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SCRUTINIZING THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES: A NEED FOR BRIDGING GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE

KEY POINTS

- ↳ The gender digital divide is to be curbed to enable women and girls, in all their diversity, to enjoy universal, acceptable, affordable, unconditional, open, meaningful, and equal access to the internet.
- ↳ The agency and autonomy of girls and women, in all their diversity, and those from marginalized groups, should be respected both online and offline while simultaneously addressing existing structural inequalities.
- ↳ Online violence against all women and girls, in all their diversity, is to be recognized as a form of violence rooted in the patriarchal system, and it should be addressed not only through legal interventions but through structural change.

INTRODUCTION

In today's age, digital technologies are instrumental to access information, express and explore oneself, and find communities. In survey research conducted by Body & Data in 2021 with a total of 300 young people in Nepal, it was found that most of them (up to 98.7%) use the internet primarily for communicating with friends and family, and then for entertainment purposes. Internet and technology have become an integral part of people's lives across different castes, classes, ages, ethnicity, gender identity, education, profession, age, marital status, geographical locations, and so on. The role of digital technologies has been found to be essential in women's empowerment and its importance was heightened during COVID-19. Digital technologies play an important role in accelerating the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and contributing to empowerment (HDR 2022). Thus, the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development has placed technology as one of the key action areas for achieving SDG.

It is also crucial to have a discussion about how the utilization of digital technologies is shaping our sociopolitical outlook and how this could impact the realities of people especially women, girls, non-binary, oppressed, and marginalized groups. And such discourse cannot occur in isolation. In order to find out the impact as well as opportunities and challenges digital technologies have brought, it requires a deep dive into the socio-political structure within which these groups exist

The feminist discussion on technology and gender revolves around shifting the language around "empowerment" and "innovation" to rights, participation, security, and well-being. One of the underlying problems is the social structure including physical and digital infrastructure, which are designed in a way that amplifies the voice of certain individuals while silencing others. This paper unpacks the nuances around the experiences of girls and women in all their diversity with digital technologies. Based on the analysis of the work from various social justice movements in Nepal, this paper identifies three main points to highlight the major findings:

A. CLOSING THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE

According to Nepal Telecommunication Authority, 90.56% of people have access to the internet as of 2021, 64.6% of households have at least one mobile subscription and 7.3% of households own computers. However, access to the internet and devices does not imply that girls and women have control over these resources and are exempt from surveillance concerning their online behavior, within their household or society.

Structural and systemic barriers created by the legal, political, socio-cultural, geographical, and financial context contribute to the digital divide that women and girls in all their diversity are facing across the regions globally. The intersection of caste, disability, and rural context further contributes to the existing gender digital divide. Although the Constitution of Nepal guarantees the fundamental rights of citizens, including the freedom of expression, there is state control over how the technology is used and what is censored. The digital divide directly impacts their online participation, access to information, and right to assembly and association, which is increasing the existing inequality and exclusion of all women and girls, in all their diversity (GEC 2020). During the pandemic, the barriers to educational attainment for girls were heightened due to the necessity of relying on digital technologies for the attainment of education.

Besides the issue of telephone and internet connectivity in rural areas, it is necessary to pay attention to the socio-economic barriers as well as design and assessment of digital technologies for those in the margins to optimize the benefit that digital technology can create. We should strive not only to increase access to digital technologies but to ensure that there is meaningful access for women and girls, in all their diversity.

B. PROMOTING AGENCY OF WOMEN, GIRLS, AND MARGINALIZED GROUPS ONLINE AND OFFLINE

The heteronormative, patriarchal, and structural injustice disregards the autonomy and agency of girls and women. The suppression, censorship,

and gatekeeping that exist in the offline space are projected in online spaces. A report (Body & Data, 2021) shows many of the laws and regulations related to information and technology are being used in restricting, controlling, manipulating, and censoring content disseminated through the internet without prior public debate, or a thorough understanding of their long-term impact, often using broad and ambiguous laws.

The expressions of minorities tend to come under the most scrutiny and attack, from legal entities, and in society, the sexual expression of girls and women remains an important dimension that state and non-state actors have sought to limit and control. Nepal banned pornography in 2018 and this can be taken as an example where the state, under the pretext of mitigating sexual violence among girls and women, disproportionately curbed access to the free and open internet. Such restrictions are linked to larger questions of moral policing, censorship, and unequal citizenship and rights. The vilification, censorship, and criminalization of sexual expression online are seen to disproportionately impact women's and marginalized communities' exploration of their pleasure. In contrast with mainstream and digital media, where women's body is sexualized for the male gaze, the phenomenon of sexual, physical, and psychological violence can be perceived as a result of the patriarchal system. Women's autonomy and consent are being constrained at various levels, including legal, political, and socio-economic domains.

Along with the state laws and policies, non-state actors and big tech corporations are equally responsible for censoring the expression and bodies of girls, women, and other marginalized groups. The data that is generated, processed, and presented represents our bodies, and thus bodily autonomy and ownership over data against the violation of our consent and privacy from government and big tech companies should be considered while adopting digital technology by the states (Khan 2023). The concern over privacy and security of online presence and the data that is generated, breach of privacy, and misappropriation of such data – at any level by any actor – has a higher impact among girls, women, and marginalized communities.

It is important to create policies that promote claiming and exercising our autonomy and agency online, which will also reflect back on our offline life – which is integral in challenging discriminatory and restrictive social norms.

C. ONLINE VIOLENCE IS AN EXTENSION OF EXISTING GENDER INEQUALITY

Girls and women of all backgrounds and identities are being constantly silenced, censored, discriminated and oppressed in both digital and physical spaces. This serves to uphold the existing inequality and maintain the status quo.

Despite the recognition of women's rights as a fundamental right by the Constitution of Nepal, the legal and justice system of the country still maintains discriminatory provisions towards girls and women, a clear example is where they cannot even independently pass on their citizenship to their children.

UN Special Rapporteur on Online Violence Against Women and Girls to the HRC highlighted in their report how the mental and psychological

harms from online violence could manifest in physical and economic harm. It warns how online threats could bring unwanted attention to the private and personal lives of the survivor as tangible physical threats. A survey report by Body & Data shows that 86% of the respondents have experienced online violence of some sort. Victims have added barriers when trying to access the justice system and make use of the existing legal provisions because of rampant victim blaming and moral policing by those in power.

Further, Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) and journalists face online harassment and hate speech, and have to bear the onus of protecting themselves online, sometimes resulting in them leaving the online space altogether. There are many documented incidents of digital security threats along with physical security risks to feminists, activists, and journalists. There is currently no universal international legal mechanism for ensuring digital security (Mansurov 2021) and while many entities are trying to create "ethical" frameworks and policies, they need to be contextualized with lived experiences of the women and girls, in all their diversities. When viewed from a feminist perspective, it is argued that this issue needs to be seen as a systemic issue. Instead of holding individuals accountable and penalizing the individual perpetrators, we must take a structural analysis of social and policy contexts that have contributed to gender-based violence. Online gender-based violence does not exist in a vacuum separate from our social realities. Any special laws or measures formulated to combat OGBV will not be effective until and unless the existing patriarchal and misogynistic ideologies are eliminated.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS:

Understanding the need for structural analysis to be conducted in addressing the gender digital divide and the gender gap in accessing digital technologies, along with ensuring data privacy and security, some critical measures must be taken to ensure gender equality. This will help women and girls from diverse backgrounds to exercise their autonomy and agency in digital spaces.

- a. Access to digital technologies means the right to be online and offline while using any technological system, including the internet. Access to decision-making spaces, access to spaces where legal and policy-making decisions are made about technology also comes under meaningful access. Access is also about having the option to freely opt out. To achieve gender equality, not only is it necessary to provide girls and young women equal access to technology and digital training but also the right to question the practices that are making their online experiences unsafe.
- b. Sexual expression to be recognized as a freedom of expression issue and there should be state and non-state actors to control, surveil, regulate, and restrict feminist and queer expression on the Internet.
- c. Addressing online gender-based violence not just through legal measures but based on intersectional identities and experiences of people including an understanding of gendered implications of cyber security, data collection, surveillance, internet shutdowns, and disinformation to protect and strengthen women and people from diverse genders and sexualities in digital contexts.



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