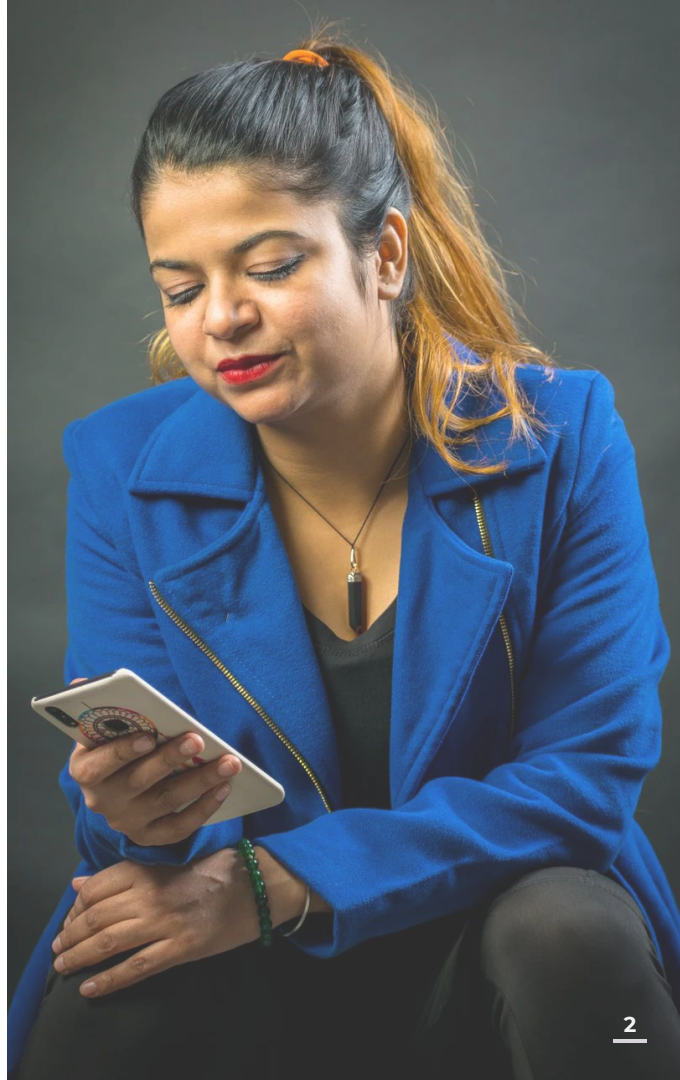
April 2021



# BACKGROUND

- Online violence is the use of technology to cause, facilitate, or threaten violence against individuals that may result in physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm and suffering. It includes the exploitation of the individuals' circumstances, characteristics, or vulnerabilities[1].
- In India, online violence is on the rise with women, girls and LGBTI individuals disproportionately impacted[2].

**Quilt.AI and ICRW studied online violence in urban and rural areas in India to understand how users are searching for and experiencing online violence before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.**



# WHAT DID WE DO?

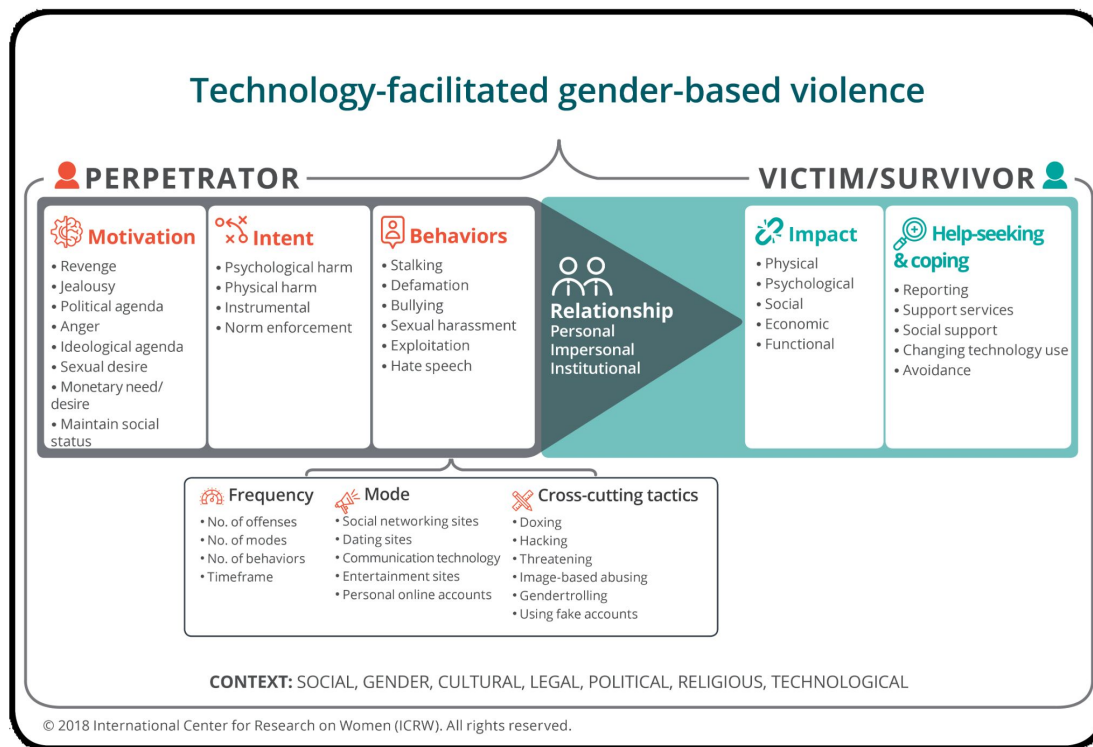
- 1 Grounded** project scope in an evidence-based conceptual framework on online violence.
- 2 Categorized** a list of 6k search keywords into: online stalking, sexual harassment, exploitation, doxing, hacking, image-based abuse, gender trolling, and using fake accounts.
- 3 Search Journey Analysis:** Assessed how people are searching for online violence and where users are directed for more information (webpage and resources)
- 4 Urban/Rural Analysis:** Assessed differences in search behavior between urban and rural areas\*, before (pre-April 2020) and during the pandemic.
- 5 Platform Analysis:** Analyzed over 8k posts related to online violence on social media (Twitter).
- 6 Compared these results** with how tech companies, NGOs and advocates are tackling online violence

\* Urban areas were Bengaluru, Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata. Rural areas were Assagao, Kangra, Palakkad, and Gaya.

# SCOPE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Our methodologies were rooted in an evidence-based conceptual framework on technology-facilitated GBV.

We focused on aspects of the framework that were digitally trackable and demonstrated stated and unstated behaviors through search or social data, including **behaviors** related to online violence, **cross-cutting tactics**, and **help seeking and coping**.



# SEARCH JOURNEY: What we found

## EXPLORING TYPES OF ONLINE VIOLENCE

### TOP KEYWORDS

"Doxing meaning" "Gender trolling"  
"Image-based abuse" "Cybercrime against women"  
"Cybercrime harassment" "What is cyberstalking"

### INSIGHTS

Top searches were a mix of foreign and local sites with more of the former. Sites varied from international organisations to freedom-of-speech activist sites to knowledge portals like Wikipedia.

The top sites users were directed to were American or British websites with definitions of key terms.

## EXPERIENCING ONLINE VIOLENCE

### TOP KEYWORDS

"How to check if i'm hacked" "Threatening text messages example"  
"am I being stalked online"

### INSIGHTS

Sites were mainly online tech platforms (security platforms or social media's help pages) or foreign online publications and blogs that provide advice. There were few local sources that explored whether one is experiencing online violence.

## SEEKING HELP FOR ONLINE VIOLENCE

### TOP KEYWORDS

"Report cyberbullying" "Electronic harassment law"  
"Cyberstalking laws" "Text harassment laws"  
"How to report cyber bullying"

### INSIGHTS

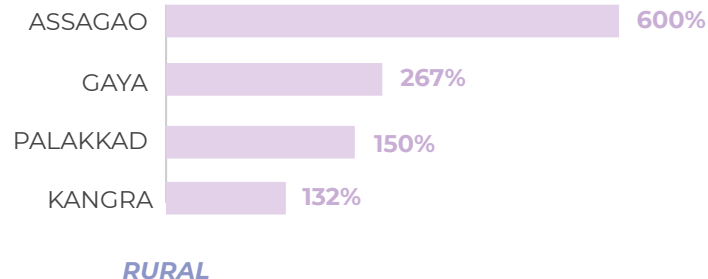
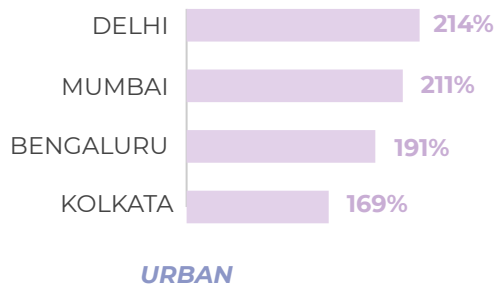
There was an equal mix of foreign and local websites with some Western country police departments..

Local sources primarily consisted of pro-bono law firms or organisation, local security companies, or the Indian government's cybercrime website.

# URBAN/RURAL AREA SEARCH ANALYSIS OVERVIEW

Search volumes of keywords in the Exploitation and Hacking categories had the highest shares in all 8 locations. Searches related to doxing are on the rise followed by image-based abuse and gendertrolling.

## GROWTH IN SEARCHES ABOUT DOXXING



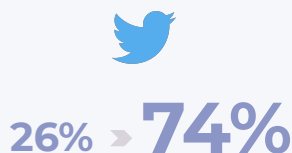
## BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19

- Delhi had the highest growth in searches for Doxing and Image-based abuse (214 % and 120% respectively) compared to other cities.
- During COVID-19, help-seeking searches in Kangra grew the most at 174%, followed by Palakkad (129%) then Gaya (71%).

# PLATFORM ANALYSIS: Size of Conversation on Social Media

In order to analyze the size of conversations around online violence, posts relating to the topic were selected. From these posts, 8,239 posts from the pre-and during COVID-19 timeframe were randomly selected. The following table breaks down the size of conversation across each category during-COVID. Excluded categories had much lower volumes of posts. Social media platforms include Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

The size of the conversation around online violence in Twitter **nearly tripled** from pre-to-during Covid:



Conversations around gendertrolling and sexual harassment **remained the largest:**

Gendertrolling	➤	47%
Sexual Harassment	➤	35%
Image-based abuse	➤	8%
Hacking & Online stalking	➤	6%
Doxxing	➤	4%

A large volume of **fake accounts** were studied separately



from Instagram along there were **370k** such posts

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The size of the conversation around online violence in Twitter nearly tripled from pre- to during COVID
- Conversations around gendertrolling and sexual harassment remained the largest at 47% and 35%, respectively
- Fake accounts were taken out of the size estimation as it was large enough to skew the above results. Instead, we studied these groups, accounts, and pages separately. From Instagram alone, there were more than 370,000 such posts.

\* Excluding fake posts

\*\*Estimated calculations

# PLATFORM ANALYSIS: Snapshots

## DOXXING

We found that people use social media to search for information or discuss if doxing is right or wrong. When women share their fears and experience of being doxed, they face backlash. In several posts, women speaking against doxing were accused of seeking personal revenge against those doxing them.

*"It doesn't make it right whether he blurred the photo or not. He doxxed the minor girl and people started giving rape threats to that minor. If that man abused zubair instead of doxxing minor he should have file complaint about it"*

*"Why are you asking? I have already been threatened of doxxing. Nonetheless, a huge chunk of South Delhi falls in New Delhi for Lok Sabha wch is bizarre. It doesn't make any sense to me or my friends."*

*Examples of how people are speaking against doxing but face backlash\**

## GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Across social media platforms, we found 'entertainment' content (e.g. images, memes) that perpetuate GBV through remarks and jokes to belittle women. These posts are largely uploaded and shared by males which makes it harder for women to push back.

*"ACCOUNTANCY FACT:*

*Question: What is the difference between liability and asset?*

*Answer: A drunken friend liability. But, a drunken girlfriend is an asset.*

*#EXO #win #Kolkata #jokes #Fasak  
#FunniestTweets #MeToo"*





# PLATFORM ANALYSIS: Snapshots

## TROLLING

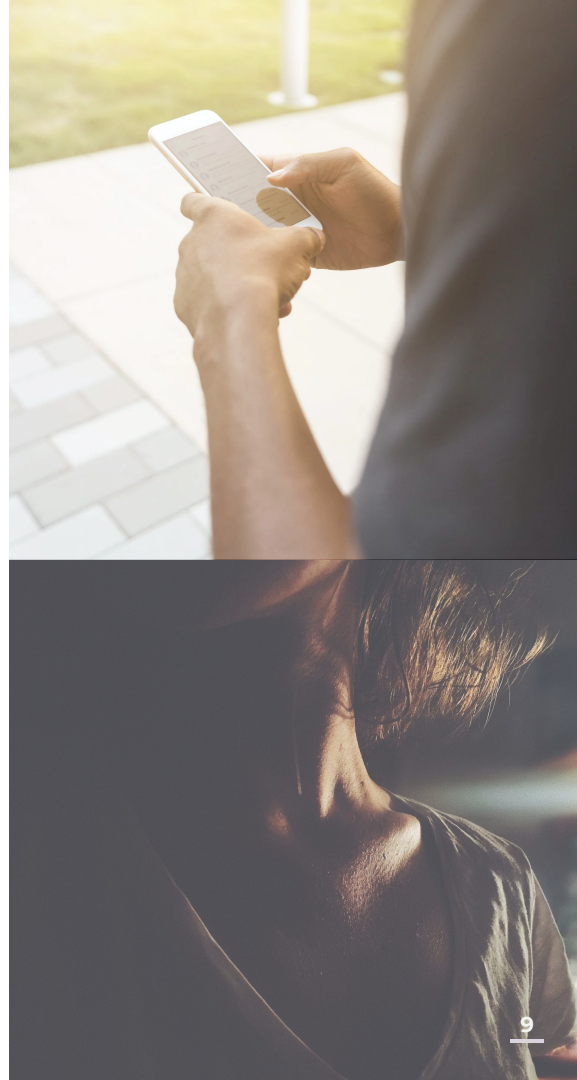
People who shared a counter opinion were trolled as 'the feminist type', which holds negative connotations (immoral, Westernized, and anti-nationalist). The volume of trolling grew when gender issues were raised. Trolling included disregarding women's messages or their qualifications and/or appearance.

*"We respect our real Women (Mon, Sisters, Aunts, Wife, Girlfriend etc.,) and protect them till our last breath. But we don't support these stupid Feminists who talk rubbish without any logic.  
#WeSupportSandeepReddyVanga"*






## SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment is plenty online. Men leave unsolicited comments on girls' posts, sometimes sending crude photos and sharing account handles without permission. Women use social media to share raw and emotional stories of online and offline sexual harassment.

*"It takes a whole lot of courage to speak about sexual harassment when you, yourself are a victim. We, women, might be chanting empowerment slogans, screaming our lungs out, day in and day out to establish our identities, we might say we are brave and that the times are changing, but how many of us can help the chill running down our spines while walking along a desolate road after dark? Or how often do we raise our voices?"*



# RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1  **Policymakers** in India and beyond can work on legislation that protects women and children from violence online. In some countries like India and Australia, policies already criminalize child sexual abuse material and hate speech. However, it is integral that policies begin to target online violence against women, girls and other marginalized groups.
- 2  **Technology firms** are accountable to the violence that is amplified through their platforms. People experience reporting mechanisms only available in English, a lack of reporting the same perpetrators on multiple platforms, and guidelines that are not transparent [1]. Tech firms should ensure transparent reporting mechanisms that are accessible to everyone. Furthermore, they should build stronger networks with policymakers and NGOs to ensure victims receive counseling and other support services, and perpetrators are identified.
- 3  **Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)** that are working to tackle online violence can advocate with policymakers, especially on laws protecting women and children online. They can also develop locally relevant content about online violence and ensure that their services are easily visible in their social media posts and on their websites.
- 4  **Research institutes like ICRW and Web Foundation** can strengthen the evidence gap around online violence and how it affects girls, women and other vulnerable communities.
- 5  **Stakeholders listed above** can collaborate to ensure girls are able to protect themselves by making information and resources readily available online, in schools and community centers. They can set up prevention response mechanisms with interventions that target rural and urban audiences differently.

## SEE THE FULL REPORT FOR MORE INFORMATION



### CONTACT US

[biva@quilt.ai](mailto:biva@quilt.ai)  
[michelle@quilt.ai](mailto:michelle@quilt.ai)  
[piya@quilt.ai](mailto:piya@quilt.ai)

### WEBSITE

[LinkedIn](#)  
[Instagram](#)  
[Twitter](#)



### CONTACT US

[lhinson@icrw.org](mailto:lhinson@icrw.org)  
  
[jfortson@bu.edu](mailto:jfortson@bu.edu)\*

\*ICRW-Quilt.AI Research Associate

### WEBSITE

[LinkedIn](#)  
[Instagram](#)  
[Twitter](#)

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