

Cyber Safety through a Gender Lens©



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Contact details:

Red Dot Foundation - info@reddotfoundation.org

Cyber Saathi - contact@cybersaathi.org

Why is it important?



INTRODUCTION

Digital platforms were gaining traction and relevance even before the Corona Virus (“COVID-19”) pandemic but with the global crisis wreaking havoc on well-established ways of life, digital platforms have become the preferred and safe havens for communication. Real and virtual worlds have effectively merged and this new normal brings with it the increasing threats of cybercrimes. A new study by a group of researchers, including WMG, University of Warwick, among others concludes that *“86 per cent [of cybercrimes] involved phishing and/or smishing; 65 percent involved malware; 34 percent involved financial fraud; 15 percent involved extortion; 13 per cent involved in pharming; 5 percent involved in hacking; 5 percent involved denial of service”* (Awasthi, 2021). Moreover, according to the cyber cell of the Mumbai city police, *“when the first six months of 2021 and 2020 each are considered (done for parity as 2021 is ongoing) and then compared with the corresponding period of the pre-Covid years 2019 and 2018, one sees a 33% rise in cybercrime in Mumbai”* (The Times of India, 2021a).

Cybercrime is an umbrella term that includes all illegal activities committed through the use of digital technology, with the motive to damage and cause harm to the physical, psychological and financial well-being of an individual or group. Although the Indian legislation does not define cybercrime, it can be described *“as a category of offences committed using computers or computing devices as a source or weapon”* (Nappinai, 2017).

ANALYSING CYBERCRIMES THROUGH A GENDER LENS

While studying the trends of cybercrimes, it is also imperative to analyse them through a gender lens. This is because women, children and gender minorities bear the brunt of these crimes. According to the data released by the National Crime Record Bureau (“**NCRB**”) in 2019, cybercrimes against women have increased at an alarming rate in the past couple of years, and this was before the onset of the pandemic. While the NCRB recorded 600 incidents of cybercrimes against women in the year 2017, in 2018 they witnessed 1244 reports, which increased to 1621 in the year 2019 (NCRB, 2019). The NCRB report may not reflect reality. In a recent pan-India survey conducted by Bumble India, 83 per cent of women have reported that they have been victims of online harassment in some form, and 1 in 3 have reported that they experience it every week.

This has worsened during the pandemic as 70 per cent of women believe that cyber-bullying has increased during the lockdown. Over half of the women respondents, that is, 59 percent of them confessed to feeling unsafe (Bumble India, 2021).

In the case of children too, the NCRB recorded 170 cases, which mostly included reports involving publishing or transmitting material depicting children in sexually explicit acts (NCRB, 2019). Furthermore, according to a report published by the Indian Child Protection Fund (ICPF), the consumption of child pornography has increased at a disturbing rate, that is, by 95 per cent in the lockdown itself (Gabhud, 2021). In this report, the ICPF cites data from one of the biggest pornographic websites ‘Pornhub’ and highlights a spike in search for keywords like “sexy child”, “teen sex videos” and “child porn” (Gabhud, 2021). Statistics provided by ICPF reveal that a whopping 90 per cent of users who consume child sexual abuse material are males (ICPF, 2020). This is important to note because according to a report released by Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) in 2019, women internet users are less than half, which is in contrast to a staggering 258 million male users (IAMAI, 2019). What is more, the Childline India helpline received a staggering 92,000 SOS calls seeking protection from violence in a matter of 11 days, which highlights the abuse against children in this lockdown (The Hindu, 2020).

UNIQUE CHALLENGES FACED BY PARENTS, TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Parents and teachers alike as young people rely on digital platforms for their online classes, research and for that matter communications. Disruptions during a class or even in the midst of an e-learning module cause grave psychological harm. Online students' meets are disrupted by persons, who are not authorised to access such platforms and either obscene content or abuses are shared. Often it is students themselves who may facilitate such "raids" (Vice.com, 2021) . Parents and teachers alike, as also the students are unable to understand the legal implications of such violations and remedies available to them (Nappinai, 2021).

Cybercrimes, such as cyber-bullying, cyber-stalking and cyber-extortion, (some forms of which may also be referred to as revenge porn) have been prevalent even before the pandemic but have increased in intensity post COVID-19 (Nappinai, 2021). According to a report published by Child Rights and You, 1 in 3 people get bullied every day and they are mostly aged between 13 - 18 years (CRY, 2020). However, unfortunately, there is a disparity between the actual number of cases and the number of cases reported to authorities, and this is because children do not report these incidents to their parents and teachers.

People possibly engage in cyber-bullying due to ignorance not only of what amounts to cyber-bullying but also due to ignorance of the consequences of their conduct (Arpana & Chauhan & GJIMT, 2012; Mehta & Singh, 2013; Aggarwal, 2015; Narahari & Shah, 2016); however, some other reasons could also be "*anger, frustration, boredom and a need of laughter*" (Shivashankar & Prakash, 2018). Bullies often lack understanding regarding the effects that their actions could have on the victims, and this lack of understanding could in future also turn a victim into a bully, thus perpetuating the cycle. The anonymity on digital platforms often allows bullies to get away with cybercrimes, while the victims are left behind with a plethora of psychological challenges, such as aggression, depression, and low self-esteem (Hase et al., 2015; Schoffstall & Cohen, 2011). Consequently, this poor psychological health could lead to sex and drug abuse among adolescents too (Oshima et al., 2012), which is a cause of concern for educators, researchers and healthcare workers.

According to a study conducted by Jain, Gupta, Satam, and Panda (2020) among university students in the Mumbai region, people aged 17 - 18 years are particularly vulnerable to cyber-bullying and about 80 percent of them were cyber-bullied during the lockdown. Whilst 79 percent of them were bullied offline before the lockdown, 66.67 percent continued to be bullied even during the lockdown. Moreover, as per a recent report, the University Grants Commission (UGC) Helpline has received close to 300 ragging cases since June 2020 from educational institutions across India (Rao, 2021). Out of these cases, 40 - 50 percent of them were regarding online harassment faced by students, and the most number of cases were reported from Uttar Pradesh, followed by Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha (Rao, 2021). Additionally, a recent study indicates that lack of access to sex education and gender sensitivity is one of the weakest aspects of higher education institutions in India (John, 2020).

Furthermore, reports also suggest that online gaming has seen 50 percent growth in India with "*national average gaming time spent by users reaching 4.1 hours post covid from the pre-covid average of 2.5 hours*" (Tembhekar, 2021). To add to this, it has been reported that about 70 percent of Indian adults "feel that children connecting with strangers while playing games online can lead to cyberbullying, harassment and violence" (The New Indian Express, 2020).

In an attempt to sensitise parents, teachers and students regarding cyber-bullying and online harassment, the Delhi government has also directed the schools to refer to the booklet containing guidelines on online safety, which has been jointly developed by the NCERT and UNESCO (Times of India, 2021b).

What did we do?



Cyber Saathi, an initiative of N.S. Nappinai, in collaboration with Red Dot Foundation, aimed to equip students, parents and teachers with knowledge about online security and privacy with gender lens, as well as redressal mechanisms that they can avail themselves of if they have been victims of cybercrimes.

The primary focus of the “Cyber Safety through a Gender Lens” workshops was to:

- Reach out to people, especially young folks and equip them with knowledge regarding cyber safety, relevant laws and possible cyber threats that they might be vulnerable to
- Help them understand how they can protect themselves from the various types of threats
- Impart knowledge about redressal mechanisms and remedies available in law, in case they or their peers fall prey to online perpetrators
- Build a sustainable system of peer support, wherein people can be empowered with knowledge and awareness so that they can extend their support to others, including friends and family
- Build a proactive network of “Cyber Saathis” or cyber friends to increase awareness, reduce risks and prevent digital crimes and also to be first responders who can help victims reach out to the appropriate authorities and seek remedies;

Furthermore, as it is evident from research, lack of access to sex education and gender sensitivity is one of the weakest aspects of India’s higher education, and since women, children and gender minorities face the brunt of cybercrimes, the “Cyber Safety through a Gender Lens” workshops also focus on:

- Increasing understanding of various types of gender biases and stereotypes prevalent in society
- Dismantling gender norms and stereotypes that socially condition women and girls to be subservient
- Discussing how the prevalent gender norms and stereotypes influence our behaviour in the digital space

- Increasing awareness regarding the various types of online crimes and violence that specifically target women, children, gender minorities and adolescents
- Discussing the various legal remedies that are available for the victims who have been at the receiving end of online violence and crimes, and how young people can be mentored to act as peer support systems to extend help to victims of cyber offences
- Engaging parents, teachers and faculty members of educational institutions in India to make them aware of cybercrimes and how they can step up to help young adolescents
- Conducting interactive sessions, including questionnaires, polls, discussion segments to understand the participants' awareness levels

The details regarding the participation of students, teachers, faculty and parents in these workshops sponsored by the U.S. Consulate General of Mumbai are as follows:

Cyber Saathi Workshops in western India from September 2020 - July 2021

	Students	Faculty	Parents	
Male	1613	108	18	
Female	3072	300	63	
Unknown	10	1	17	
Total	4695	409	98	5202

What were the outcomes?

The responses of the participants during the “Cyber Safety through a Gender Lens” workshops revealed that:

- Most of them had limited knowledge concerning cybercrimes, cyber laws, and cyber safety practices. Students’ ratings on their level of knowledge with respect to cybercrimes indicated that most students had a moderate level of knowledge (rated 3 on a 1-5 scale, with 1 being low and 5 being high).
- Nearly 90 percent of the participants had never attended such a session before.
- 90 percent of them found the sessions to be informative, timely and useful, especially during these trying times when the world has shifted to digital platforms and cybercrimes are on the rise.
- Almost all participants believed that it is difficult for victims of cybercrimes in India to seek legal remedies. When asked whether students would take legal recourse, most students responded either ‘Yes’ or ‘Maybe’. Most students responded ‘Not Easy’ when asked about how easy or difficult it would be for a victim of cybercrime to seek legal remedies in India.
- It is important to discuss and address the prevalent gender biases and inequalities in our society among students to build a safer and inclusive future. When asked about whether it is important to discuss gender sensitivity, most students indicated ‘Yes’.

Additionally, the following are some of the findings from the data collected from students, teachers, and parents during the workshops:

- Data collected from 87 students, teachers, and parents from **Heritage Girls School, Udaipur** showed that 71% claimed children are more likely to be victims of cybercrimes, 76% reported that cyberbullying is more prevalent in children and only 47% of participants felt confident in reporting a crime.
- According to the data collected from **Our Lady of Good Counsel, Mumbai**, when asked about confidence levels in the likelihood that students would report cybercrime, at most 52% of responses indicated that students were unsure of whether or not they would report.

Below are some of the commonly raised queries by participants in the workshops:

- How do I approach or deal with a cyberbully online?
- What can I do to avoid or protect myself from being a victim of cyberbullying?
- What are the legal remedies available to me with respect to cyberbullying?
- What are some of the techniques cyber criminals can use to lure children / young adults online or induce them into committing wrongful acts?
- What are the extra measures I can take to protect my privacy online?
- How do I know if the website I'm using is safe? How do I know, to what extent, is a website / platform tracking my usage?
- What do I do if a close friend of mine is using private pictures of myself to threaten and harass me?
- What is catfishing? What should one do if they have been a victim of such a crime?
- I've read several cases of adults and senior citizens being victims of phishing attacks. What is phishing? What can we do to protect them from such incidents?
- What are important safety measures while carrying out online transactions?

Below are some of the feedback that we received from the participants:

- Where 'impact measurements' were collected, most students and teachers rated the session as a '9' on a scale from 1-10, with 10 being the most impactful.
- Where feedback was requested on a scale from 1-5 with 5 being the most helpful, most students rated the session from '4' to '5'.
- In terms of written feedback, students frequently mentioned the following:
 - That the sessions were "informative" and "eye-opening", and provided "an opportunity to reflect"
 - Several students indicated that they felt more confident after the session in their ability to report experiences of cybercrime and seek recourse
 - That the sessions helped "spread awareness" and raised "sensitivity" of cybercrime issues and gendered violence
 - Some students indicated that they had never had a "proper" discussion about these topics prior to the sessions
- Teachers reported that the workshops were well-rounded, clear, well-structured and informative.

Below are some of the testimonies and examples of cybercrimes that we received from the participants:

- While discussing 'what should gender look like? Pink/ blue or a spectrum of colours? One of the **students** wrote this in the chat box "I absolutely love, stand & support this session and I really wish more people spread awareness about stuff like this."
- A **teacher** shares their experience, "I have always had an inclination towards true sayings, real life quotes etc. based on true life experiences, however I had an experience on facebook which I would like to share. I received an advertisement asking if I was interested in joining the Jay Shetty club. To know more 'click n join.' I did not check the details due to lack of time & clicked to join. Checking FB was done occasionally till I realised I was receiving messages from strangers on Messenger. They would ask for friend requests which I wasn't very comfortable with. After researching I discovered that the group I had joined was a dating club. I began blocking these strangers on Messenger and deleted the club. Luckily after deleting that club I haven't received any messages as such. But after this experience I've never joined any unknown resources and have been very careful for security reasons. Had I attended a session like 'Cyber Saathi' earlier I would have been aware of such fake sites. Yet, I am happy to have the opportunity to do so now, as I had a platform to raise & share my experience. I wish the Cyber Saathi team could reach out to all school students who are exposed to social media and who aren't aware of the consequences. Thank you Cyber Saathi for making the students aware about Cyber crimes and the do(s) and don't(s) while using technology."
- "Today's session has been very helpful to me in more than one way. Cyberbullying is a serious problem and because of this session I have learned to not be afraid and if something like this occurs with me then without being afraid, I should tell my family and file a complaint. I am also a victim of body shaming and even cyber bullying but I didn't have the guts to tell my parents about this but this session has given me the confidence I need to tell my parents about the incidents that have happened to me," writes a **student** from **Heritage Girls School**.
- Another **teacher** from **Heritage Girls School** writes, "It was an interactive and intensive session for which I would like to thank Red Dot Foundation for conducting the workshop on 'Cyber Saathi'. In the first part of the workshop I came to know the difference between sex and gender. It clarifies the difference between gender norms/roles/stereotypes."

came to know about gendered cybercrimes like Cyberbullying, Cyberstalking, Child pornography and various cyber threats which are done through online chat rooms and online video games etc. It was a great experience which made me feel privileged. I got a chance to be a part of such an interactive and indulging session which has made me more aware about cyber activities. Cinema, media and social media, in fact, influenced the behaviour of people which results in such cybercrime activities at an increasing pace nowadays. It is mandatory to keep this in mind that we should never share our address, location, phone number, password to social media accounts. Once again I would like to thank the heads and officials of Heritage Girls School for organising such a knowledge enhancing session and looking forward to joining many more sessions like this.”

What is the way ahead?



The impact of “Cyber Safety through a Gender Lens” workshops has been unanimously positive and this has been corroborated by feedback/ testimonies from students as well as teachers. Moreover, this is not an isolated case; cyber safety sessions across the world have helped young people and reinforced positive online behaviour.

According to a study, the cyber security awareness program offered by the Ministry of Education in UAE for students aged 8 to 10 years was immensely beneficial as reported by the participants (Al Shamsi, 2019). The participants of the study reported that the cyber security awareness program was effective and it influenced student’s online behaviour (Al Shamsi, 2019). Another study argues that through “*proper training and education ... [students will be] able to learn some of the basic fundamentals of cyber security and identity protection*” (Hunt, 2016), and this argument has been corroborated by various other studies as well (Crompton et al., 2016; Pencheva et al., 2019).

Below are some of our recommendations to the Education departments:

- Given that cybercrimes have been on the rise in this pandemic when the world has shifted to digital platforms and the fact that these crimes affect children, women, girls and gender minorities the most, it would be prudent to include cyber safety workshops in the education curriculum. Such addition should not just focus on victims but also deter crimes. Hence any curriculum formulated ought to note the need for gender sensitivity qua gendered crimes;
- This will allow young adolescents to identify the various types of cybercrimes that they are vulnerable to and will empower them with the right knowledge to seek relevant legal remedies in case they fall prey to any such crimes.
- To take this further, another way to deal with cybercrimes would be to train teachers and faculty members in educational institutions, so that they can support and guide young people as well as keep themselves safe in the digital world when they are taking online classes.

- Lack of awareness is one of the biggest hurdles when it comes to dealing with cybercrimes. Consequently, the available legal remedies are only reactive in nature, and that needs to change. Building a strong and proactive redressal mechanism, therefore, is the need of the hour.
- To build a sustainable and affirmative system of peer supporters, a buddy system can be introduced in educational institutions. A proactive network of 'cyber saathis' or cyber friends can help spread awareness, reduce risks as well as prevent digital crimes.

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Participating schools and colleges



- 1.Green Meadows School, Goa
- 2.Pimple Nilakh School, Pune
- 3.Prestige Public School, Pune
- 4.Zilla Parishad Prathamik Kendra Shala Bhanang School, Satara
- 5.Medha School, Satara
- 6.Mahilashram School, Pune
- 7.Zilla Parishad Kendra Shala Jirapwadi Phaltan School, Satara
- 8.Heritage Girls School, Udaipur
- 9.Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth College (MSW), Pune
- 10.Bombay International School, Mumbai
- 11.LS Raheja School of Architecture (college), Mumbai
- 12.Wilson College, Mumbai
- 13.St Andrews College, Mumbai
- 14.Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan
- 15.Navrachana School, Gujarat
- 16.Our Lady of Good Counsel, Mumbai
- 17.St Mary's ICSE, Navi Mumbai
- 18.BT Sahani School, Pune
- 19.Shankarrao Jagtap Arts and Commerce College, Satara
- 20.Jay Bhavani High School and Junior College, Satara
- 21.SK Somaiya College, Mumbai
- 22.BM Ruia Girls College, Mumbai
- 23.National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), Bhopal
- 24.Bhavan's Degree College Chowpatty, Mumbai
- 25.Wagdev College, Watar, Satara
- 26.Katalyst India, Mumbai
- 27.KC College, Mumbai
- 28.Gujarati School, Nanded
- 29.Arch College of Design & Business, Jaipur
- 30.Namdevrao Suryawanshi Bedke College, Phaltan
- 31.KC Jr. College
- 32.Department of Communication & Journalism, University of Mumbai
- 33.Ahmedabad University, Ahmedabad
- 34.Young Girl Leaders & Metgutad School, Mahabaleshwar
- 35.NGOs in Western India

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