TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN ASIA

INDIA

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Funded by USAID, NORC at the University of Chicago and the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) set out to assess technology-facilitated Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in India, including trends; programs and policies currently working to prevent, mitigate, and respond to this form of violence; and gaps and recommendations for future programming. To inform this case study, the team utilized existing literature and relied on key informant interviews with leaders of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), researchers, and other experts working on the topic in India.

KEY FINDINGS

OVERVIEW

In India, technology-facilitated GBV is gaining increased attention within research and advocacy spaces. Academics, practitioners, and researchers in the country mostly refer to this form of GBV as online gender-based violence, cyber violence, online harassment, or cybercrime. Technology-facilitated GBV in India is seen by subject-matter experts and GBV organizations as a continuation of violence in the offline sphere: inequalities that make women and girls vulnerable to offline violence penetrate the online space. As the digital divides of gender and class increase online, so do the vulnerabilities of women and girls to online harassment. While India has several initiatives, laws, and policies working to address various aspects of the issue, barriers to implementation exist. Moreover, experiences of technology facilitated GBV in India need to be understood through an intersectional lens of class, caste, gender, sexuality, religion, education, and access to technology in order to fully address the issue.

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

- **Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (GBV)** is any action carried out using the internet and/or mobile technology that harms others based on their sexual or gender identity or by enforcing harmful gender norms.[1]

- **Online sexual harassment** is a broad term to include any unwanted sexual conduct received on any online platform.[2]

- **Zoom-bombing or Zoom-flashing** occurs when people join online gatherings in order to post racist, sexist, pornographic, or anti-Semitic content to shock and disturb viewers.[3]

- **Image-based abuse** encompasses both nonconsensual distribution and creation of private and/or sexual images, including the recording of sexual assaults, as well as threatening to do so.[4]

- **Nonconsensual distribution of intimate images** refers specifically to the distribution of private, sexually explicit images or videos of individuals without their consent.[5]

---

[1] Hinson, L., J. Mueller, L. O'Brien-Milne, and N. Wandera. "Technology-Facilitated GBV: What is it, and How do we measure it." *International Center for Research on Women.* (2018).
[2] Childnet International. "Online Sexual Harassment." https://www.childnet.com/teachers-and-professionals/hot-topics/online-sexual-harassment
[3] Dunn, Suzie. "Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: An Overview." Centre for International Governance Innovation. (2020). https://www.cigionline.org/publications/technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence-overview/
[4] Clare McGlynn and Erika Rackley. "Image-based sexual abuse." *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 37, no. 3, (2017): 534-561.
[5] PEN America. "Defining 'Online Abuse': A Glossary of Terms." *Online Harassment Field Manual.* (2021).

PREVALENCE, PERPETRATION, AND MOTIVATION

As internet and social media use has increased in India, so has the prevalence of technology-facilitated GBV.[6,7] The patriarchal and conservative social norms that contribute to offline violence have translated into online spaces and information and communication technology (ICT) use, perpetuating online GBV. Contributing to this prevalence is the gender gap in internet and mobile phone use in India, one of the widest in South Asia. Around 80% of men have access to mobile phones, while less than 50% of women have this same access; overall only about one-third of internet users are women.[8,9,10] The growing urban/rural divide in India also affects who is impacted by technology-facilitated GBV. As only about 12% of the country has regular internet access, the majority of internet users come from urban settings and higher socio-economic classes and castes.[11]

The existing social norms, class and caste divide, and growing gender digital divide leave women and girls most vulnerable, especially to sexual harassment and other forms of technology-facilitated GBV. Even when women and girls have access to the internet or mobile phones, it is usually restricted by husbands and fathers who maintain control of household technology and heavily surveil their usage. This also contributes to lower reporting rates, as survivors fear that reporting their experiences of violence will lead to further restrictions of ownership and usage.

Male dominance in online spaces and gendered cultural norms often make the internet inhospitable for women and girls. Just the idea of independent women making their opinions known online, regardless of the content, challenges the patriarchal social structure in India and makes them more vulnerable to violence. Because of this, research shows that female journalists, women's rights activists, and politicians face much higher rates of online abuse compared to other women. This also contributes to women and girls self-censoring online. Women tend to only communicate to people they know online, use more private settings for communication, and are more selective about posting online—yet these actions create a barrier to being able to fully exercise their rights and freedoms in online spaces. This further perpetuates the patriarchal notion that women are unwelcome in public spaces.[12]

Experts explain that there are two levels of harassment survivors face: violence perpetrated by another individual in a public or private manner and violence perpetrated by a group, usually in a public manner. Individual attacks on women and girls are usually perpetrated by men, either by strangers or by current or ex-intimate partners. The most common forms of individual technology-facilitated GBV

---

[6] Datta, Bishakha. "Women and Online Abuse in India Submission to Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women." GenderIT. (2013).
https://genderit.org/resources/women-and-online-abuse-india-submission-special-rapporteur-violence-against-women
[7] Pawar, M.U., and A. Sakure. "Cyberspace and Women: A Research." International Journal of Engineering and Advanced Technology 8, no. 6 Special Issue, (2019): 1670–75. https://doi.org/10.35940/ijeat.F1313.0986S319
[8] Ghosh, S, Decoding gendered online trolling in India. Observer Research Foundation. (2020).
https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/decoding-gendered-online-trolling-in-india/
[9] Kantar. "Internet Adoption in India." (2021).
https://images.assettype.com/afaqs/2021-06/b9a3220f-ae2f-43db-a0b4-36a372b243c4/KANTAR_ICUBE_2020_Report_C1.pdf
[10] GSMA. "Connected women: The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2021." GSMA. (2021). https://www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2021.pdf
[11] Kovacs, A, Padte. K. R, and SV, Shobha, 'Don't let it stand!': An exploratory study of women and verbal online abuse in India, Internet Democracy Project. (2013).
https://cdn.internetdemocracy.in/idp/assets/downloads/reports/women-and-verbal-online-abuse-in-india/Internet-Democracy-Project-Women-and-Online-Abuse.pdf
[12] Chandrasekhar, Ramya. "Policing online abuse or policing women? Our submission to the United Nations on online violence against women." Internet Democracy Project. (2017). https://internetdemocracy.in/reports/un-srvaw-report

are harassing phone calls from wrong numbers, non-consensual distribution of intimate images, and online sexual harassment. Attacks carried out by groups, commonly known as "cyber troops" or "troll armies," involve repeated harassing comments or threats targeting individuals and are usually led by men. The anonymity of the internet makes it easy for anyone to discreetly participate in these attacks using a fake profile. While women are still vulnerable to these kinds of attacks, research and experts say marginalized communities, such as members of the LGTBQI+ community and those further discriminated against due to their caste, class, religion, or political beliefs, also experience high rates of group attacks.[13]

The prevalence of technology-facilitated GBV has increased manyfold due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As social interactions moved predominantly online, and women's participation in online interactions increased, there was a noticeable uptick in rates of technology-facilitated GBV, including new of violence such as "Zoom bombing" or "Zoom flashing" in online classrooms and work meetings. Other forms of violence became more popular like "shock content," videos that mix humor with violent acts against women posted as Instagram reels and TikToks. Lockdowns impacted LGBTQI+ individuals, who faced higher incidence of violence from family members due to increased surveillance of mobile phones that led to accidental coming-out situations with adverse implications. Female sex workers (FSWs) are another group that experienced increased violence during the pandemic. India saw more FSWs moving toward mobile or home-based sex work, making them increasingly vulnerable to violence from clients taking screenshots of their work to later use for blackmail or non-consensual distribution of intimate images.

PREVENTION, MITIGATION, AND RESPONSE

Technology-facilitated GBV is widely recognized by experts as a relatively new concept in India, yet there are several initiatives and organizations working to address various aspects of the issue. Funders like **Omidyar Network**, **Amplify Change**, **Women's Fund Asia**, **Electronic Frontier Foundation**, **Mozilla Foundation**, **Access Now**, **Ford Foundation**, **UN Women**, **Tata Trusts**, and **Open Tech Foundation** have been supporting initiatives on interrelated themes of technology and gender, digital rights, and digital safety in India.

Some NGOs have focused their efforts on creating more efficient reporting and monitoring mechanisms and addressing the digital literacy gaps that perpetuate online violence. One example is **The Centre for Internet and Society (CIS)**, whose staff aim to enhance AI to better moderate and prevent abusive online content, employing a feminist and linguistic perspective in the design. To improve reporting mechanisms, **Point of View** is developing an online platform called TechSakhi, which gives digital safety information via helplines to address cases of harassment experienced by women and girls specifically from low-income backgrounds. They also carry out digital literacy programs in areas with limited resources, and work to decrease the digital divide and improve digital literacy through online safety training for new and semi-literate users. The NASSCOM Foundation, Sayfty Trust, UN Women India in partnership with Vodafone Idea Foundation have developed an application called MyAmbar (meaning *my sky*) that provides information and support for survivors of GBV including online violence. Other NGOs and digital rights organizations that have been active in advocacy, trainings, research, and programmatic interventions are: **Association for Progressive Communications**, **SFLC.IN**, **BBC World Media**

---

[13] Munusamy, Kiruba. "Intersection of identities: online gender and caste based violence." GenderIT. (2018). https://www.genderit.org/articles/intersection-identities-online-gender-and-caste-based-violence

Action India, **Tactical Tech**, **Feminisms in India**, **Amnesty's Troll Patrol**, **IT for Change**, **Heart Mob**, **Internet *Saathi***, and **Internet Democracy Project**.

The government has also carried out initiatives to address technology-facilitated GBV, spearheading awareness, accessibility, reporting mechanisms (helplines),[14] cyber courts[15] and cyber cells.[16,17] Most notably in 2016, the **Ministry of Home Affairs** in partnership with the **Ministry of Women and Child Development** developed the Scheme for Cyber Crimes Prevention against Women and Children. This initiative includes an online reporting program for addressing and resolving cybercrimes, sanctions for a forensic unit, a capacity building unit to assist and improve law enforcement response, a research and development unit to improve technology readiness for response, and an awareness creation unit to disseminate education and awareness campaigns.[18,19] The **National Commission of Women** also launched a WhatsApp number to provide easily accessible support and assistance to women experiencing all forms of violence, including online violence.[20] While early research of these helplines showed low reporting incidence due to lack of awareness among survivors, the effectiveness of them still needs to be measured to fully understand their impact on addressing technology-facilitated GBV.

Some states are also using the Nirbhaya Fund for Safe Cities initiatives[21] to focus on technology-facilitated GBV. The aim of the fund is to support initiatives that provide services to survivors of gender-based violence, of which some states have included service provision to address online GBV.[22]

While legal frameworks for offline violence exist, the same is not true for online violence. The law used to address technology-facilitated GBV is the Information and Technology Act 2000 (IT Act). Sections 66E, 67, 72, and 354A are the most common provisions used for legal recourse, and address violations in privacy, publication of sexually explicit or obscene content, NCII, and breaches in confidentiality.[23,24] The IT Act does not explicitly address gender based psychological violence against women outside the

---

[14] National Cybercrime Reporting Portal. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.
https://cybercrime.gov.in/Webform/Helpline.aspx
[15] Seal, V. "First cyber court set up in Delhi." (2018).
https://www.dnaindia.com/business/report-first-cyber-court-set-up-in-delhi-1277777
[16] Government of India. "Cyber cells are part of the police machinery in India specifically dealing with cases of cybercrimes including those impacting women and children." https://www.mha.gov.in/division_of_mha/cyber-and-information-security-cis-division
[17] Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs. "Cybercrime prevention against women and children." (2019).
https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1559115
[18] Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs. "Details about CCPWC (Cybercrime Prevention against Women and Children) Scheme." https://www.mha.gov.in/division_of_mha/cyber-and-information-security-cis-division/Details-about-CCPWC-CybercrimePrevention-against-Women-and-Children-Scheme
[19] Kumar, V, 'Many measures in to check cybercrimes against women.' Ministry of Women and Child Development. 2018.
https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1540340
[20] Gupta, S. "Creating Safe Spaces: NCW launches 24/7 helpline for women facing violence." (2021). The Logical Indian,
https://thelogicalindian.com/trending/ncw-launches-24-hour-helpline-number-for-women-29898
[21] Bhandari, H and Chandra, J, "The long wait for safety: tracking the Safe Cities programme." (2019). The Hindu,
https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-long-wait-for-safety/article26959263.ece
[22] Government of India. "Nirbhaya Fund." Ministry of Women and Child Development.
2019. https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1580463
[23] Government of India. "Information Technology Act 2008." Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology.
https://meity.gov.in/content/information-technology-act
[24] Safecity. "Cyberspace and sexual violence laws." https://www.safecity.in/cyberspace-sexual-violence-laws

domestic setting. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act has provisions to address gender based psychological violence but does not address technology-facilitated GBV.

Experts have critiqued the provisions and implementation of the IT Act as being problematic due to their protectionist tendencies and focus on public morality and obscenity, further disregarding the violence experienced by the survivor. This is often linked to the inability for survivors to name their experience as "violence" due to taboos around sexual speech and imagery. Survivors are also often victim-blamed by law enforcement, all of which adversely impacts the effectiveness of legal recourse. Ultimately, there is a need to shift the paradigm from punishing various forms of online expression to more explicitly prosecuting the perpetrators of online violence.

GAPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Successful interventions will require researchers, activists, NGOs, civil society organizations, and government entities to continue to work together toward mitigating, preventing, and responding to technology-facilitated GBV. Areas for consideration to bolster programming and policy efforts include:

- **Improve digital literacy and security:** The gender and class divides online and offline contribute to the continued perpetration of technology-facilitated GBV experienced by women, girls, and marginalized communities. Coupled with interventions to address the patriarchal power over access and usage of the Internet and mobile phones, it is important to build the capacity of these communities to engage safely online. Research and experts have pointed out, however, that the infrastructure barriers to engaging rural and marginalized communities must be at the forefront of programming. Experts specifically mentioned schools as prime locations for interventions of this sort. Funds also need to be allocated for the technology itself to address the access barriers faced by many communities, with digital education and online safety training as an important and necessary intervention.[25]

- **Improve content moderation and response in collaboration with technology companies:** Social media platforms in India, namely Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, have instituted measures for checking content, conducted online safety training, and made provisions to work toward safer online spaces. However, users continue to report dissatisfaction with how these companies handle reports of online harassment, bullying, and other forms of violence. Many reports have also found that the administrators at these companies are not equipped to handle reports of violence in languages other than English and are not able to fully comprehend regional idioms of violence. This leads to a non-response to reports in languages other than English, creating a barrier to many people in India who are experiencing abuse. Unlike social media platforms, however, mobile phone companies in India have not yet worked to address issues of ICT violence at all. Overall, there is a need to work with technology companies to improve and widen their response and prevention capacity for individuals experiencing violence in non-Western countries.

---

[25] Tyers, A, Highet, C, Chamberlain, S and Arjun Khanna. "Women's empowerment collectives and the power of digital: A research and learning agenda: Increasing women's digital literacy in India-what works." BBC Media Action. (2021). https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/pdf/india-research-study-women%E2%80%99s-digital-literacy-2021.pdf

- **Strengthen laws and build capacities of law enforcement:** The laws used to address cases of technology-facilitated GBV in India do not directly mention gender-based violence or violence perpetrated by ICTs. The criminal legal system and perceptions by law enforcement officials is also built on a hierarchy of offense and subsequent response. This leads to physical violence being taken more seriously than psychological violence, which is the main impact of technology-facilitated GBV. Laws need to be improved to specifically address online violence, and law enforcement officials need specialized training on the primary forms and effects of technology-facilitated GBV for improved response and prevention outcomes.

- **Increase survivor-centric resources and support:** Comprehensive and sufficient resources, such as access to legal support and therapy services, are essential for survivors. The rise in cases reported during COVID-19 overwhelmed the already limited and saturated resources available in India. Funding for these resources is seen as a formidable challenge, with some organizations relying only on grants coming from the international community rather than the government. Additional funding from the national government and international donors can enhance survivor-centric resources and efforts.

- **Develop a survivor-centered approach to legal recourse:** The protectionist attitudes of law enforcement and puritanical undertones of the IT Act often lead to women and marginalized communities choosing not to report their technology-facilitated abuse. Given the gender norms within these patriarchal setups, perpetrators mostly escape punishment while women and girls are punished with restricted access and social humiliation. There must be a conducive and supportive ecosystem for survivors to report online violence without fear of victim-blaming or social backlash.

- **Address social and cultural norms that perpetuate violence:** Experts have noted that in order to truly mitigate and prevent further violence against women, girls, and marginalized communities online, the underlying cultural norms must be addressed. While improving access, education, laws, and capacity are important, violence will never be prevented without tackling the patriarchal and puritanical social and gender norms that perpetuate both offline and online violence.

Recommended citation: NORC at the University of Chicago and the International Center for Research on Women. (2022). Case Study: Technology-facilitated Gender Based Violence in India.