
Centre for International
Governance Innovation

Supporting Safer Digital Spaces

Phase 2 Research Preview

Anja Kovacs

James Parr

Tarunima Prabhakar

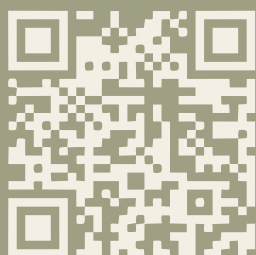
Nadia Al-Sakkaf

Subha Wijesiriwardena

Bonnita Nyamwire

Paz Peña

Ifeoluwa Olorunnipa



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About the Project

Supporting Safer Digital Spaces is a multi-year research project led by the Centre for International Governance Innovation in partnership with the International Development Research Centre. The project explores the prevalence and impacts of technology-facilitated gender-based violence as experienced by those impacted by it — including persons belonging to sexual and gender diverse communities — and includes the first statistically meaningful survey of people’s experiences with and opinions of online harms, with a focus on countries in the Global South. In the first phase of the project, an international survey collected data from 18,149 people of all genders in 18 countries. The second phase of the project expands the international survey to 18 additional countries: Bangladesh, Costa Rica, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Dominican Republic, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Lebanon, Mexico, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan, Paraguay, the Philippines, Senegal, South Korea, Tanzania and Venezuela.

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Introduction

The second phase of the Supporting Safer Digital Spaces project analyzes data collected in 18 countries in the Global South to better understand the ways in which online gender-based violence (OGBV) manifests itself, as well as to inform efforts to improve responses. Five key findings emerged from the data, each with important implications for research, policy and/or practice. These are addressed in turn below. A forthcoming special report will provide in-depth analysis of the data, and a dedicated policy brief will offer concrete policy recommendations. The report will be available soon at cigionline.org/safer-internet.

Five Key Findings

1 While the survey found that online violence is rampant, with more than half of respondents having experienced at least one form of online harm, the rates at which men and women experienced such harm are nearly identical.

Even where gender differences were found at the country level, the results often confounded expectations — in several countries, men were more likely than women to report having experienced online violence, rather than the reverse. This finding is a strong indicator that online spaces are unsafe for people of all genders.

It is important not to simply dismiss this finding as irrelevant or flawed. Other research has provided compelling evidence that online spaces mirror offline structural inequalities. Corroborating feminist scholarship on the adaptability of misogyny, research has shown that online platforms often serve as extensions of existing gendered social orders, rather than being neutral arenas. However, much of the research on technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) excludes men from the sample, making it difficult to assess nuanced gender differences in online harms and potentially overemphasizing women's experiences.

In other contexts, this then further raises the question, In what ways may digital spaces, including platforms' affordances, not merely facilitate this violence but also activate, contribute to or reinforce norms about masculinity, dominance and the acceptability of using force, which in turn further shape digital spaces for all genders and at all levels? This, too, requires further, context-specific research.

2 While online violence is not confined to one gender, an examination of the lived experience of such violence indicates that its meanings and impacts remain deeply gendered.

Although both men and women considered online harm to be a very or extremely serious problem for women in particular, the survey data showed that women were more likely to consider it a severe challenge for themselves than men did. Almost half of women who experienced online harm were targeted by a man or group of men, compared to only slightly more than one-third of men. Sexism was perceived to be an important driver of this online violence: although gender identity was by far the most commonly perceived reason for being targeted overall, women who had experienced online harm were almost twice as likely as men to attribute it to their gender identity.

The aftermath of OGBV was found to be gendered in important ways as well. Women were more likely than men to report online harm having a very or extremely negative impact on their mental health, desire to live, physical safety, and sexual autonomy and freedom, and were less likely than men to say that their ability to engage freely online

has not been impacted at all. Moreover, across all 13 types of harm analyzed, women were more proactive than men in taking action to keep themselves safe. Like men, they often adapted their online behaviour, with platform features such as blocking, muting or reporting someone often the first line of defence. Women were also more likely than men to fundamentally restructure their physical and social lives through actions such as avoiding social occasions and events and acting differently in the offline world more generally to protect their safety.

Taken together, these findings indicate that women experience and anticipate the consequences of online harm differently from men, particularly in relation to their safety, well-being and free participation in everyday life. Thus, in addition to the gendered forms that different types of harm take, the survey thus encourages us to specify more carefully the gendered nature of other dimensions of experiences of violence as well.

3

Instances in which online harm is linked to offline harmful behaviour are widespread and require specific attention, as the magnitude of the harm is strongly amplified in such cases.

Almost one in three of those who had experienced online harm reported that this incident was linked to, accompanied by or spilled over into experiences of harmful behaviour in the physical world. For each online harm, at least one in 10 of those who have experienced it reported a link with offline violence; in several cases, the figure was more than one in five, and the harmful behaviour included online threats of physical violence.

Connections between online and offline harm are the most immediate predictor of high-severity impact across all facets of life, with the odds of respondents reporting a very or extremely negative impact almost doubling. While psychological distress was the most common impact, the perception of physical danger was most affected when online harm connects to offline events, with the percentage of persons fearing for their physical safety more than doubling.

Links between online harm and offline harmful behaviour further served as a primary catalyst for an escalation in survivor response, in particular toward high-intensity protective measures, such as replacing one's devices, taking time off work or school, and changing one's behaviour in a relationship or even a part of one's identity. In addition, once such connections existed, far fewer people reported taking no action at all, suggesting that when online harm is linked to the physical world, this creates a threshold of severity that almost demands a reaction.

These findings have significant implications for policy and practice, suggesting that cases where online harm is connected to offline events deserve to be treated with priority. Protocols and procedures will need to be developed and implemented to support those facing both online and offline harm across multiple dimensions. In such complex, multi-faceted cases, the existence of coordinated, cross-sector responses may therefore be key. An ecosystem of support may be required that connects support organizations, law enforcement, platforms and other actors working to end TFGVB as well as GBV. Without such an ecosystem, survivors will likely be left to largely fend for themselves.

4

Sexual and gender diverse persons are disproportionately affected by OGBV, yet the risk they face remains under-recognized.

In the nine countries in which questions about sexual orientation and gender identity were asked, 70.5 percent of sexual and gender diverse respondents reported having experienced at least one form of online harm compared to 57.6 percent of cisgender heterosexual (cis-hetero) respondents. When broken down by type of harm, this disparity holds across all 13 types of harm, with sexual and gender diverse respondents reporting significantly higher rates in every category. They were also more likely than cis-hetero respondents to report connections between online and offline harmful behaviours (more than half, compared to around one-third of cis-hetero persons). This pattern also held across every harm type analyzed. It was most pronounced for threats of physical sexual violence, where nearly four out of five sexual and gender diverse respondents reported a link to offline harmful behaviour.

Sexual and gender diverse persons were more likely than cis-hetero respondents to report that they were targeted online due to their gender, gender expression or sexual orientation, as well as due to aspects of their identity not obviously related to their gender or sexual orientation, including their religion and their age. They were also more likely to know the perpetrators of online harm against them. While sexual and gender diverse persons reported more impact on their lives than cis-hetero persons in multiple areas, these differences were statistically significant in three areas in particular: their ability to form new relationships, their freedom to express views, and their sexual autonomy and freedom. In addition, they were more likely to favour more drastic measures to protect themselves after experiencing online harm, such as stopping participating online altogether or moving to a new address.

Overall, these findings paint a troubling picture. With more than two out of three sexual and gender diverse persons affected by OGBV, the contradiction between the actual experience of OGBV among sexual and gender diverse persons and its perceived severity (or relative lack thereof) seems to indicate that there may be a normalization of OGBV against sexual and gender diverse persons, to some extent perhaps even within the community itself. At the same time, there may be a reluctance on the part of sexual and gender diverse persons to fully acknowledge the severity of the situation because of the disempowering effects that can have in already difficult circumstances. Additionally, the disproportionate impact of online harm on sexual and gender diverse persons, especially on their ability to express their views and on their sexual autonomy and freedom, suggests that this violence may have a profound chilling effect on their self-expression and participation in everyday life, with potentially broader implications for their visibility, voice and public participation.

With legislatures around the world rolling back protections for these groups, even in places where they had earlier been secured, our concern about this finding should deepen even more. Greater coordination among those who stand for sexual and gender diverse persons' rights and many more resources to make that possible are among the measures urgently needed if advocacy is to effectively respond to the challenges described.

5

Those who reach out for support after facing online harm rely overwhelmingly on informal support; even where institutional support is accessed, its effectiveness is generally perceived to be weak.

Most of those who reached out for help sought support from informal sources such as friends and family. Women were particularly likely to reach out to their parents, spouses or partners, or siblings. The support of these immediate family members is also reported to be most effective among the sources of support analyzed: around two in three respondents who accessed this type of support thought it was very or extremely effective.

Institutional support, such as from the police, social media platforms or various types of civil society organizations, is accessed much less frequently. Men were more likely than women to do so, but even they relied primarily on informal sources. Apart from lawyers, such support was considered much less effective than that of informal sources of support. Although more than one in 10 respondents reached out to the police for 11 of the 13 types of harm (the number was one in five for those who faced threats of physical violence or physical sexual violence), only half of those who did reach out thought the support they received was effective. Online platforms fare particularly badly. More than one in 10 of those who have experienced online harm reached out to a platform, but even fewer than those who contacted the police considered them very or extremely effective. In fact, from the list of 19 options for support provided in the survey, only contacting “another person or organization” or reaching out to no one at all were considered less effective than seeking support from platforms. This is particularly noteworthy as, after governments, online platforms are the actor that respondents considered most responsible to help end online violence. Police and platforms are frequently also key actors that policy makers turn to when they seek to prevent or respond to TFGBV.

A large group, nearly 41 percent of men and 35 percent of women who encountered online violence, reported that they had reached out to no one. It is not necessarily essential that every single person who encounters online harm reaches out to others for support. Some acts of violence, while harmful, may not warrant intervention. The fact that not seeking support was considered the least helpful of all options, however, suggests that every person should at least have the option to access support. Policy so far seems to have failed to ensure this. While informal support networks may be able to provide key support in many cases, there are situations in which informal support simply is not enough to contain or end online harm. Strong, well-functioning, survivor-centred institutions are needed at that point.

The importance of having strong institutional responses is particularly evident when considering the situation of sexual and gender diverse persons. Reflecting their heightened vulnerability, sexual and gender diverse respondents were more likely than cis-hetero persons to seek support after online harm occurred, as well as to access both informal and specialized, formal help than other groups. Parents and victim support organizations, in particular, emerged as sources of support that were more important to sexual and gender diverse persons than to cis-hetero respondents. However, sexual and gender diverse persons are significantly less likely than cis-hetero persons to find the help provided by their parents very or extremely effective. Instead, it is the help from civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations, as well as from schools and universities, that rated particularly highly. Support from siblings was also considered effective. This suggests that for persons who face heightened risks, strong institutional mechanisms that can provide specialized support may be invaluable. In the current political climate, these findings deserve even greater consideration than before.

Unfortunately, the survey findings indicate that all too often, existing institutions fail to provide effective support even in the limited number of cases in which they are consulted, letting down survivors and allowing perpetrators to continue without accountability. Pressure on platforms, in particular, needs to be maintained. In many ways, technology companies have created the very environments in which violence is an everyday experience for so many people, yet many major social media companies have significantly reduced their online trust and safety efforts in recent years. Respondents' reliance on features such as blocking, muting and removing perpetrators shows that these tools serve as a useful first line of defence. However, the extreme steps women take to contain threats by adapting and restricting their own behaviour online and offline indicate that these are far from sufficient. Platforms need to not only improve their response when those who experience violence reach out to them, but also proactively develop ways to enhance user control over their online experience, including to prevent harm from occurring in the first place.

Even if platforms do step up, this alone is unlikely to ensure that those who face online harm can find the support they need. Ideally, the ecosystem approach mentioned earlier should be extended beyond cases where online harm connects with offline harm, to encompass all forms of online violence. In many countries, such an approach has proven invaluable in providing survivors of GBV with the multi-faceted support they often require, and it is time that a similar model is applied to OGBV and TFGVB.

For such an ecosystem to be effective, however, it will need to account for the fact that survivors' support needs differ, including across gender lines, depending on the type of harm experienced. Unwanted sexual content is one example. Although it was rated the sixth-most severe harm among the 13 types surveyed, fairly little action is generally taken by those who receive it — possibly indicating a sense of powerlessness, which raises urgent questions about what more platforms and policy makers could do to prevent such harms altogether. Designing referral pathways that are responsive to these nuances and socializing the most effective sources of support for specific types of harm, would be worthwhile policy goals.

Together, these five key survey findings provide a robust base of evidence on various aspects of OGBV, to inform and influence research design and policy decisions aimed at making digital spaces safer for persons of all genders and sexual orientations.



67 Erb Street West
Waterloo, ON, Canada N2L 6C2
cigionline.org