The TransNET project:

The role of intersectionality in shaping experiences of technology-facilitated gender-based violence among transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse persons in India

iHEAR Initiative For Health Equity, Advocacy and Research

Sangath

feminist internet research network

APC Association for Progressive Communications

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Report authors
Eesha Lavalekar
Sharin D'Souza
Joshua Mark George

Research team
Eesha Lavalekar
Sharin D'Souza
Joshua Mark George
Gazala Parveen
Harikeerthan Raghuram
Anant Bhan

Community advisory board
Aindriya Barua
Aritra Chatterjee
Debarati Das
Geet Sahu
Mohammed Ali Khan
Vandita Morarka

Research coordinators
Eesha Lavalekar (Sangath)
Sharin D'Souza (Sangath)
Joshua Mark George (Sangath)
Tigist S. Hussen (FIRN, APC)
Diana Bichanga (FIRN, APC)
Serene Lim (FIRN, APC)

FIRN reviewers
Natasha Chhabra
Tigist S. Hussen

Content editing
Serene Lim
Tigist S. Hussen

Proofreading
Zara Ismail

Layout proofreading
Sugandhi Ravindranathan

Publication production
Sangath
Cathy Chen (APC)
Lori Nordstrom (APC)

Design and layout
Camila Rodriguez
Jaspreet Saini

Illustrations
Aindriya Barua

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FIRN is a network of researchers, activists and practitioners from Global South countries in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America. FIRN focuses on the making of a feminist internet, seeing this as critical to bringing about transformation in gendered structures of power that exist online and offline and to capture fully the fluidity of these spaces and our experiences with them. Members of the network undertake data-driven research that provides substantial evidence to drive change in policy and law, and in the discourse around internet rights.

Sangath
H. No. 451 (168), Bhatkar Vaddo, Socorro, Porvorim, Bardez, Goa, 403501
+91 7887872345
contactus@sangath.in
https://www.sangath.in/

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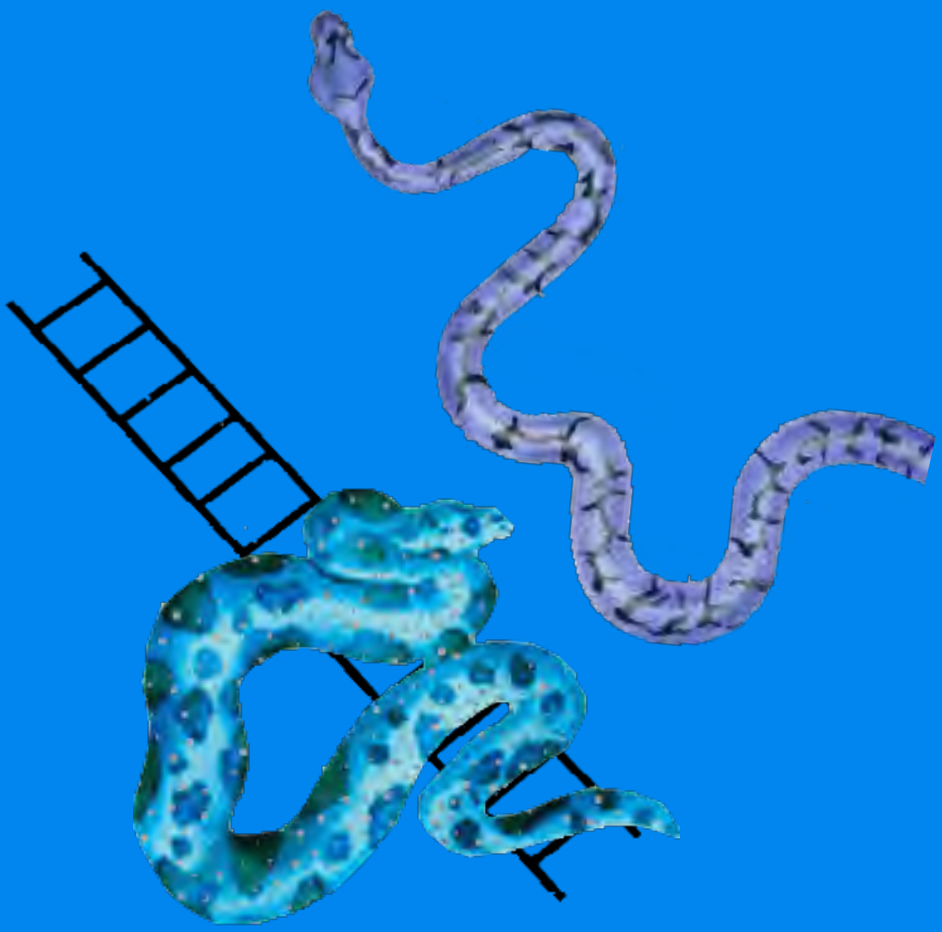
Project details



The iHEAR TransNET project aims to explore the experiences of transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse (TNBGD) persons who have faced technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) in India, with an emphasis on the role of intersectionality in shaping their experiences and the strategies they employ to resist and prevent TFGBV. Insights gained from this project will inform various outputs, including comprehensive guidelines for survivors of TFGBV that will enable community members to navigate online spaces safely.

For the TransNET project, we employed a community-driven, feminist approach to understand experiences of TFGBV. A semi-structured interview guide, co-created with a six-member community advisory board from TNBGD communities, shaped our virtual interviews. Transcripts were thematically analysed, with insights refined through collaborative discussions, reflective notes and links to existing literature.

In this final analysis we aim to build on previous discussions, incorporating the insights and information collected in more recent data collection, team discussions and community advisory board inputs.

About the project

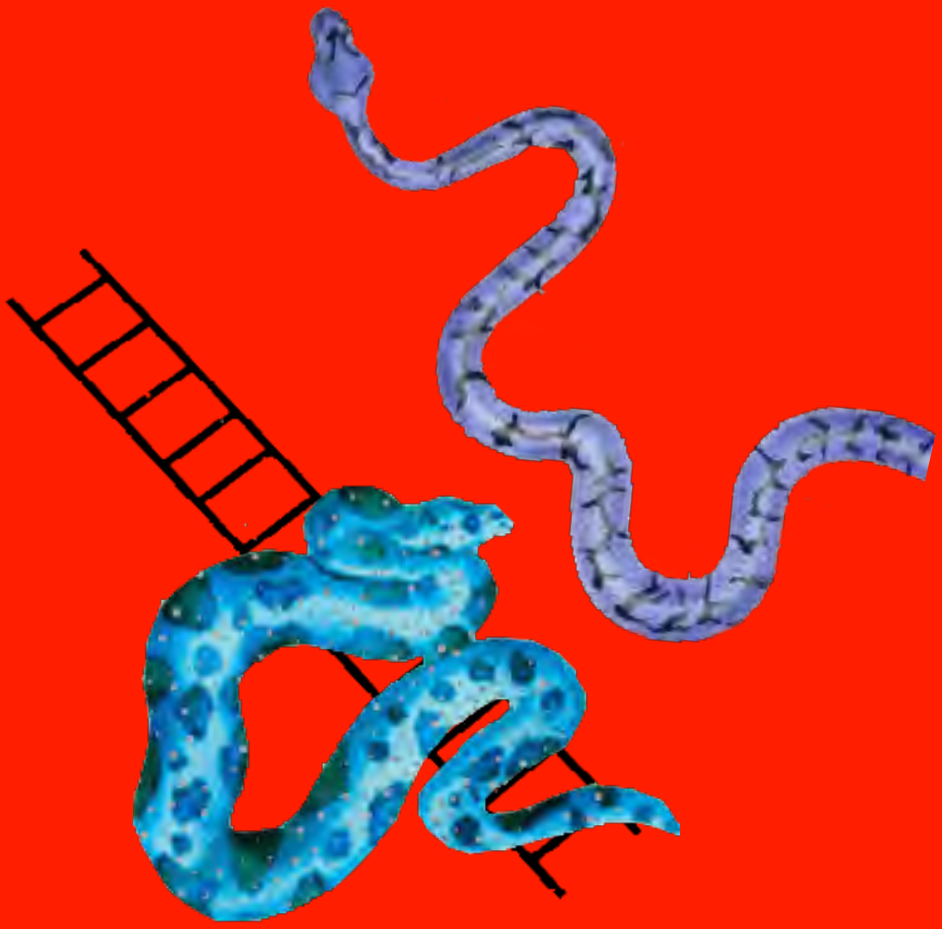
India's geopolitical context is marked by vast social, cultural and regional diversity, deeply influenced by its colonial history and ongoing democratic struggles. The country faces rising religious nationalism, regional disparities and censorship, which affect freedom of expression, especially among marginalised groups. As one of the fastest-growing digital economies, India's policies on data governance, surveillance and internet access have global implications. These dynamics critically shape how transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse (TNBGD) persons navigate identity, safety and visibility online. Hence the TransNET project aims to explore the experiences of TNBGD persons who have faced technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) in India, with an emphasis on the role intersectionality played in shaping their experiences and the strategies they employ to resist and prevent TFGBV.

Research questions

What do precarity, safety and violence mean in online communities and spaces for TNBGD persons in India who are intersectionally marginalised on the basis of other identity axes such as age, caste, religion, region and ability?

- What are the intrapersonal and interpersonal strategies employed in anticipation of or in response to TFGBV?
- What are the intersectional barriers to accessing support mechanisms during and after experiencing TFGBV?

Introduction



Over the past decade the world has witnessed large shifts in the evolution of the internet and its integration into the daily lives of the vast majority of society. This expansion of digital technologies and internet access in India has had significant implications for individuals from gender and sexual minorities including transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse communities. It has been widely seen that while digital spaces can offer important avenues for identity expression, community building and activism, they are also increasingly sites of exclusion, harm and violence.[1]

Gender-based violence (GBV) is an umbrella term for a range of harms perpetrated against a person, which stems from power inequities based on gender roles. Moreover, for gender and sexual minorities, instances of GBV are not isolated incidents but part of a broader continuum of structural violence shaped by systems of patriarchy, casteism, ableism, communalism and heteronormativity.[2] Emerging research shows that while women and girls are disproportionately impacted by GBV, TNBGD persons and men who fall outside of the dominant normativity of masculinity in a culture are also harmed by GBV.[3]

These offline hierarchies of gender and identity-based violence are often extended, adapted or morphed to the digital landscape, resulting in technology-facilitated gender-based violence. TFGBV refers to any act that is committed, assisted, aggravated or amplified by the use of information communication technologies or other digital tools, that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological, social, political or economic harm, or other infringements of rights and freedoms. TFGBV can manifest in the form of cyberstalking (following someone on online platforms without their consent or knowledge), trolling (rude or mean comments to provoke), doxxing (sharing another person's private information in a public forum), online harassment (repeated online abuse), non-consensual image sharing (posting private images of someone else without permission), deepfake pornography (fake sexual content using someone else's face), gendered disinformation campaigns (false stories targeting someone's gender), and so on.

Although TFGBV manifests at an interpersonal level, it is rooted in discriminatory structures that reinforce sexist gender norms. Women and LGBTQIA+ communities experience TFGBV disproportionately, with recent studies based in India showing that TNBGD people reported the highest proportion of incidents of

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1 McLean, N. (2020). Creating safe spaces: Digital as an enabling environment for TNB people. In S. K. Kattari, L. Kattari, & B. Holloway (Eds.), *Social Work and Health Care Practice with Transgender and Nonbinary Individuals and Communities: Voices for Equity, Inclusion, and Resilience*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429443176; Barter, C., & Koulu, S. C. (2021). Digital technologies and gender-based violence – Mechanisms for oppression, activism and recovery. *Journal of Gender-based Violence, 5*(3), 367-375. https://doi.org/10.1332/239868021X16315286472556

2 Dunn, S. (2020, 7 December). *Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: An Overview*. Centre for International Governance Innovation. https://www.cigionline.org/static/documents/SaferInternet_Paper_no_1_coverupdate.pdf

3 Wirtz, A. L., Poteat, T. C., Malik, M., & Glass, N. (2020). Gender-Based Violence Against Transgender People in the United States: A Call for Research and Programming. *Trauma Violence Abuse, 21*(2), 227-241. https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838018757749

technology-facilitated violence experienced, followed by cis women and then cis men.[4] Moreover, when GBV moves from offline to online spaces, it can become even worse because digital platforms easily cross physical and geographical boundaries.

The landscape of online violence in India

Several studies have documented the disproportionate level of online violence faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in India, particularly TNBGD persons. A 2023 survey in India showed that a substantial 90% of Indian respondents who identified as LGBTQIA+ had faced online harm. Moreover, 56% of LGBTQIA+ individuals who experienced online harm believed they were targeted due to their gender identity.[5] Women, girls and LGBTQIA+ individuals are disproportionately impacted by TFGBV. This grim picture indicates a critical need for targeted intervention and prevention efforts.

The rise of digital communication and the global presence of online platforms have facilitated easy access to victims, leading to higher incidences of cyber bullying for LGBTQIA+ youth compared to their non-LGBTQIA+ peers, who typically face cyberbullying as an extension of in-person interactions.[6] In addition, anonymity as well as the lack of bystanders make it easier for bullies to target their victims.

Along with gender identity, online or digital harms also target other axes of marginalisation such as caste, religion and disability, creating layered vulnerabilities.[7] The experience and impact of GBV can vary greatly – and often be more severe – for survivors based on their race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, religion, gender identity or expression, socioeconomic status, disability or refugee status. This can be seen clearly as women facing multiple forms of discrimination, including women with disabilities, women of colour, migrant women and LGBTQIA+ individuals, bear unequal consequences of violence, whether online or offline.[8] There is a need for the queering of GBV frameworks to adequately assess and address the complex interplays of gender and violence at these diverse intersections, particularly in the case of sexual and gender minorities who are often not included in the data or research.[9]

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4 Dunn, S., Vaillancourt, T., & Brittain, H. (2023). *Supporting a Safer Internet: India Findings*. Centre for International Governance Innovation. https://www.cigionline.org/static/documents/Supporting-a-Safer-Internet_India-Findings.pdf

5 Ibid.

6 McLean, N., & Cicero, T. (2023). *The Left Out Project Report: The case for an online gender-based violence framework inclusive of transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse experiences*. Association for Progressive Communications. https://firn.genderit.org/research/left-out-project-report-case-online-gender-based-violence-framework-inclusive-transgender; Abreu, R. L., & Kenny, M. C. (2017). Cyberbullying and LGBTQ Youth: A Systematic Literature Review and Recommendations for Prevention and Intervention. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma, 11*, 81-97. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-017-0175-7

7 UNRIC. (2023, 29 November). How Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence Impacts Women and Girls. https://unric.org/en/how-technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence-impacts-women-and-girls/

8 Ibid.

9 Haynes, T., & DeShong, H. A. F. (2017). Queering Feminist Approaches to Gender-Based Violence in the Anglophone Caribbean. *Social and Economic Studies, 66*(1/2), 105-131. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44732906; Loken, M., & Hagen, J. J. (2022). Queering Gender-Based Violence Scholarship: An Integrated Research Agenda. *International Studies Review, 24*(4), 1-22. https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viac050

Forms of TFGBV

Although TFGBV is often viewed as being limited to the social media trolling of prominent women, it can extend to an extreme range of harms like doxxing, impersonation and sexualised abuse. These threats can escalate to sexual assault and death, as seen in South Asia, Ethiopia, and Myanmar for example.[10] Violence is often sexual, with perpetrators threatening sexual violence or disparaging victims' appearance and sexual desirability.[11]

In India, women speaking on gender or rights issues are frequently targeted through cyberbullying and doxxing, reflecting a deep-rooted misogyny. Such forms of harassment are particularly targeted at individuals speaking out on social issues like sexual harassment, gender inequality or reproductive rights. A significant portion of cybercrimes in India involve offences such as stalking, voyeurism and bullying. However, women who voice their concerns online frequently face extreme backlash, often driven by misogynistic ideologies.[12]

Online platforms are likely to further worsen this harm through transphobic trolling, doxxing and algorithmic censorship, while also failing to respond adequately to reports of abuse.[13] Secondly, TNBGD identities are either erased, hyper-visualised or tokenised with the intention of personal profit and without genuinely including them, often reinforcing binary norms and marginalising lived realities.[14] The commodification of TNBGD cultures such as the use of queer aesthetics in advertising during Pride without structural investments in the community reflects another layer of exploitation. Additionally, structural exclusion from social protection schemes reaffirms the systemic denial of autonomy and dignity.[15] These interconnected forms of violence not only function in isolation, but as a continuum, where each layer reinforces the others, contributing to the social marginalisation and dispossession of TNBGD persons.[16]

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10 Baekgaard, K. (2024). *Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence: An Emerging Issue in Women, Peace and Security.* Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security. https://giwps.georgetown.edu/resource/technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence/; Berry, E. (2019, 25 November). Online violence just as destructive as offline violence. *Phys.org.* https://phys.org/news/2019-11-online-violence-destructive-offline.html; Anna, C. (2023, 12 August). LGBTQ+ people in Ethiopia blame attacks on their community on inciteful and lingering TikTok videos. *AP News*. https://apnews.com/article/ethiopia-tiktok-lgbtq-threats-attacks-f4ace0e1968d6bad46bb05710feac5cf; CBS News. (2023, 1 December). 4 arrested in "honor killing" of 18-year-old Pakistani woman after doctored photo with her boyfriend goes viral. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/honor-killing-pakistan-doctored-photo-woman-boyfriend-goes-viral-arrests/; OHCHR. (2023, 13 March). Myanmar: Social media companies must stand up to junta's online terror campaign, say UN experts. https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/03/myanmar-social-media-companies-must-stand-juntas-online-terror-campaign-say

11 Citron, D. K. (2009). Law's Expressive Value in Combating Cyber Gender Harassment. *Michigan Law Review, 108*(3), 373-415. https://repository.law.umich.edu/mlr/vol108/iss3/3; Mantilla, K. (2015). *Gendertrolling: How Misogyny Went Viral.* Praeger.

12 Gender Study. (2024, 10 February). Gender Based Violence: Social Media and the Rise of Digital Patriarchy in India. https://gender.study/gender-based-violence/social-media-digital-patriarchy-india/

13 Amnesty International. (2018). A Toxic Place for Women. In *#ToxicTwitter: Violence and Abuse Against Women Online.* https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ACT3080702018ENGLISH.pdf

14 Gossett, R., Stanley, E. A., & Burton, J. (2017). *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*. MIT Press.

15 Bose, S. (2018, 16 October). Dear Indian Brands, Pinkwashing does not equal to allyship. *Feminism in India*. https://feminisminindia.com/2018/10/16/indian-brands-pinkwashing/

16 Reddy, G. (2006). *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*. Yoda Press.

Mental health impact of TFGBV

TFGBV has far-reaching and long-term consequences that spill beyond digital space. Minority stress theory posits that such forms of violence, compounded with the social stigma created by social isolation, family rejection and systemic discrimination, disrupt the coping mechanisms of TNBGD persons, which in turn adversely affects their physical, psychological and social well-being.[17]

A study on TNBGD persons' experiences of cyberbullying found that their emotional responses to experiencing and witnessing cyberbullying included distress – with emotions ranging from sad to suicidal, fear, shame, self-hatred and resignation, as well as anger and contempt toward the perpetrators.[18] Similar results were also seen in the Indian context where the Supporting a Safer Internet study found that 30-50% of LGBTQIA+ respondents reported significant personal harm as a result of TFGBV. Domains affected included their mental health, ability to focus, ability to engage freely online, personal reputations, close relationships, freedom to express political/personal views, sexual autonomy/freedom and even their desire to live.[19] In one such instance a minor in North India, who was a social media influencer and often posted videos of himself in gender non-conforming attire and makeup, died by suicide after being heavily trolled online for his gender expression.[20] To conclude, the mental health impacts of TFGBV on TNBGD persons are serious and severe, and despite the lack of research into this, it is likely that this is compounded by intersectional forms of oppression.[21]

Intersectionality

With the evolving nature of TFGBV, researchers have cautioned against viewing it solely as an individual or interpersonal issue but to approach the power dynamics and the intersecting systems of oppression that often underlie these occurrences, such as sexism, racism, casteism, ableism and transphobia.

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17 Meyer, I. H. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin*, *129*(5), 674-697. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.674; Hendricks, M. L., & Testa, R. J. (2012). A conceptual framework for clinical work with transgender and gender nonconforming clients: An adaptation of the Minority Stress Model. *Professional Psychology*: Research and Practice, *43*(5), 460-467. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029597; Evelyn, S., Clancy, E. M., Klettke, B., & Tatnell, R. (2022). A Phenomenological Investigation into Cyberbullying as Experienced by People Identifying as Transgender or Gender Diverse. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 19*(11), 1-13. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19116560

18 Evelyn, S. et al. (2022). Op. cit.

19 Dunn, S., Vaillancourt, T., & Brittain, H. (2023). Op. cit.

20 Joshi, P. (2023, 24 November). Boy dies by suicide in Ujjain, was trolled online for wearing saree. *India Today*. https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/minor-dies-by-suicide-in-ujjain-was-trolled-online-for-wearing-saree-2467165-2023-11-24

21 Abreu, R. L., & Kenny, M. C. (2017). Op. cit.; Evelyn, S. et al. (2022). Op. cit.

Research underlines that such societal structures shape both the likelihood and lived experience of TFGBV as well as the resources and challenges that are encountered by survivors of TFGBV.[22]

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 and further developed by Black, Brown and Indigenous scholars, has been pivotal in challenging single-axis approaches to understanding violence. These scholars argued that violence, both interpersonal and structural, is situated within socio-political contexts at the intersection of multiple overlapping systems of oppression that cannot be separated from one another.[23]

Similarly, when it comes to TFGBV, people with intersecting marginalised identities such as Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC), LGBTQIA+ communities, people with disabilities or those from a marginalised caste or minority community tend to face higher risks and more targeted forms of online abuse that focus on their marginalised identity.[24] In India, where gender identity, caste, class, disability and religion are deeply intertwined, TFGBV manifests in unique and context-specific ways that can vary highly from one person to another. Yet there is limited knowledge about how caste, class and disability intersect within experiences of trans, non-binary, and gender-diverse communities online; particularly in the case of non-binary and transmasculine persons.[25]

Thus, there is a need for the active inculcation of an intersectional approach that extends beyond tokenistic inclusion and instead examines the complex power structures at play, highlights invisibilised experiences and pushes for structural change and social justice.

TNBGD persons' resistance of TFGBV

Research also brings to light evidence that TNBGD persons display and develop resilience and engage in active coping strategies to mitigate the impacts of TFGBV by employing strategic advances. Instead of merely coping with harassment, they reclaim online spaces through deliberate actions. Studies show that LGBTQIA+ individuals often deactivate their accounts, censor their posts and unfollow

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22 Faith, B. (2022). Tackling online gender-based violence; understanding gender, development, and the power relations of digital spaces. *Gender, Technology and Development, 26*(3), 325-340. https://doi.org/10.1080/09718524.2022.2124600; Bailey, J., & Burkell, J. (2021). Tech-Facilitated Violence: Thinking Structurally and Intersectionally. *Journal of Gender Based Violence, 5*(3), 531-544. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4317466; Flynn, A., Powell, A., & Hindes, S. (2024). An Intersectional Analysis of Technology-Facilitated Abuse: Prevalence, Experiences and Impacts of Victimization. *The British Journal of Criminology, 64*(3), 600-619. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azad044

23 Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989*(1), 139-167. https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8

24 Flynn, A., Powell, A., & Hindes, S. (2024). Op. cit.; Rajani, N. (2022). "I Bet You Don't Get What We Get": An Intersectional Analysis of Technology-Facilitated Violence Experienced by Racialized Women Anti-Violence Online Activists in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Law and Technology, 19*(2), 217-247. https://digitalcommons.schulichlaw.dal.ca/cjlt/vol19/iss2/2/

25 Gurumurthy, A., Vasudevan, A., & Chami, N. (2019). *Born digital, born free? A socio-legal study on young women's experiences of online violence in South India*. IT for Change. https://itforchange.net/sites/default/files/1618/Born-Digital_Born-Free_SynthesisReport.pdf

LGBTQIA+ content out of a fear of being outed, which further isolates them and leads to poorer mental health outcomes. However, many TNBGD persons engage in resistance strategies such as mass blocking, content moderation and tactical engagement, which allow them to remain visible while protecting themselves.[26]

TNBGD individuals also employ community-driven digital strategies like reporting abuse, moderating private online spaces and using encrypted platforms to resist TFGBV.[27] For instance, in India, hijra and kinnar communities use social media to expose police violence but also face harassment via the same platforms from the police, highlighting their dual vulnerability.[28]

Despite the growing prevalence of these forms of violence, there remains a considerable gap in legal recognition and redress mechanisms. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, while aiming to secure rights for transgender individuals, is widely criticised for its vague articulation of protections and lack of focus on digital forms of violence.[29] A 2014 World Wide Web Foundation survey found that 74% of countries lack effective legal responses to TFGBV, highlighting a global failure to protect TNBGD individuals from digital violence.[30] Furthermore, interactions with the police and legal systems often lead to secondary victimisation, with survivors reporting dismissal, ridicule or even further harassment when attempting to report online abuse.

TNBGD individuals continue to resist marginalisation online, but stronger legal protections and the recognition of their agency are urgently needed.

Gaps in literature

Empirical research that centres the lived experiences of TNBGD individuals in the Indian context – particularly in relation to TFGBV – remains limited. Much of the existing literature focuses broadly on online GBV without disaggregating data by gender identity, caste, class or region. Experiences of TFGBV in India must be understood through an intersectional lens, considering class, caste, gender, sexuality, religion, education and access to technology. Building on the available literature, this report seeks to address this gap by adopting an intersectional, community-informed approach that foregrounds the voices of TNBGD individuals in India.

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26 Hatzenbuehler, M. L. (2009). How does sexual minority stigma "get under the skin"? A psychological mediation framework. *Psychological Bulletin*, *135*(5), 707-730. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016441; Das, S. (2024, 20 November). Stop the hate before it's too late: Thoughts on Transgender Day of Remembrance from Amnesty researcher Shreshtha Das. *Amnesty International.* https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2024/11/transgender-day-of-remembrance-from-amnesty-researcher-shreshtha-das/; Abreu, R. L., & Kenny, M. C. (2017). Op. cit.

27 Evelyn et al. (2022). Op. cit.; Gurumurthy, A., Vasudevan, A., & Chami, N. (2019). Op. cit.

28 Gurumurthy, A., Vasudevan, A., & Chami, N. (2019). Op. cit.
The terms hijra and kinnar are culturally-specific identities used in South Asia, particularly in India, to describe gender-diverse individuals who may not identify strictly as male or female. While often grouped under the umbrella of transgender communities, hijra and kinnar identities carry distinct historical, spiritual and social significance.

29 https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/13091/1/a2019-40.pdf

30 Baekgaard, K. (2024). Op. cit.; Web Index. (2014). *Web Index Report 2014-15*. https://thewebindex.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Web_Index_24pp_November2014.pdf

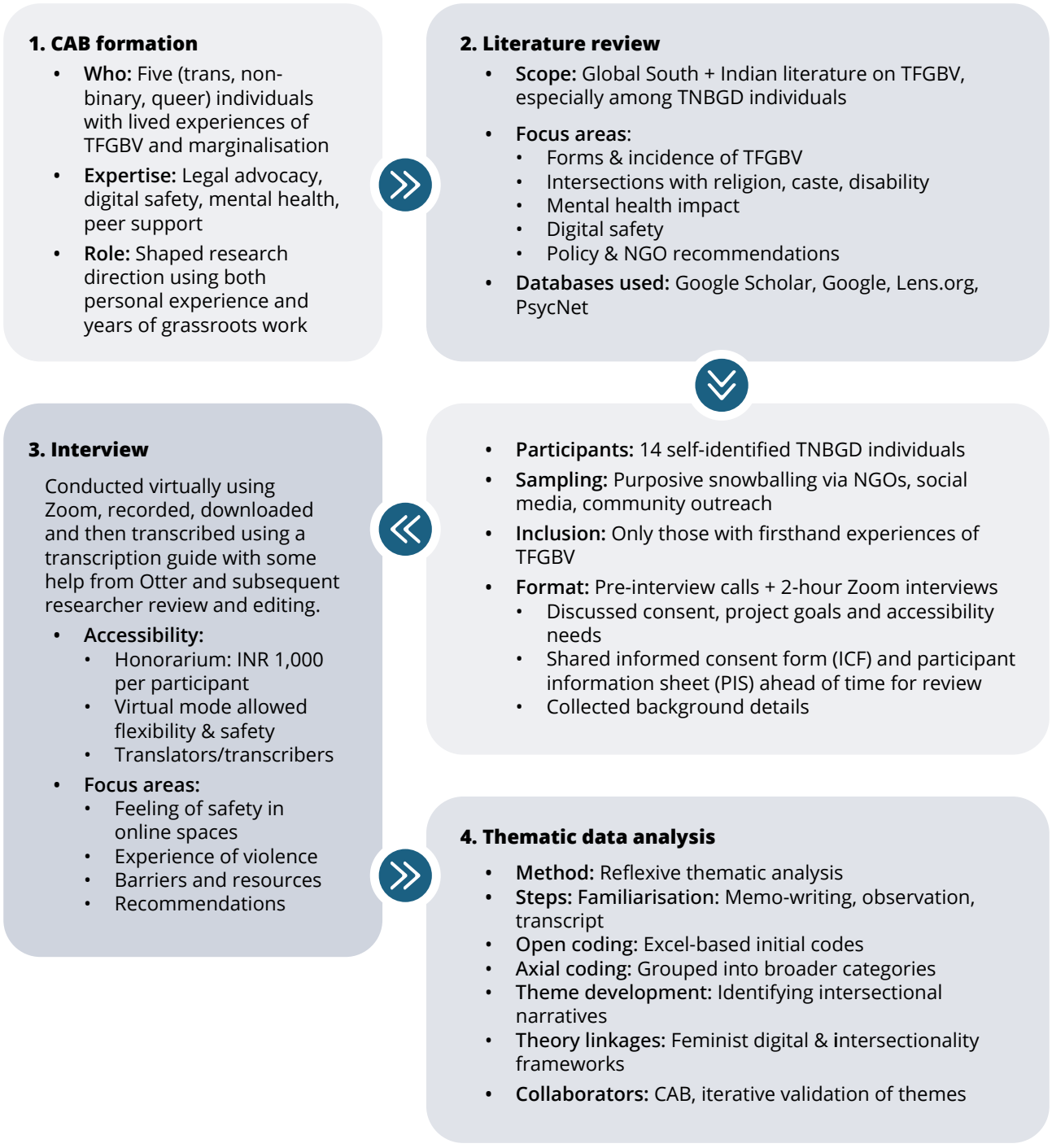
Methodology

Introduction

This project was initiated under the name of TransNET, where the research design revolved around actively incorporating lived experiences and expertise to shape every stage of the research process. Thus, the research was co-led and co-designed with TNBGD individuals. The research team and the community advisory board (CAB) were comprised of members from the LGBTQIA+ and disability communities with diverse caste, religious and regional backgrounds, including members who have experience in research as well as mental health support. Figure 1 provides a summary of the methodology followed.

Figure 1

A flowchart depicting different stages of the research study



Theoretical frameworks

The study was underpinned by intersectionality theory, queer theory, the minority stress model and feminist standpoint theory.

1. Intersectionality theory [31] helps researchers understand how overlapping identities such as gender, caste, class and religion have shaped experiences of TFGBV, preventing the erasure of complexity within marginalised groups. Our sampling strategy and field approach were informed by an intersectional lens, ensuring that we accounted for how caste, class, gender identity, sexuality, disability and religion overlap to shape people's vulnerability and resistance.

2. Queer theory[32] challenges fixed ideas of gender and sexuality, allowing the study to recognise the fluid, self-defined identities of participants and underlining the use of non-normative narratives and deconstructing binary frameworks. It provides a lens that reveals how falling beyond the binary can further complicate the stress and violence faced by non-normative communities. It deeply informed how we framed our questions, allowing for a recognition of self-defined and fluid identities, and helping us challenge fixed, binary constructions of gender and sexuality throughout the study – from tool development to participant interactions and the interpretation of narratives.

3. The minority stress model[33] offers a psychosocial lens to understand how systemic stigma and discrimination produce chronic stress for gender and sexual minorities. It emphasises both structural harm and the coping mechanisms that exist in the physical world, as well as how they are replicated in online and digital spaces. It informed our research design by guiding inquiry into both external harms like harassment and internal stressors such as hypervigilance. The model also helped us identify community-driven coping and resistance strategies used to remain visible and safe online. This lens ensured our analysis remained grounded in both structural realities and resilience.

4. Feminist standpoint theory[34] centres the knowledge and lived experiences of those at the margins, acknowledging their unique perspectives as valid and necessary for meaningful inquiry. It also informs researchers' understanding of reflexivity and ethical collaboration. This model underpinned our commitment to co-creating knowledge with participants by treating their lived experiences as expertise and ensuring research reflexivity. It guided how we maintained

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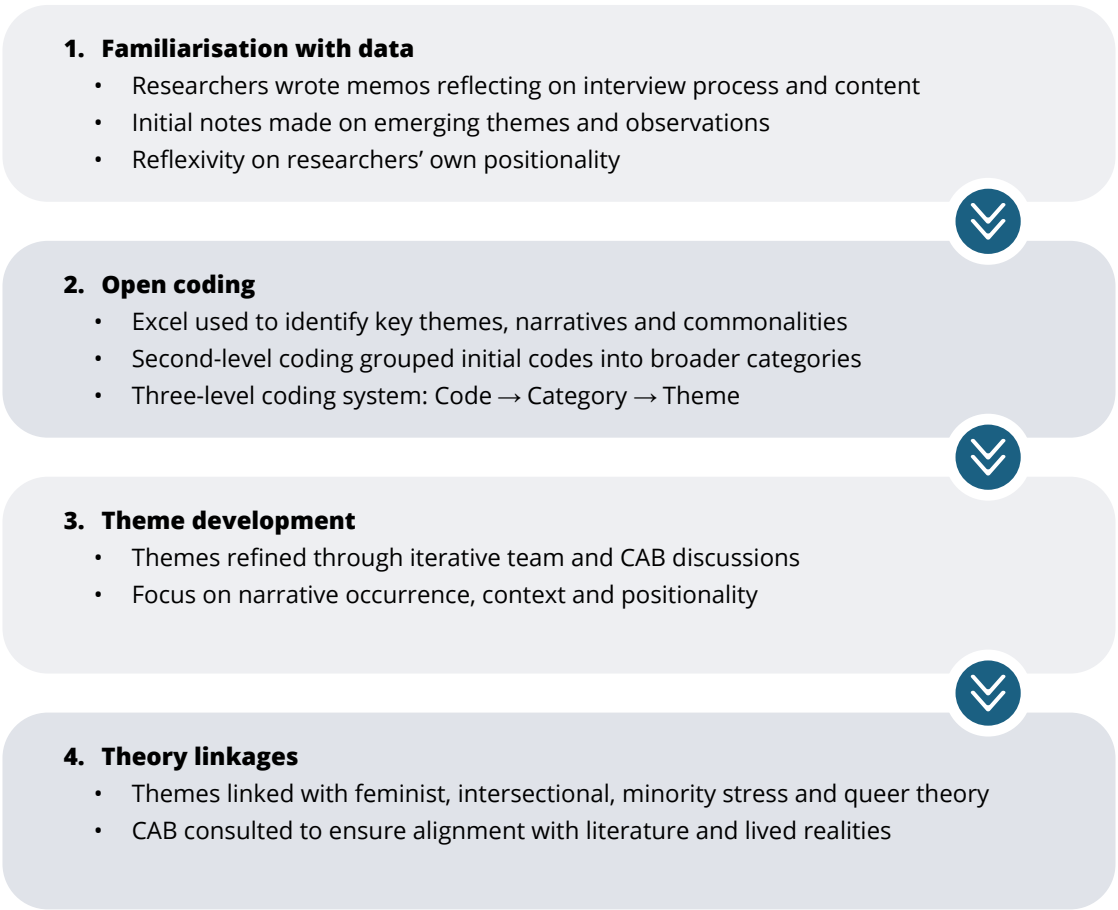
31 Crenshaw, K. (1989). Op. cit.
32 Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge
33 Meyer, I. H. (2003). Op. cit.
34 Harding, S. (1991). *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives*. Cornell University Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt1hhfnmg

ethical collaboration and co-design across all stages, especially in crafting safe spaces for sharing and recognising knowledge that comes from the margins.

Data analysis

In-depth interview (IDI) data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA).[35] RTA guides how we work with data while actively inculcating deep engagement, an openness to complexity and continuous reflection at every step. The process does not walk towards seeking "objective" truths that researchers "find" in the data, but instead asks researchers to consciously notice and acknowledge how their own identities, assumptions and positionalities shape what they notice and interpret. This is crucial when working with marginalised communities; the way trust, power and representation are navigated matters deeply. RTA supports a collaborative research process by allowing meaning to emerge through dialogue with the data (along with researchers, survivors and communities), and not through imposition. It helps ensure the analysis remains grounded in community realities. Figure 2 depicts the iterative steps of RTA that were undertaken in this study.

Figure 2
A flowchart showing the different stages of data analysis



35 Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide.* SAGE Publications.

Feminist and community-centred research approach

The study was centred in feminist and community-based practices, focusing on shared decision-making, care and reflection. Acknowledging researchers' positionality as well as continuous self-reflection with regard to the dynamics with participants both during and outside interviews was consciously inculcated as a regular practice.

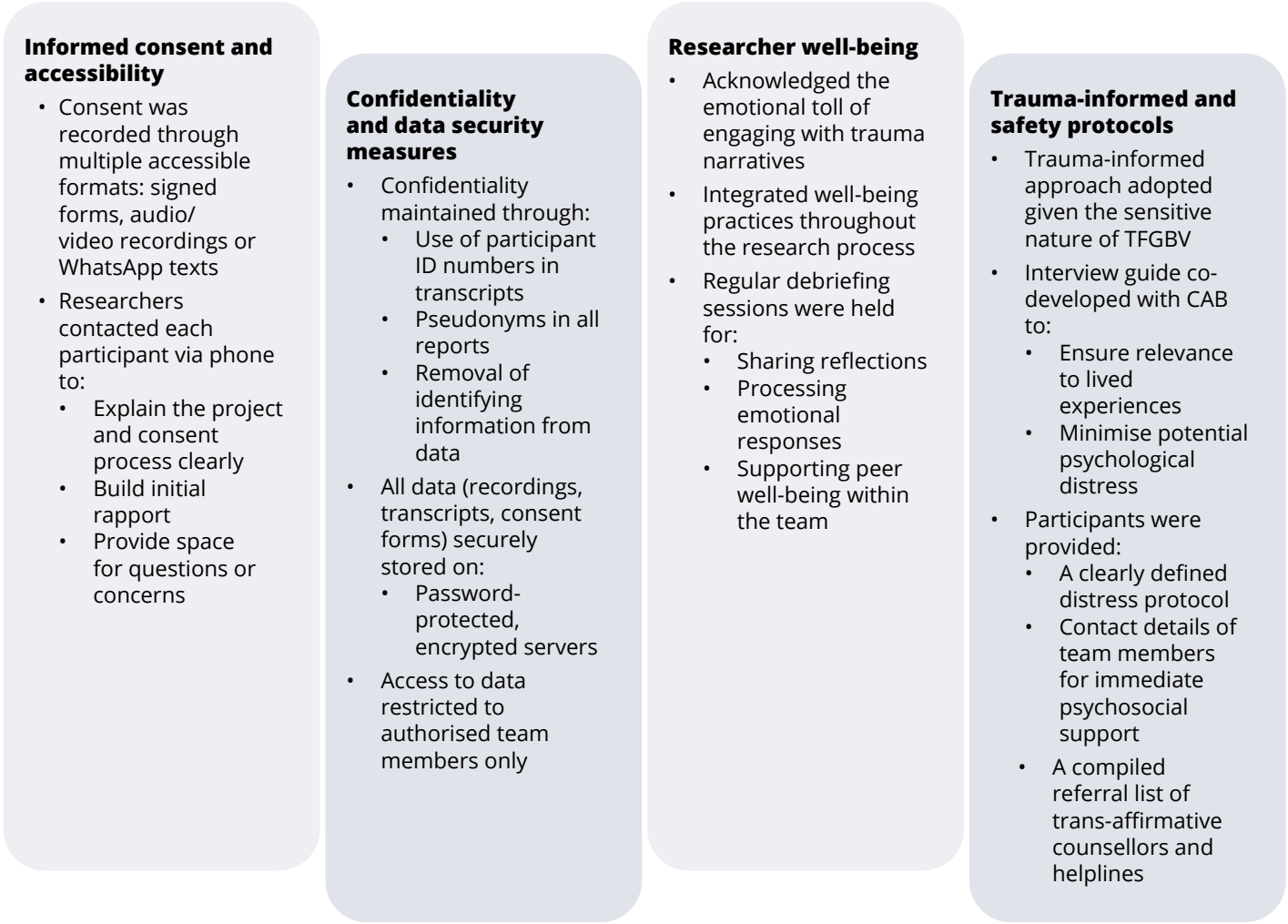
This study involved the community at each step to make the research fair and useful. We spoke with community members early on to help plan how to reach people and ask questions in a respectful way, how to work with the data, how to create meaningful resources and so on.

Throughout the process, we stayed open to feedback and made changes when needed or suggested. Similarly, participants were asked how they would wish their narratives to be represented, ensuring their autonomy over their narratives by, for example, deciding how they wished to be identified or what parts of their story to keep private. The research team acknowledged the emotional weight of sharing lived experiences by sharing mental health resources and providing an honorarium. The final aim of the study is to contribute to community-informed advocacy and knowledge-sharing efforts beyond data collection. For instance, the project aims to build a toolkit for survivors of TFGBV which will include resources, practical tips and the learnings and challenges faced by other community members. It will be shared in accessible ways so that communities can use it in their own advocacy or care work. The goal is to create something meaningful and useful that belongs to the communities, supports their needs and helps improve responses to violence from the ground up.

Ethical and intersectional considerations

This study had a foundation of feminist ethics that directed the prioritisation of agency, building accessibility at every step and safeguarding the confidentiality and safety of participants as well as researchers (Figure 3).

Figure 3
A diagram listing the ethical considerations in this study



Participant details

Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants who represented a range of characteristics, identities, experiences and backgrounds. Based on the information shared by participants about their socioeconomic backgrounds (Table 1), we were able to understand the depth of experiences in much greater detail. The following is a brief description of the participants' backgrounds.

Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 56, with most being in their 20s and 30s. This allowed for the inclusion of perspectives from diverse ages. Participants identified as transmen, transmasculine, transwomen, queer, non-binary and gender-fluid.

Their educational degrees ranged from bachelor's to master's degrees in a variety of subjects, including engineering, English literature, conflict analysis, peacebuilding, photography, medicine and so forth. Likewise, their professions were diverse, ranging from advocacy officers to artists, researchers, writers, photographers, educators, engineers, journalists and consultants. Many of them also worked as freelancers or had taken breaks from their careers because of personal circumstances. Participants resided in a mix of urban and semi-urban locations and in a variety of states including Delhi NCR, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Tripura and Manipur.

The participants also had a variety of spiritual and religious beliefs, identifying as Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and agnostic, with some doubting conventional beliefs. Participants identified as coming from middle-class and lower-middle-class families and a range of caste backgrounds, including general, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Castes. Bisexual, pansexual, heterosexual and panromantic identities were among the participants' sexual and romantic orientations. Lastly, a number of participants shared their disability status, encompassing anxiety, ADHD and other forms of neurodivergence, mental health issues, chronic illnesses and other invisible disabilities.

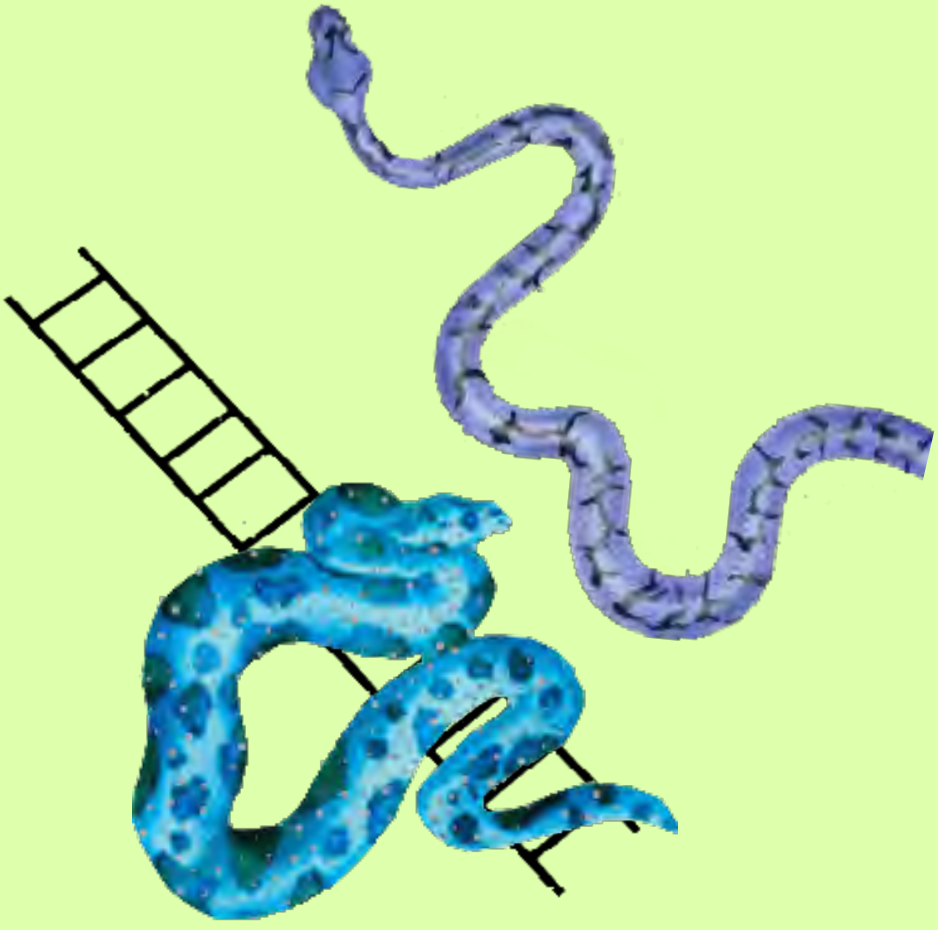
Table 1
Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample of participants in this study

Characteristic	Count
Gender	
Transman	2
Transwoman	2
Non-binary	9
Gender-fluid	1
Age	
20-30	10
31-40	2
41-50	1
51+	1
Regions	
Maharashtra	1
Karnataka	6
Kerala	1

Delhi	2
Madhya Pradesh	1
West Bengal	1
Tripura	1
Manipur	1
Religion	
Hindu	7
Christian	2
Muslim	3
Indigenous	1
Questioning religion	1
Caste	
General (Savarna)[36] – Unreserved	6
Scheduled Castes	3
Scheduled Tribes	1
Other Backward Classes	3
NA	1

36 Savarna refers to people who historically and currently experience privileges and advantages within the caste system, as opposed to people outside the caste system: “avarnas” or Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi people, who have been referred to as “untouchables”.

Observations and discussion



The intersection of transness and technology has begun to draw greater attention within research. The following sections weave together urgent and salient themes from the data analysis with literature in this area. We follow participants' relationships with technology and the internet, their experiences of violence, safety and precarity, and the role intersectionality plays in shaping their experiences, responses and access to support and redressal. We conclude with a set of recommendations for different stakeholders.

Relationship with technology: "A bizarre combination of feelings"

P09, a non-binary person, said, "Social media can expose you to different perspectives – it can bring hope, but also despair." People's current relationships with internet technologies were characterised by "bizarre" ambivalences, in the words of P04, a non-binary transmasculine person with disabilities. On the one hand, the virtual is a space for connection, solidarity, identity exploration and self-expression where TNBGD individuals forge safer relationships that allow them to share experiences, understand themselves and create supportive communities. On the other hand, the inescapable penetration of networked technologies in our everyday lives and socio-economic relations has led to anxiety, alienation, burnout, fatigue and an increased risk of violence for marginalised communities. Literature shows that continuous compulsory connectedness can lead to a permanent state of anticipation. This can generate ambivalent experiences that transition from initial excitement, enthusiasm and the comfort of shared experiences to anxiety, fatigue and a sense of duty to stay constantly connected, informed and available to others.[37]

Participants' relationships with technology also evolved over time, with socio-technological developments and different levels of access to independent or shared devices as adolescents. P06, a transman, shared that the allure of using technology for the first time was accompanied by excitement, which has now transformed into passive interactions in the form of doomscrolling and the erosion of meaningful relationships. Others describe how they currently oscillate between the utility, novelty and excesses of the internet.

Participants shared that technologies have become a constant presence in almost all aspects of life – ranging from social media and dating to services such as travel, food, groceries, payments and other aspects of life that did not previously involve technology – offering little or no choice in opting in or out. It continues to be crucial for communication, accessing information and advancing

37 Lupinacci, L. (2020). 'Absentmindedly scrolling through nothing': Liveness and compulsory continuous connectedness in social media. *Media, Culture & Society, 43*(2), 273-290. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720939454; Tegan, C. (2020). *Balancing the binary: Ambivalent entanglement and digital isolation in creative capacity for contemporary photomedia artists*. Queensland University of Technology. https://eprints.qut.edu.au/201726/1/Charlotte_Tegan_Thesis.pdf

one's career, and plays a key role in gaining access to people, often others with shared identities, and spaces beyond immediate natal families or peers.

This is particularly significant in the Indian context since many participants were not out to their natal families and peers who lived nearby. Online spaces thus allowed them to explore their identity at their own pace. For P07, a closeted transwoman from a conservative Muslim family, anonymity allowed her to find comfort in online communities and exercise her autonomy while being anonymous: "I wanted to know more about me, and it was very comforting for the first time to know that there are [other queer-trans] people who are like me. [...] To have a conversation with them, even text them, and then being friends with them." Being able to speak to others, sharing information about themselves and connecting over similar values and experiences made participants feel safe and provided a sense of belonging.[38]

The increasing dependence on and consequent over-exposure to social media has also led to precarity, overwhelm, constant comparison, anxiety and loss of interest. For example, P03, a non-binary Muslim person, described their relationship with the internet as "oil and water", often needing periodic "detoxes" which helped them step back, avoid digital fatigue and regain a sense of safety. These detoxes allowed them to temporarily disengage from the pressures of validation-seeking and maintain their mental well-being amidst continuous online interactions. Thus, engagement with social media is also increasingly characterised by peaks and valleys in response to an omnipresent, ever-changing and bottomless virtual sphere, which is constantly reconstructing identity, belonging and selfhood. Raman and Komarraju posit that digital spaces create both possibility and proscription for bodies, minds, relationships, engagement, ownership and mobilisation. Drawing on Jamie Banks and Zizi Papacharissi's work, Raman and Komarraju reimagine the self as a "networked self", a multimodal, multiplexed, multispatial phenomenon that operates in a context where human and non-human entities are structured in relation to one another.[39] Furthermore, in the Indian context, caste, gender and class divides and the resultant digital divide can leave women and girls more vulnerable to TFGBV.[40] Less is known about TNBGD people's access to technology, surveillance of their tech usage and their experience of the internet and information and communication technologies at large.

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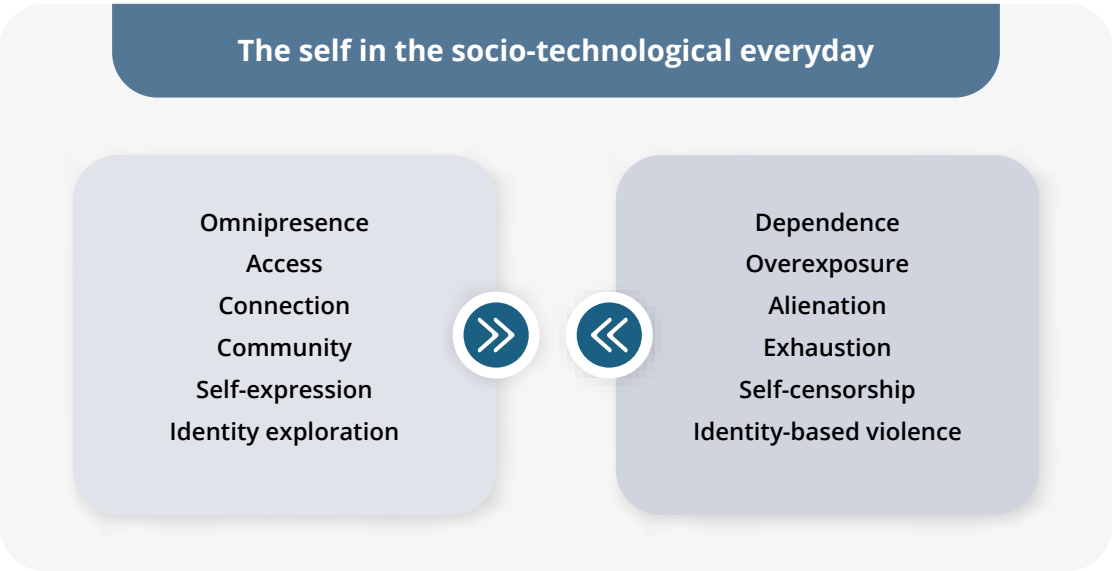
38 Cavalcante, A. (2016). "I did it all online:" Transgender identity and the management of everyday life. *Critical Studies in Media Communication, 33*(1), 109-122. https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2015.1129065; Austin, A., Craig, S. L., Navega, N., & McInroy, L. B. (2020). It's my safe space: The life-saving role of the internet in the lives of transgender and gender diverse youth. *International Journal of Transgender Health, 21*(1), 33-44. https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2019.1700202

39 Raman, U., & Komarraju, S. A. (2017). Researching Online Worlds through a Feminist Lens: Text, Context and Assemblages. In K. Kannabiran, & P. Swaminathan (Eds.), *Re-Presenting Feminist Methodologies: Interdisciplinary Explorations*. Routledge.

40 NORC at the University of Chicago and the International Center for Research on Women. (2022). *Case Study: Technology-facilitated Gender Based Violence in India.* ICRW. https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/USAID-TFGBV-India.pdf

Figure 4
A diagram depicting the duality of our relationship with technology



Safety and privacy as socio-technological negotiations

Navigating the double-edged nature of technology (as shown in Figure 4) is an inevitable part of everyday life and safely negotiating this duality is not easy. For our participants, safety was both the absence of threats and the presence of safeguards and support, online and offline. One of the factors that facilitated safety was privacy. Physical privacy while accessing digital spaces was important for those who were living in unsafe and abusive environments. For example, P01, a transmasculine person who lived in an abusive family space had to use technology in secret, but continued to do so as he felt that for trans persons it was "a great tool to connect with safer people outside of their native family; to seek support without actually explicitly saying what they were experiencing." Physical and virtual spaces are thus increasingly enmeshed, and privacy in both senses is a critical precondition for freedom from violence and for an autonomous self-paced exploration of gender, sexuality and belongingness.[41]

Privacy is generally important since coming out and disclosing your gender identity is not always easy or safe for TNBGD people. P07, a Muslim transwoman, felt that being closeted and anonymous online made her feel safer: "Being closeted is much safer for me. [...] Maybe that is one of the reasons I have still not come out." Reimagining the closet as a protector of privacy and safety in unsafe and stigmatising environments allows us to view coming out as a continuous and contextual negotiation in both online and offline spaces. Further, a lack of privacy

41 Matzner, T. (2018). *Privacy in digital media: An Arendtian approach*. https://www.tobiasmatzner.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/privacy_in_digital_media.pdf

in the online sphere can translate to anxieties about surveillance, violence and doxxing in offline settings. For example, P03, who used queer dating apps, was concerned about privacy while using public spaces and public transportation: "[Online] safety extends to offline as well. If I'm walking on the street, or if I'm [...] taking an auto somebody looking at me and recognising me" would threaten their sense of safety.

While anonymity can help TNBGD persons, especially closeted individuals in unsupportive or violent familial contexts, feel safer, anonymity also shields perpetrators from the impact and consequences of their actions and enables violence. For example, Ritash, a gender-fluid person, said, "This person [perpetrator] may be harassing you [...] in a more camouflaged or a hidden space, as in, it's a safe space for them." Therefore, as P03 highlighted, spaces inhabited by people they know feel safer and more trustworthy. Nevertheless, P08, a transwoman who used to work as a sex worker, asserted that "there is no safety in tech," highlighting the risk inherent in any use of or exposure to technology or digital platforms, particularly for transwomen. Research similarly highlights that safety and harm are mediated through technology, where virtual safe spaces like community groups can provide a respite from transphobia and other forms of discrimination while digital systems simultaneously amplify the risk of violence and abuse transgender persons can experience.[42]

Forms of violence

Monitoring, surveillance and control

Nearly all the participants interviewed experienced some form of monitoring and surveillance of their use of technology with the intent to control them, which often led to stalking, doxxing, nonconsensual image recording, sharing and generating, as well as incidents of dating violence, sexual harassment and queerphobia.

The natal families of P01, P07 and P11 (a non-binary person) monitored their use of technology and their online presence. P01's family tracked his number, and he shared that, "Every aspect of my tech usage is monitored by my natal family." P07 said, "Even if I liked a page supporting LGBTQI issues with my birth name, there would have been backlash from my family, friends and my community." P02, P03 and P12 highlighted the surveillance they encountered when making calls or when on platforms like Instagram, Zoom and Google Meet, limiting how they expressed themselves in these spaces. As an activist, P12's (a non-binary person from a region experiencing ongoing ethnic conflict) phone calls were cut every 10 minutes by whom they assumed was the state, and their fear of being recorded

42 Scheuerman, M. K., Branham, S. M., & Hamidi, F. (2018). Safe Spaces and Safe Places: Unpacking Technology-Mediated Experiences of Safety and Harm with Transgender People. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, 2*(CSCW), 1-27. https://doi.org/10.1145/3274424

pushed them to save sensitive conversations for in-person meetups. Participants who were from Kashmir and Manipur, regions with ongoing conflicts, spoke about how their political expression online and use of technology was heavily surveilled by society at large.[43]

Transmasculine participant P01's caste kin group monitored the ways in which he transgressed gender norms centred around upholding his privileged caste status as a "daughter": "I was labelled as the problem child and became the subject and object for the caste group to lecture about morality and ethicality. It was very coded within the normative structure where parents are seen as sacrosanct, and the family name must be preserved." Surveillance technologies replicate the "male gaze" and reinforce hierarchies and norms of gender and patriarchal violence, in these cases controlling and limiting participants' freedom to be queer and connect with their communities.[44]

Stalking

Stalking for some participants started online through their phone numbers, addresses, information on LinkedIn, social media profiles and dating apps, which occasionally led to offline stalking at their home, hostel or workplace. P10, a non-binary person, shared "experiences where people tracked me down and confronted me at work," causing them to become vigilant and fearful for their safety in public.

For other participants, the stalking began offline through their family or work, and then moved online. P02, a non-binary psychologist with disabilities, was looked up on LinkedIn by a client who saw them at work, sharing, "Stalking by that particular client happened through that platform first, you know, LinkedIn requests, or will start randomly endorsing me for stuff on a skill." Participants' experiences also reflected the unique stalking tactics that gender minorities have been found to experience, such as having their sexual orientation and gender identities questioned by stalkers.[45]

Doxxing

Being doxxed or even the threat of being doxxed affected several participants in the study. Having their pronouns or TNBGD identities outed was a fear for those who were closeted at home or at work. Others had their names, profiles and other personal information like bank details and their location leaked by

43 Human Rights Watch. (2024). *World Report 2024: India.* https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/india

44 Khan, S. (2023). Gendering Surveillance from a South Asian Perspective. In M. Gallagher, & A. V. Montiel (Eds.), *The Handbook of Gender, Communication, and Women's Human Rights*. John Wiley & Sons. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119800729.ch15

45 Edwards, K. M., Camp, E. E., Lim, S., Logan, T. K., Shorey, R. C., & Babchuk, W. (2022). Stalking among sexual and gender minorities: A systematic literature review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 66*, 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2022.101777

right-wing groups for expressing their political views online. Often, doxxing or the threat of doxxing was accompanied by demands for an apology or to remove political content from social media.

P04 was quite affected by the doxxing they experienced, sharing that, "[I] feel scared to step out of my house. I become hyper-vigilant, checking my surroundings if I go for a walk, go to the market or even just step outside my door." P04 (a politically vocal non-binary transmasculine person with disabilities) and Aindriya Barua (an Adivasi non-binary activist with disabilities) were even threatened with having their family members' details shared with right-wing Hindu nationalist groups in public fora, with Aindriya disclosing, "They somehow found my sister's contact info, the fact that she has a child, her phone number and email, and posted it on a big page [...] that has thousands of followers." Similar to what our participants experienced, acts of doxxing against TNBGD persons often intend to misgender, intimidate or out them.[46]

Sexual harassment and dating violence

Many instances of monitoring and stalking resulted in participants experiencing sexual harassment or dating violence originating from within and outside their immediate communities, complicating trust dynamics. P07 highlighted the betrayal of trust felt when sexually targeted by people who "were pseudo-allies – pretending to be supportive of the community, but in reality, they were just there to satisfy their sexual desires or engage in dirty talk."

P08 was often harassed by 18- to 19-year-old college-going boys, who would ask to see pictures of her privates, demanding, "What do you have down there? Show me. Show me your breasts." She felt unsafe and struggled to leave her house for fear of meeting someone who recognised her.

Queerphobia

Another aspect of monitoring and control involved queerphobia targeting participants' gender and sexual identities. Non-binary participant P09 described it as "cultural policing", which made them "self-censor" and "hesitate before sharing certain parts of myself," once being asked "When are you going to identify as a helicopter?" P10's stalker was "incredibly misogynistic and homophobic," and seemed to enjoy provoking a reaction out of them through his homophobic remarks, even though they "never explicitly came out to him." P10 shared, "I always felt like this was a personal attack on my gender and orientation" that stemmed from his obsession with "wanting to know [...] who I'm with, who I'm dating."

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46 Anderson, B. (2025). Doxxing to destroy: The convergence of transphobic hate speech and non-consensual disclosure on X. *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal,* 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1177/17416590251345736

Platform privacy issues

Many instances of monitoring and stalking were enabled by privacy issues on apps and platforms that often exposed participants' information without their knowledge or consent. P14, a transwoman from a rural region, was outed to her colleagues through Google Pay, sharing, "After making a payment at a nearby hotel, my new name and photo appeared, and they spread the information that I am such a person [trans]."

Non-consensual image and video recording, generating and sharing

Forms of violence often overlapped or served as precursors to each other. A major theme that emerged in participants' sharing about having images and videos recorded and shared without their consent was that it often came with elements of monitoring or surveillance of their gender identity and expression. The stalking P02 experienced involved pictures taken of them at their workplace and posted online, "using that imagery of, okay, this is a wild transperson, and they are, you know, not supposed to be giving therapy to normal people."

P08 and P14, both transwomen, were filmed in public without their consent, and P14 had neighbours in her village bring up her profile pictures with her parents to "stir up trouble." It got to the point where "it became unbearable for my parents to live there. They eventually had to move and live with me in [a South Indian city]. We haven't gone back since."

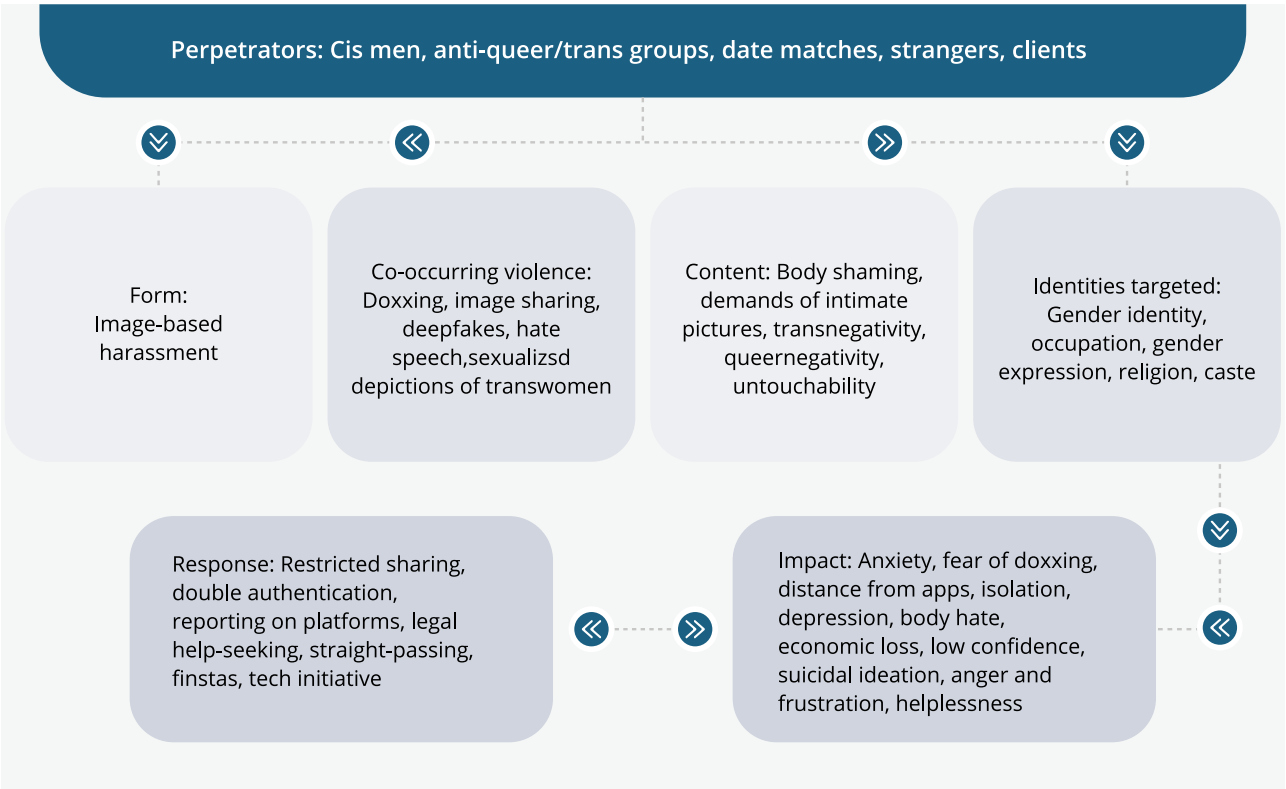
P02, P11 and P12 talked about how screenshots and screen recordings of political statements and private images were used to harass or dox them. A poem P11 wrote confessing their feelings for another woman was shared with their hostel mates. They said, "The teasing and passive harassment became overwhelming. Eventually, I left the hostel."

Unsolicited images and videos, some of which were explicitly pornographic, were sent to Ritash, an older gender-fluid person, as well as P07 and P11 on online platforms like Facebook, and via Bluetooth. P07, a closeted transwoman, was reluctant to post or share pictures of herself even in queer community spaces for fear of being outed. This led to the end of a good friendship with a lesbian woman online: "Because I wasn't comfortable sharing a picture, she broke off the relationship, saying that I wasn't sharing it."

The effects of the image-based violence experienced by participants reflected a similar study's findings that this form of violence causes long-term emotional distress, and affects personal relationships, employment, education and even physical safety and well-being.[47]

47 McLean, N., & Cicero, T. (2023). Op. cit.

Figure 5
A diagram highlighting the elements of image-based harassment

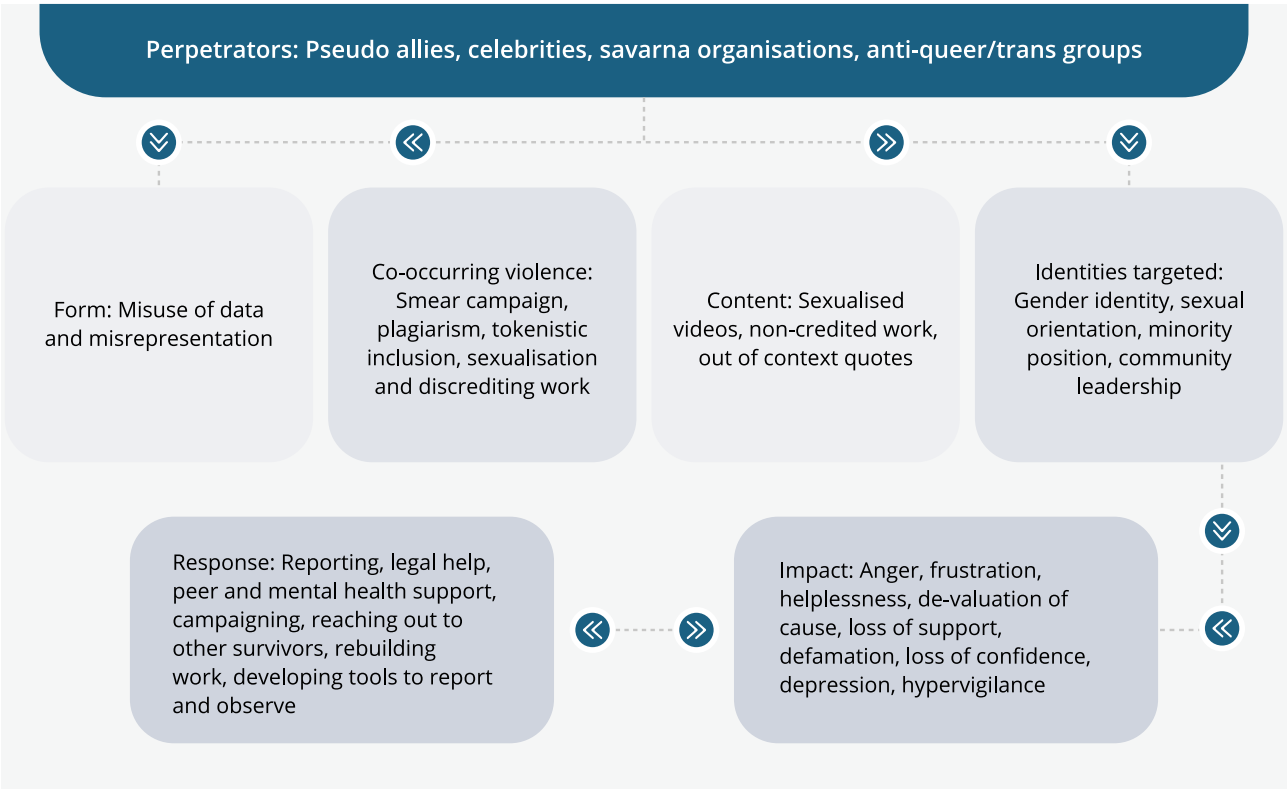


Misuse, defamation, misinterpretation

In addition to their private information being used to surveil them, participants discussed incidents where their personal details and information were taken out of context or weaponised against them. The personal narratives that P01 shared online through his blog and in private emails to professors about his mental health difficulties were used by his university to justify their decision to expel him. “It was shocking how a non-living entity, an institution, could decide that I was unfit for education,” he expressed.

P06, a transman who works with the trans community, shared his concerns for transwomen engaged in sex work whose “profiles exist on various websites. I worry that in the future, if they want to pursue a different career, get a job or engage in social activities, the personal details, photos and videos stored on those websites could impact them.”

Figure 6
A diagram highlighting elements of the misuse and misrepresentation of information[48]



Impersonation, deception and extortion

Another threat participants reported was the misrepresentation and misappropriation of identities and information by malicious actors in online spaces. P11 was impersonated online – "Multiple fake profiles of me were created, on Instagram and Tinder, using my pictures," – which made them wary of putting their information online. P14 talked about an anti-queer group in South India who would "use fake profiles with strange, non-human names" to attack queer people and Pride events. Aindriya was catfished by someone on Facebook who "was lying about everything and saying that he had cancer," even making fake accounts of fictitious friends to corroborate his story. Ritash shared how people "would call persistently, sometimes disguising their voices, finding amusement in the anonymity."

In some cases, the misrepresentation of information or intentions led to people getting scammed or extorted. Both P04 and P06 shared stories about people they knew who had been blackmailed or extorted on Grindr and other dating apps, with threats of leaking private photos, with P06 revealing that "some have lost INR 25,000, INR 30,000 or even INR 50,000" to these scams. Those who were

48 In this diagram, "savarna organisations" refers to organisations run by people with caste privilege, and in our study refers more specifically to queer-led savarna organisations.

closeted were particularly vulnerable to scams and extortion, since they were at risk of having their identity revealed, which has disastrous consequences for TNBGD persons in extremely transphobic communities and contexts.[49]

The kind of deception that P08 experienced had a more life-threatening element of risk. It ranged from incidents where "men would propose to me, telling me they loved me. [...] But when I met them, all they wanted was sex," to an incident where "this guy told me he would come alone, but when I went to meet him, he brought three other men. I immediately ran away. [...] I knew they would kill me, rape me."

Spam calls and messages

A major form of TFGBV reported by participants involved repeated unsolicited attempts to contact them through various means. Ritash, a gender-fluid participant, brought up how they were often harassed through "unwanted calls" and messages on pagers, landlines and their company email ID that could be accessed through the company intranet. They recalled, "Callers took advantage of anonymity, sometimes under the guise of marketing calls or simply to harass individuals."

Aindriya once received 99 missed calls from a Facebook friend after they blocked him for catfishing them. P08 was messaged and called so frequently by people soliciting her for sex work that she had to "keep my phone on from 11:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., and then I turn it off because I get too many calls in the evening." The harassment forced her to go offline and barred her from accessing and participating in digital spaces, and it deeply affected her mental health. "In the past, I've been in a very dark place. I've had suicidal tendencies, overwhelming feelings of self-harm."

The person who stalked P10 would call 30 to 40 times a day, making new accounts on WhatsApp and Instagram to call them and send them emotionally manipulative and verbally abusive messages, occasionally also sending vulgar sexual messages. "At one point, I was genuinely scared that this guy might physically assault me," they shared, becoming vigilant for acid attacks or being followed on their way home.

After non-binary activist P12 commented challenging a lewd, homophobic post, "people flooded my DMs saying horrible things, like 'it's unnatural.'" They received calls and messages with threats to kill them for their political opinions and support for LGBTQIA+ rights: "They called me – talked for 30 minutes – saying they'd skin my family alive, kill me, make my parents vanish."

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49 Younes, R. (2023). "All this terror because of a photo." In *Human Rights Watch*. https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/02/21/all-terror-because-photo/digital-targeting-and-its-offline-consequences-lgbt

Networked harassment

Every participant interviewed had experienced a concerted online attack from a wider group of people, ranging from classmates and neighbours to right-wing groups, religious groups and other LGBTQIA+ community members.

Trolling, hate speech and threats to safety

Most of the trolling or hate speech that participants reported were targeted at their most visible identities or at their political views. The use of TFGBV to suppress political expression and protest has been documented in other contexts as well.[50]

Non-binary Muslim participant P03 received death threats after screenshots of an Instagram story they shared supporting a nationwide protest were forwarded by a queer follower to right-wing Hindu nationalist groups: "The messages included extreme threats, saying things like, 'We will cut you into pieces.'" This incident severely affected their well-being and their freedom of expression, as they shared: "It can impact your mental health, safety and public presence. Even now, I carry the trauma from that event." This incident was a snapshot of how Islamophobia in India has been on a steep incline, with the vast majority of anti-Muslim posts worldwide originating in India, and Indian Muslims experiencing lynchings, state-sanctioned violence, and consistent dehumanisation in the Indian media and in online spaces.[51]

As an Indigenous political artist who was often outspoken about Hindu nationalist politics and casteism, Aindriya once had an advertising vehicle with a loudspeaker sent to their house. "It just parked there and played a violent song on loop [...] which means, 'If you don't chant Ram's name, we'll cut off your head.' [...] I got a panic attack just sitting at home, listening to it all day." They also received casteist comments on reels they posted about their work on gender-based violence, reflecting how casteism is often used as a tool to reinforce caste-based hierarchies on social media.[52] "Someone commented, 'Ye kiska shakal dekh liya, ab nahana padega' – like, 'Whose face have I seen that I need to take a bath now?' That level of untouchability – wow."

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50 Baekgaard, K. (2024). Op. cit.

51 Butler, U. (2022). Islamophobia in the digital age: a study of anti-Muslim tweets. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4227488; Pundir, P. (2025, July 14). Indian Muslim women fight back as far-right disinformation evolves with tech. *GenderIT*. https://genderit.org/index.php/feminist-talk/indian-muslim-women-fight-back-far-right-disinformation-evolves-tech

52 Singh, D. (2025). Dalits' encounters with casteism on social media: a thematic analysis. *Information Communication & Society,* 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2025.2462244

P04, who was also politically active online, talked about how, “Sometimes people send veiled warnings like, ‘If the wrong person sees this, something could happen to you.’ Other times, it’s direct threats of physical violence, sexual assault or abduction.” Reflecting on the nature of the attacks, they concluded that, “The attacks often have nothing to do with the actual discussion – they just target whatever seems most vulnerable about you.”

Even for those who were not explicitly vocal about their political views, there was backlash about their reticence to be politically visible online from those with caste and class privilege. P03 pointed out: “I’ve noticed how upper-class and upper-caste savarna people dehumanise marginalised people for being apolitical, without understanding the risks that come with being political.”

For participants like P09, attacks came from outside and within their communities alike. P09 was trolled by anti-Muslim groups for a journalistic video they made on a government project, receiving comments like “Of course a hijabi[53] journalist would say this,” “Muslims are always against the Prime Minister,” “Jihadi terrorist.” However, they also experienced trolling from Muslim men, receiving comments about how they wore their hijab, comments like, “This is not the right way to wear it,” or, “This is not modest.’

Transphobic trolling and hate speech made P07, a closeted Muslim transwoman, feel constantly on edge and unable to openly talk to others about her trans identity. “I could see my own family members, relatives and friends making fun of the LGBTQI community. They used slurs, treated these identities as jokes and used those words as insults.” Similarly, P14 became disillusioned with writing and activism after seeing how online communities responded to the death by suicide of a close friend, a transwoman. She shared, “I got detached from social media completely. After that, all negative posts and videos felt triggering.”

Several participants were also direct recipients of concerted transphobic attacks. P11 revealed, “I was attending a lot of Pride marches, my face was out there, and I had spoken on a couple of Tamil channels about sexuality, queerness, transness. That’s when internet bullying hit me hard.” For P12, who was sent death threats for their activism, they found themselves becoming less outspoken and altering their gender expression to be less visibly queer. They disclosed the severe mental health impacts of the trolling: “Right now I’m taking therapy, and I’m on medication. […] I’ve been severely depressed – almost institutionalised at one point. […] I know my PTSD is going to last a long time.”

53 Hijabi refers to a Muslim person who wears a hijab – a headscarf or veil.

Cancelling and social exclusion

Within LGBTQIA+ communities, cancel culture was often weaponised against vulnerable TNBGD persons. P01 had a smear campaign launched against him by an ex-partner, whose "posts were circulated in queer circles, leading to a punitive cancelling. I was removed from community groups, both online and offline. [...] Being homeless, I needed community support, like housing or financial aid, but none of it was there."

P06, a transman, was outspoken about transmasc erasure in the media coverage of an event organised by the trans community in their city. However, they were ostracised by major non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community members as a result:

> Many of them were also my good friends. But because of this situation [...] they completely boycotted me. [...] I started experiencing anxiety, even getting anxiety attacks. I developed anger issues, so I completely distanced myself – I stopped going there and cut off communication with people.

P03 reflected on the power they had as a leader within the queer community to potentially cancel people, particularly in an incident where they were targeted by a community member: "I had to figure out how to respond in a way that was both educational and constructive – without sounding like I was cancelling them."

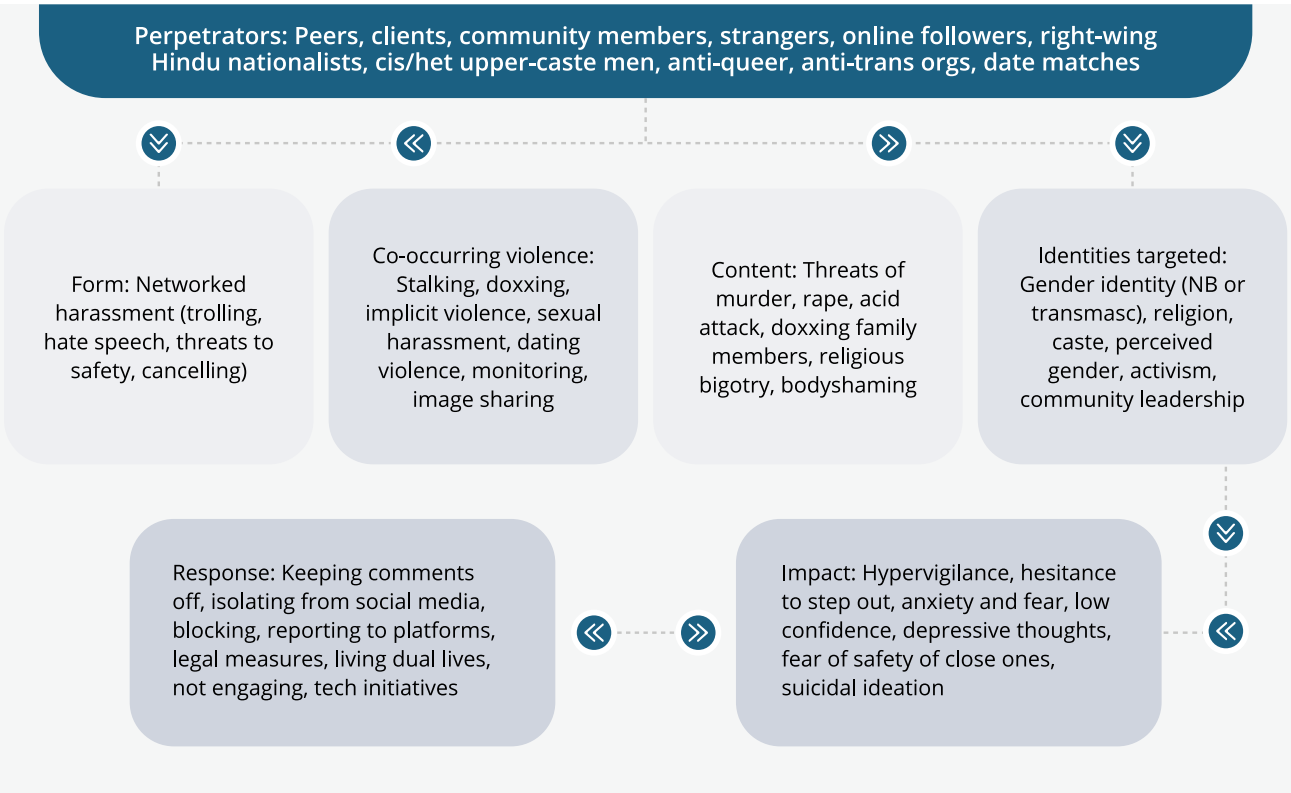
P03 also highlighted the punitive ways in which queer communities often respond to conflicts, responding with exclusion rather than resolving conflicts or restoring community members who have caused harm: "We are all trying to create safer, more inclusive spaces. However, when we make mistakes, they are often held against us indefinitely. Hurt is personal, and people rarely forget or forgive, even if we attempt to make amends."

This exemplified how cancel culture, which originated in Black digital spaces as a tool of accountability against those with structural power, has since escaped its context and is now being used within marginalised communities to silence or exile community members who are perceived to cause harm or discomfort.[54]

54 Clark, M. D. (2020). DRAG THEM: A brief etymology of so-called "cancel culture". *Communication and the Public, 5*(3-4), 88-92. https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047320961562

Figure 7

A diagram highlighting the elements of networked harassment



Erasure of TNBGD identities

A unique aspect of the violence encountered by TNBGD persons through technology was the policing and erasure of their gender identities and expression. This ties in with literature that suggests that violence is employed as a tool to regulate "deviant" expressions of gender and reinforce hierarchies of and essentialisms about sexuality, gender and sexed bodies, even within LGBTQIA+ communities.[55]

P02 had colleagues minimise the impact of the stalking they went through, because they were perceived as a "man", rather than a non-binary person. Similarly, P04 discussed how their modelling career erased their non-binary identity, explaining, "I recognise that in some ways, I was also propagating an idea of femininity through my work [...] even though it wasn't necessarily my personal ideology or identity." P10, another non-binary participant, revealed how their gender expression was policed: "When I dressed in a more masculine way, people would comment, 'You should wear more feminine clothes, you don't look good.'"

55 Loken, M., & Hagen, J. J. (2022). Op. cit.; Haynes, T., & DeShong, H. A. F. (2017). Op. cit.; McLean, N., & Cicero, T. (2023). Op. cit.

P09 found other members of the queer community dismissing their non-binary identity, sharing, "When they see me – a hijabi person – they assume I don't belong. They question why I'm there. In their eyes, I don't 'look queer'." P03, a non-binary intersex person, also pointed out the policing of their gender expression from within the community: "I've been told during meetups that I don't look 'non-binary enough.' But what does that even mean?" P14 highlighted how trans content creators have "created a benchmark image of what it means to be a 'real' or 'original' trans person, making others feel like they're fake."

Within TNBGD communities, "transmasc negativity" was highlighted by P01 in the way transmen were often invisibilised or excluded from queer spaces. When P06 spoke out about transmasc erasure in a trans event, he was ostracised to the point of being erased from photographs: "I was in the [group] picture, but they edited it and replaced me with someone else."

For many transpersons, transitioning or being trans was associated with sex work or wanting a sex life. In fact, non-binary participant P11 was stalked and solicited for sex by an auto rickshaw driver who "had mistaken me for a transwoman or transman and assumed I was a sex worker" because of their short hair in their WhatsApp profile picture and stories. By justifying acts of violence against TNBGD persons because they defy gender norms, perpetrators trivialise the violence and blame the victim for it, attempting to enforce adherence to socially sanctioned, binary norms of experiencing and expressing gender.[56]

Vicarious and implicit violence

Not all forms of violence were explicit or directly experienced. Participants opened up about the impact of violence they witnessed other people going through – vicarious violence – such as trolling, doxxing and extortion. They also talked about more subtle, implicit forms of violence that were often seen in acts of omission or changes in behaviour toward them.

After P09 openly shared their involvement in the Queer Muslim Project on their Instagram account, they noticed:

> Some people who used to engage with me distanced themselves afterward. It was subtle, but I noticed it. [...] Similarly, someone who used to include me in their close friends list on Instagram no longer does. [...] These subtle shifts create a sense of distance, even if no one explicitly says anything.

These subtle acts of exclusion seemed to be rejections of participants' queer identity and expression, and they had the effect of alienating participants from support and community.

56 Haynes, T., & DeShong, H. A. F. (2017). Op. cit.

P11 was forced to leave their hostel after screenshots of a queer love poem they wrote were distributed: “After that, people’s behaviour toward me changed drastically. [...] When I walked into a room, I could feel all eyes on me. People would adjust their dupattas, become more guarded.”

Commodification and labour exploitation

The misuse and commodification of queer and trans experiences online emerged as a significant theme. Aindriya recounted calling out a prominent queer organisation for misattributing their artwork to another collective, highlighting how their labour as a queer, Indigenous artist was exploited for visibility and engagement. They also critiqued the broader phenomenon of rainbow capitalism – sharing that organisations often sought to profit from their identity, asking them to share their trauma for campaigns or content without meaningful compensation or support, as they were asked questions like “What was the biggest trauma of your childhood?” in a widely broadcast interview. Further, they pointed out how some savarna (privileged caste) organisations would “brainstorm” with them, but never officially onboard or hire them for projects that used the ideas that were discussed in the brainstorming phase.

Internet ban

The state’s decision-making power over digital infrastructure was also pointed out as TFGBV, particularly by P12. They described how frequent internet shutdowns[57] in their state, a region with ongoing conflict, felt like targeted violence that was directed at already vulnerable communities. This disrupted the communities’ ability to seek help in crises or to share or receive critical information for movement and resistance. It often escalated to critical aspects of life like not having access to money or a livelihood. This disconnection and surveillance led to a profound sense of helplessness, financial instability and severe depression and a lack of trust in the government or platforms.

Resistance, redressal and sources of support

For most participants, experiences of TFGBV left them scared, overwhelmed and confused about how to protect themselves and seek redressal. Regardless, TNBGD persons employed a combination of different strategies to respond to violence and navigate barriers to support and resistance.

57 Freedom House. (2024). *India: Freedom on the Net 2024 India: Freedom on the Net 2024.*. https://freedomhouse.org/country/india/freedom-net/2024

Everyday safeguarding practices

Past experiences and fear of TFGBV led participants to adopt a wide range of everyday practices to remain safe as TNBGD persons. P07 shared that her Facebook account and in particular what she was "liking", including LGBTQIA+ affirmative content, was being monitored by her family. To navigate the fear of doxxing and potential familial backlash, she bought a separate SIM card and made separate social accounts with her chosen name but without any pictures. This allowed her to interact with other queer people and express and explore her gender identity. In addition, many participants also became selective and conscious about what they share online, even utilising different levels of privacy like the "close friends" feature on Instagram or making alternate private accounts, using two-factor authentication, being cautious of random links, buying from trusted online sellers and opting for cash on delivery options to avoid financial scams. Participants shared that their experiences of TFGBV have desensitised them to the violence but made them more vigilant about signs of vulnerability and escalation. They (a) "double check", in the words of P11, if the content and language of a message or post could be used against them, (b) are sensitive to signs of unusual engagement on public posts and (c) according to P04, keep their friends and allies close or in the know for support. Aindriya said:

> Through experience, I've learned to recognise patterns of hate speech – which ones escalate and how to stop them. Now I know, if someone starts tagging someone else who has a [religious] DP, or uses certain orange flags, I can tell, "Okay, this is going to escalate." So I immediately switch off comments from non-followers, things like that.

In response to tech-facilitated offline threats to safety, P10 learned self-defence techniques and became "obsessed with building upper body strength." They said, "My way of coping was trying to be practical, preparing for the worst-case scenario." Aindriya talked about carrying pepper spray. P11 shared that whenever they anticipate offline unsafety they keep their "phone ready with a voice recording app and camera" to capture evidence. Thus, safeguarding against violence involved a mix of day-to-day digital and physical rituals.

Platform-based negotiation

Reporting, blocking, temporarily deactivating or making accounts private were the most common platform-based responses to TFGBV. In cases of networked harassment and hate speech, participants used a combination of reporting and blocking features, sometimes unclear about the scope and limitations of these functions. P08 said, "How many people can I block? 1,000? 2,000? There are so many more." In addition, participants reiterated that the processes and guidelines of platforms like Meta, Twitter/X and LinkedIn have been ineffective in responding to violence. Highlighting the delay and inaction by platforms, P09

shared, "There was [a] significant lag in the review process – weeks went by before comments were addressed. In the end, the response was, 'The comments don't violate community guidelines.'"

P04 also suggested that perpetrators increasingly bypass platform filters and community guidelines, saying, "I think a major barrier is how platforms determine what qualifies as harassment. People find ways to bypass filters – like replacing letters with symbols – to avoid detection." P03 shared that when their community group on Facebook was being mass reported and was on the verge of being taken down, they got in touch with friends who work at Meta to resolve the issue and were able to retain the page through the help of Meta's trusted partner initiative.[58] P11, on the other hand, reported a driver on a ride-hailing app for inappropriate behaviour, and in response they just deducted a star from his profile. Research also shows that survivors of TFGBV in Asia are dissatisfied with the reporting and prevention mechanisms on platforms, specifically pointing to the need for community guidelines that tap into context-specific forms of TFGBV in local languages, a need Aindriya echoed.[59] Further, the lack of transparency about the progress of their complaint leaves complainants in the dark.[60] P10 also highlighted how Meta's recent systemic move to roll back content moderation and the platform specifically permitting online speech associating mental illness or abnormality with gender or sexual orientation has been alarming and has left many community members vulnerable and distressed.[61]

In cases of stalking and spamming, blocking was used by many to limit further interaction. However, in many cases, participants shared that they were concerned about blocking possibly escalating the violence and had to strategically appease perpetrators. Aindriya shared, "I wrote him a long email, putting the onus on him – like, 'I trust that you will understand, I'm not interested' [...] manipulating the abuser to make him feel like he's a good person so he won't hurt me."

Furthermore, participants underlined many instances of blocking being ineffective and leading to multimedia and multi-profile harassment where perpetrators continue making new accounts, spam messaging and calling from different numbers to bypass blocking. Perpetrators often underplay and discount blocking as survivors asserting a boundary, and in some cases the intensity of monitoring and spamming increases manifold after the perpetrator is blocked. In response to abusive spam calls, P08, a transwoman who did sex work, chose

58 Meta. (2023, 18 January). Bringing local context to our global standards. *Transparency Center*. https://transparency.meta.com/en-gb/policies/improving/bringing-local-context/

59 Bansal, V., Leasure, E., Roth, C., Rezwan, M., Iyer, M., Pal, P., & Hinson, L. (2023). Help-seeking behaviours of those experiencing technology-facilitated GBV in Asia: implications for policy and programming. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence, 7*(2), 352-363. https://doi.org/10.1332/239868021X16697232129517

60 McLean, N., & Cicero, T. (2023). Op. cit.

61 Torek, B. (2025, 15 January). Meta's New Policies: How They Endanger LGBTQ+ Communities and Our Tips for Staying Safe Online. *Human Rights Campaign*. https://www.hrc.org/news/metas-new-policies-how-they-endanger-lgbtq-communities-and-our-tips-for-staying-safe-online

to switch off her phone and use it only during specific hours, since completely disconnecting could affect her livelihood. Thus, platforms need to take into account the ineffectiveness and risks of expecting survivors to "block" perpetrators.

Many participants said that they wanted to deactivate their Facebook accounts, but didn't know how they could do that, pointing to the need for strengthening community knowledge and capacities on navigating privacy and TFGBV. While a few participants engaged with transphobic people online, many others also tried to lie low, attempting to reassess their online politics and renegotiate boundaries or isolate in response to threats to safety, resulting in limited digital participation to minimise "unwanted attention". Research shows TNBGD people often navigate TFGBV by blocking, reporting, avoiding certain platforms and online spaces, engaging with transphobes and using closed groups.[62]

Police reporting and legal redressal

Participants shared their mistrust of the police and their reluctance of going to them for support or redressal, anticipating inaction, stigma or a further escalation of violence from the perpetrators. P14 and P12 shared that they filed complaints with the cyber police and never received a response, further cementing their skepticism. P08 shared that when she called the police, they told her, "Don't come to the station – people will see, and it will harm our reputation," pointing to the systemic transnegativity and stigma around sex work within the police. In a few instances, knowing people within government and police systems has helped expedite action. In Kerala, P14 shared that despite networked transnegative threats, a pride event was organised successfully with the support of local ministers and the police. On the other hand, P12 shared that the complete collapse of law and order in Manipur has erased all possibility of legal or police redressal, leaving them in a perpetual state of fear and injustice.[63]

> But these institutions – they just don't function here. I know I might still get punched if I wear a wig, but at least give me the right to file a complaint. Even that's taken away. I know if I go to the police station, the neighbour I'm complaining about has more ammunition than the police. So if law and order was in place, that alone would bring some relief. But the whole mechanism has just been erased.

Thus, in the context of a prolonged political conflict, governmental neglect and excessive militarisation, violence and fear are a part of everyday life.

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62 McLean, N., & Cicero, T. (2023). Op. cit.; Evelyn, S. et al. (2022). Op. cit.
63 Human Rights Watch. (2025, 27 March). India: Ethnic Clashes Restart in Manipur. https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/27/india-ethnic-clashes-restart-manipur

Many participants reached out to their networks, online and offline, for pro bono legal advice to limit ongoing harm or pursue justice. While legal advice was ineffective in Manipur, in other states, participants shared that the advice allowed them to understand their options, providing support and, according to P03, "a greater sense of safety." While in most cases TNBGD persons decided not to pursue legal action due to direct and indirect costs, fear of antagonising the perpetrators and a limited belief in favourable outcomes, others like P01 filed and won the case against his university for misusing his online writings and discriminating against him as a trans student with mental health problems. The court directed his university and other central universities to institutionalise "a mental health policy and non-discrimination policy for trans students." While the government in India is putting into place initiatives like cybercrime reporting platforms and helplines, transgender people face challenges due to stigma within enforcement systems, limited capital and a lack of awareness.[64] Similarly, the IT Act in India has a limited understanding of doxxing, transphobia and networked harassment. Further, trans sex workers remain extremely marginalised within existing frameworks.

Sources of support

Participants drew on a blend of resources while navigating TFGBV. Close friends, community networks and family members were, in some cases, vital sources of support, acknowledging that violence had taken place, affirming that the violence was not the survivor's fault, underlining the importance of the survivor's political voice in the case of hate speech and brainstorming strategies to respond and recover. In a few cases, TNBGD individuals who were not out to their families avoided disclosing their experiences of TFGBV to avoid worrying their parents and to avoid potential scrutiny and the curtailing of freedoms, especially in the case of those assigned female at birth. Research shows that survivors in Asia often seek social support but patriarchal, gendered social norms and stigma around violence discourage many women and girls from seeking support.[65] In cases where TFGBV occurred in the ambit of the workplace, victim-blaming and a lack of awareness about non-binary identities caused added emotional pressure on survivors who now had to sensitise their colleagues about the validity of their experiences.

Finally, in the context of cancelling or misrepresentation, people often lost the support of friends and community members, leading to isolation, depression, lack of confidence and substance use.[66] P01 said, "I navigate these complexities alone, no peer support, which makes experiencing violence and seeking support

64 NORC at the University of Chicago and the International Center for Research on Women. (2022). Op. cit.
65 Bansal, V. et al. (2023). Op. cit.
66 Ramsey-Soroghaye, B., Onalu, C., & Anyaegbu, P. (2023). Perceived Impact of Cancel Culture and the Mental Health Challenges Associated With the Aftermath: A Discourse for Social Workers in Nigeria. *Journal of Social Service Research, 49*(5), 595-606. https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2023.2254804

even more challenging." This can take a huge toll on people's psychosocial wellbeing. Participants engaged therapists, peer support groups, online community spaces and platforms to work through their mental health needs. In the context of Manipur, where forms of redressal are not currently functioning, peer support communities and being on conference calls with people to talk or gossip were very helpful. Others have found relief in travelling, indulging in hobbies and building a queer-affirmative spiritual practice. One participant also talked about using AI to think through the pros and cons of a situation. Finally, community-based organisations (CBOs) and NGOs have provided financial, legal and emotional support to many participants. P08 said, "They [name of NGO] helped me a lot [...] I would go there for lunch, and they would give me money. They would invite me to meetings, and afterward, they'd give me 200 rupees. That helped with survival."

Research also shows that the emergence of funders and NGOs like Point of View and the Centre for Internet and Society in India (CIS) has led to focused efforts in combating TFGBV.[67] Initiatives like TechSakhi are an incredible resource that more TNBGD persons should be directed towards. Similarly, CIS takes an intersectional approach to data systems and digital spaces from a wide range of perspectives, including those of transgender persons.

Community-based innovations to fight TFGBV

Many participants developed tools to identify intersectional and regional forms of TFGBV. P09 co-developed multiple online tools to tackle harassment, misinformation and identify the nuances of online gender-based violence in the South Asian context. Similarly, one participant built Shhor as part of their resistance. Shhor is:

> An AI tool that identifies online hate speech against marginalised people. It's trained to understand hate targeting eight forms of identity-based hate speech – queerphobia, communal violence, activism, gendered violence, sexism, racism, disability, and general violence. It works in code-mixed languages, like how we speak Hindi but type in English.

In response to the violence they have experienced, participants are also trying to develop resources to navigate safety and kink in online spaces and have created online spaces for developing intersectional, community-driven solutions.

Aindriya shared that sustaining funding for Adivasi and trans-led work on TFGBV has been a challenge as an independent programmer due to savarna tokenism, alienation and rainbow capitalism. They also highlighted the urgent need for

67 NORC at the University of Chicago and the International Center for Research on Women. (2022). Op. cit.

independent artists and activists from marginalised communities to unionise to understand pay scales and conduct in different organisations, and for artists to have more bargaining power and the ability to make more informed decisions with respect to their labour.

Thus, collective forms of resistance through innovation and coalition building allow for queer-feminist imaginations of technology and the future. Research shows that trans people envision trans technologies as technologies for changing bodies, altering gender expressions or appearances, enhancing safety and finding resources.[68] Many authors argue that trans technologies must be built by and for trans people, embracing and making space for the fluidity of gender expression online as well as offline.[69] Further, while technologies maintained by individuals and small teams are bound to face challenges to sustainability, authors advocate cooperative ownership and governance models, instead of capitalist or non-profit models. In the same vein, they recommend diversifying funding streams, such as donations, grants and sliding-scale memberships.[70]

Recommendations

Participants were asked if they had any recommendations or advice for others who have experienced or are currently experiencing tech-facilitated violence, as well as if they had any suggestions for addressing gaps in responses to TFGBV in terms of systemic changes, policy recommendations, community-based interventions, legal redressal, additional research or platform-based solutions.

How survivors can navigate TFGBV

Participants shared recommendations for fellow trans, non-binary and gender-diverse people who were navigating violence, drawing from what worked for them during their own experiences (Table 2). Their suggestions broadly fell into four categories: steps survivors could take to secure themselves against threats, ways survivors could engage with or disengage from perpetrators, community-based support that might help and professional support they could access.

68 Haimson, O. L., Gorrell, D., Starks, D. L., & Weinger, Z. (2020). Designing Trans Technology: Defining Challenges and Envisioning Community-Centered Solutions. *Proceedings of the 2020 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1145/3313831.3376669

69 Haimson, O. L., Dame-Griff, A., Capello, E., & Richter, Z. (2021). Tumblr was a trans technology: the meaning, importance, history, and future of trans technologies. *Feminist Media Studies, 21*(3), 345-361. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1678505

70 Ibid.

Table 2
Recommendations for survivors of TFGBV

	Category	Suggestions
1.	How to manage risks and threats online	• Educate yourself about potential threats to safety. • Choose the platforms you are on based on safety and protections in place. • Enable two-factor authentication, and have strong passwords. • Verify your followers. • Be mindful about what content you consume and how it affects your identity and self-perception. • Be selective about the content and information you put out online – can it be taken out of context or used against you? • Delete identifying information and your social media content if the threat is too high. • Put your survival first, over activism – live to tell your story. • Take a break from tech and social media if needed, but be wary of missing out on community and connections.
2.	How to respond to perpetrators of violence	• Don't downplay the violence you experience. • Try to understand the intent behind it – are they trolling you or fearful/confused about your perspectives? • Strategise about who to engage and confront, versus who to ignore and block. • Use subtlety, nuance, humour and even being unapproachable to defuse situations. • Have a direct conversation with perpetrators you know personally, and ask questions to shift the power dynamic. • Learn how to have strong boundaries when navigating online interactions. • Recognise that some people may never change, and block them if your boundaries are crossed.

3.	How to lean on your community and peers for support	• Have a support system in place before being active online – know who your safety net is. • Have understanding family and/or friends who you can vent to. • Reach out to community WhatsApp groups for emotional support as well as to help block and report perpetrators. • Contact NGOs or prominent figures in the community for structural support. • Follow other TNBGD people who are navigating similar experiences. • Create crowdfunding campaigns in case you need financial support.
4.	Which professional services and resources can help	• Use the services of cybersecurity experts. • Access trans-affirming therapy and mental health support services. • Seek out LGBTQIA+ affirming legal advisors who understand trans rights. • Connect with watchdog organisations for guidance on legal protections. • Be aware of existing databases and resources for TNBGD people.

Need for improvement

Participants emphasised the need for community spaces, workplaces, legal systems, educational institutions, social media platforms and law enforcement to actively engage in creating safe environments and implementing meaningful policy changes (Table 3). For instance, P02 said:

> So I think one of the recommendations would be to legally enforce these spaces to be accountable for the behaviour there, [...] specifically apps created for marginalised spaces to be accountable for those spaces.

Participants highlighted the importance of building supportive networks, fostering accountability and ensuring that trans narratives are heard and validated. One participant also talked about the critical role of resources within one's communities. Their insights reflect a strong call for systemic transformation in order to effectively tackle TFGBV.

Table 3
Pathways for systemic transformation

	Stakeholder	What they can/should do
1.	Community leaders and CBOs	• Build community spaces of support and watchdog spaces. • Share information about threats and scams. • Share information about NGOs and organisations who intervene during violence. • Have private queer spaces and community spaces that cater to closeted individuals. • Have trustworthy admins moderating these groups with clear ground rules. • Enforce ground rules and remove community members who repeatedly violate them. • Ensure confidentiality during the redressal of violations. • Ensure intersectional representation in community leadership. • For those with privilege, influence and resources, support those without power or those who are closeted. • Ensure accountability for people in leadership roles and those serving as community representatives.
2.	Apps, platforms and technology companies	• Be more responsive to violence against TNBGD persons through more enhanced reporting mechanisms. • Implement their own guidelines and policies against doxxing and other harmful behaviour, with clear repercussions. • Screen out fake profiles and IDs during account setup. • Integrate hate speech detection bots into platforms and ensure more hate speech moderation. • Support community-led moderation mechanisms. • Allow for customised filtering of content. • Ensure that content that is reported, especially transphobic content, does not show up again. • Be transparent about how mass reporting and banning users works, since these mechanisms could also be used against TNBGD people.

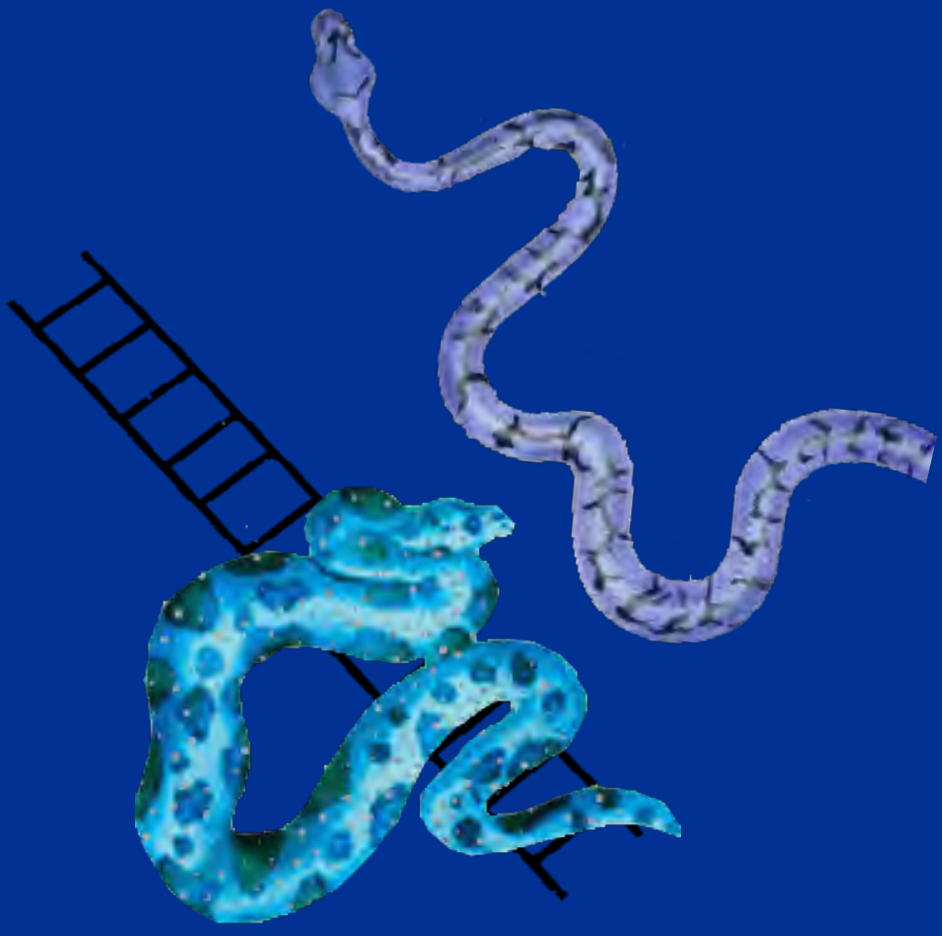
3.	Government and law enforcement agencies	• Sensitise the police force and law enforcement agencies to handle and respond to complaints from TNBGD communities in a timely manner. • Work with TNBGD communities to address the fear and mistrust of both the police and reporting mechanisms. • Legally enforce accountability for apps and platforms in relation to violent behaviour. • Have a national registry, 24/7 helpline or verified platform to assist those dealing with online harassment and violence. • Establish clear legal frameworks that recognise and address TFGBV, including penalties for doxxing and harassment. • Have policies that facilitate rapid responses since incidents can escalate within hours.
4.	Educational institutions and research organisations	• Educational institutions to incorporate media and ethics training, particularly in relation to navigating online spaces in a safe and respectful manner. • Promote digital literacy among TNBGD persons, especially about their rights and laws related to TFGBV to help them navigate legal systems effectively. • Build a centralised database with reliable resources on where to seek help or lodge a complaint. • Develop research on TNBGD persons' experiences with technology to influence institutional change.

5.	Other stakeholders	• Sensitise mental health professionals, staff in educational institutes, employees at workplaces and other allies and stakeholders to create awareness about marginalisation on the basis of gender identity and expression. • Implement workplace policies to support employees facing threats and doxxing through work, and to support grievance redressal mechanisms. • Train service providers such as cab drivers and delivery executives on apps in more professional behaviour. • Conduct background checks on cab and delivery service providers before they are given access to users' addresses and contact details through apps.

Indian researchers have reiterated as well that sensitisation and awareness generation among these stakeholders is key to facilitating help-seeking behaviours among TNBGD survivors of TFGBV.[71]

71 Rajkumar, M., & Sen, S. (2023). *The Judiciary's Tryst with Online Gender-Based Violence: An Empirical Analysis of Indian Cases and Prevalent Judicial Attitudes*. IT for Change. https://itforchange.net/sites/default/files/2190/The%20Judiciary's%20Tryst%20with%20OGBV_0.pdf; Gurumurthy, A., Vasudevan, A., & Chami, N. (2019). Op. cit.

Learnings, limitations and implications



This study sought to document TNBGD experiences of technology and the internet in the Indian context. We were particularly curious about the role of intersectionality in shaping forms of violence and access to support for TNBGD persons. Thematic analysis of 14 in-depth interviews showed us that participants maintain a self-conscious, socially situated and dynamic balance between using technologies for sustenance, connection, leisure and growth while also responding to the exhaustion, harm and abuse they can bring.

While forms of TFGBV were wide ranging, the study highlighted how state surveillance and internet bans in regions with prolonged ethnic conflict and civil unrest can target queer-trans activists. In addition, people in such regions can be the target of coordinated trolling campaigns from right-wing groups, with survivors receiving death threats and queer-negativity with no access to safety or redressal mechanisms due to the complete breakdown of law and order. Similarly, politically vocal Muslim queer-trans people experienced Islamophobic hate speech from right-wing trolls while facing stigma for being Muslim within queer spaces and an alienation of their queerness within socio-religious spaces. For those closeted within conservative families, the fear of being doxxed can also isolate them from seeking support or redressal. Casteist slurs and dog whistles are often used to suppress the voices of Dalit and Adivasi non-binary artivists online, particularly associating disgust and untouchability with their bodies. Apart from these overt forms of violence, independent artists from marginalised caste groups are also mistreated, threatened, underpaid and not given credit for their work within the nexus of savarna organisations.

We also learned that institutions can misuse personal information to scapegoat transmasculine persons with mental illnesses for raising their voice against institutional harms. Many transmen, transwomen and several non-binary persons have experienced intimate partner violence, dating violence or sexual harassment online. This has been particularly threatening and diabolically persistent for transwomen who engage in sex work and non-binary persons, given the rigid gender norms and entrenched patriarchal structures in India. Queernegativity and transnegativity are increasingly organised and rampant across platforms, with right-wing groups threatening community events and collectivisation. Within communities as well, transmen and non-binary people face erasure. Moreover, the cancelling of community members through a social media court of justice has massive pitfalls that punitively harm transpeople by withdrawing aid and support and excluding them from community spaces. Finally, digital literacy and community and social support shaped how much control participants felt they had over their online presence in the face of TFGBV.

This study centred the agency, ingenuity and resistance of TNBGD persons responding to TFGBV and navigating the digital everyday. Its findings reveal systemic gaps and have implications for platforms, as well as for legal and police

intervention. Participants underscore the role of mental health and peer support programmes, social support and self-care practices in mitigating tech-facilitated harms. Moreover, funding community-led intersectional innovations and ground-level civil society initiatives can help build safety nets for the community.

While the sample in the study is small, this exploratory study has documented the resilience and collective wisdom and power of TNBGD persons in India. The current sample comprised predominantly of young TNBGD persons in metropolitan or capital cities. Despite this, our participants ranged in how familiar they were with tech and digital literacy, pointing to the need to work with the community to strengthen these capacities. Our study has brought to light the ramifications of cancel culture, intracommunity violence and the vulnerability of TNBGD people on apps like LinkedIn, GPay and Grindr. This study also focuses on the experiences of non-binary Indians, who are relatively understudied in the literature, and sheds light on the innovations and challenges in developing trans technologies in India. Future studies can focus on understanding the experiences of TNBGD adolescents and people from the hijra community in India. Moreover, advocacy and awareness building initiatives should leverage the growing focus on cybercrimes, the IT Act of 2000 and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2019, bringing TNBGD issues to the centre of the discussion with the community as well as in politico-legal spheres.

The TransNET project: The role of intersectionality in shaping experiences of technology-facilitated gender-based violence among transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse persons in India

Sangath

feminist internet research network

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