

Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence in Cambodia

Impact on the Civic Freedoms of Women Journalists and Human Rights Defenders



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Asia Centre
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Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) is an issue of concern in Cambodia, as digital platforms are increasingly used to perpetrate harassment against women and girls. From cyberbullying to the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, TFGBV not only causes psychological harm but also reinforces societal inequalities, limiting survivors' freedom of expression and participation in public life.

Despite the severity of the problem, legal frameworks and support systems remain insufficient to address the evolving nature of digital violence.

This report sheds light on the widespread yet often underreported issue of TFGBV. By exploring the different forms of online violence and their impact, the report aims to raise awareness among policymakers, civil society, and the general public about the urgent need for action.


A total of 12 interviews with female respondents have been incorporated into this report to provide readers with a comprehensive, first-hand understanding of the impacts TFGBV has on the civic freedoms of women in Cambodia. We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to all these respondents – whose names have been anonymised – for their valuable input and for sharing their lived experiences with TFGBV.

We are also grateful to Asia Centre's partner for this project, the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), for supporting this report.

Research, drafting, and editing were led by Marc Piñol Rovira (PhD), Research Manager at the Asia Centre. Kum Somaly, Research Associate, contributed to this project with primary data collection and developing professional networks. Srushti Barbade and Bunthoeun Sreykun, Research Interns, assisted in the desk research stage and primary data collection, respectively.

Asia Centre hopes this report and its recommendations will help create an online environment where harassment is not an issue and women and girls' civic freedoms are respected.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'James Gomez', with a stylized flourish underneath.

Dr James Gomez
Regional Director
Asia Centre

ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
GBV	Gender-based Violence
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil & Political Rights
ICNL	International Center for Not-for-Profit Law
(I)NGO	(International) Non-governmental Organisation
IP	Indigenous People
KII	Key Informant Interview
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Intersex (and others)
MoWA	Ministry of Women's Affairs (Cambodia)
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
RGC	Royal Government of Cambodia
TFGBV	Tech-facilitated Gender-based Violence
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
(W)HRD	(Women) Human Rights Defender

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The growing use of internet-powered tools for advocacy by women has been accompanied by a parallel rise in technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). This form of harassment is perpetrated, exacerbated, or enabled through digital platforms, such as social media. While all women and girls are at risk of TFGBV, the issue is particularly acute for women who are highly visible in the public sphere due to the nature of their professions.

Despite the severity of the issue, women's experiences with TFGBV in Cambodia remain poorly documented. This report examines TFGBV experienced by women with high visibility in the public domain, including women human rights defenders (WHRDs), members of Indigenous groups advocating for their rights, journalists, and leaders of civil society organisations (CSOs). It draws on comprehensive desk research and interviews with 12 women representatives from these groups.

The report shows that in Cambodia, TFGBV is better understood as a form of harassment that amplifies and sustains existing forms of gender-based violence against high-profile women engaged in advocacy. On a deeper level, the report argues that TFGBV persists primarily due to patriarchal social structures and a flawed ecosystem spanning multiple sectors – including judicial and defence mechanisms – that collectively contribute to the persistence of this issue. These findings are addressed in four parts:

Firstly, the report provides the necessary contextual information to understand TFGBV as a pressing issue in Cambodia:

1. TFGBV is rooted in gender-based violence (GBV), reinforcing patriarchal structures that legitimise gender-discriminatory actions, often escalating into GBV.
2. In the context of GBV, online tools amplify and extend this issue into the digital sphere.
3. Perpetrators of TFGBV include both state and non-state actors. State actors may comprise elected officials, security forces, and state-run or state-affiliated media, while non-state actors include individuals and groups – such as cyber armies – aligned with the government, as well as those personally connected to survivors, such as friends and relatives.

Secondly, the report identifies three main forms of TFGBV:

1. Online cyberbullying – or online harassment – which primarily affects women journalists, rights defenders, and Indigenous women, involves derogatory comments on social media aimed at undermining their credibility. This can sometimes escalate to physical intimidation.
2. Online sexual harassment, which includes derogatory messages, unsolicited explicit images, or requests for such content, typically targets WHRDS, journalists, and Indigenous community members.
3. The decontextualisation and manipulation of online content, where messages are distorted or survivors are misrepresented – such as Indigenous women being labelled as witches due to their spiritual beliefs. These actions hinder women's civic freedoms, restricting their freedom of expression, association, and religious practice, among others.

Thirdly, the report outlines three defences against TFGBV:

1. Using law enforcement mechanisms is an option with several weaknesses. Existing legal provisions barely address TFGBV, as specific laws are largely missing. Further, the legal and judicial systems are ill-prepared to adopt a survivor-centred approach, which is essential for making TFGBV survivors feel comfortable and supported as they navigate these traumatic experiences.
2. Second, reporting TFGBV through CSOs, either through one's organisation or a third-party organisation. The key challenge here is that many organisations lack specific protocols to address GBV in the online sphere, and the limited availability of IT specialists further limits its effectiveness.
3. Third, calling out online harassment by publicising it on their social media handles. Increasingly, this is one strategy some women use to raise awareness among the general public.

Fourthly, this report presents a set of recommendations to address the above concerns, emphasising the necessity of a multistakeholder approach to TFGBV. This is essential, as TFGBV is not solely about digital technologies but also rooted in interlinked societal issues that predate the internet itself.

1. UN member states and civil society should use the UN human rights mechanisms to identify and suggest actionable solutions for the Government of Cambodia. In turn, Cambodian government agencies can also calibrate existing national legal frameworks to be responsive to cases of TFGBV, creating a safe environment where women can report such cases without fear of retaliation.
2. Local CSOs should monitor and document instances of TFGBV and raise awareness within communities. As developers of online platforms, technology companies should also take proactive steps to protect women in digital spaces.
3. The media sector, including mass media outlets, should not promote misogynistic attitudes that can result in gender-based violence. Instead, it should highlight women's voices that seek to address the patriarchal structures entrenched in Cambodian society.

These recommendations aim to prevent survivors from withdrawing from the public sphere – an outcome that is not uncommon, as many respondents explained. For example, while some women-led organisations report leaders stepping down, others, such as journalists, reduce their engagement on social media and professional networks. However, this response is counterproductive, as it aligns with the intended impact of TFGBV – silencing women and pushing them out of the public sphere – and, therefore, should not be understood as a defence.

As technologies evolve, it is also crucial to remain vigilant to new developments. This is particularly true with the emergence of AI, which risks exacerbating TFGBV and further complicating efforts to combat it. For instance, AI not only enables enhanced monitoring of targets and survivors but also facilitates the creation of highly realistic fake content that can be used to deceive individuals and further threaten their integrity.

Against this backdrop, only collective action can effectively address TFGBV, an increasingly pressing modern manifestation of GBV in Cambodia. Collaborative efforts involving government authorities, civil society organisations, private sector actors, and international stakeholders are essential to developing and implementing comprehensive strategies that counteract the evolving threats posed by technology while safeguarding the rights and dignity of survivors.

1. Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a long-standing and pervasive issue in Cambodia. In 2021, an estimated 34% of women – who made up 50.5% of the population in early 2024 – reported experiencing some form of GBV ([National Institute of Statistics, 2024](#)). Since the early 2000s, the widespread use of the internet has introduced new forms of abuse such as cyberbullying, doxxing, and online sexual harassment. Known as technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), it affected nearly 30% of women in Cambodia in 2018 ([Premawardhana, 2018](#)). Recent estimates suggest that almost 86% of young people aged 15 to 25 – particularly women and girls – are at risk of experiencing online violence ([The ASEAN Post, 2019](#); [Raveendran, 2023](#)). With the use of technology, perpetrators seek to silence women’s views and undermine their credibility. As a result, their civic freedoms, including freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief, and the right to safety and privacy, are in jeopardy.

Against this backdrop, this report examines the impact of TFGBV on the civic liberties of women engaged in civic space: women journalists, women human rights defenders (WHRDs), leaders of women-led civil society organisations (CSOs), and Indigenous women advocating for their communities’ rights. It shows that the rise of TFGBV underscores the weaknesses in Cambodia’s protective framework for women’s rights, allowing digital platforms to intensify longstanding gender prejudices biases that harm women’s civic liberties.

Chapter 1 explores TFGBV as a digital extension of GBV, exacerbated by the rise of digital technologies. *Chapter 2* reviews Cambodia’s national legal frameworks related to gender equality and violence against women, assessing their effectiveness in addressing TFGBV. *Chapter 3* highlights the primary forms of TFGBV, examines available defence mechanisms, and identifies their limitations. *Chapter 4* encompasses a set of policy recommendations for state and non-state actors, focusing on combating TFGBV and safeguarding women’s civic freedoms in an increasingly digital world.

1.1. Methodology

The research for this report consisted of three phases:

First, desk research was conducted to assess the existing literature on TFGBV in Cambodia. This allowed the Research Team to frame the research topic, narrow down its scope, and identify the relevant knowledge gaps to be further investigated. Primary and secondary sources were consulted, including international human rights covenants such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Cambodia’s legal framework such as the Constitution and other relevant laws, national programmes on gender by the Ministry of Women Affairs (MoWA), and reports from international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), local CSOs, and news outlets.

Second, the Research Team incorporated the views of 12 women in the media sector, human rights defenders, women-led organisations, and indigenous communities – see Annex I for a list of respondent’s backgrounds – to address the knowledge gaps identified in the desk research stage and to draft the recommendations in Chapter 4. Key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted online and a safety protocol was implemented to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of all respondents, as well as the secure storage of all interview data.

Third, the draft report was internally reviewed by the Asia Centre team and was then submitted to the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) team for further review. The necessary adjustments were made by the Asia Centre team before its final submission.

1.2. Key Terms



Cyberbullying

The use of digital platforms, such as social media or messaging apps, to harass, threaten, or harm others through abusive messages, spreading rumours, or other harmful behaviours online ([UNICEF, n.d.](#))



Doxing

The collection of personal information about a target or their connections (such as family, relatives, or friends) through various online sources such as search engines, social media, discussion forums, public records, or anonymous tips, and then publicly sharing on the internet, social media or other open platforms, including physical public spaces ([PCPD, n.d.](#))



Harassment

Unwanted and aggressive behaviour, typically repeated, that intimidates, threatens, or demeans an individual, causing them distress or discomfort. It can occur in various forms, including verbal, physical, or online (cyber harassment) ([Free Speech Center, n.d.](#))



Online Harassment

Using digital platforms to intimidate, threaten, or harm an individual through abusive messages, insults, stalking, or other hostile actions. It can occur via social media, emails, or online forums and often involves repeated behaviour aimed at distressing the victim ([Ibid.](#))



Online Sexual Harassment

Unwelcomed and inappropriate sexual behaviour or comments directed at an individual through digital platforms. This can include unsolicited sexual messages, sharing explicit content without consent, cyberstalking or making sexual advances online, causing distress or discomfort to the victim ([Ibid.](#))



Sextortion

A form of blackmail that involves threatening to share intimate or explicit images or videos of an individual unless they comply with certain demands, typically for more explicit material or money. It often occurs online and exploits victims' fears of public humiliation or damage to their reputations ([Internet Matters, n.d.](#))



Violence

The intentional use of physical force or power, whether threatened or actual, against oneself or another person, resulting in harm, injury, or psychological damage. It can take various forms, including physical, emotional, sexual, or verbal abuse, and can occur in interpersonal relationships, communities, or broader societal contexts ([UNHRC, n.d.](#))



Tech-facilitated Gender-based Violence

A form of violence perpetrated against someone based on their gender, mainly women, through the use of information or communication technologies or digital media ([UNFPA, 2023](#)).



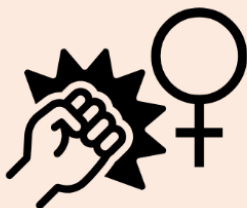
Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs)

Women and girls who work on human rights issues, including any civil society actors who do not identify as HRDs such as journalists, health workers, environmental activists, peacebuilders, development and humanitarian actors, etc ([OHCHR, n.d.](#)). For this report, WHRDs include all women in civic spaces – journalists; HRDs; labour, climate, indigenous, and land rights activists; and women-leading CSOs.

1.3. Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence

Since the late 2000s, the widespread use of the internet and digital platforms – such as blogs, vlogs, social media, and instant messaging applications – has empowered women and organisations advocating for women's rights to promote their civic freedoms, including freedom of expression, association, media, and religion. However, these same internet-enabled platforms have also exacerbated and perpetuated GBV, undermining women's participation in civic spaces (see Chapter 3). To provide context to these developments, this section overviews GBV in Cambodia as a long-standing issue and introduces how digital technology has transformed and further entrenched GBV in Cambodia.

1.3.1. The Persistence of Gender-Based Violence in Cambodia



As of 2024, GBV remains a pervasive global issue, with nearly one in three women worldwide experiencing physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, most often perpetrated by an intimate partner ([World Health Organisation, 2024](#)). GBV encompasses a spectrum of harmful acts directed at individuals – primarily women – based on their gender ([CEDAW, 1992](#)), transcending all boundaries, and affecting women of diverse ages, races, ethnicities, religions, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Certain groups face heightened vulnerability to GBV, including elderly women, young girls, individuals with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and other (LGBTQI+) communities. These groups often encounter intersecting forms of discrimination that compound their risk of victimisation ([Health Poverty Action, n.d.](#)).

Several factors contribute to GBV, including entrenched gender stereotypes, patriarchal systems, regional norms, cultural traditions, religious practices, conflicts, crises, economic hardships, displacement, and inadequate legal protections ([International Rescue Committee, 2023](#); [UN, 2023](#); [Solotaroff & Pande, 2014](#)). Perpetrators of GBV can broadly be categorised into state and non-state actors. State actors include elected officials, security forces, state-run cyber armies, state proxies, and state-affiliated or state-run media. Non-state actors encompass individuals associated with the state, religious extremists, fundamentalist groups, intimate partners, relatives, friends of targets, employers, and others ([DanChurchAid, 2023](#); [UNHRC, n.d.](#)).

Forms of GBV can also be categorised into two groups. The first is domestic violence which includes intimate partner violence, sexual violence, femicide – the intentional killing of a woman or girl – human

trafficking, female genital mutilation, child or forced marriage, psychological abuse, and economic violence ([European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.](#)). In Cambodia, domestic violence primarily manifests as intimate partner violence and sexual violence within households ([Ministry of Women's Affairs Cambodia, 2020](#); [World Bank, 2019](#)). According to the Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey 2021-2022 ([National Institute of Statistics, 2024](#)), among 5,780 ever-partnered women aged 15-49 who were interviewed, 20.7% reported experiencing at least one form of emotional, physical, or sexual violence in their lifetime. Additionally, 13.2% of women reported experiencing physical or sexual violence between 2021 and 2022.

The second form of GBV is directed at women who are highly visible in the public sphere, often because of the nature of their jobs. In Cambodia, female media professionals are one of the primary targets with nearly half (48%) of female journalists experiencing GBV and 45% of reported instances took place outside the newsroom, verbal abuse being the most common form of violence against them (63%), according to data from 2017 ([IFJ, 2017](#)). Women human rights defenders (WHRDs), particularly those involved in land conflicts and disputes with both government entities and private companies ([Amnesty International, 2017](#)), face a high incidence of GBV. A 2016 study ([CCHR, 2016](#)) reported that 94.5% of WHRDs involved in these disputes experienced threats, 73.1% faced harassment or intimidation, 33.6% suffered violence, and 2.1% were arrested by authorities. For women engaged in land conflicts specifically with land concession actors, 59.5% reported threats, 49% endured harassment, 24% encountered violence, and 1.5% were arrested.

Violence against women and girls infringes on their fundamental freedoms, including the right to life, freedom from torture and degrading treatment, freedom from discrimination, and the right to safety and security. Furthermore, GBV inflicts social and economic harm, such as social isolation, heightened gender inequalities, healthcare costs, income loss, and damage to career prospects ([World Health Organisation, 2024](#)). These consequences are compounded by the fact that many cases of GBV go unreported, as survivors¹ often avoid seeking assistance due to fears of blame, stigma, judicial processes, and potential reprisals ([IFJ, 2017](#); [UNFPA Cambodia, 2023](#)).

With the widespread use of the internet, social media, and messaging applications, a new challenge has emerged: the use of digital technologies to perpetrate violence against women, known as technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). This issue is explored in detail in the next section and will serve as the central focus of this report.

1.3.2. The Projection of Gender-Based Violence onto Online Platforms

With GBV being a pervasive issue in Cambodia, the popular use of the internet, social media, and messaging applications has brought GBV to online spaces. Digital platforms, which provide women civil society actors with new opportunities for communication and advocacy, have also facilitated GBV online that jeopardises women and girls' safety, hindered their civic freedoms, and limited their full civic participation.



¹ The term "survivors" is preferred over "victims" when discussing GBV and TFGBV, as it is more empowering and acknowledges the resilience and agency of those affected. "Survivors" reflects strength and dignity, while "victims" can imply passivity. However, "victims" may still be appropriate in legal contexts where it is a technical term. It is important to respect individuals' preferences in how they identify, and this shift in language promotes a more supportive and empowering narrative.

The widespread adoption of the internet and social media, as illustrated below in Tables 1 and 2, has been a defining trait of Cambodia's digital transformation since the late 2000s.

Table 1: Cambodia's Internet Penetration Index

Year	Population (in millions) (Male/Female Gender Ratio)	Internet Penetration	Year	Population (in millions) (Male/Female Gender Ratio)	Internet Penetration
2015	15.62 (48.8/51.2)	25%	2020	16.73 (48.9/51.1)	58%
2016	15.85 (48.9/51.1)	N/A	2021	16.97 (48.9/51.1)	52.6%
2017	16.07 (48.9/51.1)	45%	2022	17.2 (48.9/51.1)	78.8%
2018	16.27 (48.9/51.1)	50%	2023	17.42 (49/51)	67.5%
2019	16.48 (48.9/51.1)	76%	2024	17.64 (49/51)	56.7%

Source: [World Bank, 2024a](#); [2024b](#); [Kemp, Digital in Cambodia, 2015-2024](#)

Table 2: Cambodia's Social Media Penetration Index

Year	Social Media Penetration (Male/Female Gender Ratio)	Year	Social Media Penetration (Male/Female Gender Ratio)
2015	16% (n/a)	2020	58% (n/a)
2016	n/a	2021	71.3%* (n/a)
2017	31% (n/a)	2022	73.9% (55.2/44.8)
2018	43% (n/a)	2023	65% (55/45)
2019	51% (n/a)	2024	68.4%* (55.2/44.8)

Source: [Kemp, Digital in Cambodia, 2015-2024](#)

*The percentage of social media users could be higher than the internet users due to delays in the reporting of internet user data, or they could suggest an increase in duplicate or "non-human" social media accounts.

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, social media adoption in Cambodia surged alongside the rapid expansion of internet access, with Facebook becoming the leading platform for communication, content sharing, and staying updated on current events ([Sun, 2016](#)), as seen below in Table 3:

Table 3: Social Media Use by Platform, 2024

Social Media Platform	No. of Users (in millions)	Women Users (%)
Facebook	11.65	44.8
TikTok	9.96	46.7
Instagram	1.85	55.7
LinkedIn	0.65	43.3
X (formerly Twitter)	0.55	44.9

Source: [Kemp, 2024](#)

As Table 3 shows, TikTok has gained significant popularity, particularly among youth, due to its focus on short, engaging videos and its user-friendly design, enabling easy content creation and sharing ([Cambodia Creative, 2023](#)). This trend marks a shift in media consumption, with younger audiences favouring platforms that encourage creativity and interaction.

In terms of instant messaging applications such as Telegram (10 million users), Messenger (5.5 million users, with 45.1% of female users),² Line (4.5 million users), and WhatsApp (4.2 million users) ([Rov, 2024](#)) are widely used for communication in the country, as they allow users to connect with friends and family, share information, and interact with businesses and government officials more easily ([IPS Cambodia, 2022](#)). Telegram leads the list due to its user-friendly interface and strong security features, making it the preferred messaging application for an increasing number of Cambodians ([Activify, n.d.](#)). While Facebook Messenger is also widely used, it raises privacy concerns among users as it shares data, such as phone numbers and locations, with other companies within Meta's network of platforms and services ([IPS Cambodia, 2022](#)) – which includes Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp.

This digital transformation has revolutionised civic engagement, empowering women with greater visibility and influence. The internet, bypassing traditional media, allows diverse information access ([Schradié, 2018](#)), with platforms such as Facebook facilitating dialogue between citizens and officials ([University Canada West, n.d.](#)). For example, WHRDs leverage social media to amplify messages on critical issues, host online protests, and share experiences of gender-based violence through campaigns such as 'Speak Out, Sisters!' ([Frontline Defenders, n.d.](#); [Phat, 2023](#); [The Obama Foundation, 2022](#)). This shift enhances solidarity, fosters real-time collaboration, and mobilises support for women's rights, driving significant social change ([Carruthers, 2024](#)).

However, the same platforms that facilitate greater civic engagement and activism have become conducive to TFGBV through smartphones, social media platforms, and instant messaging applications ([UN 2023](#)). In 2018, nearly 29% of women reported experiences of online harassment in the last decade ([Premawardhana, 2018](#)), manifested through instances of cyberstalking, trolling, doxxing, and non-consensual image sharing, as detailed in Chapter 3.

² The gender breakdown for instant messaging applications is only available for Messenger.

In Cambodia, as with global trends, anyone can become a target of TFGBV. However, it has become particularly prominent among women with high public visibility, including rights defenders, media professionals, and especially women active in civic spaces (Kehoe, 2020; Celuch et al., 2018). As noted by a representative from a CSO, “online harassment is one of the key concerns for women in general, and an even greater concern for those who are influencers, media presenters, and human rights defenders” (KII 201). A survey conducted by LICADHO (2021) revealed that over 50% of journalists and human rights defenders reported experiencing online harassment, underscoring the heightened risks faced by these groups. This survey also identified major social media platforms, such as Facebook, Messenger, and Telegram, as significant venues for such harassment, where abusive comments, threats, and intimidation are prevalent. Furthermore, a global study by UNESCO (2023), which includes Cambodian reporters, found that 73% of women media workers have experienced online violence, underscoring the pervasive nature of this issue.

A key consequence of TFGBV is its severe repercussions on health, including mental health issues such as stress, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicide attempts in extreme cases (UNFPA, n.d.). It also leads to social isolation and self-censorship on social media platforms (DCA, 2023). These effects can translate into significant economic impacts, such as job losses, reduced earning capacity, loss of social capital, and harm to professional reputations (UN Women, n.d.).

Compounding this problem, support to tackle TFGBV remains limited, and many survivors struggle to find necessary resources, legal assistance or emotional support. Although some survivors take action by using reporting mechanisms offered by social media platforms or pursuing legal avenues, these efforts often yield disappointing results, as cases are frequently dismissed because they do not violate community policies or cannot proceed due to the anonymity of the attackers (ICNL, 2023).

Despite the challenges posed by digital technology, TFGBV in Cambodia remains under-researched, particularly regarding its various forms, impacts, available defence mechanisms, and policy recommendations specifically aimed at addressing the needs of women with high public visibility. This scarcity of detailed analysis presents a significant barrier to advancing gender equality and ensuring the safety and well-being of women in an increasingly digital world. Without adequate research and reporting, it becomes difficult for policymakers, CSOs, and advocates to develop effective strategies and interventions.

To address this gap, this report delves into TFGBV in Cambodia through the perspectives of women whose work makes them highly visible in the public sphere. As Chapter 3 addresses in greater detail, technology primarily amplifies existing forms of GBV, including bullying and attempts to publicly discredit women, rather than creating entirely new forms of violence against women. This underscores the weaknesses in the protection ecosystem for violence against women, not only in the digital sphere but also in the offline world.

1.4. TFGBV in International Legal Frameworks and UN Reports to Cambodia

International human rights frameworks address GBV extensively. However, TFGBV is only being addressed with minor amendments to some human rights covenants to acknowledge the role of technology as a source of GBV.

In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (1948), several articles enshrine the protection of all people, including women, against violence, ensuring their safety, dignity, and freedom: Article 3 enshrines the right to life, liberty, and security; Article 5 prohibits any form of torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment; Article 12 protects people against forms of arbitrary interference with privacy; and Article 18 ensures freedom of thought.

Lastly, Article 19 guarantees freedom of expression on media platforms, making it particularly relevant to address instances of TFGBV even if the Declaration was drafted before the widespread use of the internet, social media, and instant messaging applications. Furthermore, the UN's Human Rights Committee stated in General Comment No. 34 ([Human Rights Committee, 2011](#)) that Article 19 safeguards all forms of expression and means of their dissemination including internet-based platforms. Paragraph 12 states:

"Paragraph 2 [of General Comment No. 34] protects all forms of expression and the means of their dissemination. Such forms include spoken, written and sign language and such non-verbal expressions as images and objects of art.²³ Means of expression include books, newspapers, ²⁴ pamphlets, ²⁵ posters, banners, ²⁶ dress and legal submissions. ²⁷ They include all forms of audio-visual as well as electronic and internet-based modes of expression."

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) ([1979](#)), in its Articles 1, 2, and 3, calls for comprehensive policies, legislative actions, and measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women. Article 5 urges the modification of social and cultural patterns to eliminate prejudice and stereotypes against women. Article 6 addresses forms of trafficking in women and the exploitation of prostitution. Articles 11 to 14 focus on eliminating discrimination against women in the workplace, ensuring access to healthcare, and economic and social benefits, and addressing discrimination against women in rural areas.

In its General Recommendation No. 19, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) ([1992](#)) addresses violence against women, recognising it as a form of discrimination. The recommendation emphasises that states bear the responsibility for preventing, investigating, and punishing acts of violence against women, whether these acts are committed by state agents or private individuals. Through General Recommendation No. 35, CEDAW updated [General Recommendation No. 19](#) to specifically include online violence and called for states to adopt specific laws addressing these forms of violence targeted at women ([2017](#)).

During the first Universal Periodic Review (UPR) cycle (2008-2012) ([UPR-Info, 2024](#)), several recommendations were made to Cambodia concerning gender-based violence (GBV). These included the creation of comprehensive awareness campaigns on gender equality and improved protections against trafficking, sexual violence, domestic abuse, and the exploitation of women, along with enhanced training for police and law enforcement personnel. At that time, in the late 2000s and early 2010s, the internet and digital technologies were just beginning to gain popularity, yet the negative impacts of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) were still emerging.

During the second Universal Periodic Review (UPR) cycle (2012-2016) ([UPR-Info, 2024](#)), several specific recommendations were made regarding the digital sphere, urging Cambodia to combat discrimination and all forms of violence against women while enhancing efforts to hold perpetrators accountable. Other recommendations focused on improving human rights practices nationwide, safeguarding freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, and urging the government to protect human rights defenders, journalists, activists, and opposition party members from harassment, intimidation, and arbitrary arrest. It was also recommended that the Penal Code and other laws be updated to align with international standards, thereby ensuring better protection for these groups. Additionally, the international community called for the management of demonstrations in a manner that respects human rights and avoids violence, recommending the adoption of protective measures for demonstrators and the provision of human rights-focused training for police.

In the third UPR cycle (2017-2021) ([UPR-Info, 2024](#)), numerous recommendations focused on addressing GBV and protecting the rights of journalists, human rights defenders, activists, and CSOs

both online and offline. Recommendations were made to strengthen efforts to eliminate GBV and ensure the punishment of perpetrators. They also called for mandatory training for judicial and law enforcement officers, the establishment of support centres for survivors, and the adoption of legislative reforms to strengthen protections against GBV.

Additionally, recommendations from the 3rd UPR cycle also advocate for the creation of a safe environment for potential TFGBV targets to operate freely without fear of harassment, intimidation, or arbitrary arrest. Cambodia was urged to end the use of laws that restrict freedom of expression, cease all forms of interference and surveillance of media and online platforms, and reform laws that limit the activities of political parties, CSOs, media outlets, and labour unions. Furthermore, the recommendations emphasised the need to protect journalists and media practitioners from judicial harassment and to ensure that media and civil society can operate without governmental interference.

Although Cambodia has accepted the majority of recommendations from these three cycles but has largely failed to implement them, some positive developments must be noted ([UPR-info, 2024](#)), such as the efforts to strengthen training materials for authorities and CSOs which focus on survivor-centred approaches consisting of legal protection, counselling, limited use of mediation and health system management of GBV cases. However, no progress has been made in updating the law on family violence or strengthening judicial mechanisms, leaving most GBV cases unresolved in court.

At the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) level, member states have adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women ([ASEAN, 2017](#)). It recognises GBV as also encompassing violence committed through information and communications technology and calls for the strengthening of laws and national policies to protect and support survivors, emphasising a holistic approach that promotes women's rights. This includes implementing laws to investigate and prosecute perpetrators and ensuring survivors have access to justice, legal aid, social welfare, education, and health services. The declaration also advocates for the enhancement of national mechanisms to implement international recommendations and underscores the importance of partnerships with international, regional, and local entities, including UN agencies, civil society, and the private sector.

The mid-term review for the implementation of the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action found that, by 2020, Cambodia developed a National Action Plan on the Prevention of Violence Against Women ([MoWA, 2020](#)), standardising data collection to meet international standards, and initiating efforts to institutionalize interagency cooperation, strengthen administrative frameworks, and draft government SOP guidelines ([RPA on EVAW 2016 – 2025](#)).

To implement the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children and the ASEAN Committee on Women jointly developed the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Women ([ASEAN, 2017](#)). This action plan translates the declaration into actionable steps to guide regional and national implementation. It includes measures to prevent, protect and support survivors, legal frameworks and prosecution systems, capacity building, research and data collection, and management and coordination. Additionally, it emphasises the importance of partnerships and collaboration, as well as regular review and communication to ensure effective implementation.

All in all, the rapid digital transformation of Cambodia has compounded rather than addressed the long-standing issue of GBV, giving rise to forms that target women and girls online and in digital spaces. Although Cambodia has signed and ratified key international human rights covenants, which uphold women's rights, a critical examination of national laws is essential to assess their effectiveness against these international standards. The next chapter delves into Cambodia's legal framework on this subject, offering a detailed analysis of its strengths and gaps in addressing GBV, particularly in the context of technology-facilitated abuse.

2. Cambodia's National Legal Framework

Several legal provisions, outlined in various legal documents, are in place to address gender-based violence in Cambodia. This chapter provides an overview of this legal framework. It reviews four types of documents: the Constitution, the Criminal Code, gender-specific laws, and gender frameworks, assessing their adequacy in addressing TFGBV in the country.

2.1. The Constitution



The Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia (2008) incorporates several provisions relevant to addressing gender-based violence and ensuring equality. Article 31 affirms the human rights enshrined in the UN Charter, UDHR, and related covenants and conventions, emphasising that every Khmer citizen is equal and enjoys the same rights and freedoms regardless of gender. Article 32 guarantees fundamental rights, including the right to life, personal freedom, and security. Articles 35 and 36 highlight the active participation of all citizens in the political, economic, social, and cultural life of the nation, irrespective of gender. Article 37 protects the right to strike

and engage in nonviolent demonstrations within the legal framework.

Article 38 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia protects against physical abuse, unlawful prosecution, arrest, and detention, and ensures the preservation of citizens' life, honour, and dignity. Article 41 guarantees Khmer citizens the freedom of expression, press, publication, and assembly. Article 45 mandates the abolition of all forms of discrimination against women and prohibits their exploitation in employment. Article 46 prohibits human trafficking, exploitation through prostitution, and any obscenity that affects the reputation of women.

2.2. The Criminal Code

Cambodia's Criminal Code (2009) includes several provisions aimed at criminalising discrimination, violence, and harassment, including those specifically targeting women.

Article 188 addresses crimes against humanity, encompassing sexual violence, gender-based persecution, and other inhumane acts. Article 205 criminalises murder accompanied by acts of torture, cruelty, or rape. Protection against physical abuse is further reinforced by Article 210, which penalises acts of torture and cruelty, and Articles 217 and 222, which criminalise intentional acts of violence, including those perpetrated by a spouse or partner, highlighting the code's focus on domestic violence.



Sexual offences are explicitly covered in Article 239, which defines and criminalises rape, and Article 246, which targets indecent assault, encompassing non-consensual sexual contact. Article 250 addresses sexual harassment, particularly the abuse of authority to obtain sexual favours, crucial for protecting women in professional and power-imbalanced settings. Article 253 criminalises unlawful detention and confinement, relevant in cases of trafficking, prostitution, and domestic or intimate partner violence.

Discriminatory practices are tackled through Articles 265, 267, 269, and 270, which penalise refusal to supply goods or services, refusal to hire, wrongful termination of employment, and denial of rights by public officials on discriminatory grounds, including gender. Article 284 addresses procuring, and criminalising acts that promote or profit from prostitution, thus addressing human trafficking and exploitation, which disproportionately affect women.

Article 302 relates to privacy and reputation, criminalising the unauthorised recording of a person's image in private spaces, relevant in cases of harassment or exploitation of women. Articles 305-308 cover defamation and public insult, including through media, protecting actions that harm a woman's reputation or subject her to public shaming. Lastly, Articles 423 and 425 address threats to cause damage and the dissemination of false information, which can be used as tools of intimidation or manipulation, particularly against women.

2.3. Gender Laws

Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Protection of Victims



Law on the Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation



Labour Law



The Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the Protection of Victims ([2005](#)) aims to prevent domestic violence, protect survivors, and foster a culture of non-violence and harmony within households in Cambodia.

Articles 9 to 12 specify the responsibilities of authorities to intervene promptly in cases of domestic violence, document incidents and report to prosecutors. The Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) officials are given the authority to act as judicial police, enabling them to file complaints on behalf of survivors. Articles 20 to 32 outline the role of courts in issuing protective orders for survivors. The courts have the authority to impose various restrictions on perpetrators, such as prohibiting contact with survivors or entering their homes.

Articles 33 and 34 underscore the importance of public education about the law, promoting peaceful conflict resolution, and training relevant officials and organisations on domestic violence issues. The law encourages the state to conduct awareness programmes to inform citizens about their responsibilities within households and the legal measures available to prevent domestic violence.

The Law on the Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation ([2008](#)) aims to combat human trafficking and sexual exploitation to safeguard the rights and dignity of women.

Articles 8 to 10 define and penalise the unlawful removal of individuals for exploitative purposes. Articles 12 to 15 address related offences, including unlawful recruitment for exploitation and the buying, selling, or exchanging of persons. Article 21 criminalises the unlawful arrest, detention, or confinement of individuals without legal authority. Additionally, Articles 26 to 31 criminalise the procurement of prostitution, specifically targeting those who facilitate or encourage others to engage in prostitution.

Cambodia's Labour Law (1997) contain provisions aimed at addressing discrimination and harassment against women, ensuring fair and equal treatment in the workplace.

Article 12 prohibits employers from making employment decisions, such as hiring, assignment, or promotion, based on sex. Article 106 reinforces the principle of equal pay for equal work, mandating that wages be equal for all workers regardless of their sex. Article 172 specifically addresses women's labour, requiring employers to maintain decency and good behaviour among workers, and strictly prohibiting any form of sexual harassment.

Articles 182 and 183 focus on protecting women during maternity leave, prohibiting employers from laying off women during this period and ensuring that women receive half of their wages during maternity leave.

Specific to the digital sphere, the Government has drafted a Cybercrime Law designed to manage and maintain the cybersecurity of Critical Information Infrastructures to ensure national safety and service sustainability (Accessnow, n.d.). This law is intended to address TFGBV, including against WHRDs, by enhancing cybersecurity and countering harmful digital activities. However, the draft has raised significant concerns about privacy and freedom of expression. Its broad and vague terms could give the government excessive powers to prosecute critics under the pretext of protecting public order, (Human Rights Watch, 2020), while TFGBV often remain unaddressed. Weak enforcement mechanisms and the prioritisation of control over survivors' protection exacerbate this issue, leaving vulnerable groups, including women, without adequate recourse (Cambodianess, 2020; Global Voices, 2023; Kelliher & Sun Narin, 2024).

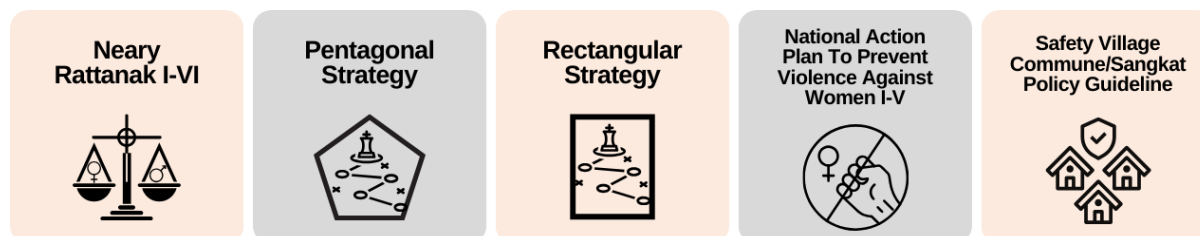
Experts, including ICNL in the report Legal Analysis: Cambodia, Draft Law on Cybercrime (2022), have identified several issues with the draft. The law could restrict freedom of speech by criminalising various forms of expression. It imposes obligations on service providers to manage and disclose subscriber information, undermining anonymity and encryption. The draft also includes broad administrative penalties that could target CSOs, such as licence suspensions or revocations. Furthermore, it grants the government extensive surveillance powers with minimal judicial oversight.

Article 45 criminalises the dissemination of disinformation through information technology, with broad categories that could stifle legitimate discourse and independent media, thus weakening democracy (Ibid). Articles 8 and 12 require service providers to retain internet traffic data for at least 180 days if requested, with penalties for non-compliance (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Articles 6 and 7 give the government the power to issue warnings, fines, and suspend or revoke business licences, potentially targeting civil society and businesses. Articles 32 and 33 penalise "unauthorised access" to computer systems, which could be used to prosecute whistleblowers and journalists (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Cambodia currently lacks a data protection law to regulate official data requests, leaving personal data vulnerable to misuse. The draft bill grants authorities broad data search powers without independent oversight, raising concerns over government overreach, digital rights, and privacy protections (Adams, 2020). Without clear safeguards, there is a risk of unchecked surveillance and misalignment with international data standards.

2.4. Gender-Specific Frameworks

The country set up the [Ministry of Women's Affairs \(MoWA\)](#) in 1993 to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in the country. Acting as a catalyst and advocate, MoWA encourages public institutions, CSOs, and the private sector to integrate gender equality into their policies and programmes. The ministry plays a crucial role in mainstreaming gender across laws, government reforms, and policies. It coordinates and monitors programs aimed at closing gender gaps and advocating for the elimination of barriers and stereotypes that hinder women's full participation in public life. It also undertakes initiatives to encourage men and boys to support gender equality and actively participate in housework and the care of children and dependents.



The Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) leads the Neary Rattanak initiative, a series of five-year plans aimed at strengthening gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment in Cambodia. This initiative promotes the integration of gender perspectives into policies, strategic plans, and development programmes across all sectors and levels of governance. Key focus areas include economic empowerment, education, health, legal protection, governance, and climate change, ensuring a comprehensive approach to advancing gender equality nationwide ([NEP, 2024](#)).

The Neary Rattanak I ([1999-2003](#)) was Cambodia's first national five-year strategic plan for gender equality and the empowerment of women. It aimed to address the significant gender disparities in the country and to establish a foundation for future efforts in advancing women's rights. The plan focused on four key areas: women's economic empowerment; promoting women's participation in the workforce and addressing their lack of access to economic resources; education and training; legal and political rights; and reproductive health. Neary Rattanak I also emphasised the importance of gender mainstreaming across government policies and development plans, as well as the need for monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track progress.

The Neary Rattanak II ([2004-2008](#)) built upon the achievements and challenges of the first phase, and focused on accelerating progress in key areas to address the remaining gender disparities in the country. It encompassed five strategic priority areas: economic empowerment; education and training; legal rights and protection; health and well-being; women in decision-making. A key feature of Neary Rattanak II was its integration with the Rectangular Strategy and the National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP), ensuring that gender equality was a cross-cutting issue across all national development sectors. The plan also prioritised monitoring and evaluation, with an aim to assess progress and adjust strategies as necessary.

The Neary Rattanak III ([2009-2013](#)) aimed at promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. It aligns with national policies and international commitments, focusing on five key areas: economic empowerment, education and awareness, legal protection, health and well-being, and women's participation in decision-making. While the plan integrated gender mainstreaming into government reforms and includes monitoring mechanisms, challenges remained, such as deep-rooted societal norms, low female leadership representation, and gender disparities in economic opportunities.

Between 2014 and 2018, the main objectives of Neary Rattanak IV ([2014–2018](#)) were to improve women's access to skills training, employment, resources, social protection, and decision-making in the economic sector. It sought to increase education and vocational training opportunities for women and girls through participation and awareness. The initiative focused on providing quality, affordable health services tailored to women's needs and ensuring their safety by raising awareness and enforcing laws against gender-based violence. Additionally, it promoted women's participation in decision-making by increasing female representation and advancement opportunities.

The Neary Rattanak V ([2019–2023](#)), included a gender-transformative approach in formulating and implementing laws, policies, and programs at all levels. It focused on changing public behaviour and social attitudes to promote gender equality and eliminate discrimination against women and girls. The initiative sought to enhance gender responsiveness in economic policies, education, youth programs, and health-related strategies, particularly for women's and girls' health and empowerment. It also emphasised preventing violence against women and girls, increasing women's participation in decision-making, and promoting gender equality in leadership. Additionally, it supported women's resilience to climate change and strengthened the capacity of the Ministry of Women's Affairs and its units, improving public administration and information dissemination on gender and inclusivity.

In April 2024, the MoWA officially launched the [Neary Rattanak VI Strategic Plan 2024–2028](#) aimed at advancing gender equality. It sets out measures "focusing on gender mainstreaming through a gender-transformative approach, with six priority programs on promoting (1) Women's Economic Empowerment; (2) Social Ethics, Women's and Family's Values; (3) Well-Being of Women and Girls; (4) Legal Protection for Women and Girls; (5) Women in Leadership and Governance; and (6) Women and Climate Change". It is designed to align with the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) policy framework and respond to societal trends, supporting Cambodia's Vision 2030 and 2050 goals.

In implementing this plan, MoWA will continue to support sectoral programs and line ministries by mainstreaming gender, reducing gender gaps, and promoting public awareness. Additionally, the MoWA will provide direct services to women and girls, particularly those affected by gender-based violence, while fostering economic empowerment, entrepreneurship, and leadership development.

Beyond the Neary Rattanak plans, the RGC also planned to empower women through its Pentagonal Strategy in [2023](#), aiming to work towards comprehensive and inclusive national development. Certain provisions focus on women's empowerment and protection. The strategy highlights the need to increase investment in gender-related initiatives, empowering women and girls in key areas such as the economy, education, health, and public leadership. It aims at creating conditions that allow women to exercise their rights, make informed decisions about family planning, and reduce their vulnerability to gender-based violence.

Before introducing the Pentagonal Strategy, the government implemented the [Rectangular Strategy](#), with its fourth phase emphasising inclusive development. This phase aimed to enhance women's roles in society by increasing their representation in leadership positions at both national and sub-national levels, across political and technical fields. It sought to mainstream gender across all development policies, promote women's entrepreneurship through expanded education and vocational training, and strengthen partnerships to combat trafficking and violence against women.

Another key element is the National Action Plan To Prevent Violence Against Women [2014–2018](#) and [2019–2023](#) to reduce violence against women and girls, particularly those at increased risk, through increased prevention interventions, improved responses, greater access to quality services, and enhanced multi-sectoral coordination and cooperation. There are four main areas of focus in the plan - Prevention, Legal Protection and Multi-Sectoral Services, Formulation and Implementation of Laws and Policies, and Review, Monitoring, and Evaluation.

For Prevention, the plan emphasises improving coordination and cooperation across government ministries, institutions, development partners, service providers, CSOs, and the private sector, to implement effective primary prevention measures. It also seeks to enhance the knowledge and skills of people to promote gender-equitable, non-violent relationships, increase positive parenting practices to build safe and non-violent family environments and promote safe, harassment-free workplaces and communities.

Additionally, the plan aims to increase the capacity of media, including social media, to sensitively prevent violence against women. For Legal Protection and Multi-Sectoral Services, the strategy focuses on improving access to justice for women affected by gender-based violence, and enhancing access to quality, coordinated social services. The Formulation and Implementation of Laws and Policies area aims to strengthen Cambodia's legal framework on violence against women. The Review, Monitoring, and Evaluation focus includes establishing a robust monitoring and evaluation framework and a comprehensive system for data collection.

Last but not least, the Technical Working Group on Gender-Based Violence, with the participation of relevant ministries, development partners and NGOs, was set up to develop, implement and monitor the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women. Training on the related laws was provided to the security agents of MoWA and service providers in the country ([UN Cambodia, 2021](#)).

The RGC also introduced the Safety Village Commune/Sangkat Policy Guideline ([2010](#)) for the protection and safety of women within local communities, in rural areas of Cambodia. The policy aims to create a secure environment by reducing all types of crimes, particularly focusing on eliminating prostitution, human trafficking, and domestic violence. It calls for a collaborative effort among government authorities, political parties, NGOs, the private sector, and citizens to implement these safety measures effectively. A key objective is to protect women from trafficking, labour exploitation, sexual abuse, and violence by enforcing existing laws and ensuring their safety in every village and commune across the country.

All these legal provisions and frameworks indicate that Cambodia has established various mechanisms and measures to ensure gender equality. However, the implementation of these laws and measures remains weak and falls short of international standards, leaving many women vulnerable, as shown in the next chapter.

3. Navigating Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence

The widespread integration of technology into nearly all spheres of society has significantly influenced the nature of GBV. Despite Cambodia’s ratification of various international human rights frameworks and the enactment of laws and committees addressing GBV – and, to a limited extent, TFGBV – the issue persists. This chapter delves into the lived experiences of affected women. It highlights how technology both drives the evolution of GBV and exposes gaps in Cambodia’s protective framework for women’s rights. These gaps enable digital platforms to deepen persistent gender inequalities, with adverse effects on women’s civic freedoms.

The chapter begins by examining how patriarchal norms and structures enable TFGBV, creating an environment where such abuses can thrive. It then identifies and analyses three prominent forms of TFGBV – cyberbullying, online sexual harassment, and manipulated audiovisual content – and their detrimental impacts on women’s ability to exercise their civic freedoms. Lastly, the chapter evaluates existing measures to combat TFGBV, highlighting their limitations and setting the stage for the recommendations detailed in Chapter 4.



3.1. Challenging Traditional Social Norms and Discriminatory Gender Attitudes

The social context in which TFGBV emerges is crucial to understanding its development. In Cambodia, a predominantly patriarchal society shapes GBV, and digital technologies have intensified this issue. Addressing the root causes and impacts of TFGBV requires examining the underlying social factors – many of which are not directly linked to technology. This context highlights that technology is merely one component of a broader, more complex landscape contributing to violence against women and girls.

As highlighted in Chapter 2, Cambodia's legal framework, beginning with the Constitution, guarantees equality before the law (Article 35) and mandates equal rights for men and women in all spheres, opposing discrimination against women (Article 45). However, ingrained gender norms, combined with cultural, religious, and social practices, have led to patriarchal structures that hinder the effectiveness of these legal protections.

As a result, violence against women is often tolerated, with societal pressures to maintain cultural harmony outweighing legal accountability. This dynamic obstructs women and girls from fully enjoying their rights (KII 203). One respondent (KII 104) emphasised that these attitudes are deeply rooted in society, and frequently reinforced through cultural norms.

“There is also the women's code of conduct taught in schools, which perpetuates the notion that women should tolerate violence. For instance, some passages in poems suggest that if your husband raises his voice, you should be mindful of that and try to appease him rather than consider it problematic. If your husband wants to be intimate, it's portrayed as your duty as his wife to comply. Such teachings are ingrained in girls, as well as boys, from a very young age, normalising the idea that violence is acceptable and that it's a common emotion for men. This creates a culture where gender-based violence is not only prevalent but also normalised.” (KII 104)

Other respondents (KII 101, 102, 104) highlighted that discriminatory gender attitudes are apparent in societal beliefs about which jobs suit women. One of them noted the following:

“In Cambodia, when we talk about women or LGBTQI+ people, society tends to perceive them as weak. People think that all women and LGBTQI+ individuals are vulnerable and that women shouldn't work in certain jobs; they should stay at home or work in a bank.³ There is a lot of discrimination against women, particularly from men who think certain jobs are not meant for women.” (KII 101)

These responses show that the job market is highly gendered, with certain occupations considered suitable for men and others for women. This trend is even more pronounced in rural areas, where many people “still believe that only men can do certain jobs, such as journalism” (KII 201) and especially affects certain groups, such as Indigenous women, who are often perceived as incapable of performing their work effectively due to the values and perspectives within their communities. This occupational segregation confines women to lower-skilled jobs, limiting their participation in the labour market and perpetuating structural inequalities that keep women in lower-paid roles while underrepresenting them in senior, higher-paying positions, particularly in managerial roles ([UNDP, 2014](#)).

Some organisations, including local media outlets ([Hong, 2023](#)), have pointed to patriarchal structures as a key factor undermining women's rights, emphasising that “social norms, stereotypes, and gender roles are deeply entrenched, with men often seen as the primary breadwinners while women are responsible for household chores.” Furthermore, research indicates that although 84.1% of women participate in the workforce, they are more likely than men to hold informal jobs ([UN Cambodia, 2022](#)). Notably, 53% of women, compared to 41% of men, work as unpaid family workers or own-account workers without wages.

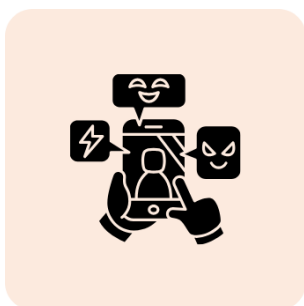
Understanding these social dynamics is crucial in the analysis of TFGBV because when women do not follow this social structure, they are often penalised for stepping outside gender norms, which includes being subjected to GBV and TFGBV.

3.2. TFGBV and the Erosion of Civic Freedoms

The patriarchal structures discussed in the previous section are key in the analysis of TFGBV because they underpin its dynamics, allowing technology to perpetuate GBV. This section identifies three forms of TFGBV in Cambodia – cyberbullying, online sexual harassment, and the manipulation of digital content to attack women and undermine their credibility – and the negative impact they have on women's freedom of expression, religious freedom, the right to safety and security, and the right to privacy.

³ Many Cambodian parents encourage their daughters to study finance, banking, administration, accounting, and other fields related to office work, as these careers are often seen as more appropriate for women's societal roles and status ([Hong, 2023](#))

3.2.1. Cyberbullying



The lived experiences of women interviewed, corroborated by existing reports, reveal that technology is frequently weaponised as a tool for cyberbullying, a form of harassment ([Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2024](#)) through internet-based technologies. Cyberbullying involves deliberate and repeated aggressive behaviour aimed at harming or distressing an individual. This can manifest as direct attacks on social media, such as insults or threats, or through more subtle actions, such as spreading rumours, sharing harmful content, or excluding someone from online groups and discussions ([APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2018](#)).

Cyberbullying cases tend to occur on social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter), largely fuelled by the fact that these platforms provide a highly accessible and often anonymous environment for perpetrators, which amplifies the impact of cyberbullying on women (KII 101, 102, 104). Among the 700 participants surveyed on online harassment in Cambodia by LICHADO ([2021](#)), 38% reported experiencing harassment, with LGBT+ individuals, young people, and activists facing even higher rates. Additionally, 20% of female respondents reported experiencing online sexual harassment – an issue that is explored in greater detail in Section 3.2.2.

Instances of cyberbullying are particularly widespread among women working in the media sector. Their work often involves public exposure, with their names being linked to news reports or audiovisual materials. As a result, cyberbullying incidents typically follow public appearances or statements, indicating a deliberate attempt to target women who voice their opinions. In these cases, bullying frequently takes the form of "inappropriate language," (KII101) with perpetrators posting insulting comments, often laced with vulgar language, to degrade and intimidate the target. The lived experience of a female journalist shows the link between cyberbullying, fear of retaliation, and self-censorship:

"In the online space, female journalists, such as myself, experience harassment when our stories are published. People post insulting comments, using vulgar language to target us.

[...]

I suffered from mental health issues [after a case of online harassment]. I cried for days and could not work.

[...]

Online harassment has also made me anxious about future reports, wondering whether I will be attacked again once the story is published. It has affected my confidence and made reporting much more stressful.

[...]

I have become more hesitant when preparing to interview government officials, especially high-ranking ones [...]. There's always a fear in the back of my mind. After publishing certain stories, I constantly worry about the reaction. This pressure affects my work, but I still strive to maintain professionalism and pursue the truth." (KII 101)

Indigenous women shared similarly compelling accounts, highlighting another form of harassment they face when advocating for their rights, particularly in the areas of land rights and environmental protection –some of the most urgent issues Indigenous Peoples face in Cambodia. These accounts describe how online interactions often escalate into physical, offline intimidation.

One interviewee (KII 301) described the experience of an Indigenous woman in her community who uses Facebook and other social media to actively defend human rights and raise awareness about local issues. Her advocacy attracted the attention of government authorities, including the police. In one incident, following a post about local concerns, she received a visit from the police, who pressured her to delete her posts and warned her against discussing community issues on social media. This direct intervention not only censored her advocacy efforts but instilled fear, indirectly pressuring her – and others like her – to remain silent about injustices affecting Indigenous communities.

This example highlights the critical connection between online harassment and physical attacks, a concern echoed by other respondents. A representative of a women-led organisation similarly identified a link between online harassment and physical intimidation, including by authorities. She recounted that her organisation once “organised a big campaign related to [a viral case of rights violation against a public figure], and the government retaliated by targeting our organisation, even placing surveillance outside our office” (KII 202). This environment causes many women with high public visibility to “become very wary when they’re out in public, constantly aware of how people are looking at them,” as shared by a member of a CSO during an interview (KII 203).

For media professionals, the impact of cyberbullying on freedom of expression undermines the fundamental principles of media freedom. When female journalists face online harassment for their work, it creates an environment hostile to open dialogue and investigative journalism. The persistent threat of harassment forces many to self-censor, narrowing the scope of their reporting to avoid backlash. This culture of fear defeats the purpose of media freedom, which is to promote transparency and enable the exchange of ideas ([Sida, 2015](#)). When journalists are hesitant to cover controversial topics or challenge public figures, the public loses access to vital information necessary for informed decision-making. In this way, cyberbullying becomes not only a personal attack but a systemic threat to democratic discourse, reinforcing power imbalances and undermining the media’s role in promoting freedom of information.

These two examples illustrate how digital spaces, instead of promoting justice and visibility, can become arenas for targeted harassment, linking TFGBV with restricted freedom of expression as survivors often fear re-engaging in the public sphere after experiencing cyberbullying. Furthermore, research has shown that this form of harassment can have severe mental health impacts, including heightened stress, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) ([CWF, 2023](#)). The fear stemming from cyberbullying frequently deters women from addressing sensitive topics, limiting their freedom of expression.

3.2.2. Online Sexual Harassment

Online sexual harassment – defined as unwanted sexual behaviour occurring in digital spaces ([ChildNet, n.d.](#)) – represents a more specific form of cyberbullying. Survivors in these instances often receive offensive or sexually explicit messages, which are frequently downplayed as mere jokes (KII 101, 102, 202). As one interviewee explained, usually, “[Survivors] receive text messages containing sexual harassment or offensive comments, which people often dismiss as jokes – but it is online sexual harassment” (KII 101). This trivialisation not only undermines the severity of online sexual harassment but perpetuates a culture where such behaviour is normalised, further silencing survivors and reinforcing harmful digital behaviours.



A viral case of online sexual harassment happened in the context of the shutting down of Voice of Democracy (VoD) in February 2023 ([Ng, 2023](#)). Pheng Vannak, a Cambodian Facebook personality and creator of [Pheng Vannak News](#) (also on [Facebook](#)) used misogynistic language towards the VoD reporter who authored the article that tipped the government’s order to shut down the media outlet. He wrote – in Khmer – on his Facebook page, “As a young girl, but with a wild character... with such a cheap character, whoever marries you would be finished...” ([Teng, 2023](#)).

The above-mentioned incident exemplifies online sexual harassment, where the perpetrator used misogynistic and sexually charged language to demean a female journalist. By publicly attacking her character and insinuating her sexual worth, he not only undermined her professional integrity but also engaged in harmful gender-based online abuse, targeting her as a woman rather than addressing the issue at hand.

Some respondents were able to recall their examples of online sexual harassment. One female journalist shared her experience, illustrating the blurred lines between professional and personal interactions for women with high public visibility. She highlighted how easily online platforms can be misused to target and harass individuals:

“One day I contacted an NGO staff member for an interview⁴ [...]. After the interview, he [the respondent] asked me to send him the article. I did so after it was published. The next morning, he messaged me on Telegram, saying hello and asking how I was. I thought it was a normal message and wanted to maintain a good relationship with my sources, so I responded politely. But he kept messaging me day after day. One day, he asked to see my photos. At first, I did not understand what he meant and told him to check my profile, as I had photos there. But he clarified that he meant *other* photos, which made me uncomfortable. I started ignoring his messages and eventually blocked him on Telegram and Facebook.

About a year later, I did not have any contact with him, but one day he found my Instagram account, which uses my nickname, and sent me a message. I don’t know how he found it. When I saw his message, my hands started shaking as it reminded me of the previous year. I told my colleagues because I did not feel safe, and I was afraid of meeting him in person since we often covered the same events. It affected my work because I became anxious about going outside to cover stories, fearing I would run into him.” (KII 102)

⁴ The topic of the interview is omitted to ensure the anonymity of the respondent.

After being harassed, this informant shared her story and concerns with colleagues from her network. Through these conversations, she discovered that the same perpetrator had sexually harassed at least two or three other female journalists, following a similar pattern of behaviour, highlighting a trend of repeated harassment by the same individual, demonstrating how perpetrators often exploit digital platforms to target multiple women using the same manipulative strategies.

Another respondent (KII 203), who leads a local CSO, described how her organisation engages with women with high visibility in the digital sphere who face similar challenges. One such woman, a content creator, was contacted and agreed to participate in this research (KII 104). She shared that challenging traditional gender norms through her work often results in online sexual harassment:

“When I challenge toxic masculinity and patriarchal norms, many men react negatively because they believe I am not supposed to speak out as a woman. This desire to ‘put me in my place’ leads to forms of violence, such as the unsolicited explicit [sexual] images I receive regularly, which are also means of control and intimidation. I think they hate me because I’m a woman. I’ve always believed that if a man were discussing these issues – asserting that a woman should have the freedom to dress as she pleases because she deserves respect – he would likely be applauded for being modern and understanding. However, when I, as a woman, address these topics, I am often viewed as provocative, as if I’m encouraging other women to adopt similar views.” (KII 104).

The unsolicited receipt of sexually explicit visual materials – in contrast to the previous case involving the woman journalist who was pressured to send images – is another form of online sexual harassment that was also shared by other respondents, including Indigenous women (KII 301). These experiences highlight the invasive and distressing nature of TFGBV, as well as the various forms online sexual harassment can take.

Furthermore, in some cases, online sexual harassment is also used to coerce or manipulate women into doing something against their will, known as sextortion ([NSVRC, n.d.](#)) For example, in one interview, a respondent described how a female colleague from her network working in the media sector had been subjected to such type of coercion:

“[She] was blackmailed into meeting someone who threatened to expose personal photos of her and her ex-boyfriend to her family. These experiences are similar to that of many other young women, especially those in rural areas, who share similar stories during media and digital literacy training sessions.” (KII 101)

These examples show that while digital platforms have democratised access to information, providing new opportunities to enhance the effectiveness of participants' work, they have also facilitated increased opportunities for criticism that often escalate into sexual harassment. Without the appropriate safeguards, aggressors can easily reach survivors instantly through their phones, amplifying both the frequency and scale of harassment.

This has intensified the emotional toll on survivors, making it a pervasive and damaging form of abuse. Mental health issues such as anxiety and a fear of engaging with others in their journalistic work are not uncommon among women (KII 101, 102, 203). The previous example of the journalist (KII 102) who experienced online sexual harassment explained that the resulting anxiety prevented her from contacting that NGO again – one of the few she could rely on for her reporting:

“After the harassment, I could not continue covering stories [on that topic] because I did not want to interact with him. It made me miss the opportunity to report on important issues. Also, when other NGOs or associations organised events, I avoided going because

I did not want to meet him face-to-face. This affected my ability to network and do my job effectively.” (KII 102)

Another respondent also noticed how online sexual harassment resulted in mental health problems.

“Receiving unsolicited explicit images every week has certainly taken a toll on my mental health, which is why I often avoid checking messages now. It can ruin your day. Additionally, I’ve received sexual harassment messages describing what they’d like to do to me, pornography sent my way, and threats of violence – essentially being told what they would do if they were physically near me. I’ve also received rape threats.” (KII 104)

Cases of online sexual harassment, such as those described above, violate women’s right to safety and security, as enshrined in Article 3 of the UDHR. Such harassment creates a pervasive sense of fear and anxiety, infringing upon the fundamental right to feel safe in all aspects of life. Women, who are often the primary targets, are particularly vulnerable to this form of violence. The fear of intimate images being shared or the continued receipt of sexually explicit messages fosters an environment of intimidation and emotional distress, undermining women’s sense of safety not only in digital spaces but also in their daily lives.

Online sexual harassment also infringes upon the right to privacy, a fundamental right that safeguards individuals from unwarranted public scrutiny and maintains the separation between their personal and public lives. Article 12 of the UDHR states that “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with their privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon their honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.” The blackmailing of a female media worker with threats to expose her photos without consent, as explained earlier, exemplifies this. Harassers often exploit sensitive personal information or images as tools for coercion or humiliation. This breach of privacy subjects survivors to public shame and manipulation, stripping them of control over their personal information and undermining their autonomy.

3.2.3. The Decontextualisation and Manipulation of Online Content



Another form of TFGBV is the use and manipulation of audiovisual material to portray a negative image of them. This form of harassment is particularly harmful because it not only targets the personal dignity of the survivors but also threatens their professional and social standing. By distorting or misrepresenting online content, perpetrators can create false narratives that damage the survivors’ credibility and public image. This kind of manipulation is especially threatening in the digital age, where information spreads rapidly and can be difficult to retract, leaving long-lasting harm to the survivors’ reputations.

Interviews indicated this occurs in two ways: by taking online posts out of context and by manipulating them. What both methods have in common is their use as a tool to “destroy their [women with high public visibility] reputation” (KII 202).

One journalist (KII 101) explained that during a press conference, she formulated a question to a high-rank government official. Before he answered her question, he made her swear that the information she used to ask the question was true. After the press conference, a manipulated video, omitting her compliance, widely circulated online. The clip sparked trolling, with some individuals supporting her and others using it to harass her. One Facebook user – a representative from a ministry – downloaded a photo from her account and threatened her, saying, “You are so rude. If I meet you, I’d push you against the wall.” (KII 101)

Further examples of social media content being manipulated can be found among women representing Indigenous peoples (IPs) in Cambodia. Cambodia's IPs have long practised spiritual belief systems, often referred to as animism, which involves a deep interconnection between the physical and spiritual realms, expressed through beliefs, rituals, and behaviours ([International Fund for Agricultural Development, n.d.](#)). In 2021, a woman from an IP community shared a photo of herself taking part in a traditional ritual in her village. Subsequently, an unknown man altered the image she had posted online to portray her as a witch, which he then posted on his social media, falsely claiming she was possessed by spirits. He then extorted her by demanding payment in exchange for removing the manipulated image. As a result, she is still afraid to share content on social media ([Haffner, 2021](#)).

This case shows a violation of freedom of religion or belief, in addition to the right to privacy. These two freedoms are ensured in Articles 31 and 43 of the Constitution, respectively. The manipulation of a photo showing a woman participating in a traditional indigenous ritual, followed by accusations of witchcraft, directly infringes upon her right to practice her religion and cultural traditions freely. For IPs in Cambodia, religious practices are intimately linked to their cultural identity ([WPM, 2024](#)). Therefore, attacks on these rituals are not only an assault on their beliefs but also on their way of life. By distorting the image and framing the ritual in a harmful and derogatory manner, the perpetrator disrespected her religious expression and fostered intolerance towards the spiritual practices of her community. Furthermore, the attempt to extort money by leveraging this religious defamation escalates the violation, demonstrating how freedom of belief is exploited for financial and social harm. Such acts create fear and discourage the open expression of religious identity, which is crucial to safeguarding cultural diversity and ensuring religious freedom.

Other respondents noted that in some instances, small, unintentional mistakes in institutional communications or social media posts went viral, triggering cases of cyberbullying. One respondent (KII 201) recounted a situation in which her organisation drafted a public document that mistakenly contained a spelling error resembling a sexual term, sparking online abuse. A screenshot of the document went viral, and her team, composed primarily of women, became the target of harassment, with online users accusing them of harbouring ill feelings towards men. The team endured significant mental stress as a result of the attacks. As the respondent explained, "Any mistake that happens, we tend to receive a lot of attacks without any specific evidence... it is very dangerous" (KII 201).

The examples discussed above illustrate how the pervasive use of digital technology has transformed GBV, reinforcing it as an enduring issue in Cambodia. This persistence is closely tied to entrenched patriarchal social structures that continue to shape gender dynamics in the country. However, while these structures provide important context, they only partially account for the prevalence of TFGBV. Another critical factor lies in the shortcomings of the mechanisms designed to combat TFGBV. The following section delves into these inadequacies, revealing how gaps in protective measures have contributed to the proliferation of TFGBV in Cambodia.

3.3. Defences Against TFGBV

The final section of this chapter analyses the defences adopted by TFGBV survivors, shedding light on their limitations and areas for potential enhancement. It presents three defences: seeking justice through law enforcement mechanisms; reporting TFGBV through survivors' organisations and third parties; and speaking up to raise awareness on TGBV. As this section demonstrates, these defences are predominantly reactive, coming into play only after an individual has been targeted. Whether it is GBV or TFGBV, the biggest challenge is that victims feel insecure in reporting such violations for legal action because both the complaints mechanism and the officers receiving the complaints are not seen as gender sensitive.

3.3.1. Seeking Justice Through Law Enforcement Channels



While more than half of the respondents (KII 101, 103, 201, 301, 302, 303, 402) identified reporting cases of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) to law enforcement as an available defence, none of the thirteen informants chose to pursue this option. The primary reason cited was the perceived inefficiency of the legal system in handling TFGBV cases, stemming from issues such as poor law enforcement practices and a lack of female officers with adequate training to address GBV and TFGBV (KII 101, 203), as detailed below.

This distrust mirrors the scepticism towards the legal system highlighted in existing research ([McCarthy & Un, 2015](#)) and can be understood within a broader context where a weak rule of law exacerbates structural failures. According to the World Justice Project ([2023](#)), Cambodia ranked 141st out of 142 countries in its rule of law index, with a score of 0.32 on a scale from 0 to 1, where 0 means that the rule of law is non-existent and 1 means its highest level. This low ranking reflects a systematic decline since 2015, underscoring the lack of faith in Cambodia's legal institutions that discourage women from relying on law enforcement.

This distrust primarily stems from respondents' lack of confidence in the system's ability to implement laws addressing GBV and TFGBV effectively. It is worth noting, as outlined in Chapter 2, that several laws reference GBV. However, as some respondents expressed, the absence of clear evidence demonstrating how the legal framework protects targets significantly limits their available defences (KII 201, 203).

For instance, existing laws, such as defamation provisions in the Criminal Code, fail to capture the unique, pervasive nature of TFGBV. Cambodia's draft Cybercrime Law ([n.d.](#)), still pending approval, lacks the specificity needed to address the complexities of online gender-based violence. This draft law is primarily concerned with preserving "moral and cultural values" rather than safeguarding individuals from online abuse. It includes provisions that criminalise a range of online behaviours, such as defamation and content that undermines family values, but these are framed broadly, with no clear focus on preventing or addressing TFGBV. For instance, Article 28 (5) of the draft Cybercrime Law – which focuses on the regulation of online content – prohibits publications considered harmful to societal values. This includes incitement of prejudice based on race, gender, or religion, as well as depictions of behaviours such as domestic violence or defamation.

However, the vague wording of this article, coupled with its focus on "moral" offences, does not directly address the specific threats posed by online harassment, particularly against women and marginalised groups ([ICNL, 2022](#)). While violations of these "moral offences" may result in imprisonment and fines, it remains unclear whether these penalties would protect women and others who defy traditional gender norms – which could be considered a "moral and cultural value" ([UN, 2022](#)). The emphasis on upholding the country's "values" rather than prioritising individual safety can exacerbate survivor-blaming, leaving many vulnerable to online abuse ([Athira, 2020](#)). Therefore, absence of explicit recognition of TFGBV leaves many survivors exposed, as they remain unprotected by Cambodia's legal structures.

The second factor contributing to distrust in law enforcement mechanisms is the presence of several structural weaknesses within the legal system, which deter many women from reporting TFGBV cases. In this context, the key weakness is the absence of survivor-centred approaches ([ASEAN, 2023](#); [UNHRC, 2020](#)) in law enforcement mechanisms. This failure to prioritise the survivor's well-being leads

to reluctance in pursuing justice, as survivors may fear the legal process will be as traumatising as the abuse itself ([Rutgers, 2024](#)). One informant shared the following:

“Does every commune or police station have a proper survivor-centred interview room? Are law enforcement officers trained in gender-sensitive interviewing techniques? Unfortunately, many interviews contain victim-blaming, which discourages survivors from coming forward.” (KII 203).

The absence of such an approach is demonstrated by the gender bias in mediation and conflict resolution, particularly when male individuals attempted to mediate harassment cases. One journalist – a survivor of TFGBV – explained her situation:

“One of my colleagues [...] tried to facilitate and solve the issue [her TFGBV case], but because he is a man, I feel like he did not listen to me. I told him a lot about the issues, I discussed the conflicts, and then he acted like he didn’t listen to me. I talked to my former editor three or four times, but I felt like they both just underestimated the situation. I think it would be great if there was a female [person], I do not know how to say it, but maybe not a man, as men might not understand how we feel. I told him that was enough; I didn’t want to continue because I didn’t think anything would improve. Sometimes he would accuse me and text my former editor, so I stopped talking. It was very bad.” (KII 101)

This example shows how the survivors’ perspectives were neither understood nor taken seriously, underscoring the urgent need for gender-sensitive approaches in conflict resolution and support services. The lack of rigour with which authorities address many cases of TFGBV results in these incidents being downplayed or not thoroughly investigated. This negligence cultivates a broader culture of impunity, where survivors often feel that their experiences are not valued or prioritised within the justice system. As a consequence, their fundamental rights to freedom of expression and access to justice are severely undermined.

Furthermore, the legal process in Cambodia is both financially burdensome and time-consuming, creating significant barriers for survivors seeking justice (KII 101, 103, 402). The costs associated with pursuing legal action, along with the emotional strain of prolonged proceedings, make it especially difficult for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds to follow through with their cases. This often leads survivors to abandon their efforts, as they simply cannot afford the toll it takes on them, both financially and emotionally.

These gender flaws are further perpetuated by the low percentage of women in political positions in Cambodia. Out of more than 30 ministries, only three are led by women, representing less than 10% ([Teng, 2023](#)). This imbalance impacts how laws are created and implemented ([Khourn, 2019](#)). As noted by one respondent “Many laws are crafted by men who have never experienced violence themselves, meaning they lack an understanding of what it is like to be a survivor” (KII 104).

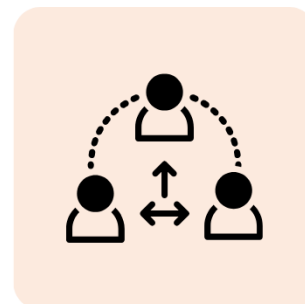
In addition to these challenges, a pervasive fear of retaliation prevents many survivors from coming forward (KII 203). With the legal framework offering inadequate protection for survivors, those who attempt to seek justice are left vulnerable to further abuse or harassment. This lack of survivor protection makes the pursuit of justice not only daunting but dangerous for many individuals, reinforcing the cycle of violence and silencing those who need support the most ([Ngo-CEDAW, 2021](#)).

Altogether, survivors of TFGBV face significant barriers in seeking justice through law enforcement due to a lack of trust in the legal system. This is primarily because of a weak rule of law, with laws that are either insufficient or poorly enforced, and a legal framework that fails to address TFGBV, such as online

harassment and cyberstalking. This failure to provide adequate protection or hold perpetrators accountable reflects a disregard for survivors' rights to legal protection and justice.

3.3.2. Reporting TFGBV Through Survivors' Organisations and Third Parties

Against the backdrop of laws that do address TFGBV but are hindered by weak enforcement mechanisms, some respondents opt to report instances of TFGBV internally within their organisation or to external third-party organisations known to provide assistance. This approach reflects a pragmatic response to the shortcomings of formal legal avenues, highlighting the importance of alternative support systems in addressing the gaps in protection and justice for survivors.



Regarding the first option - reporting it internally - it is available only in some CSOs since not all of them have implemented internal mechanisms to address harassment, including anti-harassment policies and support systems for affected staff (KII 201, 203). One interviewee (KII 201) explained that their organisation's policy provides psychological support and encourages individuals to take breaks from technology to aid mental recovery. In situations that may require legal action, management offers advice - although survivors often hesitate to pursue prosecution due to the complexities involved, as has been shown in the previous part.

An area for improvement in this defence is that while internal anti-harassment policies, guidelines, and regulations offer some support, they are often not specifically designed to address digital forms of GBV and frequently, lack guidance on tackling TFGBV specifically. A representative from a CSO shared the following insight:

"I don't think [the guidelines and defences] specifically mention technology. It is more about not engaging in harassment in any form, either professionally or personally. But yes, the guidelines do not explicitly cover TFGBV. That is probably something we should look at, that is technology-facilitated." (KII 203)

In this context, the role of third-party organisations that offer support to all survivors of GBV and TFGBV stands as crucial. These organisations provide essential services to both staff and non-staff survivors alike. A representative from a CSO (KII 201) shared that her organisation launched an initiative offering survivors a platform to report online harassment. Initially focused on domestic violence survivors, the project has since expanded to include survivors of TFGBV. The services offered include counselling, psychological support, and emergency accommodation for those in immediate need. These resources are available to staff members as well as the wider community, underscoring the pivotal role CSOs in Cambodia play in addressing online harassment and TFGBV.

The presence of such third-party support also underscores systemic weaknesses in accountability. While these organisations fill crucial gaps in survivor assistance, their necessity reflects broader inadequacies in addressing harassment through formal legal channels. These limitations are compounded by the limited trust of survivors in the practical implementation of the existing legal mechanisms to address TFGBV, as noted earlier in this chapter.

The effectiveness of the assistance provided by some organisations is evident in the accounts of informants who reported pursuing capacity-building activities after experiencing TFGBV. These initiatives equipped them with skills to address and respond to harassment more effectively. Such training empowers participants with the knowledge required to identify and manage incidents of harassment, thereby strengthening their ability to protect themselves. One journalist shared her experience, explaining how the programmes enhanced her understanding of the different

manifestations of TFGBV and offered practical strategies to safeguard both her personal and professional life:

“Since [my experience with TFGBV], I have attended many training sessions on GBV, online harassment, and sexual harassment. I have become more knowledgeable about what constitutes harassment. Now, if anyone crosses the line, I don’t keep it to myself. I report it immediately and make it clear that their behaviour is inappropriate. I’ve also become more direct in responding to comments about my body, letting people know that it’s harassment and not acceptable [...]. Most of the training sessions were face-to-face in Cambodia [...]. They were mainly in Khmer and were open to journalists as well as NGO partners.” (KII 102)

Most of these training sessions are conducted face-to-face in Cambodia, delivered primarily in Khmer, and are accessible to journalists as well as members of CSOs. This kind of external training is crucial for empowering women, particularly those in high-visibility roles, to assert their civic freedoms – especially freedom of expression and the right to safety – and continue their work without fear. By equipping them with knowledge and strategies, such programmes contribute to their resilience against TFGBV, enabling them to remain active and assertive in their professional environments and broader society. These programmes also highlight the critical need for specialised IT professionals in areas such as digital security. These experts are essential not only for delivering training but also for ensuring robust security systems, regularly updating protective measures, and providing ongoing education to staff ([Asia Centre, 2023, 2024](#)).

However, this need presents a significant challenge, as limited resources often leave organisations vulnerable. Digital security strategies are seldom updated to keep pace with the rapid evolution of threats ([Asia Centre, 2024](#)). The absence of in-house IT personnel with expertise in digital security forces many organisations to depend on external consultants. These consultants may lack familiarity with the organisations' specific requirements and are often unavailable during crises. For instance, organisations supporting WHRDs routinely engage in security practices such as clearing sensitive data and consulting external experts. Nonetheless, concerns persist regarding outdated data management systems and inadequate IT capacity to address these vulnerabilities effectively (KII 401). One respondent elaborated on her experience with this issue:

“We need skilled personnel. While we have an IT and communication officer, we require additional internal experts on technology. Last year, we hired a consultant to install programmes and provide training to our staff. [We have] 21 provincial offices, resulting in a significant number of staff. Currently, we have only one IT officer and one communication officer, which is insufficient given the technological demands on our organisation.” (KII 401)

She further elaborated that the organisation has 88 staff members but only one IT expert, who travels across the country to provide training on basic tasks such as using email and setting up security measures for phones. Periodic digital security training is crucial to protect staff against threats such as phishing attacks and malware, as well as to strengthen digital hygiene practices. When these practices are weak, digital vulnerabilities are more likely. For example, outdated software or improper password management can expose sensitive data, increasing the risk of cyberattacks.

“It is crucial to inform members about preventing unauthorised access to the [Telegram] group. Regular mentoring is also necessary to ensure safety. For instance, last month, we had an incident where a Telegram group was hacked around midnight. I had to contact our communication officer to remove the individual from the group immediately. Following that, I spoke to the group members about how to enhance security. I am

unaware of what specific information the hackers stole from the Telegram group. I do know they circulated a QR code requesting money.” (KII 401)

While reporting TFGBV through internal organisational channels and third-party support systems offers critical pathways for victims in Cambodia, notable gaps persist in the provision of specialised digital security measures and comprehensive support mechanisms. Bridging these gaps requires targeted investments in dedicated IT personnel, the revision and enhancement of internal policies to specifically address digital harassment and the expansion of partnerships with external organisations offering expertise and resources. By addressing these deficiencies, it will be possible to provide more robust protection and ensure justice for victims. Furthermore, these measures will strengthen the overall resilience of civil society, equipping it to confront and adapt to the evolving landscape of digital threats.

3.3.3. Raise Awareness Through Public Education



The third and final reporting strategy is speaking up against instances of TFGBV is speaking up to raise awareness and educate others about this issue. As some interviewees explained, speaking up against instances of TFGBV – or any other form of violence, for instance – is vital. One respondent noted that “silence equals complicity because you are watching this happen, and you are not opposing it. So, if you see things like this happening, then speak up against it in some form or another, because if not, then you are just part of the problem too” (KII 104).

One journalist who experienced TFGBV and later participated in training to strengthen her capacity to identify and cope with TFGBV spoke about the positive impact the training had on her ability to call out instances of harassment:

“Now, if anyone crosses the line, I do not keep it to myself. I report it immediately and make it clear that their behaviour is inappropriate. I have also become more direct in responding to comments about my body, letting people know that it’s harassment and not acceptable.” (KII 102)

The act of speaking up reflects one of the key factors that are conducive of TFGBV: the widespread lack of awareness among the general public of what constitutes TFGBV and its consequences (KII 101; 102; 202; 203), making them perpetrators of TFGBV and survivors alike.

Despite the rapid spread of technology in Cambodia, many individuals, particularly in rural or marginalised communities, lack the digital literacy necessary to use digital technology responsibly or to recognise potential threats ([ASEAN Foundation, 2024](#)). This digital divide undermines the effectiveness of preventive measures against TFGBV, leaving vulnerable groups at a higher risk. Children and young people are particularly vulnerable as they are often exposed to harmful online content. One participant referred to this problem:

“I have seen young boys exposed to adult content online, and they do not know how to process it. When they hit puberty, they do not understand their emotions and end up behaving inappropriately towards girls. It is a public health issue too, and we need more research on the impact of violent and sexual content on young people. Parents often lack digital literacy, and that’s another area of concern.” (KII 203)

This example not only highlights how young people are exposed to online content – such as pornography – that is often violent in nature but also how they are more likely to adopt similar behaviours in real life ([Ludden, 2021](#)). This raises significant concerns about the long-term societal impacts of such exposure, as it shapes behavioural patterns, exacerbates gender inequalities, and reinforces harmful gender stereotypes that, with the use of the internet, are magnified and rapidly spread.

In this context, two concerns arise. The first one is that parents and other relatives in charge of children often lack digital literacy themselves and struggle to monitor and control the content their children consume. And while “those with access to digital literacy – those with higher education, often living in urban areas – are better equipped to manage these risks, women and girls from general populations, Indigenous communities, or minority groups in remote areas, where access to digital literacy is limited, are much more vulnerable to TFGBV” (KII 203) as they are more likely to normalise actions of online violence.

Therefore, the significance of educating both men and women about harassment, aiming to break the cycle of silence and create a more supportive environment, is paramount (KII 102). This strategy reflects a determination not only to cope with the effects of TFGBV but also to prevent its recurrence by encouraging open dialogue and understanding. By speaking out, these individuals challenge the stigma surrounding harassment and contribute to broader efforts to shift cultural norms.

The second concern is limited accountability over content moderation. TFGBV is exacerbated by the lack of effective content moderation on digital platforms, allowing harmful material to spread unchecked. Interviewees (KII 203) pointed to platforms such as Telegram, Facebook, and Twitter, which have been criticised for their unwillingness to collaborate with authorities in addressing issues such as explicit content, including child pornography. For instance, Telegram has gained notoriety for being used to share sexually exploitative material, with minimal cooperation from the platform to curb such behaviour ([Tidy, 2024](#)).

This highlights the need for technology companies to take a more proactive stance in regulating content. Striking a balance between content removal and safeguarding free expression is essential. Without such efforts, the digital space will continue to be an unsafe environment for women and other vulnerable groups, perpetuating cycles of online abuse and harassment ([UNFPA, 2021](#); [Schwartz, 2023](#)).

The importance of accountability measures by technology companies to keep the spread of harmful and violent content in nature at bay also extends to the mass media sector. As one content creator explained, “There is a significant distinction between merely reporting on violence and glorifying it” (KII 104). When media portrayals glamorise violent perpetrators – especially those who escape punishment – such representations can lead to the perception that such behaviour is acceptable, particularly when it involves wealthy or attractive individuals.

While it is essential to acknowledge the reality of violence in society, sensitivity in its portrayal is crucial, stressing the need and importance for media creators to strive for a nuanced approach that engages with survivors and relevant organisations to ensure accurate and respectful depictions of gender-based violence. This creative process can help identify blind spots to foster a deeper understanding of GBV. By amplifying these voices, media can contribute to a more informed discourse on gender-based violence while remaining accountable for the impact of their representations – particularly in a context where survivors often resort to sharing their experiences through media as a means of seeking justice, particularly when traditional avenues, such as law enforcement, may fail (KII 104).

Considering the key points made throughout this chapter, the overarching idea is that certain defences are employed by TFGBV survivors to protect themselves from instances of gendered online harassment. However, these existing approaches reveal significant weaknesses. These shortcomings stem from a judicial system ill-prepared to prevent TFGBV and protect survivors, under-resourced reporting mechanisms that hinder efficiency, and a general lack of public awareness, compounded by limited accountability for content moderation. This environment facilitates the dissemination of violent content and fosters a culture of inaction.

While technology is undeniably a critical factor adding complexity to GBV, the evaluation and strengthening of support systems against it are equally crucial. As new measures to combat TFGBV emerge, the methods used to perpetrate online harassment are likely to evolve at an equal or faster pace. This dynamic underscores the need for proactive and adaptive strategies to address the issue effectively.

3.4. Withdrawal From the Public Sphere

Regardless of the defences that many survivors have adopted against TFGBV, its impact extends beyond the immediate harm to survivors and contributes to the withdrawal of women from public spaces. This withdrawal diminishes their visibility and participation in civic life, aligning closely with TFGBV's core objective: to exclude women from public spheres, suppress their voices, and undermine their contributions to democratic processes. Therefore, far from acting as an effective safeguard or self-protection, the decision to withdraw exacerbates the silencing and marginalisation of women, thus reinforcing structures that enable TFGBV. The act of withdrawal manifests in two primary forms: self-censorship and institutional step-downs, which serve to perpetuate the cycle of exclusion and disempowerment.

3.4.1. Self-censorship Due to Fear

Self-censorship is a form of withdrawal often adopted by survivors of TFGBV. It is driven by a fear of retaliation, further harassment, or professional jeopardy, prompting women to silence their own voices. As one journalist reflected:

"After that [harassment] experience, I have been more cautious about building close relationships with sources. I still maintain good relationships, but I am more aware of the meaning behind their words and messages. I was quite young when this happened, so I did not fully understand the implications of some messages." (KII 102)

This account demonstrates the impact of harassment on a woman's ability to engage openly and freely in her professional environment. It underscores how fear can shrink the space for critical engagement, effectively stifling the diversity of voices and perspectives. The consequences of self-censorship extend beyond the personal. By suppressing their voices, women reduce their participation in shaping public debates and discourse, which diminishes the overall richness of democratic engagement.

Over time, this diminishment erodes the vitality of public conversations in the public sphere and leaves critical issues underrepresented or misunderstood. In this way, self-censorship weakens democratic processes, fosters inequality in representation, and silences valuable contributions from women who are already subjected to systemic exclusion.

3.4.2. Institutional Step-downs

The second form of withdrawal observed is institutional step-downs, particularly among women in leadership roles within human rights organisations or advocacy groups. Many survivors of online harassment report reducing their visibility or resigning from their positions entirely to protect their personal well-being (KII 201). This withdrawal is not merely a retreat from public scrutiny; it represents a loss of opportunities for women to advance their professional and personal growth. When women step down from their roles, it also reduces the capacity of organisations to effectively advocate for human rights, social justice, and equality.

Women's reduced participation, particularly in leadership positions, exacerbates the underrepresentation of women in key decision-making roles across various sectors. The absence of women in these spaces weakens the broader impact of advocacy and human rights campaigns. As such, the impact is not limited to individual actors but extends to the structural inequalities within organisations and movements. The forced withdrawal of women from public roles, whether through self-censorship or institutional step-downs, contributes to a cycle of exclusion that retrenches existing power imbalances, further marginalising women from leadership opportunities and civic life.

In both forms of withdrawal, the result is a diminishing of women's agency and influence in shaping public life. While these responses may seem to be defensive or protective strategies, they ultimately serve to reinforce the intended effects of TFGBV: to limit women's participation, reduce their visibility, and suppress their contributions to democratic and civic life. Rather than empowering women to challenge the systems of oppression that perpetuate TFGBV, withdrawal serves to isolate them and diminish their impact, further entrenching their marginalisation.

4. Recommendations

TFGBV has emerged as a growing cause for concern in Cambodia as it perpetuates and exacerbates traditional forms of GBV in the country. This chapter consolidates the findings from desk research and primary data collection to present a set of recommendations for various stakeholders to begin addressing TFGBV comprehensively. These recommendations aim to provide a foundation for creating a safer and more equitable digital environment for women and girls in Cambodia.



The United Nations should:

- Encourage member states to report and submit actionable recommendations on TFGBV cases to the Government of Cambodia via UN human rights mechanisms – such as Universal Periodic Review Cycles.
- Strengthen cooperation with local CSOs to gather insights on instances of TFGBV and gain a more nuanced understanding of this problem across provinces and social groups in the country.
- Facilitate multi-stakeholder partnerships between government agencies, CSOs, and technology companies to develop holistic approaches to combating TFGBV.
- Encourage the establishment of national working groups to integrate TFGBV considerations into broader gender and development frameworks.
- Cooperate with the Government of Cambodia to roll out capacity-building activities such as training and workshops to raise TFGBV awareness among government officials and local CSOs.

The Government of Cambodia should:

- Provide comprehensive training to all relevant government officials, including law enforcement personnel, to ensure the effective enforcement of laws addressing GBV and TFGBV, such as the Criminal Code (particularly Articles 188, 210, 250, 302, 305-308, and 423-425), the Labour Law (Articles 12 and 172), the also in the Cybercrime Law.
- Streamline and strengthen the implementation of Neary Rattanak VI, with a focus on increased financial support, to ensure its effective execution in addressing both GBV and TFGBV.
- Raise awareness among all civil servants and government officials about TFGBV so that they can effectively identify instances where technology has been used to violate women's rights, ensuring appropriate action is taken.
- Adjust administrative and judiciary processes to take a survivor-centred approach, involving more qualified women in these processes to strengthen the support system for all TFGBV survivors.
- Increase the proportion of women representatives, particularly in the National Assembly and the Senate, to ensure that women's perspectives on TFGBV and other relevant issues are considered in all legislative processes.

- Publicly commit to strengthening efforts to address GBV and TFGBV through relevant government agencies, such as ministries, and strategic frameworks such as Neary Rattanak VI.
- Create a new budget and cooperate with INGOS to create GBV and TFGBV curricula and learning materials for primary and secondary schools as part of the education strategy.
- Create nationwide and tailored media campaigns, particularly on social media, backed by evidence-based research and data, to raise TFGBV awareness, especially among the general public in rural areas of Cambodia.

Civil Society Organisations should:

- Monitor and document instances of TFGBV – and other forms of GBV – and inform relevant members of the international community to enable proper reporting and action on these cases.
- Continue strengthening support mechanisms for survivors of TFGBV by providing anonymous legal and psychological assistance to all survivors or referring them to the most adequate professional services for support.
- Develop and implement targeted communication and advocacy campaigns to empower survivors of TFGBV to share their experiences, fostering greater awareness and understanding of the issue among the broader population.
- Ensure that internal guidelines contain anti-GBV and TFGBV policies for staff and external partners with clear guidance on the procedures to follow in the event of gender-based harassment and nominate an independent focal person or committee within organisations and institutions, ensuring a safe and confidential reporting mechanism.
- Work with law firms to provide legal aid (pro-bono cases) to survivors who wish to pursue legal channels but do not have the financial means to do so.

Technology Companies should:

- Enhance their accountability by implementing more stringent measures to address abusive behaviour and harmful content by developing and enforcing robust content regulation policies that prioritise the safety and well-being of women, particularly those targeted by TFGBV.
- Improve their reporting systems, specifically tailored for women experiencing TFGBV, allowing for easy reporting of incidents such as hacking, doxing, and the leaking of intimate photos, while ensuring swift responses.
- Provide funding to CSOs to implement awareness raising and public education programmes.

The Media should:

- Increase scrutiny to identify and restrict the publication and broadcast of content that is abusive and may influence harmful behaviours in the public, particularly targeting the exposure of young people and children to such material.
- Ensure that all media outlets create – or update – their internal guidelines on how to address and report instances of GBV and TFGBV, both internally and externally.
- Provide training to all media professionals on GBV and TFGBV to raise awareness, minimise the risk of in-house occurrences, and empower all media professionals with the knowledge to identify and address TFGBV effectively.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) in Cambodia underscores the dual impact of digital technologies from a gender perspective. While these technologies have enabled positive developments, such as instant communication and improved coordination for public events, they have also intensified gender-based violence (GBV) – a persistent issue in the country. This is particularly evident among women with high public visibility, including journalists, leaders of women-led organisations, Indigenous advocates, and human rights defenders, who are disproportionately targeted due to their roles.

TFGBV in Cambodia is becoming an increasingly pervasive issue for two reasons. First, there is a widespread lack of public awareness about the issue which exacerbates the risks it entails. These include threats to the safety and well-being of women and girls online, which significantly undermine their civic freedoms, such as freedom of expression and religious freedom.

Second, TFGBV is a manifestation of a deeply ingrained issue: gender-based violence, which stems from entrenched patriarchal structures that systematically undermine the role of women within Cambodia's society at many levels. While addressing the technological aspect when it comes to GBV is important, it alone cannot fully resolve the issue, as the underlying causes are societal, not technological. Therefore, the ultimate solution lies in addressing the societal factors at its core.

This report serves as a foundation for addressing TFGBV, examining its impact on women with high public visibility through cyberbullying, online sexual harassment, and the manipulation of digital content. While some defence mechanisms exist, these are avoided because the officers receiving the complaints do not use a victim-centred approach.

To address these issues, the report offers targeted recommendations for diverse stakeholders to mitigate TFGBV and work towards its eradication. Beyond its findings and recommendations, two key reflections emerge, each essential for shaping effective strategies to combat TFGBV in the future.

First, a multi-stakeholder approach is essential to achieving meaningful impact and tackling TFGBV. This begins with raising awareness at all levels – from government officials to children – and fostering a collective willingness to confront the issue. Key actions include integrating dedicated gender education into school curricula, strengthening policy and regulatory frameworks, and ensuring their effective implementation. Additionally, robust reporting mechanisms must be established, and the media sector should play a proactive role in identifying and restricting the dissemination of misogynistic and violent content. Technology companies also have a responsibility to ensure that their digital platforms contribute to making the internet a safer space.

Second, even with these strategies in place, some forms of TFGBV will persist and likely evolve. Therefore, it is critical to stay vigilant to emerging technological developments that may complicate efforts to combat TFGBV. One notable example is artificial intelligence (AI), which can facilitate impersonation through deepfakes that closely resemble targets' relatives and friends, making detection difficult. AI can also generate written messages that mimic the someone's vocabulary and tone, further complicating efforts to identify and combat TFGBV.

The evolving technological landscape underscore the need for more evidence-based research to analyse emerging trends in TFGBV and for regular capacity-building activities targeting all stakeholders. Such efforts are essential to raise awareness among practitioners and the general public, develop new defence mechanisms, strengthen and effectively implement legal protections, and equip survivors and potential targets with the knowledge to respond to instances of TFGBV.

Only through such collective efforts can the online sphere become a platform of opportunity, where women and girls' civic freedoms are fully respected, thereby contributing to the dismantling of patriarchal structures.

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Annexes

Annexe I: List of Respondents

Interview Code	Background	Date of Interview
KII 101	Female journalist	5 September 2024
KII 102	Female journalist	12 September 2024
KII 103	Female media representative	23 September 2024
KII 104	Female content creator	26 September 2024
KII 201	Representative of a female-led organisation	9 September 2024
KII 202	Representative of a female-led organisation	12 September 2024
KII 203	Representative of a female-led organisation	13 September 2024
KII 301	Representative of an organisation working with Indigenous peoples	14 October 2024
KII 302	Representative of an organisation working with Indigenous peoples	25 October 2024
KII 303	Representative of an organisation working with Indigenous peoples	28 October 2024
KII 401	Representative of an organisation working with women human rights defenders	8 October 2024
KII 402	Representative of an organisation working with women human rights defenders	21 October 2024

Annexe II: Guiding Questions for Key Informant Interviews

1. What are the traditional issues related to gender-based violence (GBV) in Cambodia?
2. Have the internet and digital technologies changed the nature of GBV? How so?
3. Have you or people in your sector experienced technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV)?
4. What are the impacts of TFGBV?
 - a. What are the impacts at a personal level?
 - b. What are the Impacts at a professional level?
 - i. What are the impacts at the workplace?
 - ii. What are the impacts when working on the ground?
 - c. Are these impacts related to the use of technology or not necessarily?
5. How does TFGBV affect your freedoms and capacity to participate in civic spaces?
6. Are you or your organisation taking any measures to counter these negative impacts?
 - a. Where are the measures taken at a personal level?
 - b. What are the measures taken at an institutional level?
7. What is needed to address this issue and who is responsible for addressing this issue?



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