

Digital Safety for Women in Bangladesh: Challenges, Policies, and Solutions

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SIMEC Bulletin
2025, Vol. 2(2), 8-13
DOI:10.71391/sbv2i2_0002
ISSN: 3006-211X (online);
3006-2101 (print)



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SIMEC
Bulletin

How to cite: Ahmed, A., Hossien, M. E., (2025). Digital Safety for Women in Bangladesh: Challenges, Policies, and Solutions. *SIMEC Bulletin*, 2(2), 8-13 https://doi.org/10.71391/sbv2i2_0002

Abstract

Digital technology has opened up new opportunities, particularly for women, but it has also created significant challenges. In Bangladesh, women face risks such as harassment, exploitation, and cyber violence in the digital world through social media and other digital platforms. This article explores the challenges women encounter in both urban and rural settings, focusing on the sensitive vulnerability to Technology-Facilitated Violence Against Women (TF-VAW). Understanding these challenges is essential for addressing the barriers women face in navigating the digital world safely. This article also proposes context-specific solutions to enhance the digital safety of women in Bangladesh by reviewing existing strategies and identifying obstacles. Suggestions include building digital literacy, establishing support networks, and implementing secure online reporting mechanisms.

Keywords: *Digital Safety, Cyber Security Ordinance, Online Harassment, Rural Women Empowerment, Digital Literacy*

Introduction

Digital technology plays a significant role in shaping societies and rapidly changing the world, particularly at the dawn of the digital revolution. The use of digital platforms in all spheres of life, including social, professional, financial and educational, opened immense opportunities for all. But all these improvements have also brought risks and threats, particularly to women, who are over-proportionately exposed to digital vulnerability through harassment, exploitation and cyber violence. A latest study found that 78.7% of women experienced Technology-Facilitated Violence Against Women (TF-VAW) (“Towards Safer Digital...,” 2025). As digital spaces have become central to

communication, work, and personal life, the protection of women in such spaces is paramount. This paper aims to investigate the digital safety issues faced by Bangladeshi women in both urban and rural contexts. It will also explore the strategies for making the digital world safer, more equitable and accessible for them.

According to UN Women, a significant percentage of women in the world have experienced TF-VAW of some kind “(Accelerating Efforts to..., n.d.)”. It consists of abuse by comments, threats of violence, non-consensual distribution of sexually explicit photos, and sexual harassment. There is also a difference between the digital experiences of urban and rural women. According to Kasera et al.

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(2025), urban women are often targeted by online harassment, including trolling, doxxing, and the forced dissemination of intimate content, whereas rural women, with less social media engagement, face risks of cyber exploitation, such as blackmail and social exclusion from local men (Kasera et al., 2025).

Making the digital spaces safer and equitable is direly needed in order to leverage the opportunities offered by the advancements in digital technology. Understanding the unique safety challenges faced by urban and rural women while navigating the digital world is the first step towards safer and equitable digital spaces.

Understanding Digital Safety Challenges for Women

Digital technology has modified the nature of women's interactions with society in urban areas, resulting in new opportunities to acquire education, gain employment, and establish social contacts. However, the advances in digital spaces have been accompanied by a rise in digital safety threats, which are mostly present in disproportional levels among women. A survey conducted by ActionAid Bangladesh in 2022 found that 63.51% of women in Bangladesh have been harassed online, and a large share of those women are in urban areas. The most common type of harassment occurs to urban women on social media sites such as Facebook (47.60%) and Messenger (35.37%), where they experience intense manifestations of this behavior, such as disgusting sexual remarks (80.35%), transmission of explicit photos (53.28%), and sexual assault threats (11.79%). Women, particularly those participating in social causes or the public domain activists, become key victims of coordinated harassment campaigns facilitated through social media, which are done to discredit and silence their voices. Online harassment is also emotionally painful in urban settings where victims experience psychological trauma (65.07%) and anxiety (42.79%), greatly impacting their confidence and desire to take part in a debate ("63.51% women..." 2022).

In urban areas, women mostly use smartphones and the internet. South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM) researched that the percentage of computer use and internet use is higher among urban women (Islam, 2024). In addition, urban women on social media are regular targets of offenders who take advantage of the anonymity of the internet. Online spaces, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, have turned into grounds of abuse where women are being abused with insults, body shaming, and threats of violence. Online trolls also harassed activists advancing women's rights by posting derogatory remarks and threats to shut them up. Digital abuse usually has practical effects or results, such as fear of physical assault and emotional suffering (UNFPA, 2021). The harassment faced by urban women, particularly those involved in activism or publicity have the most to lose due to organized campaigns that can jeopardize their credibility and dismiss their initiatives. Taking place within the digital spaces that disrupt or question societal norms, Blog-based feminist spaces or online political forums leave women prone to extreme harassment. Such harassment may have a wide variety of forms, starting with incriminating messages and ending with explicitly sexual material directly sent to their profiles. Social media, which at its inception was a platform to connect, has now turned into an arena where women, especially those championing social change, are constantly under attack. Besides the harassment, urban women are also exposed to identity theft and data privacy abuses. As personal information becomes more and more digital, sensitive data, including pictures, addresses, and financial information, becomes subject to compromise or loss. This information can be made available by way of hacking, phishing, or by setting up the security parameters of the social media accounts to be weak. Such risks may lead to both economic loss and physical injuries, particularly when personal information is transferred without approval. Cyber violence and online harassment have also contributed to a growing dependency among women on their male relatives for the use of digital technologies and

services (Islam, 2024). This dependence on digital inclusion exacerbated the problem of low access to technology, especially in rural communities where access to technology is already limited. In these circumstances, women who depend on male relatives for access to digital spaces face an additional layer of vulnerability, as their lack of independent engagement with the digital world restricts their ability to fully participate in the opportunities it provides.

The digital divide, characterized by the lack of access to technology, particularly mobile phones and the internet, is the most pertinent challenge to rural women's inclusion in the digital world. Within the rural context, mobile phones have become a form of empowerment, as they enable people to gain access to economic opportunities, social networks, and information (Rahman et al., 2023). A study conducted with 99 rural women revealed that the use and information and communication technology (ICT), particularly mobile phones, has contributed to rural women feeling independent and facilitated better access to health and education services (Islam & Slack, 2016). However, a 2024 report of the Global System for Mobile Communications Association (GSMA) found that the gender gap in mobile phone ownership in Bangladesh is 20%, with uneducated, rural and disadvantaged women lagging far behind ("Report: Bangladesh Tops...", 2024). The report also suggested that female smartphone ownership is almost half of male smartphone ownership. When women are lagging behind in accessing digital devices and making their footprint in digital spaces, they face numerous challenges and cyber violence.

Women in rural areas, become more vulnerable compared to their urban counterparts, and consequently form one of the targeted groups. The digital divide in rural areas has resulted in most of the females being illiterate or ignorant of the dangers of online environments ("How Can We...", 2025). This absence of accessibility to technology extends to subjecting the women in the countryside to exploitation and cyber violence. Rural women especially face online bullying,

blackmailing, intimidation, and being left out of the social space. The digital divide in rural societies not only prevents many women from acquiring the necessary skills to navigate the internet safely but also leaves them exposed to online risks with minimal support. Women experience emotional abuse, exploitation, and threats by their abusers as they exploit the unawareness of online safety ("63.51% women...", 2022). In rural Bangladesh, the digital landscape for women is marked by limited access to technology, conservative socio-cultural norms, and a lack of infrastructure to combat cybercrimes.

Digital Safety of Women: Policies and Practices

The Information and Communication Technology Act, 2006 was enacted in 2006 to provide a legal framework for the promotion and regulation of information and communication technologies in Bangladesh, including e-commerce, e-filing, and cybersecurity. It also addresses cybercrimes and establishes cyber tribunals to adjudicate related cases. The Act was once amended in 2013. In 2018, the Digital Security Act, 2018 (DSA 2018) was enacted to strengthen cybercrime enforcement and address emerging threats in the digital space. However, the DSA 2018 was criticized heavily for its vague wording and its misuse in suppressing freedom of expression (Sabera, 2021; TBS Report, 2023). The Cyber Security Act, 2023 (CSA 2023) was introduced to replace the DSA 2018, but retained some of the problematic provisions of the DSA 2018, and met with the same criticisms (Ehsan & Saquib, 2024). But neither the DSA 2018 nor the CSA 2023 could provide adequate legal provisions to ensure the digital safety of women (ActionAID Bangladesh, 2025). In 2025, the Interim Government of Bangladesh repealed the CSA 2023 and gazetted the Cyber Security Ordinance, 2025. This Ordinance defined terms such as sexual harassment, revenge porn, sextortion, and child sexual abuse, which was absent from the previous acts. In Section 25, Subsection 1, the Ordinance states:

"If any person, through a website or any other

digital or electronic means, intentionally or knowingly engages in blackmailing, sexual harassment, revenge porn, or disseminates, possesses, creates, stores, or threatens to disseminate any information, video footage, audio-visual content, still images, graphics, or any other material—whether recorded, edited, artificially generated or modified using artificial intelligence, and made viewable—related to child sexual abuse material or sextortion, with the intention of causing harm, intimidation, or fear to another person, then such actions shall constitute a criminal offense” (Cyber Security Ordinance, 2025; p.4960).

The Ordinance further enhances the penalty for this offense if it is committed against a woman or a child under the age of 18. Although Bangladesh has a long way to go in terms of creating proper legal provisions to ensure the highest digital safety for women, public-policy scholars have praised the inclusion of this provision as an unequivocal step forward (Abbas, 2025).

In 2020, the Bangladesh Police established a service named Police Cyber Support for Women (PCSW). Till February 28, 2025, a total of 43834 complaints were registered through PCSW. But the main concern remains that the majority of the women who face issues in the digital space choose not to formally file cases because of the social repercussions and unfriendly legal environments (ActionAID Bangladesh, 2025). The situation is graver in rural contexts, as women and girls who face online harassment never disclose their experience to anyone, and many choose to limit their use of the internet.

Contextual Strategies and Policy Approaches

In light of the recent developments in policy and the existing challenges in the digital safety of urban and rural women in Bangladesh, contextually tailored strategies and combined efforts of the government, NGOs, private sector, and civil society organizations are required.

Urban Strategies: Maximizing Access and Accountability

□ Urban police forces and city corporations should be trained and equipped to act in accordance with the Cyber Security Ordinance, 2025, as the ordinance includes new terms and definitions regarding online safety. This includes strengthening units such as the PCSW and cyber cells, and publicizing the legal consequences of online harassment through citywide awareness campaigns.

□ Many of the urban women and people in general still lack the knowledge and basic practices of cyber hygiene. Cyber hygiene refers to the practices and procedures that individuals and organizations use to safeguard the security and health of their digital devices, data, network and systems (“What Is Cyber..,” n.d.). A solution to this problem could be to develop online safety modules (covering topics such as two-factor authentication, privacy settings and phishing risks) and integrate them into school, college and university curricula. Digital skills-based organizations such as Women In Digital, Coderstrust can collaborate with the government in developing the modules.

□ At the core of the online harassment and violence against women remains the explicit online behaviors of the men and sometimes even women perpetrators. This issue cannot be solved only with legal bindings and women safety practices. Promoting respectful digital behavior among men and boys in urban areas by integrating digital ethics and online consent into school, college, and university ICT curricula is essential. Gender sensitive digital conduct trainings should also be normalized in public and private workplaces.

□ There are a few digital apps to combat violence against women, such as “Bachao”, a platform launched in 2021, connects the victim to the nearby neighborhood people who can help (Khan, 2021). These apps need to be upgraded to allow anonymous reporting, with optional personal details submitted later if the victim chooses to pursue legal proceedings. Moreover, the city service centers and ward offices should host “Digital Safety Help Desks” to assist women in filing complaints and accessing services.

Rural Strategies: Addressing Accessibility and Awareness

□ The main challenge in digital safety for rural women remains in breaking the social stigma and traditional norms that restrain women from even using the internet and accessing digital devices. Utilizing local storytelling tools to disseminate the significance of women in digital fields and the digital rights of women should be the first priority. Local primary and secondary schools, bazars, and religious institutions can play a major role in this.

□ With the help of NGOs and civil society organizations, community dialogue sessions led by trained male facilitators should be arranged regularly to challenge harmful norms around digital behavior. The local leaders, such as imams, teachers, and union representatives should be engaged to speak out against online harassment and promote respectful use of digital tools in public platforms.

□ Digital literacy should be an integral part of education from the very start, and only adding some general texts in the textbooks has proven unsuccessful so far. Schools, with support from the local and international NGOs can establish Cyber Clubs where students can learn through real-life case studies, roleplay, and peer engagement about safe online behavior. Mobile digital classrooms can be arranged for girls and women who have left the school system, where they can learn about cyberbullying, identity theft, mobile scams, and safe communication practices.

□ Introducing **USSD-based systems** or sealed drop boxes at union digital centers and local police stations would allow rural women to report harassment without needing direct contact with authorities, which is essential in socially conservative areas. In addition, a secure online campaign system could be implemented by government security agencies, allowing women to report harassment anonymously through an encrypted online system and ensuring user privacy.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of harassment and violence

against women in digital spaces is something that should gain more focus and attention worldwide. In a developing country like Bangladesh, which is currently in a transitional period politically and economically, both online and offline safety of women is paramount. The unique needs of urban and rural women of Bangladesh in terms of digital education and safety should be researched deeply to provide context-specific solutions to their digital safety issues. Once this safety is ensured, all women in Bangladesh can explore the potential of the digital space fearlessly and contribute more to the development of the country.

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