



FREE
TO BE MOBILE

FREE
TO BE MOBILE

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'A girl's phone number

is like a toy for boys.'

– Field worker, West Bengal

INTRODUCTION

What do we talk about when we talk about technology-enabled violence? We mostly talk about **online** violence, or violence on the internet. Verbal abuse. Rape threats. Images spreading without consent. Surveillance.

Much of this conversation centres on social media. And that's not entirely off the mark; social media is a place where offline gender hierarchies are increasingly reproduced, and where women and other marginalised genders face disproportionate abuse.

But that's only part of the story.

Another part of the story – one we talk or think about much less - goes beyond the online to the **digital**. To millions of mobile phones in India through which violence flows every other day in various ways. Three out of four mobile phone users in India today use basic phones that don't connect to the internet. But even though they're not online, they're still digital.



Some of the stories in Free To Be Mobile are rooted in low-income communities. Among teenagers, women, trans and queer persons who can't afford smart phones. In feature phones that women charmingly call 'button mobiles' even as they dream of getting their own 'touch mobiles' or smart phones that their brothers or male partners have. (Gender alert!)

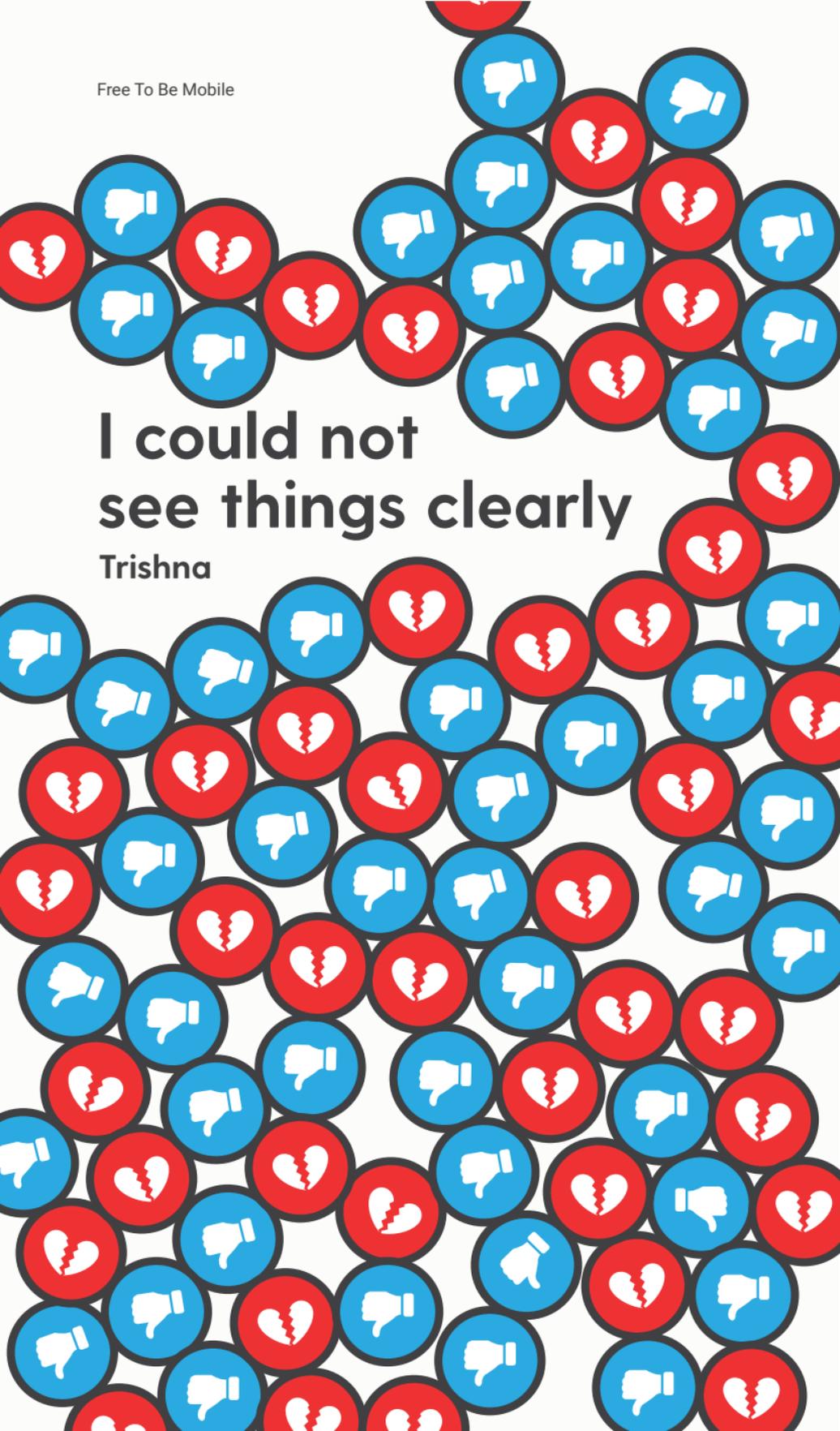
All these 10 stories are rooted in gender, which expresses itself in a million different ways. Teenage boys hacking the WhatsApp accounts of teenage girls. Fathers tracking daughters through itemised phone bills. Rural journalists receiving endless calls from strange men. Trans women constantly facing demands for sex on social media. Brothers tracking and throwing sisters off messaging apps.

Many of these are also tales of resistance. From the woman who complains to her ex's mother to the activists who continue to push the law for justice, all these individuals act to end violence. They speak up. They take courage into their own hands. They devise their own strategies where none exist. Every small step they take changes the landscape of digital violence, making it that much easier for women and other marginalised genders to freely – and fearlessly – inhabit digital spaces. Free to be...mobile.

Free To Be Mobile

I could not
see things clearly

Trishna





I could not see things clearly

27-year-old Trishna is a research associate at a university in Assam. Eight years ago, she began dating a boy with the approval of both their families, who had always been quite close to one another. The couple ended their relationship after two years, following which there was a year-long period of no contact between them.

But when Trishna began a relationship with someone else, she began to receive a slew of threats on Facebook. Her ex-boyfriend was behind them.

It started with occasional messages from fake accounts, threatening to harm her family, sponsor her murder via a third party, damage her family's reputation, or release morphed photos of her online. Trishna's partner was also contacted and threatened with consequences if he did not break up with Trishna, whom her ex referred to as 'what belongs to him'.

Initially, there was a gap of a few days between the threats. This progressed to messages arriving on alternate days and then on a daily basis. This activity spanned a period of three months. Her ex-boyfriend's friends, who also joined in, maintained the flow of threats and sent Trishna messages from three or four

accounts at a time. The messages would be sent late at night and then the accounts would be deactivated, so when Trishna saw the messages in the morning, she was unable to trace the Facebook profiles they were coming from.

...

'I was scared,' Trishna recalls.

'I was getting threatened online and could not see things clearly.'

She kept the messages a secret for a long period, but over time they began to significantly affect her: she stopped eating, lost weight, and became withdrawn. 'I would see those messages and just get so cold and shiver,' Trishna says. She was afraid to open up to anyone or to take action against the messages. And since her college was closed at the time for exam preparation, she was not in contact with any of her friends either.

Eventually, Trishna told her mother about the situation. 'When [the messages] started coming regularly, I thought to open up about the issue. The support I got from my mother was from day one.' Her mother responded with compassion, and her immediate suggestion was to reach out to the ex's family.



Trishna did not want her mother to get involved, as she was afraid that the abuse would worsen. Eventually, she contacted the boy's mother herself and explained the situation to her.

She had always had a good relationship with her ex's family, but was apprehensive about how this would be received. She recalls, 'I did not want to ruin the terms between my mum and her, because my mum was too angry at the time and I thought I could handle it better.'

Trishna says that her ex boyfriend's mother had always liked and supported her, and in fact, 'the relationship itself started because we knew that the families would consent.' Nevertheless, Trishna expected the mother to defend her son, and when she nervously made the call, she did not expect a positive reaction.

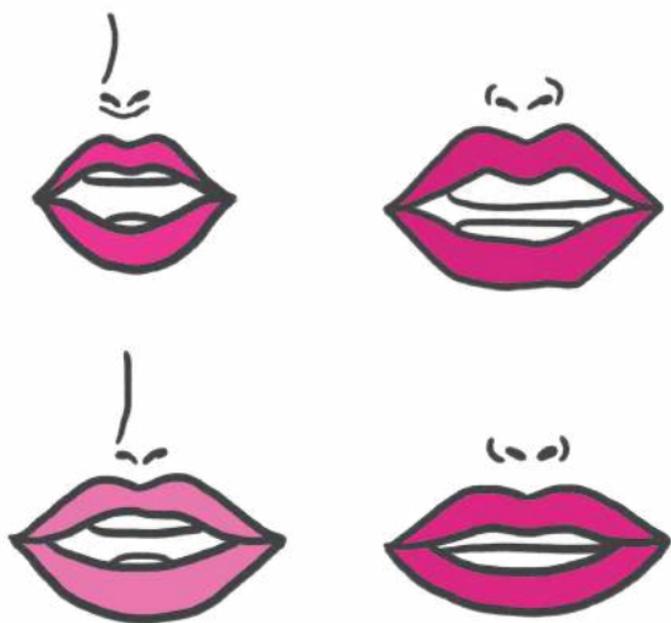
Even today, she can recall the exact words his mother said: 'This is what he is doing, is it? I will look into it, you don't need to worry...from now on it will not happen.' True to her word, she put an immediate and lasting stop to the messages.

Trishna says, 'She was shocked at what her son had done. Even if we meet someday, there won't be any negative reaction from her side.'

• • •

Reflecting on how the incident has impacted her, Trishna says, 'I am a little cautious now. I don't even trust my friends, you know. I have become very choosy even in terms of my girlfriends.' Over the years, she feels she has developed 'a more mature perspective' and she says that if the incident were to occur today, 'even if the family was supportive, I would definitely go to the police station.'

Six years down the line, Trishna has had no news of her ex apart from a follow request on Instagram. She responded to that by immediately blocking him and telling her sister, 'We'll see what happens. I'm ready to face any kind of situation.'



**We'd wake up at night
thinking the phone
was ringing**

Kavita





We'd wake up at night thinking the phone was ringing

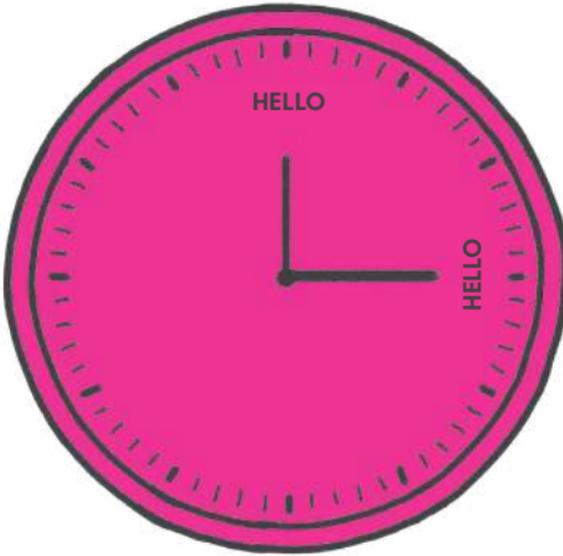
In January 2015, Kavita received a call from an unknown man, asking about one of her colleagues, Ritu*. The two worked together at the women-run, regional language newspaper [Khabar Lahariya](#), based in Uttar Pradesh.

The man seemed to know all about Ritu – details about her life, that she lived alone, that she had a child – and demanded that Kavita give him her number. Kavita refused. Soon after, the man began calling other women from the Khabar Lahariya team. None of them knew how he had gotten their contact details.

When they asked 30-year-old Ritu about the man, she said she did not know him. He had randomly called her, and she initially spoke to him a little. She lived alone with her child, and was open to new friendships. When a male relative found out, though, he made Ritu stop talking to him.

But the man, who said he was from Lucknow, continued to call her. So Ritu changed her number. And that's when the man began calling Kavita and seven of her colleagues. They refused to give him Ritu's number, and asked

*name changed



him to stop calling them. He said he would keep calling until he got Ritu's number. Every few minutes, at all hours of the day and night, the women's phones lit up with calls and messages from the man. 'We were getting so tense that we'd suddenly wake up at night thinking the phone was ringing. He'd wake us up at 4–5am, at 12–1am,'¹ Kavita recounts. He begged them to make Ritu talk to him, saying things like, 'I love her', 'I want her' and 'I will come to meet you'. Ritu asked him to stop harassing her colleagues, but he persisted.



He then began to threaten them with physical and sexual violence. Sometimes he would say that he had come to their villages, and was standing at their doors. When Kavita and her colleagues were out reporting in the field, he seemed to know where they were and what they were doing. They were worried about answering their phones in public, in case he was watching them. Once, he even asked an ambulance to go to Ritu's village, saying that she was about to deliver a child. The ambulance turned up at Ritu's house, which resulted in a huge scene.

Kavita recalls that the man would say 'obscene things' and that he'd sometimes play porn clips on the call. At the time, the women had basic feature phones, with no WhatsApp or social media, so the harassment would take place through SMS and phone calls.

'He had so many numbers that if we blocked one, he'd call from another,' Kavita says. If they didn't respond to him for a few hours, he'd have their numbers blocked. He did this by calling the phone companies and asking them to lock the women's SIM cards, on the pretext that those were his own numbers and that he'd lost his phone. This happened on multiple occasions.

The calls and messages drained them. The harassment at all hours of the night interfered with their ability to concentrate on their work.

‘His calls would keep coming,
he left no gaps for others to call
us. Some of us couldn’t even talk
to our kids, our famil[ies],’²

says Kavita in an interview. He called some of the women’s partners and husbands too.

As one of the women reports in an article, ‘We were so rattled by the phone ringing that we could barely think.’³

...

The women tried talking him out of it. They tried ‘giving him gaalis’, or abusive insults. They tried tracing the numbers on Google, but each number they could trace would show up as originating from a different city and under a different name. They also tried calling 1090, the state women’s helpline number, but the line was constantly busy. When Kavita finally got through, the police on the line promised to take action – but did nothing.



Finally, as Kavita says, they 'accepted defeat and went to the police.'

The Banda police initially didn't register an FIR, and advised Kavita and her colleagues to change their numbers, so that the man wouldn't call them anymore. Kavita recalls being furious at this response. 'We told him, "Why should we change our numbers? We need our phones, we need them for our work."'

The man even called while they were at the police station, and the police spoke to him. They asked him why he was harassing the women, to which he replied, 'Mujhe accha lagta hai, maza aata hai' ('I like it, it's fun').

The case was transferred to the crime branch, which Kavita initially thought was a positive development, but the crime branch inspector only asked them more insensitive, patronising questions.

Kavita then went to the deputy inspector general of Banda, who also spoke to the man, saying he would shut down his phone and arrest him. An FIR was eventually filed at the crime branch in Banda under Section 507 of the Indian Penal Code (criminal intimidation by anonymous communication) and Section 66A of the IT Act (sending offensive messages

via a computer or communication device (this section was struck from the law soon after)). Since the Khabar Lahariya women are spread across different districts in Uttar Pradesh, another FIR was also filed in Chitrakoot, under Section 506 of the IPC (criminal intimidation).⁴ But the police did not follow up either of these FIRs with any action.

Three months passed, then six months, and still the police did nothing. The calls did not stop. Kavita and the Khabar Lahariya team made multiple requests to the police station, trying to hold them accountable. But these efforts were to no avail.

An open letter to the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh by Khabar Lahariya reads: 'We were called to register statements again and again – sometimes because the investigating officer would be transferred, or sometimes because the file had been transferred from one police department to another. The police seemed to enjoy listening to the statements repeatedly.'⁵

The police would ask the women to repeat specific words that the man had used to harass them. Kavita recalls, 'We were already traumatised by our experiences, [so] when we go to a police station to complain and they end up asking us weird questions, it just makes the trauma worse.'⁶

• • •



Finally, in despair, the women took to the internet and published their story with online media outlets. While the Khabar Lahariya newspaper is now entirely digital, at the time the women's knowledge of the online world and their use of social media was extremely limited. So, they relied on other publications.

On 14 September, the feminist news site The Ladies Finger published an account of the incident, which Khabar Lahariya shared on their own Facebook and Twitter pages. Many people retweeted the piece, and the incident generated much attention on Twitter.

Akhilesh Yadav, who was then Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, was tagged in some of the posts. Yadav took notice, and promised to resolve the case. Soon after, the inspector general of the Lucknow police called Kavita, interviewed her and her colleagues in detail, and filed a case. Two days after the article was posted, the police arrested the caller, who turned out to be a 20-year-old man.



At the time of the arrest, they found approximately 40 SIM cards in his possession.

After the arrest, the police insisted that Kavita and her colleagues go to the police station to identify the suspect. The women said they had never met him so would not be able to identify him, and they did not want the man to see their faces.

They finally did go to the police station, though, and identified the suspect by his voice.

The police also insisted on holding a press conference. 'They made it seem like they had done some mahaan kaam (great work),' Kavita says dismissively. 'What great work is this? This man called us at all hours of the night, harassed us, caused distress to us, to our families and to our children, for months. The police did nothing for so long. This is not some great work that you've done.'

The man was sent to jail. Kavita says they do not know what happened to him, but they have not heard from him since.



Ritu ended up leaving Khabar Lahariya because of the incident. She faced a great deal of stigma in her village, and had a hard time getting married because of what had happened. Now, however, she has gotten married and says she can finally live a free life.

Thinking about their long route to justice, Kavita says, 'I think this case would have remained cold if it hadn't come out in the media. But what about other women, who don't have [so] many resources?'⁷ What will they do?

¹ Staff. (September 18, 2015). Phone Stalkers, Police Apathy and More: Kavita Speaks about the Nishu Case. Khabar Lahariya. (<http://khabarlahariya.org/phone-stalkers-police-apathy-and-more-kavita-speaks-about-the-nishu-case/>)

² Ibid.

³ Kavita. (September 14, 2015). The Policeman Said: Why Don't You Tell Me What Gaalis He Whispers in Your Ear? The Ladies Finger (<http://theladiesfinger.com/the-policeman-said-why-dont-you-tell-me-what-gaalis-he-whispers-in-your-ear/>)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ (September 21, 2015). A Congratulatory Note, Tinged with Regret. Khabar Lahariya. (<http://khabarlahariya.org/a-congratulatory-note-tinged-with-regret/>)

⁶ Staff. (September 18, 2015). Phone Stalkers, Police Apathy and More: Kavita Speaks about the Nishu Case. Khabar Lahariya. (<http://khabarlahariya.org/phone-stalkers-police-apathy-and-more-kavita-speaks-about-the-nishu-case/>)

⁷ Ibid.



**We have to
keep fighting**
Bondita

We have to keep fighting

Jorhat, the city in Assam where human rights activist Bondita grew up, has seen an unprecedented rise in religious intolerance over the past two years. One such incident occurred in April 2017, when three Muslim men, including a minor, were arrested for allegedly 'hurting religious sentiments' by having beef in their possession.¹ Assam is not one of the Indian states that criminalises beef possession, and the incident drew heavy criticism, particularly on social media.²

One Facebook post stated:

'Yesterday 3 muslims were arrested in Jorhat for eating beef. I am too from Jorhat. I also eat beef sometimes. Now I am worried to go home. Anyone can file FIR, who knows? [I] hope those who eat beef they kindly reveal that. Special request: If you eat, pl write that you eat in the comment. Even pork eater Muslims can also reveal. (As per your wish).'

When Bondita, an upper caste Hindu woman, commented on the post saying that she also ate beef, the floodgates opened.

Bondita's comment was met with a barrage of messages and comments, most of which were extremely violent, with both explicit

and implicit threats of sexual violence. The comments included mentions of acid attacks, gang rapes and septic tanks, warning Bondita to 'be careful'. Other people said they wanted to 'teach her a lesson'. A number of comments targeted her physical appearance, while others were directed at members of her family, criticising her upbringing.

Religion was brought up
repeatedly, and in addition
to various anti-Muslim slurs,
Bondita was called a 'sinner',
'the garbage of Hindu society'
and 'a stained woman'.

In addition to such comments and messages, people took Bondita's photographs from her Facebook profile and shared them across the internet. Someone publicly shared her home address on various Facebook groups, too.

What's more, posts about Bondita were also made on a number of Hindu nationalist Facebook pages. The Bajrang Dal, the youth wing of a local right-wing Hindu nationalist group, put out a threatening statement on their Facebook page, condemning Bondita



for insulting ‘the respected Brahmin society and all Hindus of the world’.

They stated: ‘We warn her that she has no right to say Sarma’s and Acharya’s eat beef and she should apologise for saying this or else we will take legal action against her.’

...

Bondita’s immediate response to the situation was to change her Facebook privacy settings, so as to prevent people from sending her any more messages. She was advised to do this by other activists, who she reached out to for support.

Less than a week after the abuse began, a few independent media outlets picked up the case, and national as well as transnational human rights groups that Bondita is affiliated with made statements in her support. Bondita believes the threats reduced after these responses, since people saw that she was serious about taking action.

When asked about her thoughts on non-legal strategies, Bondita says she did not know about Facebook’s reporting mechanisms, nor did she consider deactivating her Facebook account, because she uses social media for her advocacy work.

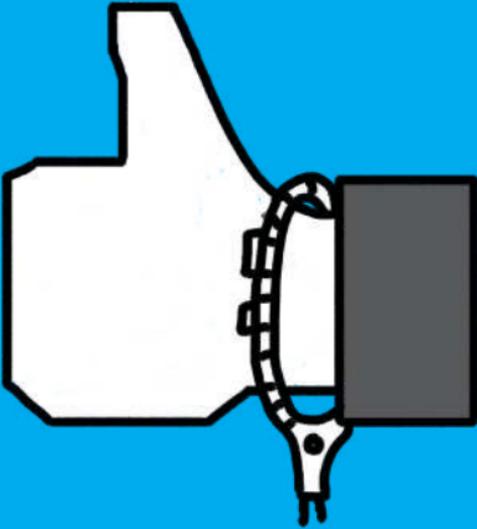
As she astutely remarks, 'If I don't use Facebook, [the abuse] will come from somewhere else.'

Because of the work she does, Bondita is not new to harassment, particularly from the State. She is familiar with the police and the legal system, and has helped several people file police cases in the past. She chose to file a complaint in this instance because she believed it would make her case stronger.

She says, 'If I didn't file a complaint, and anything were to happen to me, if someone were to actually hurt me, the blame will come on me. [They will say:] "You didn't go to the police."'

Her experience with the police, however, was marked by hurdles and setbacks. Because she was in Guwahati, the capital of Assam, at the time, Bondita first approached the city's Criminal Investigation Department (CID). The Guwahati CID is supposed to be the state's cybercrime authority, but they refused to take on her case, saying they did not have the time, and that Bondita should approach her local police station instead.

On her return to Jorhat a day later, Bondita registered the case at the police superintendent's office. She submitted screenshots of the comments made,



alongside a written complaint describing the incident and threats received. The police filed an FIR against unidentified Facebook account holders under sections 354 (outraging the modesty of a woman) and 506 (criminal intimidation) of the IPC, and 67 of the IT Act (obscenity).

Then they put a traffic inspector in charge of the investigation. Only after Bondita and some of the human rights groups supporting her protested against the assignment of a traffic inspector to a cybercrime, did the police replace him with an officer-in-charge.

...

Bondita has since been pursuing the status of the case, sending the police repeated inquiries and reminders. Seven months after the FIR was registered, Bondita filed a complaint against police inaction with the local civil district magistrate. The court ordered the officer-in-charge to provide a detailed report of the investigation, and the police responded to the court's request by stating that after several attempts to identify and verify the identities of the Facebook account holders, the investigation was still on-going.

Bondita always knew that filing a case and fighting legally would be an arduous, risky process, but she says that 'If [people who advocate for human rights] don't do it, who will? We have to keep fighting.'

She went on to file the case in the Guwahati High Court, where it was first heard in January 2018, and then once again a month later. At the hearing on 23 February, the police asked for more time. They have not identified any of the accused as yet and the case is still developing. When asked about the process Bondita says, 'I see no other option. We have to go through this system, whether we get justice or not. Still, I have some faith.'

¹ Sengupta, A. (April 7, 2017) Beef arrests criticised. The Telegraph. (https://www.telegraphindia.com/1170408/jsp/northeast/story_145144.jsp)

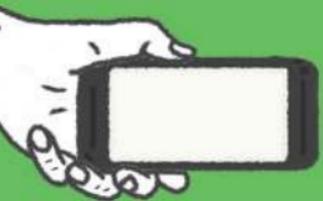
² Sarma, A. (April 7, 2017). Arrest in Assam for Possessing Beef Is at Odds With the Law. The Wire. (<https://thewire.in/122037/arrest-assam-possessing-beef-odds-law/>)

28



28





1 NEW NOTIFICATION

1 NEW NOTIFICATION

**It mostly
happens
to girls**

Mala



It mostly happens to girls

19-year-old Mala grew up in North Mumbai, where she lives with her family in an informal settlement. She is the oldest of three siblings, and is now in the second year of her Bachelor of Arts degree.

Mala was given her first mobile phone by her parents two years ago, after she completed her 12th standard exams. Before this, she used to share a phone with her family, but she was not allowed to take it outside the house. She was happy to finally have a phone of her own, and says it is most useful for planning college events and letting her parents know when she is going to be home late.

But while describing the apps she uses, Mala says, 'I used to worry about using WhatsApp.'

...

Soon after Mala got her phone, one of her male friends from her neighbourhood hacked her WhatsApp account without her knowledge or permission. By doing this, he was able to keep tabs on her WhatsApp activities – he received all her messages directly to his phone, eavesdropped on the conversations she was having, and even chatted with a few of her friends pretending to be Mala.

After a week, he confessed to Mala of his own accord, telling her that he had just wanted to see what kinds of conversations she was having and with whom. When Mala found out, she responded by 'shouting at him a lot.'

'The thing is,' she recalls, 'I didn't have anything to hide. I thought, "If I'm not like that, why should I be afraid?" But when he told me, I did get angry.' Mala believes his agenda was to see 'what type of girl' she is. 'He thought that I was "that" type of girl. That I spend time with boys, have affairs and things...he had a doubt in his mind.'

Mala told the boy's mother about the incident, and she warned her son not to do anything like this again. But the young man himself took the situation very lightly. Mala recalls: 'He started showing me [how to hack someone's WhatsApp]. He said, "You can hack mine also." I said, "I'm not like you, understand? If I do the same then what's the difference between us?"'

...



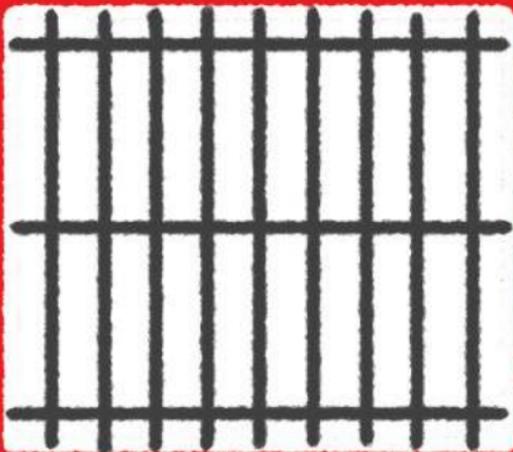
Mala recalls that while she was a little shaken after the incident, she eventually reinstalled WhatsApp on her phone. Today she no longer worries about using the messaging service. 'To keep yourself safe, you must be conscious of lots of things,' she says. For example, she takes various precautions while using her phone, from adjusting her settings to controlling who can see her display picture to not being online late at night – something that tends to make people suspicious.

'It's normal,' Mala shrugs, referring to the hacking of WhatsApp accounts. She goes on to narrate an incident about a distrustful husband who hacked his wife's WhatsApp.

'This keeps happening with lots of girls. It can happen with boys too, but I would say it mostly happens to girls.'

**SUCH
POLICING
IS NOT
~~NEEDED~~**

Kavya





Such policing is not needed

It all began in 2010, recalls 24-year-old Kavya*. She was in Class 12, and involved in her first romance. Her family didn't know about the relationship, but the secret came to light one day when her father saw that she had been tagged in a photo on Facebook with her boyfriend. Kavya says, 'He got angry and took all the passwords to my Gmail, Facebook and even Skype accounts.'

Kavya resented this intrusion but gave into it because, as she says, 'Ultimately things at my house happen the way my father wants them to.'

To retain her independence, Kavya deactivated her Facebook account and created another one with lots of privacy settings so that her father couldn't find her online.

...

In 2011, Kavya left her hometown in Nepal to study and live in the South Indian city of Bangalore. Since she was going by herself, her father gave her a basic mobile phone that allowed calling and texting. She didn't know it at the time, but since it was a postpaid number,

*name changed

her father received an itemised bill that detailed who she called and for how long, and he would keep tabs on her this way. That's how Kavya's father found out that she was still in touch with her boyfriend, and forced her to abandon her education and return home.

After much pleading, in 2012 Kavya convinced her father to let her to go to college in Delhi. This permission came with caveats. Kavya says,

'He spoke to all the guards in the hostel and maybe even bribed them, and that's how he tracked my physical movements. He also asked the office to not let me go on late nights or night outs.'

Kavya's father did not give her a smartphone because he said he wanted her to concentrate on her studies. Reflecting on this Kavya says, 'Even I didn't want a smartphone because then he would have more ways to track what I was doing. Instead, I used my savings to buy a phone with a separate SIM without his knowledge. [Before that], I used my friends'

spare phones.' When she travelled home to Nepal, Kavya would either leave her second phone in Delhi or hide it in her suitcase. Her father never found out.

Today, Kavya feels that there were perhaps some positive aspects to her father's actions when she was younger. 'Back then I obviously felt quite rebellious about it, but I think there are two parts to it – it was beneficial for me as a young person dating a guy who was not nice, because it kept me from doing a lot of things that I would have [done] otherwise.'

But secondly, she adds, 'Someone having that much control over your life? It is not a very comfortable feeling.'

...

Kavya's father did not interfere in her life much after she left Delhi to get a higher degree in Singapore in 2015. She explains with a laugh, 'I think he started trusting me a bit more because I did not fuck up in Delhi.'





Your daughter was here



However, once 2017 rolled around, things changed. Kavya moved to a city in India where she had her own apartment, a job at a bank, and was financially independent. At the same time, she recalls, '[My father] found out that Google Maps has this real-time location-sharing feature. Since then he has forced me, my mother and younger sister to share our locations with him.'

Kavya feels that tracking her sister's location is justified, because although she is at boarding school, her safety is a cause for concern when she travels alone outside campus. When it comes to her mother, though, Kavya deeply disapproves of her father's actions. She explains, 'This shows mistrust towards a partner who has done nothing in over 25 years for anyone to doubt her.'

And as for Kavya herself, who is now a grown woman living independently, she believes that **'such policing is not needed.'** When she tried to confront her father with this sentiment, he said that he wants her location because he cares for her. But he coupled this statement by telling her that if she refuses to share her location, he will

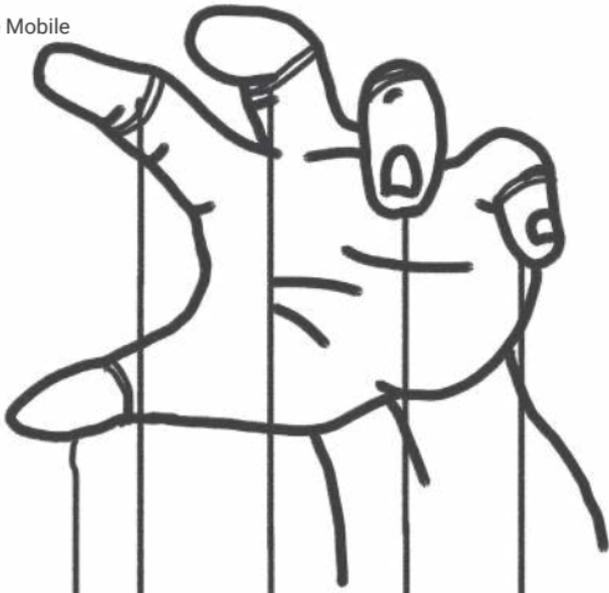
A decorative graphic at the top of the page consists of a red dotted line that starts from the left edge and curves upwards towards the right. Two large red location pin icons are placed along this line, one on the left and one on the right.

make her return to her hometown. Kavya says, 'He wants my location at all times and not just when I'm travelling. That is mistrust, not caring. It is uncomfortable to have someone stalk me at all times.'

When communicating her feelings to her father did not work, Kavya turned to technology. She now uses an app called 'Fake GPS' that allows her to fake her location. When she goes out, she sets it to her home address. This location is then reflected across all platforms. She had to experiment with a few different apps that do this before finding one that does not let the location fluctuate and therefore arouse suspicion.

Reflecting on her father's behaviour, Kavya says, 'I have no problem telling my parents where I'm going, but there is no space for this kind of communication. They won't allow me to go out [and if I do, they] will monitor me. I think it's very unnecessary because at the end of the day I will do what I want.'

Free To Be Mobile



**There wasn't a single
day of peace** Priyanka



There wasn't a single day of peace

Priyanka was brought up in a traditional Maharashtrian middle class family. In 2012, she was studying in Pune, where she lived alone and had a large group of friends. Around the same time, she and her friend Rajendra, whom she had known since 2007, told their families that they wanted to be together and eventually marry.

During the two years leading up to their marriage, Rajendra expressed discomfort with the active and visible role Priyanka played in college activities. He disapproved of her using a mobile phone, or meeting friends who were men. If Priyanka rebelled against him, he threatened to tell her parents about her lifestyle, which often went against the conservative expectations her family had for her.

'This became a weapon in his hands,' Priyanka says. 'He thought, "Now she is mine and she will have to marry me." He knew that I would not be able to say anything in front of my family, so I would have to do as he said.' Resigning herself to the situation, she hoped that his feelings about her life choices would change after marriage.

After their wedding in 2014, the couple moved to a flat in Mumbai. Rajendra's mother stayed with them for the first three months, and Priyanka often felt pressured to be the 'ideal wife'. Her husband and mother-in-law would try to dictate her behaviour as per their own preferences and wishes. Priyanka recalls, 'They believed that I was a puppet in their hands.'

Eventually her mother-in-law went back to her village, and Priyanka rekindled her academic aspirations by starting her master's degree in 2015. Shortly after this, her husband began to act physically violent towards her. She was just 25 years old.



Priyanka began studying and established a life outside the house that didn't involve her husband. Rajendra, in turn, began to routinely call her friends at university to cross check whether she had arrived for lectures and what time she left campus.

He demanded access to her mobile phone and, hoping to pacify him, Priyanka granted it to him. Rajendra routinely checked her call records and text messages. If she was on a phone call and he happened to call her at the same time, he demanded to be added to the conversation via a conference call.

She let him do this, hoping that it would bring stability to the marriage. She recounts, 'I got fed up with his complaints, so I thought, "Okay, if the marriage continues like this, it's okay."' "

Priyanka recalls that Rajendra would sometimes use her phone to message her male friends in a suggestive way, pretending to be her, and then take screenshots if they responded in a similar vein. Whenever she tried to approach her family about the abuse she was experiencing, he accused her of being 'characterless' and threatened to show the screenshots to her family, alleging that she flirted with men in his absence. Priyanka recalls that he didn't want her to talk to men at all because, in his words, 'You are now a married woman, and this doesn't happen in our society.'

A particular incident stands out for Priyanka. Rajendra bought a second SIM card and started texting her pretending to be an unknown person, asking her things like, 'When did you get married?', 'Do you miss me?' and 'Don't you recognise me?' When Priyanka told Rajendra about these texts, he asked her to ignore them.

He would often text her from the second number when they were in public together, describing her appearance and commenting on her clothes, so as to give the impression that the 'anonymous' sender was stalking her.

When she told her friends about
the calls and texts, her husband
told her that she was insulting
herself by telling them, and
should think about her ‘honour’.

Later, she found an empty SIM card packet in their flat, and matched it to the number she was receiving messages from. When she confronted Rajendra that evening, he laughed it off and said he just wanted to test her loyalty. Priyanka let it go, but in her mind she realised that ‘this wasn’t right’.

Rajendra’s control over Priyanka extended to her social networks too. He adjusted her Facebook settings so that he could receive notifications about activities on her account, such as ‘likes’ and messages, directly to his e-mail inbox. In addition to this, he altered the settings so that her password could be changed only through his e-mail ID. While this disturbed Priyanka, she did not have the expertise to figure out how to remove these settings or even be aware of them. Rajendra still controls that particular Facebook account, though she doesn’t use it anymore.

Over the course of their marriage, Rajendra steadily built an archive of screenshots of messages (some of which were typed by him) sent from her phone to her friends, recorded her aggressive retorts when he provoked her on phone calls, took photos of unwashed utensils or of Priyanka when she was asleep – even when she was seriously unwell or on her period. All of this, according to him, was evidence of her lack of character and a neglect of ‘household and wifely duties’.

Rajendra used the threat of sharing this digital archive with their community as a means to emotionally abuse Priyanka and to keep her trapped within the marriage.

• • •

The psychological and physical distress over the course of their relationship took a toll on Priyanka. ‘I could not understand what to do, who to tell. In my two years of marriage there wasn’t a single day of peace at home.’ She grappled with depression and suicidal thoughts. Her health deteriorated, while her attendance and performance at university suffered.

Priyanka finally confided in her friends at university, who supported her and encouraged her to fight.

They also stopped answering her husband's calls. She tried approaching the police, but her husband prevented her by saying, 'Think about your parents' honour and our honour. We are both educated people, what will everyone think if we go to the police?'

Finally, she recalls, 'One year of marriage had passed when I went home and told my mother and showed her my injuries. She said, "You won't go back, but do not tell your father."'

Rajendra called Priyanka's father and pleaded with him to make her come back. When her father tried to do so, Priyanka showed him her injuries, which made him change his mind. However, Rajendra's family downplayed the incidents by saying, 'This happens between husbands and wives.' Eventually, under sustained social pressure and active persuasion from their in-laws, Priyanka's parents sent her back to live with Rajendra.

But a year later she left him for good, because there was no respite from the abuse.

Priyanka did not pursue a domestic violence case due to a lack of evidence, as well as her family's insistence on settling the matter immediately, rather than getting involved in long drawn-out legal proceedings. The archive of false screenshots created by Rajendra may have played a further role in this decision.

The couple filed for mutual divorce in 2017.

...

Priyanka now lives with her parents and is excited about what life has to offer – despite the social stigma that she faces as a divorcee in their town. Looking back on her marriage to Rajendra she says, ‘Since childhood, I would see how women just stay at home, and that was their [entire] world. I would think, “I will have to take care of my house” and I didn’t think of anything beyond that. Staying with him, these old-fashioned thoughts continued in my mind.’

When asked whether she would like anonymity in the recording of her story, she responds, ‘No, why should I hide? Everyone should know that women are not afraid.’

**"Facebook" Would Like to
Access Your Photos**

Don't Allow

OK

**"YouTube" Would Like to
Access Your Location**

Don't Allow

OK

**"WhatsApp" Would Like to
Access Your Contacts**

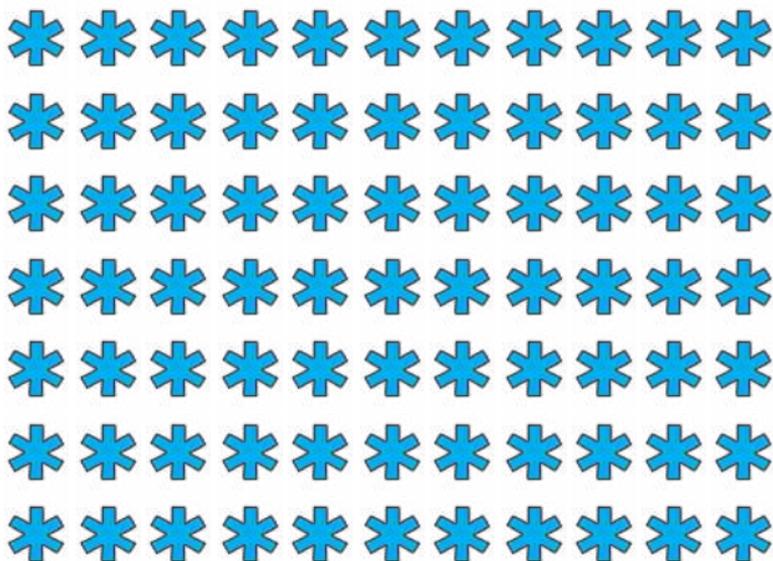
Don't Allow

OK

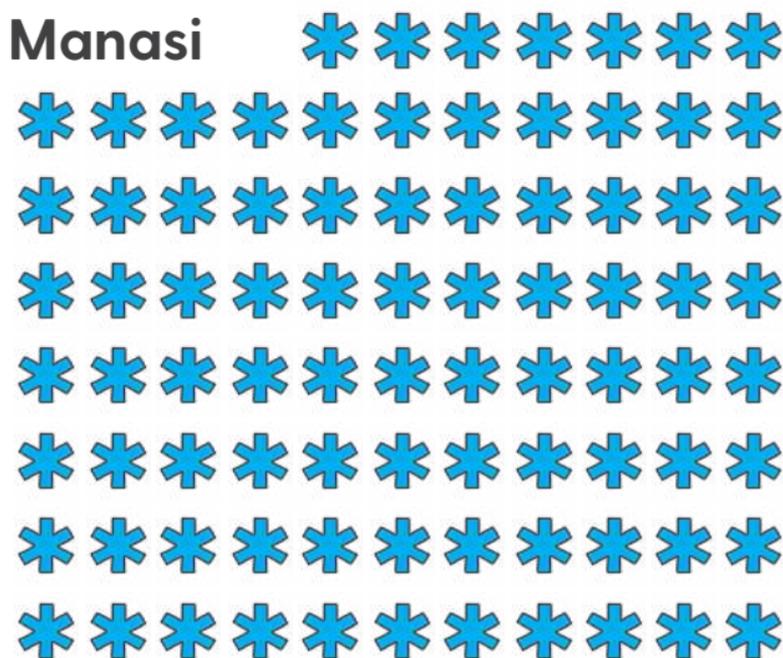
**"Instagram" Would Like to
Access Your Videos**

Don't Allow

OK



It's the same * * * *
as what happens * *
on the street * * * *



It's the same as what happens on the street

17-year-old Manasi's greatest desire is to have her own mobile phone. 'My friends all have their own phones,' she laments. 'Their families are more sensible. My family will not let a girl use a mobile phone.'

Manasi lives with her parents and two older brothers in an informal settlement in Dharavi, Mumbai. Her brothers, aged 21 and 24, have both had their own phones for many years now. Manasi explains, 'My family says, "It's okay if your brothers have [mobile phones], but you are not allowed. You will get spoiled if you have a phone.'"

Working as a beautician, Manasi spends her days going to different clients' houses. She has had no formal training – instead, she taught herself by watching YouTube tutorials on the phone that she shares with her mother. This shared phone stays at home. Manasi is occasionally allowed to take it out with her – if she is going to be back late, for instance – but for the most part, she can only use the phone when she is at home.

The phone is mainly used to talk to friends on WhatsApp. Manasi does not delete the conversations, and knows that the rest of her family sometimes reads them.

She also says that she uses Facebook, 'even though I'm not allowed to.'

It is her brothers who insist on limiting Manasi's Facebook use. They tell her: 'Do not post anything, do not add photos. Your photo can go to someone else and what will they do with it? We won't know.'

• • •

This protective attitude was sparked by an incident that took place a year ago. An unknown man began to talk to Manasi via Facebook Messenger. It started with a 'hi', and when Manasi replied, the man began to ask her more questions like 'Have you eaten?' and 'What are you doing now?'

Manasi stopped responding to him.

But a few days later, the young man began to show up around her home. Manasi had listed her neighbourhood on her Facebook profile, but she is not sure how the man found out her exact address. He would often loiter outside her house, and on recognising him from his Facebook photos, Manasi would run inside to avoid him.

'I felt scared when he suddenly came to my house,' she says. 'If he talked to me in front of my family, then what would happen?' After a

few days of Manasi ignoring his messages, the man stopped trying to communicate with her, both online and offline.

But her family found out about him anyway. Manasi's Facebook account was logged in on the shared phone, and her brothers saw the messages. They demanded that she delete her Facebook profile and stop using the platform altogether. 'I said, "Okay, fine"; she recalls. But then she smiles and adds,

'The only difference now

is that I use a password on

Facebook [so they can't see].'

However, Manasi is more cautious these days about accepting strangers' requests on Facebook, and does sometimes wonder whether anyone can steal her photos. But despite this, she doesn't feel afraid to use the platform.

...

Soon after the incident on Facebook, Manasi had a similar experience on WhatsApp. A relative of Manasi's – her aunt's younger brother-in-law – began to message her. Manasi's aunt and mother wanted her to marry the man, but Manasi refused. 'I only met him once, I didn't know him,' she explains.

Manasi doesn't know how he got her number, and she didn't reply to his initial WhatsApp message. But after a stream of messages, she finally responded, and they began to talk a little. 'Then he suddenly started sending videos of love songs,' Manasi recalls. That's when she stopped replying.

One day, her brother saw the messages and asked who was sending them. 'I told him who it was and said, "I don't want to talk to him, but he keeps messaging me."' Manasi's brother called the man and said, 'I'm explaining nicely now, so please understand. But if you ever do this again I will beat you up.'

Manasi's mother, on seeing the messages, also encouraged her brother to intervene. But while Manasi didn't want a relationship with the man, she hadn't minded chatting at first, and was upset with the way her brother shouted at him. 'It wasn't right,' she says.

The messages stopped for four days, but then started again. Even today, he continues to



WhatsApp her daily, sending her 'Good Morning' and 'Good Night' forwards.

'He thinks I will reply,' Manasi laughs. 'It's been 5-6 months and I haven't replied. Nor am I going to.'

...

Manasi sees incidents like these as inevitable if you are a girl online. But she does not want to let these experiences, or her brothers' authority, limit her.

She says, 'Boys can use Facebook and WhatsApp freely. But girls always have to be cautious. It's the same as what happens on the street. The other day, I was walking down the road, and a man on a bike was riding beside me and kept saying 'Hi'. For five minutes, he continued. I just ignored him. That's what you have to do if you want to live peacefully.'

HELLO

	+91	88	77	09	12	10		
			+91	32	65	12	21	11

HELLO

	+91	97	41	38	45	55		

HELLO

	W	R	O	N	G			
	N	U	M	B	E	R		
							FIELD WORKERS	

HELLO

			+91	98	30	59	15	00
	+91	88	92	27	99	77		

HELLO

	+91	89	60	69	26	21		
		+91	98	32	33	23	20	



Wrong number

In the bustling town of Malda, West Bengal, a group of young women field workers and peer educators working on the rights of the girl child came together for a digital security workshop. The women, all aged between 18 and 24 years old, were asked what topics they wanted to discuss. **'Wrong numbers,'** said many.

The facilitators didn't quite know what they meant, until one by one, all 14 women revealed stories of receiving unrelenting phone calls from unknown men.

...

'I love you'. 'You are so beautiful'. 'I want to spend the night with you'. 'I want to marry you'. 'Do you have a boyfriend?' These are the things women hear from unknown male callers. The callers plead with the women to meet them. They ask women personal questions about where they live and what they do. Often, when women don't concede to reply, the callers use cuss words.

One woman narrates how a man once somehow got her number and began to incessantly call her. When she told him she was not interested, he spread a rumour in

YOUUU.

her community that she was having an affair with him. It was only after the man got married that he stopped calling.

Sometimes, when the women ask whom the caller is trying to reach, he simply responds: **'You'.**

The callers are persistent. One woman says, "When I say it's a wrong number, they insist I speak to them saying, "It's not using your phone balance," and continue to ask questions like, "Where are you right now?" "Have you eaten?" "Why are you hanging up? Talk to me." One woman shares how a man once told her that if she didn't speak to him, he would commit suicide and mention her phone number and location in a note.

The callers are inventive, and just won't take no for an answer. One woman recalls receiving calls from an unknown man who asked to marry her. She made him talk to her mother, thinking it would deter him. Instead, the caller said, 'Hello aunty,' and began talking to the mother as well, completely unfazed.

While these are usually phone calls, some of the women say they also receive



text messages, WhatsApp calls, or video and audio calls on Facebook Messenger.

Though they usually don't know the callers, the women often feel like the callers know everything about them – what they look like, when they go out, and even things as specific as their outfits or their daily routines. They ask questions like, for instance, 'Are you doing the evening aarti (prayer) now?'

A few of the women feel like they are being watched all the time. 'The boy speaks to me as if he knows me,' one woman says. Sometimes the callers pretend to have met the women before, but do not reveal any details about themselves.

...

But how are the callers getting women's numbers? A range of approaches, it turns out. Often, the callers are young men in the same social networks as the girls – though they use fake names on the call. For instance, a brother might go through his sister's contact list when she leaves her phone at home, taking her girl friends' numbers, and then sharing them with his friends.

Sometimes in school or college, when a class has to give their numbers to the teacher, the student in charge of collecting the phone numbers will share a photo of the list among his friends. 'Some boys are masterminds,' one woman says. 'When they see or hear a phone number, they can memorise it.'

But there are also cases of completely random people obtaining women's numbers. These numbers can be acquired from online forms, such as college admissions or job applications. Men take numbers from these forms and then call up, pretending that they are helping women to fill out the applications. Once, a participant got a promotional call from a company, and she responded by saying she was not interested. After that, the salesman began to call her from his personal number.

One woman recounts seeing a group of boys in her neighbourhood standing together with their phones, dialling '+91', followed by random digits to make up mobile numbers. If the call went through and there was a girl on the other end, they would save the number. If a boy picked up, they would not call again. Alternatively, boys play with the last few digits of a phone number until they hear a girl's voice on the other end. They often do this systematically, and in groups, each one assigned different numbers.





‘A girl’s phone number is like a toy for boys.’

Young men even share and trade numbers amongst each other – two numbers in exchange for two new numbers. Often, after one man calls, the women begin to receive calls from other numbers too. As one woman recounts: ‘Once I was at the ration shop with my friend. I got a call from an unknown number three times. I cut the call all three times. Then the fourth time my friend picked up and spoke to them, posing as Pallavi. After that, I started getting calls [from other numbers] asking for “Pallavi”.’

As one woman puts it, ‘A girl’s phone number is like a toy for boys.’

...

These ‘wrong number’ phone calls stir up a lot of feelings in women. Irritation. Rage. Tension. Disgust. Discomfort. Anxiety. Worry. One woman says, ‘I feel so angry that if they come in front of me, I’ll slap them or even kill them.’ Another wonders, frustrated, ‘Don’t they have any work to do in life?’ Some women say the use of abusive language makes them feel bad.

Some feel afraid, especially when callers tell them that they know their addresses. Some see the calls as an invasion of their personal space. The calls can make them feel controlled and threatened.

A couple of women explain that a few years ago, they didn't mind the occasional playful call. 'In the early days of getting a cell phone, everything was new and I used to not get that many calls. That time, I used to answer calls from unknown numbers and used to like talking on the phone. Not anymore.'

Some block the calls instantly. Others are more hesitant. 'I only block those calls that get really bad,' says one woman. Another says that blocking multiple wrong numbers fills up her phone memory, so she just ignores the calls. A third woman explains: 'Even when I block, they call back from different numbers.'

None of the women have tried to trace the numbers. A few of them have tried confronting their callers, though. One woman recalls telling a caller, 'Please don't call me like this, I am not interested in romance.' Another told a boy who would repeatedly call her saying he loved her: 'I am a 70-year-old woman and have had much love in my life. I don't need it anymore.' This didn't work – the boy persisted, saying, 'You need love at any age.'



But as one woman says, asking questions only prolongs the call, so the women usually try not to engage much with the caller.

Giving the phone to a male family member sometimes deters the caller, or even just pretending to call out to their father, asking him to take the call. Sometimes, not responding for a few days leads to the calls stopping.

One woman believes, ‘When [the callers] get married, they stop calling.’

Once a woman told her caller that she worked for the police, and that he should come into her office if he wanted to talk to her. That led to the calls ceasing. Many of the women have attempted to threaten the callers, saying they will complain to the police or to the cell phone company, and record the conversations as proof of harassment. But most often, both the callers and the women know that impunity around gender-based harassment is so widespread that their threats will remain empty.

Not only do women believe that their complaints won't be taken seriously, but they are also afraid that these actions will backfire.

The women voiced concerns about being blamed if they were to report the calls to anyone, especially their family members. Their worry is that the situation will end with their phones being taken away from them, and their characters being called into question.

As one woman explains, 'If the woman getting wrong number calls is someone's wife, then there are questions thrown at her like, "Why are they calling on your phone?" or "Why do you pick up when you know it's a wrong number?"'

As usual, the blame is placed on women, and the women themselves sometimes wonder if they are to blame. One woman says, 'When men say, "You called me first," I feel guilty somewhere and question myself.'



I have to deal with it



Queer & Trans Activists
esc

I have to deal with it

Online abuse often concentrates itself on people's gender and sexual identities. For LGBTQ+ activists and members, the internet is an important space to create social change, build relationships, and express their desires.

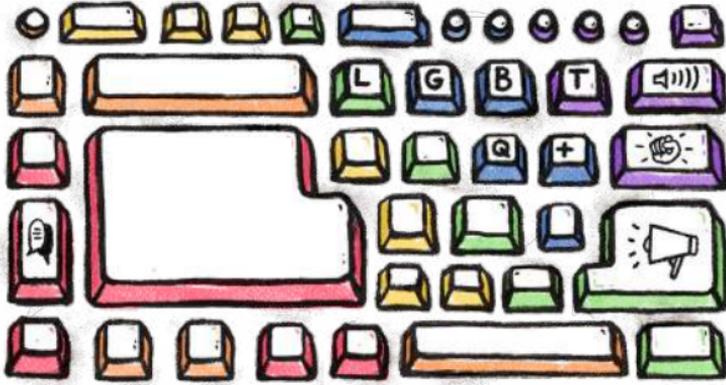
However, by living as queer people online, LGBTQ+ individuals also face various forms of harassment and violence, which play out across a range of internet platforms.

...

Both online and offline, trans people face a heightened vulnerability to violence. In comments and messages on social media, trans men and women are often interrogated by strangers about their gender identities, with frequent demands to know the intimate details of their bodies and relationships.

Anita*, a trans rights activist and programmer, says, 'I frequently get messages on [Facebook] Messenger asking me details about my body, like if I have been operated, what my genitals look like, and other sexual abuses of that nature.'

*name changed



‘Why are you behaving like a boy? You’re a girl, be like that’ or ‘Hey tomboy, take off your clothes. I want to see whether you’re a boy or a girl’.

This sort of dehumanisation is something that occurs almost constantly, and also extends to the Facebook pages of the trans rights groups or organisations that activists work with.

Vidya*, an activist and poet from Chennai, believes that as a trans woman, she lacks freedom on social media and is often exploited. She explains: ‘Social media has become a place where the trans community has to comply with the demands of others. If they call, we have to talk. If they chat, we have to respond. The independence that other people have on social media is lacking for trans people.’

*name changed

The 'demands' that Vidya refers to are often related to sex. Vidya describes how she gets 'tonnes of messages' from people saying that they want to have sex or a sexual relationship with her. These messages are mostly from men using fake profiles, without their actual photos. Vidya finds the messages and calls very disruptive, especially when they pop up while she is using her phone for work.

Vidya is used to people reaching out to her for help and advice, via messages or video calls on Facebook. These are usually people who are trying to explore their gender identities – everyone from young boys to married men. However, as a public activist and community role model, she is also vulnerable to abuse. 'Approaching for help is okay,' she says. 'But I get 90% requests for sex and 10% for help.'

She goes on to say: 'As soon as someone sees a photo of a transgender person, they immediately ask if you are open to anal or oral sex. To hide your face and then come to people who have shared their orientation just for sex? [This] is something I find unacceptable.'

Nandini*, who is an activist and artist from Tamil Nadu, has faced similar experiences. She put up her work mobile number on her organisation's website and Facebook page, because many transgender people are vulnerable to depression and suicide,

and she wants to help them the best she can. However, she often gets calls from men outside the trans community who ask her things like, 'Where are you?', 'What are you doing?', 'Have you eaten?' 'Can I meet you?'

'If I don't respond, then they use very vulgar words like "prostitute" and "tranny".

'This makes my [blood] boil and puts me in a very angry state.

But I have to deal with it.'

Nandini says that after having responded to thousands of phone calls, she can now tell within the first few minutes of a conversation whether the person calling is a sexual predator. Over time, Nandini has grown accustomed to receiving daily sexual passes on Facebook. She also receives messages on her organisation's Facebook page asking for 'the payment options' – not for donations, but for sex.

It's also the case, though, that trans women who are sex workers receive a huge amount of abuse for the work they do. Sujata*, a trans woman activist and sex worker from a small town in West India, has faced several situations where people pretending to be customers or

*name changed

part of the trans community get a hold of her number and then harass her. Once, someone got her number by claiming to seek counselling services, but the interaction soon turned into threats.

She recalls: 'Suddenly, I received a message from that number saying that they were checking and monitoring my WhatsApp and Facebook, and that my accounts will be shut down and that I will be punished.' Sujata* has had to change her phone number four times because of instances like this, and now uses a separate number for clients.

...

When faced with abusive comments, messages or calls, the trans people interviewed here respond by deleting the comments, or else blocking, reporting or ignoring the abusers.

Anita's immediate response is to block the people harassing her. She says she has tried reporting the profiles to Facebook, 'but nothing has happened. I just received a message saying the report is being reviewed. That's it. So, I just block them.' She expressed frustrations with Facebook's reporting mechanisms – the lack of transparency, consequences and follow-ups.

Vidya has never reported a profile or comment

to Facebook. 'I didn't know that we can do this,' she says. But she also adds: 'I am not fluent in English. If I knew English well, then I would have made much better use of social media.' Vidya sometimes chooses to meet with the men messaging her at her organisation's office, to counsel them not to use fake IDs for abusive purposes.

Due to online experiences that leave them feeling vulnerable, many trans activists have taken precautions to improve their digital security. They make sure to constantly change their social media passwords, and are cautious about who they add as friends and whose requests they accept.

...

In addition to social media, dating apps – an important space for many people in the LGBTQ+ community to express love and desire – have also been sites of difficult experiences.

'From a minute level of discrimination to a hardcore level, homophobia is expressed in many ways on dating apps,' says Bijoy*, a gay man who lives in Kerala. Bijoy describes how, when he was still closeted and having sex with someone he met online, that person told many other men that he was gay and gave them his phone number. After this, several unknown people began contacting him for sex.

*name changed

Bijoy says that while in his case he was able to dodge the situation safely, this sort of abuse often happens to people who are closeted or less comfortable with their sexual identities. 'You are vulnerable and might feel forced to have sex with people out of fear. Many people end up submitting because they're concerned about their privacy and safety.'

'There are a lot of abusive profiles on Grindr. There are profiles created just to abuse people,' says Mohit*, a gay man based in Lucknow. People create faceless profiles without any information, simply for the purpose of harassing the queer community. Someone who Mohit was chatting to on Grindr even casually admitted: 'I just made this profile so I can abuse people and then run away.'

Amar*, who identifies as 'gender empathetic', 'in the grey spectrum' and gay, says that for the past six months, a profile with no name, no details, and no photo has been messaging him on Grindr – calling him ugly and telling him to die. 'I'm used to it,' Amar says resignedly. He used to try and engage with the harasser, but doesn't any longer.

The abuse and shaming that queer people face on dating apps cuts across other dimensions of their identities too, from race to age to religion to sexual preferences. Amar explains how white men on Grindr have used racial

slurs against him, while 42-year-old Mohit has experienced a great deal of age-shaming on the dating app. 'People say, "You are so old. What are you doing on Grindr? You should be happily married with 5-10 kids."' Mohit's stand is that he never responds to abusers; he simply blocks them.

He explains that people are shamed for their sexual preferences as well – 'there's a lot of bottom shaming' – and also points to what he calls a 'very recent phenomenon on Grindr': anti-Muslim abuse. 'People have started saying in their profiles, "If you're a Muslim, stay away". It's really horrendous.'

For many queer people, threats and blackmail on dating apps are a constant reality, and often extend to the offline world. Screenshots from dating apps – of profiles, photos or intimate messages – have been used to blackmail individuals, who, as Bijoy explained earlier, may agree to the demands for fear of being outed. People who don't use the app have also found their photos being used on Grindr without permission.

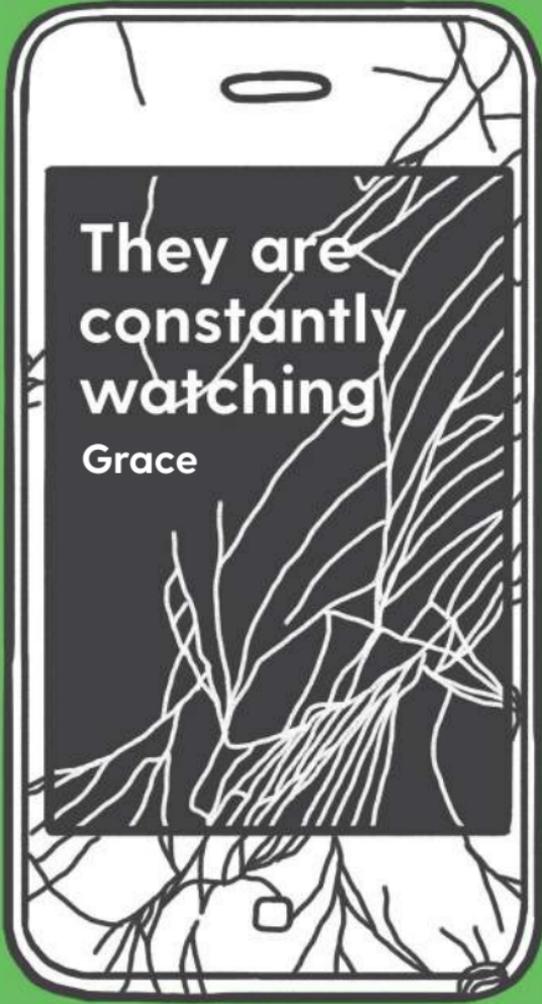
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When Amar reported the profile that has been sending him death threats for six months to Grindr, absolutely nothing happened. 'They didn't seem to take it seriously,' he says.

What's more, once you block a profile you can no longer see it, so it's hard to know whether the profile has actually been taken down or not. And often times, these reporting mechanisms do more harm than good.

A trans woman explains how her Tinder profile has been reported many times by men, because her gender does not fit into Tinder's binary options. Her profile was subsequently blocked by Tinder, and she had to make a new profile with a new phone number.

In the absence of reliable ways to respond to abuse, people have taken to employing their own safety precautions while using dating apps. Many queer individuals have stopped putting their photos on their profiles, and only share pictures if the person they are chatting with shares their own photo first. Most also avoid giving personal details like where they live and work, and provide no other information until they have built up sufficient trust.



They are constantly watching

29-year-old Grace is a transgender rights activist and the founder of the [Trans Rights Now Collective](#). She is also actively involved in a long-standing agitation against the expansion of a copper smelting plant run by Sterlite Copper in her native district of Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu.

Recently, Grace has been using social media to document the protests as well as the government's response to them – which, at one stage, included a complete internet shutdown.

...

Local communities have been resisting Sterlite Copper – a subsidiary of Vedanta, a company known for flouting environmental regulations – for years. A fresh wave of protests began in March 2018 in response to Sterlite's attempts to expand their copper smelting unit in Thoothukudi with no regard for the environmental damages that would result.¹ To mark the 100th day of their protest, activists in the community planned a rally to the district collector's office, carrying with them a petition.

The entire rally was coordinated and organised over WhatsApp. The protestors moved along a pre-planned route with many people joining

along the way. This resulted in a movement that was over 20,000 people strong.²

The protestors had informed local authorities of their plans in advance, and the authorities had expressed no opposition – but activists still anticipated resistance. Sure enough, on the day of the rally, the police turned violent. To stop the protest, they set up roadblocks, released hordes of cattle on to the roads, conducted a baton charge, and used tear gas against those present.

When the protestors still continued onwards with their march, the police began to shoot. Thirteen people were killed, and many others were injured.³

• • •

Following the protest, the government ordered a five-day internet shutdown in Thoothukudi, as well as in the two neighbouring districts of Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari. This order was passed under the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency or Public Safety) Rules,⁴ which lays out the procedure for suspending telecom services in cases of public emergency.

‘Provocative messages are spread in social media violently with half truth and anti-social elements are trying to exploit the situation,’ the government said in the televised announcement of its order.⁵



The shutdown covered both mobile data and broadband internet, with only voice calls and text messages being permitted.

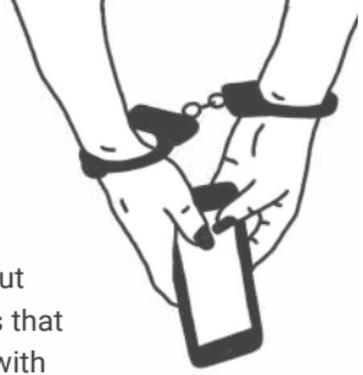
Without access to WhatsApp and social media, activists could no longer communicate and organise amongst themselves. Reliable information could not be shared. Families struggled to get updates on injured or killed relatives, and to locate missing people.⁶

What's more, communities could not get the details of the situation out to the rest of the world.

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At the same time, the police began to arbitrarily pick up people on the streets – ‘always the ones who had smartphones,’ says Grace.

She believes that people with smartphones were specifically targeted, as opposed to those with feature phones or those without any phones at all. The police stopped people and checked their phones for any messages, photos or videos related to Sterlite – all without a warrant. The police also ordered people to delete content, broke their phones, and then filed FIRs against them, accusing them of threatening law and order. In the FIRs, no mention was made of the phones, nor of the police's unlawful checking of them.



Many women and trans persons were harassed and beaten up by the police, but all those arrested were men. Grace says that young men in particular were targeted, with around 400 in total being arrested. Grace goes on to say: '[The arrests] were done so suddenly that parents whose sons had gone to the shop nearby only realised they had been arrested when they didn't come back.'

Instead of taking those arrested to the police station as per the law, they were driven in a van to a hill station, where they were beaten up and held in a cave. It was only when the bar association approached the Thoothukudi District Court to file bail petitions that the situation was finally investigated, and the police were ordered to take the arrested men back to the police station.

But even after this, those arrested could not file for bail immediately, because bail applications are usually made online. Due to the internet shutdown, lawyers had to travel long distances to file bail orders, extending the duration of the arrests.

When activists filed a case in the Chennai High Court, the Chief Justice asked for the shutdown to be lifted immediately in Thoothukudi's two neighbouring districts. However, in Thoothukudi itself, Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code was in place ('temporary measures to

maintain public tranquillity'), so the High Court refused to take any action on the matter.

Section 144 is a legal provision that gives state governments emergency powers and is typically used to prevent unlawful assemblies and issue curfews in times of unrest. However, according to a [Software Freedom Law Centre](#) report, it is increasingly being misused to impose internet shutdowns.⁷

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The order was lifted after five days. Those who had photos and videos on their phones of the protest and the police clampdown began to upload them to their personal Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Grace explains that the images being put out by the media were entirely inadequate. 'We wanted to share content that included videos of police brutality and violence,' she says.

But the state was determined to stop this. While none of the content was taken down from platforms, those uploading photos and videos related to police violence were directly targeted. The police even went to hospitals to break the phones of people who had been injured by police brutality and had put up images or videos of themselves. This was once again done without any warrants.

When Grace posted videos from the protest online, she got calls from people she knew in the Indian Administrative Service and the Collector's Office. They told her to be careful and remain quiet. While she believes these calls were well intentioned, Grace was taken aback by the pervasive fear and silence surrounding the incident.

Once the shutdown was lifted, the media started coming to Thoothukudi. People who were interviewed by news channels and had allowed their faces to remain visible were located by the police and held for a day of interrogation. This included many trans women. Several trans women sex workers, in particular, were threatened by the police, who told them, **'If you keep talking [about Sterlite] we'll silence you. We know what you do.'**

A group of women in a village with a majority Dalit population continued the resistance. Grace and others livestreamed their protest on Facebook. This resulted in the police going to the village and filing FIRs against the women. These women are now living in hiding in nearby villages. Every time they try to return home, the police return as well – to harass them or their families.

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So far, India has seen 121 internet shutdowns in 2018, but according to the Software Freedom Law Centre's [internet shutdown tracker](#), this was Tamil Nadu's first ever



suspension of internet services. Grace notes that this was also the first time she had seen a widespread attempt to delete mobile phone content and the targeting of individuals based on their smartphones.

‘It’s relatively calm now, but we are still monitored a lot online,’ she says. ‘They are constantly watching.’ Those who were arrested continue to be tracked. Every time activists organise a meeting, the police show up, having heard about it on Facebook. As Grace says, ‘Right now, surveillance and monitoring are so much that even as an activist I can’t speak out freely.’

¹ Radhakrishnan, S. (23 May, 2018). The Hindu explains: Sterlite protests. The Hindu. (<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/the-hindu-explains-sterlite-protests/article23969542.ece>)

² Ranipeta, S. (23 May, 2018). As Thoothukudi simmers, TN asks internet providers to cut data services in 3 districts. The News Minute. (<https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/thoothukudi-simmers-tn-asks-internet-providers-cut-data-services-3-districts-818130>)

³ Staff. (25 May, 2018). Death toll rises to 13; over 200 picked-up for interrogation. The Hindu. (<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/death-toll-rises-to-13-over-200-picked-up-for-interrogation/article23982274.ece>)

⁴ Ranipeta, S. (23 May, 2018). As Thoothukudi simmers, TN asks internet providers to cut data services in 3 districts. The News Minute. (<https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/thoothukudi-simmers-tn-asks-internet-providers-cut-data-services-3-districts-81813>)

⁵ Staff. (23 May, 2018). Tamil Nadu: Internet suspended in three districts after fresh anti-Sterlite protests in Thoothukudi. Scroll. (<https://scroll.in/latest/879997/thoothukudi-day-2-of-anti-sterlite-protests-deaths-reported>)

⁶ Ranipeta, S. (23 May, 2018). As Thoothukudi simmers, TN asks internet providers to cut data services in 3 districts. The News Minute. (<https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/thoothukudi-simmers-tn-asks-internet-providers-cut-data-services-3-districts-81813>)

⁷ Software Freedom Law Centre. (2018). Living in Digital Darkness: A Handbook on Internet Shutdowns in India. (<https://sflc.in/sites/default/files/reports/Living%20in%20Digital%20Darkness%20-%20A%20Handbook%20on%20Internet%20Shutdowns%20in%20India%2c%20May%202018%20-%20by%20SFLCin.pdf>)

‘I would see those messages
and just get so cold and shiver.’
- Trishna, Assam

CONCLUSION

The 10 case studies in Free To Be Mobile cover a range of experiences, many of which destroy the notion of a divide between the digital and the physical. When the boundary you thought existed between your digital profile and your doorstep is crossed by an unknown man from a social media post. When your physically abusive husband turns your mobile phone into the digital instrument of domestic violence. When your education is stopped because your father found out from your phone bill that you were talking to a boy. In all these cases, the physical and the digital intertwine to create harmful consequences.

Some of these cases lie below the radar of what we think of as digital violence. Situations like the incessant ‘wrong number’ phone calls, that lead to a slow, but constant, erosion of everyday life, a permanent, but invisible, state of discomfort. When the more visible sides of technology-enabled violence, like social media trolling, garner most of our attention, it is these insidious kinds of violence that get lost.



Even though mobile-enabled violence is ubiquitous and pervasive, it is often normalised. 'I'm used to it.' 'It's normal.' 'If I don't use Facebook, the abuse will come from somewhere else'. There's a feeling that this comes with the territory, that it's part and parcel of using digital devices, that it's almost inevitable, that it's not violence. What is never normalised is the impact of this violence: every single person spoke of the enduring emotional, physical and mental toll they had faced from mobile-enabled violence, and the trauma and disruption it had caused in their lives.

We need to hear their voices. We need to listen to them. Building from these stories, here's what we can do to end digital violence. And ensure that women, girls, queer and trans people are free to be mobile.

Recognise homegrown solutions

As much as these are stories of violence, they are also stories of resistance. Using a fake GPS location. Buying a second SIM card in secret. Using an alternative Facebook account. Ignoring incessant messages. These are some of the homegrown solutions that the women in our case studies used. These strategies are usually contextual and driven by necessity, rather than technological adeptness. But they do work, and it is only when we acknowledge them as valid strategies that we can strengthen them.

Build networks of support

Allyship, solidarity, community and networks of support are critical to those facing violence of any kind. When faced with persistent harassment, a rural journalists' collective used social media to put out statements, leverage networks, and get support. Of course, this requires a certain degree of social capital that not everyone can afford. Large shows of support become even more vital when confronted with the mobs that increasingly reign over digital spaces and unleash collective, targeted harassment. These are very different from isolated acts of abuse and there is only so much a single user can do in the face of a mob.

Dump protectionist responses

It is crucial that the strategies used to deal with digital violence are empowering, not limiting. Responses like 'change your phone number', 'don't share your photo', 'delete your profile' only put the blame, and the burden, on the person experiencing violence. These are not meaningful responses. Limiting women's freedoms in physical spaces has not made them safer; restricting their freedoms in digital spaces in the name of safety is not a solution.

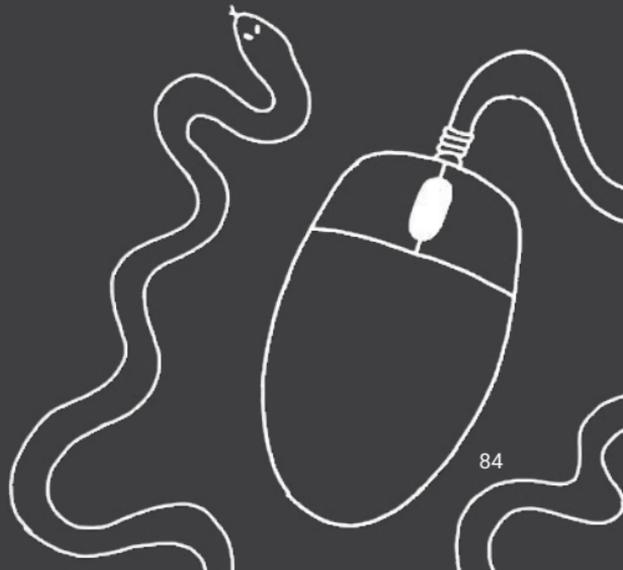
Create holistic, inclusive digital security for all

Digital security practices don't always encompass the realities of people in low-income communities, many of whom



use shared feature phones. If digital security only accounts for skilled smartphone or laptop users, who are we considering as worth keeping digitally secure? We miss out on a whole world of problems, and a whole world of strategies. We need to meet users – of all kinds – where they are at, in their own ecosystems of WhatsApp forwards and YouTube videos and apps that often don't make it to digital security curricula, and start thinking of their security needs.

We also need to factor in emotional and mental health when thinking about digital security. Human beings cannot be compartmentalised into digital and physical when their lives seamlessly yin and yang in and out of both spaces; holistic digital security practices must account for this.



Demand platform accountability

Even though violence in most of these cases takes place on WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter etc., the onus of staying safe in digital spaces is often on users. Does this mean that platforms are not accountable to their users? What role do mobile service providers have to play in this? While we don't want digital platforms to control speech, what we do want is empathy, responsiveness, transparency and accountability. This can start with strengthening language options, security settings, and reporting mechanisms.

But there's much more that can be done if companies understand that they are accountable not just to shareholders, but to the billions of users who live and breathe on these platforms day in and day out.

Get the law to work

In most of these cases, taking the legal route was rarely a consideration simply because the legal system, in so many cases, has not delivered justice. For complainants, the process itself is not just opaque, but often painful, time-consuming, resource-intensive and punishing. What one activist faced while trying to file her complaint is a travesty of justice; the crime department first refused to take on her case, and then put a traffic inspector in charge of an online case. When complaints are not taken seriously by those

in charge of law and order, how can the legal system give us justice?

For complainants, the process
itself is not just opaque, but
often painful, time-consuming,
resource-intensive
and punishing.

Create rights-affirming laws and policies

Digital rights are an integral aspect of our human rights, but laws and policies are often based on 'protection' rather than on affirming rights. We don't need laws and policies based on morality; we need laws that recognise the concrete harms that people experience on a daily basis. We need policies that affirm consent. We need policies that recognise hate speech and deal with it, while upholding free speech and expression, including sexual expression.

Dig deeper, deal with gender, sexuality and patriarchy

The mobile phone, the internet, digital devices: these are not objects, but spaces for people, and, therefore, for hierarchies. Experiences in this

space are mediated by the usual axes of power – around gender, sexuality, language, caste, ability and other social markers. We need to dig deeper into power to address digital violence, which is ultimately, much more than a technological problem. It's not the digital device itself that causes violence, it is the way the mobile phone is weaponised in the context of power dynamics that are all too familiar to women, girls and trans and queer folks.

Gender is one such axis of power that lies below all of these stories. When parents worry that the mobile phone will 'spoil' their daughters, it's gender bias. When brothers tell sisters not to use social media anymore, it's gender bias. Control over women and girls is often masked as love, care and protection, but ends up restricting the freedoms of women, girls and marginalised genders. We need to recognise the root causes underpinning digital violence to move beyond Band-Aid solutions.

All said and done, using mobile phones and other digital devices is not fundamentally dangerous – it's pleasurable. Mobile phones are channels for friendships and relationships and romance and fun; they bring us joy, pleasure, freedom and mobility. We need to do what it takes to ensure that women, girls, and marginalised genders can inhabit digital spaces freely – and fearlessly. That everyone is free to be mobile.

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Many of the stories in Free To Be Mobile emerged during workshops that Point of View conducts across India. Based in Mumbai, India, Point of View builds and amplifies women's voices and removes barriers to voice, speech and expression. Our program on gender, sexuality and technology equips women, trans and queer people to freely – and fearlessly – inhabit digital spaces.

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