Protecting Online Rights of Changemakers

Voices from the Ground: Insights from Focus Group Discussions

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CUTS International
D-217, Bhaskar Marg, Bani Park, Jaipur 302016, India
Tel: +91.141.2282821, Fax: +91.141.2282485
Email: cuts1@cuts.org, Web site: www.cuts-international.org

Authors:
Asheef Iqubbal, *Senior Research Associate, CUTS International*
Krishaank Jugiani, *Senior Research Associate, CUTS International*
Bijaya Roy, *Senior Research Associate, CUTS International*

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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.

Box 1: Digital Divide

Internet usage has become ubiquitous in modern society, significantly shaping communication, businesses, and access to information. In South Asia, internet usage has seen a significant increase over the years. For example, individuals using the internet as a percentage of population increased by 34 percent from 9 percent in 2011 to 43 percent in 2021.[1] However, the region still faces substantial challenges related to digital divide and weak regulatory enforcement, resulting in the negative experience for the users.

Disparities in internet access persist within the countries, influenced by socio-economic status, geography, and infrastructure availability.[2] Despite the progress made in urban areas, the digital divide between rural and urban India remains significant. According to the latest National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) data, only 24 percent of rural Indian households have access to internet, compared to 66 percent in urban areas. Similarly, according to GSMA's 2023 Mobile Gender Gap Report, only 21 percent of women in India use mobile internet, compared to 42 percent of men. The report also states that while 79 percent of men in India own a mobile phone, only 63 percent of women do.

1 Individuals using the Internet (% of population) - South Asia | Data (worldbank.org)

2 The challenges and opportunities presented by South Asia's digital economy - Modern Diplomacy

Box 1: Digital Divide

According to the World Bank, Nepal has an internet penetration rate of 54.88 percent as of 2022.[3] However, Nepal's digital divide is significant, with urban areas having better internet connectivity and more accessible digital devices compared to rural areas. In terms of gender too, twice as many boys as girls are likely to have internet access.[4]

In Sri Lanka, as of 2023, 66.7% of Sri Lanka's population, or 14.58 million people, were internet users.[5] However, a significant digital divide exists between urban and rural areas. In 2021, digital literacy was 72% in urban areas, but only 55.2% in rural areas and 38.2% in the estate sector.[6] Additionally, a 2018 UNICEF study revealed a gender digital divide, with 67% of boys aged 11 to 18 having internet access compared to only 33% of girls of similar age.[7] The findings from the FGDs point to a similar picture.

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 users, including restricting free expression and digital rights, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups like women and youth. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the level of awareness of women and youth about the digital harms, rights, and policymaking and how local contexts and practices influence online engagement, safety, and freedom. This is crucial 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 examine 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

3 Bridging the digital divide in Nepal
4 Tackling the digital gender divide in Asia - ITU
5 Digital 2023: Sri Lanka — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights
6 Bridging the Digital Divide in Sri Lanka: Empowering Digital Rights for All - Hashtag Generation
7 Shattering Women's Futures: Evidence Of Patriarchal Control Of The Cybersphere In Sri Lanka | GenderIT.org

policies, the perceived impacts of these policies on their digital rights and the existing capacity of civil society to engage with them.

Additionally, the project seeks to identify challenges and develop strategies to enhance the active participation of women and youth in technology-related policymaking. As part of this project, CUTS organised a series of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka to gather insights from women and youth groups on issues related to awareness about digital harms and rights, technology policy, and its enforcement.

Further, across all locations, a significant urban-rural and divide exists in digital awareness and literacy. Women reported experiences of harassment and fraud online, and in general, also face disproportionate impacts of cyber harms, such as blackmail and online gender-based violence, while young users feel their opinions are often dismissed. In addition, a lot of self-censorship has been reported and people's activity on digital platforms, especially social media, has gone down. However, participants also noted the use of tactics like Virtual private network (VPN) to bypass censorship.

In terms of digital rights, most of the participants emphasised that every human right should extend to the digital realm, albeit with some adjustments. The right to privacy, freedom of speech and expression and informed consent were the most frequently highlighted needs among participants. They also stressed the need for greater representation of women in policy development, addressing structural barriers like patriarchy and discrimination.

Regarding policy recommendations, emphasis was on adopting an inclusive approach, ensuring diverse representation, particularly of marginalised groups in policy development. Participants advocated for capacity-building initiatives and awareness generation programmes to help them fully exercise digital rights. Effective grievance redress systems are also crucial, enabling consumers to report issues easily and receive timely responses, maintaining trust and safety.

Methodology

Each FGD session was facilitated by a CUTS representative to ensure effective execution and data collection. Potential participants were identified based on predetermined criteria of age and gender and invited to join the discussions. Participants consisted of a diverse range of stakeholders, such as representatives from civil society organisations, students, teachers and journalists among others. The discussions were guided by a set of predetermined open-ended and semi-structured questionnaires related to awareness, free expression, privacy, digital harms, and rights. These questionnaires aimed to gather insights and perspectives from diverse stakeholders, with a thematic structure designed to gauge the awareness and perceptions of women and youth groups.

In India, three FGDs were conducted in the capital cities of Kolkata, Jaipur, and Delhi. These cities are among the most populous in India, each with its unique socio-political and cultural context. In Nepal and Sri Lanka, FGDs were held in Kathmandu and Colombo, respectively. Conducting FGDs in these cities allowed access to diverse participants, including various age groups, geographical backgrounds, educational levels, and socio-economic profiles. The focus was on engaging women and youth groups on diverse digital issues, using different methodologies to create impact. These cities host a wide range of stakeholders, including policymakers, civil society organisations, academia, and media outlets, providing a unique opportunity to capture diverse perspectives on the online engagement of women and youth groups.

The discussions were conducted in person to facilitate insightful and meaningful interactions. A total of 95 people participated in the five FGDs, with a regulated number of participants ensuring effective, free, and frank discussions, as well as a safe space for dialogue. Diversity in terms of gender, age, and profession was ensured in each discussion. The FGDs were conducted in safe spaces, ensuring the anonymity of the participants and providing them with the opportunity for free and frank discussions.

Respondents Profile

The total number of participants is shown in the tables below. Figure 1 shows the diversity of stakeholders, and Figure 2 shows the participation in terms of gender.

Figure 1: Diversity of Stakeholders

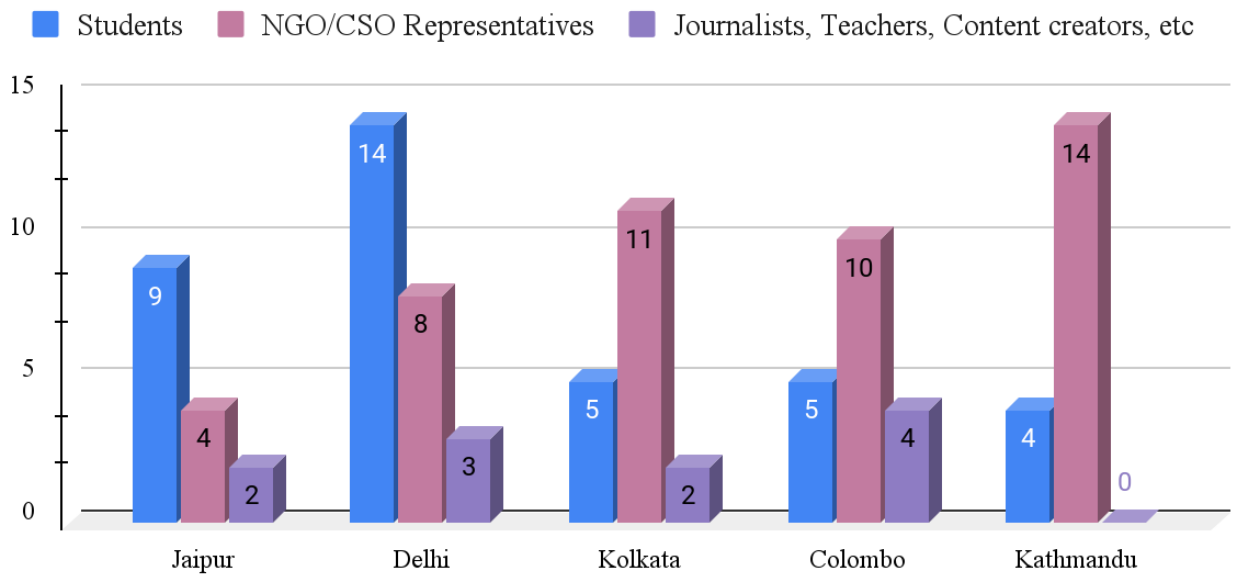
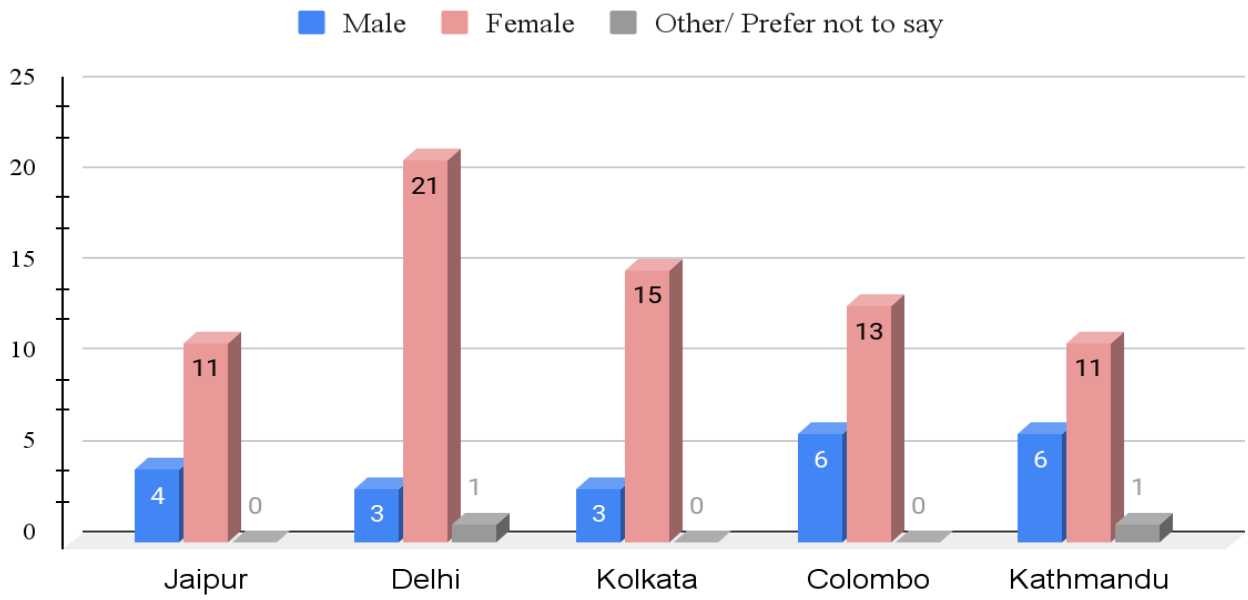


Figure 2: Gender Participation



Key Highlights

- The focus group discussions saw greater participation from women (71) than men (22).
- Participants included a diverse range of stakeholders, such as civil society members (47), students (37), teachers, journalists and other relevant stakeholders (11).
- The majority of participants were aged between 19 and 35.
- Some respondents were from nearby Tier 3 cities and rural areas.

Internet Usage, Access and Censorship

Challenges and Opportunities of Digital Technologies: Participants across locations reported using the internet and digital platforms for multiple purposes, including studying, online shopping, entertainment, social media, online gaming and conducting online meetings among others. They pointed out that the internet has significantly transformed people's lives in terms of communication and access to services. For example, a participant in Delhi shared the benefits of Digital India initiatives like Unified Payments Interface (UPI) and seamless online payments.

Participants in Kolkata, too, highlighted the practical advantages of online payment methods, pointing to a shift towards digital financial transactions. From an educational standpoint, the shift to online classes ensured continuous learning for students during the pandemic. Access to information became more convenient, and also, everyday tasks like commuting saw improvements in efficiency with queue-less systems.

A representative from an NGO in Jaipur elaborated on how their organisation leverages the Internet for hosting virtual meetings, which facilitates collaboration among team members. Additionally, they use digital platforms to distribute surveys, gather valuable feedback, engage with a broader audience, and connect with individuals across various communities. Similar views were shared by a representative in Colombo.

One of the participants said, "*The benefits are of course, it's the social connections, it's education, it's also greatly the advocacy that comes through it and also to mobilise and connect different stakeholders from all around the world on certain topics.*" Another participant emphasised that "*when it comes to professional life, platforms are used when it comes to creating awareness of certain topics that we are working on, especially politically sensitive topics, about governance, environmental regulations, and laws*."

A participant in Delhi also highlighted the benefit, "*I would like to say social media is not all bad, or you know, digital platforms are not all bad, because, during COVID, I earned my first 2000 rupees by taking tuition of a three-year-old child by teaching English*." Similarly, a participant in Delhi highlighted both the benefits and difficulties

of working with the LGBTQ community. Many individuals prefer to ask questions anonymously online rather than in person, where cultural taboos and legal restrictions make accessing information difficult. Thus, online platforms offer anonymity and fewer barriers, but the reliability of the information is a concern, leading to misinformation, particularly about subjects like HIV, especially on social media.

A participant in Delhi pointed out that India has become a global hub for mobile gaming. In peri-urban and rural areas, however, many young people play games that are often localised versions of western games, sometimes featuring problematic or overtly nationalist messaging. This trend is largely unnoticed by mainstream media and culture, indicating a significant shift regarding problematic content within the internet culture. This shift underscores the growing influence of digital spaces in shaping the experiences and perceptions of young people across different regions in India.

Participants also raised concerns over how political parties and companies often use social media as a powerful tool in election campaigns, leveraging it to influence voter opinions and mobilise support. However, this can lead to the exploitation of social and ethnic faultiness. Some participants underlined that excessive screen time led to decreased people's engagement with each other and their own independence, affecting mental and physical health. Social relationships suffered as people became more reliant on online communication, highlighting the dual nature of the digital transformation.

Challenges Faced by Women in Digital Spaces: It was evident during all the discussions that women face disproportionate challenges in relation to the use of digital technologies, such as blackmail, online sexual violence, non-consensual image sharing, sextortion, online grooming, spamming and digital harassment, particularly in the form of trolling and abuse. This pervasive threat stems from the unchecked ability of individuals, especially men, to engage in online harassment and abuse. A participant in Jaipur shared a harassment incident from when she was 17.

> *"I just opened my Instagram account. A guy from my coaching forwarded me some screenshots and questioned me about a message I supposedly sent. I said no, it is not me, it is my fake account. He basically blackmailed me to come at night at 12 PM otherwise I'll call the police at your house. At that time, I took help from a childcare helpline. They asked me to share the screenshots, both that he sent and of our chats. They sorted the issue. They were issuing an FIR, but my*

parents took it back, saying it is not right as we were both the same age (underage)."

Female participants also opined that both the government and platforms should take swift action on complaints to prevent further harm. They have reported that patriarchy and discrimination result in a lack of female representation in key decision-making processes and positions. Many participants believed that content moderation policies of social media platforms are not contextual to prevent unfair bans and warnings.

A participant in Colombo shared, "*In suburban areas, women don't really know what to do if they are being harassed or bullied. They don't know what kind of laws they can use against these people. They don't know where to go and also have a fear of going to the police and complaining. The lack of awareness is the main point here. Even in urban areas, women are not digitally educated. For e.g. they are victims of scams. The internet is growing faster than we are able to educate people.*"

Another participant from Colombo sharing a few findings from one of the types of research they did, raised the point that there is a growing number of platform workers and gig workers in Sri Lanka and some of them are working mothers. "*In our research, we found that the number of platform or gig workers in Sri Lanka is growing, and this includes working mothers. We observed several gender-related issues that mirror those found in offline life, which are now being replicated online. These issues also extend to financial transactions and the perception of female platform workers. For instance, there is a question of whether female platform workers are considered equal to their counterparts of other genders. Marginalised individuals often face specific challenges, and these issues need to be considered when discussing the online gig economy*."

Box 2: Internet Shutdown
The participants in India highlighted the impact of the internet shutdown, noting that it caused inconvenience to people especially in availing emergency and government services. This is further supported by the Keep It On report that states that for the sixth consecutive year, India saw the most amount of Internet outages worldwide in 2023.[8]

[8] India records highest number of Internet shutdowns globally in 2023 - The Hindu

Box 2: Internet Shutdown
Participants in Colombo also expressed fear of internet shutdown. "*Every time there is some social upheaval, the immediate response is the internet shutdown. Now it is becoming a habit and free access to the internet is something a lot of people don't talk about because they don't see it* (access to internet) *as of economic value, which affects the people.*"

Young People: Participants across locations pointed out the pervasive use of the Internet and mobile devices by young people, highlighting several adverse effects on their well-being. Excessive usage has been linked to various health issues among children, while students have been facing difficulties in maintaining focus on their academic studies. The participants in Kolkata, both educators and parents, highlighted concerns on the younger generation's fixation on social media validation, leading to reduced attention spans and increased anxiety. Excessive mobile phone usage is linked to various health issues, such as eye strain and disrupted sleep patterns.

In Kolkata, the pandemic forced people in remote areas to rely on the internet for education, exposing children to inappropriate content. Parents are now counselling and monitoring their children's online activity, highlighting the need for parental control features. Further, participants shared that usually in suburban and rural areas, families only have one phone. People are not aware of issues like parental consent and children usually just click on buttons for age verification and access adult content. Young participants also reported that their opinions are often dismissed as naive and immature, a challenge they encounter both online and in real-world interactions. A participant noted,

> "*I have felt that regarding age, opinion is that these are kids, and they said it in ignorance. Maybe our opinion could have mattered, but it doesn't matter so much just because we are kids or were kids.*"

Awareness on tech policies: In the discussion, it was highlighted that there is a significant awareness gap at the grassroots level regarding digital rights and policies. Participants thought that even authorities like the police often lack knowledge and do not have adequate capacity to deal with the issues of harassment. A participant in Delhi shared, "*When we talk about rights, even if some rights have been created, then how is their awareness at the actual grassroots level? Even the police don't know which IT section they have to put.*"

Participants argued that the authorities tend to suggest simply blocking or removing content rather than addressing the root issue, highlighting the need for better awareness and education on digital rights. Participants also reported following technology policy developments and keeping up with updates through social media and browsing. However, participants noted the lack of policies and regulations in local and regional languages, which limit their awareness level.

Content Moderation: Participants raised issues with online platforms, with instances like a YouTube channel being blocked due to copyright infringement after uploading a video received via WhatsApp. They reported that fake accounts are being created in their names on social media and dating apps, with complaints remaining unresolved. Additionally, participants thought that pre-installed apps like Facebook automatically create accounts using users' data, presenting privacy concerns. Many participants across locations highlighted the need for platform accountability in cases of users posting misinformation and harmful content on social media.

Respondents perceive that there are inconsistencies in social media guidelines, and content moderation policies lack transparency and fairness. For instance, a participant observed that non-harmful yet controversial content is often censored, whereas harmful content, such as nudity in breastfeeding videos, remains uncensored. This inconsistency poses potential harm to children, especially on platforms with young users, raising concerns about the appropriateness and impact of such policies. Participants also reported lacking the means to question and challenge these guidelines.

A representative from a CSO highlighted their focus on advocacy and policy for digital safety and online well-being, especially for children and women. They stressed the importance of culturally sensitive community guidelines. For example, in India, posting normal images of women can spread misinformation and defame them, leading to severe consequences for them and their families due to the significant role social status plays in society. According to them, current reporting mechanisms are limited to non-consensual sharing of explicit images, which doesn't address the cultural context here. They advocated for community standards that reflect the realities of our market, not just Western norms.

Box 3: Urban Rural Digital Divide

Participants across locations highlighted several negative impacts of digital technology overuse in rural areas, such as online gaming addiction and financial fraud. Financial fraud, in particular, emerged as a most common concern across all groups. Further, the grievance redressal mechanisms are not accessible and responsive. Consumers in rural areas often cannot register their complaints due to language barriers. Even when they manage to register, their grievances are not addressed effectively through the grievance redressal mechanisms.

One of the participants in Delhi shared insights from their organisation, which engages with youth and young girls, noting that they have seen both benefits and challenges associated with internet access. While the internet has made many things possible, the issues such as internet access and usage, especially in rural areas, pose significant problems. Girls using the internet in rural areas often face scrutiny and harassment, with their profiles checked and inappropriate comments made on social media.

Another participant in Delhi highlighted the work they do with youth, and are exploring how people perceive digital spaces over time. They pointed out a significant rural-urban divide in the use of digital platforms. In peri-urban and rural areas, young people predominantly use social media, becoming passive consumers of content. When discussing issues like fake news or misinformation with these groups, they often rely solely on content based on algorithms for content consumption. This passivity presents a challenge in reaching them with accurate and safe information.

Additionally, there is disconnect between the content and influencers recognised in urban areas and those in peri-urban and rural regions. Many people in these areas are influenced by different, often unknown, content and messaging, raising concerns about the nature of the information they receive.

Digital Rights Awareness

In the discussion, it was highlighted that digital rights include access to the internet, privacy, data protection, and freedom of expression, and are crucial for ensuring individuals have control over their online activities and data.[9] However, greater awareness and understanding of digital rights among the general population are needed. From the findings of the FGDs, it was found that awareness about digital rights varies across different locations. For example, participants in Delhi were more informed compared to those in other locations. Additionally, there was a clear urban-rural and gender divide in terms of awareness.

One common observation across all locations is that people may not always articulate their concerns in the policy framework, but they do care about their rights and express a need for more awareness of the issues and policies in the online space. Participants in Delhi and Kathmandu pointed out that digital rights should be viewed from an intersectional perspective. For example, addressing sexual harassment of queer community both on the street and online is crucial, as both are equally harmful and should inform policy formulation.

A participant in Delhi shared that the current Information Technology Act of 2000 is an outdated framework that fails to address contemporary issues like online payment fraud, phishing calls, and threats. There is a pressing need for updated legislation to reflect technological advancements and protect consumers' rights. Participants also opined that officials often lack a nuanced understanding of how social media and digital tools work, which impacts their ability to adjudicate related issues effectively. It was also mentioned that this lack of capacity and understanding among government officials makes it difficult to address the digital harms. One participant highlighted the absence of specific laws for tackling online harassment, as only limited provisions in penal laws are not enough.

A participant noted that the gig economy and platform workers' rights need attention. Viewing gig workers differently from traditional workers leads to exclusionary

[9] Digital Principles

practices. It is important to integrate digital work conditions with everyday work standards to avoid exclusion. In Delhi, participants opined that with the impending enforcement of the DPDP Act, there is uncertainty about how it will apply to data already shared. This is particularly relevant in rural areas where initial digital interactions often involve their data from the government services, such as Aadhaar to Ration Card applications. The technology managing this data is opaque, leaving citizens unaware of where their data goes or how it is used. When issues arise, there is no clear structure for redress, and the DPDP Act does not provide guidance on where to file complaints.

Box 4: Digital Rights Knowledge Gap
In urban areas, there is generally a higher level of awareness and understanding of digital rights among the population. However, in rural areas, participants underlined that individuals may have limited exposure to technology and digital rights, resulting in a lack of technical knowledge. This knowledge gap often leads to a higher incidence of issues related to digital rights for rural residents, such as data breaches. They may find it difficult to understand which actions to take and what precautions to follow while navigating the digital world, potentially compromising their online safety and rights.

Important Digital Rights: Participants identified the digital rights that matter to them. The right to privacy and informed consent were the most prominently highlighted needs among participants.

- Participants underscored that ***the right to freedom of speech, expression, and association*** is essential right, particularly in light of widespread self-censorship, and also due to platform and governmental repression and fear of repercussions. Many participants note observing and increasing self-censorship, often stemming from fear of harassment by their social networks, limiting their ability to express themselves freely.

- ***Data Privacy:*** According to participants, protecting their data, especially on platforms requiring personal information, is critical. Ensuring that personal information is secure and not leaked is essential to protect it from potential harm. There is also a need for stringent regulations to prevent the misuse of data for political propaganda and other malicious activities. They also emphasised that

harassment complaints, such as photo leaks, should be taken as seriously as offline incidents. Current practices often downplay digital harassment, necessitating better legal and regulatory frameworks.

- ***Right to be forgotten:*** A participant highlighted that young girls often access the internet through family members' profiles due to fears about their personal information being permanently available online. They worry about future reputational damage from their online activities. From this perspective, the right to be forgotten is extremely important to them.

- According to some participants, ***access to the internet and digital devices*** should also be fundamental rights, as the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the digital divide, leaving many without access to online education. Many participants also reported that uneven distribution of resources, such as internet towers, due to profitability concerns, necessitates ensuring equitable access to digital infrastructure. Additionally, free and uninterrupted internet access is crucial, as shutdowns during social upheavals disrupt connectivity and freedom of information. A participant from Colombo shared their organisation's study. Between 2018 and 2021, Internet usage went from 37 to 44 percent. But interestingly, the gender gap among Lankans is reducing, from around 30 percent to around 7 percent. According to them, more than gender, age, device ownership, and awareness are important when it comes to access to digital services.

- ***User-Friendly Platforms:*** Platforms should prioritise user-friendly features by ensuring terms and conditions, as well as user interfaces, are available in local languages and are easy to understand, enhancing accessibility and user experience. Additionally, to overcome language barriers, platforms should allow users to easily change language settings, accommodating a diverse user base.

- A few participants also opined that the consumers on digital platforms lack adequate rights. For instance, products received often differ from their descriptions on online stores, and there is insufficient information regarding the prices and quality of these products. This highlights the *need for better consumer protection and transparency* in the digital marketplace.

- A participant opined that the *right to create and protect their creative work*, alongside issues like censorship, copyright, and privacy, is important for them.

Box 5: Protection of Digital Rights

All the participants emphasised that promoting digital rights awareness through campaigns, advocacy initiatives, and capacity-building efforts is essential for empowering individuals to navigate the digital landscape safely and responsibly. Governments and other stakeholders should integrate digital rights into national policies and laws to ensure comprehensive protection and empowerment for all internet users.

One participant noted that in Sri Lanka, there is no effective mechanism for reporting cyberbullying and cyber threats. The police and the Cyber Crime Investigation Units lack the necessary expertise and capacity to handle such cases, posing a significant risk for women users.

Online Freedom of Speech and Expression

Online freedom of speech and expression is a contentious and complex issue in South Asia, where the rise of internet access has also led to increased online hate speech and misinformation, fuelling domestic conflicts.[10] These often draw on historically rooted social tensions.[11]

Participants across locations expressed concerns about freedom of speech and expression due to negative experiences like trolling and harassment. They reported that when they share opinions that are not aligned with the dominant narrative, in addition to trolling, their content is often taken down by platforms. While harassment is faced by all the groups, women participants underscored that they are more likely to face digital harassment such as trolling and abuse due to patriarchy, discrimination and less representation in key positions. A participant in Delhi said:

> "*I have not faced anything, but I know someone who did. He had written a tweet back in 2019 on the lines of secularism, and his account was completely banned by stating the community guidelines. He didn't do anything about it because he was a student back then and it was just an opinion that he gave. But the question which he realises also is, who would decide what can instigate communal violence as a matter of fact, or what can hamper peace and the harmony of a society? And this question is not regarded or specified towards the digital space because this question has been raised through decades. This is a matter of freedom of speech and expression and what can be claimed under hate speech*."

Participants also said that complaints about these issues frequently go unaddressed. They reported that due to these issues they have resorted to self-censorship and that their activeness on social media has gone down. A participant in Colombo shared, "*For me, I would say that freedom of speech, freedom of expression and freedom of identity association are very important as there is a lot of self-censorship based on perceived fear but also lots of censorship coming from the various parties.*"

10 2021: Fundamental Freedoms In South Asia

11 The Digitalization of Hate Speech in South and Southeast Asia: Conflict-Mitigation Approaches - Georgetown Journal of International Affairs

In Jaipur, participants highlighted concerns about cyberbullying on social media, particularly when sharing photos, with individuals in rural areas lacking the resources to address such incidents effectively. Additionally, the importance of upholding freedom of speech on social media platforms was emphasised, along with the need to report fake profiles. In India, the participants emphasised the need to extend the freedom of speech guaranteed by the Indian Constitution to online platforms, advocating for better self-expression on social media.

A participant in Delhi shared that posting on social media, even simple questions or comments, often results in a barrage of negative comments and targeting by bot armies. "*When you post something on social media, let's say, a rally. A headline comes. You posted your questions in it. Whichever social media you want to use, whatever you took, posted it there. Then, there is a rush in the comment section, and it gets so much that you feel that you have posted it for no reason. Many times, you just don't care about, what was the quality of that question, what was the question, whether it is valid, is it invalid. Beyond these things, just because you asked a question, you are targeted. Multiple times. So much so, that when you are on the other side, you are picked, and a bot army comes, which tries to devastate you*."

Participants also raised concerns over the reach of their social media content on issues like the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 and farmers' protests due to a lack of transparency in the content moderation practice of the government and platforms.

The environment of trolling and a lack of tolerance challenge the freedom of speech and expression, as individuals are often attacked for their posts. Despite this, many users continue to express themselves, refusing to be silenced by trolls, demonstrating resilience and the importance of maintaining one's voice on personal platforms. A participant emphasised that we should have the freedom to celebrate our ideals without being apologetic, as it is an important part of our culture. But when we do this, we often face slurs, especially when it comes to historically marginalised sections of society.

According to a participant in Delhi, social media has intensified one-sided conversations, reinforcing existing opinions and creating in-groups and out-groups. People tend to listen through a biased lens, shaped by pre-formed opinions and

reaffirmed by social media interactions, leading to a lack of genuine dialogue and understanding.

Participants highlighted that the lack of freedom in online spaces is leading to behavioural changes such as self-censorship. They explained that when they fear their political ideas might not align with the dominant ideology, they often avoid posting them. Even social workers are reluctant to amplify the voices of marginalised communities due to the potential for negative repercussions, so they avoid posting directly on social media. This self-censorship is influenced by both platform policies and state apparatuses. Consequently, people try to play it safe by using terms that will not invite backlash. Participants emphasised that the online environment continues to be less conducive to contesting ideas and voices. For instance, a social activist in Kathmandu mentioned that she had to deactivate her social media accounts for a month to avoid unnecessary backlash and its potential impacts on her mental well-being.

Misinformation: One concern raised across all locations was that misinformation is rampant in the online spaces, especially on social media, leading to social division. For example, in Delhi participants noted that false rumours about child theft caused parents to keep children home, resulting in tension and violence against outsiders. Despite their awareness of the widespread misinformation and hate speech on social media, they expressed difficulties in verifying the information they encountered due to the lack of reliable tools. This vulnerability leaves them at risk of consuming and sharing unverified information. Their struggle to differentiate between fact and fiction in the digital landscape underscores a significant challenge, making it difficult for them to contribute positively to online discussions.

A participant in Delhi said, "*If we talk about fact-checking, people do not know how to fact-check. If we talk about misinformation or disinformation, people do not know. People only know that this is fake news, or this is wrong information. So, all these things are happening in rural areas. People do not know how to access, how to keep their security*."

Additionally, the discussions revealed that a substantial number of individuals impacted by misinformation are elderly. These individuals tend to believe the authenticity of forwarded messages or content encountered on social media without verifying their accuracy. Consequently, they inadvertently propagate this information, perpetuating the spread of unverified information within the online community and

contributing to the broader issue of misinformation. Moreover, rural users tend to rely heavily on YouTube for information, often accepting misinformation as truth, which leads to various issues, including fraud and harassment.

One notable incident a participant reported involved a colleague who lost 60,000 rupees to a scam after sharing an OTP. These incidents highlight the lack of awareness about fact-checking and digital security in rural areas, making people vulnerable to misinformation and scams.

Privacy and Personal Data Protection

Privacy and personal data protection are critical issues in the digital age, particularly as the collection and use of personal data have become increasingly prevalent. These countries, including India[12] and Sri Lanka[13], have adopted or are implementing comprehensive privacy laws. Empowering individuals through digital literacy is crucial for enabling them to protect their personal data. Participants in FGDs also raised similar concerns.

The right to privacy and informed consent were the most commonly identified needs among participants. A participant shared that they take precautionary steps that they take are not saving and continuously changing passwords, different security questions and choosing cookie preferences, among others.

Awareness of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act in India: Participants in Jaipur showed a basic understanding of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act and Rights, although there was a consensus that a more comprehensive understanding is lacking among many individuals. However, participants in Kolkata have limited awareness of the Data Protection Act, indicating a need for more widespread information dissemination and public engagement initiatives. Delhi participants had a greater awareness of the passage of the Act.

Concerns regarding personal data: Participants raised that they are often unaware of how their data is used or who accesses it when they download applications. A participant in Colombo opined, "*I would like to highlight the Right to data privacy, especially when it comes to using certain apps, websites that ask for personal data. It sometimes can be used for certain political propaganda, you never know. It is certainly better now that you can choose your preference but sometimes are no longer able to use the website. Right to data privacy comes to the forefront when using digital platforms.*" While another said," *There is pile and pile of data about us, what we do, see, etc. and*

[12] Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023

[13] Sri Lanka Becomes the First South Asian Country To Pass Comprehensive Privacy Legislation | WilmerHale

see no regulation around that. This is something that can be regulated." Participants expressed the need for greater transparency about where their data is being used.

Participants from various locations shared experiences highlighting breaches of privacy and harassment. Examples include event organising companies using event photos for promotions without consent, restaurants collecting and potentially misusing personal information, privacy issues with a cab booking app where a user received unsolicited calls after cancelling a trip, and many others. They raised concerns over the processing of their data. A participant in Delhi said:

> "*We don't know where our data is being used, or who is using it. Because when we download any application, they demand us access. They use our profile, they use our gallery, they use our data, and they may even listen to us. Apart from this, the biggest thing is when you receive a call, I am talking to this bank, will you take a credit card? So, think about your entire profile, what is your income? Where does all the information go? If we have data privacy, if we have a policy, if we have everything, then how is it being used publicly? This is the biggest concern these days.*"

Another participant in Colombo pointed out the lack of regulation on this data processing:

> "*Governments and platforms don't have enough practices in place for people to exercise these rights effectively. One of my friends had to go through a very traumatic experience, because of a data privacy issue, so the services should be regulated when it comes to data privacy issues.*"

A Colombo participant, while sharing the findings from a qualitative study conducted in the Western and Northern provinces in Sri Lanka revealed that gender-marginalised communities face significant online harassment, including offensive comments on social media. Many individuals from these communities do not report these incidents to the police due to fear of further harassment, opting to remain silent instead.

A participant shared that while managing the organisation's social media account, frequent spam messages claiming guideline violations were observed, with at least two spam messages received daily. These messages appear to be attempts to hack the account. Although the organisation knows to avoid such traps, smaller organisations or individuals may inadvertently click on these links, putting their accounts at risk.

Participants emphasised that substantial capacity-building efforts will be necessary to implement these rights effectively within communities, including women and youth. Simplifying these processes and educating individuals on privacy measures is crucial. For instance, iPhone users can adjust app tracking settings, and WhatsApp users can limit who sees their display picture. Educating young people and others about these measures is essential for effective data protection.

Representation of Youth and Women in Policymaking

Youth and women are often underrepresented in policymaking processes, particularly those related to digital technologies and internet governance. Participants highlighted that this lack of representation results in the formulation and implementation of policies that fail to address the needs and concerns of these groups. In South Asia, women's representation in political positions is generally low, despite some countries implementing quotas to increase female participation.[14] In the discussion, women underlined that their representation is significantly lower compared to men. They emphasise structural barriers such as patriarchy, lack of mobility, and discrimination. All participants agree that more women should be represented in the policy development at all levels.

Empowering Women in Technology: A participant emphasised the significance of organising capacity-building sessions in schools and colleges, specifically aimed at empowering women and encouraging their active participation in technology development. The idea is to equip women with the necessary skills and knowledge to thrive in the rapidly evolving tech field. Some young women suggested implementing measures like affirmative action, where a few positions in the policymaking process are reserved for women stakeholders.

A participant in Colombo opined, "*the beginning point should be to focus on attitude and leadership, because the way digital media and social media operate hugely differs across different communities, genders, different classes of people, etc. So they must also be included as key stakeholders in these discussions*." Efforts should focus on creating an attitudinal shift through a multi-pronged approach involving the state, development sector, and media. Local groups should be empowered and equipped to spread awareness within their communities, taking into account the varying attitudes towards digital platforms across different regions.

[14] Women in South Asia: Status, Challenges and Prospects

Prioritising Rural Women's Voices: Participants emphasised the need to prioritise and amplify the voices of women in rural areas. This can be achieved through capacity-building initiatives and an intersectional approach in policy development and implementation. Empowering rural women with training and resources is essential for their inclusion and representation. The speaker also called for an intersectional approach in policy development and implementation, considering the diverse and interconnected factors that influence the lives of rural women.

Digital Rights Awareness for Students and Remote Communities: In response to the global shift towards digitalisation, participants highlighted the need for comprehensive digital rights awareness and capacity-building programs. These programmes should be tailored specifically for school-going students, the elderly and individuals in remote areas of Kolkata. A participant in Colombo said that "*whatever strategy is being adopted should keep in mind not to generate fear of using the digital platforms and tools, especially those focused on the elderly people*."

Capacity-Building Initiatives and Policy Dialogues: Across all locations, there was a strong interest in participating in capacity-building initiatives and policy dialogues. A journalist highlighted the commendable initiative by the Kolkata police to launch a comprehensive awareness campaign on cybersecurity across various districts. Through a series of blogs, the journalist shared insights and experiences, emphasising the importance of such initiatives. However, there was concern about the lack of public attention and participation in this crucial program. Women and youth should be trained to hold the state accountable by understanding relevant laws, regulations, and resource allocation. Civil society organisations, NGOs, religious leaders, community leaders, and activists share the responsibility to educate the public.

A participant in Colombo opined, "*The education system must be redesigned to bring how to use social media wisely in the curriculum. This is really important for people who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and are not digitally aware, for example, students coming into universities from backward communities*." Voter education on legislation and its issues is also crucial for fostering informed decision-making.

Grassroots Empowerment: Speakers stressed the necessity of organising capacity-building sessions to enhance knowledge and skills at the grassroots level. Additionally, there is a need to raise awareness about pertinent issues and ensure this information reaches individuals at the grassroots level. When forming policies for digital safety, it is crucial to include not only top executives and government officials but also those

most affected, such as youth, women, and general citizens. Their involvement ensures that regulations are practical and address the needs of all stakeholders. Strategies should avoid generating fear of digital platforms and tools, with particular consideration for elderly users, ensuring that digital adoption is seen as safe and beneficial for all.

Algorithmic Reach: A participant opined those algorithms promoting such awareness, generating social media campaigns, should target rural and marginalised communities, not just those already engaged in these areas, to ensure broader visibility and impact.

CUTS International

D-217, Bhaskar Marg, Bani Park, Jaipur 302 016, India
Ph: 91.141.228 2821, Fax: 91.141.228 2485
Email: cuts1@cuts.org, Website: www.cuts-international.org

Also at Delhi, Kolkata and Chittorgarh (India); Lusaka (Zambia); Nairobi (Kenya); Accra (Ghana); Hanoi (Vietnam); Geneva (Switzerland) and Washington DC (USA).