Protecting Online Rights of Changemakers

Expert Insights from Key Informant Interviews: Challenges and Strategies for Engaging Women and Youth

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Asheef Iqubbal, Krishaank Jugiani and Bijaya Roy
Senior Research Associates

Background and Context

Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), such as the internet and social media, have become integral to various aspects of our lives, including education, healthcare, business, and entertainment. While the benefits, such as freedom of expression, access to information, and services, are significant, there are also challenges at multiple levels, including violations of privacy, misinformation, and surveillance. Governments worldwide, including those in South Asia, are striving to create new legal and regulatory frameworks, and update existing ones, to facilitate advancements in the digital economy and leverage digital technologies for the benefit of their citizens.

However, as governments aim to facilitate digital inclusion and tackle the challenges of digital harm, there is growing concern that existing and proposed regulations, coupled with suboptimal implementation, could unintentionally harm the users, which include restricting free expression and digital rights, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups like women and youth, and may also make access difficult for potential users. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the level of awareness and how local contexts and practices influence online engagement, safety, and freedom. This is critical to empower women and youth groups and ensure their active participation in digital technology policymaking.

Through the **Protecting Rights of Online Changemakers (PORCH)** project, in collaboration with *Internews*, CUTS aims to evaluate the awareness of digital policies and regulations among youth and women in South Asia, including Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. This involves assessing their understanding of technology policies, the potential impacts of these policies, and the existing capacity of civil society to engage with them. Additionally, the project seeks to identify challenges and develop strategies to enhance active participation of women and youth in technology-related policymaking.

As part of this project, CUTS conducted a series of Key Informant Interviews (KII) in India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka to gather expert perspectives on digital technology and related policies. The goal was to identify challenges and develop strategies to promote active involvement of women and youth in technology policy making processes.

Methodology

Ten experts were interviewed across India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, offering a nuanced understanding of digital technology and policy challenges. These experts included female tech leaders, media practitioners, researchers, lawyers, and investigative journalists, working in various aspects of digital rights, and technology policy governance, women and youth advocacy, digital literacy, and addressing violence against children and women.

Their insights spanned a wide range of critical focus areas, including information literacy, online safety, mis/disinformation, privacy breaches, and responsible AI advocacy. Experts also talked about issues at the intersection of digital technology, gender, sexuality, and disability, as well as online gender-based violence, violence against children, and child protection systems. Discussions also covered digital rights, freedom of expression, data protection, internet safety, governance, and digital literacy initiatives. Some experts highlighted gender digital inclusivity, digital awareness, and capacity building in technical and professional domains, while others focused on media rights, freedom of expression, access to information, and journalism ethics.

Additionally, perspectives on digital access, platform governance, data and algorithmic policies, and tech skilling contributed to a well-rounded analysis of challenges and opportunities in the digital policy landscape.

This diverse expertise ensured a comprehensive and multi-faceted exploration of key issues, emphasising strategies to promote the active involvement of women and youth in technology policymaking.

Each Key Informant Interview (KII) session was conducted by CUTS representatives to ensure effective execution and information collection. Experts for interviews were selected based on predetermined criteria such as expertise in women's rights, and digital rights. These interactions were guided by open-ended and semi-structured questionnaires, focusing on the experts' understanding and experiences, contributions and work related to awareness, free expression, privacy, and digital rights of women and youth. The thematic structure of these questionnaires aimed to gather insights

and perspectives from diverse stakeholders, to understand their views on the extent of awareness and exercise of digital rights among women and youth, as well as to gather their suggestions for the way forward.

Internet Usage, Access and Censorship

Access to Internet

It was evident in the talks with the experts that digital access is being negatively impacted by both patriarchal and cultural norms across India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Patriarchal world-views often restrict women's internet use, impeding access to crucial online safety resources. A significant gender digital divide exists due to cultural beliefs that discourage girls from using mobile phones and digital technologies, fearing negative influences on their lives. These restrictions limit girls' opportunities to benefit from digital advancements. Parental consent requirements for internet access further exacerbate this divide, widening the gap between boys and girls in terms of digital opportunities and resources. An expert from India shared,

> *"We see this, even in rural Tamil Nadu, where there are young women who work in the cotton mills in Tamil Nadu and very poor families. And you know, often the father is an alcoholic, the mother is looking after the house. So the only person who can go and work is the daughter. But you know, even though she's the breadwinner, the phone is staying in the house. She is not allowed to take it. So this is all about what we call gender norms. It's like, you know, you're seeing the iceberg on top, right, the phone."*

Another expert underscored:

> *"I clipped something from the Times of India, where the Election Commission said that basically, they wanted to go to many villages to train voters on, you know, how to use social media, how to sort of use EVMs and all. And in several villages, they were told by men in the village who are powerful that you don't need to do any workshops for women, because these technologies are not for women. If you have a belief system like this, and a rule like this, and it's very similar to the earlier belief, that women don't need to go to school, women don't need to go to college, you know, then it's not enough to just take that technology to that village, right, that fibre optics will get it to the village, but it's not going to put it in the hands of girls and women. So they're all these invisible forces."*

An expert opined that over the past 15 years, data consistently reveals stark gender disparities in digital access across South Asian countries like Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka. Despite economic development measured by GDP per capita, these regions exhibit significant gender gaps. This disparity persists despite statistical adjustments for income and education, highlighting deep-seated cultural factors influencing women's digital exclusion.

> *"The irony of it is that generally most of the digital indicators that you look at follow GDP per capita purchasing power adjusted across the world, and yet you have these outliers like India and Bangladesh which have such high gender gaps that are far worse than let's say Rwanda and Mozambique, which are much poorer countries."*

Women in these countries often face barriers such as lower income, limited education, and fewer social connections compared to men, impacting their access to digital technologies. Even when economic and educational factors are equalised, cultural norms around gender restrict women's online engagement. Women often have to seek permission from male family members to use these devices, impacting their autonomy, especially in rural and remote areas. Experts noted that women's internet usage is sometimes scrutinised by male relatives, who may question their interactions online, suspecting infidelity or inappropriate behaviour.

Box 1: Digital Divide in Nepal

Nepal grapples with a multifaceted digital divide that cuts across geographical, gender, caste, and ethnic lines. Geographically, there is a stark disparity between urban and rural areas: urban centres like Kathmandu boast better internet quality, while remote regions with unreliable networks due to the country's mountainous terrain. In urban areas, many young people have access to digital content, the internet, and digital devices. While they are proficient in using these tools, they often lack awareness of the associated risks. CSOs working with young women in these areas focus on internet safety, responsible media usage, and the purposeful content creation.

Older women, typically aged 40 and above, face different challenges. They often have limited education and digital literacy, compounded by language barriers as

Box 1: Digital Divide in Nepal
much of the online content is in English. This makes them vulnerable to online scams and misinformation. Similarly, caste and ethnicity play a role, with groups like Brahmins and Kshatriyas typically enjoy better digital access, while marginalised communities such as Dalits and Tharus, who often face significant barriers in internet accessibility and use.

Young people: A frequently raised point concerns the key challenges regarding youth and uses of digital media, which include online safety issues and screen addiction, leading to behavioural shift. Experts underscored that unlike traditional media, social media lacks stringent guidelines, exposing children to inappropriate, violent, sexual, and shocking content. Algorithms often feed primal instincts, making youth particularly vulnerable to potential harms. Exposure to pornography at a young age is also a significant issue, with children as young as five imitating inappropriate content, leading to serious mental health issues like panic attacks, anxiety, and self-harm.

An expert mentioned that platforms like video-based platforms can inadvertently guide children from innocent content to harmful material through their recommendation algorithms. An expert noted, *We heard specifically from local representatives in smaller villages and cities that children often encounter pornography at an early age and tend to imitate what they see without understanding it. This imitation can lead to harmful behaviours among children, resulting in guilt, pain, and severe mental distress. Counsellors frequently receive calls from children experiencing panic attacks, anxiety attacks, and engaging in self-harm. These children often feel unable to discuss these issues with their parents, further exacerbating their distress"*

Harassment Faced by Women: The gendered nature of online harassment is evident across various contexts, illustrating the broader societal challenges that influence women's digital engagement negatively. Moreover, women entrepreneurs, although more active online due to business needs, face heightened levels of harassment, indicating systemic issues that transcend mere economic participation. An expert pointed out the issues faced by women and particularly journalists, who face significant online harassment by the whole troll army, including deep fakes and morphing of their news content, especially when they critique certain ideologies. This harassment often involves creating and spreading sexual content through social view platforms.

The expert shared the sorry state saying that senior women journalists have become numb to this abuse, while younger journalists are deterred from entering the field due to these hostile conditions, affecting the diversity of voices in journalism. Experts also argued that women, when online, disproportionately experience harassment compared to men, partly due to their less frequent and more restricted usage patterns.

Box 2: Loss of Economic Opportunities Due to Online Harassment

Senior women journalists explain that online harassment has become so normalised that they often no longer bother to correct or confront it. The more they try to point out that such behaviour is unfair or ask for removal of harmful content, the more backlash they face. As a result, many become numb to it over time.

Younger women journalists also experience significant harassment, which sets a damaging precedent for new women to come into the field. For aspiring women journalists, this creates discouraging environment, making seem less appealing. This is particularly harmful from a systems perspective as it reduces the presence of female voices in journalism - something critical for a diverse and representative media landscape.

Moreover, online harassment leads to loss of economic opportunities for women journalists, with some ultimately choosing to leave the profession entirely. According to a survey conducted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the International Centre for Journalists (ICFJ) on online violence against women journalists, four percent women quit their jobs, and two percent abandoned journalism altogether due to relentless harassment.[1]

The ongoing pattern of harassment and inadequate government response mechanisms continue to enable perpetrators, posing a significant barrier to women's participation and safety in journalism. An expert from Colombo shared that the ways people use the internet can differ significantly. In general, users in both areas primarily use the internet for sharing information and social interactions. However, online abuse and trolling often escalate when users comment on public figures or political issues. This pattern highlights the intersection of digital communication with societal norms and political discourse.

[1] Online violence, fueled by disinformation and political attacks, deeply harms women journalists

An expert in India shared that online gender-based violence (OGBV) encompasses various forms, from persistent harassing calls to abusive comments on social media platforms. Even in rural areas, women face the threat of image-based abuse, where innocuous photos posted online can lead to familial accusations and repercussions. Reports on online abuse have historically caused alarm among stakeholders, including parents, educators, and policymakers. However, these reports have often failed to educate on the practical steps to take when faced with OGBV. This gap in knowledge underscores the need for more evidence-based and action-oriented resources. The expert underscored the fact that digital awareness cannot be a brief or superficial effort like distributing pamphlets or scanning QR codes. There is a need for continued engagement, guidance, and support, especially in the event of an untoward incident.

Experts in India also said that significant progress has been made since the introduction of the *cybercrime.gov.in* portal, which includes a specific function for anonymous reporting. This feature was heavily advocated for and has been instrumental in encouraging victims to come and report the harassment. The data from this portal shows a higher number of reports compared to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, suggesting increased awareness and willingness among victims to report harms. The increase in reports on *cybercrime.gov.in* indicates a shift towards a more victim-centric approach.

This approach is crucial for empowering victims to report incidents without fear of exposure or retribution. The overall awareness about help-seeking mechanisms for OGBV remains scattered. Many victims do not possess the necessary knowledge or resources to navigate the available support systems effectively. This gap highlights the need for more comprehensive education and outreach efforts.

Gig Economy: According to experts, women are increasingly participating in the gig and platform economy, particularly those not geographically tethered. However, platforms like ride-hailing and delivery apps remain predominantly male-dominated. One expert remarked, "*So there's no doubt that women are using the gig economy. But I again, want to say, like, the most well-known parts of the gig economy are the ride-sharing apps. But how often do you see a woman driver? Correct. So that traditional role is still there. But the gender bias means that even in the gig economy, women are still doing the same jobs they were doing in the traditional economy, and that has not changed. It's only so the beautician is still a woman, you know, that has not shifted. It's given more opportunities, but the roles are still the same.*"

Both men and women face similar issues in the gig economy space, including accepting terms and conditions they may not fully understand. Often, these terms are only available in English, creating a language barrier. Further, they are unaware of the extent of data being collected by these platforms, including real-time tracking, as one expert noted, *"None of them are aware. So they are very confused as to how everything is happening. They're like, how am I, how is my data being shared? Like, how is this algorithm working?"* This lack of understanding leads to ambiguity about their consent and how their data is used.

Additionally, according to an expert, the algorithms used by these platforms are not transparent, leading to confusion among workers regarding ride allocations, penalties, design, and data collection processes. Experts noted during the interview that some female gig workers believe certain areas are geofenced for their safety, preventing them from receiving rides or deliveries in those regions. While only a few people have reported this, it raises questions about which areas are deemed safe for women and the reasons behind these algorithmic decisions. This perception of protection, whether accurate or not, requires further exploration to understand its implications and validity.

Experts also highlighted that peer learning has become crucial, with many workers using social media groups to share strategies and seek advice. These groups serve as a resource where drivers can quickly receive responses to their questions, helping them navigate the opaque rules and penalties imposed by the platforms.

According to the experts, many gig workers engage in this work full-time, driven by incentive structures that push them to complete a certain number of rides within specified periods to earn bonuses. This structure effectively turns gig work into a full-time job without providing the benefits and security of full-time employment. This has led to discussions about what social security for gig workers should look like, given their quasi-employment status.

Grievance Redressal: An expert shared that many individuals prefer to report obscene or violent content directly to the platform rather than to law enforcement. However, despite frequent reports, platforms often respond inadequately, stating that the content does not violate their policies. This lack of effective action by platforms undermines users' confidence in their ability to address and remove harmful content, highlighting significant gaps in grievance redressal mechanisms. Similar concerns were raised by an expert from Sri Lanka that women avoid legal help due to shame and fear of not being taken seriously by authorities in online harassment cases:

"Most people, including women, do not seek legal help. There's a fundamental problem. That starts with the shame that if it goes public, it will be shameful. Second, if I go to the police station and say, you know, in an example, you know, my images are online and so-and-so posted it, that from the point of taking evidence, they will not be taken seriously or the person, a grieved party will be harmed."

An expert highlighted the ground level perception in Nepal, there is a widespread perception that complaints to major tech companies are not taken seriously due to their country not being part of affluent nations. Many experts underlined that these companies operate behind closed doors, with interactions handled by machines rather than humans. This leads to a general sense of disengagement, where individuals perceive the company as impersonal and unresponsive. When the content is removed, the common response is not to seek resolution but to simply move on. This reflects both a lack of knowledge on how to address these problems and a belief that efforts to resolve them will be futile.

An expert on OGBV in India highlighted that while mechanisms like reporting to grievance officers and the grievance appellate committee[2] have worked in some cases, the process remains complex and often requires intervention from intermediaries. Discussions around breaking encryption for combating Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)[3] are largely confined to policy circles, leaving victims and grassroots organisations unaware of these debates:

"I don't think there is a need for breaking encryption, you know, so on and so forth, because we see that as a huge hit on freedom of expression. Having said that, we also see the other dark side of the internet. So we are somewhere in the middle. But I think we are one of those organisations who have taken the position that we shouldn't be looking at just an issue and then going, you know, let's break

2 Both these mechanisms have been established under the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 ["IT Rules"], issued under the Information Technology Act, 2000 of India. The Grievance Officer is appointed by an intermediary (such as a social media platform) to address user complaints related to violations of IT Rules or other issues concerning the platform's computer resources. The Grievance Appellate Committee (GAC) handles appeals from users who are dissatisfied with decisions made by Grievance Officers.

3 India has implemented several legal and regulatory measures to combat Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM). The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 require social media platforms to actively identify and remove CSAM, enforced with penalties for non-compliance. Additionally, there's a push to redesign end-to-end encryption to enable law enforcement agencies to trace perpetrators effectively in combating CSAM.

all encryption, because, you know, there are perpetrators grooming children, etc. And I think data shows that a lot of perpetrators are known to victims. So these are people within your immediate circle, sometimes, you know, over time, they groom victims, etc. So that's the position that we take as an organisation where we are not anti-encryption at all. "

The expert also lamented the tech-centric grievance redressal for OGBV issues:

"You cannot have technology solve all these issues, right? Like, imagine somebody has leaked my nudes on the internet, I am reaching out to a helpline. And the first 10 questions I have to answer, I have to get through a bot to be able to reach a human being. Like, how is that victim-centric, right? You should be able to have counsellors or human-like social workers or trained individuals who are immediately responding to this victim and they are not. So you don't, that I feel is a barrier. So in this case, technology becomes a barrier to accessing help, right?"

Further, the evidence submission process to platforms is particularly complicated, with high standards and platform-specific requirements that are difficult for victims to navigate. Inconsistencies within platforms further complicate the process. CSOs play a crucial role in helping victims succeed in their complaints, but their limited reach means many victims still struggle to register their complaints. Victims often encounter impersonal, automated systems when seeking help, which can be particularly discouraging for those who are not well-equipped with the given mechanism. Many victims struggle with basic digital skills, making it crucial to have human counsellors or social workers readily available to assist them, rather than relying on complex tech-driven solutions.

There are also inconsistencies in how quickly and effectively platforms remove harmful content. While some types of explicit content are taken down swiftly, other less overt but equally damaging content, such as manipulated images used to defame or spread misinformation, often remain online for a longer period of time, causing distress to victims.

The current regulation mandating content removal within 72 hours[4] is not consistently enforced, particularly for less overt forms of harmful content, highlighting the need for more stringent and comprehensive enforcement mechanisms.

An expert who works with the platform workers noted the similar concern. Gig workers often do not raise grievances with the platforms, feeling it is futile as the platforms do not seem to prioritise their interests. Instead, they rely on each other to resolve issues, reflecting a disconnect and lack of direct communication with platform operators. This perceived futility and disconnection highlight the need for better training and information dissemination by the private sector. They suggested that private sector organisations, especially platform companies, take more responsibility in training workers and providing clear information. Ensuring workers understand the terms and conditions that govern their work are essential for fair and transparent operations.

Box 3: Motivations for Internet Use Among Women and Rural Populations

According to an expert, the eagerness to learn about the internet among women and rural populations is primarily driven by practical needs rather than a desire to understand potential harms. Their interest lies in how they can leverage the internet and for economic gain, communication with family members abroad, or marketing purposes. However, this eagerness is negatively impacted by widespread fear stemming from the harms that they had not initially perceived. They realise that without having good knowledge, they are vulnerable to online scams and use other digital platforms effectively.

For example, experts noted that one of the prominent issues is financial fraud through mobile payment apps, as well as predatory loan apps. Users often unknowingly grant these apps access to their contacts, exposing them to threats of public shaming if loans are not repaid, highlighting a critical lack of awareness among women regarding these risks. Basic digital literacy challenges persist, including issues like password loss and account lockouts, which disproportionately affect women. Additionally, incidents of hacked accounts and WhatsApp cloning are common, with many women unsure of how to address these security breaches.

[4] The IT Rules mandate intermediaries to acknowledge complaints about Rule violations within 24 hours and resolve them within 15 days. The Amendment specifies that complaints regarding the removal of specified prohibited content must be addressed within 72 hours.

Box 3: Motivations for Internet Use Among Women and Rural Populations

One of the experts noted, "I believe we need to approach this situation with more creativity. The government should engage in discussions with app developers to establish clear agreements that assert regulatory authority, rather than formal contracts. If issues arise, the government should set specific guidelines and timelines for compliance to streamline the resolution process. Additionally, platforms should not have unchecked freedom, particularly regarding practices like requesting access to contacts for loans, which often lead to problems. It is essential for the government to proactively intervene to prevent these issues from occurring."

Content Moderation and Misinformation: An expert shared that social media platforms are struggling to moderate violent content, often tied to political or corporate agendas. While platforms defend certain content as freedom of speech, they inconsistently remove content from journalists or activists expressing legitimate opinions. For example, many families still rely on old feature phones limited to SMS and phone calls, where harassment is through phones and SMS. However, these concerns are rarely addressed at digital rights conferences, where the focus tends to be on advanced topics like artificial intelligence (AI) rather than the everyday challenges faced by these users.

It was mentioned that the imbalance is further exacerbated by the dominance of Western viewpoints in shaping global tech policies, which can lead to frameworks that inadequately address the unique challenges and contexts of users in developing regions. The underrepresentation of local issues and the imposition of Western-centric norms underscore a broader issue of marginalisation within global technology governance. Stakeholders from the global South, including India, often feel that their experiences are sidelined or not fully considered in the global policy development. *"So that localisation, what we call Asianisation of the internet, is really what we are pushing for. We're asking for an internet that understands the cultural linguistic ethos and languages of our region, in particular women and marginalised communities", said an* expert from Colombo.

Experts also pointed out that many users do not fully understand the primary purpose of social media platforms, which are designed for profit and audience engagement rather than as traditional publishing platforms. This profit-driven model uses algorithmic governance to manage and promote content, which can sometimes lead

to conflicts with community guidelines and the handling of online hate. Algorithmic governance is a critical issue, as these algorithms impact how content is moderated and how safe digital spaces are for women.

Box 4: Drivers of Misinformation
An expert noted that the spread of misinformation is fuelled by the broader information ecosystem, particularly the role of global platforms and their algorithms which promote viral content without providing adequate local context to counter it. Political dynamics and power struggles also play a significant role, as misinformation is not a new phenomenon but has gained unprecedented speed and scale due to modern technology. Additionally, a population lacking critical skills to understand sophisticated technology and a media landscape with little pluralism further exacerbates the problem. Understanding gender disinformation and online hate also requires recognising the distinct ways men and women are treated online. Women's experiences are often highly gendered, sexualised, and subjected to more judgmental scrutiny compared to men's. This gendered nature of online interaction highlights the importance of addressing the specific challenges women face in digital spaces.

Awareness on Tech Policies: Echoing the findings from the FGDs, an expert agreed that people may not articulate their concerns in policy frameworks, but they do care about their rights. As one expert noted, *"If you start using big words, and all people don't identify with all this, but if you start talking about experiences, like if you just go to someone and say, Oh, do you care about your privacy on the phone? Maybe they'll say, we don't know, or maybe they'll feel that they don't want to feel stupid. So they might say, yes, yes, we care. But if you look at their experiences, you know, and then you go outward from that, then I agree with you that people do show that they want safety online, they want privacy online, and they would also like consent online. People don't like signing, you know, when we start using apps, we are forced to consent. Because it says you have to go through this giant thing, which is not humanly possible. And you have to take this, this, otherwise, you can't use the app, right? But that's not free consent. It's forced consent. People would like consent also, or a choice to consent. If you explain it to people, and you say, okay, you know, your photos are your data, you're what you're saying."*

Experts noted that there is a significant gap in awareness and understanding of digital rights and policymaking processes, particularly among women and rural populations. Many are not aware that using the internet and accessing digital tools can be a part of their rights. This lack of awareness stems from a lack of exposure and education about these rights. Without this foundational understanding, individuals cannot advocate for their digital rights. This limited access to digital tools and information has broad implications. It impedes economic freedom, restricts access to information, and limits communication opportunities. This digital divide also reinforces dependency on male family members.

Experts also pointed out that as systems become increasingly digitised, such as payments for utilities, many, including elderly women in urban areas like Kathmandu and Delhi, struggle to adapt. They often depend on male relatives or younger family members to manage digital payments and access e-commerce platforms.

Box 5: Women in Policymaking

An expert from India pointed out that women's participation in technology policymaking at the global level, including forums like the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), remains significantly lower than that of men. Similarly, within Indian technology policy discussions and consultations, there is a noticeable gender gap. Women's participation is limited, and the gap widens further when considering inclusion beyond binary gender norms, such as LGBTQ, which is less represented in these spaces.

Moreover, young women from grassroots and economically disadvantaged communities are crucial stakeholders whose experiences with digital technologies should inform policy. However, their voices are seldom heard in policy-making arenas, which predominantly feature more affluent, urban, English-speaking participants. This lack of representation excludes perspectives from low-income, Dalit, rural, and other marginalised women.

Overall, digital literacy remains a significant barrier across demographics in India. Fuhrermore, experts noted that significant disparities exist in the representation and consideration of Global South perspectives in international technology policy forums.

Unforeseen Implication of Tech Policy and Associated Consultation: Experts have highlighted concerns regarding government policies aimed at regulating online content, often criticised for their potential misuse to suppress dissent rather than protect vulnerable groups like women and children. Governments in South Asia tend to prioritise issue directions to take down content that they perceive as critical of the government, often using the justification of national security or cultural preservation without clearly defining these terms, and often without complying with procedural and substantive safeguards. The enforcement of such regulations can disproportionately affect marginalised communities and restrict freedom of expression online.

According to them, in South Asian cultures, there exists a prevailing sentiment of protecting societal honour and norms, which can influence the types of content deemed unacceptable or harmful. This cultural framework often translates into regulatory actions that prioritise community standards over individual liberties, potentially hindering progressive discourse and diversity of opinions.

Experts highlighted that one of the major barriers that is not enabling women and youth to participate in the consultation process stems from structural issues in governance across Sri Lanka, India, and Bangladesh. Sri Lanka faces challenges with limited and rushed policy consultation windows. India shows mixed efforts with varying degrees of genuine public consultation, while Bangladesh struggles with transparency and access to bill details. There is a critical need for a policy-oriented mindset and stronger collaboration among women's and digital organisations to effectively influence government policies in these contexts.

An expert pointed out that historically, policymaking in Nepal has been characterised as a closed process, although there have been recent strides towards increased openness. While there are CSOs and human rights groups engaged in policy advocacy, youth and women outside formal CSO networks lack targeted outreach. The policymaking process remains centralised in Kathmandu, neglecting participation from provincial and field-level stakeholders. A significant barrier to effective engagement is the lack of capacity and thematic knowledge among stakeholders, even CSOs, to comprehend and contribute meaningfully to policy discussions. This gap is particularly pronounced in digital policymaking, which is still evolving in Nepal. Traditional human rights organisations, despite their vibrancy, often perceive technology-related policies as outside their expertise, leading to hesitancy in engaging with these issues. An expert noted:

"Another aspect is civil society organisation, the traditional legacy human right organisation, they somehow think that this technology thing, that is not our domain. The level of knowledge and skill among them is limited. So that is the reason. Otherwise, the civil society in Nepal is considered very vibrant, but because of this kind of gap, they think technology is something they do not know. And because we do not have any expertise in this area, we better not talk about these policies."

According to experts, the lack of consultation with youth, women's, and LGBTQ groups during the policymaking process results in policies that are not well-informed about the specific needs, perceptions, and challenges faced by these communities. Consequently, the objectives of such policies often fail to address the challenges faced by these groups. Without inclusive consultation, policymakers miss out on crucial insights that could shape more effective and equitable policies. An expert pointed out, *"Even in the parliament as well, there is lots of representation, political representation is there, but the representatives are also not much aware about the issues. So they cannot raise their serious concern in the right time and right forum."* This gap undermines the efficacy of policies and limits meaningful engagement from youth and marginalised groups in the policymaking process, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion and ineffective governance.

One Size Fits All Approach in Policymaking: An expert in India pointed out that there are differences between and among the groups such as women, children, and youth. This heterogeneity is often overlooked in policymaking, leading to generalised solutions that fail to address specific needs. For instance, discussions around internet addiction and pornography often overshadow the more pressing issue of internet access, especially for marginalised groups. Many children in India lack sufficient access to the internet, which is a fundamental disconnect between policy advisors and the realities on the ground. Policymakers, often detached from these realities, tend to rely on western templates and insufficient data, leading to hyper-legalised and hyper-surveillant frameworks that do not reflect the nuanced needs of different communities and are often based on isolated incidents or lack comprehensive qualitative research. This results in a robust but impractical legal framework that can criminalise minors for adolescent behaviour without addressing the underlying issues.

Regarding intersectionality within the broader context of sexual harassment, they said that the internet's design often fails to cater to the needs of LGBTQIA individuals exploring their identities, inadvertently exposing them to harmful content and exploitation. An expert from Colombo opined, *"Racism takes very different, you know,*

different forms, but they are there and then they keep women down. So being able to work with people beyond our region has helped me understand that the issues are the same. Yeah, the issues really are the same. So black, Asian, Hispanic, minority women are really having it hard when they are online."

Digital Rights Awareness

Awareness of Digital Rights: An expert opined that, in the context of digital rights and technology use, many people perceive platforms primarily as tools for convenience and social interaction rather than as a space for rights and responsibilities. This perception shifts when incidents occur, prompting individuals to realise their lack of understanding about their own rights in digital environments. An expert from India noted women often shared that they are expected to share their passwords with family members, whereas men typically do not reciprocate. This discrepancy highlights deeper gender norms and inequalities. Women often struggle to connect everyday digital activities, such as sharing passwords, with potential risks like financial fraud, showcasing a need for enhanced digital literacy.

Sharing their knowledge from a tier 2 city, an expert opined that there is a notable lack of awareness among individuals regarding their online harassment and digital rights. Many are unfamiliar with the nature of online harassment and its potential impact on them. Despite frequently reporting abusive content on social media, experts noted that frustration is growing over lack of effective action. Beyond reporting mechanisms, there is a general absence of knowledge about digital rights among women in the semi-urban and rural settings. This gap hinders their ability to navigate and address online threats and violations effectively. As an expert noted:

> *"I have not come across anybody who's familiar with these aspects yet. Social media reporting is something they all ask us, you know, does it help? We keep pressing on the right button and we report, but nothing happens is something that often comes up. But other than that, are they aware of digital rights per se, no."*

Experts also pointed out that the issue of language accessibility poses significant challenges for users, particularly women, when navigating digital platforms and understanding their rights. The preference for local language over English is evident among users, especially in rural and other areas. However, many disclaimers and terms of service on apps and platforms are predominantly available in English, which creates barriers for those who are not comfortable with it.

As a result, many users, particularly women, rely on family members—often younger individuals or spouses—to interpret app permissions and terms of service. This reliance sometimes leads to bypassing or skipping through critical terms and conditions without fully understanding their implications. This situation underscores the urgent need for simplified, accessible language options in local languages and enhanced educational efforts to empower users with knowledge about their digital rights and responsibilities. In the realm of digital rights, the focus has primarily been on legislative frameworks such as bills and acts. This top-down approach in policy formulation neglects the implementation challenges faced by users in rural areas, where awareness and access to digital rights initiatives remain minimal.

Box 6: Strategies to Address OGBV

An expert working on OGBV issues shared that some victims, including those from rural areas, do reach out to the government or civil society for help. They actively try to address and confront privacy violations, such as the non-consensual sharing of intimate content. Although these victims may not speak in polished policy language, they understand the distinction between consensual and non-consensual sharing of their private data. This reflects a nuanced grasp of their rights despite varying educational backgrounds. Victims' efforts extend beyond merely seeking content removal; there is genuine eagerness among them to comprehend their rights, even if detailed platform policies are secondary to understanding their personal rights. Experts noted that effective advocacy for digital rights begins with awareness: if people do not recognise that their rights are being compromised, they cannot make a case for improvements.

Education and exposure to the concept of digital rights are crucial for empowering individuals to demand better access and inclusion in the digital policymaking process. Efforts should focus on engaging users about digital rights, privacy, and safe online practices, tailored to diverse demographics across South Asian countries. An expert suggested, *"I believe we should approach mobile phones for the current generation in the same way previous generations viewed textbooks. For example, providing scholarships to girls to encourage their proactive participation in the digital space. Furthermore, recognising that the physical and digital worlds are interconnected, we should develop curricula around gender for all government schools and integrate digital literacy into the educational system. This will help bridge the gap between physical and digital spaces and promote a more inclusive and informed society."*

Online Freedom of Speech and Expression

The internet has become a battleground for polarised opinions, often creating a toxic environment that exacerbates societal divisions. An expert noted, *"It's the kind of toxic ecosystem that we have in social media, right? Because if you start getting lots, people feel free to comment on anything they want, right? It's like your body has become like public property. So if you put up a photograph, people might say, 'Oh, why are you wearing this? What are you doing?' So there's so much judgement, continuously, that that exercises a lot of control and forces people to self-censor because you just feel judged all the time. Right? And you're scared to give your true opinion."* This pervasive judgement and the resultant self-censorship underscore the profound impact of polarisation online. Individuals often hesitate to express their authentic views for fear of backlash, leading to a constrained and homogenised discourse.

Online censorship involves the suppression or regulation of online content by governments, platforms, and society which can be driven by various motives, including maintaining social order, protecting national security, or adhering to cultural norms. In many cases, lack of transparency and accountability in the implementation of censorship policies exacerbates these issues, leading to a climate of fear and self-censorship among users.

An expert highlighted the pervasive issue of online self-censorship, which is often driven by fear of social, legal, and online repercussions, such as trolling. This is particularly pronounced among women and girls, who face greater pressure due to patriarchal attitudes. Instances where girls are forced to stop engaging online due to complaints from family members or teachers illustrate this impact. Consequently, women and girls tend to self-censor more than boys, who are more susceptible to online grooming and extortion. While boys might quickly comply with perpetrators' demands for inappropriate content, girls often resist longer, posing questions that may deter perpetrators. This dynamic underscores the complex interplay between gender, societal norms, and online behaviour.

To avoid these potential repercussions, individuals often choose to remain silent rather than engage in discussions. This self-censorship is prevalent among those who fear

that expressing their genuine opinions might provoke attacks or be used against them in the future. Many people have experienced trolls and attacks, where their past statements are dredged up and used to criticise or harass them later. Consequently, the fear of these coordinated assaults leads to a culture of silence and self-censorship, with individuals refraining from publishing their views on social media to avoid potential negative consequences. An expert from Colombo said:

> *"So viewpoints, the conflicting ideas are not really necessarily there, you get trolled when the ideas conflict. And it's supposed to be the most essential thing about democracy is to have nonviolent conflict. And that's a conflict in ideas. So that itself is the one thing that the internet really does not support now. And I find it really problematic. Because this is the reason why we enjoyed having these platforms initially. And now it's like backtracking a lot. So you have the lack of democracy online, and the toxic nature of the internet as responses."*

An expert pointed out that the issue of self-censorship and polarisation in online spaces is multifaceted, influenced both by human behaviour and algorithmic processes. Algorithms play a significant role in shaping user experiences by presenting content that aligns with past preferences, thereby reinforcing existing beliefs and creating echo chambers. This phenomenon contributes to societal polarisation by limiting exposure to diverse perspectives and promoting homogeneity among like-minded individuals.

Consequently, marginalised voices such as those of women, queer and trans persons, are often silenced or overshadowed, leading to a skewed representation of societal views online. This trend towards self-censorship, particularly among less powerful groups in society, results in a narrowing of discourse and a reduction in democratic diversity. The dominance of certain voices amplifies power hierarchies, wherein only the loudest or conforming with perspectives prevail, undermining the inclusivity and richness that diverse viewpoints can bring to public discourse.

Despite these challenges, many individuals, including those from marginalised communities like LGBTQI and people with disabilities, find solace and community online highlighting the importance and value of online connectivity.

For instance, individuals who may face physical or social barriers in expressing their identities or finding like-minded individuals locally can connect globally through private online spaces. These platforms provide a vital avenue for self-expression and

support, offering communities that may not be accessible offline due to geographic, social, or safety concerns.

However, a significant drawback of this trend is the confinement of these communities to private online spaces, limiting their visibility and impact on broader societal discussions. This isolation can reinforce societal segregation and hinder efforts towards greater social inclusion and acceptance. They highlighted the importance of platforms assuming responsibility not only for specific instances of biases and patriarchal harassment but continued efforts to make it inclusive. They stated that governments should actively encourage platforms to take substantive actions regarding free speech and expression rather than merely passing laws.

Additionally, they noted that while there may be numerous laws in place, individuals often hesitate to resort to legal action except in severe cases. In less severe situations, people generally prefer issues to be resolved through other means such as taking help of CSOs.

Experts pointed out that self-censorship is also prevalent in Nepal's social media landscape, particularly among women and girls who are notably less active compared to their male counterparts. This trend reflects broader societal dynamics where individuals, especially in rural areas, exhibit heightened caution in expressing views online. The fear of repercussions, exemplified by arrests of comedians and public figures critical of political figures or policies, underscores the chilling effect on free expression. In urban centres like Kathmandu, individuals with stronger internet presence and support networks are relatively more emboldened to engage in advocacy and express dissenting views.

Conversely, in rural areas, individuals exercise greater caution due to perceived risks associated with online expression. This highlights disparities in digital empowerment and underscores the need for broader digital literacy initiatives and protections for online freedoms across all the countries.

Box 7: Coping Strategies

An expert shared the strategies being adopted by women and youth to prevent self censorship, due to the fear of their families and relatives. As one expert pointed out, *"They either have to self-censor, or they have to start what are called second accounts,*

Box 7: Coping Strategies

what are called alternative accounts, like a private account, not a fake account, but where you restrict access, right? Like many, many young women I know have two accounts. One is your public account where you put, like whatever your family is okay with. And then one is your private account, where you decide who can be your friend, etc. And then you reveal a different part of yourself. So they're like two different performances."

Another expert noted that self-censorship is also driven by the desire to avoid online conflicts and focus on meaningful work. Engaging in online battles is time-consuming and distracts from the main goal of policy change. Sharing their personal experience, they said, *"My form of self-censorship is like, having online battles with idiots is not my full-time job. Policy change is my full-time job. Because if you're playing the online game, it is a full-time job, because those people, keyboard warriors, have no other thing to do. So I can't afford that kind of time."*

They also shared coping strategies observed in some regions, like Myanmar, through strategies, such as maintaining multiple social media accounts or using family members' accounts to navigate online spaces discreetly.

Privacy and Personal Data Protection

Awareness on Privacy: Sharing their knowledge from a tier 2 city, an expert opined that, initially, people were indifferent to data privacy concerns, often stating they had nothing to hide. This perception shifted over time as individuals became aware of technology's influence on their online experiences such as hearing about scams. They also reported receiving targeted content. The expert shared ground-level perception that indicates a growing concern about online content and its impact, prompting people to seek understanding of how technology shapes these issues. This shift underscores an evolving awareness and interest in comprehending the intricacies of data privacy and its implications in digital environments.

Concerns over Data Sharing Practices: According to an expert in Nepal, awareness regarding data sharing and consent remain fragmented. The widespread practices involve individuals routinely sharing personal information such as names, addresses, and phone numbers without questioning the purpose or seeking clarity on data usage. While there is some discourse on platforms like Instagram about rights regarding photos and consent, the broader understanding among the public remains limited. However, the expert also noted that students in grades 11 and 12 do express concerns about photo ownership and privacy rights online.

Box 8: Implication of Parental Consent

When it comes to protecting children's data online, minimal data should be collected to ensure their safety. For example, requiring a child's Aadhaar card to be entered into a safe network so the government or parents can monitor their online activity is a surveillance-based approach. This method is unhealthy, as it gives the government or parents excessive control over a child's online experiences. Instead, a balanced approach is needed. While monitoring is important, parents should be involved in their children's online activities from an informed and supportive perspective. A binary approach, where children are simply allowed or not allowed to do certain things online, is not ideal.

Representation of Youth and Women in Policymaking

In the consultation process, according to experts, women often face significant barriers when expressing their opinions in policy and leadership contexts, reflecting broader societal norms that have historically subdued women's voices for decades. Women's opinions are frequently dismissed. Leadership positions in policy discussions predominantly feature individuals with long-established male voices, often overlooking the perspectives of women. This underrepresentation of women in influential leadership roles highlights both cultural and structural challenges within the policymaking process. An expert from Nepal noted:

> *"In overall I would say in policymaking just the mention of women minority groups has been very limited and it has only been towards capaciting women towards the digital economy. So, it doesn't say much about internet safety, how we can work on different parts and all the new conversations have been around how to create digital infrastructures that can actually bring in."*

Another expert from Colombo shared,

> *"At best, women are given lip service without actually being allowed in the participation or discussion. As for the youth, representation of those demographics is a complete farce."*

Role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs): According to the experts, CSOs play a crucial role in addressing gaps in technology policy and mitigating social issues. They facilitate increased participation of women. While state governments and other departments are supportive, women often lag in understanding and adapting to technological developments. CSOs bridge this knowledge gap, advocating for responsible digital policymaking. An expert underscored:

> *"The state governments, other departments are also open, but they are very, like any government machinery, slow to kind of understand how technologies*

are developing, what could be the consequences. So organisations like ours come in that space where we try to bridge the knowledge gap so that they can innovate or even have the industries develop in much more responsible ways."

However, an expert from India lamented the noticeable absence of CSOs specifically focused on technology policy, with many organisations primarily addressing specific issues like online child safety, misinformation, and digital addiction. Another expert remarked:

"There are no other civil society organisations working on the technology policy aspect, but there are several other CSOs working to address some of the harms. Organisations have picked up either online child safety as an issue, or let's say, I don't think any organisation addresses harassment, but fake news and misinformation is an issue that some people address. Digital addiction is something that some CSOs are working on, but it's just those issues. So it's like putting Band-Aids on those wounds."

Similar concerns were raised by an expert from Sri Lanka:

"*When it comes to women and issues, is there civil society engagement? Sure, not just on, not on digital stuff. I mean, there have been, you know, if you look at, I think Women and Media Collective and a few other organisations, they have used court procedures on non-digital stuff in the past to take people to court. Are they a strongly unified civil society in Sri Lanka? Not really.*"

Recommendations

The experts from India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka provided several recommendations to increase the participation of women and youth in the digital policymaking space to ensure it is safe and inclusive for them.

Bridging Digital Divide: Efforts to bridge the digital divide should focus on ensuring equal opportunities to access to technology and in the discussions around digital policymaking. Proactive hiring policies, potentially including quotas, can help achieve greater gender parity. Involving more women and young people in tech policy discussions and decision-making processes is essential to draw upon diverse perspectives to inform inclusive policies. This inclusive approach not only addresses systemic barriers but also fosters equitable digital participation for all.

In this regard, there is also a critical need for policy frameworks to adopt a bottom-up approach, ensuring that local perspectives and needs are integral to the design and implementation of digital rights initiatives. An expert from Nepal highlighted the robustness of this approach. In Nepal, the local government has a significant responsibility to increase awareness among people in their respective municipalities, particularly through civic education

Currently, discussions around acts and regulations predominantly occur at the national and policy-making levels, which sometimes lack engagement with municipal and local government bodies where grassroots impact can be maximised. Thus, strengthening local governance structures to focus on digital education and internet literacy can enhance awareness and civic engagement. By involving local governance, digital rights initiatives can be more effectively implemented and tailored to the needs and perspectives of local communities.

Policy and Legal Reforms: Policy initiatives should aim to create simpler legal tools to deal with online issues effectively. Instead of relying solely on traditional laws like the IT Act or the Indian Penal Code, we should have more straightforward options for people to seek justice and resolve problems online. For example, an expert talked about how some people are using tools like the "Take It Down" application, which

partners with platforms like Meta and Discord to remove deep fakes anonymously. This tool provides a more convenient alternative to legal action, which many journalists find cumbersome and ineffective.

Similarly, another suggestion was to implement economic penalties for online violations. This approach aims to incentivize responsible and ethical behaviour among both users and platforms in the digital sphere. An expert expressed, "I believe economic penalties could be effective in addressing these issues. Imposing fines can have a significant impact, as financial consequences can be a deterrent. Additionally, establishing a fund for digital security, specifically for low-income communities in India, funded by these penalties, could help mitigate online risks effectively."

Enhancing Accessibility and Safety within Platforms: Experts emphasised that safety measures should be integral to platform design, with prominent placement of safety resources on homepages. This visibility is crucial for users, including those with disabilities, to easily access support mechanisms and report issues without navigating through convoluted menus. Further, creating safe digital spaces where individuals can freely express themselves without fear of harassment or discrimination is also a foundational step towards fostering inclusivity online. An expert from Colombo opined, *"The first step is to, you know, create a space where people can be who they are and appear to be who they are, and we have not created platforms that are safe enough for people to feel safe."* Additionally, standardising and centralising reporting mechanisms for online gender-based violence (OGBV) is crucial to offering clear guidelines and support to victims. Simplifying the reporting process and providing transparent feedback on complaints are essential for building trust and accountability on digital platforms. Implementing a unified system for evidence submission across platforms would streamline reporting, alleviate burdens on victims, and ensure timely resolution of incidents.

Capacity Building: There were calls for increased capacity building initiatives for women and youth to empower them in the digital space. An expert highlighted that effective capacity building involves a multi-level approach where different skill sets are required. One is to continuously engage with policymakers, keeping issues in the public domain while other is to consult with platforms and other organisations.

Additionally, there must be a capacity for public advocacy, such as advocating with the government to demand serious consideration of these issues. These skills are distinct,

yet both are crucial. Core skills for effective capacity building include policy analysis, gender audits, and the ability to review legislation through a gendered lens.

As one of the experts noted, *"I think having capacity for policy analysis is a core, core thing. Skilling is a great thing. And how to do gender audits and, you know, how to undertake a piece of legislation and do a gender audit on a piece of legislation is important."* Moreover, the expert also noted that efforts in digital capacity development for women and youth are gaining momentum but require more comprehensive integration into policymaking discussions. It is imperative to prioritise initiatives that empower women and minorities through digital literacy programmes, ensuring they are equipped to navigate and advocate for their rights in the digital sphere effectively.

Enhancing Digital Inclusivity through Government Support and Education:
According to experts, governments should play a pivotal role in promoting digital inclusivity by facilitating access to mobile devices, akin to educational resources like textbooks. This ensures that all individuals, particularly women, have equal opportunities to participate meaningfully in the digital realm. Furthermore, integrating gender-sensitive digital literacy into school curricula is essential. Such integration acknowledges the interconnectedness of physical and digital identities, preparing young learners to navigate digital spaces safely and responsibly from an early age. Further, an expert from India emphasised another importance of transforming the education system, particularly encouraging students in the humanities to explore impactful career options beyond traditional roles like teaching or writing. There is a significant need to promote public policy as a viable career path for humanities students, highlighting their potential to influence technology and innovation.

Furthermore, according to experts, to support women in technology and policy, initiatives such as creating spaces for women to innovate and related mentorship programmes are essential. These programmes empower women to develop entrepreneurial ideas and participate actively in mainstream policymaking spaces. However, challenges persist in integrating women into leadership roles within the tech sector, requiring systemic changes to ensure equitable representation and decision-making. Diversity in technology development is crucial, not just for gender diversity but also for broader inclusivity across all demographics. It is essential to move away from paternalistic approaches and adopt participatory decision-making processes that reflect the needs and perspectives of diverse communities. This shift will help create a more equitable and innovative tech ecosystem. To promote diversity and innovation,

initiatives like innovation festivals and summits should be expanded to facilitate inclusion of women and other genders. These policies will incentivise diverse participation by offering tangible benefits for pitching ideas and contributing to the innovation ecosystem.

Enhancing Women's Representation and Advocacy in Digital Spaces: In today's digital landscape, the presence of women role models and educators across various sectors is not just desirable but imperative. Their visibility plays a crucial role in inspiring and empowering young women in tech. Women in leadership positions can also advocate for safety and inclusivity through relatable and reassuring communication methods, such as short videos or interactive reels. Efforts are needed to cultivate leadership among women and enhance their skills in articulating advocacy issues effectively in policy dialogues. Further, policymakers must be encouraged to prioritise gender equality and youth perspectives in policy formulation, recognising their pivotal role in shaping a more inclusive digital future. As highlighted by an expert from Colombo, "*Incumbent policymakers have very few incentives to listen to women and youth. To make them listen, it must be made clear that they are having conversations and that on these conversations, votes hinge.*"

Collective Action: According to an expert, the competitive nature of funding for civil society organisations (CSOs) can hinder effective collective action. Funders should encourage collaboration by requiring joint proposals from multiple CSOs with a history of working on these issues. This approach would promote cooperative efforts rather than pitting organisations against each other for limited resources. By fostering collaboration, CSOs can work more effectively towards common goals.

Similarly, an expert from Colombo highlighted an innovative youth engagement initiative called Teen Check. This programme involves teenagers in fact-checking activities, gaining significant global attention. Unlike traditional fact-checkers, these young individuals use contemporary language, asking "Is it legit?" instead of "Is it fake or false?" This approach resonates more with their peers and makes the fact-checking process more relatable and collective. Teen Check represents a creative way to involve young people in critical thinking and information verification, empowering them to play an active role in combating misinformation.

Enhancing Representation and Inclusivity in Policy Consultations and Advocacy: Effective policy consultations necessitate active advocacy for increased representation, particularly for women and marginalised groups. According to an expert, those civil

societies privileged enough to participate in engagement in policy discussions and committees should prioritise greater female representation. To foster effective governance and inclusivity, government policies should also mandate comprehensive public consultations that actively involve all relevant stakeholders, including community organisations. Establishing clear action points from these consultations, accompanied by regular feedback mechanisms to track progress against set objectives, is essential. This accountability framework ensures that commitments made during consultations are honoured, thereby promoting transparency and trust between CSOs and the government.

Furthermore, to enhance the effectiveness of policy consultations, it is imperative to ensure that consultation documents are accessible and comprehensible across all demographics. This involves not only translating documents into local languages but also presenting information in a clear and engaging manner that can be easily understood by individuals with varying levels of literacy and education. Prioritising communicability and accessibility of community guidelines in all local languages on platforms can significantly enhance user engagement and comprehension. Developing user-friendly interfaces that simplify complexity ensures technology accessibility for all users, irrespective of their familiarity with digital tools. This concerted effort towards inclusivity and accessibility is crucial for fostering meaningful participation from all segments of society.

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