ONLINE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

And Its Impact On The Civic Freedoms of Women Human Rights Defenders in the Indo-Pacific
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Executive Summary

Although online spaces and tools have enhanced opportunities to exercise civic freedoms such as freedom of assembly, association, and expression, women’s meaningful participation in internet-based spaces has been hindered by online gender-based violence (OGBV). The link between OGBV and offline gender-based violence (GBV), as well as violations of women’s civic freedoms and the general chilling of women’s exercise of civic freedoms that result from OGBV, are recognized under international law. Research shows that women human rights defenders (WHRDs) who challenge patriarchal norms and structures are particularly vulnerable to OGBV.

This study seeks to understand the impact of OGBV on WHRDs in five countries in the Indo-Pacific region (Cambodia, India, Malaysia, Nepal, and Thailand). We examine the international legal framework governing OGBV and women’s exercise of civic freedoms. Then, focusing on adults who self-identify as WHRDs and live in or, as a result of their work as WHRDs, have been forced to relocate from one of the five targeted countries, we present the results of primary and secondary research about the major types and impact of OGBV experienced by WHRDs and the resources and strategies that WHRDs have found helpful in responding. We present recommendations grounded in the experiences and insights shared by individuals participating in our study along with case studies that provide rich insights into the cultural contexts, types, and impacts of OGBV and the responses of OGBV survivors.

THE KEY FINDINGS OF OUR RESEARCH ARE AS FOLLOWS:

WHRDs in the five countries studied were subjected to many types of OGBV. They can be grouped into ten broad categories: mass trolling; online sexual harassment; manipulation or alteration of information and photos with an intent to malign; doxing; identity theft; direct threats against WHRDs and their families; gendered hate speech and sexist and misogynist attacks; surveillance, monitoring, and cyberstalking; coordinated online targeting; and targeting beyond social media.
The most common forms of OGBV experienced by WHRDs in the study were mass trolling, gendered hate speech, and online sexual harassment.

Psychological harm and self-censorship were the effects of OGBV most often experienced by WHRDs.

The psychological harm experienced by WHRDs included depression, anxiety, social anxiety, stress, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and paranoia; self-blame, self-doubt, self-shame, and humiliation; fear of physical harm, feelings of being watched; feeling unsafe, uncomfortable, and insecure; and feeling worried.

The self-censorship experienced by WHRDs included reduced engagement on social media, loss of voice, engagement in a less controversial area of activism, and increased risk evaluation before posting on social media.

The two main avenues of recourse pursued by WHRDs were reporting abuse to a social media platform and taking legal action.

The strategies adopted by WHRDs after experiencing OGBV included changing their methods of engaging on social media; changing social media settings and blocking accounts; digital detoxing; documenting abuse and warnings to other WHRDs; requesting help from friends, family members, and the community; and practicing self-prioritization and self-care.

WHRD’s recommendations for improved responses to OGBV include more accessible, survivor-centric reporting mechanisms; greater accountability from social media companies and platform owners; more context-specific laws and policies; and increased and more accessible training in digital literacy and security.
Definition of Terms

Cyber-flashing: Sending unsolicited sexual images via social media, messaging apps, and other electronic or digital means.

Cyber-stalking: Harassing or intimidating someone using electronic or digital means.

Doxing: Publishing someone’s personal information online, usually with malicious intent.

Hate speech: Verbal or written attacks on or the use of pejorative or discriminatory language to refer to a person or group based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, descent, gender, or other identifying factor.

Mansplaining: Communicating in a way that silences women.

Morphing: Transforming one image into another, often sexualized image.

Non-consensual dissemination of intimate images: Sharing sexual images of a person without their permission.

Online gender-based violence (OGBV): “Action by one or more people that harms others based on their sexual or gender identity or by enforcing harmful gender norms...that is] carried out using the internet and/or mobile technology and includes stalking, bullying, sexual harassment, defamation, hate speech and exploitation.”

We note that there is no single definition of OGBV and multiple terms are used interchangeably to describe the same behavior.

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**Patriarchy**: Systems and institutions that concentrate power in the hands of men and place women in a subordinate role.

**Sexual harassment**: Unwelcome physical, verbal, or gestural conduct of a sexual nature, including sexual advances and requests for sexual favors.

**Slut-shaming**: Belittling or humiliating a person for violating expectations of proper behavior related to sexuality.

**Trolling**: “A form of cyber-bullying . . . [that] involves the sending or submission of provocative emails, social media posts, or ‘tweets’ (Twitter messages), with the intention of inciting an angry or upsetting response from its intended target, or victim.” It is typically committed anonymously.5 “Mass trolling” is insistent or ongoing trolling, often from multiple sources.

**Women human rights defenders (WHRDs)**: “Women and girls who work to promote human rights and people of all genders who work to promote women’s rights and rights related to gender equality.” WHRDs include individuals “who may not self-identify as human rights defenders,” such as journalists, health workers, environmental activists, and humanitarian actors. In the definition offered by the United Nations (UN) Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), WHRDs include lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) activists, “as issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity are part of achieving gender equality.” This definition notes that individuals use other terms to identify themselves and their work, including terms reflecting regional and colloquial diversity.6

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1. Introduction

In her 2021 report to the thirty-eighth session of UN Human Rights Council (HRC), the UN special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression Irene Khan wrote that “in the digital age, the Internet has become a new battleground in the struggle for women’s rights, amplifying opportunities for women to express themselves but also multiplying possibilities for repression.”

With the widespread shift of civic activities to virtual spaces, internet freedoms have become closely connected to civic freedoms. Online spaces and tools have democratized the exercise of civic freedoms for many people by enhancing opportunities for assembly, association, and expression. At the same time, OGBV has hindered women’s access to and, in many instances, prevented their meaningful participation in online spaces.

A study by the UN Women notes that OGBV, much like offline GBV, should be approached from an intersectional viewpoint. A study published by the US Agency for International Development points out that in Asia, OGBV and offline GBV are often “interlinked and cannot be separated.” In the offline world, various forms of discrimination and inequality related to, for example, age, race, poverty, and sexual orientation affect different groups of women and leave them particularly vulnerable to violence. OGBV is shaped by similar factors. Notably, not only are some of the factors that contribute to OGBV unique for women, but there is a significant difference in the manner in which online violence manifests for men and women.

OGBV can take various forms, from sexual harassment, doxing, and the non-consensual dissemination of intimate images to cyber-stalking and threats of rape. In many cases, OGBV and offline GBV are on a continuum, with online harassment transitioning into actual physical violence. As the special rapporteur on violence against women Dubravka Šimonović said:

Owing to the easy accessibility and dissemination of contents within in [sic] the digital world, the social, economic, cultural and political structures and related forms of gender discrimination
and patriarchal patterns that result in gender-based violence offline are reproduced, and sometimes amplified and redefined, in ICT [information and communications technology], while new forms of violence emerge. New forms of online violence are committed in a continuum and/or interaction between online or digital space; it is often difficult to distinguish the consequences of actions that are initiated in digital environments from offline realities, and vice versa.  

The special rapporteur on violence against women echoed the widely held view that “patriarchal beliefs of male, heterosexual dominance and the devaluation of girls and women lie at the root of gender-based violence” and “the online expression . . . of gender-based violence is an extension of offline gender ideologies and patriarchy.”

Given the similar factors shaping both OBGV and offline GBV, WHRDs who challenge patriarchal systems and stereotypes are particularly vulnerable to OGBV. As the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders Michael Forst highlighted in his 2019 report to the HRC:

Many women defenders continue to face significant risks in their human rights practice. They often face the same risks that defenders who are men face, for women defenders, too, are subject to restrictions on rights and fundamental freedoms and live in the same social, cultural and political milieux that shape responses to human rights. However, women defenders often face additional and different risks and obstacles that are gendered, intersectional and shaped by entrenched gender stereotypes and deeply held ideas and norms about who women are and how women should be.

2. Methodology

We relied on desk research of secondary sources and two methods of primary research—interviews and a structured survey—to collect qualitative data.

DESK RESEARCH

The main goal of our preliminary desk research was to understand the existing literature on OGBV, the forms and impacts of OGBV, and helpful strategies for responding to and preventing OGBV. We focused on secondary sources such as media articles, journal articles, reports, and studies.

To inform our selection of focus countries, we reviewed secondary literature for each country in the Indo-Pacific region, concentrating on general political conditions, the state of internet freedoms, and other contextual factors for OGBV. We examined the following metrics: general socio-political environment, form of government, status of WHRDs, Gender Equality Index ranking, Freedom on the Net score, Freedom in the World ranking, ability to exercise speech and expression online, the prevalence of OGBV in the country, and country-specific literature on OGBV. In using these metrics we took into consideration that offline and online violence often act in a continuum. On the basis of this research as well as practical considerations such as language, security, and access to WHRDs, we selected five countries that reflect the diversity of the Indo-Pacific region: Cambodia, India, Malaysia, Nepal, and Thailand.

PRIMARY RESEARCH

Using our review of secondary literature and a snowballing sampling technique, in which individuals whom we contacted referred us to other victims of OGBV, we compiled a list of WHRDs who had faced some form of OGBV and then contacted them for interviews. Between June and July 2022, we interviewed fifteen WHRDs from five countries. The interviews were conducted virtually or by telephone. Before the interview, each interviewee received an informed consent form explaining the purpose of the study, the potential risks involved, and our policies to protect data security and anonymity. Given the sensitive nature of the study, our default approach was to ensure the anonymity of all participants. Therefore, unless otherwise requested, real names and other identifying information have not been included in this report. An honorarium of $30 was provided to each interviewee to express gratitude for their contribution to the study.

We used a structured survey as a second form of primary research. The survey contained

20 APC, “Online Gender-Based Violence,” 49.
thirty-seven questions, the majority of which were multiple choice. A few questions included open fields so that respondents could share information about their experiences in their own words. The first two questions sought information about the country and occupation of the respondent, answers to which were mandatory for quality-control purposes. Otherwise, the survey did not seek identifying information, and respondents were instructed not to include such information in their responses. The survey was designed for WHRDs aged eighteen and older.

We disseminated the survey widely to human rights groups, digital rights groups, journalists, civil society organizations (CSOs), WHRDs, and addresses on restricted email lists of international CSOs over a seven-week period in June and July 2022. We also posted the survey on social media and networking websites for a limited time to obtain a wider reach. Fifty-four respondents completed the survey.

The interviewees and survey respondents were predominantly individuals who identified as women. Forty-three of the fifty-four survey respondents and fourteen of the fifteen interviewees identified as women. Nine survey respondents identified as men, and one non-binary individual was interviewed. As indicated by our working definition of WHRD, the term embraces people of all genders who work to promote women's rights and rights related to gender equality.21

We aimed for geographic diversity, but because our selection of interviewees was based mainly on a desk review, it may not be inclusive of grassroots WHRDs. The survey was disseminated only in English, thus limiting participation to individuals proficient in English. All but one interviews were conducted in English.22

The number of survey respondents by country was Cambodia-15, India-19, Malaysia-8, Nepal-9, and Thailand-3. The experiences of OGBV noted by all respondents was similar no matter what their countries of origin.

A trauma-informed approach was utilized at all stages of the study, from the drafting of the questions to the documentation of survivors’ experiences to the writing of the report. This approach sought to ensure that our research provided a safe and respectful space for WHRDs to open up about their experiences of OGBV without renewing feelings of trauma.

22 One interview was conducted in Hindi.
3. OGBV and Women’s Civic Freedoms Under International Law

It is well established in international law that GBV is a form of discrimination that “seriously inhibits women’s ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on a basis of equality with men.”\(^{23}\) The framework for states’ positive and negative obligations to eliminate discrimination against women in all its forms is articulated by the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).\(^{24}\) In its General Recommendation 19, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the implementing body, explains that

the definition of discrimination includes gender-based violence, that is, violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty. Gender-based violence may breach specific provisions of the [CEDAW] Convention, regardless of whether those provisions expressly mention violence.\(^{25}\)

As a threshold matter for the international legal framework protecting people from GBV, including OGBV, it is also critical that

women’s right to a life free from gender-based violence is indivisible from and interdependent with other human rights, including the right to life, health, liberty and security of the person, the right to equality and equal protection within the family, freedom from torture, cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment, and \textit{freedom of expression, movement, participation, assembly and association.}\(^{26}\)

Thus, while the right to a life free from GBV is a right in and of itself, it is closely related to other fundamental rights as articulated in CEDAW and other international legal mechanisms. For example, article 7 of CEDAW says that states must take measures to eliminate discrimination against women in their countries’ political and public life and promote, in particular, women’s right to hold public office, participate in the formulation of government policy, and “participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.”\(^{27}\)

\(^{23}\) CEDAW Committee, General recommendation No. 19 on violence against women, para. 1.

\(^{24}\) Each of the five countries examined in this study has acceded to CEDAW on the dates indicated: Thailand (1985), Nepal (1991), Cambodia (1992), India (1993), Malaysia (1995).

\(^{25}\) CEDAW Committee, General recommendation No. 19 on violence against women, para. 6.


With regard to OGBV specifically, the special rapporteur on violence against women has said:

> Even though the core international human rights instruments, including those on women’s rights, were drafted before the advent of ICT, they provide a global and dynamic set of rights and obligations with transformative potential, and have a key role to play in the promotion and protection of fundamental human rights, including a woman’s rights to live a life free from violence, to freedom of expression, to privacy, to have access to information shared through ICT, and other rights.28

As highlighted in the findings of this research, OGBV is not only a violation of a fundamental right in itself. It leads directly to violations of other fundamental rights, including the rights to freedom of assembly, association, and expression. The rights to the freedom of assembly and association are enshrined in article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), widely considered customary international law, and in articles 21 and 22, respectively, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The right to freedom of expression is enshrined in article 19 of the UDHR and article 19 of the ICCPR. Article 19 of the ICCPR states that

1. Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference.
2. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.29

As with states’ obligations under CEDAW to eliminate discrim-

ination against women, states have positive and negative obligations under the ICCPR to uphold civil and political rights. For example, article 2 of the ICCPR requires states to adopt laws or measures to give effect to the rights in the convention,\(^\text{30}\) while articles 19, 21, and 22 require states to refrain from implementing restrictions on the rights to freedoms of assembly, association, and expression that are not in line with certain requirements.

States are also obligated to guarantee the right to freedom of expression, including the right to receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of national boards. This right encompasses “the expression and receipt of communications of every form of idea and opinion capable of transmission to others, subject to the provisions in article 19, paragraph 3, and article 20” of the ICCPR.\(^\text{31}\) It “includes political discourse, commentary on one’s own and on public affairs, canvassing, discussion of human rights, journalism, cultural and artistic expression, teaching, and religious discourse.”\(^\text{32}\)

A restriction on the freedom of speech and expression guaranteed in article 19 of the ICCPR is lawful only when such a restriction passes a three-part, cumulative test derived from article 19. According to the test:

1. The restriction must be provided by law, which is clear and accessible to everyone (i.e., adheres to the principle of legality).

2. The restriction must pursue one of the purposes set out in article 19(3) of the ICCPR, namely: (i) to protect the rights or reputations of others; (ii) to protect national security or public order, or public health or morals (i.e., adheres principle of legitimacy).

3. The restriction must be proven as necessary and the least restrictive means required to achieve the purported aim (i.e., adheres to principles of necessity and proportionality).\(^\text{33}\)

Thus while freedom of expression is not an absolute right, restrictions on freedom of expression must comply with the requirements of article 19 of the ICCPR to be legitimate. Measures taken to protect women against OGBV must be carefully designed in accordance with this framework.\(^\text{34}\) In a joint statement with the special rapporteur on

\(^{30}\) “Where not already provided for by existing legislative or other measures, each State Party to the present Covenant undertakes to take the necessary steps, in accordance with its constitutional processes and with the provisions of the present Covenant, to adopt such laws or other measures as may be necessary to give effect to the rights recognized in the present Covenant,” ICCPR, art. 2.

\(^{31}\) ICCPR, art. 11. Article 20 of the ICCPR states that: “1. Any propaganda for war shall be prohibited by law. 2. Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.”


\(^{33}\) HRC, Report of Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Frank La Rue, A/HRC/17/27 (May 16, 2011), para. 69.

\(^{34}\) HRC, Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, para 52.
violence against women, the special rapporteur on freedom of expression stated that the internet should be a platform for everyone to exercise their rights to freedom of opinion and expression, but online gender-based abuse and violence assaults basic principles of equality under international law and freedom of expression. Such abuses must be addressed urgently, but with careful attention to human rights law.\textsuperscript{35}

In the joint statement, the special rapporteurs highlighted the need of OGBV survivors for “transparent and fast responses and effective remedies which can only be achieved if both states and private actors work together and exercise due diligence to eliminate online violence against women.”\textsuperscript{36} As the special rapporteur on violence against women elaborated:

States have a direct responsibility concerning violence perpetrated by agents of the State itself. They also have due diligence obligations to prevent, investigate and punish acts of violence against women committed by private companies, such as Internet intermediaries, in accordance with article 2 (e) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. According to article 4 (c) of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, States should exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate and punish acts of violence against women.\textsuperscript{37}

States’ obligations with regard to OGBV include prevention, protection, prosecution, punishment, and redress, reparation, and remedies. States’ obligations also include examining the role of private intermediaries to ensure that they uphold human rights responsibilities, including protecting and providing redress for survivors of OGBV. Other state obligations include safeguarding against arbitrary censorship as well as examining and revising the domestic legal framework to holistically prevent OGBV and provide streamlined redress for survivors of OGBV.\textsuperscript{38}

As the special rapporteur on violence against women elaborated, many states do not have holistic legal frameworks to address OGBV, which hinders survivors from accessing justice and creates “a sense of impunity for perpetrators.”\textsuperscript{39} While existing legal frameworks, including criminal laws, cybercrime laws, and domestic violence laws, may be sufficient to address OGBV, this may not always be the case.\textsuperscript{40} Furthermore, the lack of a specialized law on OGBV may require survivors to attempt to access justice through a patchwork of laws:

\textsuperscript{36} Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, para. 52.
\textsuperscript{38} Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, para 66-81.
\textsuperscript{39} Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, para. 79.
\textsuperscript{40} Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, para. 80-81.
For instance, some victims have brought claims under laws relating to the protection of privacy or to defamation. In cases where gaps in criminal laws exist, victims have attempted to seek recourse through civil means, but this does not adequately address their rights to justice and remedy, and contributes to continuing impunity.41

A report by the International Commission of Jurists and Justice for Peace Foundation on women’s access to justice in Thailand elaborates the scope of states’ obligations to ensure access to justice for victims of GBV:

Legislative frameworks, dealing with various forms of gender-based violence, and providing adequate protection to all women, respecting their integrity and dignity, must be adopted and implemented; such frameworks must provide for penal sanctions, civil remedies, and remedial and protective provisions [emphasis added]; following instances of all such violence, States are obliged to carry out an effective investigation with a view to instigating criminal proceedings, bringing the perpetrator to trial and imposing appropriate penal sanctions. Moreover, States must ensure a gender sensitive judicial process [emphasis added] in cases of such violence. Among other things this necessitates that legal definitions of acts of gender-based violence and relevant evidentiary rules are not overly restrictive or predicated on gender stereotypes or discriminatory approaches. . . . It also requires that relevant legal procedures, including courtroom procedures and investigative processes, are responsive to the particular needs of survivors.42

The experiences of OGBV that interviewees and survey respondents reported during our research suggest that in the countries studied there are significant gaps in the laws addressing OGBV as well as in their implementation. However, a comprehensive overview or analysis of the legal frameworks governing OGBV in the five countries studied is beyond the scope of this project.

41 Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, para. 81.

4. Types of OGBV Experienced by WHRDs in the Indo-Pacific

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There is a rich body of literature on the methods, actions, and behaviors that constitute OGBV. Different studies have used various terms to document the forms of OGBV. For instance, the report about online violence from a human rights perspective from the special rapporteur on violence against women and girls documents various forms of OGBV. They include threats, harassment, the dissemination of harmful information that may malign a person’s image, impersonation, the non-consensual sharing and alteration of information, doxing, sextortion, trolling, online mobbing, online sexual harassment, and revenge pornography.

The Internet Governance Forum’s Best Practice Forum 2015 generated a non-exhaustive list of behaviors grouped into six categories of OGBV: infringement of privacy, surveillance and monitoring, damage to reputation and/or credibility, harassment (which may be accompanied by offline harassment), direct threats and/or violence, and targeted attacks on communities (such as direct threats of violence or the hacking of websites). The report noted various impacts of OGBV, including psychological effects such as depression, anxiety, and suicide; self-censorship; restrictions on mobility; and damage to career prospects. Additionally, the report posited that the impacts of OGBV are not limited to individuals but can extend to communities at large, creating societies in which women feel unsafe, disparities between women and men and inequalities increase, and a culture of sexism and misogyny is solidified.


44 HRC, Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, para. 33.

Similarly, a 2022 study by Australia's eSafety Commissioner noted that there are a variety of ways in which OGBV can be carried out. They include "unwanted private messages[,] . . . negative comments, bullying, trolling and harassment, defamation and offensive remarks about . . . race, ethnicity or gender or physical appearance." The study concluded that OGBV can significantly impact women's personal and professional lives, with its impacts including the degradation of mental health and well-being, a loss of confidence, reductions in online presence, negative impacts on work satisfaction, stepping down from leadership positions, and the deletion of social media accounts.46

Another study by the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights, a human rights CSO, found that the most common type of online harassment was the transmission of unsolicited sexual messages, pictures, and videos. Among the impacts of OGBV, the study identified psychological stress, reduction in online presence, self-censorship, fear of harm to self or family, and an inability to find jobs or housing.47

A report by the UN Population Fund noted other forms of OGBV, including limiting or controlling use of communications technologies, the use of spyware, hashtag poisoning, Google bombing, catfishing, mobbing or dogpiling, swatting, and hacking.48

In 2018, the UN high commissioner for human rights noted that WHRDs are more vulnerable than most to OGBV. He explained that online violence and abuse are inflicted with the aim of reducing the credibility of WHRDs and decreasing their presence in public spaces. Other panelists at the event at which his remarks were made noted that OGBV has a direct impact on the human rights of WHRDs. For instance, online violence reduces one's freedom of expression and participation in public discourse.49

Other studies concerning the types and impacts of online abuse experienced by WHRDs have made similar observations. One of the earliest studies, conducted by the Association for Progressive Communications in 2013, found that more than 51 percent of in-

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48 Hashtag poisoning is "the creation of an abusive hashtag, or the hijacking of an existing hashtag." Google bombing is an "internet scam where the abuser pretends to be someone they are not, by creating false online identities in social media—often using other people’s photos and developing extensive fake life stories and experiences, jobs and friends—with the objective of seducing another person or making them believe they are in an online relationship and use this as a means to ask for money, gifts or intimate images." Mobbing or dogpiling, "also called cybermobbing or networked harassment, consists of organized, coordinated and systematic attacks by a group of people against particular individuals or issues, such as by groups that target feminists or people who post about racial equality issues online." Swatting is "placing a hoax call to law enforcement detailing a completely false threatening event taking place at a target's home or business, with the intention of sending a fully armed police unit (i.e., SWAT team) to the target's address." UN Population Fund (UNFP), Making All Spaces Safe (Dec. 2021), 64-68, https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/unfpa-tfgbv-making_all_spaces_safe.pdf.
individuals surveyed had received “violent messages, threats or [offensive] comments.” More recently, a 2020 survey of more than 900 people from 125 countries conducted by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) looked at online violence against women journalists. The study found that women journalists faced a wide variety of attacks, including “threats of sexual assault and physical violence, abusive language, harassing private messages, threats to damage their professional or personal reputations, digital security attacks, misrepresentation via manipulated images, and financial threats.” These attacks often had adverse impacts on the mental health of women journalists and spillover effects on other areas of their lives, manifest in behavior such as a tendency to miss work, quit their jobs, or live in fear. Notably, the study found that 20 percent of women journalists had experienced offline violence as well.

SAFEnet, Awas KBGOI, and UK Aid conducted research to document the experiences of WHRDs facing OGBV in Indonesia. Based on eleven interviews with WHRDs and thirteen focus-group discussions, the authors found that WHRDs faced the following types of OGBV: “privacy violations, surveillance and monitoring, damage to reputation/credibility, harassment and threats to violence, direct threats and violence, and attacks targeted at certain communities.” They noted that WHRDs also faced hate comments and trolling in sexually degrading forms, were on the receiving end of the non-consensual sharing of intimate photos and pornography, and received threats of violence (including sexual threats). In some cases, threats were directed toward the families of WHRDs.

A study of OGBV against WHRDs in the MENA region conducted by Fe-Male found that 78.3 percent of 115 activists surveyed had experienced online violence. The study noted that the most common forms were the receipt of sexist, racist, and homophobic messages, followed by direct threats of attacks.

**RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Our research findings suggest that WHRDs’ experience of OGBV in the Indo-Pacific is similar to WHRDs’ experience of OGBV elsewhere. The findings that we present here are based on our analysis of qualitative data gathered in interviews with fifteen

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52 SAFEnet, Awas KBGOI, and UK Aid, “We are the Target: Experiences of Women Human Rights Defenders in Confronting Online Gender-Based Violence,” executive summary (2022), https://awaskbgoi.id/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Executive-Summary-We-Are-The-Target-Experiences-of-WHRDs-in-Confronting-OGBV_.pdf.

WHRDs and fifty-four anonymous survey responses. The information gathered through interviews showed a pattern of OGBV similar to that in information collected through surveys. Both interview and survey participants also offered second-hand information about the experiences of OGBV of their colleagues, friends, and family members, suggesting that the issue extends to individuals beyond the scope of this study.

Some recurring observations about the nature of OGBV and the wider civil and political contexts that surfaced from the interviews include:

- The majority of WHRDs expressed concern about the general state of freedom of speech and expression in their countries. They believed that governmental restrictions sometimes exacerbate a lack of freedoms.
- Online violence is gendered and often involves shaming women for violating dominant socio-political norms in their countries.
- In most cases, attacks on WHRDs go beyond their professional work or the issue at hand. For example, a journalist might be slut-shamed for expressing an opinion about politics.
- Several WHRDs described online violence as a coordinated attack.
- Some WHRDs highlighted that, in addition to backlash from random internet users or opposition party or government representatives, they had received backlash from the human rights movement or community that they felt part of.
- The abuse could extend beyond the WHRD and target their family members and children.

We found that WHRDs in the five countries studied were subjected to many types of OGBV, which can be put into ten broad categories: a) mass trolling; b) sexual harassment online; c) manipulation or alteration of information and photos with an intent to malign the person’s reputation; d) doxing; e) identity theft; f) direct threats against WHRDs and their families; g) gendered hate speech and sexist and misogynist attacks; h) surveillance, monitoring, and cyberstalking; i) coordinated online targeting; and j) targeting beyond social media. Each of these categories contains a number of subcategories, as discussed below. It must be emphasized that these categories are intersectional, interrelated, and not mutually exclusive.

Our research suggests that the most common forms of OGBV experienced by WHRDs in the five countries studied were gendered hate speech, sexual harassment online, and mass trolling (Table 1). In response to a question asking whether they had been sub-

54 The quotations in this and subsequent sections are from the interviews, survey responses, and case studies. Quotations from case studies indicate the case study numbers.
ected to certain types of behavior over the internet, twenty-five respondents said that they had experienced sexist or hate speech; twenty said that they had received messages or posts that undermined their self-esteem or reputation; nineteen had experienced trolling or mass targeting; seventeen had experienced online threats or intimidation; and fifteen had dealt with rumors, false information, or defamatory messages or posts (Table 1).

### Table 1. Types of OGBV Experienced by Survey Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexist or hate speech</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messages or posts that undermine self-esteem or reputation</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trolling, mass targeting</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online threats or intimidation</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rumours, false information or defamatory messages or posts</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threats to share personal/private information</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threats of rape, acid attacks, other physical violence</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threats to share videos/intimate photos</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Mass trolling**

WHRDs experienced two primary forms of mass trolling.

**Trolling with sexualized content:** Mass trolling characterized by messages with sexual connotations and often degrading. For example, respondents reported receiving messages saying that they would be willing to walk naked down the street with their daughter or that their gender-affirming surgery was an attempt to live their sexual fantasies or asking their “daily rate.”

**Trolling with gendered hate speech:** Mass trolling involving comments attacking an individual’s identity, including their gender. For instance, respondents reported receiving comments saying that they should be raped, describing the behavior of an ideal woman, criticizing their appearance or choice of clothing, using casteist slurs, or targeting their religion.
Online Gender-Based Violence

The majority of interviewed WHRDs reported being trolled with gendered hate speech, often with sexualized content.

“When I was in Korea and I went to the beach, I was dressed in . . . half pants and sleeveless sandos [top]. I posted a picture and then there were comments saying, ‘Oh, you forgot your culture. Why are you posting this kind of photo?’ . . . So it was like when a boy posts such pictures no one says, oh, you are not . . . following your traditions, but when a girl is posting they will comment on your dress, your makeup, your haircut, etc.” (Case Study 1)

“When I post any content or pictures regarding the human rights of women or gender minorities, I am blamed as a home breaker.”

“Whenever I talk about women’s issues and feminism, I get hateful and sexist remarks.”

WHRDs were also trolled by religious individuals and government supporters and agents.

“Not necessarily when using my personal account, because I would usually go private, but when engaging using my work social media account there sometimes will be hate comments saying we are deviant women and trying to propagate wrong teachings of Islam.”

Online sexual harassment

Sexual harassment was another form of OGBV commonly experienced by WHRDs. Such harassment ranged from abusive, sexually degrading, or obscene comments to slut-shaming (including accusations of being a “mistress” or “prostitute”), unsolicited pictures or video calls showing male genitalia, pornography, and sexualized private messages. Abusive, sexually degrading, and obscene comments were among the forms of OGBV most frequently experienced by WHRDS, followed by slut-shaming and sexualized private messages.

“I have talked and chatted with many foreigners.
before. At that time, I also met bad people.... They had sent me their private parts and naked pictures and said inappropriate words as well. And one guy said he will come to my country with a gun, kidnap me to his country to marry him.”

One WHRD said that the experience of slut-shaming was very stressful and demotivating.

“I am a pro-choice person, and I support sex workers. But having people name and shame you, calling me a sex worker or a prostitute ... can be stressful and demotivating.”

“They said that I have slept with the diplomat and I’m not good at my work, that I just use my body to get support from the diplomats or international community.” (Case Study 7)

Manipulation or alteration of information and photos with an intent to malign

This type of OGBV included the non-consensual dissemination of photos and videos of a person, morphing, spreading rumors or false information with a malicious intent, and misrepresenting facts or taking statements out of context. Interviewed WHRDs reported that their photos and videos had been disseminated without their consent.

“People used my pictures, edited and posted them … [so] somebody commented … maybe she wants to be raped.” (Case Study 6)

“There was a trend where unknown sexual content was shared automatically from one’s social media.”

WHRDs also reported that their pictures had been subjected to morphing, that rumors or false information with malicious intent had been spread about them, and that their statements had been misrepresented or taken out of context.

“I have had my reputation trashed by an old business partner who also threatened me with violence, made sexist and harmful comments to me, and threatened to share pictures he had taken of me I didn't know about.”

Doxing

WHRDs commonly experienced doxing of their personal information and the information of family members.

“I found out that they also made my personal information, public, like my address, my telephone number on social media.”

“My pictures, my phone number, my home address, and even my parent’s home address was shared.”

Identity theft

WHRDs also experienced identity theft. For example, a fake social media profile of an individual was created using her personal information and photos. The false profile
tried to reach out to her acquaintances pretending to be her.

“Somebody had created a fake account using my picture. I was not careful with my privacy setting at that time, I guess. So, they started sending friend requests to other people.”

**Direct threats to WHRDs and their families**

Direct threats of rape and sexual violence, death, bodily mutilation, physical violence, and legal action were among the most common type of OGBV experienced by WHRDs. Nearly half of the interviewed WHRDs had experienced threats of rape and sexual violence.

“I started receiving very explicit threat messages where they said that they know my family and they will murder me, they rape and kill me, they will mutilate my body and everything. I just panicked because, it was not only about me, it was about my family.” (Case Study 2)

“I get a lot of rape threats on social media. [The] worst profanities. The kinds that will fill you with fear of what you are going to see next.” (Case Study 14)

Death threats and threats of physical violence were next most common threat experienced by WHRDs.

“My family also got a [call] from an anonymous person who said we will send you a coffin, and they sent death threats against me.”

“My photo and two other women activist’s photos were posted and it was declared that whoever will smear black paint on our faces will be rewarded.” (Case Study 2)

Threats were made not only to WHRDs but also to their families.

“There was this one website which said that she (the WHRD’s underage daughter) is a budding secret agent of another country. That is why the order for this family is shoot at sight.”

**Gendered hate speech and sexist and misogynist attacks**

This type of OGBV includes gendered vitriol, or speech involving extreme criticism laced with misogyny and sexism, as well as hate speech, mansplaining, and negative or crude messages. The majority of WHRDs interviewed reported that they had experienced hate speech and attacks in the form of comments on social media and websites and gendered vitriol.

“I don’t remember as much in detail except the ones where they told me to jump off my roof—my parents would be happy—and to cut off my genitals. Most of them invalidate me and gave me different rape threats and say horrible things that you should get raped and killed.” (Case Study 8)

“There’s a lot of mansplaining and the mansplaining of those completely disregarding what my work or my research is showing and going on a
completely different tangent and people are supposed to believe that just because they are men."

Negative or harsh messages as well as mansplaining were also experienced.

“Men . . . that used to be my friends would turn against me, mansplaining me, commenting, [leaving] harassing comments and messages.”

Surveillance, monitoring, and cyberstalking

Surveillance and related forms of OGBV were also reported by WHRDs, including monitoring by unknown internet users, monitoring by the government, and cyberstalking.

“He has my number and with that number, he had access to a whole range of different platforms. . . . When I installed Telegram, he found a new way to reach out to me through Telegram. . . . I was obviously terrified. He managed to track [down] my workplace.”

Coordinated online targeting

Coordinated online targeting occurs when two or more entities (such as random internet users, religious groups, civil society members, CSOs, government agencies or officials, or government supporters) use various technological means to target WHRDs. Several of the WHRDs interviewed said that they felt the attacks against them were coordinated.

“During that time, when I used to walk on the street, some people use to recognize me from social media. There was a campaign against me. They even made a press release. They also ran a campaign against me on the TV channel.” (Case Study 7)

Targeting beyond social media

WHRDs also experienced targeting beyond social media, including the publishing of blogs, commentaries, and articles with an intent to harm the WHRD’s reputation, formation of a signature campaign or press release targeting the WHRD, and tarnishing of the WHRD’s image on national television.

“There’s this man in my hometown who is considered a very intellectual person. And he wrote an article, [in which] he just dismissed [me], you know, [and fit my] views in the format he defined. He just limited my identity to a privileged woman.”

Several of the WHRDs said that the targeting was deliberating meant to tarnish their image and harm their reputation. Three of the WHRDs interviewed were targeted on national television. Two were subjected to attacks via signature campaigns, public statements, and press releases.
5. Impacts of OGBV Experienced by WHRDs in the Indo-Pacific

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature shows that there are a variety of ways in which WHRDs choose to respond to violence, with their responses influenced by various factors, including the identity of the perpetrators. In many cases, OGBV survivors ignore the abuse or choose not to act.\(^{55}\) In some cases, they report incidents to their employers or law enforcement or to moderators of a social media platform. Women who face online violence sometimes reduce their presence online or quit social media altogether.\(^{56}\)

The special rapporteur on violence against women noted that the impact of OGBV could be psychological, physical, sexual, or economic, and that such violence could lead to harm offline, such as suicide, loss of employment, or reputational damage.\(^{57}\) Similar observations were made in a study by the Association for Progressive Communications, which noted that the harm caused by OGBV falls into five categories: psychological harm, social isolation, economic loss, limitations on mobility, and self-censorship.\(^{58}\)

The study conducted by SAFEnet, Awas KBGOI, and UK Aid on the experiences of WHRDs experiencing OGBV in Indonesia noted that OBGV impacted multiple facets of a person’s life. Interviewees had experienced “self-censorship, depression and anxiety, and decreased quality of life” as a result of OBGV, which affected the quality of their daily lives.\(^{59}\) Similarly, the study conducted by UNESCO and the ICFJ on online violence against women journalists found that the attacks had adverse impacts on mental health and spill-over effects on other areas, such as days off from work, quitting of jobs, and feelings of fear. Notably, 20 percent of women journalists who had experienced OBGV had also experienced offline violence.\(^{60}\) Similar findings were presented by Fe-Male’s study of OGBV against WHRDs in the MENA region. This study noted that the impact of violence is heavy, taking a toll on the psychological well-being of WHRDs, undermining their ability to access jobs and other networks, and arousing concerns about being surveilled.\(^{61}\)

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Psychological harm and self-censorship were the impacts of OGBV most commonly reported by WHRDs in the study (Table 2). All of the WHRDs interviewed reported some

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55 HRC, Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, para 18.
57 HRC, Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, para 27.
58 APC, “Online Gender-Based Violence.”
59 SAFEnet, Awas KBGOI, and UK Aid, “We are the Target.”
60 Posetti, et al., Online Violence Against Women Journalists, 9-10.
61 Fe-Male.org, “Online Violence against Women Human Rights Defenders in the MENA.”
form of psychological or behavioral impact after experiencing OGBV. In most cases, the impact was long lasting. But while psychological harm and self-censorship were the two most common effects experienced by WHRDs, each impact had the potential to influence other facets of a OGBV survivor’s life, making the comprehensive effect of OGBV impossible to quantify. There are other impacts of OGBV that might not be commonly experienced yet have equally life-altering consequences. This study does not discount any effect of OGBV, even if only experienced by a single WHRD.

Table 2. Impacts of OGBV Reported by 47 Survey Respondents

How did that behaviour/attack make you feel? Kindly choose the reaction that is closest to your state of mind at that particular time. Please select all that apply.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Felt unsafe, uneasy or embarrassed</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt anxious about going online</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thought twice about posting anything online</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worried about my safety</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced mental health or emotional harm</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worried about family safety</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worried re affect on work/performance</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family members felt uncomfortable</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost or had to change occupation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The forms of psychological and behavioral impacts experienced by participants in the study include the following.

**Depression, anxiety, social anxiety, stress, PTSD, paranoia**

WHRDs reported feeling depressed after experiencing OGBV. Several interviewees reported that they experienced anxiety and social anxiety after the abuse. In many cases, OGBV left the WHRDs feeling stressed and overwhelmed, and some WHRDs stated that they experienced PTSD after the incident of OGBV. One felt “panicked” as the violence unfolded, and one reported feelings of paranoia.

“Harrowing experience shattered my mental health and it took time to cope with the situation.”

“I felt disturbed and [experienced] sleeplessness.”
Self-blame, self-doubt, shame, and humiliation

Among the other impacts of OGBV highlighted by interviewed WHRDs were blaming themselves for the abuse that they had experienced, feelings of self-doubt and doubt about their work, and feelings of humiliation.

Fear of physical harm, feelings of being watched

Several WHRDs interviewed said that OGBV left them with a feeling that they would be physically harmed. In one case, the WHRD reported feelings of being watched.

“It is exhausting… I just feel like I’m being watched, even if it’s not true. I just feel that.” (Case Study 3)

Feeling unsafe, uncomfortable, and insecure: WHRDs reported that they no longer felt safe, comfortable, or secure after experiencing OGBV. This feeling most often concerned their online presence and social media postings, although in some cases it extended beyond online spaces.

“When I have been targeted of online bullying, it also had an effect to my physical security because people might recognize me when I am walking on the street and try to attack me.”

Feeling worried

Some interviewed WHRDs said that the experience of OGBV left them worried about their employment opportunities, families, and fellow activists.

“The threat is clear and present. Women in India know and feel it in our bones. It turns up in subtle ways—like drafting and redrafting a tweet, or using coded language to state something without naming the actual thing/political party/individual etc. We still say it, but we also protect ourselves and our work.”

Self-censorship

Self-censorship in various forms was one of the impacts of OGBV most commonly reported by interviewees.
Reduction in social media engagement
Nearly half of interviewed WHRDs reported that they had reduced their social media engagement after experiencing OGBV. One interviewee withdrew temporarily from social media.

“I often do not engage with things and incidents that everybody is talking about, even though I would want to add my voice. But rather than tweeting about it to get my voice to ‘that’ level, I will work on it. Release a paper, write an article, something like that, which kind of limits the audience that it gets.”

Loss of “voice”
WHRDs reported that after experiencing OGBV they were less vocal about issues or less likely to share their opinions on social media.

“I stopped commenting on friends’ posts. I put safety measures/checks on my account.”

One WHRD reported that after the traumatic incident, they lost their ability to think and use their voice.

“For so long I shut myself up. For years I haven't written anything. I used to write every day. So when I say I lost my voice, I didn't lose my physical voice. I lost my voice. I don’t know what to say, I don't know what to express. I think everything is locked. You know, because of that fear, this fear of that backlash again.” (Case Study 5)

Refocusing on a less controversial area
One WHRD reported refocusing their activism on a less controversial issue after experiencing OGBV.

Increased risk evaluation before posting on social media
Some WHRDs reporting engaging in more extensive risk evaluation before posting on social media after their experiences of OGBV.

“I have to think a lot, like, how people will perceive me through my pictures and through my writings, how people will see me. So that’s always been a challenge for me.” (Case Study 10)

“If I post online, I have to go through that added thought process. So yeah, just added anxiety, unnecessary anxiety, and paranoia. I have to go through . . . my own risk assessment, and what’s the worst thing that could happen.” (Case Study 3)
Physical censorship
Some interviewees reported that the self-censorship caused by OGBV was accompanied by a physical response.

“For me, I didn’t think it had affected me to a point where I would censor myself. But I think it maybe does sometimes. For example, I would choose to wear long-sleeved shirts . . . so that nobody will body-shame me because of the tattoos. So I think maybe it does have an effect.” (Case Study 13)

Other impacts
Other impacts of OGBV identified by WHRDs included feelings of a loss of privacy, more negative or less trusting perceptions of men, and life-altering economic and social implications. Two of the interviewed WHRDs had lost employment as a result of OGBV, and one of them had been forced to change their field of work and leave the country.

Finally, another impact of OGBV identified by several WHRDs was that it encouraged them to speak out.

“It affected me in a way that it makes me want to [do] more work on advocating for the elimination of online gender-based violence. . . . So I suppose the one positive side of it is that it makes me want to do more work in order to prevent that from happening.”

Several WHRDs noted that their experience of OGBV did not affect them greatly anymore. There were several reasons given for this, including self-care, wellness routines, healing over time, and desensitization to OGBV because of its frequency.

“I’ve literally been through this before, many, many times. I have grown immune. And I shouldn’t be saying that. I shouldn’t be saying that I’ve gotten immune to the violence. We shouldn’t be normalizing it. But what else do you do when that is your normal?” (Case Study 5)
6. Responses to OGBV by WHRDs in the Indo-Pacific

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There is a substantial body of literature on strategies and recommended actions to combat or prevent OGBV. They include responses on the individual level, such as changing privacy settings, increasing digital literacy, increasing knowledge about digital security, reporting abuse to the hosts of online platforms, documenting abuse, filing a complaint with relevant authorities, and seeking help from digital-rights organizations. Additionally, given the intersectional and multi-dimensional nature of violence, some studies advocate for a multi-stakeholder approach, such as increasing access to legal and policy interventions, holding online platforms accountable, and working to change cultural norms around OGBV.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The two main avenues of recourse pursued by WHRDs in our study were reporting abuse to the social media platform on which it occurred and taking legal action.

Nearly half of the interviewed WHRDs reported the offending comments and accounts to a social media platform at some point. In every case, nothing resulted from their reports.

“I have reported [comments] to Facebook. . . . But so far, most of the time, the response that I get back is that it doesn’t violate community policy or community guidelines. I don’t know why, but apparently it doesn’t. . . . So after a while, I just stopped [reporting them]."

“No, of the multitudes of times I’ve reported problematic and downright harmful content, replies, trolling, etc., on social media platforms, nothing has come off it. On a rare, rare occasion the tweet/reply is deleted, but there are no consequences for the perpetrator other than a message to them from the platform that their post/content was removed.”

“Platforms are seldom helpful. Had to shift my own mindset/perspective to keep creating awareness videos. When haters comment, the video will be boosted.”

“I tried to report it. . . . I think I tried to report the post to, like, Twitter and Facebook, but I don’t think they removed because a lot of it was in [another language].”

62 See for example, UN Women, “Online Violence Against Women In Asia”; IGF, “Best Practice Forum on Online Abuse and Gender-Based Violence Against Women”; APC, “Online Gender-Based Violence”; and Rae, “Two Steps Forward, One Step Back.”

63 UNFP, “Making All Spaces Safe.”
A minority of interviewed WHRDs resorted to legal action or filed police reports. There were challenges in these processes as well.

“Actually, they didn’t register the case. So in order to get the case registered, even from the, you know, local police station, you need the IP address. It was not given to me…. There’s some loopholes in the laws as well. I would not say we need a new law, [but] there are some loopholes which need to be addressed—like, if the threats are in your messenger, the cyber bureau will not look at your case. It will [be dismissed as] gali beijjati [abuse and insult].
(Case Study 2)

“Small cities used to have things like gang fights. People to people, person to person. But now this fight is happening on the internet. And unfortunately we don’t have a strong cyber law. We have been fighting for this for a very long time. Nepal police, cyber bureau, and some media are using the Electronic Transaction Act, but it is not made for this [kind of] cybercrime.”
(Case Study 12)

One WHRD pointed out that her attackers used anonymity to shield themselves from legal action.

“As for legal actions, the most frustrating part was . . . I could not do anything legally. Except for the person from the conservative side that I could sue . . . because he posted, he attacked me on Facebook, he said things, that was easy to sue because it was obvious that he was referring to me. Those words were written in the law (recognized by the law) . . . so that was easy, but the hardest part was that the younger ones pro-democracy, people who are anti-feminist, were hard to sue because they knew how to avoid this kind of thing. They remained anonymous, and it’s very hard to track them, to track their identity. I could get help from the cybercrime unit but they only care about article 112, which is ‘lèse-majesté’. The cybercrime unit could track these people down, but for activists like myself, they wouldn’t do it.”
(Case Study 4)

WHRDs adopted a variety of strategies to respond to and protect themselves from OGBV.

**Changing methods of engagement on social media**

One of the major strategies that WHRDs used to respond to OGBV was to change their method of engaging online. These changes included not responding to, not interacting with, or ignoring comments and messages; becoming more selective about who could communicate with them; confronting the person responsible on social media; creating an alternate account; and getting off social media or deactivating their accounts. Of these methods, not responding to or ignoring abusive messages and comments was the strategy most commonly used.

“As time goes by, I learned that it’s not healthy for me to look at the comments or to check messages…. So in a way my coping mechanism is if I don’t see it, then I can pretend that it’s not as bad as it is.”
Changing social media settings and blocking accounts

WHRDs also blocked accounts and changed social media settings to limit interactions.

“I started blocking these abusers. And then I blocked over 10,000 people, or even more. At one time, I think my block list was bigger than my followers.”

“I disabled my DMs [direct messaging] when I was trolled. But yeah, the comments still come.”

Digital detoxing

One WHRD said that she completely removed herself from social media because of the OGBV that she experienced.

Documenting abuse and warning other WHRDs

Some WHRDs documented their abuse by sharing it on social media, with a trusted friend, or with other human rights defenders.

“So I started to screenshot. I wouldn’t comment. I would just screenshot it and share them on my network, informing fellow HRDs, look! this is the consequence of being vocal. I don’t want to intimidate them. But I just want to normalize the fact that that is the price that we pay.” (Case Study 1)

Seeking help from others

Seeking help from others, including friends, family members, CSOs, and the community, was a common strategy utilized by WHRDs. In some cases, relying on mental health support from friends, family members, and loved ones during and after the incident proved very effective.

In certain cases, friends, family members, and colleagues helped report the abusive comments and accounts.

“I tried not to fully read the comments when it happened to me. I tried reporting, but I did not do it by myself. I asked my friends to do that because I didn’t want to see any of those comments. So I asked my friends and colleagues to report and then they said that it’s not easy because we don’t have more people reporting it. Sometimes when this
happens we have to call like, mobilize the Facebook users that can support our report, those comments and yes, it’s not that easy. We have to learn how to campaign, gather support from the people.”

The importance of support was echoed by another WHRD who had experienced mass trolling.

“So, the important thing is the support system around you at the time when these things happen. I was fortunate to have that, like a very small circle.”

In a few cases, WHRDs said that the support provided by CSOs, including international organizations, such as by issuing statements expressing solidarity or monitoring cases, was valuable.

**Self-prioritization and self-care**

In addition to relying on community resources, some WHRDs advocated for self-focused techniques to combat the negative impacts of OGBV. These included developing self-care and wellness routines, practicing acceptance, detaching from online spaces, and distracting oneself. Some WHRDs said that practicing self-care and wellness had helped them cope with the impact of OGBV.

“I am very much into . . . meditation. And listen to dharma. I’m a Buddhist, I seek comfort from those as well.”
7. Recommendations

The interviewed WHRDs and survey respondents made a number of recommendations for improving protections against and responding to OGBV. While some of the recommendations are applicable to only one stakeholder, others are relevant to multiple stakeholders, including governments, social media companies, the private sector, donors, civil society groups, and the public.

A. MORE ACCESSIBLE AND SURVIVOR-CENTRIC REPORTING MECHANISMS

WHRDs said that procedures for filing complaints or reporting incidents of OGBV must become more sensitive to victims, who may feel that their complaints and reports are not treated seriously.

“For the people who become the target. It is not easy for us to see all the content by ourselves, so we need someone to help us handle that. I remember when it happened to me. I didn’t have a lot of help and I really could not do anything. I just stayed at home and cried for about two weeks.”

“This complaint mechanism to register a complaint, that is very, very victim-shaming and blaming kind of structure. The victim themselves have to take the screenshots, gather every evidence, print it out and then go to the cyber bureau. Then they will decide like whether it is, quote-unquote, serious crime or not. Because they don’t see any physical harm done and they see you walking fine, they think that it’s not a problem at all because I’m alive, nothing has happened to me. So that mentality, you know, needs to change as well, and they also need a translator at their place, because they made me translate the whole threats, each and every threat, so it was more traumatic, you know, threats were not as traumatic experience but going through the legal procedure to register the complaint was more traumatic for me because of those issues.” (Case Study 2)

WHRDs who had faced OGBV almost always had to gather evidence of the attacks, select and highlight abusive comments, and then print and present the documents to the responsible authorities, such as police or cybercrime bureaus.

Reporting and complaint mechanisms such as these retraumatize OGBV survivors by shifting the burden of accountability onto them. WHRDs pointed out that existing reporting and redress mechanisms often inflict greater trauma than the original violence, and there is a need to streamline systems to make them more empathetic towards survivors.
B. GREATER ACCOUNTABILITY FROM SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES AND PLATFORM OWNERS

One of the most common recommendations expressed by interviewed WHRDs to demand more accountability from social media platforms.

“Private actor has to be involved. The company has to be more sensitized you know, like, they have to make tools more user friendly and available for victims to report.”

Several WHRDs observed that social media platforms do not have systems that are contextualized to the socio-political realities of countries in the Indo-Pacific region. For example, most WHRDs interviewed found that online platforms did not recognize gendered hate speech as hate speech because the systems were not in place to recognize profanities and slang in local languages directed against WHRDs. Interviewees highlighted that on social media platforms there is a lack of moderators in regional languages.

“The cyber bureau which can help you is not able to help you because it’s online and you have to follow the law, [so] someone from the company has to verify if it is a threat or not. They’re a multi-billion dollar company . . . they can hire a translator or something, it’s not a big deal for them to hire just a translator like to translate such stuff in regional language because, I think especially in global south there are lots of threats which you get in regional languages, most of the threats are not in English.”

“They are all American corporations. They all abide by one country’s law and they try to impose the same community guidelines, for everyone . . . and the realities are so different that it doesn’t translate very neatly. You know, what might count as a non-consensual image in the west might be something that includes nudity in it, but in countries like ours where women are so protected and they’re not supposed to go out in Muslim culture, an image that is taken of someone standing at McDonald’s when she was not supposed to be there can prove to be fatal. So these are the differences that they don’t understand and so they can’t offer us the recourse either. They will not take something off of their platform, because according to them there’s nothing bad in it.”

“There is a need for the government to, to really take accountability to protect people like us as well, not just using this platform, or using the law to restrict our freedom of expression online.”

C. GREATER ACCOUNTABILITY FROM GOVERNMENTS

The majority of the WHRDs interviewed recommended that governments and authorities to take more responsibility and implement better laws and policies. While not in favor of restrictions on freedom of speech, WHRDs felt that governments need to put systems in place so that involved platforms and perpetrators can be held accountable. The need for greater government support for OGBV survivors was also stressed. For example, in Thailand, the government provides lawyers to support WHRDs who are arrested or prosecuted but does not provide lawyers to assist WHRDs who are victims of OGBV.
“The first thing [needed] is the government support, the legal support. Improve their systems and also the police. Police reform maybe, their behavior, they should be trained well, how to behave when such cases occur.”

**D. MORE CONTEXT-SPECIFIC LAWS AND POLICIES**

Some WHRDs pointed out that perpetrators of online violence were let off the hook because they did not use traditionally abusive words or phrases. For instance, words such as “kill,” “murder,” and “rape” are easily recognizable by platform filters, but less common words or phrases, such as “you should cut off your genitals” or “you’re sleeping around,” are not recognized despite conveying threats of serious harm.

“I got threats, serious ones, and those were in the regional language and according to the cyber law [in my country], I don’t know about other places, but here Facebook has to verify whether the messages are threats or not, then the Cyber Bureau can do something about it. Because it was all in the regional language, Facebook would not consider them as violent, because they were not kind of explicit terms like rape or murder or something, it was in the regional language and the threats were very explicit and they were very graphic, which was very traumatic for me at that time.”

**E. CROSS-ISSUE SOLIDARITY FROM CSOS, DONORS, AND FUNDERS**

WHRDs highlighted a lack of funding and support for advocacy efforts, legal aid, capacity building, mental health care, and community building. They stressed the need to organize efforts to strategically mobilizing national and international support to counter OGBV, especially as attacks on WHRDs can be well coordinated.

“I really want to do some advocacy work among activists [to raise funds], because if you let it go, you know, let it happen, [every time] when someone criticizes you or whatever, you just let it go, then maybe it [will happen] . . . repeatedly. Again and again and again.” (Case Study 7)

“One of the things that you must have noticed is that all the experience happens very publicly, but when we are offering support to somebody who’s facing hate speech, we do it very privately, we will DM them, even call them or will WhatsApp them, you will extend your support and you’ll say okay, don’t worry, it’s going to be alright. . . . But in the public it’s that one person who’s facing all of this. There’s no public support for them. I think we need to figure out ways to mobilize people. So when there is a barrage of abuse that is organized, there are the support messages and support systems that are also organized.”

**F. MORE SUPPORT FROM FRIENDS AND FAMILY MEMBERS**

Some WHRDs said that support systems need to be developed so that WHRDs can feel safe and share their experiences and feelings. The systems should consist of friends or family members or a circle of like-minded people who understood the ordeal experienced by WHRD survivors of OGBV. Many WHRDs emphasized that such support
systems were invaluable in dealing with OGBV.

"I hope that you will find a support system because having a support system in order to, well, just have someone to be there for you when things get really tough, to hold your hands through it. Because you can't do this alone, being an activist. Being an advocate for human rights, it's a really difficult, challenging path. And sometimes, if you're walking down this road alone, you will feel bogged down, so find someone to help you to be there for you."

"What all I can say is, to make sure who are your allies, kind of like who are truly your friends, who are there for you and are not adding to that stress. You find that circle or group of people who are closer to you, they might not be from [an] activist background at all. But people who think like you so that they will support you when it is most needed. And who are . . . there so you can share whatever is going inside your head without having fear of being judged. Without being fearful of your privacy. So make sure you have those people around you [so] when you are going through that tough time you can talk to them. I know it's very tough. But at least even one or two persons, that helps a lot in the initial stages."

G. INCREASED AND ACCESSIBLE DIGITAL LITERACY AND SECURITY

The need to improve access to digital literacy and security training, including in local languages, was one of the most frequent recommendations made by WHRDs in the study. WHRDs said that while they may have some technical knowledge and can access support to secure themselves digitally, these were usually insufficient and depended on access to the right people and resources. Many people lacked digital literacy altogether. WHRDs said that they were concerned about their lack of awareness of digital security. Most had never had training to enhance their security while engaging in online activism.

“The concept of online violence is also same but because you are still standing, nothing has happened to you; you have not been raped, you have not been murdered, you have not been assaulted or physically abused, you are looking perfectly fine and so the mental trauma, the effect on the person who is facing online violence is not considered violence at all. They would just say that, okay, don't use social media or stop using Facebook or, those obvious choices that you have to stop doing things so people don't get into your business.”

“There is an issue of digital literacy. We face a lot of challenges. . . . I think, I am a bit more privileged than other [activists] because I have friends who are digital security experts, I have access to them . . . but not a lot of them would have [similar kind of support], especially those who live in the province, and remote [areas]. And for us, because we live in the urban area and also I can speak English, so I can read instructions, I can communicate with the company, or with the platform. So I think we need to take into account all these aspects and like with digital security, digital literacy, and
also accessibility, I think it’s a challenge as in terms of coverage, especially between the rural and urban, and accessibility, not just in terms of the coverage, but also accessibility tools.

“But meanwhile, we also became a bit exclusionary because we, by default, we were working with people who had access to the internet and who didn’t have challenges of privacy who didn’t have challenge of online safety in the same manner. They could afford to be there. . . . So I feel that you know, a bubble was created as well. Which was the worst that could have happened because, you know because the pandemic kind of brought the whole thing to your face, you could see that there are two classes of people, those who were aware of the digitalisation and when the world switches to digital, people who are already marginalized in many ways, get left behind further and just giving them the access and giving them a mobile wouldn't work. They don't have the ability or the understanding to optimize their own way.”

“And I think one more thing is to be aware of the digital security element, maybe not a lot, but at least to a certain degree, like, [the need to] protect ourselves.”

H. MORE WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP AND POSITIONS OF AUTHORITY

WHRDs emphasized the urgent need for more women to be in positions of leadership and authority.

“I think basically, one of the things is that we need more women in the authority position. Because I feel like women experienced more so we can be more empathetic to situations. . . . In general, women can be more sympathetic and empathetic to the survivors, to the victims. So I feel like we need more of that.”

I. RECOGNITION OF MENTAL TRAUMA

Several WHRDs emphasized the need to recognize that the mental trauma caused by OGBV is equivalent to physical trauma, given its life-altering impacts. One interviewed WHRD had had to leave her country to protect herself and her family. Another WHRD was forced to choose a less controversial avenue of her work for the sake of self-preservation.

J. STANDARDS FOR ONLINE CONDUCT AND CYBER-HYGIENE

Some WHRDs identified the need for digital hygiene and an online code of conduct, ideally learned at an early age to inculcate tolerance for different point of views.

“They need to apply the same kind of ethics, the same kind of etiquettes, the same kind of kindness that they're taught to apply in the physical world.”

“The solution is not external at all. You know, you’re going to have to find your way to be resilient in that environment. Because the technology, the platform, is just the medium. It’s the society that needs to change.”
K. CHANGES IN THE PUBLIC NARRATIVE, INCLUDING MEDIA COVERAGE

Given the often coordinated nature of OGBV attacks, WHRDs emphasized the need for countercampaigns and counternarratives to generate constructive reactions to abuse and trolling by internet users. For example, WHRDs suggested that it would be beneficial for civil society actors and others to support WHRDs whose mental health had suffered or whose reputations or integrity had been tarnished (by, for example, hate speech, false rumors, or morphing photos) by providing counternarratives to offset false claims. WHRDs also emphasized that the societal view of and response to OGBV must change to acknowledge the seriousness of the harm that it inflicts.

L. SELF-PRIORITIZATION AND SELF-CARE

WHRDs highlighted the need for self-care and self-prioritization to deal with the experience of violence, particularly if experienced frequently.

“I really believe that securing their own sense of self and sanity, mental health and physical health, is a top priority. And if that means you have to deactivate your account for some months for this to die down, then go ahead and move on. Because I want to be realistic and say that, you know, there is absolutely no guarantee from the state and stakeholders involved, [such as] social media platforms involved, that any action would be taken.” (Case Study 9)
8. Conclusion

This study gathered data through questionnaires and interviews to assess the major forms of OGBV that WHRDs in the Indo-Pacific region have experienced, the most common impacts of OGBV on WHRDs’ exercise of civic freedoms, and the resources and strategies have WHRDs found helpful in preventing and responding to OGBV.

The data shows that WHRDs across the five countries examined are subjected to many types of OGBV, with the most common being mass trolling, gendered hate speech, and sexual harassment online. The most common impacts of OBGV experienced by the WHRDs in the study were psychological harm and self-censorship. The types of psychological harm experienced by WHRDs included depression, anxiety, social anxiety, stress, PTSD, and paranoia; self-blame, self-doubt, self-shame, and humiliation; fear of physical harm, feelings of being watched; feeling unsafe, uncomfortable, and insecure; and feeling worried. The forms of self-censorship experienced by WHRDs included reduction in social media engagement; loss of voice; opting to choose a less controversial area of focus for activism; increase risk evaluation before posting on social media; and physical censorship.

The two main avenues for recourse pursued by WHRDs in the study were reporting the abuse to a social media platform and taking legal action. WHRDs adopted a variety of strategies to respond to and protect themselves against OGBV. These included changing their method of engagement on social media; changing social media settings and blocking accounts; digital detoxing; documenting the abuse and warning other WHRDs; seeking help from friends, family members, and community; and self-prioritization and self-care.

The experiences of WHRDs in the study show that there are many gaps across the region when it comes to protecting against and responding to OGBV, including OGBV against WHRDs. WHRDs made a number of recommendations for improving protections and responses to OGBV, including more accessible and survivor-centric reporting mechanisms; greater accountability from social media companies and platform owners; more context-specific laws and policies; and increased and accessible digital literacy and security.

The data from this research suggests that addressing OGBV against WHRDs and more generally will require a multi-faceted response that engages a variety of stakeholders and holds them accountable. Ultimately, any response—whether reforming the legal framework, enhancing reporting mechanisms, or increasing available support for those who have experienced OGBV—will only be effective if they keep the survivor’s experience at the forefront.
Annex: Case Studies

The case studies presented below are based on interviews with WHRDs in each of the case study countries. In each instance, the WHRD-survivor made the decision themselves of whether to remain anonymous, in which case a pseudonym was used and all identifying details removed. The quotations presented in the case studies are excerpted from the interviews and have been edited for clarity.

CASE STUDY 1: SOPHEAP

Sopheap is a prominent woman human rights defender and executive director of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR). She has faced various types of online and offline harassment. Trolling and online hateful comments are part of her day-to-day experience as an activist. For example, her criticism that a piece of new legislation was undermining women’s rights resulted in trolling and sexually degrading comments.

I have received messages from a number of trolls, such as having my face pasted on a naked body, and the comments that my daughter and I will be willing to walk naked in the street or at the market, you know, a lot of things. That is the price that we pay for being outspoken on women’s rights.

The harassment was also carried out by troll armies supporting the government.

I think there have been a number of cases of what you call online army. . . . It is a campaign to attack us online.

On reflecting on the impact on her experience of online harassment over the years, Sopheap shared that such instances do not impact her profoundly because of her ability to practice acceptance, her ability to mentally prepare herself for such experiences, and her wellness routines. However, she was uncomfortable with the idea that the trolling could go beyond her to target others close to her:

I accept everything, you know, either good or bad. But I think one thing that I’m uncomfortable with is when people will come beyond me personally. They will say, for example, my daughter and I would be willing to be naked in the street. Of course, I have no daughter. I have no children yet, but if I have a kid, how would it affect my kid?

She also worries about fellow WHRDS who face such harassment.

I’m thinking of other women human rights defenders who have the family and maybe their families are different, you know? [If] their families are restrictive, their family [are] sensitively affected, what would happen, you know?

To ensure that women human rights defenders in her networks are prepared for such attacks, she has started documenting her online abuse.
I started to screenshot. I wouldn’t comment. I would just screenshot it and share it with my network, informing fellow HRDs, look! this is the consequence of being vocal. I don’t want to intimidate them. But I just want to normalize the fact that that is the price that we pay.

Despite the continued harassment, Sopheap feels the need to speak up about issues of social justice and women’s rights:

“Sometimes I feel that I want to step back a bit. I don’t want to see sexist comments, so I may think okay, should I talk about this issue then? But at the same time, it depends on the issue. For example, like online gender-based violence cases, on the rights of women’s bodies. Although I received several comments, I can’t back out, because I feel that I have to speak out.”

Sopheap believes that changing public perceptions of OGBV, ending victimization, and greater accountability on the part of the social media platforms will go a long way in combating OGBV.

CASE STUDY 2: “SANCHITA”

I started receiving very explicit threat messages where they said that they know my family and they will murder me, they will rape and kill me, they will mutilate my body and everything. I just panicked because, it was not only about me, it was also about my family.

Sanchita is an artist, poet, and activist who likes to stay out of the limelight. In 2021, one of her poems describing the fatal idealism of women and women’s decision to fight idealism and break the shackles of patriarchy was uploaded to social media and went viral. A couple of days later, Sanchita received a call from a friend who informed her that a Facebook account was impersonating her and sending friend requests to people known to her. Soon after, she started receiving explicit threats, which did not stop online but also extended to offline harassment.

Just the day after the threats were posted on social media, my photo and two other women activist’s photos were posted and it was declared that whoever will smear black paint on our faces will be rewarded. And my phone was ringing like crazy, like from morning to night. The phone did not stop ringing crazily. That was more traumatizing than those threats.

Sanchita was horrified and decided to stay with a friend, avoiding phone calls from journalists and most other people.

I was not feeling safe staying at my place. I just went to a friend’s place to stay because I was staying alone. Because you know [my city] is a very small place, and everyone knows everyone. So you cannot trust other people, especially in this situation. So I just stayed there for a few weeks. It was really, really tough for me.

64 Pseudonyms in place of the real names are in quotation marks.
After a few weeks, Sanchita gathered herself together and decided to report the incident to the cyber bureau of her country. They denied her request for help on the grounds that Facebook does not recognize the posts as threats because the trolls or abusers did not use terms such as “rape” or “murder” and the threats were posted in the regional language.

The complaining mechanism in itself needs to be changed. In [my country], you need to come to [the capital] to register online violence, you cannot register it at your local level, at your municipality or at the ward office. . . . If the threats are in your messenger, the cyber bureau will not look at your case. It will [be dismissed as] gali beijjati [abuse and insult]. Then it will go to another police department [and] they will consider it gali beijjati.

Sanchita’s case was not registered at either at the cyber bureau or the local police station.

It didn’t register. Actually, they didn’t register the case. So in order to get the case registered, even at the local police station, you need the IP address. It was not given to me. So I just decided to stop because it was already four months, I guess.

I was not able to focus on my work and even paintings and they were not helping at all in the cyber bureau. So for the sake of my mental health, I decided to stop, I just called them once. I didn’t have the guts to go to the cyber bureau to ask them what happened. Because I didn’t want to repeat the same, you know, the same procedure of everybody surrounding me and lecturing me that I was wrong, I should not have done it. So yeah, I just called them and they said, no, Facebook had not verified and your case file is closed.

This complaint mechanism to register a complaint is very, very victim-shaming and blaming kind of structure. The victim themselves have to take the screenshots, gather every evidence, and print it out, and then go to the cyber bureau. Then they will decide whether it is, quote-unquote, serious crime or not. Because they don’t see any physical harm done and they see you walking fine, they think that it’s not a problem at all because I’m alive, nothing has happened to me.

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CASE STUDY 3: “SHARON”

Sharon is an activist who experienced extreme backlash from and harassment by government authorities and religious groups for tweeting against a government program. After her tweet, multiple police reports were filed against her by governmental authorities and religious groups. The whole ordeal was stressful, she said.

There were some comments that said we will file police reports against you. And see you asked for it. Something along those lines. Oh, I brought this upon myself . . . in a very, I guess, [in a] victim-blaming way, where if something bad happens to you, you did this yourself. There were no threats of sexual violence. But there were, like, threats [that were] almost like coming down or punishing me for questioning a government program . . . [for] speaking out about this. Saying we’re gonna teach you a lesson. Punishing you by filing this police report. This is what you get for posting all this.

The weeks following the tweet were filled with stress and anxiety as Sharon tried to keep tabs on the multiple police reports filed against her, engage a lawyer, and prepare herself mentally. During this time, she approached other civil society organizations and felt comforted by their support. The incident has had a long-lasting impact on Sharon. Posting online has become an uncomfortable experience for her.

I just don’t feel comfortable posting on social media. I don’t feel comfortable being my own regular kind of . . . carefree . . . activist. But now I’m, like, okay, we’re doing serious risk assessments for everything.

It has also taken a toll on Sharon’s mental health. She says she experiences subconscious anxiety when I post online. If I post online, I have to go through that added thought process. So yeah, just added anxiety, unnecessary anxiety, and paranoia. I have to go through . . . my own risk assessment, and what’s the worst thing that could happen. And then just, like, it is exhausting . . . and I just feel like I’m being watched, even if it’s not true. I just feel that.

She worries that this would impact her career prospects, as more risk-averse organizations may view her as a liability:

So I know what they have done . . . they know that it’s a thing to intimidate me. They know that the police may not call me in for questioning but they know that . . . they have done it to obviously leave a digital print online . . . When people Google me, all of these things against me come up. Oh, that this is the police report, oh, this person has been called a liar by an official government body. [This is] to prevent me from continuing to do more activism, intimidate me, and also . . . affect my employment opportunities.

CASE STUDY 4. FLEUR

For being [a] pro-democracy activist, I got a lot of hate from the other side, like conservative people, pro-monarchy, pro-government . . . and those people attacked me . . . online.
Sirin, who also goes by the name Fleur, is well known in the feminist and pro-democracy movement in Thailand. She started off as a student activist in 2017, when the pro-democracy movement was just beginning. She became the face of feminist and pro-democracy protests in universities around Thailand in 2018–19. She is an outspoken intersectional feminist who works on an array of issues, including women's rights; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) rights; and civil liberties. Fleur remembers the entire experience of online violence.

When I started to be on the news there were pictures of me protesting... wearing something I would normally wear... and people attacked me about how I dress. They said that I look like a sloth... and they called me sheep and a lot of things that are related to my gender. That was only the beginning. Like, from the conservative side. That was one thing. But the other thing is that because I'm a feminist, and I spoke out against many things, especially on my Twitter, about gender issues, LGBTQ issues, and feminism issues. I spoke out on my Twitter and Facebook and a lot of anti-feminists—most of them were actually pro-democracy, so it’s like we were on the same side... politically, but when it came to gender issues they didn’t agree with me—they attacked me on this, especially online. There is, like, this group on Facebook that is, you know, where anti-feminists talk and things are posted, they bully people... A lot of times my tweets or my posts were shared into this group. There were multiple groups, actually, and people in these groups would comment negative things about me, and then I became known as the feminist... that they hated, like the face of Thai feminism for some period of time, and whenever there was a mention of feminism on Twitter, etc., they mentioned my name. The pictures that I posted online, like pictures of myself, were posted in these groups. They would criticize my appearance... I remember this one time, I have my Tinder profile, and some guys from these groups saw me on Tinder and they captured my Tinder profile and then they posted it in these groups, and people were commenting, criticizing me, sexually sometimes. They either over-sexualized me or they said that I’m not sexually attractive for them.

Fleur pointed out that these attacks affect women activists by blurring the line between physical space and virtual space and can have a very real impact on one’s sense of physical self.

There was a period that many people, anti-feminists, were posting about me constantly, nonstop in their groups or mentioning me on Twitter... making fun of me nonstop, and that was so hard on me. Because they used personal information and personal pictures of me to make fun of me, and I felt really bad. Because I couldn’t do anything, I felt so helpless. Maybe some people will think that it’s not important, because it’s not like a physical attack. So some people don’t get that. Some people only think that Oh! it’s just online. You know, it can hurt... I had to go offline for a while. And I saw my psychiatrist... and I’m lucky to have this psychiatrist, because she is pro-democracy and she understands things like this. So it was good that I could access mental health support. But I want to mention that, like for other activists, especially women activists... they don’t have financial support, it’s really hard to get
Fleur tried to report these groups and individuals to online platforms and seek legal help as well. She was able to sue and win a case involving a person who had attacked her by posting multiple statements on Facebook. But for the other groups and individuals involved, there was nothing much she could do.

As for legal actions, the most frustrating part was . . . I could not do anything legally. Except for the person from the conservative side that I could sue . . . because he posted, he attacked me on Facebook, he said things that were easy to sue because it was obvious that he was referring to me. Those words were . . . recognized in the law . . . so that was easy. But the hardest part was that the younger ones, pro-democracy people who are anti-feminist, were hard to sue because they knew how to avoid this kind of thing. They remained anonymous, and it’s very hard to track them, to track their identity. I could get help from the cybercrime unit but they only care about article 112 which is “lèse-majesté.” The cybercrime unit could track these people down but for activists like myself, they wouldn’t do it.

In some instances, the people who attacked Fleur online were well aware of the privacy settings and anonymity that made her feel helpless. When they targeted her, their aggression was so subtle—mostly in the form of slang from anonymous accounts—that the law did not recognize it as online harassment, abuse, or attacks.

So that’s hard. One thing that’s hard is to track them up, track their identity, and the second thing is that they usually mocked me . . . satirically, it was not so obvious. They used words that were not . . . recognized in the law. These people were young, some were in middle school or high school, and they used slang . . . It’s hard to prove to the court, but they were referring to me and they were attacking me. It was very hard. I could only sue one case that was the conservative . . . guy and not these anti-feminist groups. I couldn’t do anything and that, like, bothered me a lot. Because I wanted to, you know, to make them accountable. Because I wanted to make an example of at least one case. That would have been enough, but I couldn’t do it. If I wanted anything to change, it would be . . . the legal system.

CASE STUDY 5. DINÁ

Dina is a women human rights defender who has been subjected to OGBV so many times that it has become normalized for her.

I’ve literally been through this before many, many times. I have grown immune. And I shouldn’t be saying that. I shouldn’t be saying that I’ve gotten immune to the violence. We shouldn’t be normalizing it. But what else do you do when that is your normal?
In one incident, Dina posted a picture of herself that was perceived as controversial, and she faced extreme backlash online.

Because everything that happens on the internet happens so fast . . . I literally was receiving hundreds of messages on my Facebook Messenger telling me that, you know, how wrong I was how ashamed I should be of myself, and things like that. Those kinds of things. But yeah, the point here is, you lose control over the story.

She shared that, while she had previously been subjected to OGBV, this time an immediate reaction was not possible.

It was not my first time experiencing that and learning from past lessons, I just ignored them. So, I mean, that doesn’t mean it didn’t hurt. It did. But yeah, I kind of just, it was just too . . . I absorbed actually quite a bit of that energy. But . . . I was not strong enough to fight back. I was only one person against hundreds and thousands, like against a mob.

Within three days of the incident, Dina was fired from her job and has not been able to find employment since. When she lost her job, she received comments that applauded the event, claiming she “deserved it.” The entire ordeal had long-lasting impact on Dina’s sense of self and mental health.

In fact, actually, it got so bad to a point that I lost my ability to speak . . . I can speak physically, but my thoughts and my speech just are not there. I think there is that psychological and trauma response that affected my ability to express myself.

The fear of another backlash led to self-censorship.

For so long I shut myself up. For years I haven’t written anything. I used to write every day. So when I say I lost my voice, I didn’t lose my physical voice. I lost my voice. I don’t know what to say, I don’t know what to express. I think everything is locked. You know, because of that fear, this fear of that backlash again.

Describing the impact, she reflected on how incidents such as these are traumatic to a point that they can rewire one’s brain.

Attaching my sense of worth, my sense of identity to something other than my online existence—that was a key part to my healing. It’s very easy, you know, part of the violence is the fact that it really literally rewires your mind to believe what people say about you.

Though Dina has made great strides towards healing through acceptance, with support from her close community, she shared how the permanence of the internet has led to a certain permanent version of her online, with real-life consequences.

This has happened so many years ago, but . . . I still live with the impact. I still can’t get a job in human rights in my country . . . Every time I meet people . . . they just they have that notion of you. And they treat you as that. It’s very difficult to break away from that.
CASE STUDY 6. ANGAKHANA

[It] is difficult, because . . . when I complained to the police, I had to print out everything . . . and had to highlight and show that this is the hate speech, this is the sexual harassment.

Angakhana is a prominent women human rights defender who has fought against human rights violations in Thailand for twenty years. She is a winner of the 2019 Ramon Magsaysay Award, which recognizes greatness of spirit and transformative leadership, and a former commissioner of Thailand’s National Human Rights Commission. Angakhana’s work has exposed her not only to physical threats, but also to many online attacks from the Thai military. She views her experience as indicative of the state of affairs with online violence against WHRDs.

The latest case, when we complained to the police . . . I think in the year . . . 2020 . . . they were debating in the parliament, in the House of Representatives, and one of the members of parliament presented a PowerPoint showing that one website attacked women human rights defenders, including myself . . . . Members of parliament say that they have the evidence that this website was supported by the Internal Security Operations Command—the ISOC, led by the military, the police and civilian officials, in the Southern Provinces of Thailand. But . . . everyone denied it, especially the military. They deny that the military use[d] the national budget to attack the women human rights defenders, but then . . . later, maybe only a couple of months, Facebook released the report that the military was involved in some Facebook accounts and Facebook closed it.

At one point, Facebook deployed facial recognition technology that helped Thai WHRDs determine if someone’s photos had been posted online, thus enabling them to report such incidents to the police. Angakhana expressed her disappointment with the system because, even though they had evidence, it did not do much to help WHRDs combat OGBV.

During the time that Facebook had facial recognition, so every time people used my pictures, edited and posted them . . . somebody commented . . . maybe she wants to be raped or whatever. So it’s like, gender was a tool used to attack me, and when I report[ed it] to the police, I had to print out all the comments and highlight them in the colors that illustrate that this is hate speech. But again, the police said that they cannot file, because it’s just like an anonymous profile, they cannot find anyone whose account this is. I think [it] is a problem because many people use anonymous accounts.

Angakhana pointed out that the system fails its people, especially WHRDS.

Every time I was attacked [online], I reported it to the police. Now Thailand has [a] technology crime suppression division. So that when I was attacked, I went to the technology crime suppression division to report, complain, and ask them to find the perpetrators—the people who violated my rights. But it failed . . . I [do] not understand, because, you know, when the high-profile
people in the country—for example, the prime minister or ministries—when they are attacked, the police work really fast. . . . But for women human rights defenders, I think [it is] totally different. It seems that nobody protects our rights.

Even though Angakhana has been subjected to much online and offline violence, she does not feel that it can deter her from acting against human rights violations in the country.

Actually it [did] not make me stop my work, but it’s, like, really irritating. It’s really irritating and you know, sometimes it [also] made me scared.

Angakhana believes that Thailand could take a big step to help its WHRDs by adhering to UN guidelines.

CASE STUDY 7. “VINH”

Vinh is recognized as a leader of pro-democracy and human rights activism in her country. She has been working to build a strong movement through her advocacy efforts and capacity building for young human rights activists. Vinh has been subjected to online violence many times in her life. She shared that being a public figure is not easy and that WHRDs’ privacy is often compromised. She also said that having a public profile as a human rights activist means having to compromise your privacy and open your life to public scrutiny.

One of the challenges of being [a] public figure is that we become the target of online harassment, cyberbullying. And if you are a woman, it’s gonna be harder than [for] a man, I think. Women and LGBT activists become a target of gender-based online harassment on social media. . . . Another point is that we lose our privacy . . . and people just try to . . . monitor [our] life. I mean, not just the people who support you, but also the people who might hate you and your idea[s.] They would monitor my social media accounts. . . . They criticize us . . . even my personal life in public. So yeah, that’s not that easy for us, it affects us . . . in both our privacy and also mental health, [when] we are subjected to online harassment.

Vinh’s life as a pro-democracy activist and a leader has not been easy.

When we become public figures, one of the problems is that the government and the authorities will try to monitor my social media account. Every time that I post something there, [they] will look at it, and if they don’t like my idea, they will just prosecute me. Like in the case [when I posted a comment against the authority figures in the country]. I posted on my social media some criticism of [a government authority] and asked them to reduce the budget and support people during the COVID pandemic. But the government didn’t like that idea. So they prosecuted me with defamation, which can put me in jail for fifteen years. So yeah, I become a public figure. Even at times when I post my photo and I am wearing some short pants or a dress, then people will look at me and criticize me [for] the way I dress.
Vinh said that she has been getting rape threats, death threats, and sexual harassment in various forms throughout her time in activism. Her photos have been photoshopped and put on social media along with misinformation and fake news campaigns. Her personal information has been made public on social media. People have sent her unsolicited photographs of nude men and male genitalia. All of this had a huge effect on her mental health.

In one incident, Vinh was labeled the mistress of a foreign diplomat and was said to seek support from the international community and run a campaign against her own country. The social media page that was running the allegations belonged to a group that supported the government and the military. They also had a television channel that ran a similar campaign against her.

During that time, when I used to walk on the street, some people use to recognize me from social media. There was a campaign against me. They even made a press release. They also ran a campaign against me on the TV channel.

It is not easy to file a civil defamation suit against someone who has expressed or posted critical comments. Although the Human Rights Committee provides legal assistance, its lawyers are limited to providing support only in cases in which human rights activists are arrested or prosecuted. If a woman human rights activist wants to file a civil defamation suit, she has to hire her own lawyer and bear the legal fees, which are high.

Can you imagine if you hired a lawyer, you [spend] the money [on] the lawyer, but then you don't win the case, you wouldn't get that money back. But you still have to pay the lawyer. Yeah, that's not easy for us... I really want to do some advocacy work among activists [to raise funds], because if you let it go, you know, let it happen, [every time] when someone criticizes you or whatever, if you just let it go, then maybe it [will happen] . . . repeatedly. Again and again and again.

CASE STUDY 8. RISHIKESH

Rishikesh is a Dalit, non-binary, transgender activist. Despite the challenges of these multiple layers of intersecting marginalization, they strive to make the world a better place for themselves and others through their activism. Recently, they became the target of a barrage of abuse and transphobic violence online, which escalated into offline violence. They shared how they face online harassment in their daily life.

I was on Grindr, and I get a message. I’m like, is it someone under my building, because I live in an individual building with just one other family. I looked through the window to see if anyone was downstairs near our shop. There was nobody there. I felt I knew who this person was, but didn't think they’d be on Grindr and dismissed it. So he sent me his picture, and I said oh you, and then he said, yeah, we are classmates from primary school, and I said yeah, okay cool. And then he just sent me his dick pick and it felt extremely unsafe to even step out, because there are people like this right outside my house. He was sitting right across the road near the tea stall and a bunch
of shops, where there were a few public benches. He was there with a few friends.

In 2020, right before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Rishikesh started a fundraiser to pay for their gender-affirmative surgery but then paused it temporarily after more urgent issues came up. While they received some support, others resorted to harassment and online abuse. As soon as they started their fundraiser again, the cycle of casteist slurs, transphobic comments, hate speech, death threats, and threats to mutilate their body began again.

Then I posted my fundraiser again for my transition. I was trolled horribly because [earlier] also there will be one or two comments and I would just delete them because I didn’t want people to read them, feel bad, or get triggered. But this time, I’m like, let me reply to them because that was my first time dealing with trolls. So I responded and then it just got worse. Meme pages started harassing me, people just kept commenting disgusting things. People kept saying [things] like, “you want vagina and boob implants—you are trying to fulfill your sexual fantasies, you know, this is a luxury.” Or “why are you using our hard-earned money?” “You should die, your parents will be happy if you kill yourself,” and other horrible things.

For Rishikesh, it is common to receive hundreds of hate comments and threats on a daily basis.

I got rape threats, I got death threats, I had people telling me to cut off my genitals . . . and some of them are visible on my Instagram highlights. I don’t remember as much in detail except the ones where they told me to jump off my roof—my parents would be happy—and to cut off my genitals. Most of them invalidate me and give me different rape threats and say horrible things like you should get raped and killed.

CASE STUDY 9. ARIAL

Arial is a prominent feminist and WHRD who advocates for gender equality. Online activism is the core of her work, even though it subjects her daily to online violence and harassment, including trolling, doxing, and hateful comments. In one incident, Arial was subjected to continuous online trolling after an old tweet went viral, which led her to deactivate her social media accounts for almost ten months to protect her mental peace.

I am back now, but I mention on my Twitter profile that I am inactive, and I am inactive. . . . It took me quite a long time. It took me ten months to have the courage.

Reflecting on the incident, she notes that the online harassment led to some form of self-censorship and negatively impacted her mental health. Even though online activism and social media platforms were vital to her work and professional growth, Arial was forced to take a step back. In another incident, Arial was targeted for her religious identity.

During a prominent protest in the country . . . the trolling took a religious turn. And a lot of those protesting belong to one religious community and
were visible in the media. And I am also from that community. I put out a
tweet saying I support the protest and I was trolled. I was called names that
suggested I am a separatist and I support the separatist movement.

While Arial has reported the accounts that engage in trolling and filters out hateful
comments whenever possible, she believes that a multi-stakeholder approach would be
helpful, especially in cases of mass trolling and online abuse. In some cases, prioritiz-
ing self becomes key.

I will advise from my personal experience to secure your own sanity as opposed to fighting back. Because you can’t fight back. You are outnumbered, and you can’t even take everyone to court. I really believe that securing their own sense of self and sanity, mental health and physical health, is a top priority. And if that means you have to deactivate your account for some months for this to die down, then go ahead and move on. Because I want to be realistic and say that, you know, there is absolutely no guarantee from the state and stakeholders involved, [such as] the social media platforms involved, that any action would be taken.

CASE STUDY 10. INDU

Indu is an indigenous rights activist and writer and part of the pedal movement in Nepal. Most of her writing is focused on Tharu women and indigenous people’s rights. Because of her identity as a WHRD who belongs to an ethnic minority, she has faced a lot of OGBV.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Indu was in Seoul, Korea, for her university studies but remained closely connected to the movement back home. She recalls being called racist for talking about her community’s rights.

So I was, like, really connected through Facebook, through Zoom meetings at that time also. We organized many, many discussion programs, and I got a chance to participate in all of the programs. So during that time, you know, we are fighting for our community, so many people said, oh, you people are racist. You want to talk about Tharu only, but we are all Nepali. But every [other] time we have had [to hear] like, oh, are you really Nepali? Because the government and the people who run the government or those who are regarded as so-called higher caste people, they only know us as Tharu, not as Nepali. Like on my Facebook, I have so many friends who are also non-Tharu, and then also those who do not accept us as Nepali. So when I am speaking on Facebook or when I post about our rights, those people will come and comment, like, oh, you are [an] educated lady. Why do you think so? Like why you are dividing people? Why are you dividing families?

Indu’s personal choices have been questioned on social media, and she has been ac-
cused of flouting her native culture.

You know, every time I use social media, I feel very insecure in terms of [whether] I want to post my picture or post anything personal. I have to think a lot, like, how people will perceive me through my pictures and through my
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writings, how people will see me. So that’s always been a challenge for me. I don’t know if it’s online violence or not, but I felt very bad when I was in Korea and went to the beach, I was dressed in half pants and then sleeveless sandos. I posted a picture, and then there was one comment saying, oh, you forgot your culture. Why you were posting this kind of photo? Then I was, like, oh should I wear . . . my cholia and lehenga [traditional clothing] . . . on the beach in Korea? . . . When a boy posts such pictures no one says, oh, you are not following your traditions. But when a girl is posting they will comment on your dress, your makeup, your haircut, etc.

Indu recalls the time that she started looking through a gender lens at the annual process of choosing a leader in her community and the kind of comments she received after writing about that issue.

As a writer, I write on many issues from my community. . . . Some years ago I [wrote] about Tharu people’s rights . . . about [the] whole system. I used to talk about the community, about gender . . . So at that time, when people read my articles, they were like, oh, wow, you are doing [such a] good job. Yeah, so people used to appreciate me. Then I started thinking from women’s perspective, [and] I wrote an article about community leaders . . . and indigenous communities. In every village, we have one community leader and that community leader is chosen [by the people]. . . . They come together once a year, and then he gets chosen by them. It happens every year, so people say that, oh, this is like communism in our community, we are choosing our own leaders. But when I started thinking from [a] women’s perspective, it was like, oh, only men come to choose [another man], and they [have been] choosing men for many years. So why not have women come out and chose women leaders. . . . There is still discrimination [in] our own community as well. When we are fighting against a state which is racist, at the same time, we have to fight with our own communities, with some bad practices that are happening in our community. And then, when I published that article, people are, like, oh, oh why are you writing this? This is beijjati [disrespectful of one’s community].

Indu’s strategies for self-preservation are to block the abusive accounts and ignore the comments from people that are violent or might hurt her feelings.

I just ignore them. I delete those comments or block them.

CASE STUDY 11: “CATHERINE”

Catherine is a feminist and founder of the blog “A Dose of Cath,” in which she dismantles patriarchal structures one video at a time. An inspiration for many, she has been featured on the Forbes 30 under 30 Asia list and has a huge social media following. However, these achievements have not come easily. Posting videos on issues considered taboo, such as sex, menstruation, and women’s health, she has received regular abuse online and has often been accused of “destroying” Cambodian culture. She feels she has become “desensitized” to online abuse because of its sheer frequency. In describing her experience, she said that

Basically, anything that you can call a person, I’ve been called that. They have
even used racism to attack me by saying that, obviously she’s Vietnamese, so she’s talking about shameless things like this. As if being Vietnamese is bad! I have been accused of bestiality just because I take photos with my dogs.

Because she talks about sex education on the internet, Catherine is the target of harassment that is often sexual in nature, which forces her to not engage with her followers or look at the comments section and messages on her page.

There was one point when I was talking about erotica and I was attacked by a political party who’s probably the equivalent of Trump in Cambodia. I was attacked by them, and all their supporters were harassing me and posting my videos, posting my images everywhere. . . . I don’t look at private messages. I don’t look at the page message[s], the page inbox anymore, because I would get a lot of unsolicited dick pictures. Sometimes they would send me screenshots of porn. Sometimes they would send those kinds of images or even videos and tell me things that they want to do to me, which is really disgusting. And because of that, I don’t check my inbox anymore, because I figured I don’t want to do that to my mental health.

When Catherine tried to connect to her audience by hosting a live video, random men started passing sexual comments, making her uncomfortable and forcing her to forgo yet another medium of communicating. Catherine said that she mentally prepares herself against online abuse to continue her work. Her few attempts to act against the perpetrators have proved futile.

I have reported [comments] to Facebook or to the platform. But so far, most of the time, the response that I get back is that it doesn’t violate community policy or community guidelines. I don’t know why, but apparently it doesn’t. . . . So after a while, I just stopped doing that as well. As far as reporting it to the authority, I am pretty sure that they’re not going to do anything about it, because they say, oh this is your fault for talking about sex online. If you don’t want to get that kind of images, maybe you should stop talking about sex. Or they will find fault in me or they would just not do anything at all.

I have reported [comments] to Facebook. . . . But so far, most of the time, the response that I get back is that it doesn’t violate community policy or community guidelines. I don’t know why, but apparently it doesn’t. . . . So after a while, I just stopped [reporting them].

Catherine believes that OGBV needs to be taken more seriously and a greater sense of awareness and accountability by social media giants and governments would help in the move towards a safer internet.

**CASE STUDY 12. BABITA**

Babita is a well-established print journalist and WHRD in Nepal and has thirty years of experience. She is not only an active member of a vast network of women journalists in Nepal but has also spearheaded some of the most extensive networks of journalists. Her article reviewing recent amendments to the country’s rape laws raised eyebrows, and a flurry of online attacks that took a toll on her. Despite being based on her re-
search of underage boys and the justice system, her article was widely misunderstood to be sympathizing with rapists. The public was against her, and even the community of women’s rights activists and social activists were divided.

I was part of a research [project], which required reviewing the juvenile justice system and rehabilitation center for boys under the age of eight years. Due to the structural fault lines and loopholes in the legal system (which still needs stronger monitoring mechanisms), a large number of young men, especially from marginalized and vulnerable communities, were in the system because of false accusations by the families of young women who they were in a relationship with. Based on this knowledge, I wrote an article demanding a wider discussion on rape laws. . . . Things were taken totally out of context when coincidently the issue of a national “heartthrob” had jolted a different national debate on rape law concerning the minors. I was so scared to even open my FB and Twitter. I was harassed and I didn’t want to see anything! Any kind of words they could use to attack me baselessly, and people passing unsolicited opinions on me. Not only me, but my family. My brothers they said, what is happening? They were scared too. My whole family had to go through it.

It all started with an offline campaign that gathered 125 names on a statement that was not only published but also sent to various embassies. The offline campaign ended up spurring targeted mass trolling by 100+ people online, mainly on Twitter and Facebook, based on misinformation. The impact of this online attack was such that Babita took time off from social media and stopped defending her position. The trauma was so intense that she could not sleep properly for weeks. Her family members were worried about her safety because of the comments that her profiles were attracting.

After publishing my article, there were women’s group members, including both women and men, and they released a statement. . . . There were 125 names on it, and they were trolling me and harassing me based on that statement. . . . They wanted to establish that I was in the rapists’ favor. So that kind of perpetrated misinformation that they wanted to establish about me. . . . There are some groups in Nepal that do this kind of cyber-war, as the internet makes it easier to do it behind the screens.

Babita recalls that she was finally able to deal with the trauma with support from the Federation of Nepali Journalists, Freedom Forum, and Sancharika Samuha, a network for women journalists.

I could not sleep for about a week, because I was thinking, oh! even those that I thought were close to me were talking about me. And on the internet, suddenly, somebody started trolling me and another one added, oh, yes, yes, they are like this. And you feel so embarrassed. I was thinking, oh God! he is also thinking [this way about me], and she is also thinking [this way about] me. People who knew me, people who knew my core, you know? They did not say anything against me, but they did not say anything to defend me either. I was hurt. That is kind of a mental trauma that I felt.
Babita felt frustrated by the entire experience. For the first time in her life, she felt that she should perhaps step away from writing on women’s issues because things were being taken out of context. She even contemplated focusing on larger national issues that needed her undivided attention, as the country was going through rapid transitions. And right at that moment, another pivotal law, the Divorce Law, was ready to be revised. Recognizing the vulnerabilities of both women and men in the situation, she could not help but raise her voice again for a just legal system for everyone regardless of gender. Babita expressed her disappointment with the lack of legal protections when dealing with online violence. She continues to fight for justice despite the adversities.

Small cities used to have things like gang fights. People to people, person to person. But now this fight is happening on the internet. And unfortunately we don’t have a strong cyber law. We have been fighting for this for a very long time. Nepal police, cyber bureau and some media are using the Electronic Transaction Act, but it is not made for this [kind of] cybercrime.

CASE STUDY 13. HEATHER

Heather is a WHRD and co-founder of a feminist organization that works on a range of human rights issues using an intersectional lens. OGBV is frequently experienced by the organization and Heather herself, especially when addressing more “controversial” issues related to women’s rights. Heather shared how fellow WHRDS in her country are routinely subjected to online harassment, trolling, and sexual and hateful comments.

Recalling incidents of OGBV that she has experienced, Heather described how her online presence on a feminist talk show attracted comments about her body.

We have our feminist Friday live show. It depends on the topic that we discuss. For some topics, we receive a lot of hate comments. And we do receive messages on our Facebook page as well. I think especially for me. I have a lot of tattoos on my arms, neck, and shoulder. So every time I wear a tank top and do the show, there would be comments. There would be body-shaming.

The constant subjection to such comments had a negative impact on Heather’s mental health. Repeated exposure to such comments made her feel depressed and demotivated.

I mean, I am a pro-choice person, and I support sex workers. But having people name and shame you, calling me a sex worker or a prostitute or something like that because I have a tattoo. It can be stressful and demotivating. . . . I do not read the messages or respond to the messages anymore. So this helped as well. But I also try to remind myself of the purpose and that this kind of reaction is sort of expected.

For me, I don’t think it has affected me to a point where I would censor myself. But I think maybe it does sometimes. For example, I would choose to wear long-sleeved shirts to do this show, so that nobody will body-shame me because of the tattoos. So I think maybe it does have an effect. But in terms of the message, I still haven’t changed.
Although Heather has tried to report the comments to social media platforms, there are rarely any consequences. She believes the problem is compounded by the authorities’ evident lack of seriousness about the issue, which has resulted in few mechanisms for redress.

Heather advocates for a change in accountability and suggested that individuals going through such an ordeal distance themselves from the experience, rely on the support of family and friends, and enhance their knowledge about digital security.

**CASE STUDY 14: MEENA**

I get a lot of rape threats on social media. [The] worst profanities. The kinds that will fill you with fear of what you are going to see next, which new word they are going to use that you might not even have heard of. I get a lot of other things, but an inordinate amount of rape threats, that we can do whatever, come anywhere. So these kinds of threats I have had in excess.

Meena is an award-winning Dalit journalist who has bravely faced adversity and caste-based discrimination. She was forced out of the media house BBC Hindi for her identity as a Dalit woman journalist, which compelled her to be vocal and own her caste with pride. She started her own media house called Mooknayak, which translates roughly as “the silent hero,” based on the ideals and teachings of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. Meena explained that belonging to a lower caste comes with challenges, but being a woman from a lower caste adds another layer of marginalization.

Because I belong to [the] Dalit community I am already marginalized. But because I am also a woman, that further marginalizes me. Being a woman comes with its own challenges.

Over the years, Meena has been the target of extensive trolling and has received death and rape threats and sexually explicit phone calls and messages, to the point that she has grown accustomed to the abuse. What breaks her heart is that people who belong to her community troll her. Meena highlighted the deeply rooted patriarchy that is evident even in the language used to abuse women online. She has reported a few incidents to the police, but nothing much has happened.

When you look at the profanity used for swearing at women of lower caste, you would notice that the profanities are based on their gender and caste. And if you look at it like that, I perfectly fit both criteria. So I used to get abused a lot based on my identity as a Dalit woman. When you look at social media, you will see those kinds of profanities used in extreme for me. So much so that at the beginning I used to feel that perhaps I am doing something wrong. Otherwise why would this many people use abusive language against me? A lot of things were happening, and I used to get depressed because of it. But then I got so used to it that now I feel I must be doing something right. That is probably the reason why they feel so threatened by me.
On reflecting on the impact of the abuse that she experiences because of her work, Meena said that while it does not break her down personally anymore, she worries about her family.

I got scared in the beginning. When I burned the Manusmriti [a Hindu text], I got threats of physical violence, so that it kind of scared me a bit. I mean, when people use profanities on social media, you will notice that it’s similar to what happens in real life. Whenever [people] belonging to a lower caste used to cross other people’s paths, they used to get abused. That has been happening for ages. But what is more worrisome is that people shouldn’t harm us physically, because we also have to earn and we also have to work.

Meena continues to experience trolling and receive sexually explicit content via every possible channel, including Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. The abuse is so severe that even her family members have been subjected to it unknowingly.

This one time it happened that a man called and started showing his penis. And I had not received that call, my sister had. I had got back home at that time, and my sister said someone is calling you. So I said just pick it up, and then I will take over. I didn’t know that it was an unknown caller. So she picked it up and he started showing his penis. At first my sister didn’t say anything to me. Although she is older than me, she was also scared that, what was that. . Then the phone rang again, but she didn’t tell me. Then I picked that call up and he did the same thing again. . Then I blocked him because he was calling incessantly. They will keep calling me incessantly on WhatsApp.

Despite Meena’s ordeal of online violence, she said her experiences have prompted her to continue her fight to pave the way for future generations.

I am hitting them where it hurts the most. I am showing them a mirror, and they feel flustered. I have seen so much online violence that now if nobody is using profanities against me, I feel I haven’t done my job properly.