
Centre for International
Governance Innovation

Supporting a Safer Internet Paper No. 5

The Cost of Transgression

Gender, Sexuality and Online Violence in India

Anja Kovacs



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About the Project

Supporting a Safer Internet: Global Survey of Gender-Based Violence Online is a two-year research project, in partnership with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Ipsos. This project explores the prevalence of online gender-based violence (OGBV) experienced by women and LGBTQ+ individuals in the Global South. From cyberstalking, impersonation and the non-consensual distribution of intimate images, to deliberate personal attacks on communications channels, OGBV is silencing the voices of women and LGBTQ+ individuals, causing digital exclusion and propagating systemic inequalities. To address these emerging challenges, the survey and papers produced under this research initiative will help to develop policy recommendations and navigate shared governance issues that are integral to designing responses to OGBV — whether that be through the regulation of online social media platforms, educational programming or legal recourse.

About the Author

Anja Kovacs is a CIGI senior fellow. She is currently an independent researcher and consultant, as well as a senior fellow at Research ICT Africa, South Africa and a non-resident CyberBRICS fellow at FGV (Fundação Getulio Vargas), Brazil. Previously, she was the founder director of the Internet Democracy Project, India. Her research has focused on understanding, developing and realizing feminist visions of the digital society for more than 15 years. This includes groundbreaking work on online abuse, the intersections of gender and surveillance in the digital society, and the linkages between bodies and data. She has also worked as an international consultant on internet issues, including for the Independent Commission on Multilateralism, the United Nations Development Programme Asia Pacific, and the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression. She has lectured at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK, and Ambedkar University, Delhi, India, has guest lectured in India and Brazil, and has conducted extensive fieldwork throughout South Asia. Anja obtained her Ph.D. in development studies from the University of East Anglia.

Executive Summary

The Supporting a Safer Internet survey on online harms in 18 countries was undertaken by the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) in partnership with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and was carried out by Ipsos. This paper considers the survey's India findings. Some of the findings may appear somewhat surprising. For example, the survey found that women in India do not, in fact, report experiencing online violence significantly more often than men. Moreover, while gender and sexual minorities do appear to be targeted much more frequently, even persons belonging to these groups, the survey finds, tend to not acknowledge this vulnerability. This paper argues that the continued power and dominance of a deeply patriarchal culture of social control and discipline in India, and the acute awareness of that power among women and gender and sexual minorities, explains these and other findings. The paper examines how likely women, men and gender and sexual minorities are to have been faced with online violence, how harmful each group perceives different forms of violence to be and how those who have faced violence have been impacted by it. It delves deeper into the significance of harmful behaviours that violate personal space and bodily integrity or target identity, as these stood out in the survey data. And it unpacks the importance of findings regarding perpetrators' profiles in India and the platforms they use. This analysis demonstrates that deeply conservative socio-cultural norms continue to shape not only online violence and its impact in India, but also the extent to and the ways in which different groups can or will speak up about or respond to it. The paper concludes with key recommendations on how to move forward.

Introduction

This paper aims to analyze and contextualize the India findings of a research survey on online violence in 18 countries. The survey was part of a multi-year project on technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) by CIGI in partnership with the IDRC and was carried out by Ipsos.

Since the early 2010s, TFGBV has received growing attention in India as elsewhere (see, for example, Kovacs, Kaul Padte and SV 2013; Pasricha 2016; Devika 2019; Di Meco 2023). Moreover, as internet access and use have expanded, this problem only seems to have grown — even more so since the COVID-19 pandemic began (Express News Service 2021; Dehingia et al. 2023; NORC and the International Center for Research on Women [ICRW] 2022; Quilt.AI and ICRW 2021). But reliable, representative quantitative evidence on TFGBV in India was not available. As a consequence, debates about such violence and how to respond to it have frequently erased important differences between forms of violence and, thus, have lacked depth and nuance at times.

This has been particularly concerning in India, which continues to have one of the largest digital gender gaps in the world. For example, in 2022, only 31 percent of women were reported to use the mobile internet in India, compared to 52 percent of men, translating into a gender gap of 40 percent (GSMA 2023). Moreover, much evidence exists that socio-cultural concerns are a key factor in perpetuating the digital gender gap. As safety and security, too, have been highlighted as reasons to continue to restrict women's internet access (Banaji and Bhat 2019; Barboni et al. 2018; Kovacs 2017; NORC and ICRW 2022), portraying all of the digital world as unsafe for women only plays into such concerns.

While the research survey commissioned by CIGI and IDRC therefore provides a welcome opportunity to bring greater depth and nuance into the debate, its findings may at times be surprising. For example, while the survey shows there is broad recognition in India that heterosexual, cisgendered women are particularly vulnerable to online violence, it also suggests that their vulnerability does not, in fact, lie in *how often* they experience such violence: heterosexual, cisgendered women in India do not report

experiencing such violence significantly more often than heterosexual, cisgendered men in the country do. Rather, it is people who identify as transgender or gender-diverse and/or as having a sexual orientation other than straight or heterosexual who appear to be targeted most frequently in India — up to four times as often as heterosexual, cisgendered men and women, according to the survey's data. Yet, the survey further finds, the profound vulnerability of these groups goes unrecognized even by many persons belonging to gender and sexual minorities themselves.

How do we make sense of these and other somewhat startling findings of the survey? This paper argues that the continued power and dominance of a deeply patriarchal culture of social control and discipline in India, and the acute awareness of that power among users who are heterosexual, cisgender women and/or belong to a gender and/or sexual minority, explains these contradictions. Deeply conservative socio-cultural norms continue to shape not only digital violence and its impact in the country, but also the extent to and the ways in which each of these different groups can or will speak up about or respond to it.

In what follows, this argument will be developed by examining how this dynamic shapes the survey data in three key areas. Following the first section on methodological considerations, the second section takes as a starting point the survey data on how likely women, men and gender and sexual minorities are to have been faced with online violence, how harmful each group perceives different forms of violence to be and how those who have faced violence have been impacted by it. In the third section, the focus is on two sets of violent behaviours that, for different reasons, stood out in the survey data: those entailing violations of personal space and bodily integrity and those targeting identity. Finally, in the fourth section, the significance of relevant data regarding the profile of those who perpetrate technology-facilitated violence (TFV) in India and the platforms they use are investigated. The paper concludes with some recommendations on where to focus energies to move forward in this complex context. Before diving into the analysis, the survey method itself deserves some further discussion, however. This is addressed in the next section.

Methodological Considerations

The survey consisted of three parts. First, survey participants were asked how big an issue they believed online gender-based violence (OGBV) to be in their country, and how harmful they perceived 13 types of online harm in particular to be. In the analysis of the survey data by Ipsos, on which this paper is based, these 13 types were grouped into four categories. They are:

Identity and reputation-based harms:

- being called discriminatory names or derogatory cultural terms;
- lies being posted online about you;
- online impersonation; and
- experienced harassment online because of gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, gender expression, etc.

Privacy and security-based harms:

- someone accessing a device or social media accounts belonging to you or someone you know without permission;
- being monitored, tracked or spied on online; and
- having personal contact information or address posted online without permission.

Coercion and harassment:

- being physically threatened online;
- being blackmailed online;
- networked harassment; and
- repeatedly being contacted by someone you/they don't want to be contacted by.

Sexual image-based harms:

- personal nude/sexual images of you/ someone you know have been shared or shown to someone else or posted online without permission; and

→ unwanted sexual images sent to you or someone you know.

Those who had experienced violence were then asked additional questions about the platforms involved in those incidents, the actions they took in response to these incidents and the impacts they experienced as a consequence of these incidents. Finally, for the most serious incident in particular, further questions were asked regarding the frequency with which the violence occurred, the reasons people were targeted, the party inflicting violence, the people or organizations they reached out to after the incident for support, and the effectiveness of the support provided.

In India, 501 individuals were surveyed online. To ensure adequate representation of those who might otherwise be excluded, an additional 506 Indians were interviewed by telephone. This makes for a sample size of 1,057. Quotas and weighting by age, gender and region, but not class, were applied to ensure a representative sample. While the margin of error is three percent for the survey as a whole, it is five percent for the Indian sample because of this smaller size.

The sub-sample of those referred to as gender and sexual minorities in this paper was, however, small. Because of their sensitivity, questions regarding people's gender identity, sexual orientation and whether they identify as cisgender were restricted to the online version of the survey in India. Only 30 individuals answered that they identified with a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth (transgender), with a gender identity other than man or woman, and/or with a sexual orientation other than straight or heterosexual. Because of the small size of the sub-sample, results related to these groups have to be read with care; however, some of the trends identified below are so stark, and follow such a clear pattern, that it would be unwise to ignore them.¹

In addition, users who are more active or visible than the typical user are more highly represented in the India sample than that of other countries. In fact, between seven percent and 19 percent of all Indian respondents identified as a social

media influencer, creator, blogger, politician or journalist. In addition, more than 40 percent indicated that they have a significant social media following — considerably higher than the global average of around 30 percent — and unlike in other countries, this applied equally to heterosexual, cisgender men and women. Among people belonging to gender and sexual minorities, the number with a significant social media following is as high as four out of five. Moreover, around half of all respondents said they post regularly on social media or message boards, more than one-quarter post on video streaming sites, and almost one-fifth maintain blogs — all of which indicates an active engagement and relatively advanced skills on the part of many of the respondents, in a country in which digital literacy continues to be a major challenge.

These details matter, because they influence the survey's findings: statistical modelling on the survey's data confirmed that heavy daily usage and significant public following have a very high impact on how many different types of online violence a person is likely to face. In India, they increase that number with a factor of 0.85 and 0.90, respectively. Further statistical modelling was therefore conducted while controlling for these baseline usage effects. In other words, if elsewhere in this paper, additional information on the drivers of online violence or on the odds of facing such violence is provided, this data represents influences that are significant even after the effects of heavy daily usage and significant public following are accounted for. Moreover, although patterns are harder to detect in smaller samples, these additional findings on the drivers of online violence have statistical significance where India's gender and sexual minorities are concerned as well.

Finally, a note on the use of the terms “men” and “women” in the rest of this paper. For ease of reading, these will no longer be qualified with the words “heterosexual, cisgender” from here on. However, people belonging to gender and sexual minorities can, of course, identify as men and women as well. Where “men” and “women” are used in the rest of this paper, these should therefore be read to refer to heterosexual, cisgender men and women only.

¹ Because of their sensitivity, questions regarding gender identity, sexual orientation and whether people identify as cisgender were not asked in Algeria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates. Whenever global figures are referred to for gender and sexual minorities, this needs to be kept in mind.

Perceptions, Experiences and Impact of Online Violence

How do people in India perceive TFV and how likely are they to experience such violence in its different manifestations? This section will outline the main overarching, and sometimes surprising, even confounding, answers that the survey presents in response to these questions — first, where men and women are concerned, and then, for people belonging to gender and sexual minorities. In each case, some of the key questions that these findings raise will also be addressed.

Women and Men

As the survey results suggest, Indian people are quite aware that OGBV affects women in particular (see Figure 1). More than three out of five men and women in India believe that it is a big problem for women. Moreover, while almost half of all respondents believe that OGBV

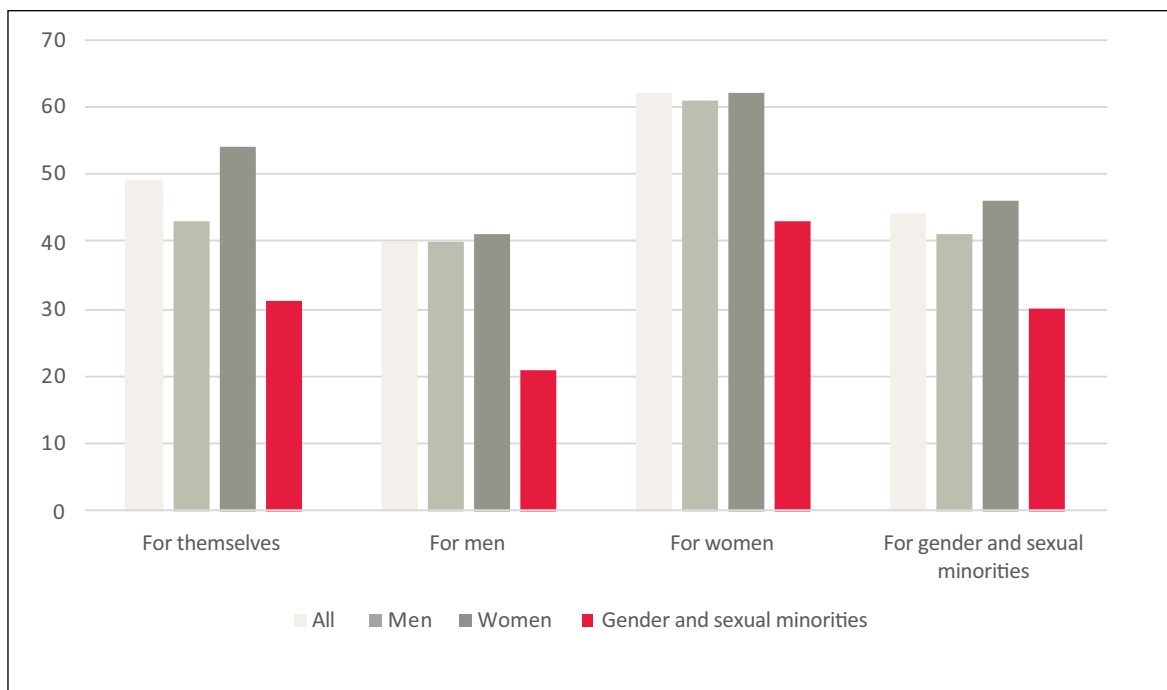
is a big problem for themselves, women are more likely to believe this than other genders.

But although OGBV is considered a problem that women in particular are vulnerable to, the survey results suggest that this does not mean that women are generally more likely to suffer such violence than men, or that they are more likely to consider such violence as extremely harmful than men.

Forty-four percent of Indian respondents reported having been subjected to one or more of the 13 forms of online harm explicitly listed in the survey in practice — significantly fewer than the global average of 59 percent. The difference between men and women in India is negligible (see Figure 2).

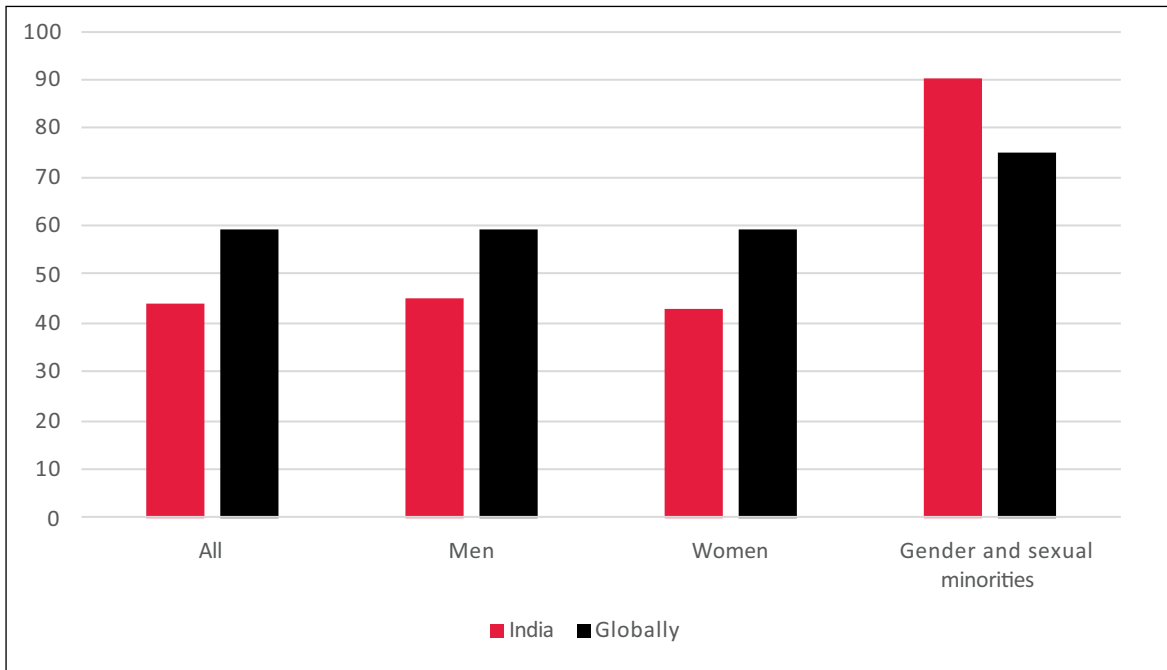
Similarly, men and women in India were also slightly less likely than people globally to consider all behaviours listed in the survey as extremely harmful and, once again, the difference between Indian men and women was so small as to be insignificant. Rather, it is the difference between Indian women and women globally that is striking here: eight to nine percent fewer Indian women consider each category of behaviour as extremely harmful than do women globally (see Figure 3).

Figure 1: Consider OGBV a Big Problem, India



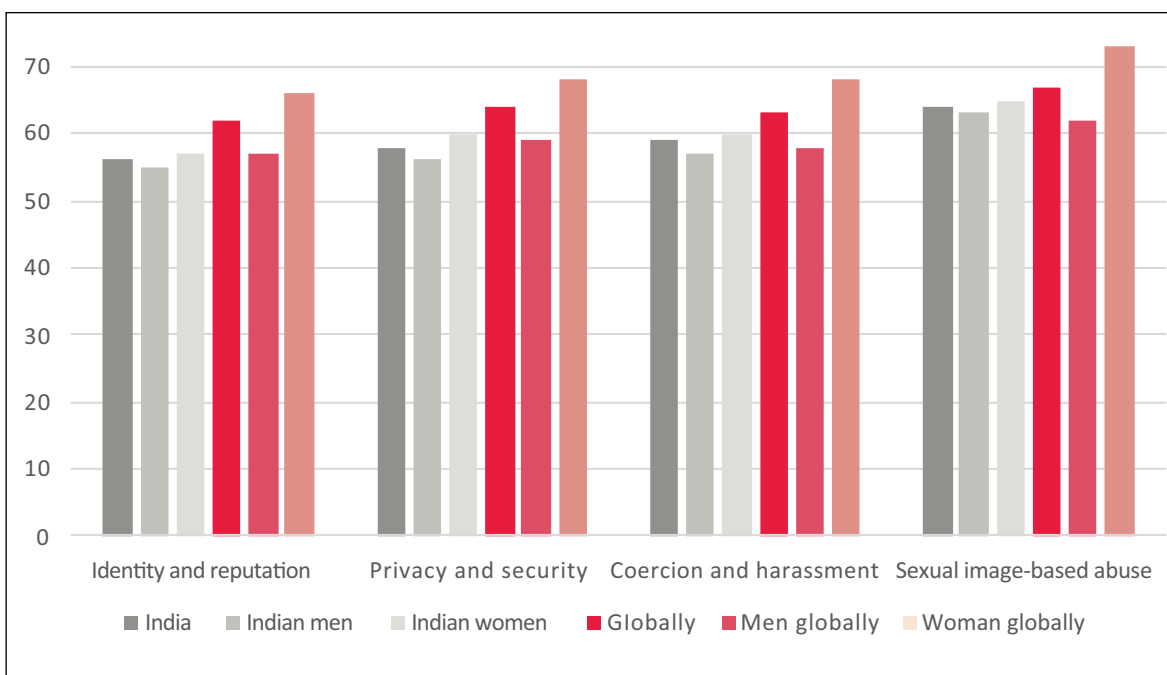
Data source: Ipsos, Supporting a Safer Internet Survey.

Figure 2: Personally Experienced at Least One of 13 Forms of Harm, India and Global



Data source: Ipsos, Supporting a Safer Internet Survey.

Figure 3: Consider Categories of Behaviour Extremely Harmful, India and Global



Data source: Ipsos, Supporting a Safer Internet Survey.

When it comes to the impact of online violence on men and women, the survey findings do not uncover stark gender differences there either. In India and around the world, research has noted the tremendous psychological, emotional and other tolls TFV takes on women and gender and sexual minorities, with far-reaching impact on their lives (Dhrodia 2017; Dunn 2020; Dunn, Vaillancourt and Brittain 2023). In India, women have, for example, been reported to adapt their behaviour online, such as by refraining from being online at night so as to not be seen as subversive and therefore not worthy of protection (Devika 2019). They have restricted their participation and expression online, for example, by not posting any images in which their face is visible (Sambasivan et al. 2019). Some have faced severe restrictions from their families on their mobility and study and work opportunities or were excluded from community activities. Some have even been given into early marriage or have become the victim of physical violence, including by male relatives who became aware of the incident (Devika 2019). As these examples show, many of these impacts are gender specific.

Yet, while around 40 percent of Indians reported incidents had a very negative impact on different areas of their lives — a considerably higher number than did people globally — the differences between men and women in India as reported in the survey remain too small to be statistically significant (see Figure 4). Women were four percent more likely than men to report that their ability to engage freely online was very negatively impacted, and three percent more likely to report a very negative impact on their sexual autonomy and freedom. They also reported two percent more frequently a very negative impact on their ability to focus and three percent more on their physical safety and on their desire to live (the latter was reported by 43 percent of Indian women respondents, as compared to 30 percent of women globally). But the only statistically significant difference between men and women related to the impact on their employment or business: while almost half of men reported this, only slightly more than one-third of women did so. Note, however, that at 24 percent in 2022, Indian women's labour

force participation is low. Men's labour force participation at the same time was at 74 percent.²

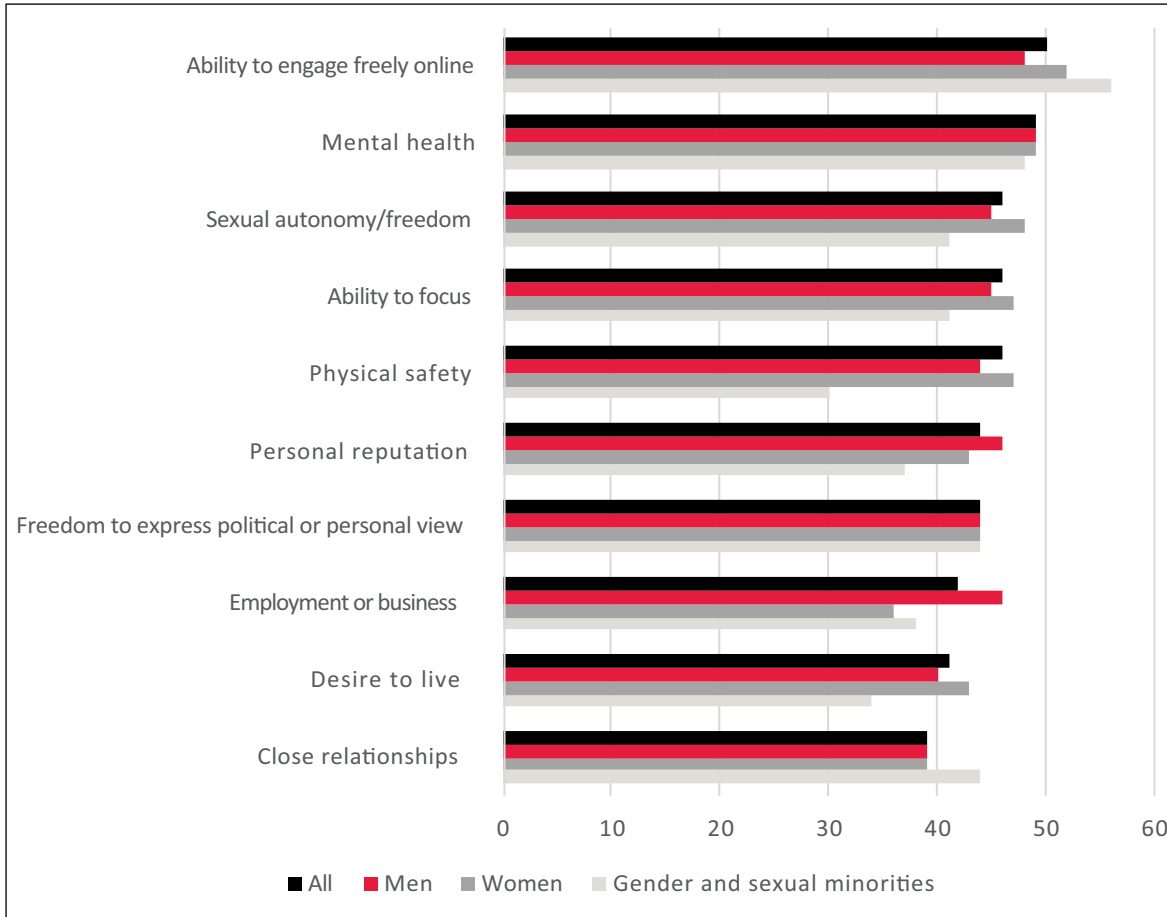
While the above numbers might well indicate a “public crisis” (Gurumurthy, Vasudevan and Chami 2019), they do not bring out the gendered nature of that crisis, which has been foregrounded so often, especially in qualitative research. If anything, these figures raise the question of whether perhaps men's experiences with TFV require greater attention as well. Is it possible that women in the survey under-reported their experiences of violence and its impact, and even their perception of the harmfulness of such violence?

Especially in telephonic interviews, women may have had reason to under-report. In early research on verbal online abuse in India, respondents emphasized not wanting to share incidents of online abuse with their family or partners. Despite coming from fairly privileged backgrounds, they feared being told to restrict or discard altogether their activities online (Kovacs, Kaul Padte and SV 2013). Other studies have noted that girls and young women of all class backgrounds place strong emphasis on being “responsible” or “proper” internet users precisely to prevent such restrictions (Barboni et al. 2018; Kovacs 2017). Boys did not have to provide such explanations or justifications.

These gender differences can be attributed to the widespread social anxiety that mobile phone usage disrupts patriarchal regimes of control and surveillance. Women's sexual purity and reputation are central to caste, ethnic and religious divides as well as to patriarchy, and for this reason, continue to be a major concern in many communities in the country. In this context, mobile phone usage now creates new avenues and opportunities for women to pursue love and romance on terms that go beyond those their community might have set out for them (Arora and Scheiber 2017; Jeffrey and Doron 2013; Kovacs 2017; Philip 2018). For many women, the possibilities offered by mobile phones constitute an area of “fearful excitement”: they allow for the exploration of social alternatives while also requiring, because of their ambivalence, intense reflection on the boundaries of their ethical selves in this changed context (Huang 2017; Mishra and Basu 2014). For many families

2 Ratio of female to male labour force participation rate (%) (modelled International Labour Organization estimate) - India; <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FM.ZS?end=2022&locations=IN&start=1990&view=chart>.

Figure 4: Very Negative Impact on Areas of Personal Life, India



Data source: Ipsos, Supporting a Safer Internet Survey.

and communities, however, mobile phone usage is feared to raise questions about women’s sexual purity and reputation. While the impact of such questions might be hyperlocal, the consequences can nevertheless be extremely severe (Sambasivan et al. 2019). This, in turn, then becomes a reason to curtail or even forbid such usage, especially among young women. Indeed, the evidence shows that socio-cultural concerns are a key factor in perpetuating the digital gender gap in India, and this occurs across demographic groups. Reports of TFV and harassment further play into such concerns and the resulting restrictions: safety and security, too, have been highlighted as reasons to continue to restrict women’s internet access (Banaji and Bhat 2019; Barboni et al. 2018; Kovacs 2017).

Deliberate under-reporting may not be the only challenge here, however. To the extent that women

have internalized these values themselves, they may also find it difficult at times to recognize violence as violence — especially in situations where a woman, by transgressing social norms, is believed to “have brought it on herself.” Depending on the context, not much might need to happen for that conclusion to be drawn. As one girl told a researcher: “In my area, most people think that, if a girl is using a phone a lot, then they’ll get ruined” (Centre for Catalysing Change and Digital Empowerment Foundation 2021, 25). If women carefully curate their presence online, from what they post to at what time of the day they are visible online, this is in recognition of these concerns. To that extent, their participation online is always somewhat precarious.

Gender and Sexual Minorities

Whether or not deep-seated beliefs around women's sexual purity impact the extent to which women in India report their experiences of TFV, or their perceptions of the harmfulness of such violence, remains to be confirmed by further research. The relevance of these beliefs for understanding the experiences and perceptions of gender and sexual minorities are, however, more obvious: for individuals who defy patriarchal control over women's sexuality (that is, who are socially or sexually transgressive in any way), the cost for such rebellion can be high — as the survey's findings on the extent to which gender and sexual minorities in India are faced with online violence confirm.

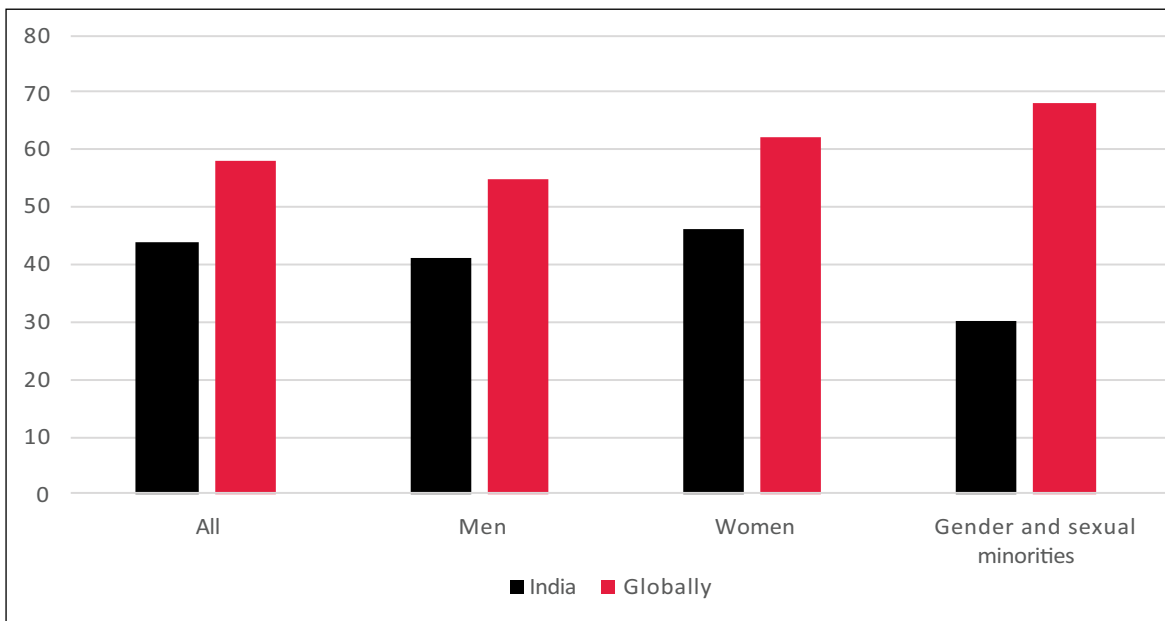
Globally, OGBV is considered a big problem for gender and sexual minorities almost as often as it is for women. Among gender and sexual minorities globally, this recognition is even higher. But as Figure 1 indicated, the particular vulnerability of gender and sexual minorities is not recognized in India. Figure 5 shows that the number of Indian respondents who considered online violence a big problem for gender and sexual minorities is only slightly higher than those who believe it a problem for men in the country.

People belonging to gender and sexual minorities themselves are even less likely than men and women in India to consider online violence a big problem for their group: only 30 percent did so, compared to 41 percent of men and 46 percent of women. Also, 15 percent of respondents in India did not want to answer this question or did not know, which is very high — for similar questions regarding men, women or themselves, this figure is between four and six percent.

This lack of recognition in India for gender and sexual minorities' particular vulnerability to online violence is particularly noteworthy because, in practice, the survey findings indicate that these communities are the hardest hit by such violence: as Figure 2 illustrated, a whopping 90 percent of survey respondents in this group had experienced at least one of the types of harm referred to in the survey. Among respondents, seven out of 10 persons belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority in India have experienced some form of coercion and harassment, eight out of 10 have been faced with identity and reputation-based forms of harm, and more than six out of 10 have experienced sexual image-based harms.

As Figure 6 highlights, the survey results suggest gender and sexual minorities in India face coercion

Figure 5: Consider OGBV a Big Problem for Gender and Sexual Minorities in Their Country, India and Global



Data source: Ipsos, Supporting a Safer Internet Survey.

and harassment, identity- and reputation-related harm, and privacy- and security-related harm more than twice as often as Indian men and women do, and sexual image-based harm more than three times as often. Where specific forms of harm are concerned, the differences are at times even larger. For example, persons belonging to gender and sexual minorities in India are around four times as likely as other Indians to have been monitored, tracked or spied on online.

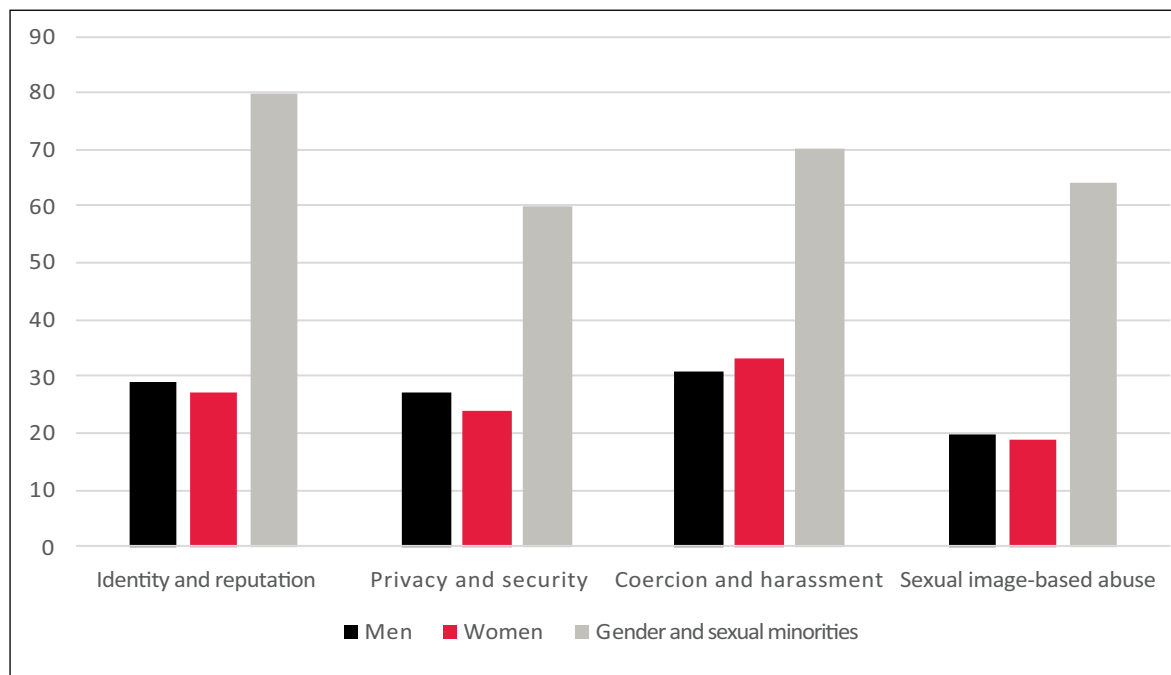
The vulnerability to online harms of those who identify as both Hindu and belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority, in particular, was confirmed by statistical modelling. It found that these individuals are likely to face around 2.78 more forms of online harm, out of the list of 13 forms of online harm flagged in the survey, than other Indian individuals with similar usage frequency and the same significant public following and who participated in the same survey. Statistical modelling further confirmed that, compared to other Indians with an otherwise similar profile, those who identify as both Hindu and belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority have more than four times higher odds of facing online harms related to privacy and security or sexual image-based abuse; more than 12 times higher odds of

facing coercion and harassment; and almost 17 times higher odds of experiencing identity and reputation-based online harm (see Figure 7).

Finally, gender and sexual minorities are also more likely than men and women in India to be faced with violence that continues over a longer period of time. For more than eight out of 10 men and women in India, the most serious incident of violence that they experienced was a one-time event or consisted of only a few episodes. However, for gender and sexual minorities, this was true in less than six out of 10 cases. More than four out of 10 persons belonging to gender and sexual minorities reported that the most serious incident that they had experienced happened monthly or more frequently (see Figure 8).

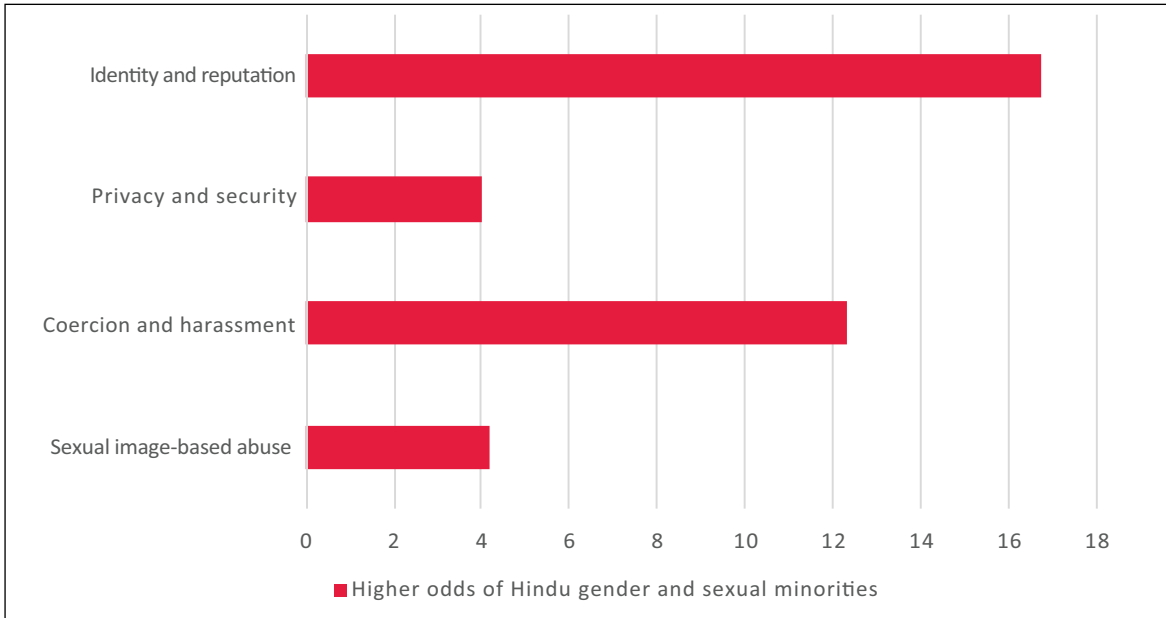
Despite being faced with significantly more online violence more frequently than others in India, relatively few persons belonging to gender and sexual minorities in the country rated different types of harm as extremely harmful. Around 20 percent fewer Indians belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority rated each category of behaviour as extremely harmful than did Indian men and women or than did gender and sexual minorities (see Figure 9). For individual behaviours

Figure 6: Personally Experienced Types of Online Harm, India



Data source: Ipsos, Supporting a Safer Internet Survey.

Figure 7: Odds of Hindu Gender and Sexual Minorities Experiencing Different Types of Online Harm Compared to Others with an Otherwise Similar Profile, India



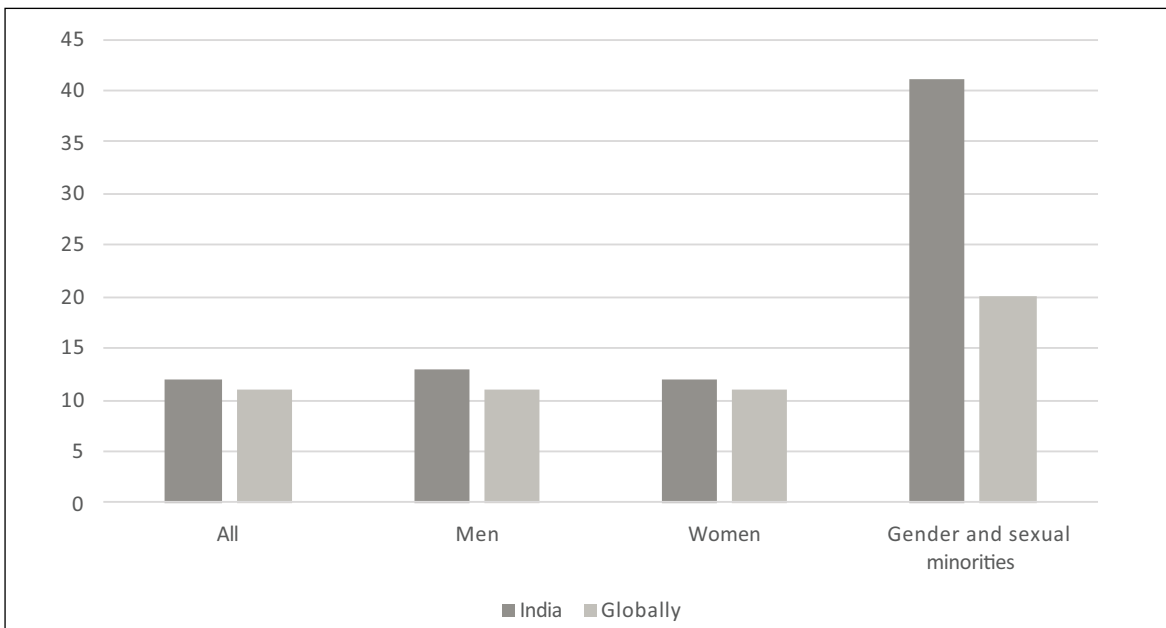
Data source: Ipsos, Supporting a Safer Internet Survey.

polled, the differences with Indian men and women range between 13 and 25 percent.

Moreover, people belonging to gender and sexual minorities in India did not report much difference (maximum three percent) in how they perceive

the harmfulness of the different categories of harm outlined as a whole. However, as compared to men and women in India, they were more likely to be concerned about specific behaviours in each of these categories. For example, only one out of

Figure 8: Faced Ongoing or Recurring Online Harm (on a Monthly Basis or More Frequently), India and Global



Data source: Ipsos, Supporting a Safer Internet Survey.

three persons belonging to a gender and/or sexual minority considered each of the identity- and reputation-based harms extremely harmful. The exception was online impersonation, which was judged extremely harmful by 46 percent. Other behaviours that were considered extremely harmful by relatively more people belonging to gender and sexual minorities were: someone accessing a device or social media account without permission (43 percent); being physically threatened online (47 percent); being blackmailed online (43 percent); and receiving unwanted sexual images (44 percent).

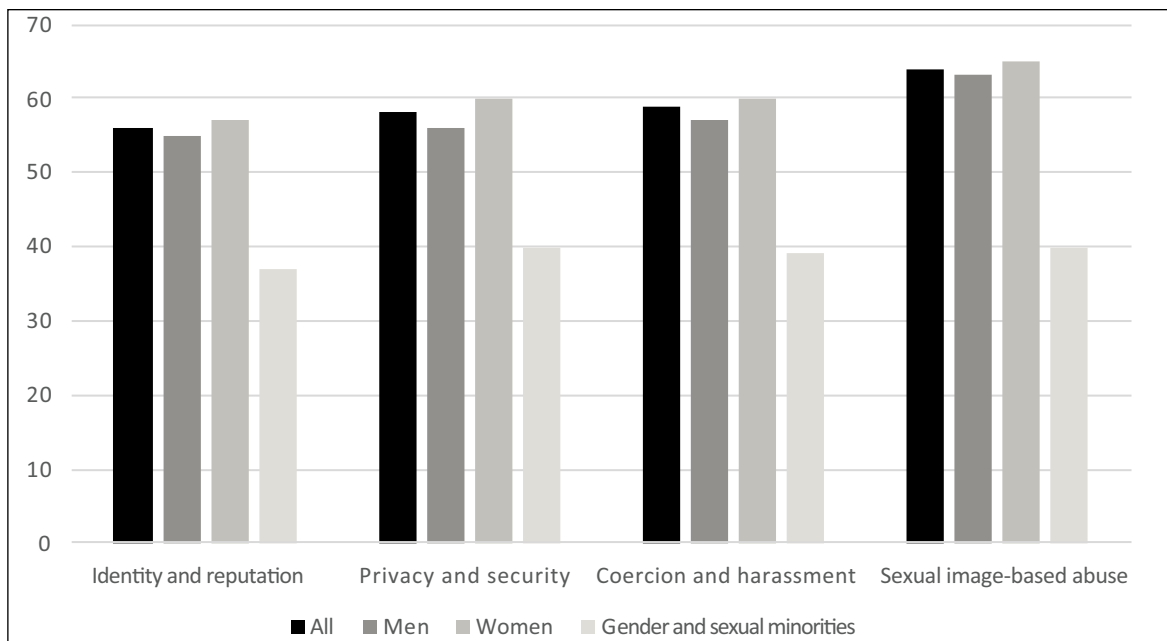
Finally, despite their considerable vulnerability to online violence, and contrary to global trends, persons belonging to gender and sexual minorities in India also reported having been impacted very negatively by this violence much less often than men and women for many dimensions of impact. There are only two exceptions: People belonging to gender and sexual minorities are even more likely than women to have experienced a very negative impact on their ability to engage freely online, although their sexual autonomy and freedom was less frequently affected than that of women. They also reported a very negative impact on their close relationships in greater numbers than men and women in the country do. The latter result once again illustrates the enormous cost

of transgressing social norms in India: such costs can include being further victimized by one's near and dear ones when faced with violence on account of that transgression. In contrast, the number of Indian men and women who had experienced a very negative impact on their close relationships were the lowest globally.

Overall, then, the survey data suggests that gender and sexual minorities in India may be extremely vulnerable to TFGBV, and significantly more so than men and women in the country. Yet, this specific vulnerability is underplayed even by these individuals themselves.

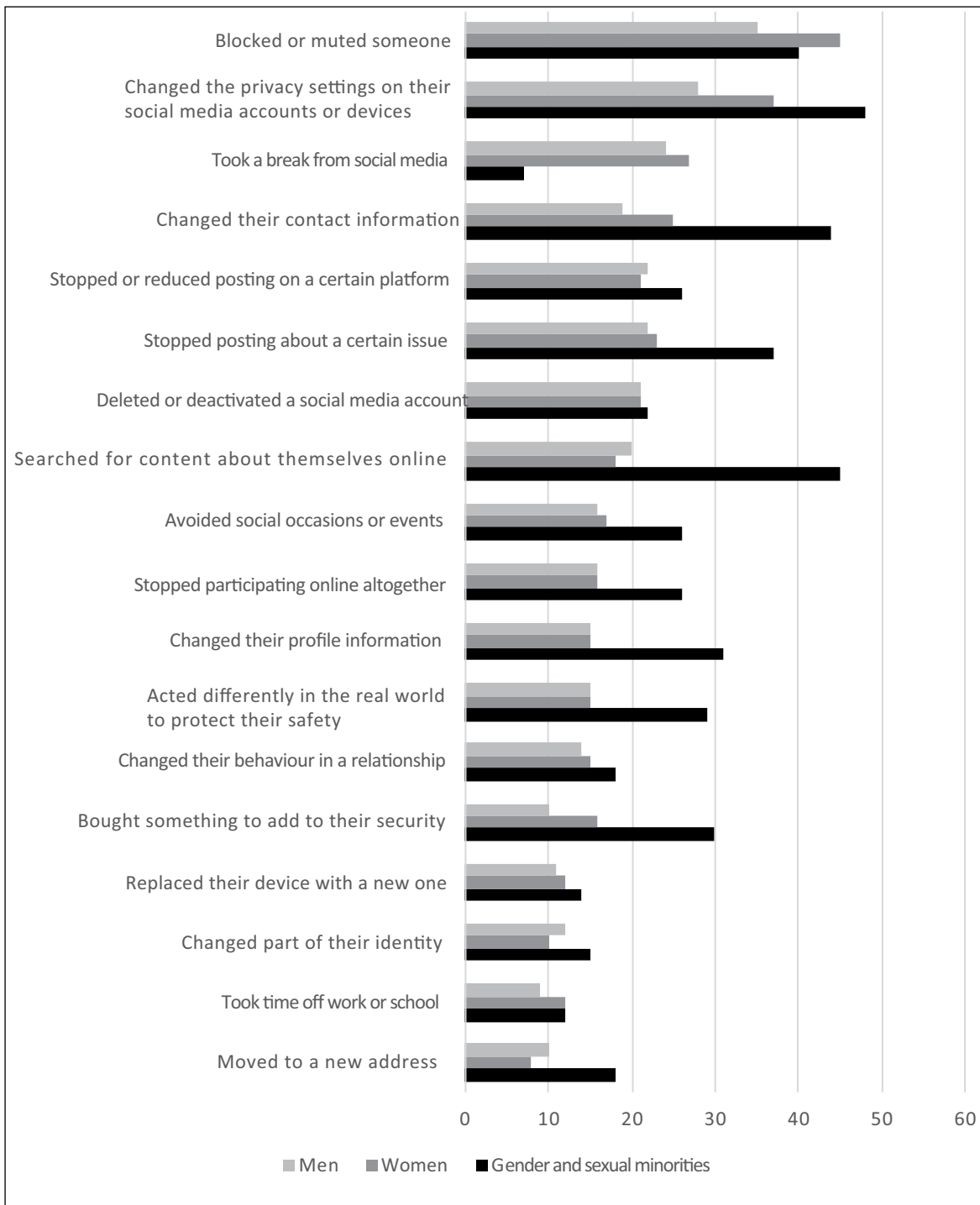
What this seems to indicate is a certain normalization of this violence against gender and sexual minorities in India, including by those affected. The low scores for impact among these groups could perhaps indicate a resilience developed as a consequence of having an identity that is considered non-normative, and the continuous challenges, even violence, that can come with that in a deeply conservative society. That their sexual autonomy and freedom in particular was less often impacted than that of women, and even of men, can perhaps be read as one confirmation of such resilience. Further qualitative research is needed to investigate this in greater depth. But resilience should not be confused

Figure 9: Consider Categories of Online Harm Extremely Harmful, India



Data source: Ipsos, Supporting a Safer Internet Survey.

Figure 10: Actions in Response to Incidents, India



Data source: Ipsos, Supporting a Safer Internet Survey.

with an absence of harm, or even of violence. In fact, going by the extent to which they are likely to adjust especially their offline behaviour, gender and sexual minorities in India clearly believe that they need to go to great lengths to keep themselves safe (see Figure 10). For example, following the violent incident(s), 26 percent of persons belonging to gender and sexual minorities avoided social occasions or events (compared to 16 percent of men and 17 percent of women), 29 percent acted differently in the real world to protect their safety (compared to 15 percent of men and women) and 18 percent even moved to a new address (compared to 10 percent of men and eight percent of women). Although gender and sexual minorities are much less likely to consider online violence as extremely harmful or to report a deep impact of such violence, they are, in other words, more likely to adjust their behaviour in myriad ways in response.

Forms of Online Violence

To more profoundly appreciate the ways in which a desire for patriarchal control over women's sexuality and concern for their reputation shapes OGBV in India, for both women and gender and sexual minorities, an in-depth analysis of two specific sets of harmful behaviours is instructive. The first set is that of forms of harm constituting unwanted and unapproved intrusions into personal space and violations of bodily integrity. The second set is harmful behaviours that specifically target someone's identity, in particular in terms of their gender and sexuality. While the first set affects both women and gender and sexual minorities in India, it is people belonging to gender and sexual minorities who are particularly targeted by the second set.

Violations of Personal Space and Bodily Integrity

Accessibility and Vulnerability

While overall figures might have thrown up few differences between men and women, some notable gender differences did emerge in a more fine-grained analysis of men's and women's perceptions and experiences of different forms of harm. Many of the most common forms

of harm in India were specifically targeted at explicitly and overtly violating the personal space and bodily integrity of women and people belonging to gender and sexual minorities.

Among the five behaviours considered most harmful in India, four consist of violations of personal space and bodily integrity. These are: having sexual images shared or posted online without permission (64 percent); receiving unwanted sexual images (63 percent); being physically threatened online (62 percent); and someone accessing your devices or social media accounts without permission (60 percent).

In statistical modelling, identifying as a woman did not emerge as a significant factor to explain the number of forms of harm a person might experience. But women in India were found to be somewhat more likely to have experienced coercion and harassment than men (see Figure 11). Statistical modelling confirmed that being female increased the odds of facing coercion and harassment in India by a factor of 1.45. Women did not face significantly higher odds than men of experiencing any of the other types of harm.

Moreover, the differences between men and women are significant only for one type of harm in the category of coercion and harassment: that of having been repeatedly contacted by someone against one's wishes. For both men and women, this was the form of harm they had experienced the most, but more than one-quarter of all women reported having experienced this as opposed to more than one-fifth of all men. Interestingly, being repeatedly contacted against one's wishes was also the only behaviour that both Indian men and women were more likely to consider as extremely harmful than do men and women globally.

In addition, while differences between Indian men and women in their perceptions of different behaviours as extremely harmful were again small to non-existent, there were two exceptions. Women in India were significantly more likely than men to consider having their personal contact information or address posted online without their permission as extremely harmful (54 percent versus 62 percent). They were also significantly more likely to see being physically threatened online in that way (59 percent versus 65 percent). These, too, consist of violations of personal space and bodily integrity, and perhaps indicate that it is when an online menace threatens to lead

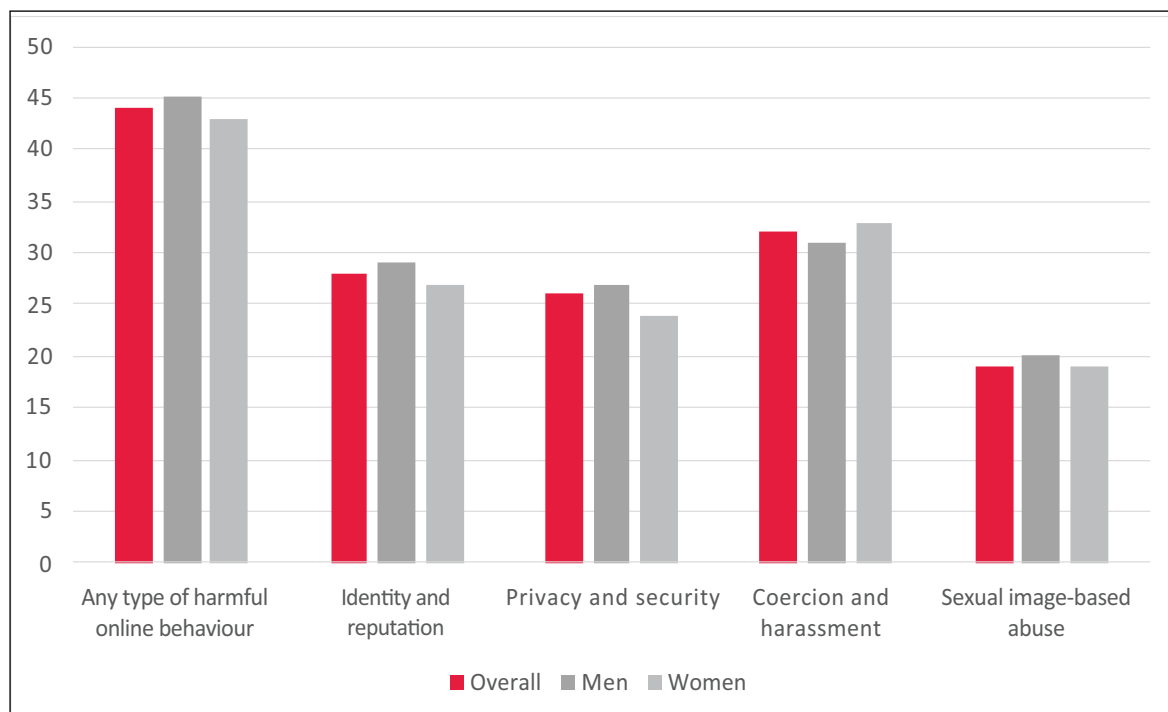
to physical contact, and possible physical harm, that the differences between men and women in the country are most pronounced. In many other countries, such significant differences exist for a much wider range of behaviours.

Why does it matter from a gender perspective that violations of personal space and bodily integrity in particular are considered so harmful? As noted, patriarchal control over women’s sexuality remains a crucial concern in many Indian communities. This has consequences also for their participation in the public sphere. Research has shown that in order to be considered “respectable,” and therefore deserving of protection against violence, in the public sphere, women in India need to prove that they really believe they belong in the private sphere even while out in public (Phadke, Khan and Ranade 2011; see also Patel 2010). By flagrantly invading a woman’s private sphere and even threatening her bodily integrity through any of these behaviours, a private woman is thus turned into a public one (that is, a prostitute) — even when there is no documentation of behaviour on her part that can “justify” such a representation, such as sexual images of her. These need not exist: in many conservative sections of society, privacy is a duty,

as much as or perhaps even more than a right for women (Allen and Mack 1990; Kovacs 2022), and so when a woman’s privacy is invaded, this is easily presented as an indication of a failure on her part, rather than a violation by the invader. Because she proved herself to be “accessible” to random men, she has clearly failed to protect her privacy as she should, and so does not deserve any protection or defence. The boundary violation, thus, constitutes the harm, with particular gendered consequences.

Some of the online behaviours that were considered extremely harmful by the largest number of people are, thankfully, the least likely to have been experienced in practice. For example, fewer than one out of 10 Indian men and women reported having had their personal nude or sexual images shared or shown online without their permission or being physically threatened online. These forms of harm were also among those least experienced by people belonging to gender and sexual minorities, although they were around three to four times more likely to have experienced them than other Indian respondents. Given the difficulties they have in establishing “respectability” in this framework, this should no longer come as a surprise. The message to

Figure 11: Faced Different Categories of Online Harm, India



Data source: Ipsos, Supporting a Safer Internet Survey.

all “good girls” is clear: losing the right to demand safety or protection is the price of rebellion.

A violation does not need to be considered extremely harmful in order to have this effect of turning a private woman into a public one, or at least into one whose respectability is now in doubt — albeit perhaps in less dramatic fashion. Consider the three types of harm most often experienced in India. According to the survey, men and women in India were most likely to have been repeatedly contacted by someone they did not want to be contacted by (23 percent), to have had someone accessing their devices or social media accounts without their permission (17 percent) or to have received unwanted sexual images (17 percent). Among gender and sexual minorities, almost half had experienced these forms of harm. Moreover, as noted earlier, being contacted repeatedly by someone against their wishes was experienced significantly more among women than men (26 percent versus 21 percent). In all of these cases, access against a person’s wishes is at the heart of the harm. The explicit transgression of the boundary itself constitutes the violation, as in doing so, the perpetrator lays a claim to the victim that is not theirs to make. In deeply conservative circles, as explained above, this has much more severe consequences for women and people belonging to gender and sexual minorities than for men, as they are automatically forced into a struggle to re-establish their credentials as “respectable.” Patriarchy profoundly shapes not only what constitutes harm, but also how it plays out for people of different genders and sexualities.

Whether or not such an intrusion is considered an act of violence depends, however, on who is engaging in it. Often under the guise of keeping women safe, the deep-seated beliefs around women’s sexual purity have also led to a widespread social acceptance of the surveillance of women — and of young women in particular (Kovacs 2017; Ranganathan 2017). This includes a widespread acceptance, even an assumption, of the surveillance of the devices of girls, young women and even wives — by brothers, fathers, husbands and even boyfriends — so much so that objecting to such surveillance is not even considered an option by many of those affected (Kovacs 2017; see also Udvardia and Grewal 2019). Such a normalization of surveillance is further facilitated by the fact that shared access to mobile phones is often gendered in India as well: it is mostly women and girls who

have to use others’ phones to go online (Barboni et al. 2018). Since the survey did not uncover pronounced gender differences when it comes to someone accessing people’s devices or social media accounts without their permission, this might — at least in part — be because boundary violations that receive social sanction are difficult to name as such.

The Conundrum of Sexual Violence

If respectability is centrally about control over women’s sexuality, some of the survey’s findings regarding sexual violence may come as a surprise. At 64 percent, relatively few Indian respondents rated the posting or sharing of someone’s sexual images without their permission as extremely harmful (see Figure 12) — in fact, only China scores lower. Globally, the number of people who find such behaviour extremely harmful is seven percent higher than in India; for women specifically, the difference is 13 percent.

In addition, the survey found that being sent unwanted sexual images is considered more or less equally as harmful in India as having your own images shared or posted (see Figure 12). In most countries, the latter is perceived as considerably more harmful. India is also the only country where the differences between men and women in the category of sexual violence are not statistically significant. Gender and sexual minorities in India rated sexual violence extremely harmful even less frequently than did Indian men and women — when it comes to having one’s sexual images shared or posted without consent, the percentage who rated this as extremely harmful was in fact lower by 27 percent. In addition, gender and sexual minorities in the survey rated this behaviour as extremely harmful (37 percent) in smaller numbers than they did receiving unwanted sexual images (44 percent) (see Figure 12).

In practice, as noted, the non-consensual sharing of sexual images is among the forms of harm that are actually the least likely to have been experienced in India, with fewer than one out of 10 men and women affected. For gender and sexual minorities, too, this type of harm was among those experienced least, although they were more than three times as likely to have gone through this as other Indians.

As for receiving unwanted sexual images, while, globally, this happens to women much more often than to men, in India the figures reported



Photo: Roshp/Shutterstock

for men and women are again similar. India's average for this type of harm is also the lowest among all countries; however, as compared to other forms of harm, it remains fairly common even then, with around one out of six men and women reporting having received unwanted sexual images. Among gender and sexual minorities, this type of harm was also among those most likely to have been experienced, with almost half reporting experiencing it.

Part of the reason why there are not greater gender differences in these figures may lie in the growing number of sextortion cases in India in which men are the victims (Chakraborty 2023; Tiwari and Shekhawat 2022). In such cases, cybercriminals try to exploit the taboos around sexuality in India for their own financial gain. Because of the connections between sexual purity, privacy and respectability, women in India may have reason to under-report sexual violence in particular.

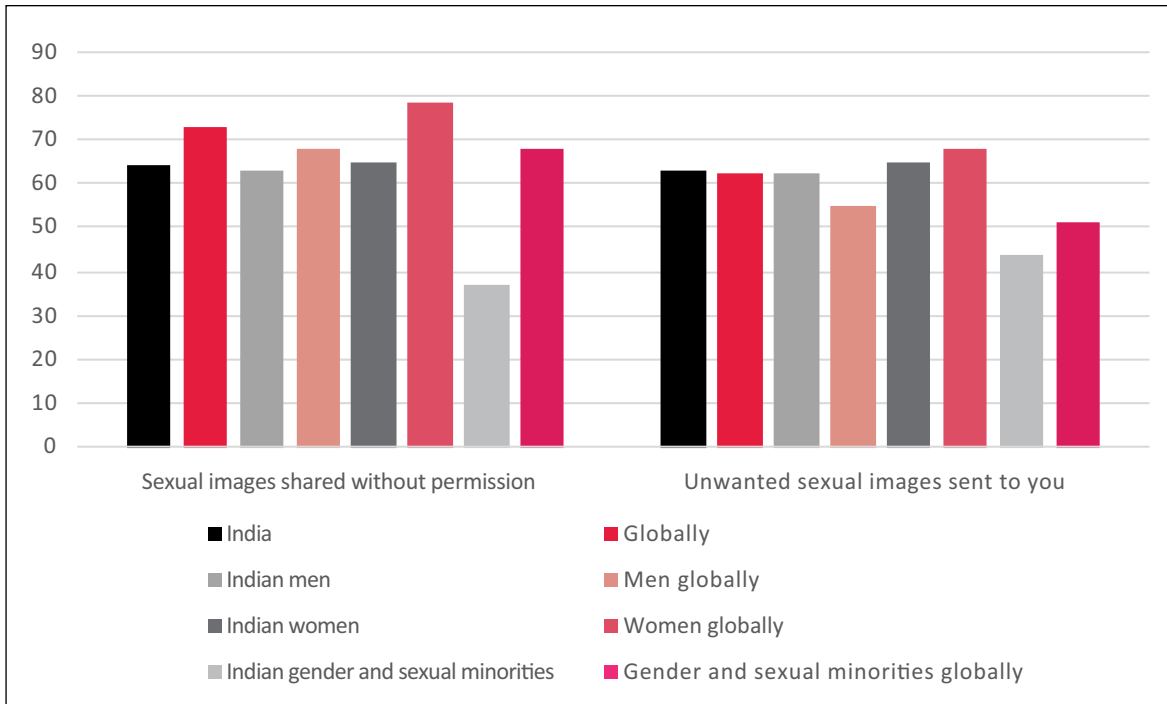
The many calls received from unknown young men who are looking for romance by dialling random numbers are often not welcomed (Udwadia and Grewal 2019). Yet, in a culture in which young men and women are still unlikely to meet in person without supervision and explicit parental approval, virtual encounters between young people sometimes do develop into a love story (Barry 2017; Philip 2018). Among many other benefits, women may not want to let go of the space for exploration of and even new opportunities for love and romance that digital technology affords them. At the same time, because women's sexual purity continues to be given so much weight in Indian culture, extensive damage ensues to a woman's reputation, as well as that of her family and even community, when digital violence publicly exposes that she is indeed a sexual being, and that her sexuality is not always under patriarchal control and restricted to the approved confines of the heterosexual marriage. Concern that they may form relationships with men outside of the confines of marriage and without the approval of their family remains one of the key concerns families have around mobile phone usage by young women in particular (Devika 2019; Kovacs 2017; Mishra and Basu 2014). Thus, while the survey's figures on the non-consensual sharing of sexual images may seem gender neutral, such images and their circulation continue to possess profound gendered significance.

Acutely aware of these challenges, women often curate their reputations online quite carefully in response. For example, research has shown how many young Muslim women often prudently post only pictures that emphasize their purity and chastity, rather than suggesting sexual assertiveness of any kind (Mishra and Basu 2014; see also Philip 2018; Shah 2015). Others do not post images of themselves at all (Sambasivan et al. 2019). But the possibility that such strategies will fail is always present, as perpetrators exploit the cultural significance of sexual images for their own purposes, no matter how much women try to manage their representation and reputations online. Thus, of Indian respondents in the survey, 15 percent flagged that they had been faced with gender-based violence on pornography websites — seven percent more than those who said that their nude or sexual images had been shared or posted without their permission (and double the global average). In one example from 2018, a studio in Kerala specializing in wedding photography was found to be morphing photos of brides and women guests at wedding functions to create pornography (Hariharan 2018). In some cases, names and contact details of the people in the photos are added (Bhandari and Kovacs 2021), increasing the harm exponentially.

In order to both retain access to potential opportunities that they value and limit possible damage to their own and their family's reputation, women have reason to downplay, wherever they can, how harmful they perceive the non-consensual sharing of sexual images to be, and even to under-report their actual experience of such violence (Udwadia and Grewal 2019). This may be especially true of active users and those with large followings, who are strongly represented in the survey's sample; when the cost of challenging existing norms and values is so high, denying or downplaying a threat that comes with new opportunities, and thus maintaining the respectability that is essential to have continued access to these opportunities, might seem to be the better option.

Strategic silence may not similarly aid people belonging to gender and sexual minorities, however. For those who "defy the boundaries defined by families and communities and are not merely content playing the roles assigned to them" (Phadke, Khan and Ranade 2011, 28-29), respectability is, by definition, out of reach. There

Figure 12: Consider Sexual Image-Based Abuse Extremely Harmful, India and Global



Data source: Ipsos, Supporting a Safer Internet Survey.

is, therefore, little value for them in displaying the same reservations about reporting actual experiences of the non-consensual sharing of sexual images as women have — in fact, it is the contrary. For these groups, safety can only ever be secured if the discourse shifts from a morality-focused one to a rights-based one. However, there is value for gender and sexual minorities in downplaying the harmfulness of the non-consensual sharing of sexual images, even if they are targeted by such behaviour in large numbers: if a person’s sexual images are believed to be such a powerful weapon when they fall in the hands of others, especially when they document a sexuality that is not normative, refusing to acknowledge that power is one way of neutralizing, or at least questioning, it, and perhaps even taking it back. In fact, for all those who want to protest patriarchal control over sexuality, this may be a valued strategy.

Moreover, that not only gender and sexual minorities but also women report receiving unwanted sexual images in much larger numbers than they report having had their own sexual images shared without consent may point to another way in which both groups are resisting

socially conservative discourses that accord respectability only to women who performatively maintain their privacy. As it is not their own sexuality that is exposed in such cases, the risks of protesting this behaviour are somewhat lower, and thus there is somewhat more space here to openly object to the violation of their rights. That a relatively large number of people belonging to gender and sexual minorities assessed receiving unwanted sexual images as extremely harmful needs to be understood in the same light: their concern is perhaps not related to Indian society’s moral views on nudity and sexuality, but the flagrant violation of their personal space that being sent such unwanted images entails.

Despite such protests, the hold of these socially conservative discourses continues to be considerable, allowing men who engage in this and other behaviours that violate personal space and bodily integrity to portray these violations as anything from playful pranks to justified tests or interventions. The mere fact that such behaviour has been possible is used to justify it and to swiftly shift blame onto

the victim. Those who have become victims are almost invariably on the back foot.

Although country-specific figures are not available, it deserves mention that globally the non-consensual sharing of sexual images is reported to have among the most profound and multi-faceted impacts on victims of all violent behaviours considered in this survey. In the Indian context, victims thus find themselves in a particularly fraught place, which any remedial action will need to acknowledge and take into account.

Identity Matters

A second set of harmful behaviours that deserves a more in-depth discussion consists of those forms of harm that touch directly on someone's identity.

Identities, Gender and Violence

Research has shown that India's caste, ethnic and religious divisions are often reflected in the shape that verbal online abuse in particular takes in the country, with Islamophobia being particularly rampant (Amnesty International India 2020; Banaji and Bhat 2019; Shanmugavelan 2021; Soundararajan et al. 2019). Yet when it comes to being called discriminatory names or derogatory cultural terms or to online harassment because of gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, gender expression and other identity aspects, the number of Indian respondents who considered these behaviours extremely harmful is below the global average. Only slightly more than half of Indian men and women thought these are extremely harmful, and only one-third of those belonging to gender and sexual minorities do so. Moreover, unlike in most other countries, differences between men and women in India are small to non-existent.

While perceptions of the harmfulness of different forms of identity-focused harm might be relatively low, some Indians are, however, extremely vulnerable to such violence. In particular, people belonging to gender and sexual minorities are four to five times as likely as men and women in India to have experienced identity-based forms of harm. In fact, among gender and sexual minorities, being called discriminatory names or culturally derogatory terms (60 percent) and being harassed because of identity markers such as their gender or sexuality (54 percent) were the most commonly experienced types of harm.

In general, those Indians who experienced violence were more likely to be targeted for aspects of their identity than the global average, with India having among the highest scores for all identity categories surveyed except race and ethnicity. Gender was particularly prominent. As Figure 13 illustrates, more than half of Indian women and almost half of people belonging to gender and sexual minorities reported being targeted because of their gender identity — around twice as many as men.

The number of people belonging to gender and sexual minorities who reported being targeted on the basis of their gender expression or sexual orientation is only slightly fewer, and more than double the number of women who did so. Still, almost one out of five women reported being targeted because of their gender expression as well — significantly more than men (see Figure 13). India's average figures for both gender expression and sexual orientation are among the highest of all countries surveyed.

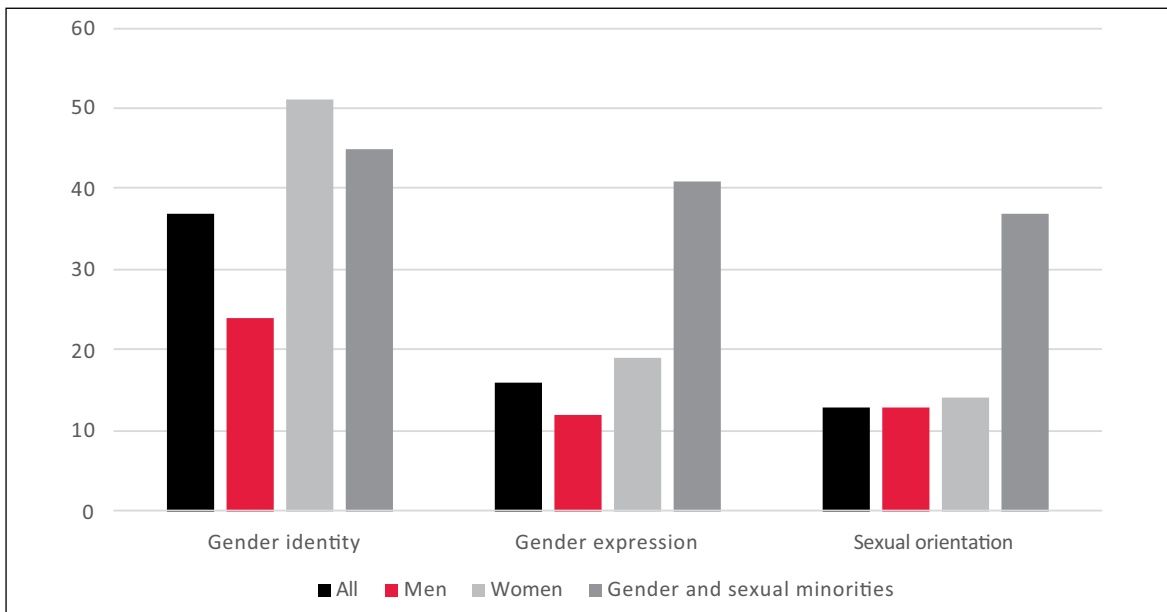
Other identity categories can be of relevance also. For women, in particular, age is an important factor: 29 percent reported it was a reason for being targeted, significantly more than men or people belonging to gender and sexual minorities. In contrast, around one in four men as well as people belonging to gender and sexual minorities reported being targeted based on their race or ethnicity, more than double what women reported. Men and gender and sexual minorities were also more likely than women to report being targeted on the basis of their religion or occupation (around one in five). Violence targeted at a disability was reported by 11 percent of people belonging to gender and sexual minorities, again more than men and women.

The Price of Departing from the Norm

The above confirms that the social policing and disciplining of gender and sexual identities online is a particularly pronounced trend in India. Where gender and sexual minorities are concerned, such policing is not limited to their gender and sexual identity, however. With the exception of age and gender identity, they were more likely than men and women to be targeted based on any aspect of their identity.

In fact, the survey found that people belonging to gender and sexual minorities are four to five times as likely as men and women in India to have experienced identity-based forms of harm.

Figure 13: Targeted Because of Gender Identity, Expression or Sexual Orientation, India



Data source: Ipsos, Supporting a Safer Internet Survey.

Moreover, among gender and sexual minorities, being called discriminatory names or culturally derogatory terms (60 percent) and being harassed because of identity markers such as their gender or sexuality (54 percent) were the most commonly experienced types of harm.

The survey also found that gender and sexual minorities in India are almost four and a half times more likely than other Indians to have experienced networked harassment (44 percent). Globally, networked harassment is among the types of harm that is most likely to target one or more aspects of the victim's identity. In India, such harassment, and the infrastructure that supports it, has a relatively long and documented history, especially as it has been perpetuated by adherents of a Hindu right-wing ideology that fuses identity categories and political beliefs in its particular brand of violence (Banaji and Bhat 2019; Chaturvedi 2016; Di Meco 2023; Udupa 2015). Only slightly more than one-third of people belonging to Indian gender and sexual minorities consider networked harassment extremely harmful — about one-quarter fewer than gender and sexual minorities globally. Global figures indicate that its impact is actually quite severe, however: although country-specific data is not available, networked harassment was among

those types of harm that were reported to have the greatest impact on victims' lives globally.

While there have been many positive legal changes for gender and sexual minorities in India over the past decade,³ these findings indicate that socially, gender and sexual minorities continue to suffer from a heightened vulnerability to online violence specifically on account of their identity. Not only are they affected to a much greater extent by OGBV than other Indians, the extent to which they are subject to identity-based harms indicates that their non-normative sexual and/or gender identity remains a key focus of targeted hate and a key driver of such violence. The price they pay for simply being themselves online remains very high and makes them vulnerable along multiple axes. Moreover, if gender and sexual minorities themselves consider violence in which identity plays a key role of relatively less concern, this again

³ For example, in 2014, the Supreme Court of India upheld the right of all persons to self-identify their gender while also legally recognizing the category of "third gender" and affirming that all fundamental rights granted under India's Constitution will be equally applicable to transgender/third gender persons as well, *National Legal Services Authority v Union of India & Others*, AIR 2014 SC 1863. In 2018, the same court decriminalized consensual "carnal intercourse against the order of nature," *Navtej Singh Johar & Others v Union of India*, Writ Petition (Criminal) No. 76 of 2016.

raises questions about the normalization of such violence, which deserves further investigation.

Platforms and Perpetrators

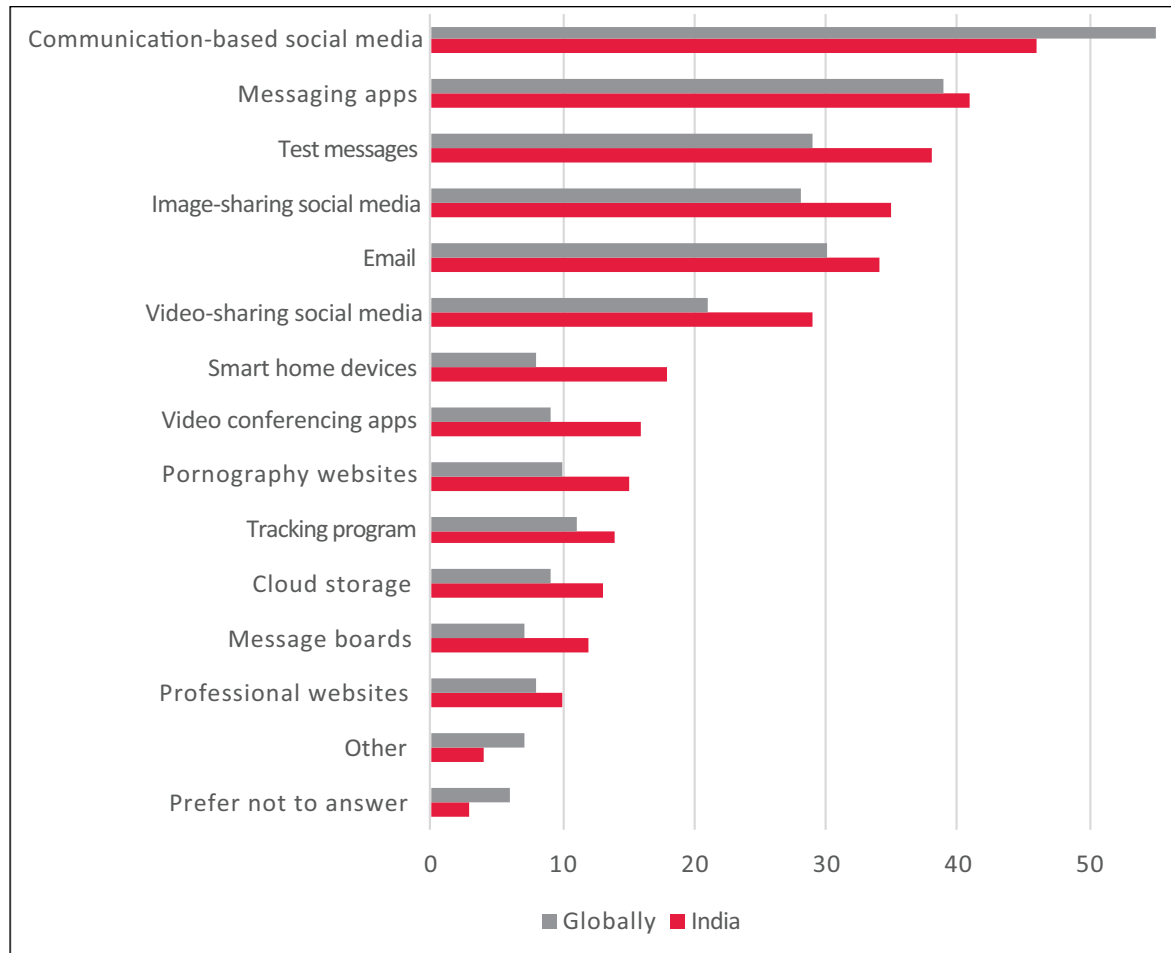
An examination of the platforms used in TFV in India and of the profile of the perpetrators further confirms the extent to which a patriarchal culture of social discipline and control both drives and shapes TFGBV in India. In what follows, each of these will be addressed one by one.

Platforms Used

When it comes to the platforms used in incidents of online harm, India stands out because rather than one or two platforms dominating, perpetrators in India use a wide range of means to perpetuate online violence (see Figure 14).

As in many other countries, almost three-quarters of those who have faced online violence in India were targeted through social media or message boards. Almost half faced violence on communication platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (now X) (considerably less than the global average), while around one in three have faced violence on image-based platforms such as Instagram and YouTube (considerably higher than the global average). Since the non-consensual sharing of sexual images does not occur that often, the common use of image-sharing platforms to

Figure 14: Platforms on Which Incidents of Harm Took Place, India and Global



Data source: Ipsos, Supporting a Safer Internet Survey.

perpetuate violence reminds us that sexual images are not the only ones that can be used to harass. By taking it out of context, any image in which a person is identifiable can be used in potentially damaging ways (Sambasivan et al. 2019).

In addition, more than two-thirds of all respondents in India have been directly targeted. Two out of five have faced violence on messaging apps such as WhatsApp, but remarkably, an almost equal number — much higher than in most other countries — has experienced violence through text messages, and only slightly fewer have been faced with such violence via email. If, in the name of keeping them safe, families at times only allow women to use communication channels that focus on pre-existing networks of contacts, such as WhatsApp, rather than those that seem to open up the whole world, such as Facebook (Kovacs 2017), those strategies have clearly failed. In fact, the particular platforms used, in these cases, only contribute to the experience of a violation of personal, even intimate, space.

Moreover, India also stands out because it scores relatively high for less commonly considered, newer technologies such as tracking programs (14 percent), video conferencing apps (16 percent) and smart home devices such as cameras and home security systems (18 percent). In other words, not only can perpetrators frequently be identified, they also increasingly target victims using communication channels that require them to have access to at least some of the victim's personal information, devices and even spaces.

Part of this somewhat uncommon pattern can likely be ascribed to the fact that, as will be explained in the following sub-section, perpetrators are as likely to be identifiable and known as they are to be anonymous: where perpetrators and victims are so frequently known to each other, this can exponentially expand the range of possible platforms and opportunities through which control, discipline and violence can be perpetrated, without much additional effort on the part of the perpetrator. For example, a young man might search his sister's phone and share the numbers of her girlfriends with his own friends. Or when a teacher needs to collect students' phone numbers in class, the boy in charge of doing so might share a photo of the list with his friends. Strangers acquire numbers through online forms, such as job applications or college admission forms (Udwadia and Grewal 2019). In

2017, reports indicated that young girls' mobile phone numbers in the state of Uttar Pradesh were sold for rates ranging from Rs. 50 for an "ordinary-looking" girl and up to Rs. 500 for a "beautiful" girl (Poonam 2017). In all these cases, it is obvious that the violation lies in the access sought itself.

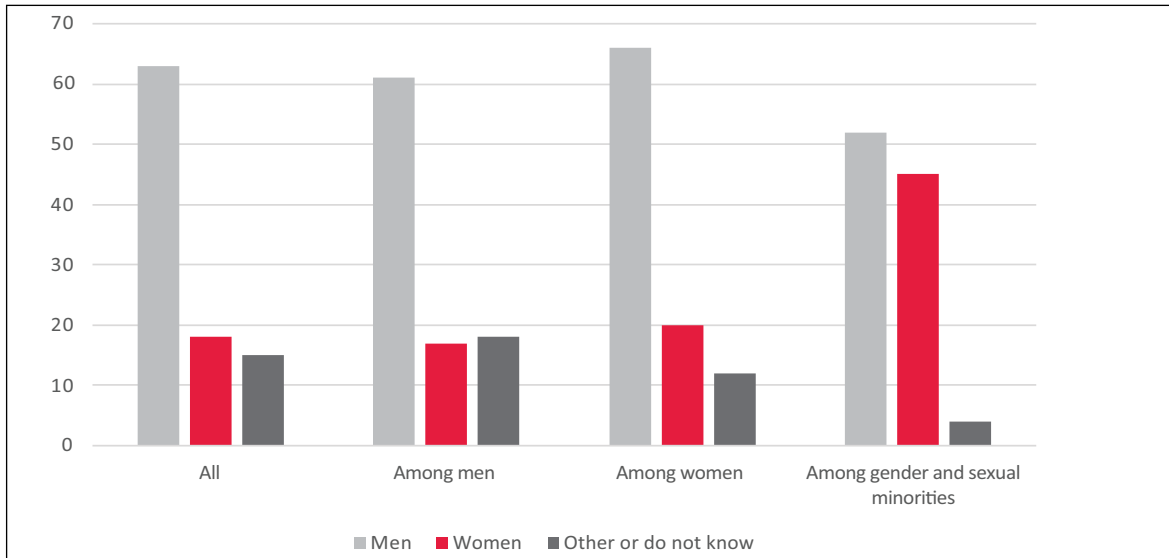
Perpetrators' Profile

Finally, the extent to which OGBV in India needs to be understood in the context of widespread social control and discipline is further confirmed by an examination of the perpetrators' profile. Again, contrary to global trends, both men and women in India are far more likely to be targeted by men than by women: 61 percent of men and 66 percent of women reported that the perpetrator was male, while only 17 percent of men and 20 percent of women identified the perpetrator as female (see Figure 15). In no other country are the perpetrators identified as men, or are men targeted by other men, so often. In addition, victims in India are the least likely globally not to know the gender of the perpetrator or to identify the gender as one that does not fall into the gender binary.

Where gender and sexual minorities are concerned, however, the picture is once again somewhat different: they are targeted almost equally by men (52 percent) and women (45 percent) (see Figure 15). This contrasts with the global situation, where gender and sexual minorities are far more likely to be targeted by men and where in almost one-quarter of cases, the gender of the perpetrators either does not fit the gender binary or is unknown.

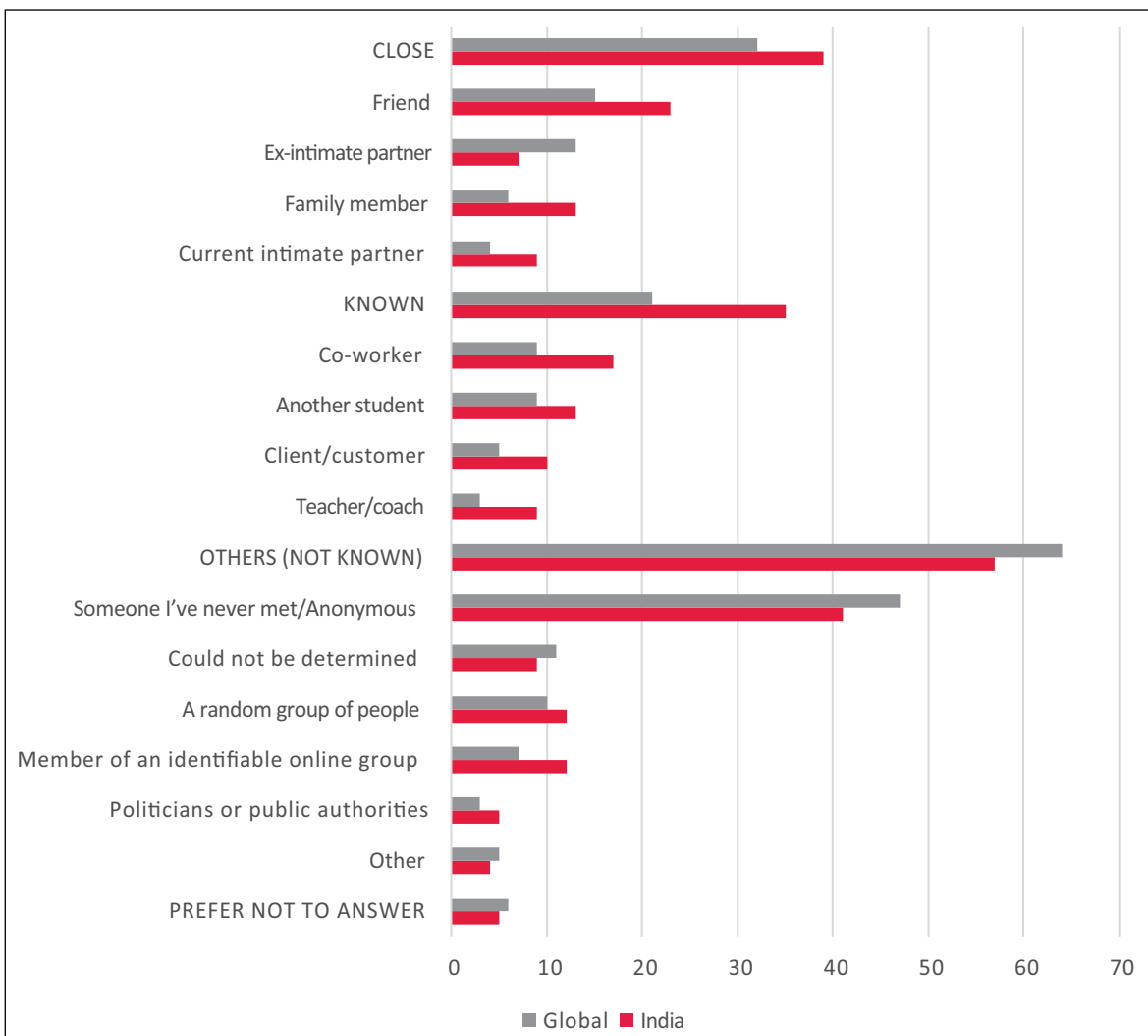
In addition, while in the fight against TFGBV, anonymity is often depicted as the big scourge (see, for example, Ajaykumar 2022; NORC and ICRW 2022), the reality is more nuanced in India. Perpetrators are among the least likely globally to include someone the victim has never met or who is anonymous (41 percent), or to be someone whose identity could not be determined (nine percent). In fact, contrary to public perception, almost as high as the former figure is the number of instances where the perpetrators include people close to the victim (39 percent): friends, current intimate partners and even family members (see Figure 16). No other country rivals India's scores in the latter two categories. Only ex-intimate partners are least likely in India to be among the perpetrators — at least not that victims are aware of or are willing to report. Globally, India is also the country in which perpetrators are most likely to include

Figure 15: Gender of the Person Inflicting Harm, India



Data source: Ipsos, Supporting a Safer Internet Survey.

Figure 16: Relation of the Perpetrator to the Victim, India and Global



Data source: Ipsos, Supporting a Safer Internet Survey.

people known to the victim in a less intimate manner (35 percent), such as coworkers, clients or customers, and even teachers or coaches. When it comes to fellow students, India ranks second. Furthermore, India scores highest when it comes to perpetrators who are not known to the victim but who can nevertheless be identified, such as members of an identified online group or public authorities or politicians (see Figure 16). Finally, India also stands out in that incidents of online harmful behaviour are more likely than in any other country to involve several types of perpetrators.

These findings are significant, because control over and the disciplining of others has always been at the heart of the reproduction of systems of inequality along caste, religious, ethnic and other lines, and the intersectional gender divides they are accompanied by — and this remains true today (Kaur 2010; Kovacs 2017). Within such systems, the perpetuation of violence is as much a symbol of power as it is a means to exert it. TFGBV in India needs to be understood in this context. That most perpetrators of such violence are men, and that they often are men who can be identified, or are even known or close to the victim, confirms the continued and widespread acceptance of social surveillance, control and disciplining. That gender and sexual minorities are almost equally likely to be targeted by women as by men does not contradict this. On the contrary, it confirms that, whatever the gender or sexual identity of the victim, those who are perceived not to fit the norm frequently are disciplined by those who believe they are able to set or enforce the dominant standard.

This context also makes intelligible why there are so often several types of perpetrators in incidents of digital violence in India: where social control and disciplining have such social currency that even public figures openly engage in it, the barriers to jumping on the bandwagon of abuse are arguably even lower than elsewhere. Simultaneously, identifying violence as violence becomes increasingly difficult for victims.

Conclusion and Recommendations: Moving toward Effective Responses

This paper highlights how a deeply patriarchal culture of social control and discipline shapes not only TFV in India, but also the extent to and the ways in which women as well as gender and sexual minorities will speak up about or respond to it.

In the survey data, while differences between men and women overall were surprisingly small, violations of their personal space and bodily integrity did stand out, however, as carrying particular weight for women. This is in line with conservative social norms that remain dominant in India and that seek to keep women's sexuality under tight patriarchal control. Moreover, there is considerable social sanction to police and discipline those whose behaviour does not adhere to these norms, including online. In their attempts to maximize their participation in digital spaces, many women, therefore, seem to “bargain with patriarchy” (Kandiyoti 1988) by carefully curating their presence there — for example, by restricting their use of digital technologies to the daytime or by prudently choosing which pictures to post. But because, in this context, women are particularly impacted by violence that constitutes a violation of their personal space and bodily integrity, speaking out about such violence when it nevertheless occurs, then, becomes difficult, especially where it concerns sexual violence. Such violations appear a rough test of the respectability many women are consciously trying to establish and maintain while participating in digital spaces — a test, moreover, that appears to increase in intensity and social acceptability the more “transgressive” of social norms women's behaviour appears. And when they have “failed” that test — for example, when they have engaged in conversation with a man without their family's knowledge — it is women themselves who are frequently blamed if violence ensues. As it may affect everything from their internet access and use, to their reputation and that of their family, to their very right to ask for safety and protection, the cost of reporting violence, even to those close to them, may therefore simply be too high, despite the profound impact such violence can have on women.



Photo: Rawpixel.com/Shutterstock

While many families restrict women to communication channels that largely rely on pre-existing networks, such as WhatsApp, in the hope that this will keep them safe, the survey found, moreover, that this strategy is simply not effective. Again, pointing to the social sanction that moral policing and disciplining enjoy in India, perpetrators are not only frequently identifiable, they are also often known to the victim, and in attacking women's respectability, they actively use a wide range of platforms, including direct modes of communication.

While differences between men and women were often small, differences with gender and sexual minorities were, in contrast, quite stark. Perhaps this need not be surprising: because their identities are per definition non-normative, they are particularly vulnerable in a deeply patriarchal and heteronormative context. This is evident from the very high levels of digital violence that they face, which included violations of personal space and bodily integrity. In addition, gender and sexual minorities suffered disproportionately from harms that targeted their identity — not only their sexual or gender identity, but all aspects of their identity. It is as if their obvious transgression of one set of social norms somehow is understood to make violence against all aspects of their existence permissible.

Yet gender and sexual minorities' extreme vulnerability to TFV is not acknowledged in

India, not even by these individuals themselves. Rather, people belonging to these groups seem to downplay both the harmfulness of this violence and its impact, or even whether such violence is a big problem — all while adjusting their online and offline behaviour in myriad ways in response. This may be ascribed, at least in part, to a certain resilience they may have developed as a result of having a non-normative identity, and, thus, to their agency. Moreover, in a deeply patriarchal society, reframing the significance and impact of sexual violence, in particular, can be a powerful way to question existing social norms (Menon 2004). But, perhaps an indicator of the tremendous weight these social norms still carry, this also seems to indicate a certain, and rather troubling, normalization of such violence against anyone who transgresses these norms. Seeing the high levels of violence that these groups face, TFV against gender and sexual minorities in India specifically certainly deserves and requires far greater attention than it currently receives.

How to move forward in such a context? It is clear that any response to TFGBV in India can only be effective, and truly rights-respecting, if it acknowledges the extent to which current social norms are, in fact, part of the problem. Thus, the analysis in this paper indicates that it is essential, in awareness raising and the formulation of responses, to abstain not only from a discourse focused on protection and safety, but also from alarming language that implies the internet is an

unsafe place for all women at all times. Instead, it is crucial to use a rights-affirming approach in all aspects of the fight against violence, including in the ways rights are articulated and defended. The right of women and gender and sexual minorities to fully and actively participate in digital India should be the starting point, not the patriarchal impulse to keep women and their sexuality under tight control.

Many studies have outlined a range of recommendations on how to combat TFGBV (Dunn, Vaillancourt and Brittain 2023; NORC and ICRW 2022; Soundararajan et al. 2019). The survey's findings suggest that one crucial aspect of such solutions may, then, be to expand the space for non-governmental organizations (NGOs), helplines and other civil society initiatives that already use an intersectional, feminist, survivor-centric, rights-based approach that challenges social norms in contextually sensitive ways.

The survey indicates that when it comes to people and organizations an individual can reach out to for help, the police was believed to be most effective in India, followed by laws and helplines. Faith in the effectiveness of these resources was in fact more than 20 percent higher than the global average. In addition, one in three respondents in India believed that the police should have a leading role in combatting OGBV, again one of the highest rates in the world.

This optimism about the police's potential stands, however, in stark contrast to the actual experiences of those who have faced abuse. Almost one in five reached out to the police when faced with online violence, the highest figure globally. But of those, only about one in three thought the support they received had been effective. The police and lawyers were, in fact, considered the least effective among all people and organizations reached out to.

Earlier research has questioned the capacity of the law enforcement system to support victims of TFGBV in India. Rather than a rights-based approach, the police frequently adopt a moralistic stance or even blame those targeted by violence, further stigmatizing them and perhaps even bringing further disrepute. These challenges are even more pronounced for those belonging to gender and sexual minorities (Devika 2019; Kovacs, Kaul Padte and SV 2013; Sambasivan et al. 2019). Moreover, although not consistently, the law itself often takes protectionist and moralistic stances on matters relating to gender-based violence,

including digital violence (Datta et al. 2017; Devika 2019; Kaul Padte and Kovacs, 2013). The police often neglect to take action, frequently because they do not perceive the case to be serious enough (Devika 2019; Kovacs, Kaul Padte and SV 2013; Sambasivan et al. 2019; Udwadia and Grewal 2019).

In contrast, the support people found most effective (and significantly more so than the global average) was that from those the victim is close to. The survey found that the support provided by friends and family — who, at 39 percent and 28 percent, respectively, were those most commonly confided in in India — was judged very effective by almost three in five. Few Indian respondents — only 13 percent, fewer than those who had gone to the police or done nothing — reached out to their partner or spouse, but more than three in five who did so rated this support as very effective.

Previous research has highlighted that such trusted relations are valued because they provide confidentiality and emotional support as well as technical advice on how to resolve or avoid abuse. In addition to friends, younger male family members, too, have been found to at times emerge as important sources of support in cases of digital gender-based violence (Sambasivan et al. 2019). In a climate of social control and discipline, having a trusted person one is close to and who one can count on to understand, rather than judge, is of tremendous value.

In between these two extremes are located a range of civil society initiatives. Of all countries investigated, India had the highest number of people who consider OGBV organizations and civil society organizations (CSOs) and NGOs to be effective, around two in three. Only seven percent of those faced with violence in practice reached out to a victim support organization and eight percent to a CSO or an NGO, but around half of those who did rated the support as very effective. This is second only to the satisfaction rates of those who reached out to family and friends, and around 15 percent higher than the satisfaction rates for the police, platforms, lawyers, or even schools and universities.

Earlier research has found that victims of violence appreciated the confidentiality that such organizations provided, and their non-judgmental approach, as well as their vast experience in dealing with cases of TFV. Marginalized communities especially valued these organizations

for their expertise in navigating the legal system (Sambasivan et al. 2019). In other words, such organizations already play a key role as a bridge between users, on the one hand, and police, law makers and platforms, on the other.

This role played by CSOs and NGOs could be further built and expanded on. On the one hand, this requires that users can more easily find out, depending on the kind of support they require, which organization(s) to reach out to. At present, discoverability is often a problem (ibid.). On the other hand, the potential of such organizations as a key knowledge resource for the police and law makers could be more fully harnessed through collaborations aimed at structural change.

For example, although a Cybercrime Prevention against Women and Children Scheme⁴ that includes capacity building of police officers is already in place, CSOs and NGOs, including helplines and OGBV organizations, could work more closely with law enforcement to ensure a rights-based approach to TFGBV is at the heart of all trainings and other relevant efforts. Seeing that the police's limited technical knowledge often remains a sore point (ibid.), they could further work with law enforcement to develop appropriate standard operating procedures for those threats that the survey found users are most likely to look for help with: when their sexual images have been shared without their permission, for example, or when they are faced with networked harassment, blackmail and physical threats. Although social norms may dictate that the victim's behaviour is put under the scanner, civil society initiatives could ensure that throughout these interventions the focus remains squarely on the actions of the perpetrator(s), while victims are met with care and consideration.

Such an expanded role for CSOs and NGOs, including helplines and OGBV organizations, can only be effective, however, if they are recognized as key actors and resources in the ecosystem to combat TFGBV, in particular by government, law enforcement and platforms. It is also crucial that they receive all the financial and other support they need to fulfill this expanded role properly. To make significant progress on combatting TFGBV in India, a range of agencies and actors will need

to work in close collaboration to ensure that a culturally rooted rights-based approach is adopted, rather than one favouring morality. As key actors themselves, government, law enforcement and platforms need to buy into the idea of a shared responsibility not only in words, but in deeds.

Finally, it deserves repeating that it is also essential that the civil society initiatives involved in these efforts are anchored in feminist, intersectional, rights-based approaches to and understandings of gender and sexuality. If this is not the case, the belief systems that make gender and sexual minorities and women who defy the social norms regarding women's sexual purity particularly vulnerable to violence will only be further entrenched — and this time in the name of combatting violence. Globally, the survey finds, people belonging to gender and sexual minorities are less likely to rate the structural or public responses as effective. Research in India has confirmed this (Sinha Roy and Ball 2022). If efforts to combat TFGBV in India are to be successful, a feminist, intersectional, rights-based approach will necessarily need to be at the heart of any solution.

4 See www.mha.gov.in/en/division_of_mha/cyber-and-information-security-cis-division/Details-about-CCPWC-CybercrimePrevention-against-Women-and-Children-Scheme.

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