

GENDERED IMPACTS OF CYBERCRIME AND CYBERSECURITY INCIDENTS

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Abstract

As technology evolves, so do the scales through which violence and crime can be perpetrated. This presentation examines the impacts of cybercrime and cybersecurity incidents, focusing on technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). Women, particularly those engaged in particular activities or belonging to certain groups often suffer greater psychological harm from cyber harassment and stalking, leading to anxiety, trauma, isolation, fear, and distrust. These impacts extend to their social and economic lives, hindering political and social engagement, employment opportunities, and access to education. This presentation highlights these differential impacts and provides recommended actions to prevent, respond to, and recover from TFGBV. It is important to raise awareness to ensure women’s safety in digital spaces.

Introduction

In today's digital age, technology is an integral part of our daily lives, offering countless benefits and opportunities. However, it has also become a space where perpetrators can abuse women based on their gender.

Cyberattacks are more likely to affect women and girls, particularly those who belong to underrepresented groups because of their age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, religion, or immigration status. Globally, almost one-third of women have suffered abuse on the internet; for younger women, this number approaches 50% (Gawn, 2023).

Amnesty International, an international organization that campaigns to protect human rights worldwide, and Element AI, an artificial intelligence company, used advanced data science and machine learning techniques to analyze the scale of abuse that women face on Twitter(X). Element AI calculated that 1.1 million abusive or problematic tweets were sent to the women in the study over a year – or one every 30 seconds on average (Amnesty International, 2018).

These statistics are just one of many proofs that technology-facilitated gender-based violence is a real problem.

TFGBV

technology facilitated gender based violence(TFGBV) is an act of violence perpetrated by one or more individuals that is committed, assisted, aggravated, and amplified in part or fully by the use of information and communication technologies or digital media, against a person on the basis of their gender (UNFPA 2021).

TFGBV is both a cybercrime and a cybersecurity issue because it involves criminal activities using digital means that compromise the safety and security of individuals, particularly women and girls. It highlights the intersection of gender-based violence with digital technologies.

Common Forms of TFGBV

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Online harassment

The repeated use of technology to get in touch with, irritate, threaten, or frighten someone else is known as online harassment. Rather than being defined by occasional events, it is characterized as persistent actions (VAW Learning Network, 2013). Harassment against women and minorities can be carried out by a single person or by groups (known as mobbing). Usually, those who are men are involved.

Cyberstalking

Cyberstalking is the practice of tracking and keeping an eye on someone's actions and behaviors via technology, either in real time or in the past (VAW Learning Network, 2013). It is frequently perceived as a continuation of offline stalking since it involves unwelcome, persistent, invasive, menacing, and harassing actions. Relational control or destruction may be the driving force behind this extreme type of obsessive pursuit and monitoring, which makes the victim feel afraid (Henry & Powell, 2016).

Doxxing

The term "doxxing" describes the non-consensual sharing of personal data, which includes the public disclosure of private, sensitive data such as home addresses, email addresses, phone numbers, and child images. This type of online harassment rarely happens on its own; instead, it frequently coexists with other types of harassment, such as IBA (J.M. MacAllister, 2017). Doxxing can be classified into three types: de-anonymizing, which involves disclosing an individual's identity; targeting, which involves disclosing personal information that permits a physical location; gendered repercussions that could seriously jeopardize women's security; and de-legitimizing, which seeks to damage an individual's reputation or credibility (D. Douglas, 2016).

Hacking

Hacking is the use of technology to obtain unauthorized or illegal access to systems or resources in order to obtain personal data, change data, or discredit and slander women's groups and/or survivors (VAW Learning Network, 2013). A survivor's phone or computer may be hacked for blackmail. In order to manipulate online behavior, get access to bank accounts, or inflict financial harm, hackers may also target social media and email accounts.

Recruitment

Technology can be exploited to deceive victims into perilous situations or to enable physical or sexual assault (Fascendini & Fialová, 2011). Offenders and traffickers might employ fake posts and advertisements on dating websites, "marriage agencies," or phony job offers to reach potential victims (APC, 2020). Moreover, spyware or GPS tracking can be used to monitor, control, and locate survivors with the intent to intimidate or physically harm them (Levy et al., 2018). This form of violence can lead to the trafficking of women, young people, and children (Rose & Goverde, 2021).

Defamation

Defamation involves the dissemination of false information publicly to tarnish a person's reputation, intending to humiliate, threaten, intimidate, or punish the survivor (Douglas, 2016). Due to strict gender norms regarding female sexuality, defamatory remarks about women's sexuality can be particularly harmful. Most online defamatory attacks against women and girls focus on their sexuality (Solinge, 2019).

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Impacts of TFGBV

Though often perceived as less serious, TFGBV can have severe consequences on the health and lives of women and girls, comparable to physical violence. The public, pervasive, repetitive, and perpetual nature of TFGBV, along with the continuum of online-offline violence, causes constant fear and insecurity. This is worsened by the lack of specialized and accessible response services and the incorrect perception that TFGBV is not “real” (UNFPA, 2021). TFGBV often leads to offline violence and vice versa.

Survivors frequently report severe emotional and psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, PTSD, and, in extreme cases, suicidal thoughts or attempts. An Amnesty International study in eight high-income countries found that 54% of women subjected to TFGBV experienced panic attacks, anxiety, or stress (Amnesty International, 2018). Similarly, a study in Southern India revealed that 28% of women felt anxious or depressed, and 6% had attempted self-harm (Gurumurthy et al., 2019). Among young women and girls, 42% reported mental or emotional stress and lower self-esteem according to a Plan International study in 31 countries. Survivors of IBSA often experience mental health disorders comparable to survivors of sexual assault (Plan International, n.d).

Women subjected to or witnessing TFGBV often reduce their online participation, restrict activities, and self-censor. This silencing effect is concerning for women whose professional lives depend on their online presence, such as journalists and politicians, and has broad ramifications (UNFPA, 2021). The psychological impacts of TFGBV also affect women's political and social engagement, employment opportunities, and access to education and information (GBV AoR Helpdesk, 2023). Globally, 18% of young women and girls subjected to TFGBV experienced problems at school (Plan International, n.d).

Current Challenges in Addressing TFGBV

Legal and Regulatory Gaps

Current laws often do not adequately address TFGBV within existing gender-based violence frameworks. Many jurisdictions have generic, gender-blind laws for online safety that fail to effectively prevent digital harm or hold perpetrators accountable (UNICEF East Asia & Pacific & Pacific, 2021). This gap is compounded by inconsistent implementation and enforcement due to biases within law enforcement and judiciary systems.

Platform Responsibility and Accountability

Private technology companies, including social media platforms and internet service providers, face challenges in effectively responding to and mitigating TFGBV. Issues include inconsistent content moderation practices, biases in algorithmic decision-making, and the profit-driven nature of some platforms that prioritize engagement over user safety. There is a need for clearer regulations and proactive measures from these companies to prevent and address TFGBV effectively.

Cultural and Societal Norms

TFGBV is often perpetuated by cultural and societal norms that normalize or trivialize online harassment, stalking, non-consensual intimate image sharing, and other forms of digital violence against women. Addressing these

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deeply ingrained attitudes requires comprehensive education and awareness campaigns, as well as efforts to promote gender equality and respect online.

Recommendations

- Use Strong Passwords and Keep Them Private
 - Create unique, complex passwords and update them regularly.
- Protect Your Personal Information
 - Be cautious when sharing personal details.
 - Avoid disclosing your location on unsafe apps.
- Avoid Suspicious Links
 - Verify the authenticity of links offering discounts or freebies before clicking.
- Disconnect Your Webcam When Not in Use
 - Always disconnect your webcam when it's not in use.
- Block Unwanted Contacts
 - Ignore or decline friend requests from strangers.
 - Block anyone who makes you feel uncomfortable.
- Keep Security Systems Updated
 - Regularly update your security software.
 - Perform frequent anti-virus scans.

(CyberQuote Pte Ltd, 2021)

Conclusion

In the face of technology-facilitated gender-based violence, it is imperative that we forge a united front. As policymakers, technology companies, and civil society work hand in hand, we can create a digital world that is safe, inclusive, and just for all. As Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai aptly said, 'We cannot all succeed when half of us are held back.' Let us ensure that no one is left behind in our digital age.

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