Creating Women's 'Safe Space' in Digital Life: Perspectives from Singapore

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Introduction

Digital technologies have only served to intensify tensions among a range of connected concerns: national security, the security of individuals, and policies or laws set in place to ensure such security in the digital ecosystem. This is especially apparent when it comes to the security of women and girls. As a matter of fact, the orientation of digital data is such – devoid of attention to people and places[1] – that it sheds light on the fragility of legal certainties and boundaries, which becomes 'increasingly "undone" by digital technologies and future-oriented security practices'.[2] To address these rapid changes, policymakers have opted to explore areas of new knowledge as they emerge in controversies of mass surveillance, fraud, harassment, and the like as they would in the physical realm. Unfortunately, this has taken place through systems of governance that, once again, leave out the interests of certain groups, be it women, sexual minorities, or other minority groups. What is required now is the advancement of more critical approaches to digital security, especially for the protection of women and girls.

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[1] Aradau, Claudia. "Assembling (Non)Knowledge: Security, Law, and Surveillance in a Digital World." International Political Sociology 11, no.4 (2017): 327–342.
[2] Ibid: p. 329

Contents

In March 2022, the Singapore government tabled a white paper[3] on women's development following a year-long consultation with the public. The paper acknowledged, along with other key areas for change, the need for greater efforts to create *safe spaces* in the digital ecosystem. Singapore is among the safest cities in the world yet sexual harassment and other forms of offence against women persist and have taken on new arenas such as going online. "Efforts must begin upstream," the white paper highlights. Hence, Singapore will continue efforts to educate students on appropriate behaviours and laws that protect them against sexual abuse and harassment either online or in-person. "Refreshed" Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) in schools, gradually implemented since 2021, "emphasizes moral values, cyber wellness, and the importance of respecting personal boundaries online and in person".[4] While targeting younger users of digital space at an early age through school curricula is an excellent way of sensitising users of the various dangers lurking online, equal emphasis should be placed on the creation of content and services, (upstream) the flow of information (along various pathways) and consumption of information and content (downstream). This would include appropriate checks and follow-up actions at each of these points along the value chain, and periodic evaluations of these checks and actions to assess their effectiveness in protecting users, female users in particular.

This NTS Insight examines the commitment to create online *safe spaces* for women and girls in Singapore. An online *safe space* is a virtual platform where women and girls can freely state their opinions, seek support, and engage in discussions without fear of harassment or judgment. *Safe spaces* can also be spaces where women and girls feel free to express themselves on common digital fora without any repercussions. This space will have to be governed with a gendered understanding of the use of different online platforms. The central premise of the Insight lies in why there is a need for such spaces and recommends additional measures to ensure that online violence against women and girls is eradicated.

'Unsafe' Spaces

There are as many reports, blogs, articles, protests, and even laws against threats or harassment against women online as there are actual incidents of violence faced by women and girls in the digital space.[5] This is unfortunately evidenced by examples of suicides of prominent female artists as a result of cyberbullying,[6] cases of 'revenge porn'[7] being spread

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[3] Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF). "White Paper on Singapore Women's Development – Towards a Fairer and More Inclusive Society." MSF, 2022. https://www.msf.gov.sg/docs/default-source/celebrating-sg-women-document/white-paper-on-singapore-womens-development.pdf.

[4] Ibid: p 103

[5] Nair, Tamara. "The Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Digital Space." In *Gender and Security in Digital Space: Navigating Access, Harassment, and Disinformation*, eds. Haciyakupoglu, Gulizar and Yasmine Wong, (London, NY: Routledge, 2023), 19-32.

[6] Marks, Hayden. "Cyberbullying and the Tragedy of Hana Kimura." The Diplomat, 05 June 2020. https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/cyberbullying-and-the-tragedy-of-hana-kimura/ ; Zuppello, Suzanne. "Why We Let Famous Women Get Bullied Online." Rolling Stone, 21 July 2016. https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/why-we-let-famous-women-get-bullied-online-93244/ ; Kim, Soyeon, Melissa Kimber, Michael H. Boyle, and Katholiki Georgiades. "Sex Differences in the Association Between Cyberbullying Victimization and Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation in Adolescents." *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 64, no. 2(2019): 126–135; among numerous other sources that indicate cyber bullying is prevalent against female celebrities and the females present a significantly higher number of suicide victims because of cyber bullying.

[7] Mckinlay, Tahlee, and Tiffany Lavis. "Why Did She Send it in the First Place? Victim Blame in the Context of 'Revenge Porn'." *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law* 27, no. 3(2020): 386–396; Dodge, Alexa. "Trading Nudes like Hockey Cards: Exploring the Diversity of 'Revenge Porn' Cases Responded to in Law." *Social & Legal Studies* 30, 3(2021): 448–468; Bloom, Sarah. "No Vengeance for Revenge Porn Victims: Unraveling Why This Latest Female-Centric, Intimate-Partner Offense Is Still Legal, and Why We Should Criminalize it." *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 42, no. 1 (2014): 233, among many others.

online by disgruntled former or current intimate partners, to death threats and hate speech,[8] with a particular feminised twist, directed at women who may be exercising their freedom to express opinions on a social media platform. This comes from an accepted misogynistic culture that unfortunately dominates many societies. The online space has thus become an extension of the physical world where inequality and discrimination have been diffused through the technological boundary. We think of technology as being gender neutral, but it is in fact highly gendered at its very inception. The creators of current digital technologies (mostly, if not all, male) come from a (masculine-centred) world where their safety is not threatened in gendered ways, and thus have not created platforms where all individuals would be safe regardless of gender.[9] These platforms were mostly created from blinkered and blind spotted perspectives, steeped in a machismo culture. The social context within which new technologies are created and later embedded is where misogynistic behaviour continues to reside, with the outcome that women and girls continue to face old threats, now in new places.[10]

Suppression of one's freedom of speech and expression, 'Cyber-Touch',[11] breach of dignity and violation of privacy; all these constitute Violence Against Women (henceforth VAW). Seventy-four percent of countries, although passing or having passed legislation on cybercrimes, lack an adequate implementation mechanism, with concurrent failures on law enforcement, to effectively address online VAW.[12] Examples abound of such violence in digital space and there are sadly too many to name here. Suffice to say, activists and researchers, for example, the London School of Economics WPS blog,[13] do a good job in bringing forth many examples of such violence.

One of the reasons for the existence of unsafe spaces online is because of the anonymity accorded to perpetrators of harassment and online VAW. This is exacerbated by a culture of impunity, which is not unheard of when discussing such forms of online violence against women and girls. We must add to this the difficulty of enforcing any form of rules or 'code of conduct' on users. With the greater move towards eXtended Realities (XR) technologies,[14] which plunge people into an all-encompassing digital environment, unwanted attention and (virtual) touches in the digital world can be made to feel real where the sensory experience is heightened. This is the aim, but it is also becoming a space that is unsafe. For instance, in the virtual world, women have complained about being "groped" and even "raped" by male avatars while others stand by and do nothing.[15]

Tracking abusive behaviour in digital environments is already a challenge because incidents are not recorded and generally occur in real-time. The alternate reality constructed by companies like Meta and others working in the XR spaces is, by definition, supposed to feel authentic. The corollary of this, however, is that personal abuse feels authentic, too. In one popular virtual reality game, VRChat, a violating incident on women occurs about once every seven minutes, according to the non-profit Center for Countering Digital Hate.[16] Meta's community standards do not permit such

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[8] Edstrom, Maria. "The Trolls Disappear in the Light: Swedish Experiences of Mediated Sexualised Hate Speech in the Aftermath of Behring Breivik." *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 5, no. 2(2016): 96–106; Scott, Jennifer. "Misogyny: Why Is it not a Hate Crime?" BBC News, 15 March 2021. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-56399862 ; Piscopo, Jennifer. "Being a Woman in Politics Shouldn't Come with Death Threats." Ms, 12 February 2020. https://msmagazine.com/2020/12/02/violence-against-women-being-a-woman-in-politics-shouldnt-come-with-death-threats/.

[9] Swisher, Kara. (Panellist) Foreign Policy Virtual Dialogue (in collaboration with Our Secure Future): WPS for the Digital Age: Putting Gender on the Tech Agenda. 06 May 2021. https://oursecurefuture.org/news/virtual-dialogue-women-peace-security-digital-age.

[10] Nair, Tamara. "The Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Digital Space." In Gender and Security in Digital Space: Navigating Access, Harassment, and Disinformation, eds. Haciyakupoglu, Gulizar and Yasmine Wong, (London, NY: Routledge, 2023), 19-32.

[11] This is a term coined by the UN broadband commission for digital development. Refer to: UN Broadband Commission. "Cyber Violence Against Women and Girls' A worldwide Wake-Up Call". Discussion Paper, UN Broadband Commission for Digital Development Working Group on Broadband and Gender. UN Broadband Commission, 2015. https://www.broadbandcommission.org/Documents/reports/bb-wg-gender-discussionpaper2015-executive-summary.pdf. The report also argues that "cyber touch is recognized as equally as harmful as physical touch," suggesting that online harassment might be just as lethal as domestic violence or sexual abuse.

[12] Gurumurthy, Anita and Amrita Vasudevan. "Equality, Dignity and Privacy Are Cornerstone Principles to Tackle Online VAW." LSE Women, Peace and Security Blog, 04 December 2017. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/2017/12/04/equality-dignity-and-privacy-are-cornerstone-principles-to-tackle-online-vaw/.

[13] For more on blogs from the WPS Centre in LSE, please refer to: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/?s=WPS+and+digital+security

[14] Extended Reality (XR) refers to all combined real and virtual environments and man-machine interactions, and is therefore, to be understood as the "reservoir" for representative forms such as Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) and the interpolated areas between them. "HYVE. XR, AR, VR, MR – What's the Difference?" HYVE, 2023. https://www.hyve.net/en/blog/all-about-virtual-reality/#:~:text=Extended%20Reality%20(XR)%20refers%20to,the%20interpolated%20areas%20between%20them.

[15] News18 Tech Desk. "Woman Claims She Was 'Virtually' Gang Raped In Metaverse." CNNNews18, 03 February 2022. https://www.news18.com/news/tech/woman-claims-she-was-virtually-gang-raped-in-metaverse-4731377.html.

[16] "CCDH Submission to the White House." Center for Countering Digital Hate, 22 September 2022. https://counterhate.com/research/ccdh-submission-to-the-white-house/.

behaviour, but the difficulty of enforcing rules, coupled with the anonymity and nascent social structures of VR, have posed an important question: can such [and all digital] spaces ever be safe for women?"[17]

Online gaming is a huge industry with millions of participants, and we do not have enough data from female gamers or hosts of these platforms of such violations. Unless a conscious effort is made or controls and checks are in place, many perpetrators continue their vile behaviour against women in these alternate reality platforms with little or no consequence. The gaming industry in Singapore too, has little to no data on such online harms. This lack of data is something that needs to be addressed especially with the popularity of the online gaming experience. Apart from such experiences, the relatively safe environment that Singapore projects can, and has been, compromised online. Between November 2018 to October 2019, hundreds to thousands of private photos were circulated in a Telegram group chat called "SG Nasi Lemak", in Singapore. At its peak, the group had 44,000 members and 29 administrators who, without consent, shared among themselves obscene photos of (mostly) Singaporean women. A report said that men in the group had to contribute and share photos; otherwise, they would be kicked out of the group. The police arrested four administrators after receiving numerous reports between March and October 2019. Two, aged 20 and 18, were placed on probation; another sentenced to nine weeks in jail and a fine of $26,000; the last one sentenced to mandatory treatment for a year in lieu of jail time. The scandal went viral on social media. People expressed outrage over the scandal and its scale—44,000 men! — and the fact that all of those involved, apart from the four who received minor penalties, got away scot-free! This points to the culture of impunity discussed above. Sadly, offshoots of the "SG Nasi Lemak" group chat have emerged since then, unsurprising, considering the near lack of accountability in the previous instance.[18] In light of this, AWARE, a Singapore women rights group and NGO, created a hotline for victims who need help.[19] There was much support for the victims, and condemnation of the perpetrators from the general public, including calls for greater 'naming and shaming' of those who were involved. For as much online support victims of these crimes received, there are downsides to such forms of vernacular security. Not only might that not create the change that is needed (unless on a global scale like the *#MeToo* movement), to speed up criminal proceedings or change the consequences—or lack, thereof—it can also lead to vigilantism, where people decide to take justice into their own hands. Hence a more institutional and curated approach is necessary when we think of creating *safe spaces* for women online.

The Need for Online Safe Spaces

Women may seek *safe spaces* online for various reasons, including the need for support, protection from harassment, and the opportunity to freely express themselves without fear of judgment or discrimination. Such spaces also emphasise the role of digital technologies as a democratising tool. *Safe spaces* can empower women by providing a platform to discuss issues that affect them, share stories, and build a sense of community. These spaces foster solidarity among women, allowing them to connect with others who have similar experiences and challenges. Published studies have found that women's online communities can provide emotional support, validation, and empowerment, as well as a sense of agency.[20,21] There are a number of examples of online *safe spaces* such as *Girls' Globe*, which is an online community that aims to amplify the voices of women and girls by providing a platform for them to share their stories, experiences, and perspectives on various topics, including health, education, and gender equality. Yet another example is the *Women's*

[17] Marsden, Rhodri. "Will women ever be safe in the metaverse?" The National, 13 February 2022. https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/2022/02/13/will-women-ever-be-safe-in-the-metaverse/.

[18] AWARE. https://twitter.com/awarenews/status/1376852502683869189?s=20&t=2CUMhhH8iSi_lSu_se0oug
AWARE Singapore Twitter feed. 30 March 2021.

[19] Uwase, Aisha. "Safe Spaces: A life-changing place for adolescent girls and young women in Rwanda." Girls' Globe, 05 July 2023
https://www.girlsglobe.org/2023/07/05/safe-spaces-a-life-changing-place-for-adolescent-girls-and-young-women-in-rwanda/.

[20] Garton, Laura, Caroline Haythornthwaite, and Barry Wellman. "Studying online social networks." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 3, no. 1 (1997): JCMC313.

[21] Stavrositu, Carmen, and S. Shyam Sundar. "Does blogging empower women? Exploring the role of agency and community." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 17, no. 4 (2012): 369-386.

Web, an Indian online platform that provides a safe space for women to share their stories, opinions, and experiences. It covers a wide range of topics, including career development, relationships, parenting, and social issues.[22]

An extension of the democratising nature of these online spaces is that they provide for freedom of expression. Women can opine on topics of interest freely without the fear of judgment or backlash. In male-dominated online spaces, women's voices are often silenced or dismissed. This has a lot to do with the cultural norms expected of women (and men). For example, women are not as easily accepted as political beings who have strong views on defence or foreign affairs or military matters or national or global economics. The backlash then comes from this 'unexpected' or 'unwelcome' opinions from those not expected to be interested in these matters. *Safe spaces* provide an environment where women can share their thoughts, opinions, and ideas without being interrupted or undermined. This becomes important when discussing critical public policy decisions, or during elections, or equally - perhaps more so - during times of crises.

Safe spaces can also focus on addressing gender-specific issues that women face, such as sexism, misogyny, and gender-based violence. These spaces provide a platform for discussions, awareness-raising, and advocacy without exposing these women to public criticism that can disempower them. And there is also the issue of narrative styles. Research on gendered inequality in online discourse point out the dominance of a 'male style' of interaction.[23] The male style is characterised by messages that are longer and more frequent, issue-oriented, assertive, authoritative, adversarial, sarcastic, and self-promoting. The female-gendered style, on the other hand, tends to be shorter, personally-oriented, questioning, tentative, apologetic, and supportive.[24] The male narrative style tends to be accepted and even encouraged in many online groups rendering women 'voiceless'. However, some hope for deliberative equality can be found within online discourses that are accepting of different narrative forms. For a start, the extent of inequalities within online interaction varies across cyberspace. There are numerous online deliberative fora in which there is no noticeable abuse or domination,[25] of narrative style or otherwise. Discursive inequalities may also diminish with the influx of women and other marginalised groups into cyberspace.[26] Such *safe spaces* help to address inequalities online and help promote social change.

Safe spaces can be particular to women but can also be a shared platform. Even within common online platforms, *safe spaces* can and should be created and maintained. It is important to note that *safe spaces* are not meant to exclude or discriminate against others but rather to create an inclusive environment where women can feel safe and supported.

Women's Online Safe Spaces in Singapore

In the Singapore context, women and girls face a host of online VAW in different forms. They may experience cyberbullying, online harassment and stalking, and include receiving abusive messages, threats, or having personal information shared without consent.[27] Women and girls in Singapore also encounter online misogyny and sexism, including derogatory comments, objectification, and gender-based discrimination and this occurs in various online spaces, including social media platforms, online forums, and comment sections.[28] Young girls are also victims of 'grooming',

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[22] Women's Web. "India's only digital platform that enables women @ work, through Content & Community". https://www.womensweb.in/about-us/

[23] Herring, Susan C. "Gender and Democracy in Computer-Mediated Communication." *Electronic Journal of Communication* 3, no. 2 (1993): 1-17; Herring, Susan C. "The rhetorical dynamics of gender harassment online." *The Information Society* 15, no. 3 (1999): 151-167.

[24] Ibid

[25] Dahlberg, Lincoln. "Computer-mediated communication and the public sphere: A critical analysis." *Journal of Computer-mediated communication* 7, no. 1 (2001): JCMC714.

[26] Ibid

[27] Quilt.AI and Aware, Singapore. "A study of online misogyny in Singapore." https://www.aware.org.sg/wp-content/uploads/Quilt.AI-x-AWARE-study-of-online-misogyny-in-Singapore.pdf.

[28] Ibid

where perpetrators try to build a trusting and emotional relationship with a minor, usually with the purpose of sexual exploitation, gratification or abuse.[29]

When it comes to preventing and combatting online VAW, women in Singapore also face the challenge of gender bias and under-representation in tech-related industries, especially in decision-making roles, such representation being a vital first step in addressing such violence. Greater representation and inclusion can help create 'safety switches' in programmes and devices that would go a long way in protecting women and girls who are end-users of such technology. Similar to online tools for other issues such as terrorism and child abuse, specific codes can be created to address online VAW.[30] Such tools would be able to identify harmful language and images, as well as the ability to remove such content from platforms. It would also allow for immediate reporting by any user.

In May 2021, a poll was uploaded on social networking platform "MeWe" about ranking how attractive 12 ustazah (female Islamic religious instructors) were, even venturing to ask which of them should be sexually assaulted.[31] This incident, together with the "SG Nasi lemak" case discussed above spurred the establishment of the Sunlight Alliance for Action (Sunlight AfA) to address online harms against women and girls – the first of its kind to do so - under the leadership of Senior Minister of State Sim Ann and Parliamentary Secretary Rahayu Mahzam.[32] Ms Sim made the observation that women and girls in Singapore may not have "the same degree of freedom and confidence online as they do in real life", and this is a gap that requires remediation.[33]

Launched by the Ministry of Communication and Information (MCI) in July 2022, the Sunlight AfA created a range of outreach and education programmes for providing support and resources to victims of cyber harassment and promoting responsible behaviour online.[34] At the launch, the MCI organised a community hackathon around creating and promoting online spaces that are safer and kinder for users.[35] Also, Safer Internet Day was observed with the Sunlight AfA organising a webinar on ways and means of tackling the online safety gap faced by women and girls.[36]

Although Sunlight AfA programmes only ran from July 2021 until July 2022, efforts towards awareness-raising about the issue and creating access to resources for victims of online harms are ongoing. The work begun by the Sunlight AfA was taken up and is being carried on by the non-profit organisation known as SG Her Empowerment (SHE). SHE was launched in September 2022.[37] It has since established SHECARES@SCWO, a support centre for victims of online harms, in collaboration with the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations or SCWO. It "provides holistic support and a safe space for targets of online harms, particularly girls and women, to turn to when they encounter harmful behaviour" online.[38] It has a telephone helpline and text-line manned by trained counsellors, and it also provides free counselling services. Pro bono legal assistance is also provided by volunteer lawyers from the Law Society Pro Bono Services.[39] Further, in January 2023, the Singapore Police Force has worked with SHE in piloting an improved victim care process

[29] Phua, Rachel. "'I never thought it would happen to me': Teenage girl who was groomed online at 13." Channel News Asia, 08 February 2020. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/sexual-grooming-online-teenagers-children-775681.

[30] Warraich, Emaan. "Tory peer proposes Online Safety Bill change to tackle online sexist abuse." BBC News, 16 May 2023. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-65610719.

[31] Baharudin, Hariz. "Police investigating offensive poll ranking female Islamic teachers; President Halimah and other leaders criticise poll." Straits Times, 27 May 2021. https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/mps-and-religious-leaders-speak-out-against-offensive-poll-ranking-female-asatizah. MeWe is a social networking platform that promises more privacy for its users.

[32] Chew Han Ei and Lim Sun Sun. "Online harm is an urgent issue for women." Global-is-Asian, 14 March 2022. https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/gia/article/online-harm-is-an-urgent-issue-for-women. Also, AfAs are industry-led coalitions working in partnership with the government.

[33] Ibid

[34] "Ministry of Communications and Information Launches Singapore Together Alliance for Action to Tackle Online Harms, Especially those Targeted at Women and Girls." Press Release, Ministry of Communications and Information, 21 July 2021, https://www.mci.gov.sg/pressroom/news-and-stories/pressroom/2021/7/mci-launches-singapore-together-alliance-for-action-to-tackle-online-harms-especially-those-targeted-at-women-and-girls.

[35] Ibid.

[36] "Speech by Ms Rahayu Mahzam, Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Communications and Information at the Ministry of Communications and Information Committee of Supply Debate on 4 March 2022." Ministry of Communications and Information, 4 March 2022. https://www.mci.gov.sg/pressroom/news-and-stories/pressroom/2022/3/speech-by-ms-rahayu-mahzam-parliamentary-secretary-ministry-of-communications-and-information-at-the-ministry-of-communications-and-information-committee-of-supply-debate-on-4-march-2022?=page&page=83_6.

[37] "Launch of SHE: Press Release, 11 September 2022." SG Her Empowerment, 11 September 2022. https://www.she.org.sg/news/launch-of-she-press-release.

[38] "SHECARES@SCWO: Online Harms Support Centre," SG Her Empowerment, https://www.she.org.sg/shecares-scwo.

[39] Ibid.

– if SHE is the "first touchpoint" for victims of online harms, the police interview can take place at SHECARES@SCWO's premises, instead of at a police station.[40]

Legislative Frameworks in Singapore Addressing the Commission of Online Harms

A number of existing legislative provisions relating to crimes committed against the person have been updated in recent years, to reflect the fact that these crimes are taking place in the online environment. The acts of cyberstalking, online harassment, and doxxing (the publishing of private or identifying information of a person online, with malicious intent) are now offences under the Protection from Harassment Act (POHA), punishable by substantial fines and/or imprisonment.[41] Revenge porn – which is understood as the leaking of nude images or recordings online without the consent of the person identifiable from the images or recordings – is addressed in updates to the Penal Code which proscribes a range of related acts intended to cause shame, embarrassment, and reputation damage.[42] These acts do not just concern the distribution of the material online but extend to possession of such material as well as threats to distribute the same.

In July of this year, the Online Criminal Harms Act (OCHA) was passed and will come into force at a later date.[43] The aim of OCHA is reinforcing protections for the public from online harms and provides more effective mechanisms for the authorities to deal with criminal activity online.[44] The range of criminal activities that OCHA seeks to address includes dissemination of intimate or voyeuristic material online. The First Schedule to OCHA provides a list of Specified Offences which includes the existing offences under POHA and the Penal Code that have been discussed above.[45] Further, OCHA provides the government with the power to issue a range of directions to online services (including social media platforms) where there is a reasonable suspicion that an online service is enabling the conduct of criminal activity.[46] The five directions are:

- A stop communication direction compelling individuals and entities to cease distributing specified online content within Singapore.
- A disabling direction to online service providers to prevent access by Singapore persons to specified content and copies of the same on their platforms.
- An access blocking direction requiring internet service providers to disable access to specific online material or locations in Singapore.
- An account restriction direction requiring online service providers to restrict an account on their platform from engaging in communication and/or interaction with people in Singapore; and
- An app removal direction requiring app stores to take down certain applications from their stores located in Singapore, to prevent further downloads.[47]

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[40] "Police Sexual Crime Awareness Seminar 2023." Singapore Police Force, 14 April 2023. https://www.police.gov.sg/Media-Room/News/20230414_police_sexual_crime_awareness_seminar_2023.

[41] See Sections 3 - 5, and 7 of the Protection from Harassment Act 2014.

[42] See Sections 377BC – 377BE as well as Section 292 of the Penal Code 1871.

[43] Davina Tham and Grace Yeoh, "Parliament passes law targeting online content used for scams, malicious cyber activity." Channel News Asia, 5 July 2023. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/online-criminal-harms-new-law-passed-scams-malicious-cyber-activity-3607501.

[44] Andy Leck, Ren Jun Lim, Ken Chia, Alex Toh and Sanil Khatri, "Singapore: Online Harms Bill passed in Parliament." Baker McKenzie, 1 August 2023. https://www.globalcompliancenews.com/2023/08/01/https-insightplus-bakermckenzie-com-bm-technology-media-telecommunications_1-singapore-online-criminal-harms-bill-passed-in-parliament_07272023/.

[45] First Schedule, Specified Offences and Scam or Malicious Cyber Activity Offences, Part 1, Online Criminal Harms Act 2023.

[46] Part 2, Sections 6 – 14, Online Criminal Harms Act 2023.

[47] Part 2, Sections 10 -14, Online Criminal Harms Act 2023.

What social media platforms already have to comply with is the recently-promulgated Code of Practice for Online Safety (Code) under the Broadcasting Act 1994.[48] Under the Code, designated Social Media Services are required to meet specific outcomes with respect to enhancing online safety for end users.[49] The Code lists "cyberbullying content" as a category of harmful content.[50] Designated social media services are required to comply with obligations in three categories: user safety, user reporting and resolution, and accountability.[51]

At one level, the existing POHA and Penal Code provisions give victims legal recourse and empower the authorities to act in cases where harms have been caused. The POHA and Penal Code provisions have already been used in a number of instances. The addition of OCHA provides another means of protection by mandating action on the part of online platforms and services to curtail the occurrence of harmful activity in the digital sphere. As OCHA is yet to come into force and have its provisions tested in real terms, it is difficult to speak of its effectiveness now. It will also be interesting to observe how effective the interplay of these legislative provisions will be in addressing online harms – specifically online VAW. What is important though, is that people are made aware that these avenues of recourse are available to them – and be encouraged to use the same.

Conclusion...Moving Forward

Online VAW is a serious and constant occurrence and is gradually being seen as a digital security blind spot that needs immediate attention. The online harassment and abuse cases involving women in Singapore has made the government and the community pay more attention to these forms of violence. However, despite the above efforts, the authors contend that **more can be done**.

Awareness and education stand out as important factors in carving out online *safe spaces* for women and girls. Such awareness and education campaigns have to target both boys and men in highlighting the challenges that women and girls face online, instead of just educating women and girls to identify what is happening to them and where they might go to get help, which is something that is already being done. However, greater focus on such issues of online harm and harassment should be placed on informing the wider community – possibly including a focus on educating families as whole. Although efforts are made to inform and educate, they can be stepped up, perhaps through targeted campaigning.

Greater awareness and education should go hand-in-hand with the establishing of strong community guidelines. This will become easier as more people understand, firstly, the need for a particular 'code of conduct,' and secondly, the need for explicit prohibitions on any forms of harassment, abuse or discrimination against women and girls. The fair and consistent enforcement of these guidelines should be undertaken by an agency that has the necessary mandate, backed by legislative mechanisms to hold perpetrators to account.

Agencies that deal with online VAW, and the enforcement and legal frameworks in place must take a survivor-centred approach. This will include ease of reporting, appropriate training for the treatment of survivors, the familiarity and technical know-how of first responders and those conducting investigations, suitable charges (for example, against invasion of privacy and not merely under obscenity laws), and the protection of survivors from reprisals.[52] A survivor-centred approach is a holistic one that includes passing and implementing laws to protect women, a boost in the prosecution of offenders, and comprehensive services accessible to all women who experience violence, including

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[48] Code of Practice for Online Safety, Broadcasting Act 1994. This came into effect on 18 July 2023. Available at https://www.imda.gov.sg/-/media/imda/files/regulations-and-licensing/regulations/codes-of-practice/codes-of-practice-media/code-of-practice-for-online-safety.pdf
[49] Ibid at paragraph 3.
[50] Ibid at paragraph 4.
[51] Ibid at Sections A, B, and C.
[52] UNWomen and Govt of Republic of Korea. "Online Violence against Women in Asia - a Multicountry Study." UNWomen, November 2020.

medical support (if necessary), counselling, safety planning and legal advice.[53] Even in terminology, there should be a change from 'victim' to 'survivor; legitimizing their experience and giving them agency, similar to survivors of VAW, offline.

There must be concrete efforts to implement effective systems to monitor and address any inappropriate or harmful content. There must also be easy-to-use reporting mechanisms for users, in the four national languages, to report abusive behaviour. Government agencies tasked with cybersecurity need to work closely with CSOs and tech companies to campaign strongly against online VAW, developing counternarratives to contest harassment and harm directed at women and girls.[54] The resources on the Cyber Security Agency of Singapore's portal GoSafeOnline could be further augmented in providing more focused information for online harms awareness and for victims of online VAW. Equally important is to provide an environment to induce 'good Samaritan' action to allow for 'bystander' intervention. This is something that is lacking in current reporting policies. This would go a long way in not only increasing the number of reports of online harms, but to also act as a deterrent.

Greater collaboration with tech companies is vital at all levels of development of online tools and platforms. This would include features such as blocking and filtering options, content warnings, and improved privacy settings.[55] Community organisations should also work closely with tech companies to filter safety and privacy information to the ground.

Together with the above would be the continuous evaluation of these strategies. There should also be clear feedback loops to constantly revise strategies based on how well they work in the 'field'. There should be regular assessments of the effectiveness of measures to counter online VAW. Most important of these measures is to take seriously what women and girls say and feel when they experience such harm or harassment, instead of explaining things away by using arguments of cultural relativism and accepting as common or acceptable certain depictions of 'female' and 'male' behaviours or attributes.

Ultimately, empowering women in tech would go a long way in eradicating online VAW. Encouraging and supporting women's participation and leadership in the tech industry by increasing the representation of women in decision-making roles will most surely contribute to a greater likelihood of creating digital spaces that are safe and inclusive not only for women and girls, but for all users.

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[53] Ibid
[54] Ibid
[55] Ibid

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