

“ADDRESSING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN DIGITAL SPACES: POLICIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS ACROSS LOWER-MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES—A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW”

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Abstract

Gender-based violence (GBV) in digital spaces is a burning issue in lower-middle-income countries (LMICs), where rapid digitalization, inadequate legal frameworks, and deeply - rooted gender inequalities increase the vulnerability of women. While several laws and policies exist to address GBV, their effectiveness is often undermined by inadequate enforcement, socio-cultural barriers, and lack of enough digital literacy. This systematic review examines existing policies, legal frameworks, institutional mechanisms and recommendations to address GBV in digital places across LMICs. The review identifies key policy gaps, enforcement challenges, and best practices that have been effective in combating digital GBV. It further explores the role of community engagement, legal reforms, and technological interventions in creating safer online spaces. By making evidence from different LMIC contexts, this study provides actionable recommendations for legislators, researchers, and stakeholders to reinforce policies, advance implementation, and improve protections against GBV in digital environments.

Methods

This review employed the search terms: "Gender-Based Violence," "Digital Spaces," "Online Harassment," "Cyberstalking," "Policies," and "Lower-Middle-Income Countries" across four databases: PubMed, Google Scholar, Science Direct, and CINAHL. Citation chaining was also used to capture additional relevant literature. From an initial pool of 1200 articles, 350 were screened, with excluded based on title and abstract. After a full-text review, 25 studies were included in the final analysis, consisting of qualitative studies, quantitative studies, scoping reviews, systematic reviews, and reports.

Findings: Seven areas identified the different aspects and challenges related to gender-based violence, particularly in digital contexts. These areas include Gender-Based Violence and Human Rights Violations, forms of Digital Gender-Based Violence (GBV), the Impact of GBV, Legal Frameworks and Policies, Regional Focus, Support Systems and Awareness Campaigns, and Prevention and Intervention Mechanisms. This study concludes and recommends that to address Gender-Based Violence (GBV), particularly in digital contexts, recommendations include conducting comprehensive data collection to understand prevalence, assessing the impacts on victims, and analyzing existing legal frameworks for gaps. Developing policies and awareness campaigns to educate the public, enhance support systems for victims, and provide training for professionals in related fields is vital. Additionally, fostering community engagement and exploring technology solutions can significantly aid in preventing and responding to GBV.

Keywords:

Gender-Based Violence (GBV); Digital Spaces; Policies; Online Harassment; Cyberstalking; LMICs.

Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a commonly prevalent violation of human rights, having no social, financial and national boundaries. It includes wellness, dignity, autonomy, and safety of an individual which often remains hidden within a culture of silence. This silence is maintained by social beliefs, norms and values that normalize, justify, or dismiss it as a typical aspect of male-female relationships (United Nations Population Fund). In modern era, the increase of digital spaces and information and communication technology (ICT) has led to new forms of gender-based violence. Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in digital spaces refers to any hurtful act directed at an individual based on their gender, facilitated by digital technologies or online platforms. As the internet and digital communication has rapidly expanded, GBV has increasingly replaced from offline settings to online environments, leading to new challenges for victims as well as for the policymakers. Some groups of women are more vulnerable to this type of violence because of their activities, identities, or access to specific information and services, especially, human rights activists, women revolutionists and feminists, scholars and young people (UNRIC, n.d.). GBV has substantial consequences for women's physical and mental health, educational accomplishment, and their overall well-being. In educational institutes, women may face harassment and ill- treatment from peers, teachers, or administrative faculty and staff, leading to more dropout rates and lessen opportunities for personal and professional progress (United Nations, 2019). Online, cyberbullying and ICT-facilitated GBV can have damaging effects on women's psychological health, self-esteem, and their self-determination to contribute in the digital world (UN Women, 2022). Cyberbullying of women and girls is not just a violation of human rights, it is a universal phenomenon that is abolishing the lives of women, girls and their families around the globe. To prevent women from being affected through the mentioned channels, an action is need to make policies and implement them to combat the challenges of GBV. Over many years, the United Nations and the Council of Europe have approved a number of international tools to combat violence against women. These are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. However, the established and the conventional international legal mechanism is not always followed to by countries, and services for victims and affected people are remain limited or underfunded. At the same time, the standards of countrywide legislation and the existing support for victims of violence differ greatly in each state of the world (Krylova et al., 2022). The UN has been at the front of combating GBV, including GBV in digital spaces. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlight the importance of addressing GBV and promoting safety and protection. Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) exactly call for the elimination of all forms of violence against women and the assurance of online safety (United Nations, 2015). The lower middle countries have made various policies regarding the elimination and prevention of GBV in digital spaces. For instance, In Pakistan, The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016 addresses GBV in digital spaces through multiple provisions. It criminalizes online harassment and abuse, with Section 21 pointing cyberstalking and Section 24 punishing cyberblackmail, especially threats involving the non-consensual sharing of private pictures. To combat online defamation and hate speech, Section 20 forbids and criminalizes false accusations, allegations and character assassination, while Sections 11 and 25 prohibit hate speech and provocation to violence. The law also regulates non-consensual content sharing, with Section 22 penalizing illegal sharing of private pictures and Section 23 addressing the transmission of

sexually explicit content without consent. Implementation is carried out by the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) Cyber Crime Wing, allowing victims to report incidents via helpline 9911 or an online portal. Violations under PECA carry penalties, imprisonment (3 to 7 years), or both, serving as a warning against digital GBV. However, challenges persist, including underreporting due to social stigma, implementation gaps leading to inconsistent enforcement, and potential misuse of certain sections to control freedom of expression rather than merely focusing on digital GBV (National Assembly of Pakistan, 2016).

GBV in digital spaces is a key concern in state of India, which affects many women and gender minorities. The law that address this issue includes various provisions under Indian legal framework, though challenges still exist in implementation and comprehensiveness (Padte & Kovacs, 2013). According to the Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000, sending offensive messages through communication services is criminalized. In addition to this, the law penalizes the publication or sending of offensive material in electronic form, with various levels of punishment based on the severity of the crime (Padte & Kovacs, 2013). The Section 354A of Indian Penal Code (IPC) addresses sexual harassment, including undesirable physical contact, demands for sexual favours, and showing pornography against a female's will (Padte & Kovacs, 2013). Also, section 499 deals with defamation, which is applicable to online spaces when false statements damage an individual's status (Padte & Kovacs, 2013). In addition to this, Section 507 addresses the criminal bullying by anonymous communication, relevant to threats received through digital podiums (Padte & Kovacs, 2013). A study shows that, while India has a well-known legal provision to combat GBV in digital places, there is a burning need for more stronger laws, better implementation, and raised awareness to effectively highlight and alleviate online harassment and GBV (Padte & Kovacs, 2013; Centre for Internet and Society, 2022).

In Bangladesh, the current laws, recommends to address cyber violence against women. To provide sustenance and support to GBV survivors of any kinds, the Office of Ministry of Women and Children Affairs made several platforms including "One Stop Crisis Centers" (OCC) to offer medical, legal, and social services. To punish preparators, the current legal framework presently highlights general harassment and defamation within the pre-colonial penal code as well as post-independence regulations. Specific to cybercrime, Bangladesh approved the Information Communication Technology Act in 2006, and voted for an amendment act in 2013 that established a Cyber Crimes Tribunal that focuses cases of cyber violence. In 2018, the state of Bangladesh also passed the Digital Security Act of 2018 to control violent extremism and hatred speech online. In the year 2020, Bangladesh established an all-woman police station particularly to deal cyber-crimes against women and girls. The study suggested that while existing laws and legal frameworks exist in theory to defend against technology-facilitated GBV, there are gaps in proper application.

The Constitution of Nepal supports fundamental human rights, which includes access to justice and safety from violence. Article 38(3) clearly forbids physical, mental, sexual, and emotional violence or mistreatment against women based on religion, tradition, culture, or any other levels, confirming legal consequences and reimbursement for sufferers. In addition to this, Article 28 safeguards individual privacy, including digital data and communication, while Article 17(2)(a) and Article 19(1) offer for autonomy of expression with reasonable limitations to keep public morality. These constitutional

provisions act as a framework for underscoring GBV in digital places, but they lack specificity in defining and suing cyber-related offenses against women. To more strengthen defense, Nepal must implement comprehensive cyber laws clearly targeting online harassment, digital threats, and non-consensual distribution of private content. Specialized guidelines should focus on raising awareness, establishing digital knowledge programs, and creating accessible reporting mechanisms to ensure rapid legal action against cyber committers. The main legislation governing digital crimes in Nepal, the Electronic Transactions Act (ETA) 2063, is designed for regulating electronic transactions rather than talking about cybercrimes against individuals, especially women and girls. Section 47 of ETA forbids the publication of prohibited materials and online content against public morality but generally categorizes all virtual offenses as computer-related crimes. This ambiguous legal framework results in the misunderstanding of GBV cases in digital spaces, limiting effective action and justice for victims. Therefore, Nepal should review the ETA to introduce clear definitions and strict penalties for cyber harassment, stalking, and online GBV. Establishing a more dedicated cybercrime unit, will enhance the effectiveness of legal comebacks and victim protection in digital environments (Kaphle, 2019).

Cybercrime in Nigeria is a noteworthy and growing concern, manifesting in different forms such as financial scam, commonly known as 419, where offenders deceive individuals to extract money. According to the Nigerian Communications Commission, cybercrime charges Nigeria an estimated \$500 million each year. Common cybercrime strategies include phishing emails, fraudulent websites, and identity stealing, where cybercriminals bargain personal information to open fake accounts and make illegal purchases. Hacking is also predominant, as criminals break into computer systems or networks to steal information, cause damage, or install hateful software. These doings are governed by the Cybercrime (Prohibition, Protection) Act of 2015, which purposes to provide a unified legal framework for stopping and prosecuting cybercrimes in Nigeria. The study suggests that the rate of cybercrime could be decreased in Nigeria by public education which will stop online financial victimization. The state law implementation agencies can supportively take advantage of the anonymity of cyberspace, this may discourage new offenders from entering the market place and decrease crimes. The parliament should also modify the Cybercrime Act in Nigeria to evade ambiguity in other to make it qualify with global standard (Akinyemi, 2020).

GBV in digital spaces is also a key issue in Uganda, where the increase in internet access and use of digital platforms, particularly social media, has led to new methods of abuse. Online harassment, cyberstalking, and retaliation pornography are among the rising issues affecting women and girls in Uganda. The state of Uganda has made efforts to combat GBV, but the laws in place are often not enough to address the unique challenges posed by digital spaces. The current legislation such as the Domestic Violence Act (2010) and Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act (2009) highlight physical forms of violence but are restricted in scope concerning online abuse (Tushabe, 2018). The Computer Misuse Act (2011) is one of the main legal instruments that addresses digital harassment, particularly the unauthorized sharing of harmful or defamatory content (Kakooza, 2021). However, this law does not fully cover the complications of digital GBV, such as digital sexual harassment and cyberbullying, which continue to affect many people in Uganda (Kagaba, 2020).

GBV in digital places is an escalating issue in Kenya, aggravated by the widespread implementation of internet machineries. Kenya has implemented several policies and legal frameworks to address GBV, such as the Sexual Crimes Act (2006) and the National Policy on Prevention and Response to Gender-Based Violence. However, these measures mainly focus on physical forms of violence and often lack provisions exact to digital contexts. The Computer Mismanagement and Cybercrimes Act (2018) forbids various cyber crimes, including cyber harassment and cyberstalking, but its implementation concerning TFGBV remains limited. The study suggests that for the effective struggle against TFGBV in Kenya, it is recommended to and implement specific laws addressing TFGBV. Moreover, there is a need to initiate comprehensive campaigns to teach the public on the manifestations and consequences of TFGBV, enhancing digital knowledge and responsible digital behavior. Also, they suggest the establishment of accessible support systems (Kenya ICT Action Network [KICTANet], 2012).

In Vietnam, GBV in digital areas is an issue reflecting a worldwide trend where technology is progressively used to commit harm against women. These acts can lead to severe psychological, social, and economic consequences for victims. A report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) highlights that online GBV can cost women their professions, health, and even lives, with young girls, women relying on digital being principally vulnerable. Vietnam has identified the need to talk about the GBV, including its digital manifestations, through different policies and legal frameworks. The "Programme on Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Response 2021-2025" purposes to reinforce prevention strategies and multisectoral responses to GBV. In addition to this, the National Digital Transformation Program recognizes the importance of ensuring protection and ethics in the digital setting to prevent and respond to such violence. Studies shows that there is lack of law that can effectively combat TFGBV in Vietnam, so it is recommended to develop and implement definite laws addressing TFGBV, ensuring strong definitions and suitable penalties. Collaboration with Digital Platforms which include the Engagement with social media companies and other digital service providers can enhance reporting mechanisms, content moderation, and user safety features (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2023).

In Sri Lanka, GBV trends are high because technology is increasingly advances to impose harm based on gender. (Search for Common Ground, 2024).

Sri Lanka has made policies and legal actions to combat GBV, including its digital manifestations. The Countrywide Action Plan to deal with the Sexual and Gender-Based Violence 2016-2020. The Multi-Sectoral National Action Plan to Address Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Sri Lanka 2024-2028 has prolonged its focus to include digital spaces, aiming to provide safety mechanisms for victims and promote law implementation capacity (UNFPA, 2025). However, noteworthy challenges remain in terms of enforcement, victim support, and policy enforcement. Key recommendations include strengthening legal frameworks by introducing comprehensive cybercrime lawmaking specifically addressing TFGBV (Search for Common Ground, 2024).

In Philippines, addressing GBV need proper legal frameworks and strategies to deal with the issue properly. Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act of 2004 deal with violence against women and provides protections for sufferers, including those lay open to online abuse (Philippine Commission on Women [PCW], 2021). In addition to this, Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012 also

highlights the issue. This law punishes cyberbullying, identity stealing, and other computer-related crimes, which can be applied to cases of GBV in digital places (Bikbov, 2020).

A study in Ghana shows that despite the existence of so many laws, policies, and organizations to address GBV in Ghana, state policies are mainly ineffective in protecting the rights of victims and this is predominately as a result of present patriarchal values. While these guidelines indicate an essential milestone in Ghana, the extremely rooted patriarchal mindset within families, state, and institutional settings poses a significant challenge for institutions advocating for women's rights and looking for justice for victims. The study suggests that more effective strategies should be undertaken to deal and prevent GBV. Awareness initiatives that challenge traditional masculine roles and enhance alternative, non-violent forms of masculinity and lower aggressive behaviors should be endorsed. Moreover, community mobilization, literacy and involvement of men and boys were suggested by participants at the public level. Furthermore, educating and engaging men in programs that stop or address GBV has the potential to weaken any patriarchal and domineering mindset that endorses GBV or retards gender equality and limits women and children (Tontoh, 2024).

Indonesia has taken lawmaking steps to deal with GBV in digital places. One of the most important legal developments is Law No. 12 of 2022 on Sexual Violence Crimes (Undang-Undang Tindak Pidana Kekerasan Seksual or UU TPKS). This law forbids different forms of sexual violence, counting those facilitated through digital platforms, such as cyberstalking, and non-consensual sending of intimate pictures (International Commission of Jurists [ICJ], 2023).

In Sudan, the constitutional platform addressing GBV, especially in digital spaces, is not enough. Traditional methods of GBV, such as female genital mutilation (FGM), intimate partner violence, and matrimonial rape, are still existing and often considered normalized, leading to significant underreporting and limited legal option (Association for Progressive Communications [APC], 2024). This normalization outspreads to online GBV, which becomes largely unaddressed in present legislation. The lack of exact reforms leaves a gap in protecting females and girls from digital harassment, cyberstalking, and some other forms of online abuse. This legal void contributes to the digital exclusion of women, as fear of online violence discourages their participation in digital places (APC, 2024).

To effectively combat GBV in digital spaces in Sudan needs a many-sided approach that includes legal transformations, capacity building, community education, and the provision of backing services for victims. By applying these suggestions, Sudan can make safer online environments and help the digital inclusion of women and girls.

Table 1. Literature Review: Overview of Included Studies

	Author (s) Name & Year	Region	Study Design	Key Findings
1	(United Nations Population Fund, 2025.)	Worldwide	Website Report	Gender-Based Violence, Human Rights Violation, Cultural Silence, Social Norms

2	(UNRIC, 2023)	Globally	Website Report	Digital GBV, Online Harassment, ICT Expansion, Vulnerable Women, Policy Challenges
3	(United Nations, 2019)	Globally	Website Report	GBV Consequences, Women's Health, Educational Impact, Harassment in Institutes, Dropout Rates
4	(Krylova et al., 2022)	Ukraine	Review article	Cyberbullying, ICT-facilitated GBV, Psychological Impact, Women's Self-esteem, Digital Participation
5	(United Nations, 2015)	Pakistan	Website Report	Cyberbullying, Global Human Rights Violation, Policy Action, International Legal Tools, Limited Services, Underfunded Support, Legislative Gaps
6	(National Assembly of Pakistan, 2016)	Pakistan	Website Report	Digital GBV Policies, Pakistan PECA 2016, Cyberstalking, Cyberblackmail, Online Defamation, Non-consensual Content Sharing, FIA Cyber Crime Wing, Implementation Challenges.
7	(Padte & Kovacs, 2013)	India	Report	Digital GBV in India, Gender Minorities, Legal Framework, Implementation Challenges
8	(Centre for Internet and Society, 2022)	India	Website Report	Legal Provisions, Stronger Laws, Implementation, Awareness, Online Harassment
9	(USAID, 2020)	Bangladesh	Website Report	Cyber Violence, Bangladesh, Legal Framework, One Stop Crisis Centers, Cyber Crimes Tribunal, Digital Security Act, Women Police Stations, Law Gaps

10	(Kaphle, 2019)	Nepal	Scoping review	GBV in Nepal, Privacy Protection, Digital Rights, Cyber Laws, Electronic Transactions Act, Legal Gaps, Online Harassment, Victim Protection
11	(Akinyemi, 2020)	Nigeria	Legal Framework	Cybercrime in Nigeria, Financial Scams, Phishing, Hacking, Cybercrime Act, Public Education, Law Enforcement, Legal Framework, Global Standards
12	(Tushabe, 2018)	Uganda	Review	GBV in Digital Spaces, Uganda, Online Harassment, Cyberstalking, Retaliation Pornography, Domestic Violence Act, Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act, Legal Framework, Challenges.
13	(Kagaba, 2030)	Uganda	Review	Digital GBV, Uganda, Computer Misuse Act, Digital Harassment, Defamatory Content, Digital Sexual Harassment, Cyberbullying, Legal Gaps
14	(Sarah M et al., 2017)	Uganda	Qualitative study	Digital GBV in Kenya, Sexual Crimes Act, National Policy on GBV, Computer Mismanagement and Cybercrimes Act, Cyber Harassment, Cyberstalking, TFGBV, Legal Gaps, Digital Literacy, Public Awareness, Support Systems
15	(Kenya ICT Action Network [KICTANet], 2012)	Kenya	Report	Digital GBV in Kenya, Sexual Crimes Act, National Policy, Cybercrimes Act, Cyber Harassment, Cyberstalking,

				Legal Gaps, TFGBV Awareness, Public Campaigns, Support Systems
16	(UNFPA, 2023)	Vietnam	Website report	Digital GBV in Vietnam, UNFPA, Psychological Consequences, Vulnerability, Gender-Based Violence Prevention, National Digital Transformation Program, Legal Gaps, TFGBV Laws, Social Media Collaboration, Reporting Mechanisms.
17	(SFCG, 2024)	<i>Sri Linka</i>	<i>Qualitative Study</i>	Digital GBV in Sri Lanka, Technology Advancements, Gender-Based Harm, Search for Common Ground, 2024.
18	(UNFPA, 2023)	<i>Sri Linka</i>	Website report	National Action Plan, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, 2024-2028, Safety Mechanisms, Law Implementation.
19	(Bikbov, 2020)	Philippine	Report	Digital GBV in Philippines, Anti-Violence Against Women Act, Cybercrime Prevention Act, Cyberbullying, Identity Theft, Legal Frameworks.
20	(Tontoh, 2024)	Ghana	Quantitative Study	GBV in Ghana, Patriarchal Values, Legal Frameworks, Ineffectiveness, Awareness Initiatives, Non-Violent Masculinity, Men and Boys Involvement, Community Mobilization.
21	(International Commission of Jurists, 2023)	Indonesia	Website Report	GBV in Indonesia, Sexual Violence Crimes Law, UU TPKS, Digital Platforms, Cyberstalking, Non-

				consensual Intimate Images, Legal Developments.
22	(Association for Progressive Communications, 2024)	Sudan	Website report	GBV in Sudan, Legal Gaps, Female Genital Mutilation, Intimate Partner Violence, Matrimonial Rape, Digital Harassment, Cyberstalking, Legal Reform, Digital Exclusion.

Recommendations

Some recommendations from the different studies suggest that governments should ensure the effective implementation of current laws by improving monitoring mechanisms, increasing accountability, and addressing socio-cultural barriers that hinder enforcement. Also, educational initiatives should be developed to promote digital literacy, empowering individuals, especially women to recognize, prevent, and respond to digital GBV. In addition to this, community Engagement should be Promoted and International and Regional Collaboration must be more Strengthened. Moreover, Legal Reforms should be encouraged to ensure the comprehensive protection against digital harassment and abuse. Most importantly, Further Research should be conducted to explore more effective possible solutions to combat the GBV in digital space.

Conclusion

Gender-based violence (GBV) in digital spaces is an increasingly pressing concern in LMICs, requiring prompt action from policymakers, researchers, legislators and main stakeholders. To ensure safer digital environments, it is important to implement inclusive and enforceable policies together with community-led initiatives. Future research should examine the continuous impact of these policies and explore how developing technologies can be leveraged to combat GBV in digital places.

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