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Changing Trends in Online Abuse and Trafficking of Women and Children

A Study in Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and West Bengal

Space2Grow and CyberPeace Foundation | October 2022

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Executive Summary

This study is the result of a collaborative effort by Space2Grow (S2G) and CyberPeace Foundation (CPF). As organisations working in the area of digital safety, both felt that the time was ripe for an exploration into experiences of women and children with cybercrimes, especially in rural India. This is increasingly significant in the post-pandemic phase that is marked by increased exposure to the internet, penetrating different aspects of one's life, without a concurring capacity building towards safe practices in online actions and interactions.

The study proposed to explore trends in online abuse and trafficking of women and children and examine their vulnerability to abuse in rural and semi-urban communities in India. A total of eight districts were chosen from the states of Jharkhand (Deoghar and Khunti), Madhya Pradesh (Bhopal and Raisen), Rajasthan (Jaipur and Udaipur) and West Bengal (Jalpaiguri and South 24 Parganas) for the field study. Women and children in the age range of 13 to 35 years were interviewed. The purpose of choosing these locations is the dearth of studies on online experiences of women and children in rural and semi-urban areas of the country. A total of 749 women and children were interviewed.

This report will be relevant and beneficial for all stakeholders who work with women and children- particularly those working towards their protection and development. Needless to say, this will be helpful for those working in the area of cyber crimes in India- government, civil society, industry and technology companies. Researchers, policy makers and students can gain perspective on the issue and prevalence of cyber crimes in rural areas. This report would also be of interest to mental health professionals who work with women and children.

Key Findings of the Study

➔ While cyber abuse and fraud are extremely common among women and children in the study areas, awareness on prevention, reporting and redressal is abysmally low.
➔ Only a minuscule number of study participants who have been subjected to fraud or abuse online have placed an official complaint about or reported the matter to relevant authorities.

➔ Many study participants shared that they often avoided taking any action in response to fraud or abuse simply because they did not know if and what options were available to them.

➔ A vast majority of study respondents chose to confide in their friends, rather than a close family member like a spouse or parents, when they were faced with some uncomfortable situation online.

➔ The findings indicated a certain level of tolerance to cyber abuse in that participants would not consider reporting an incident unless it was grave or involved financial fraud.

➔ While nearly 89% of study participants own a mobile phone, the study found that women and children additionally use devices that belong to their parents, spouses, or even to their workplace/school/college. It is clear that cyber abuse is agnostic to ownership of devices as it can and does happen via any device and medium.

➔ Many study participants expressed that they never reported cybercrimes/fraud as they did not believe it would lead to any substantial result. They seemed to suggest that justice can never be meted out in cases of cyber crime.

➔ Teachers in general are not aware of or involved in any way with their students' online activities.

▤ Recommendations

The key recommendations of the study are given below. The findings pointed to the following as the need of the hour with respect to online safety of women and children:

☐ Awareness and capacity building on the topic for all stakeholders involved
☐ To encourage, promote and normalise conversations and discussions on cyber abuse
☐ Peer-group trainings and support groups in institutions and community
☐ Ensure reporting of cyber crimes
☐ Education of caregivers, parents/guardians and teachers
☐ Efficient and convenient reporting mechanisms
☐ Transparent and quick redressal processes
☐ Counselling services for victims of cyber abuse
☐ Collaboration of all stakeholders to address rising cyber crimes
☐ Rural-area specific prevention strategy to tackle abuse
☐ To popularise helplines numbers

▶ The Way Forward

This study has shown that cyber abuse and fraud are common among women and children in the districts under study. The recommendations made at the end of the study need to be addressed as a priority by all concerned stakeholders in order to ensure safe online experiences of women and children.

While this project adopted exploratory and descriptive research designs, the findings point to the need for large-scale studies on the topic that can inform interventions at scale. Future studies can focus on those who began using the internet in the aftermath of the pandemic, to understand new issues, challenges and trends with respect to online abuse in India. A study of those who have been using the internet for longer periods could focus on changes in their internet usage and experience over time.