

OGBV Regional Insights

Asia



The World Wide Web Foundation is working with Social Finance and members and affiliates of the Women's Rights Online Network to address online gender-based violence and develop responses that lead to lasting and systemic change. This regional summary is part of a research project aiming to develop a global landscape of the responses to online gender-based violence (OGBV) from civil society, tech, and governments. It has a particular focus on the Global Majority.

Executive Summary

On average, about two thirds of the population across Asia use the internet; Facebook and YouTube are the most used social media platforms. Existing data and research suggests OGBV is highly prevalent across Asia, however limitations to this research mean that it is not possible to know the true extent of OGBV. As in other parts of the world, this is largely due to under-reporting and a lack of standardized data collection. The data and evidence that does exist mostly comes from research conducted by civil society organizations, who also play a key role in supporting survivors of OGBV and in advocacy work. In Asia, big tech companies engage with civil society on the matter of OGBV to an extent, however, this is ad-hoc, and overall platforms' response to incidents of OGBV is insufficient. The legislative landscape around OGBV in Asia is rapidly evolving, with new laws currently in development, but there is not yet any legislation specific to OGBV in any country in this region.

Regional partners

- Women in Digital, Bangladesh
- Foundation for Media Alternatives (FMA), Philippines
- IT for Change (ITfC), India

Context

- **Internet penetration** averages [67%](#) in Asia, just below the global average of 69%. There are significant regional disparities; internet penetration is highest in Southeast Asia, where it [averages 73%](#), while some South Asian countries have lower rates. For example, internet penetration [averages just 46%](#) in India. Rates are rapidly increasing in some countries, for example [34 million](#) more people accessed the Internet in India in 2022 as compared with 2021.
- Facebook and Youtube are the [most used social media platforms](#) in the region (e.g. Across India, in early 2022, Youtube had 460 million users, Facebook 330 million, Instagram 230 million, Snapchat 126 million, and Twitter 23 million users. TikTok is also used widely across Asia, specifically in Bangladesh and the Philippines, and it is particularly popular among young people. However, it was [banned in India in June 2020](#) due to issues around privacy, meaning that YouTube has a lot of popularity with content creators.
- **The gender gap in the use of social media** across South and Southeast Asia varies significantly. While in the Philippines and Thailand women seem to use social media platforms as much, if not more, than men, this is not the case in India. Facebook's advertisement audience was [more than 75% male in India in 2022](#). A Meta study found that many Indian women had shunned the male-dominated social network due to concerns around safety and privacy. In June 2021, [nearly 34% of women users in India adopted the "locked profile" feature on Facebook](#) to avoid unwanted comments from strangers, confirming widespread safety concerns.
- **Familial and kinship dynamics** also shape the context of OGBV in Asia. Policing and surveillance of online activities by family members and kinship networks can often be seen in "honor cultures" where, for instance, brothers position themselves as protectors of their sisters, guarding their mobility and dignity for the sake of family honor. For example, in Bangladesh and the Philippines, men generally own the technology. Women in these countries who experience OGBV are often blamed for being active online in the first place; thus men are more likely to monitor and survey women's activity online in an effort to prevent this, and/or due to a wish to control a woman's freedom of expression.

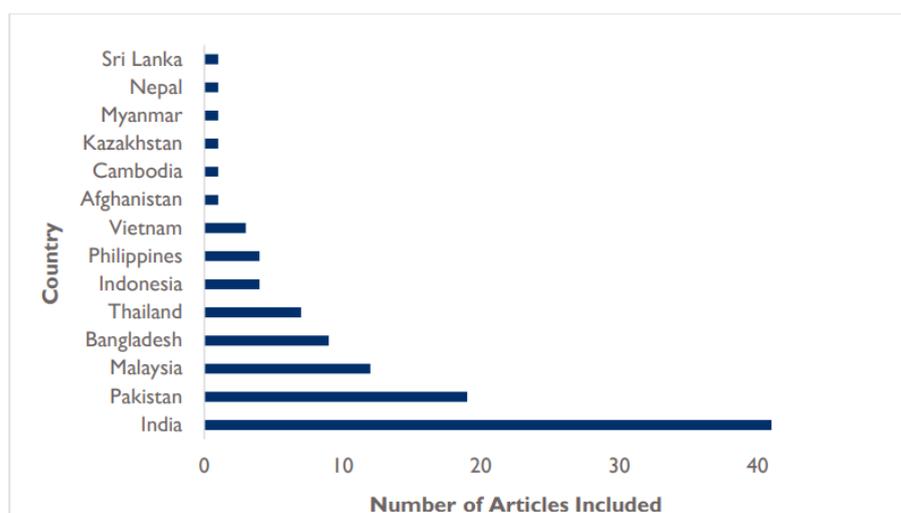
OGBV prevalence and data

- Across Asia and in line with global trends, women are experiencing a **high prevalence** of OGBV. [A landscape analysis](#) of OGBV in the Asia region conducted by USAID in 2022 found that OGBV constitutes a myriad forms of abuse, violence, and harassment is largely shaped by key societal norms and values as well as the evolving landscape of technology use in the region. For example:
 - 50% women journalists in Pakistan had experienced hate speech, and only 10% had never faced any form of online violence, according to a 2019 [study](#).
 - All of the 20 Indian women involved in politics, or political commentators, interviewed by IT for Change had received some degree of abuse on Twitter, according to a 2022 [study](#). It appears that in some cases, social media platform's algorithms can be exploited to further abuse women: typically, algorithms boost content that has received a lot of engagement, so trolls can capitalize on this with coordinated attacks on certain posts to maximize the exposure of that post and its

comments, and drive further abuse. As well as in India, this was seen in the Philippines during an election campaign, where algorithms were exploited by trolls to specifically target women candidates and manipulate the narrative against them.

- 13% of hate speech on Facebook in India is gendered and/or targets an individual's sexuality, found Equality Labs in a [2019 report](#). Of this, more than 25% was transphobic, of which half glorified or called for sexual violence.
 - 83% women in India face online harassment of some kind, including stalking, and 1 in 3 experience it weekly, according to a nationwide [survey](#) done by Bumble
 - Research shows that [58% of girls and young women worldwide](#) have been harassed or abused online, and [this figure rises to 68%](#) when looking at the Philippines.
 - Research also highlights that [those who identified as having at least one intersecting characteristic are even more vulnerable](#) to online violence.
- **While it is clear that OGBV is common in this region, understanding the true extent of OGBV in Asia, as in other parts of the world, continues to be a challenge.** This is due to underreporting to platforms and to the police, limited data sharing from those stakeholders, a lack of standard definitions of the forms and types of OGBV, and a lack of resources for extensive research.
 - **Yet, there are many efforts** from civil society organizations and researchers in Asia to collect data and evidence. Mirroring global trends, many studies **focus on public figures, who are particularly exposed to OGBV:** politicians, journalists, and human rights defenders. **Little data on the regular Internet user is available, and even less is given on perpetrators.**
 - There are regional disparities too, as **OGBV data is particularly lacking in Central Asia and the Pacific region**, according to a [USAID's analysis of OGBV across Asia](#) in 2022, which focused on South and South-East Asia. India and Pakistan are, by far, leading the production of literature on the subject, as reflected by the proportion of Indian articles in USAID's analysis, shown in Figure 1 below. Given the relative dearth of information on OGBV in many Asian countries, **this summary therefore also focuses on South and South-East Asia.**

Figure 1: Geographic Distribution of included articles from USAID's analysis of OGBV in Asia



Tech company initiatives

- **As in the rest of the world, tech companies engage with civil society organizations and researchers on topics around OGBV to an extent; however, this is inconsistent, ad-hoc, and puts the responsibility on women and LGBTQI+ communities to protect themselves.** For example:
 - Meta has launched stopNCII.org in India and hosted roundtables with representatives of women's and children's rights organizations in the Philippines & India to present their products' safety features.
 - Through [Digital Tayo](#) (We Think Digital), Meta provides training on digital literacy in the Asia Pacific region, including modules/resources on how to stay safe online, and content is translated in some local languages like Filipino and Singalese.
 - Bumble in India partnered with the Centre for Social Research and Nyaaya for its [Stand for Safety initiative](#), aiming to promote awareness on digital safety and help recognize and combat online abuse, bullying, and discrimination.
 - TikTok has established an in-app [Digital Literacy Hub](#) in Southeast Asia in an attempt to help users navigate the online environment and fight against harmful misinformation. It is a portal containing educational materials on mental health, cyber-wellness, safety for minors, and potential online dangers.
- Despite some initiatives like the [Meta Women's Safety Hub translated into 12 languages across India](#), **the lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate responses** to OGBV by tech companies is a significant concern in the region.
- **Several governments in Asia have banned Tiktok:** for national security issues in India, and on the basis of pornography-related concerns in Indonesia and Bangladesh.
- Globally, research suggests that **tech companies' response to reports of offensive material is insufficient, and this is no different in Asia.** For example, 93% of all hate speech posts reported to Facebook in India remained on the platform in 2019, according to a Equality Labs [study](#).

Government initiatives

- **Government authorities across South and Southeast Asia are implementing policy and legislative initiatives supporting the response to OGBV. As in other parts of the world, the legislative landscape around OGBV in this region is rapidly evolving.** Some examples of recent policy and legal changes are:
 - **In Indonesia:**
 - In 2022, Indonesia passed the Sexual Violence Act which sets out nine different kinds of sexual abuse, including sexual abuse through electronic means
 - **In the Philippines:**
 - The Safe Spaces Act 2019 expanded the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act, penalising sexual harassment in online spaces as well as physical.
 - Meta, the National Bureau of Investigation and the Philippine National Police met to discuss 'an alarming spread of child sexual abuse and

exploitation materials online'. They also discussed the possible passage of the Anti-Online Sexual Abuse or Exploitation of Children (OSAEC) bill, which subsequently passed into law in July 2022.

- o [The Anti-OSAEC law](#) increases legal efforts to protect minors against online sexual exploitation, regardless of consent from the child. It will give large technology platforms the responsibility to take down material that violates minors' rights, preserve evidence, and report back to law enforcement agencies.
- o There are currently pending bills in Congress that relate to the role of big tech, for example the Anti-False News Bill and the Digital Taxation Bill.
- **In India:**
 - o The Indian government recently released the draft Digital Personal Data Protection Bill 2022, which will place data protection obligations on tech companies.
 - o In 2013, the government passed an amendment to the Indian Penal Code which extended the Code to include voyeurism and stalking as offenses.
 - o India's Information Technology Act criminalizes intimate image abuse.
 - o Tech companies in India are now mandated to publish periodic reports on the details of the complaints they have received and the action they have taken; however, there is no specific data published by these companies on the safety of their products for women and other minorities.
 - o A Digital India Act, which is not yet in development but rumored to be being considered by the government, could bring regulations around deliberate misinformation and doxxing.
- **In Bangladesh:**
 - o The Bangladeshi Government passed the Digital Security Act 2018 to curb violent extremism and hate speech online. In 2020, a Police Cyber Support for Women was created to provide assistance in taking necessary legal action pertaining to cyber-crimes committed against women.
- **There are also emerging instances of legal institutions in the region holding big tech liable** for their insufficient response to OGBV. For example:
 - o **India:** In 2018, the Indian Supreme Court introduced a fine for Yahoo, Facebook Ireland, Facebook India, Google India, Google Inc, Microsoft and WhatsApp for failing to comply with the Supreme Court's orders to inform the court of measures taken to block videos that include sexual abuse on their social media platforms.
 - o **Philippines:** In 2022, Meta and YouTube were ordered to submit information on an online account promoting the exploitation and sexual abuse of minors within 72 hours.
- **However, as in other parts of the world, governments struggle to create cohesive laws and timely policies that sufficiently respond to the complexity of the issue**, and there is still no specific legislation in the region that pertains to OGBV. Existing legislation often either focuses on women but misses an online dimension, or focuses on online violence but misses a gender dimension. This leads to a landscape where definitions of OGBV and responses across the region are disjointed, outdated, or non-existent in the laws. For example:
 - o In India, the existing provisions that are relied on by Courts when addressing instances of OGBV are present in the Information Technology Act 2000 and the Indian Penal Code 1860. For instance, cases of non-consensual dissemination of intimate images are addressed under the penal provisions for obscenity or that of outraging the modesty of a woman. These provisions do not adequately address

the harm caused to the victim, and instead punish on the basis of some outdated standard of morality, according to civil society organizations.

- In Bangladesh, the legal framework still lacks a clear definition of sexual harassment and relevant laws have ignored issue of online sexual harassment.
- **Furthermore, as is the case globally, the implementation of these legislations remains a huge challenge in the region**, with limited enforcement of laws in cases of OGBV. The patriarchy and the lack of gender-sensitivity among law enforcers create systemic barriers to enforcing laws in these cases. For example, a study by [Women's Centre for Change](#) revealed that the “culture of skepticism” is still present in the Malaysia’s criminal justice system, where victims of sexual assault and rape can be viewed with suspicion. In South and Southeast Asia, criminal legal systems and perceptions are built on a hierarchy of offenses that prioritize physical harm over online harm, leading to law enforcement agencies not taking cases on online violence as seriously as offline violence. There is also a lack of training for police on the primary forms and effects of OGBV, and how to prevent and respond to incidents sensitively.
- **Finally, legislation might aim to improve online safety for women and other minoritized groups, but can also be misused and/or have negative consequences. For example:**
 - The Philippines is considering a SIM Card Registration Act. This would obligate anyone registering a SIM card to link their national identity card or passport. This would make women and other marginalized groups more vulnerable due to the lack of anonymity.
 - Criminalization strategies reinforce structural inequalities of race and class, and prove to be ineffective in promoting structural changes in inequalities.

Civil society initiatives

Key civil society stakeholders working to address OGBV in South and Southeast Asia include:

- **Bangladesh:** Women in Digital
- **India** [IT for Change](#) (Research and advocacy), [CyberSaathi](#) (survivor support and research), [Point of View](#) (research and advocacy), [Breakthrough](#) (research and advocacy), [Social Media Matters](#) (Policy and capacity building), [Centre for Internet and Society](#) (research and advocacy)¹
- **Indonesia:** Purple Code Collective
- **Malaysia:** KRYSS network
- **Philippines:** Foundation for Media Alternatives (FMA), Women’s Legal and Human Rights Bureau
- **Regional:** Coalition against Trafficking in Women Asia-Pacific

This is not an exhaustive list, please find further information on civil society organizations working in this region [here](#).

Case studies

¹ In India, other NGOs and digital rights organizations that have been active in advocacy, trainings, research, and programmatic interventions include: [Association for Progressive Communications](#), [SFLC.IN](#), [BBC World Media](#), [Action India](#), [Tactical Tech](#), [Amnesty’s Troll Patrol](#), [Internet Saathi](#), and [Internet Democracy Project](#).

- Bumble India has teamed up with Mumbai-based public safety platform Safecity to create [a safety guide](#) to help its community identify, prevent and combat common types of digital abuse and harassment.
- The [Centre for Internet and Society and Tattle Civic Tech](#) have partnered to build a free-to-use user-facing web plugin to help users moderate instances of online violence in Indian languages with a focus on the experience of persons situated at the margins of gender, caste, religion and sexuality.

Selected reports

Below are some selected recent reports on OGBV in Asia. For an extensive list of reports, see [here](#).

- [Measuring Pakistani Women's Experiences of Online Violence: a quantitative research study on online gender-based harassment in Pakistan](#) compiles together data collected during the 17 sessions that had been conducted in Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and Gilgit and maps different aspects of online harassment and e-VAW (*The Digital Rights Foundation, 2017*)
- [Revenge Porn Against Women and the Applicability of Therapeutic Jurisprudence: A Comparative Analysis of Regulations in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh](#) aims to investigate whether the application of Therapeutic Jurisprudence may benefit women survivors of Revenge Porn (*IGI Global, 2017*)
- [Born digital, born free?: A Socio-Legal Study on Young Women's Experiences of Online Violence in South India](#) uses a posthuman feminist frame to explore how gender regimes operate in digitally-mediated social interactions, understand the nature of cyberviolence, and evaluate the effectiveness of prevailing legal-institutional response mechanisms (*IT for Change, 2019*)
- [Online Sexual Harassment over Anonymous Social Media in Bangladesh](#) is a study of the use of anonymous social media in Bangladesh and proposes a set of design and policy recommendations for such anonymous social media (*Tenth International Conference on Information and Communications Technologies and Development, 2019*)
- [Troll Patrol India: Exposing Online Abuse Faced by Women Politicians in India](#) is a study into the scale and nature of online abuse faced by women politicians in India during the 2019 General Elections of India (*Amnesty International India, 2020*)
- [Landscape Analysis of Technology-Facilitated Gender Based Violence: Findings from the Asia Region](#) is a review of peer-reviewed and gray literature across Asia (*USAID, 2022*)
- [Profitable Provocations: A Study of Abuse and Misogynistic Trolling on Twitter Directed at Indian Women in Public-Political Life](#) is a study into hateful and problematic speech on Twitter directed at 20 Indian women in public-political life (*IT for Change, 2022*)