TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN ASIA

THAILAND

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 Thailand, 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) and researchers working on the topic in Thailand.

KEY FINDINGS

OVERVIEW

Information Communication Technology (ICT) usage has rapidly increased in Thailand in recent years. This increased utilization has led to rising levels of digital harassment and technology-facilitated GBV, particularly targeted toward women, the LGBTQI+ community, and children.[6] One significant challenge is access to justice mechanisms, which is linked to factors including gaps in the legal framework and lack of awareness of legal protections. These factors serve to amplify the consequences of technology-facilitated GBV. This, in tandem with limited understanding of the motivations and effects of online violence, limits the comprehensive support potential targets and current survivors need.

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]

- **Cyberbullying** is the use of information and communications technology to intimidate, harass, victimize, or bully an individual or a group of individuals.[2]

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

- **Doxing** is the non-consensual release of personal or identifying information, such as an address or contact information.[5]

PREVALENCE, PERPETRATION, AND MOTIVATION

The ubiquity of internet culture in Thailand renders users susceptible to technology-facilitated GBV, especially due to the rapid rise of access to information and communication technology in recent years. Many of these survivors are women, who have faced myriad forms of cyberbullying, sexual

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[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] Bhat, C.S., Ragan, M.A., Selvaraj, P.R. *et al.* "Online Bullying among High-School Students in India." *Int J Adv Counselling* 39, 112–124. (2017). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-017-9286-y

[3] Childnet International. "Online Sexual Harassment." https://www.childnet.com/teachers-and-professionals/hot-topics/online-sexual-harassment

[4] McGlynn, C. and Rackley, E. "Image-based sexual abuse." *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 37, no. 3 (2017): 534-561.

[5] Ibid

[6] UNFPA. "A digital cry for help: Big data study in Asia-Pacific provides key signposts to violence against women amid COVID-19." (2021). https://www.unfpa.org/news/digital-cry-help-big-data-study-asia-pacific-provides-key-signposts-violence-against-women

harassment, image-based abuse, and doxing online. Due to increased amounts of time spent online during the COVID-19 pandemic, incidences of technology-facilitated violence have expanded in the country.[7]

In Thailand, perpetration of cyber violence is mostly gendered, with men targeting women and the LGBTQI+ community. This may reflect the social expectations that men demonstrate masculinity, enacting gender roles through targeted harassment. As such, perpetrators often consider the bullying or teasing of females a part of this "performance." Similarly, widespread patriarchal norms reflect an expectation that men in Thailand can be sexually adventurous while women are expected to be moderate and reserved in their expression of sexuality. As a result, victim-shaming women who experience technology-facilitated violence is prevalent in Thai society—more so than taking action against perpetrators through legal mechanisms.

Technology-facilitated GBV in Thailand often targets female activists, singers, journalists, and other women in the public eye. These attacks also draw attention to the intersection of racism and sexism, as women with dark skin tones are specifically targeted and harassed. LGBTQI+ individuals are also targeted by technology-facilitated violence and are often mocked or misgendered online. Further, as they are already marginalized by society in Thailand, LGBTQI+ individuals are less likely to feel comfortable in seeking support, leading to extremely low rates of reporting these crimes. Since technology-facilitated GBV in Thailand is not regarded socially as a pervasive crime with significant impacts, online harassment is also often stigmatized, with survivors being blamed for even having online presences.

Younger people tend to be more at risk of technology-facilitated GBV, as more of them are online. Cyberbullying is one of the most frequently perpetrated forms of harassment among students in Thailand, who mock and tease their peers on online platforms and social media sites, often as a result of offline disputes.[8] Image-based abuse, which encompasses nonconsensual distribution and creation of private sexual images, is also prevalent in school contexts in Thailand, with perpetrators disseminating pornographic images of past romantic partners to shame them. In certain cases, survivors may face severe backlash compelling them to transfer schools. Younger children are also particularly susceptible to online sexual abuse as they are less familiar with safety measures while navigating online spaces, and thus have faced an even higher risk of being targeted during the COVID-19 pandemic as their increased presence online is exploited by perpetrators through chatrooms and other online platforms. In 2020, the police-led Internet Crimes Against Children (TICAC) taskforce identified and registered cases of over 100 children who were subject to online sexual abuse—a figure that had doubled since statistics were recorded in 2018.[9]

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[7] UNFPA. "A digital cry for help: Big data study in Asia-Pacific provides key signposts to violence against women amid COVID-19." (2021). https://www.unfpa.org/news/digital-cry-help-big-data-study-asia-pacific-provides-key-signposts-violence-against-women

[8] Sittichai, R., and P.K. Smith. "Bullying and Cyberbullying in Thailand: Coping Strategies and Relation to Age, Gender, Religion and Victim Status." *Journal of New Approaches in Educational Research* 7, no. 1 (2018): 24–30. https://doi.org/10.7821/naer.2018.1.254

[9] Reuters. "Online child sex abuse in Thailand nears record high with coronavirus." (2020). https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-sexcrimes-internet-trfn/online-child-sex-abuse-in-thailand-nears-record-high-with-coronavirus-idUSKBN23P33K

PREVENTION, MITIGATION, AND RESPONSE

There are several key actors currently working to mitigate and prevent technology-facilitated GBV in Thailand. These include **FES Thailand**, which conducts sensitization programs about women's rights and sexuality, advocates for digital rights, provides counseling services, and promotes gender justice through discussion forums and meeting groups. The **Foundation for Women** provides information, support, referral, and emergency assistance to women who have been victims of exploitation and violence. The **Thai Netizen Network** is a leading non-profit organization that advocates for digital rights, civil liberties, and internet freedom for all Thai citizens. However, while these organizations provide valuable support and resources to survivors, perpetrators themselves are not often held accountable for their actions

Academics and student groups from universities play an important role in conducting research on online violence in Thailand and implementing awareness campaigns. Institutions such as Silpakorn University, Chulalongkorn University, and Mahidol University provide research and organizational support to students and researchers studying the prevalence and incidences of technology-facilitated GBV in Thailand. Student groups and advocates, including IKIGAI and Mu Studio, at these universities have collaborated with large international organizations such as UN Women, UNFPA, Korea International Cooperation Agency, and other entities to launch online initiatives, such as the **Girls Not Objects** campaign to counteract objectification and online GBV.[10]

Government initiatives include the **1300 hotline**—a mechanism to flag and respond to violence against women and children, which is run by the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. This resource received over 300 calls a day[11] during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting their increased vulnerability during this period. The TICAC taskforce continues to identify and register cases to aid victims of online child sex abuse.

Legislation aimed at protecting Thai citizens from cyber-attacks and technology-facilitated GBV includes measures to mitigate and prevent online violence through the Cybersecurity Act of 2019 and the Personal Data Protection Act of 2019,[12] which indirectly combats the perpetration of cyber abuse or misuse of data through strictly mandating consent from the individuals the data identify. However, there is no specific legislation related to protecting individuals against cyber harassment, stalking, doxing, image-based abuse, or other forms of online violence. Research indicates that such distinct laws are urgently required to prosecute perpetrators and protect targets of online violence.[13]

GAPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There have been several efforts to counteract and mitigate technology-facilitated GBV in Thailand through collective approaches by international organizations, local stakeholders, researchers, and law

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[10] UN Women. "Join us to fight another spreading virus: cyber violence." (2020). https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2020/03/join-us-to-fight-another-spreading-virus
[11] UN Women. "What happened after Covid-19 hit: Thailand." (2020). https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/11/what-happened-after-covid-19-hit-thailand
[12] Thailand Institute of Justice. June 23, 2020. https://www.tijthailand.org/highlight/detail/cybercrime-covid-19
[13] Pitaksantayothin, J. "Sexual Harassment on the Internet: A Comparative of Legal Measures in Thailand, England and the Republic of Korea." P*ublic Health Policy and Laws Journal*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2020): 365-381. https://so05.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/journal_law/article/view/240093

enforcement officials. These existing endeavors might be most effective if supplemented in the following ways:

- **Enhance monitoring and identification mechanisms:** Victims report cases of online abuse through platforms such as Facebook. In addition to strengthening overall response mechanisms to these complaints, companies could strengthen their monitoring strategies to ensure that the reports are sent to the relevant authorities. Government monitoring systems also need to be improved to prevent similar future behaviors.

- **Conduct awareness-raising campaigns:** There is a need to improve and expand awareness-raising campaigns on technology-facilitated GBV and its impacts in Thailand. Existing programs center primarily on democracy and human rights; these, in conjunction with specific initiatives designed to educate Thai society on the parameters of online violence, can aid the reduction of this type of violence through improved understanding. This is particularly of note due to the negative perceptions and societal attitudes surrounding victim-blaming and harassment in Thailand.

- **Improve digital and legal literacy:** Research by UNFPA underscored the need for digital and media literacy programs, especially designed for victims in rural areas, those with low levels of literacy, and/or marginalized groups, such as women and LGBTQI+ populations. These programs would form vital bridges by connecting these groups with highly valuable life-saving technologies, such as helplines and applications for contacting law enforcement. This literacy should include access to and understanding of hotline systems or resources for understanding mechanisms for accessing justice.

- **Strengthen capacities of government and law enforcement officials:** To promote their engagement in the recourse process, law enforcement and government officials in Thailand need improved institutional capacity-building and sensitization training. Official spaces also need to increasingly acknowledge the pervasiveness and negative consequences of technology-facilitated GBV, as there is a reported lack of attention by government officials given to technology-facilitated GBV crimes. The effects of this inattention may be amplified for those victims from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, some of whom report marked differences in responsiveness from law enforcement officials compared to victims with resources and connections, who are able to identify and access justice with greater ease and more rapid results.

- **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 Indonesia. 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.

- **Increase funding for researchers and civil societies:** Research gaps on the causes and motivations behind technology-facilitated GBV must be bridged by funding academics and other data collection initiatives. Mental health outcomes related to online harassment or bullying

should also be studied in order to create appropriate resources for survivors. Furthermore, funding researchers through grants is immensely helpful for specific research questions, but sustainable mechanisms that support civil society initiatives monetarily must be conceptualized and implemented by the government, technology companies, and international organizations.

- **Strengthen legal protection mechanisms:** Legislation specific to technology-facilitated GBV is urgently needed. Existing laws such as the Criminal Code broadly cover certain aspects of online protections or criminal activities, but the nebulous nature of this type of violence necessitates specifications on forms such as sexual harassment, doxing, trolling, and image-based abuse. This would also enable survivors to access justice in a swifter, more streamlined fashion.