

Are digital spaces only for men?

According to a study by ActionAid Bangladesh in 2022, about 63.51 percent of women in the country face online harassment and violence. We must keep in mind that this is based on only the reported numbers, which means the real situation of digital safety of women in the country is tremendously alarming.

MAYABEE ARANNYA

"As a woman, navigating online spaces in Bangladesh is quite challenging. Whether it's crude comments about women or gender minorities, news of violence and people making fun of it and victim blaming or problematic content - all of them affect me negatively and stay with me," shares Ahona Aroni Hassan, 26. While boasting about the growing digitalisation of the country, we can't ignore the other side of the coin - digital spaces are not yet safe for women in Bangladesh. According to a study by ActionAid Bangladesh in 2022, about 63.51 percent of women in the country face online harassment and violence. We must keep in mind that this is based on only the reported numbers, which means the real situation of digital safety of women in the country is tremendously alarming.

"Offline public spaces, such as fairs, roads, and public transport, are so unsafe for women and girls that it's no surprise digital spaces can pose similar dangers. In both spaces, this can manifest as not only sexual harassment but also aggression, bullying, and use of obscene language," says Nobonita Chowdhury, Director

of Gender, Justice and Diversity (GJD) and Preventing Violence Against Women Initiative, BRAC. In fact, cybercrime can sometimes be even more dangerous due to the layer of anonymity that cybercriminals possess. They can easily impersonate someone and lay a trap for the victim, and they can also hide their digital footprint, making it difficult to track them down and bring them to justice.

One of the most common forms of harassment of women online is victim blaming. "Victim blaming is not confined to only physical spaces. When a woman speaks up about online harassment, people start to bombard her with questions such as why she posted photos online or wore such a dress in her photos - and if she has followed all societal rules, then they will question why she is even using social media in the first place," explains Nobonita Chowdhury. This culture of victim blaming causes victims to think a hundred times before speaking up and reporting online harassment and violence. "Young women and girls usually don't even share with their parents since they commonly engage in victim blaming,"

shares Kaniz Fatema, CEO, Bangladesh Open Source Network (BdOSN).

While discussing safer digital spaces for women, we cannot exclude transwomen and gender-diverse people from the conversation. "From our surveys, we have found that huge numbers of transwomen and queer women face online abuse, especially fraud and blackmailing. Their safety and security online are so much at risk that many choose not to use social media. This paints the picture of a bigger problem - trans people do not have access to online spaces, and hence are deprived of important opportunities; for example, they miss job postings online," shares Lamea Tanjin Tanha, Founder and CEO, TransEnd.

"There is a need for more conversations on how women and girls have the right to exist in both offline and online spaces without facing harassment or violence. Legal action can't be the only solution to unsafe spaces - there also needs to be a behavioural change in society. We need to create an environment of mutual respect, where people stand up against harassment or violence instead of partaking in it. Social media etiquette should be taught through conversations

in families and schools," she continues. Indeed, the Digital Security Act (DSA) 2018 has proven ineffective in protecting women against cyber violence, so resorting to legal action may not be the best approach.

"Many women and girls in Bangladesh do not maintain 'online hygiene' - they do not have the awareness and knowledge of basic safety and security measures they need to follow when using digital spaces," says Kaniz Fatema. "BdOSN organises regular awareness sessions at academic institutions on online safety. We include both students and teachers in the sessions so that teachers are also aware of these issues and can help students when we are not there. Since a single organisation can't reach all women in Bangladesh, it's imperative that the government and other NGOs conduct similar sessions," she continues.

Another type of awareness session is also required, according to Lamea Tanjin Tanha. "We cannot forget that trans people also have digital rights as citizens of Bangladesh. We need to organise more awareness sessions for cisgender people so that they are aware of these rights and can learn to respect trans individuals. There should also be an app with resources for trans people on digital rights and safety, along with hotlines and website features. There is also a lack of data on the trans community concerning online safety, which needs to change. At TransEnd, we are already trying to change people's mindsets with our activities, such as our documentaries that portray a counter-narrative to the common misconceptions cisgender people have about trans people," she shares.

While awareness building is crucial, there is no alternative to education. "I believe awareness sessions and seminars can't completely solve the problem at hand. Our national curriculum now includes a subject called Information and Communications Technology (ICT). We could include information on online safety in the curriculum of ICT so that students are equipped with this knowledge as early as class three," says Kaniz Fatema.

Finally, we must address the elephant in the room when discussing women's safety in the digital space. "There is a stark digital divide between men and women. We cannot talk about digital safety without ensuring all people, especially women, have equal access to the internet and technology," remarks Nobonita Chowdhury.

Therefore, we can see how breaking down the digital divide and ensuring access of all individuals, including women and gender-diverse people, to online spaces is vital. Simultaneously, their safety and security must be ensured so they can continue accessing online spaces and not be forced to go offline. Everyone deserves to be on the internet - safely.

Mayabee Arannya is a feminist activist leading the youth organisation Kotha.

IMAGE: FREEPIK



Bridging the Digital Gender Divide

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financial concerns," said Rashida. Rashida's story illustrates that in many households, smartphones are predominantly used by men, which can create obstacles for women and girls who need access to them for their education and other essential activities.

According to the Groupe Speciale Mobile Association's (GSMA) 2020 report, there is a significant gender disparity in the ownership and usage of mobile phones in Bangladesh. Women were 29 percent less likely than men to possess a mobile phone, and they were also 52 percent less likely than men to use mobile internet.

The latest Population and Housing Census 2022 also revealed the gender gap in connectivity, as 66.53 percent of men and 45.53 percent of women use mobile phones. The number of internet users stands at 38.02 percent of men and 23.52 percent of women, respectively.

On the other hand, a 2021 Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) study titled "Understanding the Digital Gender Divide in Rural Bangladesh: How Wide It Is and Why" found that there is a striking gender gap among the most digitally-abled members of households - 63 percent of households identified a man as the most digitally-abled person, almost twice as many as women.

The digital gender divide has not only been restricting women's access to educational opportunities, leading to a knowledge gap and skill disparities between men and women, but also further contributing to lower levels of female participation in the labor force and hindering the country's economic growth.

Women's limited access to ICT has also been leading to income disparities between men and women.

For example, Shirin Sultana, a 29-year-old from Melandoho, Jamalpur, has been stitching Nakshi Kanhass for the past five years and earning Tk 5,000 per month by selling those to a local vendor in her area.

The man resells them online throughout the country using a Facebook page. While Shirin only earns Tk 1,000 for each Kantha she stitches, the vendor sells them for around Tk 5,000 each to his customers.

Despite other female workers like Shirin being aware of this, they are unable to take advantage of the online market, as according to Shirin, "None of us know how to operate a smartphone, let alone do business online."

Inequality in digital access between genders also has a profound effect on women's health and well-being, leading to adverse health outcomes for them and their families.

Women who are unable to utilise digital technology are less likely to obtain vital health-related information, such as maternal health, family planning, or disease prevention. Additionally, the absence of digital tools can negatively affect women's mental health, making them feel isolated from their support systems and social networks, increasing the possibility of depression and anxiety.

The BIGD study indicated that social and cultural

beliefs play a significant role in preventing women from using technology. For instance, women who have limited education are often seen as incapable of using technology, while men with similar education levels are not judged the same way.

It also found that women with higher education and in leadership positions are more likely to use technology, resulting in a greater percentage of women who are educated and heads of households being found to be technology users.

The study suggested that as improving women's digital literacy is closely related to their level of education, the government must continue investing in women's education, and also raise awareness among rural citizens about the significance of digital literacy for both men and women.

Besides, although changing societal norms can be difficult, it's essential to identify and pursue feasible solutions.

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On the other hand, Dhaka University Economics Professor Dr Sayema Haque Bidisha, who is also the research director at the South Asian Network of Economic Modeling (Sanem) emphasised that parents must change their mindsets and be aware of the advantages of digital literacy for children and allow them to use the device with proper guidance so that they make the best use of it.

"The adolescent club established by the Department of Women's Affairs can raise awareness of digital literacy and its importance, while the government should increase the budget of the women and child affairs ministry, to bridge this parity," she said.

She also suggested that banks and financial institutions in upazila can significantly contribute to reducing the digital gender divide by hiring female officers who can assist women at the grassroots level in accessing the necessary information.

Nilima Jahan Rahman is a journalist at The Daily Star

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