



TECH-FACILITATED GENDER BASED VIOLENCE: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The rapid advancement in technology has transformed communication, access to information, and participation in social, economic, and political life. While these developments have emerged as a great leveller for creating opportunities for women and girls, they have also increased online gender-based violence (GBV). This has become a significant concern globally, particularly for women and girls who face online harassment, cyberstalking, image-based abuse, trolling, and other forms of digital violence. Such behaviours in the virtual world are an extension of gender-based violence in the offline world. While there is a growing body of literature on such online GBV, they remain highly oriented towards user experience of global north. Limited empirical data within Indian context, and absence of intersectional understanding from a survivor perspective contributes to the gaps in addressing the issue. This paper will present a review of existing literature on online GBV by situating it within the Indian socio-technical and patriarchal context, which amplify gender inequalities both online and offline and disproportionately affect women.

KEYWORDS : Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence, TFGBV, Online Violence, India, Digital Gender Divide

INTRODUCTION

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) has emerged as a pervasive and complex manifestation of gender inequality in the digital age, encompassing a wide range of abusive behaviours including cyberstalking, online harassment, image-based sexual exploitation, and deepfake abuse. While a growing body of international literature has begun to document the forms, prevalence, and impacts of TFGBV, the field remains heavily skewed toward high-income, English-speaking countries, leaving significant empirical and conceptual gaps in understanding the phenomenon within lower- and middle-income country contexts, particularly India.

Defining Online GBV

There is still no consensus regarding how to define gender-based violence online, many scholars refer to it as tech-facilitated gender-based violence. The use of the term tech-facilitated is on purpose to emphasise that violence might not always be perpetuated when the potential victim is online, rather it can be through systems which require a person to be online for getting connected by then they can be in touch without the use of the Internet as such. Hence the term captures the nuance of technology playing the role of facilitator rather than just the perpetrator of violence. Henry and Powell (2016) use the term *technology-facilitated sexual violence* as it captures an array of abusive behaviour using technology. The UN Women, *use the term Technology-facilitated violence against women and refer to it as an* “that is committed, assisted, aggravated, or amplified by the use of information communication technologies or other digital tools, that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological, social, political, or economic harm, or other infringements of rights and freedoms”.

The ambiguity and absence of clear definition on TFGBV makes it difficult to understand, document and address the issue. As a result there are several terms used to describe the violence such as online digital harm, online gender based violence, tech-facilitated gender based violence, online sexual violence. Often these different terms are used to categorise the varied forms of violence that occur on digital platforms. This results in inconsistency in reporting, and recognising the seriousness of it. Moreover this is also one of the reasons why physical violence is seen as more significant when compared with online violence.

Forms of TFGBV

According to UN Women (2020) stalking, bullying, sexual harassment, sex trolling are the most common forms of online violence. Henry and Powell (2016) have categorised Technology facilitated sexual violence (TFSV) into online sexual harassment, gender-and sexuality based harassment, cyberstalking, image-based sexual exploitation, and use of carriage service to perpetrate sexual assault. Other forms of violence include sextortion, doxing, stalking, and cyber harassment amongst many others.

Online harassment is the most common form of violence faced by users, especially women users in India and globally. It is an umbrella

term that consists of a gamut of abuses such as threats, sexist comments and messages. One of the most common forms of TFGBV is online and targeted intimidation on social media platforms. Moreover, these forms of violence have severe consequences on a person's mental health. It impacts their social relationships, reduces or limits their educational opportunities, and negatively impacts their economic opportunities as well online and civic participation. Many women and girls who face the violence often limit their participation online, by reducing their online activities, deactivating their account or even deleting their account. This results in self-censorship, withdrawal from online spaces, and limiting digital participation of a significant gender from the online space altogether.

Existing Digital Divide

India is the second largest market for mobile ownership in the world, however the ownership of mobile phones is highly gendered and skewed. Mobile ownership stands at 84% for men and 71% for women, moreover 33% women are less likely as compared to men to use mobile internet (GSMA 2025). Despite owning a smartphone, 13% of women do not use the internet on their phone, this may be attributed to reasons such as lower literacy rate, affordability and risks associated with safety and security (GSMA 2025). Additionally, the dominance of internet spaces by men coupled with lower access and ownership of ICT devices and services by women further pushes away from online spaces, making them vulnerable to online risks and threats. Hence, women often communicate within their known network or choose private channels of communication which again limits their freedom online (USAID 2022).

Women as Vulnerable Population

Henry and Powell (2016) highlight the nature of these online abuses are highly gendered, with young women often disproportionately affected. According to Plan International (2023) adolescent girls and young women are vulnerable to online harms and are more likely to experience the violence as they also face intimate partner violence. Further the increasing use of digital platforms and networking sites such as social media amongst young women and adolescent girls, makes them more susceptible to TFGBV. As per a survey by Plan International with 140971 girls, found that those who were racially black, belonged to ethnic minorities, had disabilities and identified as LGBTQIA+ were targeted specifically for their identity. This highlights the experience of violence faced is also determined to a large extent by the intersecting forms of discrimination.

Iyer, Nyamwire and Nabulega (2020) note that there is paucity of literature in understanding the issue of TFGBV in low and middle income countries, as most of the research is dominated by the perspective of higher income countries. For instance, the survivors and victims of TFGBV in India face varied and complex challenges due to limitations of technology platforms to undertake content moderation in regional dialects and languages other than English (Paul and Sengupta 2024).

In context to India, often the, online violence against women is

normalised and reduced to being unimportant. Violence is mostly understood in the context of harm that has physical consequences. While online violence also has both physical, mental, socio-emotional consequences it is often not recognised. The online harm has offline implications including sexual, physical, emotional, and psychological harm along with anxiety, fear and restrictions on mobility. These online violence also has the potential of leading to both physical (suicidal) and economic harms as well as prevents victims-survivors from realising their human rights such as right to freedom of expression and participation in public and political life.

Moreover lack of acknowledgement leads to significant underreporting. Additionally, the existing patriarchal social norms and factors around women being responsible for upholding family's honour, repeated victim-blaming, and associated stigma attached to the use of digital platforms, and conducting interactions online with individuals beyond family ties is discouraged. This further limits women from reporting online abuse, especially when it involves sexuality, relationships, or image-based violence.

The lack of institutional mechanisms and support coupled with limited documentation and categorisation of TFGBV cases within official crime records, makes it more difficult to capture the extent and forms of violence experienced online by women.

Additionally, the rapid expansion of internet access in India has not been matched by adequate digital literacy, gender-sensitive reporting mechanisms, or platform accountability in regional languages, further obscuring women's experiences of online harm.

The misogynistic nature of the online-violence and threats received, forces women and girls to use pseudonyms or maintain low profiles, limiting their online presence and activity. There are also instances where the survivors deactivate or delete their accounts to evade harm. However such measures further increase their self-censorship which finally results in decreasing participation and engagement from online spaces (UNHRC, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence has emerged as a significant challenge in the digital age, particularly for women and girls in countries such as India where digital inequalities intersect with patriarchal social structures. The review demonstrates that online violence is not separate from offline gender discrimination but rather an extension and amplification of existing power relations.

The review reveals that in the Indian context, TFGBV is further compounded by a significant digital gender divide, limited access to and ownership of digital devices among women, linguistic diversity that undermines effective content moderation, and socio-cultural norms that normalise gendered surveillance and control. Despite growing incidence, TFGBV remains chronically underreported, inadequately legislated, and poorly understood in its intersectional dimensions within India. The paper identifies critical gaps in existing literature including the absence of India-specific empirical data, lack of intersectional analysis, and limited focus on survivor-centred responses and calls for contextually grounded, culturally responsive research and policy frameworks to address TFGBV as a continuum of offline gender-based violence.

Moreover, addressing TFGBV requires stronger legal frameworks, gender-sensitive reporting mechanisms, improved digital literacy, and greater accountability from technology companies and social media platforms. More importantly, efforts to combat online violence must recognise TFGBV as part of a broader continuum of gender-based violence and address the structural inequalities that enable such violence to persist both online and offline.

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