

CanWaCH GEWG Complex Issues - Brief #5

Digital Technology: A Double-Edged Sword in Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence

What is a Complex Issue?

Complex issues have multiple and interconnected parts for which a quick fix is not possible. Instead, complex problem solving requires innovation, and multiple, sometimes competing, perspectives that considers the impact of the solution on the surrounding environment and individuals.

Defining Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence

For the first time, the United Nations has dedicated a major global women's rights conference on the intersections between technology and women's rights. In March 2023, the [Commission on the Status of Women 67](#) (CSW67) focused on digital innovation and technology, with the priority themes highlighting innovation and technological change and education in the digital age as the primary areas for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. Over the past few years, digital technology has advanced at unprecedented speed and scope. COVID-19 has further accelerated this growth, strengthened our reliance on digital tools, and today, the world has completely moved into the digital space. However, not everyone is able to equally participate in our increasingly digital societies. There is a persistent global [gender digital divide](#) that is deeply connected to poverty, and that excludes underserved communities from the benefits digital technology can bring.

While digital technology has become a game changer to advance gender equality by expanding access to sexual and reproductive health information, building support networks and tools for survivors of gender-based violence (GBV), and providing a space to advocate for sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), there are also negatives that have detrimental setbacks for advancing gender equality. Digital spaces mirror the systemic divides that exist in the physical world and create new ways for women, girls and gender-diverse people to be isolated, exploited, abused, harassed, silenced and excluded. As a result, digital technology is a double-edged sword that can help prevent and respond to GBV but can also facilitate it in both physical and virtual spaces.

[Technology-facilitated gender-based violence](#) (TFGBV) is any act that is committed, assisted, aggravated or amplified by the use of information communication technologies or other digital tools likely to cause physical, sexual, psychological, social, political, or economic harm or other infringement of rights. While TFGBV simplifies well-known abusive behaviours, such as stalking and child luring via



convenient tools for abusers to access their targets, it also opens to new forms of abuse that require technology, including the non-consensual creation of sexual images through artificial intelligence (AI). Women, girls, LGBTQI+ and BIPOC individuals are at high risk of TFGBV. For example, [women are 27 times more likely](#) to become victims of TFGBV, especially women journalists, politicians and human rights defenders. Further, some are at even higher risks due to the additional discrimination and barriers they face, including women with disabilities, Indigenous women, racialized women and women who are homeless or underhoused.

Why is Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence a Complex Issue?

Scale and speed of TFGBV: TFGBV can happen across geographical and legislative locations with abusers being able to access their victims even when they are not in close physical proximity and target people in different cities or countries. Abuse can occur immediately because of how easy it is to access the internet and communicate with potential victims. It can also sometimes be impossible for survivors to escape TFGBV (e.g., if the violence is occurring on social media platforms accessible on the target's phone or computer, or if the abuser has remote access to her devices). Digital content can also easily be copied and, even if the original source of the information is deleted, copies may have been downloaded and can be redistributed, leaving the survivor at perpetual risk of future abuse.

Anonymity: In the digital world, there is a freedom from accountability that stems from anonymity and pseudonymity.

Silencing effect: TFGBV silences the voices of women online, causing them to self-censor, and reduce their participation in digital spaces. It also discourages women from taking up leadership roles, thereby reducing online content related to equality and human rights. While TFGBV has an impact on individual women who experience/have experienced TFGBV, there is also a systems-level impact that affects women's digital inclusion and access to digital tools and platforms.

Normalization of TFGBV: The digital world is often expected to be unsafe and there is this expectation that we need to just accept it or that there is nothing that can be done to change it. In addition, while research has repeatedly demonstrated the severe effects that TFGBV can have on the lives of those impacted by it, there is a widespread belief that experiencing online abuse and harassment is not as serious as physical altercations. TFGBV is viewed by many as insignificant *because* it occurs in digital spaces, and survivors are told to ignore the abuse or just disconnect from social media or their devices to avoid it. Myths about TFGBV, the lack of understanding around the harms caused by TFGBV, and stigma against survivors of GBV result in TFGBV not being accepted as another form of GBV, either by the wider public or the justice system.

Discussion

How can we ensure our duty to 'do no harm' and prioritize human rights and other legal protections in our work while leveraging the benefits of digital technology given the risks?

While practitioners (program managers, technical coordinators, team leaders and similar roles in the humanitarian, gender equality and development fields) are working towards a long-term goal of building safer digital spaces, there is also an urgency to break the digital divide. That means bringing women into the digital world now while remaining committed to our duty to "do no harm".

Building safer digital spaces: The design of digital spaces and tools inherently facilitates the spread of



TFGBV and the growth of hate communities that amplify and reinforce systemic sexism and discrimination. For example, group messaging apps, social media websites and other digital tools can be leveraged by groups and movements opposed to women's rights to actively share and amplify sexist, hateful and violent ideas about women, girls and transgender people, as well as to harass women and girls that advocate in digital spaces. As technology evolves at such a fast pace, it has become increasingly difficult for advocates to keep up with the changes and create mechanisms to solve these issues. One of the elements to consider is accountability and looking at who should be held responsible for negative behaviour online and who should commit to doing no harm.

Breaking barriers and reframing power dynamics: Too often, digital spaces are framed as unsafe places where women will always be vulnerable. As a result, women and girls are viewed as passive users of digital spaces with little to no power or agency, and they must adopt a defensive posture when accessing digital spaces. There needs to be a shift in this attitude, one that looks at the power dynamics that exist in digital spaces, and finds ways to empower and support the agency of women as co-creators of their own digital life. For example, how can we embrace the concept of [digital self-care](#) in which women and girls define their own digital lives, and take actions to create healthy online lifestyles and mechanisms for resilience. We must also acknowledge that today, women in digital innovation are breaking barriers and shifting gender norms about who can leverage digital technology. Furthermore, in addition to working on individual women's capacity to navigate the digital space, practitioners need to address the root causes of what makes digital platforms unsafe in the first place.

Acknowledging the real-life harms of TFGBV: TFGBV has an immense impact on the real lives of women and should not be considered a separate issue but instead, be placed on the continuum of GBV and integrated into the broader work being done to combat GBV at local, regional, national and global levels.

How do we balance prioritizing agency in online spaces, navigate power dynamics in the digital space, and ensure protection all at once?

Another tension point is looking at what the ideal digital space is, who should build it, and who it should be built for. In other words, who gets to decide who is safe in these spaces?

Urgency: Digital technology is advancing at unprecedented speeds. While in other areas governments, the private sector, and CSOs would take the time to come up with a proper safety plan before use, the digital space is not waiting. A multi-sectoral approach needs to be taken to find solutions to keep women safe right now. Some solutions may include identifying and considering the risks that have been missed and overlooked in the past, and building solidarity in digital safe spaces such as creating girl-only spaces to discuss SRHR.

Limited power of end-users: When it comes to designing digital infrastructures, there is a constant tension point between ownership and people's agency in shaping them. End users often don't get to have a voice in creating these spaces, and women and girls become passive users with no or very limited agency to co-create. Practitioners in the humanitarian, gender equality and development fields, therefore, need to prioritize women and girls' agency and consider how they can proactively contribute to the ideal internet space that is accessible, safe, free of violence, private, secure and inclusive.

Unlimited access to information: In digital spaces, people have unlimited access to information, and practitioners need to consider whether this infringes on people's rights and it exposes women and girls to further abuse and harm. In fact, one type of TFGBV is the public disclosure of private information. Perpetrators of GBV have published private information about a person in order to harass, embarrass and harm the reputation of their targets. In communities or families with more conservative or patriarchal values, the publication of private information, such as a screenshot of a woman conversing with a male non-family member or wearing particular clothing, or images of a woman in a particular social situation,



can lead to these women being harmed in real life. The context in which the information is released changes the meaning of personal information, and the publication of non-sexual material can be equally, if not more, harmful than the publication of sexual material. As the potential consequences of unlimited access to information are explored, determining whether users have the agency to decide the limits of what information can be accessed to keep us and others safe is critical. Users have to be empowered to define their own digital life and spaces for digital self-care need to be created.

How can we bring in disconnected communities that face increased barriers to accessing, meaningfully engaging and equally benefitting in digital spaces? How can we establish Access, Inclusivity and Safety for marginalized groups in this digital era?

The ideal digital space is **ARISE**:

- **A**ccessible to all
- **R**elevant: information is reaching different people/relevant information for their particular context
- **I**nclusive: consider intersectionality
- **S**afe
- **E**mpowering

Inequalities and inclusion: To ensure that the digital divide doesn't worsen, we need to find ways to address inequalities that prevent access to digital technology. This is because the structures, power systems and dynamics that exist in the physical world and sustain inequalities continue to exist in the digital world. Those who have agency continue to have more in virtual spaces and those who have been historically marginalized continue to fall through the cracks. Practitioners need to consider how intersectionality impacts people's access to and engagement with digital technologies. Gender identity, race, age, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, etc. are all determining factors that play a role in determining whether people will benefit from the digital world. For example, LGBTQI+ individuals face more abuse and harassment online, and therefore don't have the same freedom to express themselves in the digital space.

Global North/Global South, Rural/Urban, and other divides: Availability and affordability of smartphones, speed of internet connection, reliable access to electricity, literacy levels, income levels, poverty levels, etc. all differ between rural and urban areas as well as between high-income and low-income countries, and all impact people's meaningful access to the digital spaces. The language used online can also be a barrier to engaging with the digital world as the language used in apps may not have been contextualized to the language spoken in an area and/or may not be inclusive to the literacy levels of people around the world. Finally, most tech companies are located in the North with very few consultations with end users that may be located in the South.

As work continues to address the digital divide, it is critical that no one is left behind. Failing to meaningfully include marginalized communities will only prolong and exacerbate inequalities and the pursuit of equality in digital spaces.

Resources

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