Help-seeking behaviours of those experiencing technology-facilitated GBV in Asia: implications for policy and programming

Vaiddehi Bansal,1,2 Bansal-Vaiddehi@norc.org
NORC at the University of Chicago, USA

Erin Leasure,2 eleasure@icrw.org
Connor Roth,2 croth@icrw.org
International Center for Research on Women

Mayumi Rezwan, rezwan-mayumi@norc.org
Mithila Iyer, iyer-mithila@norc.org
NORC at the University of Chicago, USA

Poulomi Pal, palpoulomi1@gmail.com
Laura Hinson, lhinson@icrw.org
International Center for Research on Women

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (GBV) has become an increasing issue in recent years, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic which prompted a significant rise in online activity. In addition to amplifying traditional forms of abusive behaviours such as stalking, bullying and sexual harassment, information and communication technologies have facilitated new manifestations of violence such as image-based abuse, doxing, gendertrolling, impersonation and hacking, among others. Women, children, sexual, religious and ethnic minorities, and other vulnerable groups are particularly vulnerable to elevated risks of experiencing violence. Based on findings from a scoping review, this article discusses how certain key stakeholders – identified as technology companies, government and legal systems, and social support systems – are used in the help-seeking process by those who have experienced technology-facilitated GBV. We seek to highlight particular nuances which key actors must consider when addressing technology-facilitated GBV and summarise gaps and propose recommendations to inform policy and programming efforts in low- and middle-income countries across Asia.

Key words technology-facilitated • gender-based violence • help-seeking • information and communication technologies • online harassment
Key messages

- Technology-facilitated GBV comprises different and growing forms of violence underscoring the need to develop nuanced policy and programmatic strategies.
- Response mechanisms are intrinsically linked to help-seeking behaviours of survivors.
- There are fundamental gaps in response and prevention mechanisms that can inform future policy and practice.

To cite this article: Bansal, V., Leasure, E., Roth, C., Rezwan, M., Iyer, M., Pal, P. and Hinson, L. (2023) Help-seeking behaviours of those experiencing technology-facilitated GBV in Asia: implications for policy and programming, Journal of Gender-Based Violence, 7(2): 352–363, DOI: 10.1332/239868021X16697232129517

Introduction and background

As the usage and accessibility of digital technologies increases globally, the landscape of violence has grown to include technology-facilitated gender-based violence (GBV), defined as ‘action by one or more people that harms others based on their sexual or gender identity or by enforcing harmful gender norms’. This action is 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’ (Hinson et al, 2019). Technology-facilitated GBV includes cyberstalking, cyberbullying, sexual harassment, image-based abuse, doxing and impersonation (Backe et al, 2018; Hinson et al, 2018; Dunn, 2020; Henry et al, 2020). Global prevalence of witnessing or experiencing technology-facilitated GBV for women and girls has been found to be as high as 85 per cent, with some reports showing prevalence in Asia to be as high as 88 per cent (EIU, 2021).

Technology-facilitated GBV has recently garnered attention, following the increase in online activity stemming from COVID-19 that has led to a proliferation in cases. Low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) throughout Asia are among those facing drastic increases in cases. For example, the Indonesian National Commission on Violence Against Women received 940 reports of technology-facilitated GBV in 2020, representing a nearly 400 per cent increase from 2019 (Sheany, 2018), while the Thai government hotline received 300 daily calls during the pandemic’s first year (UN Women, 2020). Meanwhile in India, increasing conversations around technology-facilitated GBV on Twitter almost tripled between 2019 to 2021 (Quilt.AI and ICRW 2021).

Like offline GBV, the risk of experiencing technology-facilitated violence seems to vary by individuals’ gender, sexual orientation, caste, religion, nationality and economic status, among other identity aspects. In addition to demographic characteristics, the anonymity and unknown proximity of perpetrators are unique factors that promote harassment and make it difficult to determine or prosecute the perpetrator (Duggan et al, 2014; Henry and Powell, 2015; Hinson et al, 2019; Afrouz, 2021; Dunn, 2021).

The nature of technology-facilitated GBV also impacts survivors’ motivation to seek help. Help-seeking behaviours are the actions, or lack thereof, taken after one has experienced technology-facilitated GBV. These actions include reporting incidents to authorities or technology platforms, seeking informal or formal support, modifying online behaviours, or avoiding action altogether (Hinson et al, 2018). Understanding
the challenges faced by those experiencing technology-facilitated GBV when seeking help, and the factors enabling or deterring them from accessing it is important when considering future policy and programmatic initiatives. This article presents structural gaps in current prevention and mitigation efforts from LMICs in Asia and outlines policy and programmatic recommendations for addressing them.

Methods

This article uses data from a larger scoping review of existing literature on technology-facilitated GBV across LMICs in Asia, as well as key informant interviews (KIIs) on four case study countries. For the scoping review, search terms were developed using the conceptual framework developed by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) (Figure 1) and were entered into academic databases (PubMed, Scopus and Web of Science) and organisation websites to identify relevant literature. Query results were eligible for inclusion if they were published in English between 2006 and 2021; had an explicit emphasis on technology-facilitated violence and gender; and were from LMICs in Asia, as classified by the World Bank. For this analysis, we used deductive coding to extract data based on the following themes: help-seeking, key stakeholders involved in response and prevention, and policy and programmatic recommendations. This analysis includes 82 articles (50 peer-review and 32 gray literature documents), including literature from the following countries: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines and Thailand. A total of 17 KIIs were conducted in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia and Thailand with representatives of donor agencies, NGO leaders, researchers and other GBV and technology experts to supplement literature and fill gaps in evidence.

Findings

Survivors may seek support from friends, family, legal and other professional sources as a result of experiencing technology-facilitated GBV and take action against their abuser. However, survivors face barriers to accessing that support due myriad factors such as patriarchal gender norms and the nuances of technology-facilitated GBV that make understanding, responding to, and preventing violence difficult for the stakeholders involved. Grasping the challenges which survivors face when seeking help and the forces that deter them from receiving support can help to inform future programmatic and policy efforts. As technology-facilitated GBV continues to become more prevalent, it is imperative that response and prevention procedures provided by stakeholders – primarily technology companies, government and legal systems, and social support systems – are comprehensive, responsive, accessible and effective for all survivors. Given the critical role they play in preventing, addressing and mitigating technology-facilitated GBV, findings are organised by stakeholder to shed light on the challenges that survivors face when interacting with each group.

Technology companies

Most technology and social media platforms have mechanisms in place for users to report and flag online harassment, abusive content, privacy violations and fake profiles. However, survivors are overall dissatisfied with the report and prevention
Figure 1: Conceptual framework of technology-facilitated GBV

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence

**Perpetrator**
- **Motivation**
  - Revenge
  - Jealousy
  - Political agenda
  - Anger
  - Ideological agenda
  - Sexual desire
  - Monetary need/desire
  - Maintain social status
- **Intent**
  - Psychological harm
  - Physical harm
  - Instrumental
  - Norm enforcement

**Behaviors**
- Stalking
- Defamation
- Bullying
- Sex-based harassment
- Exploitation
- Hate speech
- Gendertrolling

**Impact**
- Physical
- Psychological
- Social
- Economic
- Functional
- Aspirational

**Help-seeking & coping**
- Reporting
- Support services
- Social support
- Changing technology use
- Avoidance

**Incidence**
- Duration
- Frequency

**Mode**
- Social networking sites
- Dating sites
- Communication technology
- Entertainment sites
- Personal online accounts

**Cross-cutting tactics**
- Doxing
- Hacking
- Threats
- Image-based abuse
- Impersonation
- Unwanted messaging or posting

**Context:** SOCIAL, GENDER, CULTURAL, LEGAL, POLITICAL, RELIGIOUS, TECHNOLOGICAL

© 2018 International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). All rights reserved.
frameworks offered, citing numerous challenges that prevent them from accessing support. One such challenge is the western bias of technology companies. For example, their community standards, which outline acceptable conduct by their users, and reporting mechanisms, often lack the context to recognise and address culturally-specific violence (Munusamy, 2018; Gurumurthy et al, 2019a; Sambasivan et al, 2019). For example, research in India found that content considered derogatory slang in the local culture was not addressed because platform reviewers were unable to recognise it as violence (Pasricha, 2016). Survivors from India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan also reported being ignored or told that their experience did not violate community standards (Halder, 2017). Published community standards and reporting mechanisms are also almost exclusively in English, creating a barrier for individuals in countries where English is not the native language (Chowdhury, 2016; Gurumurthy et al, 2019b; Quilt.AI and ICRW, 2021; Posetti et al, 2021). In India, survivors reported a lack of response when their complaints were made in languages other than English, suggesting that technology companies are not equipped to handle grievances in native languages (Gurumurthy et al, 2019b).

Other impediments to reporting include poor awareness of reporting mechanisms, perceptions that the platforms will not take action, and perceptions that filing a report is cumbersome and too complex (Munusamy, 2018; Gurumurthy et al, 2019a; Sambasivan et al, 2019). As most technology companies' headquarters are registered in western countries, governments in Asia have jurisdictional limits to the types and extent of regulations they can implement over them, especially if there is no regional physical presence (Pawar and Sakure, 2019). Therefore, the issues facing those experiencing technology-facilitated GBV in Asian countries may be discounted from this governance.

**Government and legal systems**

Most Asian countries have some form of legislation which they use to prosecute various forms of technology-facilitated GBV. For example, Bangladesh passed the Digital Security Act of 2018 to curb violent extremism and hate speech online and Thailand passed the Cybersecurity Act of 2019 and the Personal Data Protection Act of 2019 to address the perpetration of cyber abuse or misuse of data through strictly mandating consent (Thailand Institute of Justice, 2020; Bangladesh Police, 2021). Unfortunately, legal recourse often comes with major bureaucratic, institutional and cultural barriers that create harmful effects for victims. In some instances, legislation intended to support victims of technology-facilitated GBV has instead been used against them. In India and Indonesia, anti-obscenity and anti-pornography laws are used to prosecute image-based abuse cases (Kamilla, 2021; Government of India, 2008). However, these laws are often used to protect ‘social decency’ or to justify persecution of the LGBTQIA+ community (Xu, 2010; Gurumurthy et al, 2019b; Boellstorff, 2020). Bangladesh’s Digital Security Act of 2018 has also been used to overreach on issues of privacy and dissent, using the facade of addressing technology-facilitated GBV as a proxy to quell free speech online that challenges political figures (Chowdhury, 2016). This misuse of legislation ultimately perpetuates victim blaming and discourages reporting, therefore blocking survivors from receiving support services.

Governments also face response and prevention challenges in creating and enforcing timely and comprehensive laws for technology-facilitated GBV. The dynamism of
this form of violence and the platforms on which it occurs, coupled with the lack of understanding about the perpetuation of violence through technology, make it difficult for lawmakers to pass and execute laws that fully encompass the issue (Chowdhury, 2016; Halder, 2017; Akter, 2018; Gurumurthy et al, 2019b). This influences how survivors interact with the legal system. Survivors who utilise reporting mechanisms describe the process as harrowing and bureaucratic and are often unable to file a formal report without tangible proof of the crime, which can be difficult due to the online nature of the crime (Kovacs et al, 2013; Halder, 2017). Law enforcement agencies are also outdated in their knowledge of technology and do not understand technology-facilitated GBV or take it seriously, instead often disregarding the abuse entirely (Kovacs et al, 2013; Devika et al, 2019). Patriarchal norms also impact the survivors’ interactions with law enforcement officials. One of the most reported challenges to filing a formal complaint is the fear that it will be met with an abusive or disrespectful response or victim blaming (Sambasivan et al, 2019). Overall, these challenges leave many experiencing technology-facilitated GBV without a path for legal recourse and justice.

Social support systems

Similar to government actors, cultural barriers also influence survivors’ ability to seek support from their communities. Research shows that while survivors often desire support from their communities, gendered social norms and digital literacy issues create barriers to accessing it. Patriarchal social norms create a stigma associated with experiencing violence (Devika et al, 2019). The low social capital of women and girls means gaining family and community support, especially from male relatives, is essential to accessing legal response methods (Sambasivan et al, 2019; Devika et al, 2019). Most survivors choose not to share their experiences, perceiving that family members are likely to blame or not believe them (Devika et al, 2019). In India, women and girls reported fearing retribution from their family if they disclosed, worrying that their phones and laptops would be confiscated or their online activities restricted (Sittichai, 2014; Hassan et al, 2018; Devika et al, 2019; Gurumurthy et al, 2019b; Sambasivan et al, 2019).

Marginalised communities, such as ethnic and religious minorities, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and those of lower caste or class face even greater barriers to accessing social support systems that facilitate help-seeking behaviours. At the same time, the vast gender digital divide in terms of usage and access of technology in Asia predisposes these groups to technology-facilitated GBV (Xu, 2010; UN Women, 2020; Cai et al, 2021). Male presence dominates online space, burdening women and marginalised communities with the responsibility of consistently assessing and monitoring the safety of online spaces for themselves. Research in India and Thailand found that women in the public eye, such as female journalists, celebrities, activists and politicians, experience much higher rates of technology-facilitated GBV compared to women without a public presence (Chen et al, 2020). In Bangladesh, India, Indonesia and Thailand, the LGBTQIA+ community is subjected to ‘cyber homophobia’, with ingrained conservative social systems used to justify a lack of social and legal support. These stigmatisations ultimately inhibit survivors from accessing social support systems, both online and in person.
Discussion

Technology-facilitated GBV is a growing phenomenon that has been exacerbated by COVID-19, underscoring the urgent need to develop prevention and response strategies. Findings based on LMICs in Asia highlight barriers of help-seeking behaviours within various stakeholder contexts, including technology companies, government and legal systems, and social support systems. First, the anonymous, intangible nature of the internet creates new expressions of violence that starkly differ from offline forms. Without specialised inspection to capture the nuances of GBV perpetration in online spaces, key stakeholders struggle to develop and enact comprehensive and robust protection mechanisms. Second, patriarchal social perceptions of technology-facilitated GBV play a large role in shaping both the help-seeking behaviour of victims and the response of stakeholders. The potential for enduring social shame, victim-blaming and possible retribution from one’s family, community, or even the police, deters individuals from seeking the help they desire when experiencing technology-facilitated GBV. In turn, these social stigmas confine those same stakeholders as well, preventing them from fully embracing social and legal support pathways for the survivor. Finally, the lack of awareness and clarity on reporting structures makes it difficult for those experiencing violence to navigate support pathways and creates opportunities for sensitive content to be mishandled. Consequently, all these factors weaken trust in reporting and response systems and hinder stakeholders from adequately addressing needs, leaving those experiencing technology-facilitated GBV without avenues for redress.

These findings provide critical insights into gaps in response and prevention systems, as well as areas of intervention to more robustly support those experiencing technology-facilitated GBV. Outlined here are recommendations to help close these gaps in policy and programming.

Address nuances of technology-facilitated GBV to strengthen government and legal stakeholders’ ability to prosecute perpetrators and protect survivors:

- **Enact and improve laws that support those experiencing technology-facilitated GBV and repeal those used against them.** Many existing laws in LMICs in Asia are problematic because they are either insufficient to safeguarded survivors or they are used in unintended ways to prosecute victims. For example, provisions in anti-obscenity and anti-pornography laws have been used in India and Bangladesh to persecute vulnerable populations such as hijras and the LGBTQIA+ community. New and amended laws are necessary to provide clear legal recourse for those experiencing technology-facilitated GBV.

- **Clearly define and widely disseminate information about technology-facilitated GBV.** Unclear understandings of technology-facilitated GBV definitions and legal processes surrounding digital evidence in crimes leads to uneven applications of the law. National governments need to provide guidance on a standardised definition for law enforcement, legal officials, and civil society so that they can clearly identify and address technology-facilitated GBV crimes and support those experiencing it. These actors must also be
trained on what documentation (including digital content) is admissible as evidence in technology-facilitated GBV cases and how to gather them securely and sensitively.

Address social and patriarchal norms to reduce victim-blaming and lessen stigma:

- **Strengthen support for marginalised populations, who are the most vulnerable to experiencing violence.** Marginalised populations, including ethnic and religious minorities, those of lower caste and class, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community, experience both increased vulnerability to violence and reduced avenues for safe redress due to social and legal discrimination. In order to increase support for survivors, patriarchal belief systems and prejudice policies that directly harm marginalised populations must be recognised and addressed.

- **Conduct awareness campaigns for internet users and their social support networks on technology-facilitated GBV.** Widely disseminated awareness campaigns should provide information on the forms of technology-facilitated GBV, where to report it, and explore how harmful gender norms perpetuate it. Programming should be offered using both online and offline education tools to ensure wide accessibility. Breaking down harmful gender norms will strengthen families’ ability to successfully support a loved one by building trust.

- **Provide gender training for complaint reviewers and first responders.** Those assessing reports, including but not limited to police, workplace officials and technology company employees, should be trained on challenging harmful gender norms and responding to survivors in trauma-informed manners.

Strengthen reporting mechanisms so that those experiencing violence will be knowledgeable about the process and have an efficient reporting experience:

- **Make the reporting pathway clear.** Technology companies, police, schools and workplaces should outline clear steps for reporting technology-facilitated GBV, including what happens after a report is filed, who will be involved in the investigation process, and how sensitive information will be handled/stored.

- **Ensure safety by design through enhancing accessibility of privacy settings and community standards for all online platforms.** Platforms should embed safety into design, including providing users with easy access to privacy settings and releasing community standards in as many languages as possible. Advanced privacy settings should be set as the default option when downloading apps or creating online profiles.

- **Build capacity of direct response organisations specialising in technology-facilitated GBV.** The lack of support organisations focusing on technology-facilitated GBV – such as in Bangladesh where there are no crisis centres specific to technology-facilitated GBV – limit survivors’ options to safely find assistance and information. Increasing the availability of direct response organisations as reporting avenues can increase survivors’ comfort in reporting by involving experienced professionals.
• Provide accessible trauma-informed reporting and resources through direct response organisations and on technology platforms. Reporting mechanisms and resources should be developed in collaboration with organisations that specialise in supporting survivors of technology-facilitated GBV to ensure that they are not re-traumatised in the process. After reporting, stakeholders should provide trauma-informed resources such as links to support pages or local organisations.

Conclusion

There is an immediate need to strengthen partnerships among key stakeholders, including technology companies, government entities, legal and police systems, and programme implementers to streamline prevention, reporting and response mechanisms. To better inform policy and practice, research should focus on measuring global and regional prevalence of technology-facilitated GBV, the role of social and technological landscapes in facilitating violence, survivor-centric response mechanisms and trauma-informed best practices, and the gendered aspects of burgeoning technology growth. Interventions to address policy and programmatic gaps should focus on the nuances of technology-facilitated GBV, the lack of awareness around the seriousness of this violence among first responders, underreporting and patriarchal social norms that perpetuate violence. Timely and targeted policy and programmatic changes have the potential to create more supportive systems for survivors.

Note

1 Corresponding author.
2 These authors are recognised as co-first authors based on the significant contributions made to this manuscript.

Funding

This work was supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under the DRG Learning, Evaluation, and Research Activity II (DRG-LER II) under contract [GS-10F-0033M/7200AA18M00016, Tasking N048].

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank key informants who participated in the study for sharing their valuable insights. We are also grateful to Catherine Bollinger, Nicole Goodrich and Kareem Kysia for their guidance throughout the course of the study, as well as to the reviewers for their thoughtful feedback which guided revisions of this article.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

References


Help-seeking behaviours of those experiencing technology-facilitated GBV in Asia


