

# Fostering the Safety of Women and Children Online in South Asia

By Solyh Ahmad | 8 November 2021, 5.00pm SGT

## Overview

Much has been reported about the state of online safety in the South Asian region. Despite the enormous potential in the emerging Internet sector for the region, and the fact that just [20 per cent of the South Asian population uses the Internet](#)<sup>1</sup>, it does pose significant societal dangers that harm vulnerable people online in the community without the necessary safeguards that govern the growing digital space. Coupled with the increasing necessity of using the Internet for work, education and leisure since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an overwhelming growth of internet usage and these influence how online communities communicate and use the Internet.

Addressing online safety for women and children require multiple stakeholders that work within this nexus on a whole-of-society approach. We will attempt to encapsulate the essence of this matter; and, touch on the broad nuances that define the South Asian context; along with its existing challenges, and opportunities that can be developed to foster an environment that is safe for these communities online.

## Understanding the Nuances in South Asia

In order to bridge the present with the future, one has to appreciate the region's history intertwined with the complex undertones of its legacy of colonialism, and a society entrenched in tradition in order to understand the context which forms the digital landscape in the region.

With the demise of imperial rule in the Indian sub-continent, colonial governance institutions offered a framework for larger economic development in the region. In reality, the independence of India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) constituted a multitude of developmental pathways with uneven results [punctuated by occasionally severe political crises](#)<sup>2</sup>. This period in history later led toward flashpoints which escalated into episodes of violence as the Western colonial powers were in the region with the [objective of first establishing trade and commerce](#)<sup>3</sup>, not solely for political power nor, for nation-building. The result of its enduring institutional framework has also posed to be a hurdle to the societal development of the region, however, this will not be the ultimate goal of this brief study.

As the countries in the region steamed ahead in its economic development, the creation of a middle class has altered attitudes in the society. This departure from traditional norms brought about by greater awareness and optimism which comes with economic access is defined by a new outlook toward convenience, consumption and individuality. The outcome contributed to enlarging disparity within the society where [Jean Drèze commented in his paper - The "elitist orientation of public policy in India,"](#)<sup>4</sup> coupled by the structural inefficiencies in governance and lack of growth in productivity granted by education to the poor and middle class have persistently plagued the inclusive development of the region.

## The Challenges and Barriers that Exist

Coming back to the challenges that mire the current digital landscape in South Asia, we can point to the inherent lack of equal access and inefficiencies that exist, caused by an enlarging disparity that is entrenched on many levels of the society in the region.

Many cultural variations exist, including distinct disparities in attitudes toward women and gender minorities, such as the LGBTQIA+ community across the South Asian region. Women interviewed in the region about their online abuse experience and coping methods were emphasised [in a recent study published in 2019, demonstrating entrenched gender gaps in online access](#)<sup>5</sup>. These risks are amplified as Internet penetration rises whilst digital literacy is lacking, particularly in emerging countries that have limited resources and capacities to tackle complex issues such as online sexual abuse, cyberbullying, and Internet addiction. Exacerbating this matter amongst these countries is the fact that many have a huge rural population – [the World Bank finds that 65 per cent of the region](#)<sup>6</sup> falls within this demography. Compounding this is the existence of indigenous minorities where there is a variation of norms and sensibilities, which often gets misunderstood or unattended as their practices differ from mainstream society.

We can broadly categorise the online harms that women and gender minorities face as cyber threats; misuse of personal information; *revenge porn* and cyber-bullying. In the case of revenge porn, or, the sharing of non-consensual intimate images; the majority of survivor stories captured by civil society organisations have highlighted how this often revolves about the blurring boundaries that exist between offline and online realms where the female victim was subjected to revenge porn, accompanied by leaking personal information by her ex-partner. Within the domestic confines, women tend to have little to no access to mobile Internet despite the unprecedented growth in mobile access the region experience in recent years. Nonetheless, according to the encouraging findings in [“The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2021 by GSMA”](#)<sup>7</sup> noting a narrowing of the gender gap in mobile internet usage where the region saw it decreased significantly from 50 per cent in 2019 to 36 per cent in 2020.

Other than women, children are encountering more online harm that can negatively impact their well-being and safety. Despite the increasing necessity of using the Internet in education and social development since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, these can increase exposure amongst the young to online harm while the region’s rate of Internet penetration increases, [particularly in emerging countries that have limited resources and capacities to tackle complex issues such as online sexual abuse, cyberbullying, and Internet addiction](#)<sup>8</sup>.

Non-profits (NPOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) are working hard to reduce the extent of online harm and protect online users through advocacy and digital literacy programs, with the goal of supporting a healthy environment for online usage in South Asia's growing Internet landscape. However, such organisations are also facing increased internal and operational pressures from the South Asian governments that is proving as a challenge toward the work of these NPOs and CSOs from deepening its social impact efforts [navigating crackdowns](#)<sup>9</sup> and [punitive legislative laws on foreign-funded organisations](#)<sup>10</sup>.

## **A Way Forward and Opportunities that Foster Online Safety in South Asia**

Considering these broad challenges which the region faces, there are some pathways and examples, which can be overlapping and can be considered to foster greater online safety for women and children:

- a. Establish greater collaboration in addressing these challenges between private corporations and the public** – A whole-of-society approach involving multiple stakeholders from different sectors should come together to share common accountability in addressing the challenges that women and children in South Asia face online. As parties with agency and interest in the region, the tech industry (e.g. platform owners) could, and, have been engaging with the civil society to

forward a vision of a more-equitable digital world. Research and platforms for engagement should be established to allow work that forwards this agenda – an example would be Google’s work with CSOs in their 2019 report “[Toward Gender Equity Online: Research with the Next Billion Users](#)”<sup>11</sup>. Policymakers and government agencies should also be a part of these consultations with civil societies and private corporations to build trust and break down existing barriers that create proactive models for policy-making which leads to a more inclusive future for women and children.

- b. Greater investment in educating digital literacy** – Collective action that leads to greater investment and commitment pledged to educate the youths and equip them with digital literacy should be a priority. Most of the time, children and young people are much more well-versed in the use of digital tools than their parents. However, they may not have the necessary skills and abilities that make them *digital citizens*. “We Think Digital” is an example of a digital literacy programme that has been running in Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and countries in other regions to provide digital literacy and citizenship training to promote responsible use of the Internet. In Bangladesh, the program led by Facebook along with its partnership with the Ministry of Education, ICT Division and a2i piloted the initiative in the country as part of building the vision *Digital Bangladesh*. As social media and technology taking centre stage in many lives, Facebook’s “We Think Digital” program addresses the nation’s goal towards [digital transformation and the significance of including social media literacy to the ICT curriculum of its people to build capacity that prepares them for a safe and prosperous digital economy](#)<sup>12</sup>.

**Updating regulatory and enforcement codes that reflect currency in the digital landscape** – As the digital and tech landscape constantly evolves, more effort needs to be aligned in developing a progressive legal and enforcement code that moves away from archaic definitions of harms and abuse. There is also a greater need for lawmakers and policymakers to consider and include local languages and terminologies used by victims (especially in indigenous populations), and break the stigma behind abuse, which more often than not, either comes about due to their offline experiences, or, spills over to the digital sphere.

*Note: The opinions expressed in this blog post are those of the author. They do not purport to reflect the opinions or views of the Asia Internet Coalition (AIC) or its members.*

## References and Citations

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