Understanding technology-facilitated gender-based violence in Asia

A qualitative study

kNOwVAWdata
know the data: end violence against women

Australian Aid

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Acknowledgements

Catfishing: Internet scam where the perpetrator pretends to be someone that they are not on social media with the purpose of seducing another person or making them believe they are in an online relationship – often doing this to ask for money, gifts, or intimate images.

Closed groups on apps or file hosting services: Refer to groups that require users to apply for membership to be able to view or engage with posts.

Deepfakes: Digital images, videos, and audio that are artificially altered or manipulated by AI and/or deep learning to make someone appear to do or say something that did not actually do or say. It is increasingly more difficult to distinguish artificially manufactured material from actual videos and images. Deepfakes are often used to create non-consensual sexual imagery that portray the target in a sexual manner.

Digital literacy: Refers to the ability to access, manage, understand, communicate, evaluate, and create information safely and appropriately through digital technologies.

Doxing or Doxxing: The malicious publication of personal, private, or identifying information about an individual, such as publicly releasing someone's home and email addresses, phone numbers, employer and family member's contact information, etc. Often leads to further harassment.

Gender digital divide: The gap between men and women in access to digital technology and digital literacy, contributing to heightened vulnerability to TF GBV.

Gendered disinformation: Strategy to silence women, girls, and gender-diverse people and to dissuade them from participating in the public sphere. Involves the spread of information that relies on false or misleading gender narratives with the intent to cause harm. It incorporates three defining characteristics of online disinformation – falsity, malign intent, and coordination.

Hacking: The use of technology to obtain illegal or unauthorised access to systems or resources for the purpose of attacking, harming, or incriminating another person or organisation by stealing their data, acquiring personal information, altering or modifying information, violating their privacy, or infecting their devices with viruses.

Image-based abuse: The use of imagery to coerce, threaten, harass, or abuse someone. Includes a range of behaviours such as the creation, distribution, or threats to distribute intimate images without consent. When images are sexual in nature, we refer to this as "image-based sexual abuse."

Impersonation and deception: Process of stealing an individual's identity for nefarious purposes, including destroying someone's reputation, threatening a person's safety, and obtaining confidential data or money.

Limiting or controlling use of technology: A form of TF GBV where perpetrators use technology to exert abuse and control over the survivor by tracking, monitoring, or restricting the survivor's movements, communications, and activities.

Online child sexual exploitation and abuse: The sexualised exploitation and abuse of children facilitated by technology. This can include: grooming, live streaming, consuming child sexual abuse material, coercing and blackmailing children for sexual purposes.

Online disinhibition effect: Refers to how some people self-disclose, act more intensely, or with less restraint online than they would in-person.

Online-offline continuum: Refers to TF GBV occurring as part of a pattern of violence perpetrated both 'online' and 'offline.'

Online mobbing: Coordinated harassment by a large group of individuals targeting a person across multiple online platforms, aiming to degrade or silence them.

Red tagging: Phenomenon that occurs when critics of the government are labelled as communists or terrorists (with activists, journalists, and human rights defenders often targeted). This can occur online and puts the individual at serious risk for further harassment and violence.

Self-censorship: Refers to efforts aimed at avoiding harassment, such as reducing public participation or refraining from sharing one's opinions and speaking out on controversial topics.

Sextortion: A form of blackmail where someone has, or claims to have, an intimate image of another person and uses it to threaten or coerce a person into doing something they do not want to do.

Sexualised technology-facilitated harassment and abuse: Unwelcome sexual advances, unwelcome requests for sexual favours, or other unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature which makes a person feel offended, afraid, distressed, and/or intimidated.

Spoofing: Falsifying a phone number, email address, IP address, or location/GPS to convince the target that they are interacting with a trusted source.

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TF GBV): An act of violence perpetrated by one or more individuals that is committed, assisted, aggravated and amplified in part or fully by the use of information and communication technologies or digital media, against a person on the basis of their gender.

Technology-facilitated stalking and surveillance: The use of digital technology to track, monitor, and harass someone. This can turn into offline stalking and vice versa.

Trolling: Involves someone posting or commenting online to deliberately provoke or upset others. An individual who perpetrates this behaviour is referred to as a 'troll.' A troll can also encourage others to join in the attack, leading to a pile-on where multiple people collectively target and harass the same person.
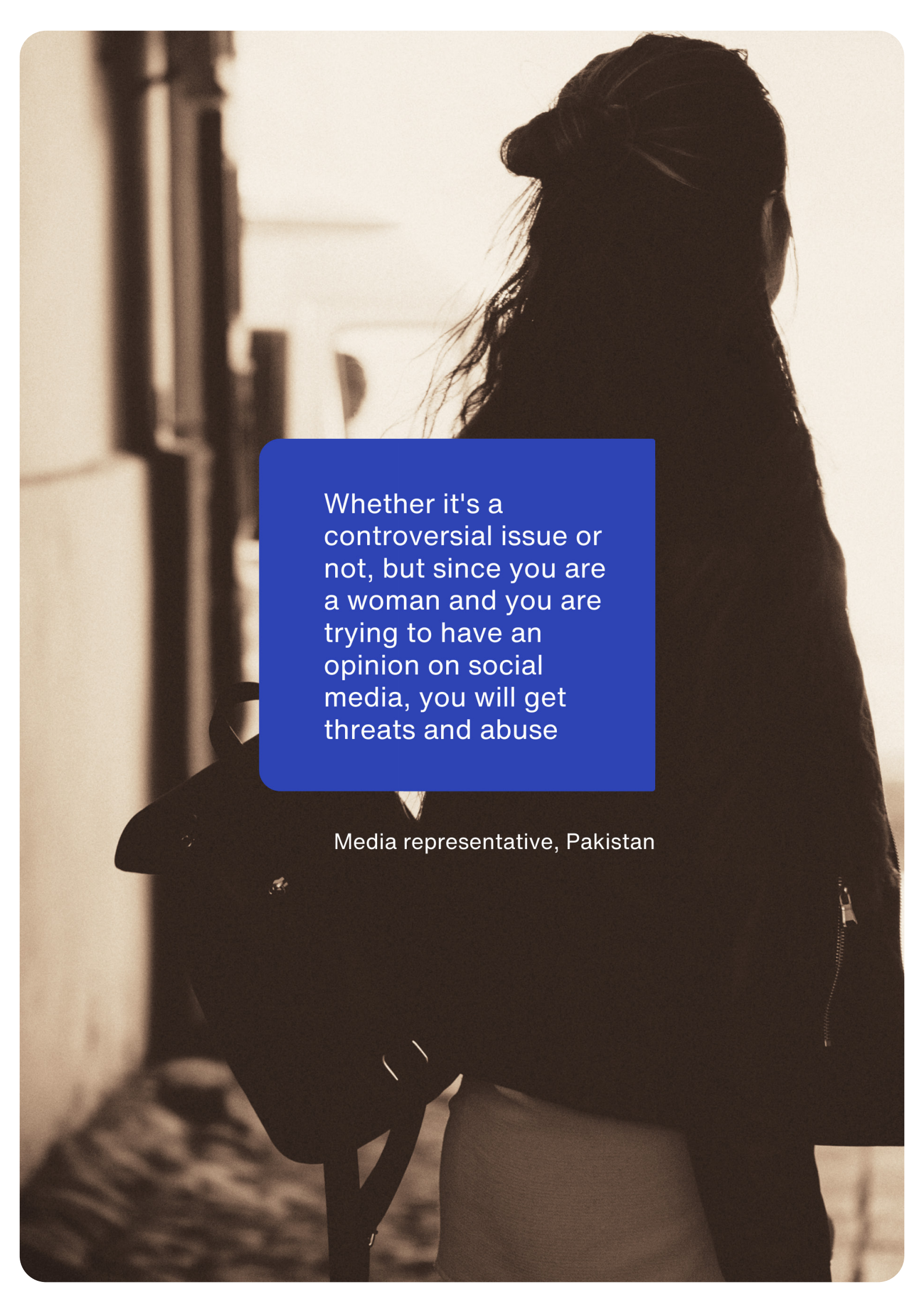
Victim-survivors: This is used to describe people who have direct experience of TF GBV. We use this term to acknowledge both the ongoing effects and harm caused by TF GBV and the resilience of people with lived experience of violence. We recognise that people may use different terms to describe their experiences.

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Whether it's a controversial issue or not, but since you are a woman and you are trying to have an opinion on social media, you will get threats and abuse

Media representative, Pakistan

Executive Summary

Technologies are increasingly used to exacerbate existing forms of gender-based violence (GBV) and enable specific new acts of GBV, including image-based sexual abuse, targeted hacking, and the use of diverse forms of technology for surveillance and stalking. Cyber violence, online sexual harassment, technology-facilitated coercive control, and online violence are just a few of the terms given to acts that may be technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TF GBV). The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) defines TF GBV as "an act of violence perpetrated by one or more individuals that is committed, assisted, aggravated and amplified in part or fully by the use of information and communication technologies or digital media, against a person on the basis of their gender", and this is the definition of TF GBV that will be used in this report.

TF GBV is an emerging form of GBV that is rapidly growing but is not well understood. All evidence to date indicates that it is harmful and is occurring worldwide. Indeed, previous research has demonstrated the serious impacts of different forms of TF GBV on women, girls, and other people targeted because of their sexual orientation or gender identity and expression. Like other forms of GBV, TF GBV is driven by structural gender inequalities and intersectional forms of discrimination. However, the unique features of technology distinguish TF GBV from other forms of violence and can produce additional barriers to seeking help. This includes, for example, the capacity to enact harms across jurisdictions, the accessibility and ease of propagation, and the ability for acts to be committed in perpetuity. Additionally, research suggests that technology companies are failing to sufficiently respond to TF GBV.

Asia represents a compelling region to examine TF GBV. Some countries in the region have highly developed technology infrastructures, inclusive of government and private technology systems, with a citizenry possessing considerable 'digital literacy'. Other countries have a more rudimentary national technology architecture, where citizens may have limited digital skills or familiarity with 'cyber safety' – yet many citizens still have access to a range of digital technologies and spaces, often using them daily (particularly through mobile phones). At present, most studies on TF GBV have been conducted in high-income settings, and researchers have discussed the paucity of information on TF GBV in low- and middle-income countries, including those in Asia. This report starts to redress this gap and presents findings from a regional study with diverse stakeholders in Asia.

It concludes by summarising key implications for policy and practice to address TF GBV that are tailored to the region.

Aims & Objectives

This qualitative study sought to help build the evidence base on TF GBV in Asia. The project aimed to examine: 1) stakeholders' highest priorities in relation to TF GBV; 2) how TF GBV is currently understood and measured in the region; and 3) what strategies are being used to prevent and respond to TF GBV in Asia. To address these objectives, we conducted multi-country focus group discussions with key stakeholders working across Asia, including with representatives from women's service providers, civil society organisations, professional associations, government, and legal services. In addition to generating evidence on TF GBV in Asia, this report aims to help inform national and regional policy, and guide TF GBV prevention and response efforts.

Completed with the support of the UNFPA Asia Pacific Regional Office (APRO), this report is part of a larger research project that seeks to increase understanding of TF GBV, with an emphasis on Asia. Other outcomes from this project include a scoping review on the quantitative measurement of TF GBV and in-depth qualitative research in Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Viet Nam.

Methods

From August to November 2023, 12 multi-country focus group discussions were conducted in English with representatives (n=68) from relevant advocacy and stakeholder groups across 14 countries in Asia: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Viet Nam. Researchers completed 10 focus group discussions using Zoom videoconferencing software and conducted two discussions in-person. The project received ethical approval from The University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (ID# 25865) prior to commencement of data collection.

Focus group discussions followed a question guide that supported consistent data collection while also allowing for flexible discussion amongst participants. We asked participants what forms of TF GBV they most observed in their country contexts; their understandings of TF GBV and how they currently defined and measured these behaviours; the strategies they observed for TF GBV prevention and response; and their priorities in relation to addressing TF GBV. Researchers also collected basic demographic data including each participant's age, gender, ethnic background, organisation type, and country. Individual focus group discussions lasted approximately 90 minutes. Transcripts were de-identified and exported to NVivo software. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic

analysis based on a coding framework created by the research team. To preserve confidentiality, this report refers to participants only by their organisation type and country. No individuals' or organisations' names have been used.

Key findings

- Participants reported that women, girls, and LGBTIQ+ people were the primary victim-survivors of TF GBV across all country contexts in Asia. They described TF GBV as mainly being perpetrated by men and boys.

- Individuals are experiencing various forms of TF GBV in Asia, in six main overarching categories: image-based abuse, sexualised technology-facilitated harassment, technology-facilitated stalking, doxing (or doxxing), impersonation and deception, and online child sexual exploitation.

- Participants reported witnessing and experiencing technologically sophisticated acts (such as instances of deepfake image-based sexual abuse), as well as behaviours involving more basic technologies (such as incidents of harassing phone calls and denial of access to devices).

- The digital, political, economic, religious, and sociocultural context uniquely shaped experiences of TF GBV across and within country contexts. Intersecting social positions also affected who was exposed to TF GBV and how the impacts of this exposure were experienced. Participants especially discussed this in the context of religious minorities and LGBTIQ+ people in the region.

- The digital landscape particularly influenced how TF GBV manifested in a country. Participants shared that women and girls without 'meaningful access' to technologies were still experiencing TF GBV, often involving abuse via mobile phones.

- A gendered digital divide also created barriers to help-seeking for TF GBV. Gender disparities in digital literacy translated to uneven awareness of TF GBV among individuals, which affected victim-survivors' abilities to engage in personal prevention efforts, recognise acts as TF GBV, and subsequently seek help and support.

- In addition to TF GBV occurring in the context of other forms of intimate partner violence (IPV), individuals in Asia frequently experienced TF GBV in non-partner contexts. This includes TF GBV directed against women in public facing roles, such as journalists, activists, and politicians.

- TF GBV is contributing to self-censorship in the region, with individuals (particularly women) adopting various strategies including posting less

content and reducing their use of technologies. This can have particularly damaging impacts on people whose jobs and economic security depend on the use of technologies. It also has social impacts, as it prevents women and marginalised communities from being able to fully participate in the public sphere.

- TF GBV had significant psychological, physical, economic, and social impacts on victim-survivors, but participants reported that frontline service providers and stakeholders often minimised these harms. Participants also expressed that acts of TF GBV are normalised by the public in their country contexts. This suggests a lack of understanding of TF GBV at both the service provider/stakeholder and community levels.

- Participants highlighted numerous barriers in TF GBV response systems, including a lack of supportive legislation; coordination problems; awareness and capacity gaps at both the stakeholder and community levels; obstructive sociocultural norms; and ineffective redress mechanisms from technology companies.

Implications for policy and practice

Results strongly support the need for localised approaches to addressing TF GBV. Findings in this report have important implications for policy and practice in Asia, which include:

For practitioners and frontline stakeholders

- It is vital to prioritise education and awareness initiatives for both frontline service stakeholders and the public. These programs should focus on recognising TF GBV as a form of GBV with serious consequences.

- Response systems should explore investing in training programs for frontline service providers, including police, health, psychosocial support workers, and shelter operators, on how to respond to survivors of TF GBV. Education and capacity building initiatives would also be beneficial for essential GBV response services organisations, police, and court systems; such programs should emphasise addressing biases and victim-blaming attitudes.

- Children are being exposed to technology-facilitated harms at a very young age, so prevention efforts should start early. This should include programming on the safe use of technology and digital literacy skills, as well as developing programs around consent in both the digital and 'offline' worlds. Initiatives

should also focus on addressing sociocultural norms, including programs to tackle gender inequity.

For technology companies

- Technology companies urgently need to improve their reporting mechanisms, including ensuring content is reviewed and removed in a timely manner.

- Given the highly diverse and contextual nature of harms, technology companies should consider tailoring their response policies and procedures to the specific country context. This could include investing in content moderation staff that understand the local languages and sociocultural context, as well as reviewing their use of AI technologies—which often fail to capture the contextual nature of communication.

- Technology companies should consider implementing safety by design approaches to ensure that they are proactively creating an inclusive 'online' environment.

For governments
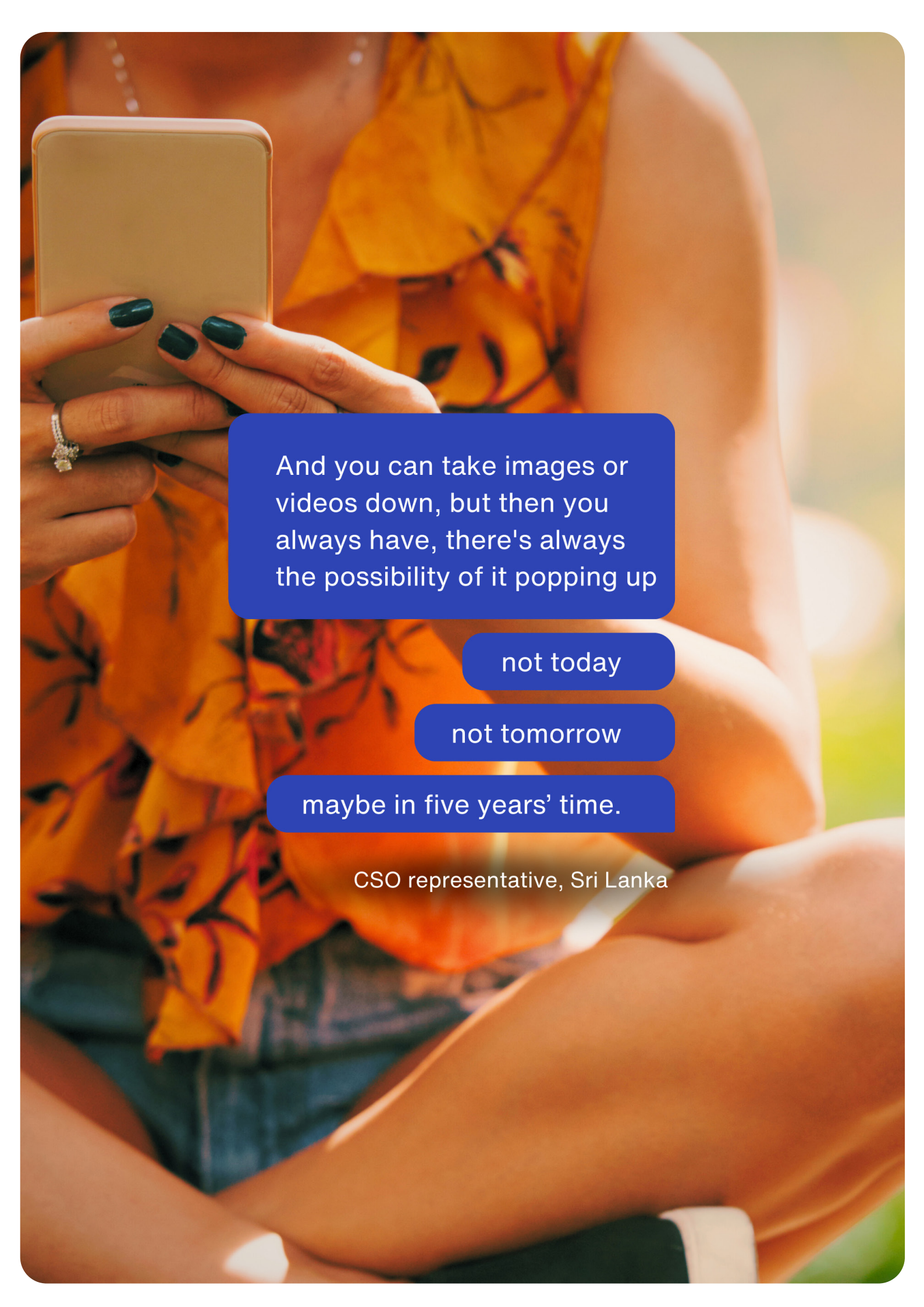
- Addressing TF GBV requires a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach. Stakeholders should consider opportunities to build on existing multi-sectoral GBV response systems, including expanding partnerships to technology companies who are often not part of current GBV response mechanisms.

- Governments and stakeholders are increasingly interested in measuring TF GBV in national prevalence surveys, with an emphasis on women's experiences of TF GBV. Given the many different forms of TF GBV, it is unlikely that any short set of questions on TF GBV would enable an accurate understanding of the scale of the problem and may lead to significant underestimation of the prevalence of TF GBV.

- It may be more useful for countries to measure the prevalence of particular forms of TF GBV (such as image-based abuse) and to clearly describe what is being measured as such, rather than the prevalence of 'TF GBV'. The contextual nature of TF GBV also means it is unclear whether the same questions about different forms of TF GBV could be used across country contexts in a meaningful way.

Conclusion

This report starts to address the gap in research evidence on TF GBV in Asia and summarises findings from 12 multi-country focus group discussions with representatives from advocacy and stakeholder groups across the region. Results can help guide future TF GBV research in the region and contribute to the design of fit for purpose policy, prevention, and response strategies.

Findings show individuals are experiencing various forms of TF GBV in both IPV and non-partner contexts in the region, including image-based abuse, sexualised technology-facilitated harassment and abuse, technology-facilitated stalking and surveillance, doxing, impersonation and deception, and online child sexual exploitation. Results also indicate that the gender digital divide influences how TF GBV is experienced in Asia, and there is a need to explore how TF GBV affects individuals who lack meaningful access to technology. Despite the serious impacts of TF GBV, findings reveal that both frontline stakeholders and the general public in Asia often minimise these harms. There are also numerous barriers in TF GBV response systems, including: legal issues, coordination problems, awareness and capacity gaps at both the stakeholder and community levels, sociocultural norms, and ineffective redress mechanisms from technology companies.

This indicates a strong need for prevention and response efforts that are tailored to the local nuances of each country context, which should be informed by further country-specific research.

And you can take images or videos down, but then you always have, there's always the possibility of it popping up

not today

not tomorrow

maybe in five years' time.

CSO representative, Sri Lanka

Background

Technology can both intensify existing forms of gender-based violence (GBV) and enable specific acts of GBV, such as image-based sexual abuse, coordinated online harassment and abuse, and targeted hacking. As an emerging form of violence, research on technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TF GBV) is rapidly growing, but the phenomenon is not yet well understood. All evidence to date suggests that it is common, harmful, and is experienced by individuals across the globe (Economist Intelligence Unit 2021). Furthermore, harms are occurring not only at the individual level, but also at the community and structural levels as we witness the non-consensual generation and sale of personal data, harmful gender disinformation campaigns, and inequitable access to digital literacy and technologies for women and girls.

TF GBV is a heterogeneous phenomenon known by a variety of definitions and terms. Terms commonly used to describe TF GBV include online violence, technology-facilitated abuse, and cyber violence. Previous researchers have discussed the difficulties of defining this form of violence, and there is ongoing work to clearly define and conceptualise the issue (Vaughan, Bergman, Robinson, & Mikkelson 2023; Mitchell et al. 2022; Backe, Lilleston, & McCleary-Sills 2018). In the absence of standardisation, this report will use the term TF GBV, which the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) defines as "an act of violence perpetrated by one or more individuals that is committed, assisted, aggravated and amplified in part or fully by the use of information communication technologies or digital media, against a person on the basis of their gender" (UNFPA 2021, 10). This definition is inclusive of the various mediums in which abuse occurs, including technologies that do not require a network connection (for example, some recording devices) (Dunn 2021). Additionally, this definition underscores the gendered nature of TF GBV and recognises the seriousness of harms enacted through technologies, as well as their linkages with other forms of violence (Dunn 2021).

To that end, feminist scholars and activists have asserted that TF GBV occurs on a continuum of violence that includes both 'online' and 'offline' violence (Dunn 2021; McGlynn, Rackley, & Houghton 2017; Kelly 1988). Online and offline violence are inextricable. The online-offline continuum recognises that TF GBV intersects with other forms of GBV, including physical, psychological, sexual, and economic violence. They also share the same drivers of harmful social and gender norms.

Indeed, previous research has illustrated that in an intimate partner violence (IPV) context, for example, TF GBV is frequently enacted as part of an overall pattern of abusive behaviours perpetrated both online and offline (Afrouz 2023).

As with other forms of GBV, TF GBV is rooted in structural gender inequalities and intersecting systems of oppression, including racism, classism, and heterosexism (Bailey & Burkell 2021; Montesanti & Thurston 2015). Evidence indicates that women, girls, and people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities are more likely to experience TF GBV (Douglass, Wright, Davis, & Lim 2018). Research also suggests that some groups are disproportionately exposed to TF GBV, including women in public life (such as journalists, politicians, and activists), women with disabilities, and people from racial, ethnic, and religious minority groups (Posetti et al. 2021; Woodlock & Harris 2022; Powell, Scott, & Henry 2020). In addition to highlighting who is more likely to be exposed to TF GBV, an intersectional analysis reveals differences in how individuals experience digital abuse and harms, and their subsequent access to support and services (Bailey & Burkell 2021).

TF GBV can be perpetrated by current or former intimate partners, by known non-partners (such as family friends, colleagues, and acquaintances), by unknown individuals or groups, and by state actors. It shares some characteristics with other forms of GBV, including the wide-ranging impacts it can have on the victim-survivor (UNFPA 2021). The consequences can consist of social, economic, psychological, and physical health effects on victim-survivors (Hinson, Mueller, O'Brien-Milne, & Wandera 2018). The digital nature of TF GBV, however, also means there are characteristics that make this form of violence unique, including (but not limited to) the capacity to enact harms across jurisdictions, the ease of propagation, the accessibility and low barriers to entry, and the ability for acts to be committed in perpetuity (Chowdhury & Lakshmi 2023; UNFPA 2021).

The gender digital divide is a structural form of TF GBV. Women generally have less access to and knowledge of technologies compared to men, which limits their participation in digital spaces and other opportunities to engage in the public sphere, including employment and education (MacQuarrie et al. 2022; Robinson et al. 2015). Global structural inequalities also mean that the gender digital divide differs by region and along facets such as age, rurality, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. It drives uneven access to technologies and technology-related information between and within country settings.

Research indicates that women in low- and middle-income countries are especially affected by the gender digital divide, with one study finding that women in these settings were 16 percent less likely than men to utilise mobile access to the Internet, with the widest gender gaps reported in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (Shanahan 2022). Additional evidence suggests that the gender digital

divide may particularly impact the Asia region. Data, for instance, show that South Asia has some of the highest gender disparities in Internet use among youth aged 15-24 years old, where 60 percent of adolescent girls and young women are offline, compared to 33 percent of adolescent boys and young men who are unconnected (UNICEF 2023).

Overall, the gender digital divide will influence how TF GBV manifests in countries; this includes factors such as who is exposed to TF GBV and which forms of TF GBV are commonly experienced in a country.

Aim of the research

While research on TF GBV is growing, most studies have been conducted in high-income settings, and previous researchers have discussed the need for more evidence from low- and middle-income countries (Iyer, Nyamwire, & Nabuelga 2020; Backe et al. 2018). Asia represents a compelling region to examine TF GBV due to its diversity. In addition to political, economic, and sociocultural differences, some countries in the region have highly developed technology infrastructures, inclusive of government and private technology systems, while other countries have a more rudimentary national technology architecture. Additionally, researchers have specifically recommended more TF GBV studies in Asia (NORC & ICRW 2022). Indeed, there is a lack of research on TF GBV in Asia to help inform national and regional policy and practice, as well as guide prevention and response efforts. Findings in this report aim to address this gap and contribute to building the evidence base on TF GBV in Asia.

Completed with the support of the UNFPA Asia Pacific Regional Office (APRO), this report is part of a larger qualitative research project that seeks to increase understanding of TF GBV, with a particular focus on Asia. The first phase of the project consisted of a scoping review which synthesised the international literature to identify the quantitative methodologies, instruments, and tools currently used to measure TF GBV. The second phase of the research (and the focus of this report) involved a regional study with stakeholders across Asia. The third and final phase commenced in 2024 and will be based on collection of in-depth qualitative data on TF GBV in Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Viet Nam.

This report presents findings from the second phase of research. The main objectives of this phase of the project were to:

- Generate evidence about TF GBV in Asia, including about stakeholder experiences, responses, and priorities

- Generate evidence that can underpin the design of strategies for measuring the prevalence and impact of TF GBV that will be relevant across the region.

Since TF GBV is an emerging issue, this project chose to use qualitative methods to explore the contextual nature of TF GBV and collect detailed information on how the

phenomenon manifests in the region. To address the project aims, we conducted multi-country focus group discussions with representatives from relevant advocacy and stakeholder groups across Asia, including women's and LGBTIQ+ services, legal services, professional and journalist associations, government organisations, research institutions, and civil society organisations focused on digital safety and rights. In addition to generating more evidence on TF GBV in Asia, this report also aims to provide information to help government regulators, policymakers, and practitioners when they design prevention and response initiatives.

Methods

Participant recruitment

Participants were identified through the research team's professional networks and Internet-based searches (purposive sampling) and through recommendations by other participants (snowball sampling). Participants were contacted by email and invited to take part in the study. Each participant was provided with a plain language statement explaining the purpose of the project and the risks and benefits of participation, consent form, and a demographic questionnaire that was used to collect basic demographic data including the participant's age, gender, ethnic background, organisation type, and country. Participants completed both the consent forms and demographic questionnaires and returned them to the researchers prior to participation in focus group discussions.

To enable participation in cross-country focus group discussions, participants were required to speak English and be from or working in Asia (i.e. from one of the 22 countries covered by UNFPA in the Asia-Pacific region).

Data collection

Primary data were collected between August and November 2023 (inclusive), through 12 focus group discussions, 10 of which were completed over Zoom and two of which were completed in-person. A total of 68 participants, from 47 different organisations and across 14 different countries, took part in the focus group discussions. Three of the participants identified as men, 56 identified as women, two as non-binary, and seven participants did not state their gender identity. Participants were from: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Viet Nam.

Researchers developed a question guide to enable consistent data collection while supporting flexible discussion amongst participants. Participants were asked about what forms of TF GBV they most commonly observed in their country contexts; their understandings of TF GBV and how they currently defined, measured, and

recorded these behaviours; the strategies they observed for TF GBV prevention and response; and their priorities in relation to preventing and responding to TF GBV. Each focus group discussion included between three and eight participants and lasted approximately 90 minutes. These sessions were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis

Transcripts were de-identified and exported to NVivo software to support data organisation, management, and efficient coding. This included removing all direct identifiers and reducing the specificity of indirect identifiers. Any personally identifiable information collected for the discussion was stored separately from the de-identified data files. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis based on a coding framework developed by the research team. Two researchers separately coded three of the same transcripts to test reliability. Data were then divided between the two researchers who met weekly to discuss each transcript, address emerging issues identified in the data, and to ensure inter-coder reliability. To preserve confidentiality, participants are referred to by their organisation type and country throughout this report. No names have been used. We also use the term "civil society organisation (CSO) representative" to describe participants from a wide range of organisations (such as GBV response services and digital rights organisations). The research team chose not to further specify the type of CSO in this report to protect the anonymity of participants, given the potentially small number of organisations working on these issues in each country.

Ethical considerations

To minimise potential power imbalances between participants, focus group discussions were conducted with participants from similar types of organisations (for example, researchers were grouped together, journalists were grouped together, workers from women's organisations were grouped together, etc.). This project received human research ethics approval from The University of Melbourne (ID# 25865) prior to commencement of data collection and each participant provided written and verbal consent.

Findings

This section details key findings from focus group discussions, organised in relation to:

- Victimisation and perpetration
- Forms of TF GBV
- Online-offline continuum
- Unique features of technology
- Impacts of TF GBV
- Barriers to effective responses
- Measurement and availability of data
- Key future priorities identified by participants.

Victimisation and perpetration – who is experiencing/using TF GBV in Asia?

Participants overwhelmingly reported that women, girls, and LGBTIQ+ people were the primary victim-survivors of TF GBV across all country contexts in Asia.

Stakeholders specifically noted the need to consider the diversity of TF GBV experiences among women and girls, especially since the digital landscape and levels of access to technologies shaped lived experiences of TF GBV. For instance, while online TF GBV affected women in urban areas with access to social media, participants observed that women and girls without 'meaningful access' to the Internet were also experiencing TF GBV.

A CSO representative from India, for example, shared that they frequently received requests from women and girls who were experiencing "non-online yet digital gender-based violence." This often consisted of phones being used to commit harassing behaviours.

> **Like, if they go to a shop to recharge their phone, and they give the shopkeeper their phone number,** some shopkeepers have been known to sell off their numbers to, you know, men and boys who just kept calling them repeatedly.
>
> **So, this is not necessarily online, but something very real and something very common that happens to young women and even adolescent girls in India, around blank calls.**

<div align="right">

`CSO representative, India`

</div>

Furthermore, participants noted that access to technologies may be expanding (especially since the COVID-19 pandemic), but this was not accompanied by efforts to increase digital literacy. For instance, findings suggested that class intersected with experiences of TF GBV; poor women were gaining access to technologies, but an information asymmetry remained. Participants suggested that lower education levels among poor women affected their digital literacy, which put them at higher risk of experiencing TF GBV. In short, women and girls were more likely to be exposed to TF GBV and the harms could be exacerbated for individuals who did not have the skills to navigate digital and online technologies.

Findings also revealed a strong need for an intersectional approach to understanding TF GBV in Asia. Most participants observed that women from religious minorities were more likely to be exposed to TF GBV and this applied across a variety of country contexts. Participants from India, for example, highlighted the Bulli Bai and Sulli Deals online applications as prominent cases which illustrated the intersection between gender and religion. Both cases involved the targeting of prominent Muslim women in India, whose images and personal information were uploaded to these apps, alongside derogatory commentary, with the women then being 'sold' in online auctions on the apps. Participants highlighted that the religious identity of these women played a large role in why they were targeted.

As well as experiencing TF GBV within intimate partner and family contexts, participants noted that victim-survivors also frequently experienced TF GBV in non-partner contexts. In particular, women engaging in public-facing roles were reported to be experiencing TF GBV, including women journalists, politicians, activists, social media influencers, and gamers. Women journalists, for example, noted that it was easy to find information about them online due to the public nature of their roles, which facilitated the escalation of abuse. Participants also remarked that women politicians often experienced gendered disinformation, which could include harmful narratives tied to the way a woman dressed, as

well as 'slut-shaming'. Notably, participants indicated that this dynamic did not only affect women in prominent roles, suggesting that women were more likely to experience TF GBV if they were simply active on social media and shared their opinions.

> You know it is very interesting to note that you are sharing any opinion, whether it's a controversial issue or not, but since you are a woman and you are trying to have an opinion on social media, you will get threats and abuse, you know, comments in the threads.

Media representative, Pakistan

Cultural context also had a significant influence on who was more likely to be experiencing TF GBV. In conservative contexts where dating before marriage was frowned upon or taboo, participants reported that young people were using technology as a way to meet people and form intimate relationships outside of parental and family surveillance. Such conservative social contexts were seen to increase exposure to TF GBV for, particularly, young women, while at the same time reducing access to support and increasing the potential social harms that TF GBV could cause.

> Given the sociocultural setting, dating is still not widely accepted. Neither is pre-marital sexual activity of any kind.
>
> There is a lot of fear in taking this to, you know, your support system, which could be your family or friends or siblings, there's a lot of shame attached to it.
>
> There is a lot of fear in taking this information back to say that 'somebody is threatening me' or 'I'm in an abusive relationship', because that could have consequences to the person's mobility, their access to education, and could lead to early marriage.

CSO representative, India

Stakeholders frequently reported that LGBTIQ+ people were more likely to be exposed to TF GBV in Asia. Participants specifically highlighted that image-based abuse was commonly experienced by LGBTIQ+ individuals, including doxing and

sextortion. They also observed that technologies acted as a double-edged sword for LGBTIQ+ communities. On the one hand, technologies and the 'online world' served as tools and spaces for expression — especially for people whose gender identity or sexual orientation were not known to family and friends — and on the other hand, the increased use of technologies also meant that LGBTIQ+ communities were more frequently exposed to TF GBV.

> **As regards to the queer community, the LGBTQI community, we'll actually see higher cases from the group because they use the Internet more and they use online dating apps more, for them to socialise online.**
>
> **It is about the privacy, so they can have more control and more authority over, well, how they want to present themselves. Because maybe in the physical world they haven't come out.**
>
> CSO representative, Taiwan, Province of China

Participants also indicated that certain other population groups were experiencing specific forms of TF GBV, including children, older people, and migrant workers. Children were mentioned in the context of online child sexual exploitation and abuse. On the other end of the spectrum, a few participants observed that older people were experiencing TF GBV, particularly through financial scams. Older populations were also less likely to have digital literacy skills, which could increase their exposure to TF GBV.

While less frequently discussed, several participants shared that refugees and migrant workers were experiencing TF GBV. This included acts in an IPV context, such as spouses—who did not migrate and were physically separated from the victim-survivor—perpetrating cyberstalking behaviours (for example, tracking the Internet activities of refugees and migrant workers). Stakeholders also expressed that this population was at risk for experiencing TF GBV from their employers. For instance, an academic in Singapore researching migrant domestic workers noted that employers would monitor and restrict access to devices.

Participants noted that women from refugee and migrant backgrounds were potentially affected by TF GBV as much as or more than other groups, including TF GBV across national borders; however, due to intersecting forms of marginalisation and barriers in accessing services and support, it is likely that

they were less visible in the system compared to other groups of women.

> **Refugees are one of the groups that are particularly, that are equally or even more, exposed to technology facilitated gender-based violence, but reporting is definitely not quite a safe option for refugees in Malaysia. Just because of the threat of detention or deportation and also victimisation by law enforcement.**
>
> **Yeah, unfortunately there's not a lot of data regarding refugee communities in Malaysia.**

CSO representative, Malaysia

Additionally, CSO representatives reported that sex workers were increasingly experiencing TF GBV. In Singapore, instances of image-based abuse against sex workers were reported as common, especially involving clients bringing spy cameras into sessions with sex workers. Participants remarked that the COVID-19 pandemic also contributed to the rise in TF GBV against sex workers as they shifted largely to providing online services.

> **We have had experiences where somebody would book a service for one person, but on the video call itself, they would come with like three friends, but pay for one person. And this was also related to financial precarity that sex workers were experiencing.**
>
> **For example, they had to take online payments now. And a lot of the times, clients would send them like fake screenshots of payments being made, like on platforms like Google Pay, et cetera, but the money would never come.**

CSO representative, India

Finally, findings indicated that experiences of TF GBV were not only limited to those at the individual level. Participants from CSOs, for example, noted that TF GBV could be directed at their organisation (or their organisations' work).

So, in terms of our work, what we see is because we have a lot of, you know, because most of our posts are about sexual health, there's often a lot of comments that are just like, kind of like making jokes about sexual stuff.

But sometimes, it's not necessarily targeted at anyone in, on our staff or a specific woman, but you just see a lot of like, really degrading comments about women, especially when the posts have anything to do, like, you know, we're a very sex positive organisation.

CSO representative, Philippines

Perpetration

Participants reported that in their experience, TF GBV in Asia was primarily perpetrated by men and boys. Examples included perpetration by current and former partners (in the context of IPV), by other persons known to the victim-survivor (including family members, friends, acquaintances, and colleagues), strangers, businesses, and by institutions and the State.

While there was considerable overlap between types of perpetrators and the different forms of TF GBV used, participants highlighted that certain forms of TF GBV were more likely to be perpetrated by particular types of individuals or groups of people and to target victim-survivors in different ways and with different intent. This is explored in context throughout the next section.

There are sextortion cases there [connected to loan apps] where they take your entire data and then using your selfie. They...harass you even if you have paid the loan amount.

CSO representative, India
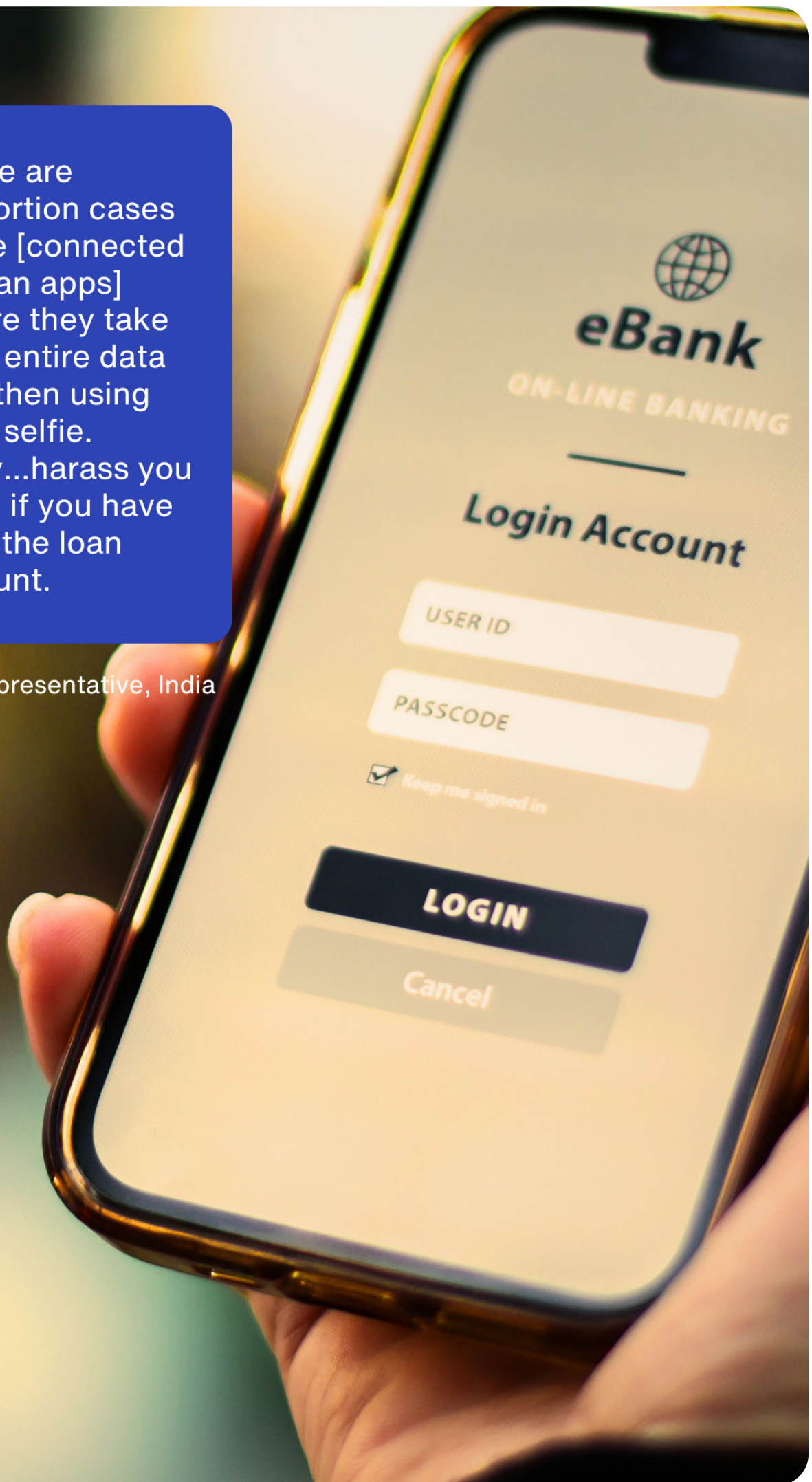
Forms of TF GBV

Participants reported seeing and experiencing a range of different forms of TF GBV across and within their country contexts. These fell into six broad categories: image-based abuse; sexualised technology-facilitated harassment and abuse; technology-facilitated stalking and surveillance; doxing (malicious publication of private or identifying information about a person on the Internet); impersonation and deception; and online child sexual exploitation.

TF GBV can involve a range of different technologies. Participants most commonly spoke about online and Internet-based technologies as being the primary means of perpetration, with phones (calls and messages) being the form of technology next most reported. The most commonly discussed types of online/web-based technologies reported included transnational social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter (via both public and private accounts); group messaging apps such as Telegram, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp; online dating apps such as Grindr; classified advertising platforms such as Locanto; file hosting services such as Dropbox; and video conferencing platforms such as Zoom.

Image-based abuse

Image-based abuse (IBA) was the most reported form of TF GBV across all country contexts. IBA was commonly reported as being initially perpetrated by individual men within the context of IPV or via relationships formed online, with images/videos then shared and re-shared by acquaintances or strangers with ease and with impunity.

Participants discussed a range of ways in which perpetrators sent unsolicited images about, or made, distributed, or threatened to share intimate images of women without their consent, often with the intention of blackmailing women (sextortion). This blackmail included pressure to reconcile relationships, demands for money, offline sexual activity, more images and videos, and other demands.

> **Also in the intimate partner violence… when we break up with our boyfriends or when we get separated from our ex-husbands, there are examples of husband threatening their ex-wives to [make them] do whatever they want her to do, like send them money, or 'do not meet my friends, do not meet our common friends, otherwise, I will leak our intimate videos, photos,' you know. These kinds of things are, like, very common. Very common.**
>
> CSO representative, Nepal

Image-based abuse was reported to include non-consensual distribution or threatened distribution of real (un-doctored) images taken with or without the consent of women; use of coercion or deception to obtain images; creation of deepfakes, morphed, or doctored images; images of offline acts of sexual violence; and included sending unwanted sexual images (particularly 'dick pictures') or sexually explicit or suggestive WhatsApp stickers or GIFs.

> **I think one of the other intimate or like photos or video is including WhatsApp stickers. I don't know whether you've seen the stickers of, like, WhatsApp stickers that objectify a woman like that, kind of, you know, like photos and videos is also being categorised as like an intimate, you know, like a visual.**

CSO representative, Indonesia

Participants also spoke about the sharing of intimate images and videos by individuals (usually strangers or acquaintances) in other contexts. These included customers recording content from interactions with sex workers without the sex worker's consent, individuals selling content to others via group channels, taking over a woman's social media account and posting nude pictures, image-based sexual harassment in workplace settings, and predatory businesses such as loan apps using women's images to blackmail them for money.

> **They're connected with financial apps such as loan apps where they take your data, and these are not unregulated loan apps. Also, I can't say that these are illegal. These are under the purview of legality.**
>
> **These loan apps exist and so there are sextortion cases there where they take your entire data and then using your selfie. They try to move those images and harass you even if you have paid the loan amount, so those are the kind of cases.**

CSO representative, India

Participants frequently spoke about an increase in men's and boys' use of closed group messaging apps to perpetrate image-based abuse.

We had a very prominent case was in 2020. There was this Telegram group. Yeah, there was a group called V2K. And they, there's just a lot of men, about 40,000 members who were just kind of sharing non-consensual intimate images of women everywhere, there were videos and so on.

Media representative, Malaysia

Findings also revealed that it was increasingly common for boys in secondary school to share images of female students using group messaging apps or file hosting services, with participants highlighting the difficulties of identifying and shutting these groups down.

So, from the closed groups that I have experienced... they've all been men. We had another quite serious issue in Sri Lanka, where schoolgirls were blackmailed into sending nude selfies of themselves. And these pictures were collected by schoolboys in Dropbox. And so, I actually met a boy of a friend of mine.

He said: "Do you want to see girls from your school?"
I said: "No."
He said: "Okay, then let me show you, you know, someone from another school."
I said: "Show me how you store them."

And then he just clicked on a link, the Dropbox link, and then they have this, the schools are separated, you have X school, Y school, Z school.

So, all the pictures from the different schools are in these different boxes. And you know, these are what, 14, 15-year-old girls who are forced to send the images.

And how they blackmail you is that if you don't get your friend to send me her image, I'm going to release your image to the public. So, she somehow coaxes and forces her friend to send the image. And that's how it goes on.

CSO representative, Sri Lanka

Sexualised technology-facilitated harassment and abuse

Sexualised technology-facilitated harassment against women, girls, and LGBTIQ+ communities was the second most reported form of TF GBV by participants. This included unwanted sexual advances and/or requests; unwanted sexual jokes or comments; comments about women's appearances, bodies, and clothing; threats of rape and sexual violence against women and/or her family members; and derogatory comments about victim-survivors of both offline and online sexual assault.

This behaviour was reported to occur using a variety of different platforms and in a number of different settings, including social media, workplaces, online gaming platforms, and phone calls and text messages. Technology-facilitated harassment and abuse was reported to be overwhelmingly perpetrated by men who were typically strangers to the victim-survivor. This form of TF GBV was commonly reported to be perpetrated by more than one person, using increasingly coordinated and sophisticated technologies, and was frequently thought to have connections to politicians and political groups. This was seen by participants as being primarily motivated by the intention to degrade, humiliate, and ultimately silence victim-survivors. Perpetration of this kind of violence was closely connected to the political and ideological agenda of victim-survivors, the person/group of persons perpetrating TF GBV, and the broader political and religious landscape.

> **Even though it's a political space, the harassment and the criticism and stuff, it's always, it is almost always about rape.**
>
> **It's like threatening rape, of the person running [for political office], threatening rape of her family, of her daughters, of her children.**

CSO representative, Philippines

> **Going back to you know, 2019 when important Code decisions were taken place by Indian government... [when I reported on these] ... I was trolled brutally, not just trolled brutally, trigger warning, I was given constant rape threats because of my political ideology.**

Media representative, India

In contrast to IBA where women most commonly experienced initial perpetration in the context of IPV, participants suggested that the majority of victim-survivors of technology-facilitated sexualised harassment were women in public-facing roles. This typically included women journalists, women's and LGBTIQ+ human rights activists, politicians, social media influencers, and women in leadership roles, who were reported to frequently experience coordinated and sustained abuse across multiple platforms, often in response to their views.

> I think the other trend that we see is definitely mobbing online and I think this is like extremely common where, you know, things can quickly escalate. You can go cross-platform and you can also escalate into different levels of media.
>
> For example, it can go from social media viral to being reported in the tabloids and then being reported in the mainstream media and then that leading to state intervention.

CSO representative, Malaysia

Doxing

Closely linked to technology-facilitated sexual harassment were experiences of doxing in many countries. Doxing typically involved the perpetrator searching for, locating, and then publishing private or identifying information about someone, typically with the intent of causing that person harm (including in offline spaces). Participants described the ways in which women in public facing roles were especially targeted, however they also highlighted how this form of TF GBV could be used against any woman in public digital spaces and could directly lead to offline violence.

> It can be a person who has been videoed to be maybe arguing, maybe quarrelling in public, and people will find who you are and publish everything about you online and people will try and find you. So it does not have to be journalists only, or politicians only.
>
> One case that really pops in my mind is where an elderly man was arguing about a parking space with this younger woman. So this woman was arguing with that elderly man with I think a steering lock, but nothing happened. Right.

> **But what happened next is [bystander video of the incident] went viral all over Malaysia and within a couple of hours, we know everything about her, where she lives, her address, what car she drives, everything. And people actually start driving by her house, which is crazy.**

One participant also spoke about the connection between their country's political and legal context and perpetration of doxing against the LGBTIQ+ community, in particular transgender people.

> **And I think this, I guess trans people specifically are vulnerable to doxing and that's linked to the lack of legal gender recognition in Malaysia and also in many countries, right.**
>
> **So, we've seen a range of doxing with LGBT people, and especially LGBT people with intersecting identities, like if they're atheists or anything else I guess that then increases their vulnerability as well, and a lot of times we also see that aside from the person themselves, their family members and others are also affected as well.**

Technology-facilitated stalking and surveillance

Participants reported that technology-facilitated stalking and surveillance was very common. Participants stated that this was often perpetrated by strangers, typically through social media, but was also a particularly common form of TF GBV used by intimate partners, ex-partners, and family members.

Participants reported the most common ways that technology-facilitated stalking is perpetrated by partners/ex-partners is through: obtaining passwords to accounts and devices, often through coercion; monitoring women's social media; tracking a person's Internet activity; recording women's private conversations; using phones and other devices to contact women's family members or workplaces in order to locate them; syncing devices such as iCloud or Google Maps to monitor activities and locations; and locating ex-partners through scouring women's photos on social media.

Participants stated that it was common in some contexts for family members, typically parents and/or male relatives, to monitor the mobile phone use of their daughters, sisters, and other female relatives in their households by forbidding them to have passwords on their phones or by denying them access to devices. In contexts where there is a greater digital divide, another commonly described issue is that families will often share devices like phones, making it impossible for women to have privacy and creating the conditions in which women and girls can be monitored by husbands and other family members.

> **A large part of the population is not given mobile phones in a way that they understand that it is, you know, they have a right to their privacy and they have access to it.** It's usually either a shared device or there's usually surveillance from the family or another, other male members in their lives or their partners as such.

CSO representative, India

Impersonation and deception

Many participants discussed the increasingly creative and sophisticated ways in which men use impersonation and deception to target women. Participants described the insidious use of fake social media profiles and accounts, such as Facebook and email, to discredit and damage the reputation of individual women. This was commonly spoken about in the context of both IPV and stranger violence.

Other participants described coordinated scams, where men would pretend to be an employer advertising a job online and would then harass and threaten the women who responded to these advertisements. One participant highlighted scams that appeared to exploit women's unequal economic status, which involved perpetrators and businesses posing as credible money lenders who would misrepresent their services and use this platform to abuse women:

> **But we have also seen that e-commerce has become one of the spaces where TF GBV is actually happening.**
>
> **Most of the customers who actually using this lending platform are actually women, most of the times because of they are trying to fulfill the domestic burden that apparently is not being fulfilled by what**

> traditionally is supposed to be fulfilled by men. And so, they have to borrow this money illegally [from] these kinds of illegal corporations.
>
> So the way that they are, like, asking for the interest and all of this money to basically to get for them to pay it back, the debt collector, the way that they are collecting the debt itself was very abusive, very violent and most of the time it's very intrusive, and also a lot of reports of sexual and gender-based violence are actually happening during that process.

CSO representative, Indonesia

Another participant in Bangladesh mentioned that technology could be used to trick young women and facilitate trafficking. This participant discussed a prominent case where the leader of a trafficking gang in Bangladesh used TikTok to recruit young women into sex trafficking by lying to the women and promising them false futures of TikTok stardom and glamourous lifestyle opportunities.

Other participants reported spoofing scams targeting women in specific employment or education spaces, such as not-for-profit and media organisation workers or students. In these situations, it was reported that perpetrators created fake email addresses to contact individual workers or their colleagues in order to try to scam money from them or harass them online. In some cases in the Philippines, spoofing seemed to be politically motivated, as it then led to perpetrators 'red tagging' their targets, where they were flagged as communists and/or terrorists (which often leads to further TF GBV and harassment).

> Impersonation is a big one. People impersonating sex workers, especially if you are sort of quite a famous sex worker, escort in the scene. So, these scammers will impersonate sex workers, they will charge a fee, right.
>
> Say they open a Telegram channel and say 'join my channel, pay $50, and you get access to all my photos and videos' and then turns out that these are not real. And there's a reputational harm that is caused to the sex worker itself. And not just reputational harm, but real financial setbacks, because she can't then make a living off of those means as well.

CSO representative, Singapore

Impersonation and deception were also closely linked to image-based abuse in some cases with perpetrators catfishing their victims. This was described as a process of luring someone, often women, into a relationship by means of a fictional online persona, obtaining intimate images of that person, and then using this to financially blackmail them. Similarly, participants spoke of people impersonating well known sex workers with the intention of financially defrauding them, which created reputational and additional financial harms for sex workers.

Online child sexual exploitation

While not the primary focus of this research, the final broad category that participants spoke about were the specific forms of image-based abuse and online sexual exploitation experienced by children. Participants spoke about perpetrators using a range of Internet-based platforms to perpetrate this violence, including websites, Facebook, and WhatsApp groups. Such violence was often in the form of adults coercing and forcing children, often but not always girls, to take sexual images or videos of themselves for profit, and often also involved offline sexual violence.

Participants spoke of this form of TF GBV being perpetrated by a range of different people. This included strangers online tricking or coercing children into sending them images of themselves, organised trafficking networks sexually exploiting children to sell sexually abusive content to local and foreign men, and family members.

This last subset of perpetration was reported by participants to be connected to experiences of poverty and marginalisation within the broader context of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

> **The Philippines is the hotbed for cyber pornography, particularly for young girls.**
>
> **But there's an alarming volume of OSAEC [online sexual abuse and exploitation of children] cases in the Philippines, primarily because of poverty and economic inequalities, so families resort to having to engage in sexual trade, particularly selling their children, particularly young girls online through cyber pornography.**
>
> CSO representative, Philippines

This is a phenomenon that typically precedes offline harassment.

So if you're tagged online, a lot of people take precautionary measures offline, like moving away to a safe house or changing up their route going home.

Because in a lot of cases of killings of activists and civilians who have been active in civil society, oftentimes, these are preceded by some sort of online red tagging.

Media representative, Philippines

Online-offline continuum

Participants often discussed the link between 'online' and 'offline' violence. There was increasing recognition that 'online' and 'offline' spaces did not operate in silos; rather, both arenas influenced each other, and this was evident in victim-survivors' multidimensional experiences of TF GBV.

In IPV contexts, participants from Nepal and India remarked that technology-facilitated abuse often co-occurred with 'offline' forms of violence. These stakeholders viewed abuse through technologies as an extension of 'offline' IPV. A CSO representative in India observed that clients experienced behaviours such as constant online harassment and monitoring of devices in IPV settings, indicating that these controlling behaviours mirrored abuse happening 'offline'. Stakeholders also highlighted that TF GBV can result in grave physical impacts for the victim-survivor.

In the context of family violence, one participant from Pakistan illustrated this through the example of Qandeel Baloch, a social media influencer in the country who often experienced abuse and death threats for posting content that defied social norms. Baloch was killed by her brother because of the controversy created by her social media content. Baloch's brother said he perpetrated the violence to protect the honour of his family.

While research often emphasises the online-offline continuum in IPV and family contexts, findings from the focus group discussions notably revealed the interconnectedness of 'online' and 'offline' spaces in non-partner contexts (including abuse from strangers) as well. Participants emphasised doxing as being especially linked to offline violence in terms of intimidation and threats. Similarly, stakeholders specifically discussed that women working in journalism and media commonly faced doxing, including the sharing of their home addresses on social media, which increased the risk of subsequent physical harms. Conversely, participants also shared instances of interactions starting 'offline' and then continuing 'online' in stranger-perpetrated TF GBV contexts.

I would say there's also a lot of violence manifesting, very physically, very easily. I've seen friends who, just sitting in the train, and then this guy kind of finds her on Instagram somehow. She's got a private account, no mutual friends whatsoever. And he's like [online], 'Thanks for sitting across from me in the train.'

Media representative, Malaysia

While technology-facilitated stalking is often mentioned in the context of perpetrators 'known' to the person, this case suggests that technology is also being used to enable stalking from relative strangers. Similarly, findings revealed that technology can extend the scope of acts of 'offline' violence.

> **What happened is, there was a girl in a bus, and there was a guy sitting behind, he was masturbating and taking the video, and he ejaculated over the hair on that girl.**
>
> **And that video went viral, you know.**

CSO representative, Nepal

In this case, sexual violence was enacted 'offline', and technology allowed the abuse to be further perpetrated with the posting of the video and its subsequent virality.

Interestingly, participants suggested that the political context could potentially intensify the intersection of 'online' and 'offline' violence. Representatives from the Philippines illustrated this through the phenomenon of 'red-tagging', which occurs when critics of the government are labelled as communists or terrorists (with activists, journalists, and human rights defenders often targeted). Participants shared that this could occur online and that it could have pernicious impacts on the person who is 'red-tagged'. This included a pattern where violence started 'online' and then translated into physical stalking and harassment, often near the victim-survivor's workplace.

> **This is a phenomenon that's typically, it typically precedes offline harassment. So if you're tagged online with it, a lot of people take precautionary measures offline for their security, like moving away to a safe house or, you know, changing up their route going home.**
>
> **Because a lot of cases of killings of activists and civilians who have been active in like civil society, oftentimes, these are preceded by some sort of online red tagging.**
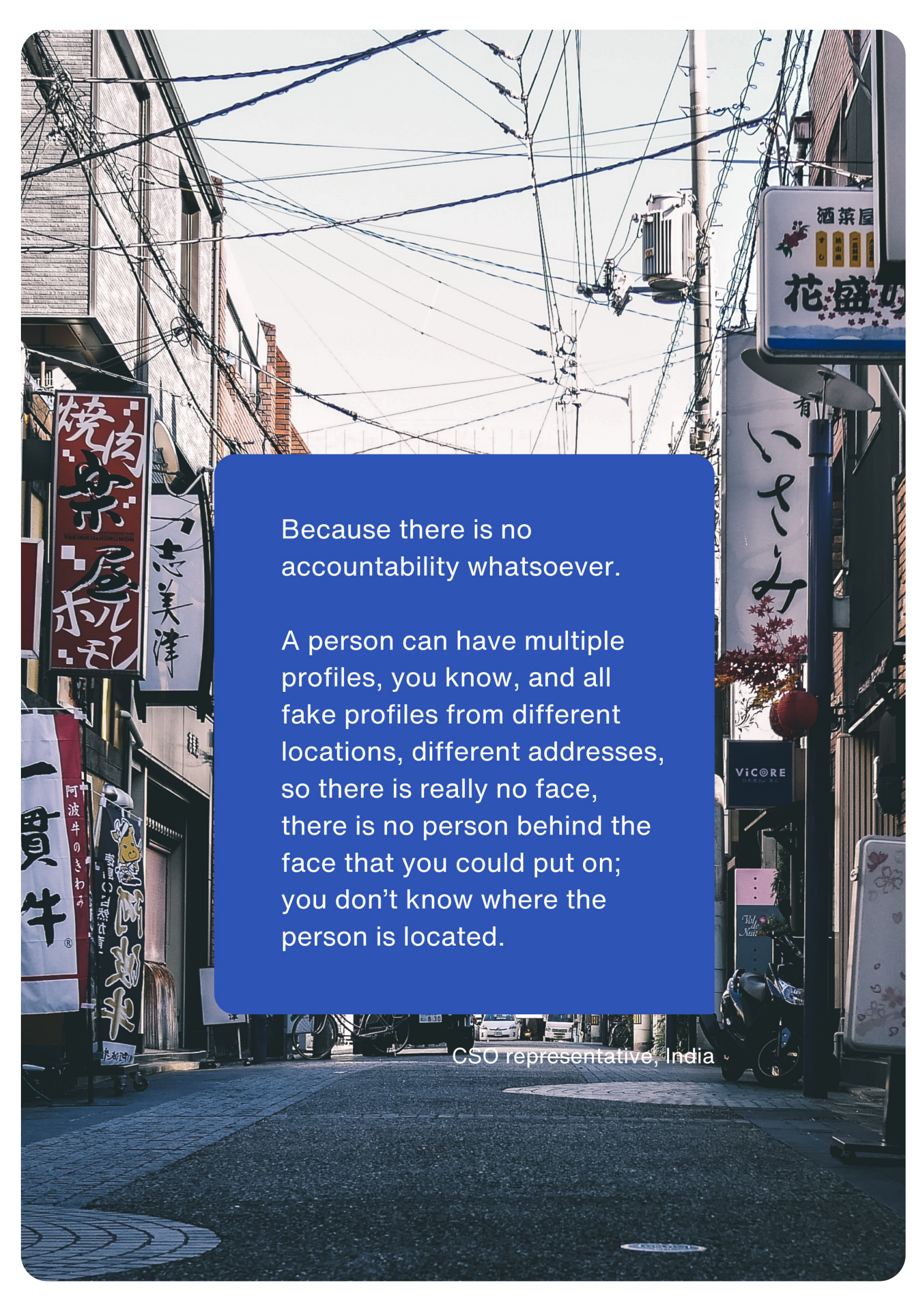
Media representative, Philippines

Participants also observed that politically charged events, such as elections and protests, could lead to a higher risk of both 'online' and 'offline' violence. They said that these events could increase hostility, which could foster the escalation of 'online' abuse into 'offline' spaces. A participant, for instance, discussed this in the context of the Citizenship Amendment Act protests in India in 2019 and 2020. Protesters, many of whom were Muslim women, experienced hate campaigns directed at them through social media. This participant specifically referenced incidents of attempted gun violence at protest sites and said that they believed the hate campaigns in 'online' spaces helped fuel these 'offline' attempts.

Overall, focus group discussions highlighted the need to recognise TF GBV's connections with other forms of violence (including physical). These findings suggest that 'online' and 'offline' spaces are deeply intertwined, and this can be seen not only in IPV and family violence settings, but also quite strongly in 'stranger' TF GBV contexts. Additionally, findings indicate that the political context in a country may contribute to an escalation of violence that occurs both 'online' and 'offline'.

Because there is no accountability whatsoever.

A person can have multiple profiles, you know, and all fake profiles from different locations, different addresses, so there is really no face, there is no person behind the face that you could put on; you don't know where the person is located.

CSO representative, India

Unique features of technology

Participants were clear that TF GBV does not operate in a vacuum. Rather, it is influenced by the same drivers as offline forms of GBV, and perpetration of both offline and online forms of GBV operate on a continuum, influencing and interacting with one another to cause immense harm.

Participants, however, spoke about some specific factors relating to technology—proliferation and perpetuity of harm; anonymity and distance; and automation and accessibility—that differentiate TF GBV from others forms of GBV and are important for understanding and responding to GBV more broadly. These factors are particularly connected to the ongoing and serious impacts of harm experienced by victim-survivors, and the capacity of service providers and systems to respond to victim-survivors and to hold perpetrators accountable.

Proliferation and perpetuity of harm

Participants most frequently reported that Internet-based technologies and platforms offer an environment where abusive texts, messages, and images can spread and exist for prolonged periods of time, in many cases indefinitely.

> **And you can take images or videos down, but then you always have, there's always the possibility of it popping up, not today, not tomorrow, maybe in five years' time.**
>
> CSO representative, Sri Lanka

Participants spoke about how an increasing reliance on technology to function in everyday life, especially since the global COVID-19 pandemic, was central to the ways in which particular forms of TF GBV were experienced. For example, image-based abuse was identified as a pernicious form of TF GBV for women and girls that could spread widely, causing considerable harm to victim-survivors because of the intrusion of the images into everyday life.

> **The Internet's involved in our life in all kinds of ways. So, if the images are spreading online and [they] can go really wide and fast, and which can cause a lot of stress and a lot of harm to the victims.**
>
> CSO representative, Taiwan, Province of China

This was amplified in contexts where social and gender norms created additional barriers to disclosing abuse and seeking help, such as in politically and religiously conservative contexts and in settings where pre- or extra-marital relationships were frowned upon.

Anonymity and distance

Participants highlighted how easy it is for perpetrators of TF GBV to remain anonymous and unknown to victim-survivors, particularly using Internet-based technologies. Participants also reported that anonymity was closely linked with the ability to perpetrate TF GBV from any location across the globe and without any physical contact.

Because there is no accountability whatsoever.

A person can have multiple profiles, you know, and all fake profiles from different locations, different addresses, so there is really no face, there is no person behind the face that you could put on; you don't know where the person is located.

CSO representative, India

Challenges associated with anonymity and distance were amplified in transnational contexts, for example, where perpetrators used global platforms, including but not limited to Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, to abuse victim-survivors.

The ways in which anonymity and distance resulted in perpetrator impunity was seen by participants to be enhanced through a complex interplay of factors. These include, but were not limited to, a lack of clear national level policies and regulatory mechanisms relating to TF GBV; the absence of targeted and gender-sensitive legislation at the national level; the absence of country-specific technology company policies, including a lack of consideration of the nuances in language and culture by technology companies; and challenges with intersectoral collaboration and jurisdictional power.

> So, one of the aspects that it's very complicated in here, despite that we have IT regulations, we have the sexual violence law, that already being, basically able to protect the victim. **However, if the perpetrator and victims are not in the same country, then it's difficult for the law enforcement.**

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`CSO representative, Indonesia`

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Participants also spoke about how technology provides opportunities for distancing of perpetrators from both victim-survivors and the general public and how this can lead to an online disinhibition effect, even when anonymity is not present.

> Filipinos are so non-confrontational when in person, and then they get behind a keyboard, and suddenly, like, so much rage, just seems to come out. **Sometimes still shocks me a little bit.**

<div align="right">

`CSO representative, Philippines`

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Automation and accessibility

Participants identified automation and accessibility as two final features of technology relevant to the perpetration of TF GBV. Due to advances in technology, increases in affordability, and the relative lack of time and effort required to use technology, perpetrators can abuse victim-survivors at a much faster rate and with greater ease than before these technologies existed.

> There have been cybersex dens that were very easy to create because of the convenience of this Pisonet, we call it Pisonet Wi-Fi. It's a small business that you can create. Anyone can access Internet, basically... you put in one peso, and then you get Internet through your phone. And before, Internet cafes were like, you needed to have like big metal to have an Internet cafe. But [now] there is also a Pisonet Internet cafe just in the house of, of people and easily created.

<div align="right">

`CSO representative, Philippines`

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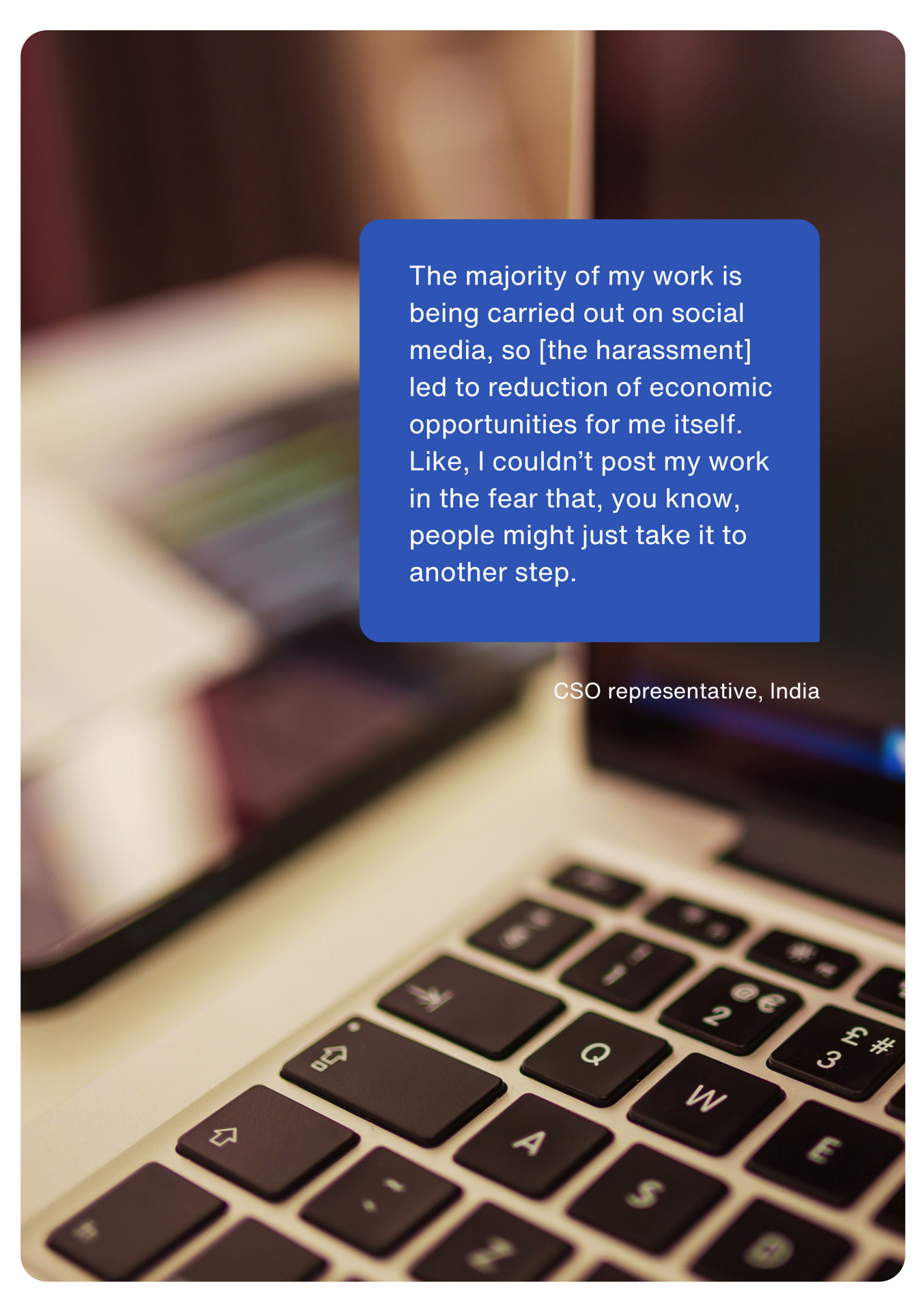
Participants also highlighted how COVID-19 facilitated an increase in accessibility to technology in places that were previously more affected by the digital divide.

> I think either, I think, because we have higher [Internet] penetration in the pandemic, like there's, like, easy access and, like, engagement.

CSO representative, Sri Lanka

Overall, participants highlighted how these unique features of technology can both facilitate offline forms of abuse and can result in new and emerging forms of abuse, making TF GBV a complex and evolving phenomenon. These unique features can create significant barriers to perpetrator and system accountability and for how societies respond to and mitigate the impacts of TF GBV on victim-survivors.

The majority of my work is being carried out on social media, so [the harassment] led to reduction of economic opportunities for me itself. Like, I couldn't post my work in the fear that, you know, people might just take it to another step.

CSO representative, India

Impacts of TF GBV

Findings demonstrated the multifarious impacts of TF GBV on victim-survivors in Asia. Participants described TF GBV as having psychological and emotional, economic, social, and physical impacts on the victim-survivor.

Psychological and emotional impacts

Most participants emphasised the deep psychological and emotional impacts of TF GBV on victim-survivors in the region. A CSO participant in Sri Lanka highlighted that TF GBV particularly affected the psychological health of victim-survivors because technologies enabled abuse to be committed in perpetuity. For example, with image-based abuse, videos and images could be removed from a specific platform, but they would continue to be circulated on private messaging channels due to the ease with which digital files can be stored and shared. Participants mentioned that this contributed to enormous amounts of stress and anxiety for the victim-survivor. Furthermore, multiple CSO participants discussed that TF GBV can result in suicide and suicidal ideation, especially among young people—indicating the extensive psychological and emotional impacts that this form of violence can have on victim-survivors.

Self-censorship

An important finding from focus group discussions was that TF GBV and the related psychological impacts had distinct outcomes in terms of self-censorship in the region. This included individuals posting less content and fewer personal opinions, decreasing the frequency of use of certain devices or platforms, and/or stopping social media use completely. While self-censorship was mentioned primarily in the context of women and girls, two participants specifically noted that this affected LGBTIQ+ communities as well. Participants also highlighted that women in public facing roles, such as journalists, parliamentarians, and activists, were increasingly engaging in self-censorship practices as TF GBV became more common.

> I know many women journalists who were very much active in Twitter, and after certain time, they have like deactivated, like disappeared from this conversation. They were the people adding a lot of value to feminist discourse as such.
>
> But now, like, at one point, I just had a conversation with her six months back for another project and she said, 'I don't think I have that kind of energy anymore, and it's too much. It's taking a toll on my mental health and things like that.'

Academic, Bangladesh

Furthermore, participants discussed how responses to TF GBV can further self-censor individuals. For instance, education and capacity building initiatives frequently revolved around digital literacy and safety trainings. While participants acknowledged the importance of these programs, they also mentioned that initiatives tend to focus on what not to do and that messaging such as "don't engage with trolls" could implicitly discourage marginalised communities from participating in digital spaces.

> **Like, they tell women and girls how we can limit our own presence on the Internet and not so much about how we can be enabled to occupy those spaces, to really, like inhabit those spaces freely and safely.**
>
> CSO representative, India

Economic impacts

Closely linked to self-censorship were reports that TF GBV had economic impacts on victim-survivors, particularly when an individual's job demanded the use of technology. For instance, participants reported that journalists and women's rights activists are increasingly required to maintain social media accounts and use platforms to promote their work, find sources for stories, and interact with their audience. One participant, a former journalist in India, shared that she used social media less after experiencing harassment on Twitter and said this had clear negative financial implications.

This suggests that self-censorship following experiences of TF GBV were specifically connected to economic consequences. In a world that is increasingly reliant on Internet connection and engagement in online platforms for employment and daily functioning, this has devastating impacts on women, particularly those reliant on online engagement for their living.

> **Majority of my work is being carried out on social media, so it led to reduction of economic opportunities for me itself, like I couldn't post my work in the fear that, you know, something, people might just like, you know, take it to another step.**
>
> CSO representative, India

Social impacts

Findings also revealed the social impacts that TF GBV had for victim-survivors in Asia. Technologies allowed incidents to spread quickly in communities and easily enabled multiple people to direct harassment and abuse towards a victim-survivor. Participants remarked that this type of abuse could also extend to family members of the victim-survivor.

For example, a participant discussed this in relation to a case of doxing and harassment when two strangers had an in-person public confrontation that was filmed by an onlooker and spread via social media.

> **Woman got off the car to stop on the causeway to stop another driver from moving on. And then they had the entire family history out there, what the son is doing, where the woman is working, where her husband is working.**
>
> **So, the entire family gets affected.**

Academic, Malaysia

Physical impacts

As previously discussed in relation to the online-offline continuum, TF GBV can be precipitated by or lead to different forms of physical and sexual violence which can have devastating impacts on victim-survivors. This includes, but is not limited to, physical injury, stalking, self-harm, and, in extreme cases, suicide and murder.

I wanted to share is how online gender-based violence and any kind of digital experiences are seen as something that is detached from somebody's real, actual life and offline, physical experience.

It's seen as something that remains in the digital space, and the fact that how it can impact somebody's mental and emotional well-being, and how it can be so related to your identity and who you are, that is really not talked about much.

CSO representative, India

Barriers to effective responses to TF GBV

Gaps in awareness and capacity

Participants shared that TF GBV is not yet fully understood at both the community level and among key stakeholders (such as government, justice systems, and service providers). The lack of shared understanding around TF GBV contributed to gaps in awareness of the issue and in subsequent capacity to respond to this form of violence.

One issue with understanding TF GBV was the various terminologies used to discuss the phenomenon. Participants themselves used different terms to describe TF GBV, including online gender-based violence (OGBV – Malaysia, Indonesia) and cyber sexual and gender-based violence (CSGBV – Sri Lanka). Additionally, a CSO representative in India reflected that their organisation's TF GBV terminologies had evolved over time, having initially used the term e-violence against women (EVAW).

In addition to differences in terminologies among key stakeholders working on the issue, participants in Indonesia, Malaysia, and India all discussed the challenge of translating TF GBV definitions and technical terminologies into their local languages.

Indeed, findings suggested that community understandings of TF GBV may be different from how some stakeholders (for example, TF GBV support services) view the issue. For instance, a CSO representative in India observed that victim-survivors often used colloquial, country-specific terms to describe TF GBV when they sought help. The general public, for example, would not necessarily use the term 'sextortion' to describe their experiences.

Community level: Awareness and capacity gaps

Findings showed that communities lacked awareness of TF GBV as an issue, which limited their capacity to respond. Participants expressed that the absence of awareness applied to both perpetration and victimisation. Indeed, they suggested that individuals sometimes did not know that they were committing TF GBV behaviours or that these acts inflicted serious harms.

Similarly, findings demonstrated potential knowledge gaps among victim-survivors, and CSO participants reported that their clients sometimes did not know an act of TF GBV could be considered an act of violence.

Many participants noted the gap in awareness and knowledge between children and parents. Parents were often more likely to lack digital literacy skills and

did not know that their children could be exposed to or perpetrate technology-facilitated harms.

Additionally, participants explained that individuals were increasingly using technologies, but without sufficient training on the risks or potentially protective mechanisms that could be used with digital tools, which increased their risks of exposure to TF GBV. Several participants discussed this specifically in the context of rural areas, noting that digital literacy in the community may be lower in these regions. The disparity in awareness and capacity then affected individuals' abilities to respond to TF GBV.

> **Information asymmetry is a very real digital divide and lack of meaningful access, it's the reality of the global South. And so, it's because these efforts are so disparate, my navigation of the digital landscape is also disparate.**
>
> **Like, I don't know, I mean, it's all in patchwork and it's at varying degrees of effectiveness and that has an impact on how effectively I can navigate through these places online.**

CSO representative, India

Organisational level: Awareness and capacity gaps

Participants indicated gaps in understanding, awareness, and capacity among key TF GBV stakeholders, including service providers and police, which contributed to the ineffectiveness of response systems. Findings suggest that stakeholders did not fully understand the multidimensional nature of TF GBV, and they were often unsure how exactly to integrate it into their response structures and processes.

> **I think the problem is recognising, including technology facilitated GBV, that it is an issue; it's on the agenda, but it's not very clear.**

Multilateral organisation representative, Nepal

Participants reported that one major gap in understanding was that stakeholders understood TF GBV through the lens of a 'hierarchy of violence', which prioritised physical violence over other forms of violence, such as psychological and emotional violence. This suggests that some stakeholders did not fully understand the severe

impacts of TF GBV, nor the connection between 'online' and 'offline' violence. To that end, many participants remarked that, if the case did not also involve physical violence, police often did not take reports of TF GBV seriously when victim-survivors sought help. The lack of awareness around the seriousness of TF GBV therefore contributed to minimisation of the issue in response systems.

> I wanted to share is how online gender-based violence and any kind of digital experiences are seen as something that is detached from somebody's real, actual life and offline, physical experience.
>
> It's seen as something that remains in the digital space, and the fact that how it can impact somebody's mental and emotional well-being, and how it can be so related to your identity and who you are, that is really not talked about much.

CSO representative, India

Findings also indicated that lawmakers and justice systems often viewed TF GBV through a narrow lens, where women were regarded as victims and men as perpetrators. This limited understanding meant responses failed to cover the full scope of people experiencing TF GBV, including LGBTIQ+ communities, which contributed to gaps in legal and policy systems to address TF GBV.

> It also comes down to not just raising awareness, particularly with service providers, with law enforcement.
>
> Our understanding of the issue, our capacity to respond to the issue, is very much based on our attitudes and mindsets; we're products of the same society, the intersectional needs are, I mean, it's also biases, right, biases we hold against communities, against castes, against religious minorities.
>
> These are some things that we see over and over again play out when it comes to service provision. So, in terms of awareness, like, you know, what kind of focus areas are we looking at?
>
> I think a lot of deeper work has to happen in terms of our own attitudes and mindsets and how we look at this. How we look at gender-based violence as a whole in our societies.

CSO representative, India

To that end, findings revealed opportunities to strengthen understandings of TF GBV and improve service response among CSO stakeholders. For example, a participant in Hong Kong, China commented that most NGOs did not provide support services to men experiencing violence. This reflected the dominant understanding of sexual violence in the country, which classified women as victims and men only as perpetrators. Similarly, findings suggested the need for stakeholder awareness since service provider biases could negatively influence the capacity to respond to TF GBV.

Participants also noted that police frequently lacked the training and capacity required to respond to TF GBV. In addition to an absence of gender sensitive approaches, findings demonstrated that police did not receive adequate training on how to respond to TF GBV cases. In the Philippines, participants flagged gaps in capacity not only among police, but also among barangay (local government) frontline service staff members.

> **We've observed that those in the barangay VAW desks aren't really knowledgeable on these things. They're not really knowledgeable enough on issues of GBV, more so on online GBV, being that it's not really, at least here, it's more of like a fringe form of GBV, it's not really talked about.**
>
> **So, the first responders in the barangay, as well as in the police don't really know how to approach these forms of violence,** because the referral pathways in approaching this violence are either, aren't really enforced or they're not seen as important or relevant issues.

Media representative, Philippines

Additionally, several participants noted that response systems lacked the basic resources required to respond to TF GBV. Participants in India, for example, commented that they did not have enough police officers to address TF GBV, especially in the context of such a highly populated country.

Moreover, a participant in Nepal remarked that systems did not currently have the capacity to respond to GBV in general. For instance, GBV data was often not collected by health systems and the small size of health facilities meant a private room was rarely available to facilitate safe disclosure and provide adequate support to victim-survivors.

Findings revealed significant gaps in legal frameworks to respond to TF GBV. Some participants in Viet Nam, for example, indicated that their country lacked robust dedicated laws to address TF GBV. Additionally, representatives from Hong Kong, China and India flagged that legislation around GBV often only applied to women and did not recognise men or LGBTIQ+ individuals as victim-survivors.

Similarly, participants in India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Singapore all noted that existing laws around pornography and 'obscene' content served as substantial legal barriers to addressing TF GBV in their country contexts, especially in image-based abuse cases. These laws deterred victim-survivors from seeking help and reporting abuse, as they criminalised the parties involved in the creation of content—meaning victim-survivors could also be charged with an offense when they reported. At the same time, Indonesia and Singapore (both countries with these restrictive laws) have also instituted laws to address image-based abuse, suggesting the existence of competing legal frameworks within countries on the issue.

Similarly, in countries that did have laws related to TF GBV, participants highlighted a variety of implementation issues. For example, CSO participants from the Philippines expressed that the responsibility to enforce TF GBV laws was devolved to lower levels of government. The lack of strong accountability mechanisms for local government units to enforce TF GBV laws was consequently a barrier to legislative effectiveness in the Philippines.

Additionally, stakeholders discussed the challenges of providing evidence in TF GBV cases as an implementation barrier. One participant flagged, for example, that justice systems in Nepal did not consider screenshots from mobile phones as evidence. The nature of technologies also made it difficult to enforce laws and hold perpetrators accountable.

Participants classified perpetrators as 'savvy'— often anonymous, operating multiple profiles, and hiding their IP addresses—which made them very difficult to locate and then prosecute. The cross-border nature of technology also created jurisdictional challenges when prosecuting TF GBV cases. Participants noted that perpetrators and technology companies were often located in different countries, which limited their ability to enforce TF GBV laws. Furthermore, intra-country coordination issues also hindered the implementation of laws.

> The whole irony is that when a case happens, so, for example, it happens in one particular state, so they're using the telecom service of a different state, if it is a kind of a financial fraud that happens in a different state, so it is all interconnected.
>
> So, it is a combination of four, five states that comes together in a particular cyber-crime case, where police have to be located in all the places to track it down.
>
> So that is one of the biggest challenges that happens right now, when even a police officer has to resolve a case, they have to visit all the sites, because that's the mandate, and due to which there is kind of, you know, that delays the process of resolving a case.

CSO representative, India

To that end, many participants emphasised that the duration of legal processes was a substantial challenge in the implementation of laws. They described backlogs in legal systems, which meant that in many cases victim-survivors were waiting years for a resolution.

> There's a lot of social workers who are sort of like getting heavy workload in cases that need to be passed on to the police, or really to be passed on in court, but nothing's really happening.
>
> It was, a lot of our cases that we tried to pass on to the local government units or to the social workers would often take about a year before we get a response.

CSO representative, Philippines

The delays in response also discouraged TF GBV victim-survivors from reporting as it required individuals to have access to both time and financial resources (for legal counsel, etc.). Likewise, participants emphasised that the psychological and emotional impacts of a long legal process further deterred individuals from reporting. Moreover, findings indicated that bottlenecks frequently occurred in the response system after a resolution as well. For example, challenges arose when enforcing a harassment protection order.

> **After the protection order is granted, if they still need to get the police to enforce it, like if there's a breach, the police are gonna take very long again, so it gets [victim-survivors] stuck where, okay, the police are investigating, it's taking three to six months, and I still have no updates, harassment is still occurring.**

<div align="right">

`CSO representative, Singapore`

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Finally, while participants largely acknowledged the importance of having dedicated TF GBV laws, several participants also mentioned the shortcomings of legal responses and the need for a more robust response to TF GBV that went beyond laws. For example, an academic observed that in Korea, the rapidly changing nature of technology meant that the "law is always trying to catch up… and then the thing will move on. So again, there is always that lag".

Additionally, an academic in Singapore expressed that a legal-only perspective can produce a misguided response that obscures the role that sociocultural norms play in driving TF GBV. Furthermore, several stakeholders from the Philippines notably suggested that lawmakers' interests in TF GBV were perfunctory and that the existence of laws sometimes created distinct challenges for advocacy.

> **It almost, it doesn't actually make things worse, but it almost does in the sense that like, sometimes outside funders, or the government, or whoever will say, 'Oh, but we already have the law, so therefore, we don't need to do anything else on this.' So, in a sense, it almost makes some things harder.**

<div align="right">

`CSO representative, Philippines`

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Participants indicated that laws can be used by government and policymakers to absolve responsibility for further responding to TF GBV and suggested that laws need to be carefully designed to mitigate these unintended consequences.

Gaps in responses from technology companies

Participants overwhelmingly found technology companies' (with a focus on social media platforms) responses to TF GBV to be inadequate. Indeed, findings revealed significant gaps in current response strategies, such as difficulties

in removing content from social media platforms and the absence of localised, country-specific approaches.

Focus group participants specifically highlighted the ineffectiveness of current social media platform reporting mechanisms. Multiple participants shared unsuccessful attempts at using reporting mechanisms to address TF GBV, both for themselves and for clients. To that end, findings illustrated that the lack of localised, country-specific policies and procedures impeded the efficacy of social media platform response mechanisms. For instance, stakeholders noted that generalised platform community guidelines and codes of conduct—especially with regards to Meta—did not capture country nuances, which consequently created barriers to requests for removal of content.

> **They [Meta] have a very neutral way of saying 'this does not violate the community guidelines' and leaving things there.**
>
> CSO representative, India

Similarly, many participants brought up the issue of language as a barrier to effective technology company responses. CSO representatives in Pakistan and India noted, for example, that platform algorithms often read English only and remarked that social media content moderation teams lacked specialised language experts who understood the sociocultural context of a country.

> **...and you are complaining through these platforms that this is an inappropriate language and they just plainly refuse to recognise whether it is something equivalent to sexual assault or not.**
>
> **And they are abuses, if you are reporting those abusive words, they are, these platforms, you know, they also refuse to recognise them as abusive language and against their code of conduct.**
>
> CSO representative, Pakistan

Findings also suggested that social media reporting mechanisms and policies were not rooted in intersectional approaches, which hindered TF GBV response efforts. For instance, a CSO participant in India reported that platforms often did recognise religious or caste-based slurs. This aligned with the perceptions of another participant in India who flagged that social media reporting mechanisms especially did not work for journalists from gender minorities.

Another key gap in social media platform responses was the flawed use of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in content review processes. AI technologies were often unable to capture the contextual nature of communication. A CSO representative in the Philippines explained that TikTok and Meta frequently flagged their educational sexual health content on the grounds of being 'inappropriate'. Likewise, AI technologies constrained individuals' personal efforts to prevent and respond to TF GBV.

> **And sometimes even when you are calling out misogynistic, sexist remarks, or posts online, or you shared it with your content to speak up against it – then you will be the one flagged by Meta, because they can't understand it, that you are actually calling them out.**
>
> **I think that's problematic that this works actually with, basically AI and all that, it's not like people who are actually checking them. So often, when I call out people, then that's when my account gets locked.**

<div align="right">Media representative, India</div>

Additionally, in cases where social media platforms removed content, participants noted the absence of post-reporting mechanisms. There were no tools, for example, to stop perpetrators from creating a new account and re-posting the harmful content. More broadly, participants expressed their frustrations with the lack of accountability from social media platforms when it came to TF GBV, as the onus for responding to TF GBV was consequently put on CSOs and individuals.

> **Like people usually too say like, 'oh, you have to be cautious, you have to be, you know, like understanding the consequences', without actually putting the burden through the company itself that needs to make sure that, that spaces are safe for their users.**

<div align="right">CSO representative, India</div>

Another key finding from focus group discussions was that ineffective response systems exacerbated the harms of TF GBV, often leading to victim-survivors experiencing re-traumatisation. For example, participants noted that technology companies were slow to respond when victim-survivors used reporting mechanisms, which negatively affected the mental health of victim-survivors. Additionally, CSO participants shared stories of clients experiencing negative interactions with police and court systems when seeking help. Often dominated by men, stakeholders noted that police and court systems lacked an understanding of TF GBV and did not practice gender sensitive approaches. This led to negative encounters in help-seeking settings; for example, participants frequently said police minimised the issue and practiced victim-blaming attitudes when victim-survivors sought help. Such experiences amplified the harms of TF GBV.

> **Because this, it's like, it's a cycle. It's like re-traumatisation, when you get violated for the second time around when people actually don't even support you, despite what happened to you and in fact, would even blame you for it.**

CSO representative, Philippines

The absence of a victim-survivor centred approach was also evident in court systems. A CSO participant in India, for example, shared that they witnessed an image-based sexual abuse court case that took "two to three years" to resolve. The long process subsequently exacerbated the psychological and emotional harms of TF GBV, and the participant remarked that the delayed response reflected the court system's (including the judge's) lack of understanding of the serious harms caused by TF GBV.

> **So, the kind of trauma that she had to, like, go through for such a long period of time when all these men just thought that, 'Oh, it's a discussion, it's like a fun discussion that we're having.'**
>
> **We're just trying to, you know, change the system without realising that there are practical, there are lives at stake here.**

CSO representative, India

In summary, findings demonstrate that the gaps in response systems, including among technology companies and justice systems, amplified the harms of TF GBV for victim-survivors.

Sociocultural norms

Finally, findings demonstrate that sociocultural norms served as barriers to an effective TF GBV response in Asia. In many countries in the region, GBV (and consequently TF GBV) has historically been viewed as a 'private matter' to be managed within a family, and stakeholders shared that this attitude was still pervasive in their country contexts. This created a stigma around reporting violence, and victim-survivors often felt shame or feared being judged if they disclosed experiences of abuse. Indeed, many participants commented that patriarchal gender norms led to victim-blaming attitudes from both informal and formal support systems. This could exacerbate feelings of shame, which further prevented victim-survivors from reporting experiences of TF GBV.

> I think, like, there's a lot of stigma associated culturally and systematically with reporting these things. So, a lot of these cases just go on unreported; people would choose to not really come forward with the case or just sweep it under the rug.

Media representative, Philippines

Another participant in the Philippines noted that the Catholic religious context amplified victim-blaming attitudes in the country and would further deter people from reporting TF GBV.

> Our cultural, social-cultural background, as well as religious background, because there is a lot of guilt and shame that's been passed on from generation to generation, that if something happens to you, you blame the victim, because obviously, it's not the perpetrator's fault for doing such a thing.
>
> That's the kind of mindset that is still unfortunately present here in the Philippines today.
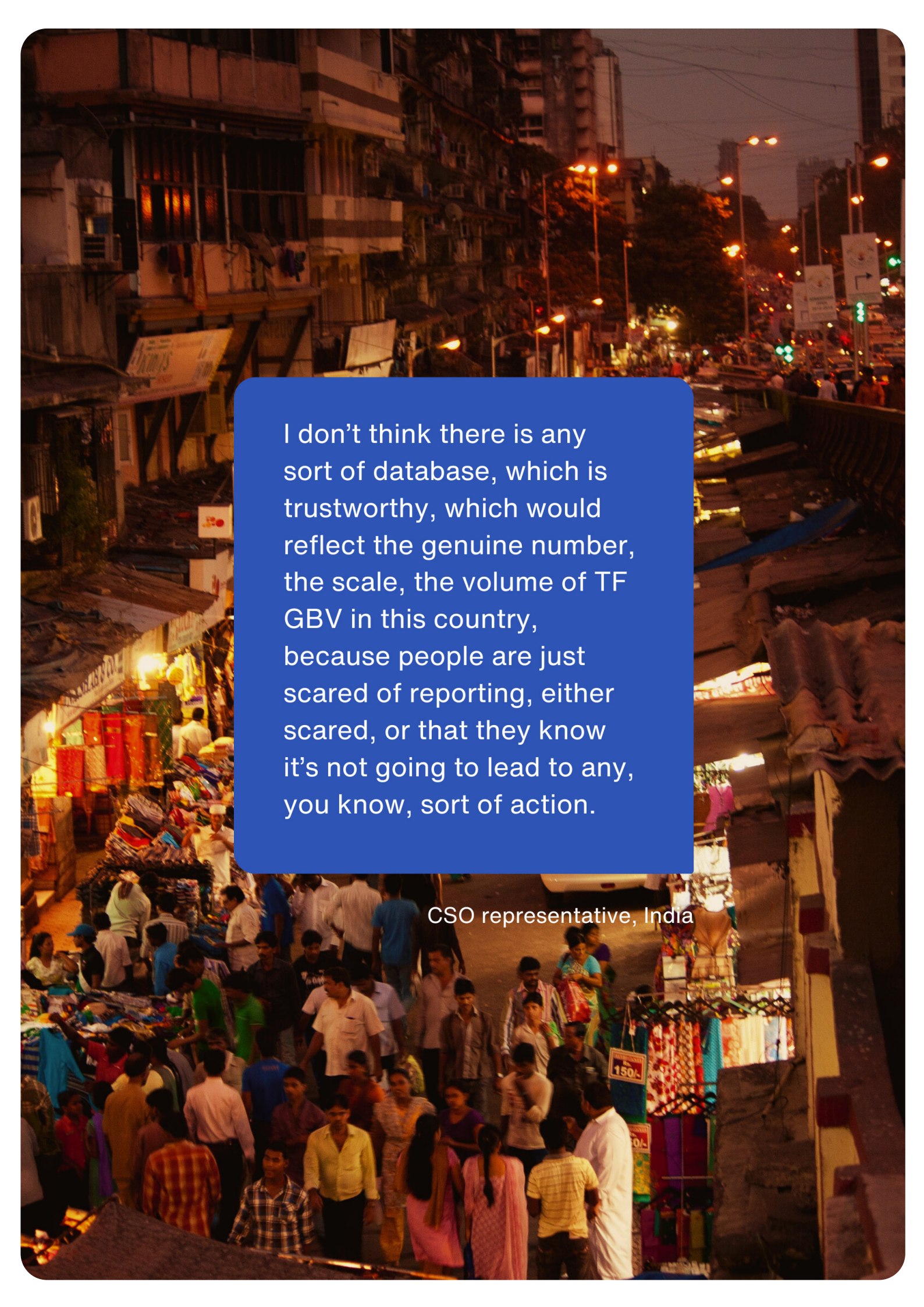
CSO representative, Philippines

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Gender and social norms around marriage in some countries also discouraged victim-survivors from seeking help. Participants in Bangladesh and India both remarked that reporting TF GBV experiences could lead to early marriage. Furthermore, if victim-survivors did seek help and report, gender and family norms then negatively influenced interactions with law enforcement. For instance, in India, law enforcement often demanded that victim-survivors include their parents in the process if they were an adolescent or unmarried young adult.

> **They don't want to deal with the person directly. But they want to say, bring your parents and we need to talk to them, how could you [the victim-survivor] have sent this?**
>
> CSO representative, India

In short, gender and family norms contributed to response system processes that did not centre the victim-survivor. More broadly, this implies that the design of response systems will need to carefully consider how sociocultural norms affect every stage of the help-seeking process and indicates that responses will need to be tailored to the specific country context.

Furthermore, participants highlighted that the sociocultural norms that deterred reporting consequently undermined the quality of administrative data available – both because of under-reporting and because of the minimisation of victim-survivors' experiences, meaning that reports were not formally recorded.

I don't think there is any sort of database, which is trustworthy, which would reflect the genuine number, the scale, the volume of TF GBV in this country, because people are just scared of reporting, either scared, or that they know it's not going to lead to any, you know, sort of action.

CSO representative, India

Measurement and availability of data

In addition to exploring victimisation, perpetration, forms and impacts of TF GBV, and responses in their countries, questions to focus group discussion participants focused on issues of definition, measurement, and availability of data on TF GBV.

There was an overwhelming consensus among participants, across countries, that currently there was very little quantitative data available to inform policy making and programming in their countries.

> **Just the lack of understanding and research on what this entails, and then you know to look at it from a woman's perspective because a lot of it, for instance, even as simple as unsolicited requests, or unwelcome sexual solicitation online, that is also GBV right. And so [before measuring, there is a need] to first identify it as such.**

Media representative, India

Participants highlighted inconsistencies in how TF GBV was understood and defined, and therefore measured, which undermined the usefulness of any data that may be available.

> **Obviously, that has implications as well for long term data collection, right, because otherwise the prevalence of online stalking [for example] from one agency like the police might be higher or generally just be inconsistent across different agencies. And that will raise a lot of questions in the public and not necessarily good questions.**

CSO representative, Malaysia

Where quantitative data were available, participants highlighted that they were in reference to specific forms of TF GBV (for example, with an Indonesian participant describing data on the national prevalence of online sexual harassment women had experienced since age 15), which was valuable, but did not represent the breadth of the problem. Others highlighted that their input to the focus group discussions

was not based on quantitative evidence about all the priority forms of TF GBV, as this was not available. As another Indonesian participant put it, "I'm saying it from my learnings and experience but not from the data".

In addition to the lack of an agreed definition of what should be measured or recorded, participants highlighted a range of barriers to accurate quantitative data on TF GBV. This included the weakness of administrative data collection systems.

> **Recording of these sorts of incidents, they're done manually, so like through a type of logbook thing, and those are easily lost, destroyed, whatever. So, they're not really recorded, they're not really inputted into a wider database.**
>
> **And if you even ask national police enforcement about data on [any form of] gender-based violence, it's not readily available to the public …. We've actually been trying to access these types of information on cybercrime, or TF GBV, from national government offices and agencies, and until now, it's been months and we still don't have this information.**

CSO representative, Philippines

Other participants emphasised that the communities and individuals that they worked with did not have confidence to report TF GBV or did not see there being any value in doing so, as they did not believe that the issue would be taken seriously. Participants felt that this meant any data on TF GBV from their countries seriously underestimated the extent of the problem.

> **I don't think there is any sort of database, which is trustworthy, which would reflect the genuine number, the scale, the volume of TF GBV in this country, because people are just scared of reporting, either scared, or that they know it's not going to lead to any, you know, sort of action.**

CSO representative, India

It is important to note that violence will always be underreported, so a database will never provide a fully accurate reflection of prevalence. Therefore, the goal of measuring TF GBV would not necessarily be to produce such a database, but to estimate and understand the phenomenon in order to inform action. This consequently suggests that the measurement of TF GBV may also require education efforts for stakeholders to better understand the role of data and measurement in preventing and responding to this form of violence.

The limited amount of quantitative research going on in countries meant that participants were unable to discuss measurement of TF GBV, or collection of administrative data on TF GBV in great detail; however, there was widespread agreement that it was a high priority. Participants noted that data on which forms of TF GBV were most prevalent, and on the long-term harms arising out of TF GBV, were needed to inform advocacy (particularly with governments and technology companies), as well as policy and programming.

Priorities for investment and action

Awareness, education, and capacity building

The top priorities identified by participants in relation to addressing TF GBV were overwhelmingly about raising awareness, education, and capacity building. Participants from every country reported that there needed to be broad community awareness campaigns to educate people that TF GBV is a form of GBV with serious consequences. After establishing this baseline, stakeholders suggested educating communities about the different types of TF GBV, the gendered nature and impacts of TF GBV, and the different support options (including laws) available to victim-survivors. Participants also frequently reported that this needed to be informed by people with lived experience.

Education and capacity building for the service system was another commonly reported priority and often focused on law enforcement personnel. This was especially common in countries that have existing legislative mechanisms for addressing TF GBV but where implementation issues were seen as significant barriers to an effective response.

Cultural change

Participants also pointed to the need for broad cultural change (primary prevention work) in relation to TF GBV and GBV more broadly. Participants highlighted four key approaches for this including:
1. An integration of comprehensive sexuality and reproductive health and consent education into formal education systems. Participants felt that these needed to be expanded to include a focus on TF GBV, given the particular impacts on young people;
2. Specific programs to tackle gender inequality and GBV/TF GBV that were inclusive of LGBTIQ+ people;
3. Programs to tackle victim-blaming culture; and
4. Digital literacy that focused on the safe use of technology with an emphasis on marginalised communities and families with children.

System coordination and legal mechanisms

Perpetrator accountability was another key priority identified by participants across the region. This was frequently discussed in connection to improvements in system coordination and collaboration, and legislative reforms.

Given the transnational nature of technology, participants overwhelmingly called for a multi-stakeholder approach to addressing TF GBV. This typically included a

call for greater leadership at both international and national levels and involvement from all sectors and stakeholders, including academia, government, civil society, technology companies, and victim-survivors. This also included strategies to address cross jurisdictional issues which were commonly reported as major barriers to victim-survivors seeking justice and getting an effective response from the system.

Legal and regulatory mechanisms to ensure accountability among technology companies was another commonly identified priority for addressing TF GBV in most country contexts. For participants from the few countries with existing TF GBV laws, their focus was primarily on addressing the barriers to effective implementation of these laws, including the collaboration, education, capacity building, and awareness that was previously discussed.

Most participants prioritised the drafting or amendment of existing laws to specifically address TF GBV. This included the need for laws that address TF GBV for people outside of intimate partner contexts.

Other participants reported that they would prioritise bringing a gendered awareness to legislation and policy, which included better understanding of the gendered dynamics of TF GBV and impacts on victim-survivors, and the basic legal recognition of LGBTIQ+ people. One of the key priorities highlighted by participants was the need for legal recognition of the impacts of TF GBV on victim-survivors that went beyond physical harm.

Research evidence base

A number of participants also prioritised building the research evidence base in relation to TF GBV. This was primarily discussed in terms of generating data that could be useful in advocating for funding, legislative changes, and service system responses to TF GBV. There was recognition that this research would need to be ongoing to be able to keep up with the evolving global digital landscape.

Discussion

Overall, findings from multi-country focus group discussions with key stakeholders reveal that TF GBV is a harmful, rapidly changing form of GBV that is being experienced by individuals across Asia. Participants reported a range of manifestations of TF GBV in the region, including image-based abuse, sexualised technology-facilitated harassment and abuse, technology-facilitated stalking and surveillance, doxing, impersonation and deception, and online child sexual exploitation.

Furthermore, findings confirm the diverse nature of this form of violence, as TF GBV often interacts with factors such as the digital, political, economic, and sociocultural context in a country. Participants reported witnessing and experiencing technologically sophisticated acts (such as instances of deepfake image-based sexual abuse), as well as behaviours involving more basic technologies (such as instances of harassing phone calls and denial of access to devices).

To that end, findings highlight the role that technology access plays in experiences of TF GBV, specifically around individuals who lack 'meaningful access' to technology—with participants observing that this often intersects with facets such as class and education. In addition to physical access to and control over technological devices, meaningful access also signifies having the knowledge and skills to navigate technologies safely and effectively.

Data from these focus group discussions indicate that disparities in digital literacy translate to uneven awareness of TF GBV among individuals, which therefore affects their abilities to engage in personal prevention efforts, recognise acts as TF GBV, and subsequently seek help and support. Overall, this means that those people who are more likely to be exposed to TF GBV are the same people who will face the most barriers in seeking help and support, thus suggesting that sociocultural norms and the gendered digital divide are distinctly shaping how TF GBV is experienced.

In addition to IPV contexts, focus group discussions also illustrate that individuals in Asia are commonly experiencing TF GBV in non-partner contexts. This includes TF GBV directed against women in public facing roles, which aligns with previous research indicating that women journalists and women politicians are more likely to experience this form of violence (Chen et al. 2020; Wagner 2020).

Findings from this report also suggest that women in public facing roles commonly experience sexualised technology-facilitated harassment and abuse. This supports recent studies which have shown that, compared to men, women politicians disproportionately report incidents of technology-facilitated harassment that targets them on the basis of gender, including receiving sexualised comments (Erikson, Hakansson, & Josefsson 2021).

Moreover, participants observed that women who were simply sharing an opinion on social media often experienced TF GBV, which echoes previous studies suggesting that women and girls face technology-facilitated harassment merely for existing online (Plan International 2020). Additionally, one key finding from this report is that TF GBV causes individuals to engage in self-censorship practices, including posting content less and drastically reducing one's engagement with technologies. This had consequences for individuals' economic independence—further supporting the literature on the self-censorship impacts of TF GBV (Posetti et al. 2022; Vitak, Chadha, Steiner, & Ashktorab 2017).

Cases such as Bulli Bai and the Sulli Deals, which involved the targeting of prominent Muslim women, highlight the importance of employing an intersectional lens to understand experiences of TF GBV. As participants noted, religious identity played a distinct role in why these women were targeted. An approach that did not recognise this would therefore ignore these women's unique experiences of TF GBV. Indeed, the literature has previously called for intersectional analyses in order to capture multi-layered experiences of TF GBV (Hackworth 2018).

Similarly, findings also indicate that LGBTIQ+ people often experience TF GBV in Asia, which builds on previous research suggesting that LGBTIQ+ people are more likely to be exposed to TF GBV (Powell, Scott, & Henry 2020). Participants also suggested that both old and young people are encountering TF GBV, as well as specific population groups such as migrant workers and sex workers. More broadly, these discussions reveal the wide range of people thought to be experiencing TF GBV in Asia, suggesting that prevention and response efforts may need to be tailored not only to the country context, but also to different populations and their distinct lived experiences of this form of violence.

Participants also reported that TF GBV can be perpetrated by various actors, including current and former partners (in the context of IPV), by other persons known to the victim-survivor (including family members, friends, acquaintances, and colleagues), strangers, businesses, and by institutions and the State. Findings overall suggest that technologies uniquely shape how TF GBV is enacted. For instance, participants shared many examples of TF GBV that involved multiple perpetrators, including instances of coordinated trolling attacks. This creates additional challenges when developing a response, as TF GBV blurs the lines around perpetrator accountability. For example, many participants brought

up prominent image-based abuse cases which involved the sharing of images of women and girls through 'closed' groups or private channels. Under these circumstances, the perpetrators could include: the group channel administrator, the people responsible for initially distributing images non-consensually, and the individuals that pay to join the private channel that stores these images.

While findings indicate that many forms of TF GBV were perpetrated by intimate partners, it is important to mention that these experiences may not formally be recognised as such due to the challenges of defining IPV in digital settings. This is particularly the case in contexts where pre- and extra-marital relationships and/or sex are considered taboo—and thus remain secret—or when digital relationships may not be formally recognised by the broader community due to interlocutors' lack of physical context. Indeed, the definition of an intimate partner has become increasingly ambiguous due to changing cultures of technology use and its interaction with notions of dating and intimacy (Koch and Miles 2020). For instance, it is unclear how someone would define a person that they met through a dating application and were 'casually' seeing, or relationships conducted entirely online.

Focus group discussions further confirmed that the unique features of technology exacerbated the harms of TF GBV. However, findings ironically suggest that TF GBV is minimised by stakeholders, including lawmakers, police, and court systems, as well as by the general public. Participants often mentioned that TF GBV is not taken seriously due to the perception that digital acts do not have severe impacts. Indeed, findings suggest that response systems often prioritised physical forms of violence over other forms of violence, including TF GBV.

Similarly, many participants noted that incidents of TF GBV, such as technology-facilitated harassment and abuse, are normalised in their country contexts. This indicates a lack of understanding of TF GBV at both the stakeholder and community levels. It also aligns with scholars who discuss the need to broadly change society's cultural perspective on TF GBV and "alter the [social] acceptability" of this form of abuse to encourage systemic change (Dunn 2021, 26).

Furthermore, findings from this report indicate that current efforts to respond to TF GBV in the region are inadequate. In addition to the flawed reporting mechanisms and approaches from technology companies, focus group discussions especially illustrated the lack of coordinated response among key stakeholders at both the national and international levels. This impacted victim-survivors' abilities to receive an effective and efficient response.

More broadly, the result of the lack of coordination in the response system is that no stakeholder is held accountable for TF GBV. Consequently, the onus for responding to TF GBV is put on victim-survivors themselves.

This report adds to the research evidence base on TF GBV in Asia, generating information on the forms of TF GBV experienced, as well as data related to stakeholder responses and priorities. It increases understanding of how TF GBV manifests in Asia and starts to address the gap in research in the region—and low- and middle-income settings more broadly—on TF GBV.

The findings illuminate how TF GBV is experienced and understood in countries with differing political, economic, digital, religious, and sociocultural contexts. Such information is critical to help develop guidance for government regulators, policymakers, and practitioners in the region. Additionally, findings can help shape future in-depth research in specific countries.

It is important to mention that this study faces some limitations. First, we used a non-probability sample. Focus group discussion findings therefore cannot be classified as representative, which limits generalisability.

While the research team engaged in efforts to recruit participants across a wide range of organisations and countries, some countries, such as India and the Philippines, were over-represented, and stakeholders were skewed toward civil society organisations.

Additionally, the sample was relatively homogenous in terms of gender (most of the participants were women), although this does reflect the gendered workforce active in relation to TF GBV. Furthermore, as our questions focused on stakeholder perspectives of TF GBV, their perceptions may differ from the rest of the population and may not capture the full breadth of TF GBV experiences and prevention and response efforts in the region.

We also conducted the focus group discussions in English only. While English was used to facilitate participation across countries, it also meant that this potentially excluded some key stakeholders in the region from participating (and in part explains the under-representation of some countries with large populations in the region).

Lastly, ten focus group discussions were conducted online, while two discussions were completed in-person, which could have created differences in the data collected. For the online focus groups, varying levels of internet quality occasionally disrupted the discussion and made it difficult to understand the participant, which possibly influenced the quality of the discussion.

Findings from this report strongly suggest the need for a multi-stakeholder approach to prevent and respond to TF GBV in Asia. While building on existing multi-sectoral GBV response systems, collaborative efforts to address TF GBV should also consider expanding partnerships to technology companies, who are often not part of current GBV response mechanisms. Additionally, some participants suggested establishing an international body dedicated to TF GBV, which could guide policy and help design regulatory standards, as well as enable collaborations across country contexts. This could include shared efforts to incorporate TF GBV into existing GBV prevention and response frameworks (for instance, updating Standard Operating Procedures related to GBV and GBV case management systems).

Focus group discussions indicate that TF GBV is common and harmful, so there is an urgent need to improve response systems. Frontline stakeholders, such as health, police, shelter, psychosocial support services, and justice units, should consider updating their existing GBV response strategies to include the needs of victim-survivors of TF GBV. Findings also imply that there is a particular need to invest in training on TF GBV for frontline service providers, ensuring that service providers have an increased awareness of the seriousness of and long-term harms associated with TF GBV. This includes training police, health, psychosocial workers, shelter operators, among others, on how to respond to cases of TF GBV. Additionally, report findings indicate the need for education and awareness efforts for essential GBV response services organisations, police, and court systems, which specifically focus on addressing biases and victim-blaming attitudes.

Since findings demonstrate that children are being exposed to harms facilitated by technology at a very young age, prevention efforts should start early. This should include programming on the safe use of technology and digital literacy skills, as well as developing programs around consent in both the digital and 'offline' worlds. Furthermore, prevention efforts should focus on addressing sociocultural norms, including programs to tackle gender inequity. This could also include advocating for comprehensive sexuality and reproductive health education in schools.

Findings in this report indicate that technology companies need to improve their reporting mechanisms, as many participants noted the lack of effectiveness of these responses. For social media platforms, this includes ensuring content is reviewed and removed in a timely manner, as participants discussed the negative impacts that a slow response system can have on victim-survivors. Additionally, technology companies should consider tailoring their response policies and procedures to

the specific country context. This could include investing in content moderation staff that understand the local languages and sociocultural context. Similarly, technology companies should reflect on their use of AI technologies and consider its limitations, such as its challenges with detecting nuances in communication and accurately removing content. More broadly, technology companies should consider implementing safety by design approaches that embed user safety throughout the entire organisation to ensure that they are proactively creating an inclusive 'online' environment.

Finally, governments and stakeholders are increasingly interested in measuring TF GBV in national prevalence surveys, with an emphasis on women's experiences of TF GBV. However, before developing questions, it is important to examine if data collected from these prevalence surveys would capture the full scope of individuals who are experiencing TF GBV (Vaughan et al. 2023). For example, findings in this report indicate that women commonly encounter TF GBV outside of intimate partner relationships. Focus group data also demonstrate that women in public facing roles are more likely to experience TF GBV. Adding items to existing measurement tools that capture these contexts, including different response options for who the perpetrator was and collecting data on the respondent's profession, could therefore further elucidate the forms of violence that particular women are experiencing and be utilised to design prevention and response initiatives. However, findings also suggest that girls and young women (e.g. before the age of 15 years) and older people (e.g. above the age of 49) are experiencing TF GBV. These individuals may not be captured in existing violence against women prevalence surveys (for example, if conducted as a module in a Demographic and Health Survey), which would most likely lead to an underestimation of TF GBV prevalence.

Likewise, such surveys would not account for many LGBTIQ+ individuals' experiences of TF GBV, which would also lead to inaccurate understandings of prevalence across the entire population in a country.

Given the many different forms of TF GBV reported here, it is unlikely that any short set of questions on TF GBV would enable an accurate understanding of the scale of the problem and may lead to significant underestimation of the proportion of the population who have experienced TF GBV. It may be more desirable (and feasible) to measure the prevalence of particular forms of TF GBV – such as image-based abuse – and to describe what is being measured as such, rather than the prevalence of 'TF GBV'.

Given the contextual nature of TF GBV, it is unclear whether the same questions about different forms of TF GBV could be used across country contexts in a meaningful way.
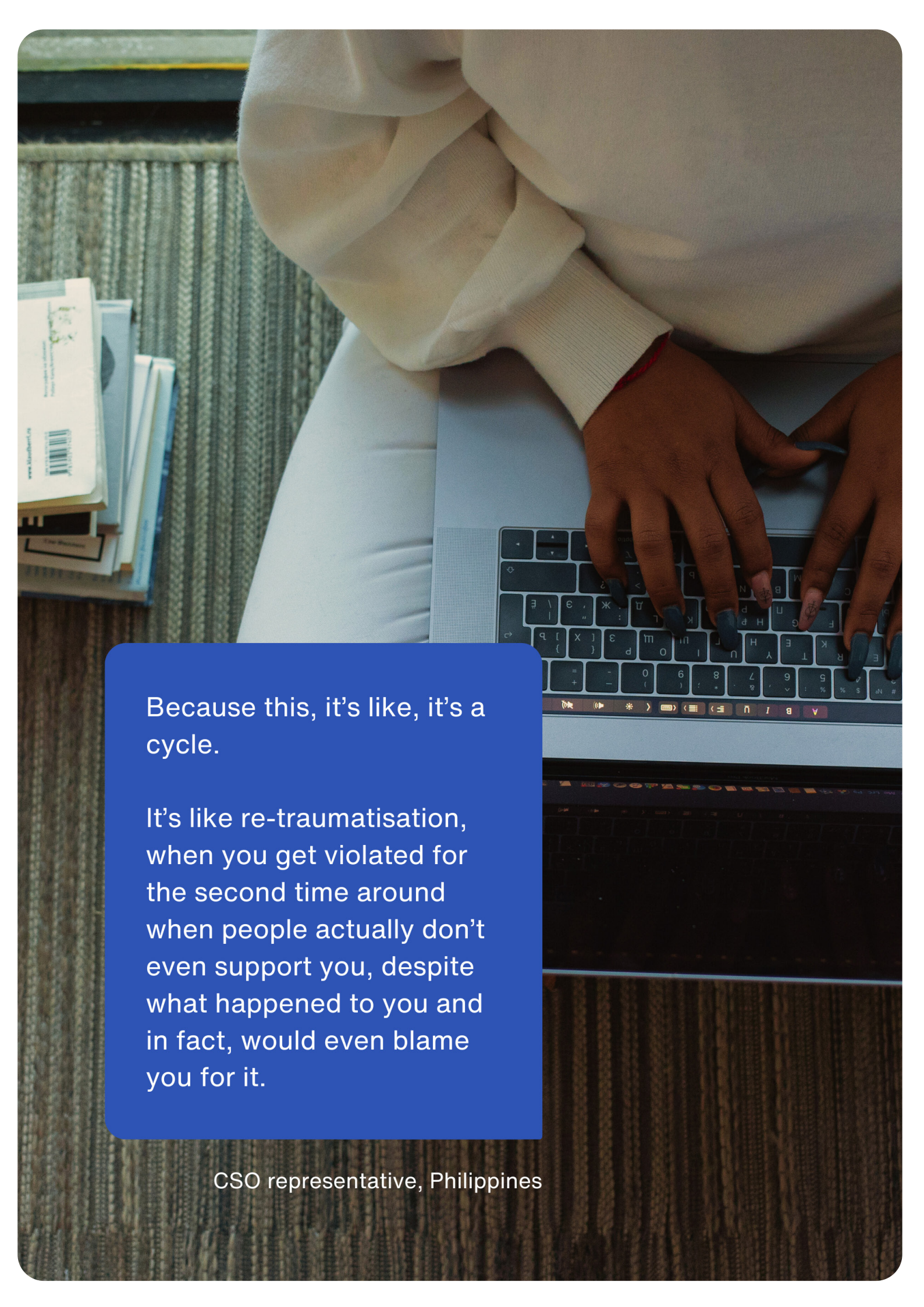
Conclusion

TF GBV is an emerging form of GBV that is common and causes serious harms. Research on TF GBV is growing, but this phenomenon is not yet well understood. There is also a particular lack of research evidence on how this form of violence manifests in low- and middle-income countries, including those in Asia. This report aims to start filling this gap by presenting findings from 12 multi-country focus group discussions with representatives from advocacy and stakeholder groups across Asia.

Data from focus group discussions indicate that individuals are experiencing various forms of TF GBV in the region, including image-based abuse, sexualised technology-facilitated harassment and abuse, technology-facilitated stalking and surveillance, doxing, impersonation and deception, and online child sexual exploitation. In addition to IPV settings, this study shows that TF GBV is being experienced quite frequently in non-partner contexts in Asia.

Additionally, findings further confirm that TF GBV is shaped by the digital, political, economic, religious, and sociocultural context in a country. The digital landscape especially influences how TF GBV is experienced in Asia, and it is critical to consider how TF GBV affects individuals who lack meaningful access to technology. Despite the damaging impacts of TF GBV, findings reveal that both frontline stakeholders and the general public often minimise these harms. Furthermore, results demonstrate numerous gaps in TF GBV response systems in Asia, including legal issues, coordination problems, awareness and capacity gaps at both the stakeholder and community levels, sociocultural norms, and ineffective redress mechanisms from technology companies.

This indicates a strong need for prevention and response efforts that are tailored to the local nuances of each country context, which should be informed by further country-specific research.

Finally, it is also vital to reform accountability systems to ensure that victim-survivors are centred throughout the entire process.

Because this, it's like, it's a cycle.

It's like re-traumatisation, when you get violated for the second time around when people actually don't even support you, despite what happened to you and in fact, would even blame you for it.

CSO representative, Philippines

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