

■ 16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM ■

Can social media help combat gender-based cyber violence?

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Social media is hailed as a democratising force, giving voices to the voiceless and connecting millions across boundaries. But in Bangladesh, it has also become a breeding ground for gender-based cyber violence, where danger thrives as rapidly as connection. According to the Cyber Crime Awareness Foundation (CCAF), cybercrime in the country doubled to 11.85 percent in just one year. This trend, marked by online harassment, account hacking, and the non-consensual sharing of explicit content, raises an urgent question: can social media evolve from a platform of harm to a tool for justice? The answer lies not in abandoning these platforms but in demanding them to evolve.

The current data paints a grim picture. Among cybercrime victims surveyed by the CCAF between April 2023 and April 2024, 78.78 percent were young adults aged 18 to 30. Children under 18 made up 13.65 percent of the victims while the remaining seven percent included those aged 31 and above. Across victims of all ages, 59 percent are women. Nearly half of them reported losing social standing, 40.15 percent experienced financial loss, and almost all suffered mental anguish. Yet, only 12 percent sought legal refuge, with 87.5 percent saying that their actions did not yield satisfactory outcomes.

These figures underscore two important issues – systemic barriers that stifle justice and the pervasive misuse of social media platforms. According to the study by CCAF, social media and online account hacking tops the list for cybercrimes in Bangladesh, making up 21.65 percent of all incidents. With such dire numbers across most metrics, we must be left to wonder what is being done by the platforms themselves.

Efforts to combat gender-based cyber violence on social media have been mixed. Meta employs artificial intelligence to detect and remove harmful content, TikTok has developed tools to flag harassment, and X has introduced advanced filters to mute abusive messages. However, these technologies often fail to address local nuances, such as language barriers and cultural stigmas. In a country like Bangladesh, where technological literacy varies widely, reliance on global moderation systems has inherent limits. These limitations reveal a pressing need for more localised solutions tailored to specific cultural and linguistic contexts.

Efforts, of course, are being made. Nirmol, the open-source project, provides a microservice-based Application Programming Interface (API) designed to

detect offensive language in Bangla and “Banglish”, fostering respectful online interactions. Similarly, research efforts such as the study Deep Learning Based Cyberbullying Detection in Bangla Language, published on arXiv by Cornell University, propose advanced models like bidirectional long short-term memory (Bi-LSTM) to identify and address cyberbullying in Bangla social media content. If properly implemented, these initiatives could create safer online spaces.

As Tarazi Mohammed Sheikh, Director of the International Law Students Association, points out, “We must acknowledge, especially in the cyber context, that both genders have a role to play. One way to address this is

transparency.” Strengthening accountability and scaling such efforts through broader collaboration can create lasting change.

Addressing cyber violence requires stronger legal frameworks and decisive action from cybercrime units to restore trust and ensure victim support. Tahiya emphasises, “Collaborations between platforms, governments, and NGOs can create lasting solutions by combining technology, policy, and grassroots expertise.” Joint efforts, including improved reporting systems and educational programmes, are essential to make social media safer.

Tech platforms, too, bear a significant responsibility. Transparency in content moderation practices, investments in human moderators who understand local contexts, and collaborations with civil society organisations are necessary steps. In Bangladesh, platforms must actively promote tools for reporting and blocking abusive content. Collaborative efforts, such as partnerships between Meta and NGOs in South Asia to combat harassment, offer promising models that can be expanded.

Despite 40.9 percent of Bangladeshi cybercrime victims having higher secondary education, digital literacy remains lacking. Tarazi emphasises, “Knowing our basic legal rights and remedies is also important. With our country’s ongoing policy and legal reformations, I believe there is ample opportunity to incorporate more rigorous legal provisions in this context and the studies of gender-based violence into the curriculum.”

From November 25 to December 10, 2024, the “16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence” campaign showcased social media’s power to rally global communities against gender-based cyber violence. The UNITE initiative urged decisive action, calling for perpetrator accountability, zero tolerance for violence, and fully funded National Action Plans. It emphasised investing in prevention and supporting women’s rights organisations to ensure survivors receive essential services. This campaign highlighted how collective efforts on networking sites can drive real, measurable change.

Digital platforms can become a powerful tool to combat gender-based cyber violence, but only if we act decisively. The tools exist: localised AI, community-led campaigns, transparent laws, and better moderation. Now, it’s about scaling these solutions and enforcing accountability. By prioritising user safety over profits, platforms can transform from enablers of harm into agents of justice. With collaborative efforts and a commitment to justice, transformation is not just possible; it’s inevitable.



ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

to begin the conversation at our homes, with our family and friends.”

Social media’s transformative power is evident through campaigns like #MeToo, which empower survivors and demand justice. In Bangladesh, initiatives like Naripokkho’s digital safety programmes and Bangladesh Mahila Parishad’s advocacy highlight their grassroots-level initiatives that leverage social networks for education. However, as Tahiya Islam, Country Manager of HerWILL, notes, “Current platform policies often fall short in mitigating gender-based cyber violence due to inconsistent enforcement and lack of